FEAR, ANXIETY, AND SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE: LEFTOVERS FROM
THE LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH CAPITALISM IN
MILLENNIAL NARRATIVES

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
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Summer 2015
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the artists and helpers, and all those individuals who dedicate themselves to the betterment of others, to improving the world around them, to giving without asking anything in return, to living without squandering, to loving without hatred and violence. To those who try to leave the world a little better upon their exit than they found it upon their entry.
The consumer society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to destroy them. The use of objects leads only to their dwindling disappearance. The value created is much more intense in violent loss. This is why destruction remains the fundamental alternative to production: consumption is merely an intermediate term between the two. […] only in destruction are objects there in excess and only then, in their disappearance, do they attest to wealth. At any rate, it is clear that destruction […] is fated to become one of the preponderant functions of post-industrial society.

–Jean Baudrillard

*The Consumer Society*
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Master of Arts in English
San Diego State University, 2015

The capitalist system is inherently based on, and thrives on, competition. This idea is the foundation of America itself, an enduring narrative steeped in the concept of Manifest Destiny, going West and taking what one feels entitled to by birth. The resulting sense of entitlement has in turn led to America’s notoriety as both one of the most affluent and privileged societies in the world, as well as one of the most violent. Americans have a conflicting sense of both awareness and ignorance of the violence of which they are intrinsically a part.

Numerous authors, journalists, film auteurs, and other cultural icons have critiqued the link between capitalism and violence within American society, offering possibility of awareness to the masses. In this thesis, I aim to analyze their connections, as depicted in several turn-of-the-millennium narratives, including the 1999 films American Beauty and Fight Club, as well as more recent 21st century novels Feed and 10:01. Utilizing research in consumer psychology and cultural theory, including work by Jean Beaudrillard and Slavoj Žižek, I will argue that the American ideal of the pursuit of happiness becomes twisted through consumerism into both a quest for conformity and a battle against it, and in turn exists as the structural basis of violence within the capitalist system. The resulting psychological turmoil suffered by individuals is a form of “cognitive dissonance,” with the consumer being forever torn between whether to consume or not, and post-consumption, tortured with guilt for doing so. Yet the only comfort is found in further consumption, repeating the monstrous cycle. Many postmodern narratives depict in their characters a perpetual feeling of dissonance, inevitably leading to destruction and violence, manifesting along a varied spectrum, from breakdown of family, to rebellion against authority, to ecological crisis, to outright terrorist acts.

The critical awareness of links between violence and consumerism offered by the postmodern narratives analyzed herein leaves us even more conflicted – in their fatalistic posture, they offer no alternative to the situation, adding further emotional turmoil and discontent. The only cure presented is, quite simply, to consume more, perhaps to the point of combustion.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The words on these pages were produced out of an existential crisis, an overwhelming feeling of being crushed by a world filled with only pain. Little by little, with the help of several remarkable individuals offering tiny threads of hope, I was able to craft a bizarre yet extraordinarily special rope and find a way up and out. Stories of common experience aided my healing and transformation, giving me strength to wade through the massive landfill of my discarded hopes and dreams. I found meaning through the shared pain of others, both fictional and real. I found inspiration through human connection, through acceptance of the tragic fused with a renewed awareness of the beauty of all human experience, good and bad.

I would like to thank those who played a role in developing a passion that, as it turns out, could not be extinguished: to Dr. Erin O’Neill, for seeing something special and igniting the flame; to Dr. Frances Gibbons for keeping it burning; to my professors at Louisiana State University, including Dr. James Catano, Dr. Patrick McGee, and especially Dr. Elsie Michie, who opened up a whole new world for me that feels boundless; to my professors at San Diego State University, including Dr. Joseph Thomas, Dr. Quentin Bailey, Dr. Glen McGlish, Dr. Phillip Serrato, and Dr. William Nericcio, each of whom in their own unique ways shared their hearts and knowledge, offered unwavering support, and allowed me freedom to get lost and smothered beneath the rubble of broken words, and trusted in my self-determination to find a way out. Also to both Dr. June Cummins and Mary Garcia, each of whom, through their continuous acts of encouragement and assistance, never failed to acknowledge that the heart is just as indisputable a component as the mind in academic pursuits.

To other special soul mates, who boosted me during crisis mode, cheering me to the finish line and beyond – Tom, Jessica, and others – too many to list, making me even more aware of how fortunate I truly am. A special thanks to Karin, for guiding me out of the dark recesses of my own mind, and helping me find a long forgotten self, allowing me to branch
out with more strength and meaning than I ever could have fathomed. Finally, to my parents, Leo and Betty Pellerin, for never questioning, and for their undying faith in me even when faith in myself was fleeting – it is an unbelievable feeling to know that I can never disappoint them, and to experience love that truly is unconditional.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I analyze several themes present in postmodern narratives, primarily focusing on the manner in which psychological conflict manifests itself along a diverse spectrum of violence. One of the premises I explore is the function of artistic expression – whether fiction, film, or some other package – as ultimately attempts at a search for meaning. Postmodern works specifically are an all-consuming form of art resulting from that very search for meaning in post-industrialist society, a time and way of life in which there is an existential crisis and an overwhelming collective sense of meaninglessness. In many ways, a search for meaning reveals itself through materialist pursuits, yet ironically, this in turn often leads to a further sense of emptiness – a paradox of capitalism.

My primary focus is on the symbiotic relationship between violence and capitalism. I found my analysis on Jean Baudrillard’s and Slavoj Žižek’s examinations of the theoretical underpinnings of capitalism. I also present research in consumer psychology, as well as other psychological and sociological analyses pertaining to capitalism, consumption, waste, and violence, to propose that contradictions inherent to the success of the capitalist system are at least partially responsible for the deep-seated and complex psychological crises in which many individuals ceaselessly struggle. As portrayed in the narratives analyzed in this thesis, the internal conflicts the protagonists endure are often projected outwardly in a varied range of what can be considered violence in some manner, from explicit forms of physical violence, as well as much more subtle forms of psychological violence and erosion. With no real enemy identifiable, everything and everyone is under attack – the earth, the family, the government, the entire capitalist system, and – perhaps most especially – the individual self.

The primary texts on which I focus include two 1999 films, American Beauty and Fight Club, as well as two post-9/11 novels, M. T. Anderson’s Feed (2002) and Lance Olsen’s 10:01 (2005). However, I find it difficult to discuss consumerism and violence, and
the postmodern condition as a whole, without also referring back to two earlier 1961 novels, John Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent* and Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*, each prophetic precursors to the cultural malaise to come to embody the American postmodern collective psyche. In addition, I occasionally refer to several other postmodern narratives, both to elucidate the degree of melancholy evident in the overwhelming amount of art produced to reflect it, as well as to describe the manner in which violence is depicted with progressive intensity throughout the years.

At first glance, the narratives I discuss in this thesis may seem quite different from one another. However, my analysis will connect their similarities in theme: perpetual discontent, materialism and overconsumption, influence of advertising, family conflict, identity crisis, psychological damage, ecological crisis, fear and anxiety, cynicism, death, destruction, and violence. As depicted in many of the narratives in the last half-century, including *American Beauty, Revolutionary Road, Fight Club, Feed*, and *10:01*, much of the violence takes place within a relatively comfortable middle- to upper-middle-class, white suburban setting, with characters living apparently financially secure and affluent lifestyles. American society, with its ostensible comforts and elements of affluence, becomes tied up with violence, an incarnation of irony on a grand scale. The ironic connections between affluence and the deeply ingrained sense of dissatisfaction and resulting violence are the areas on which I choose to focus my analysis. With more stuff comes more problems. Individuals become torn, internalizing their frustration and anger. Over and over. They are embodiments of combustibility, each essentially a festering boil, pulsating, prone to burst at any moment – which as the evidence shows, both in fiction and reality, is exactly what occurs every day.

---

1 Exceptions to the predominantly white male upper-income echelon of protagonists in postmodern films are present in the iconic work of directors Spike Lee and John Singleton, among several others. However, for brevity’s sake, I am limiting my analysis of violence in postmodern narratives to the manner in which it manifests itself in specific texts that take place in predominantly white suburban America. However, no doubt exists to the complexity of issues of violence as it relates to capitalism in America, particularly with the issues of race, class, and gender. As outlined in his now classic analysis, *The Consumer Society*, what Jean Baudrillard refers to as *systematic inequality* regarding class distinctions could serve as a competent basis for analysis of race and gender in their own rights – inequality on all levels promotes the continued functioning of the capitalist system as a whole.
POSTMODERNISM: AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Inklings of the postmodern situation are present at least as early as John Steinbeck’s final novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, as well as Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*, both, perhaps not coincidentally, published in the year 1961. These poignant and prophetic novels, released right at the arguable cusp between modernism and postmodernism, help to set up the interpretive framework for the later decades to come. Numerous narrative representations of further escalating dissatisfaction, numbness, fear, contempt, rebellion, and violence have been produced throughout the decades since, each manifesting in varying degrees, in varying forms of media. The evolution of violence as presented narratively since the early 1960s shows evidence of the interdependence of art, artists, time, and meaning, with something like *Fight Club* acting almost as a direct response to a novel like Steinbeck’s *Discontent* from forty years earlier. No change or progress has occurred: the crisis continues.

The crisis evident in postmodern art has become a topic thoroughly explored by numerous researchers. For example, Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, authors of *A World in Chaos* (2003), analyze depictions of the progressive increase in violence in postmodern films, and iterate the relevance of the social condition to the postmodern milieu at the turn of the 21st century. Postmodernism is notoriously difficult to define, perhaps utterly indefinable, as it has a mysterious chameleon-like quality, changing as needed to fit the relevant times and culture it is used to describe. Throughout the time in which postmodernism has been studied and debated, every theorist has had his or her own different and unique theory of the condition. As a result, no definition I could provide here would ever fully grasp its dynamic meaning.

However, in an attempt to define postmodernism, I suggest that it is often best understood when compared with its predecessor, modernism. Boggs and Pollard effectively articulate the enigmatic meaning of postmodernism by first illustrating the dynamic entanglements of modernism:

> [W]e view *modernism* as rooted in Enlightenment rationality, industrialism; the idea of human progress tied to science, technology, and material growth; and diffusion of universalistic ideals that, in the United States, have long been associated with the liberal-capitalist mode of development and civilization. (xi)

Contrast the authors’ above description of modernism with the following they provide for postmodernism:
Modernism] has run into a series of well-known challenges […] the product of its deep internal flaws, limits, and contradictions. The consequences of this increasingly ‘dark side’ of the Enlightenment are by now rather familiar: massive global poverty, harsh social inequalities and dislocations, escalating military conflict and civic violence on a world scale, bureaucratic domination, demise of the nuclear family, and ecological crisis. (xi)

Perhaps almost anything undesirable, discouraging, or nihilistic might be fitting to be included in the definition of postmodernism. In many postmodern narratives, modernist “science, technology, and material growth” are Trojan-horse-like gifts ingrafted with “internal flaws, limits, and contradictions” that eventually lead to the postmodern condition. In fact, it is the contradictions inherent to modernism, and its offspring capitalism, that lead to much of the psychological turmoil and violence imbedded in postmodern culture and in turn depicted in its art.

Many of the narratives analyzed herein fit Boggs and Pollard’s definition of postmodernism, with some of the fictional characters explicitly expressing an awareness of such relevant situations, while others fail to fully grasp it; yet, all are consumed by anxiety, apathy, fear, confliction, frustration, and outright contempt and rage. In the more recent novels, such as M.T. Anderson’s Feed (2002) and Lance Olsen’s 10:01 (2005), as well as earlier classics already mentioned, The Winter of Our Discontent and Revolutionary Road, evidence abounds of dissatisfaction, inequality, family strife, and violence. Similarly, the 1999 films American Beauty, Fight Club, and Office Space depict evidence of the explosive psychological state of postmodern citizens, also seen in many other films, such as Heathers (1988), Do the Right Thing (1989), Falling Down (1993), Pulp Fiction (1996), The Matrix (1999) – the list is endless. Whether novel or film, whether released in 1961 or 2005 or anywhere in between, these postmodern narratives have overarching themes.

One factor present in almost all postmodern narratives is the build-up to a gloomy ending, with the final climax overflowing with violent death and/or destruction. Steinbeck’s Winter of Our Discontent ends with the reader left to assume that the protagonist, Ethan, has committed suicide; Yates’ Revolutionary Road ends with the tragic suicide of the wife, April, by self-performed abortion; Mendes’ American Beauty ends with the murder of the protagonist, Lester; Palahniuk’s and Fincher’s Fight Club ends with the death of the alter ego, Tyler, as well as the destruction of the city’s representative towers of capitalism;
Anderson’s *Feed* ends with Violet’s slow inevitable death; Olsen’s *10:01* ends with a bomb exploding in the movie theater – such endings, definitive of postmodernism, offer further evidence of overwhelming hopelessness, with no sense of resolution depicted as even remotely possible.

**COGNITIVE DISSONANCE**

Two predominant issues come into play in postmodern narratives – contradiction and confliction – elements that only add to the dire state of society presented, and in turn lead to severe psychological consequences, on both an individual as well as a collective scale. The psychological theory of *cognitive dissonance* examines the manner in which individuals justify or rationalize negative situations, living conditions, or behaviors, particularly if they see no other alternative. In a June 2013 article from *Psychology Today*, cognitive dissonance is described:

> When we act in ways that are inconsistent with our attitudes and beliefs, we experience an aversive state of mental tension called cognitive dissonance. […] Dissonance is uncomfortable; it makes us feel like a hypocrite. So we take steps to eliminate the dissonance. We can change our behavior […] or we can change our belief. (White 1)

Social psychologist Leon Festinger’s original model for cognitive dissonance, which he developed in 1957, relied on a principle he called “cognitive consistency” (S. McLeod). Cognitive dissonance occurs as a result of the motivation to maintain *cognitive consistency* in situations in which any of our attitudes or beliefs (i.e. cognitions) become inconsistent or uncomfortable. Often this inner confliction leads to irrational thoughts, feelings, and behaviors resulting from attempts to reduce or supplant the discomfort or dissonant state (S. McLeod).

The sense of confliction characteristic of postmodern life is a definitive component of cognitive dissonance, and is caused by the numerous contradictions fundamental to capitalism. The fact that individuals see no alternatives to their complicit lifestyles goes hand-in-hand with the unresolved endings typical of postmodern narratives. More often, individuals change their beliefs to fit capitalist ideologies, rather than changing their behavior, which in turn inevitably can have an emotionally erosive impact. The human mind is not so easily tricked.
The concept of cognitive dissonance is similar to what Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek refers to as *fetishist disavowal*, a coping mechanism that allows individuals to accept things that contradict their core values and beliefs. Žižek defines “fetishist disavowal” as the knowledge and awareness of something negative leading to intentional forgetting in order to continue life unchanged. He describes it further as:

‘I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know.’ I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don’t know it. (53)

Essentially, it is easier for the conflicted individual to accept the status quo, continuing to “happily” and “ignorantly” live an obstinate life of immobility.

Cognitive dissonance and fetishist disavowal are concepts at the core of what allows the postmodern individual to sleep at night, living a life surrounded by overconsumption, pollution, and violence on a wide scale, with apparent acceptance. We can see associated psychological defense mechanisms in action in many postmodern narratives. Often the protagonists struggle with the contradictions presented by capitalism, and are plagued by anxiety as their external behaviors, which fit with society’s standards, conflict with their own internal beliefs and desires, challenging their sense of integrity. In *Feed*, Titus is faced with Violet’s impending death, caused by a way of life based on overconsumption and disposability that has been culturally accepted yet has led to horrendous ecological crisis, health problems, terrorist acts, and more. In an act of fetishist disavowal, he attempts to pretend it all away by shopping, a socially approved behavior in capitalist society, leading to more waste while ignoring the spiraling problems at hand, and resulting in increased levels of anxiety, mental instability, and breakdown. In some other postmodern narratives, such as *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*, the protagonists have previously lived lives of denial utilizing fetishist disavowal on a daily basis, leaving them with a sense of numbness; however, they begin to exhibit a change that defies their consumerist identity, rebelling against the capitalist way of life. As they become defiant toward the standards of capitalist society, they are also viewed as not only abnormal, but as almost disgraceful sinners due to their rejection of consumer ideals – sinning against the American belief system, against the almighty dollar. Most often in postmodern depictions, individual transformation of any sort develops from a severe emotional breakdown, which is a primary turn in the narratives.
Ultimately, postmodern texts reflect the sense of psychological combustibility existent within the postmodern culture, and the possible reasons behind such turmoil have been studied and debated at length.

**Finding Meaning through Art**

One factor relevant of the overwhelming sense of discontent in post-industrial society is the customary, perhaps even requisite, pursuit of forming one’s identity and finding meaning through the objects one consumes. Yet, as is fundamental to the capitalist system, the objects we are “meant” to consume are continually changing, leading to both a perpetual search for “meaning” that is never truly found, and in turn to the perpetual discontent plaguing individuals. Capitalism thrives on the lack of success in individuals’ search for meaning; it thrives on discontent. Under capitalism, we are not meant to find meaning; we are destined to keep searching through consumption with no end in sight. However, another supplemental method humans have developed essential to their search for meaning is found through the creation of art.

In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Fredric Jameson discusses what he refers to as the three semantic horizons — political, social, and historical — each of which regard all texts as symbolic acts. He states that the text “is no longer construed as an individual ‘text’ or work in the narrow sense, but has been reconstituted in the form of the great collective and class discourses of which a text is a little more than” the words of a single individual (76). Every text is a product of its *time*, as is the author — politically, socially, and historically. Moreover, the text is the author’s way of resolving some real problem in an imaginary, symbolic way: “The individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (77). The problem is of course not resolved in reality, but the author is able to express his or her real frustrations through the aesthetic process of writing. All aesthetic pursuits, all forms of expression, are therapeutic, both for the artist and the art consumer. They allow humans to find meaning and persevere through life’s many challenges. The artistic expression – whether painting, writing, film, or other form – is necessary for the human mind to not only comprehend but also endure life’s experiences. The mind is often unable to withstand the complexity of life events as they are presented in reality; it needs help to grasp meaning out of apparent meaninglessness. To “that
which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought” (83), art helps us find meaning and significance in our lives. Writing is not merely a mental pursuit, it is a response to reality. On one hand is the text, the original creation. On the other hand is the subtext, the reason behind the creation.

Jameson’s analysis of the purposes of art offers an eerily poignant explanation to the complex functions present in postmodernist works, particularly their multifarious attempts at resolving the many “real contradictions” of which they are both a fundamental part and a “reaction” to in capitalist society. To add to the complexity, postmodernist narratives in particular offer no outwardly tangible “imaginary resolution” to the “real contradictions” to which they are a critique. Such is the perplexity and significance of the narratives I analyze in this thesis, most of which offer a critical perspective on the cultural collective psychological state of society present by the end of the twentieth century. Films such as Fight Club, American Beauty, and Office Space are a “reaction” to decades of ideological and physical frustration, while the post-9/11 novels Feed and 10:01 are a reaction to that same frustration while also culminating in a new way of life fraught with a pervasive fear. However, what makes these works truly postmodern is the manner in which they defy Jameson’s notion of bringing “into being that very situation to which” they are “a reaction” – no imaginary resolution is depicted, no solution is offered, other than that of all-out destruction. They bring nothing “into being” other than an in-your-face awareness, a provocative existential statement about the meaningless of life based on incessant consumption, and the dangers of continuing along that path. Perhaps it is up to the readers and viewers to imagine a resolution. Perhaps that is the true challenge the auteurs are attempting to propose.

Robert Stam, author of Film Theory: An Introduction (2000), analyzes the significant role film can occasionally play on cultural awareness or awakening, particularly as a form of art. Stam states that art, by definition, “heightens perception and short-circuits automatized perceptions” (48). In some ways, the purpose of this “short-circuit” is critical thought, arguably not a short-circuit at all, but rather quite the opposite, provoking a higher mental functioning seldom applied in our day-to-day lives.

The moment when a particular film evolves from simple entertainment to a work of art may very well be the moment when it challenges viewers. Rather than a movie being a
form of escapist entertainment, the viewer walks away thinking about what he or she has just seen, felt, experienced, perhaps for days or weeks, or even for the rest of his or her life, so much so that repeat viewings are not only desired but absolutely necessary – this is the moment when it becomes art. When a film, or any other work of art, asks the viewer (or reader) to think critically, the feeling in the brain of the synapses firing, our brains actually working as they were meant to but seldom do – challenging our notions of reality and/or our usual denial of reality – such an unusual feeling may possibly even be described as uncomfortable. Facing a dire truth, being forced to break our long-held patterns of fetishist disavowal and admit what we already know deep down, can be painful. To actually be asked to think about negative aspects of our everyday situation – to which we may have not only become accustomed, numb, or apathetic, but also have likely contributed – might be downright distressing.

It takes some finesse to present a negative critique of reality to viewers who live the reality being critiqued, and to actually expect them to watch it. Stam refers to Marxist theorist Louis Althusser’s view of realism as that which “cannot challenge the received wisdom of the public, since spectators see nothing but their own flickering ideologies in the naturalistic images on the screen” (140). In order for the filmmaker to get his or her point across to the spectator, the film must not begin by insulting the spectator’s principles, or else the spectator will not view the film with an open mind, and certainly will not grasp, much less accept, the filmmaker’s purpose.

Many of the most critically acclaimed writers and directors appear to take heed of Althusser’s warnings when presenting their realist works of art. One can see the delicate manner in which they do so, in such films as Sam Mendes’ American Beauty, David Fincher’s Fight Club, Mike Judge’s Office Space, Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing, and numerous others. The films begin by presenting the familiar, the recognizable, the easily identifiable, thereby allowing the viewers to identify themselves and connect with the characters, to relax and feel a bit of comfort through familiarity, and, most importantly, to let their guards down. The films share in common their depiction of stereotypical characters, such as the lazy guy, the womanizer, the racist, the bigot, the homosexual, the naggy boss, the naggy wife, the mentally unstable weirdoes and freaks, as well as the traditional worker or “working stiff,” typically the protagonist with whom the viewer is meant to identify, living
a life unhappy and unfulfilled – all of these are familiar and accepted figures to the viewer. The directors’ eventual challenge to the viewer is very subtle. They aim to produce films:

which at first sight seem to be under the sway of the dominant ideology but which also throw it off course, where filmic disjunctions expose the strains and limits of the official ideology, and where an oblique, symptomatic reading can reveal, underneath an apparent formal coherence, ideological cracks and faultlines. (Stam 141)

In Stam’s definitive statement regarding postmodern films, he could well have been speaking specifically of American Beauty or Fight Club. He begins with “at first sight,” and leads to “ideological cracks and faultlines.” Both films present critiques of their current societies and challenge the viewers to “look closer” (as explicitly stated in the tagline for American Beauty). Films like American Beauty and Fight Club offer a postmodern critique of the ideals of family life, work life, and “happiness” as defined by capitalist America. In these narratives, family is not glorified a la “Leave it to Beaver” or “The Cosby Show.” Living up to society’s expectations as a good worker, showing up every day, bringing home the bacon, dutifully fulfilling one’s socially defined appropriate roles as employee, spouse, parent, and consumer do not necessarily lead to a sense of personal fulfillment. Wealth and materialism do not necessarily lead to happiness.

Sam Mendes, director of American Beauty, elaborates on the meaning of the film:

It was about imprisonment in the cages we all make for ourselves and our hoped-for escape. It was about loneliness. It was about beauty. It was funny. It was angry, very angry sometimes. It was sad. One thing I was certain of, the script like its characters, wasn’t at all what it first appeared. (Mendes, DVD sleeve notes)

Mendes’ reference to “the cages we all make for ourselves” is profound in that not only are these self-made cages, but they are also cages of capitalism, of living a life based on culturally defined standards and hegemonic domination. The pernicious magic of capitalism rests on the perfection of its ideological hegemony, its powerful influence, the manner in which it is able to convince individuals that they have a choice, all the while manipulating those choices to coincide with what the system promotes. An unfortunate byproduct is that following the dominant ideology often leads to a feeling of living someone else’s life, someone else’s dreams, and in turn a loss of personal freedom and satisfaction.

It is as if the writers and directors, like Mendes, as true artists, have an undeniable need to expose cultural denial and present an undeniable truth to the public – a truth of which
individuals are likely already fully aware and perhaps even living in their own real lives. But to see it portrayed on the big screen, forcing them to face reality, could almost have a cathartic effect, psychologically expunging those feelings of confliction, even if only for a moment. Mendes further discusses the impact of the film:

In the end though, it remains an astonishment that a movie featuring relations between older men and younger women in the era of Clinton, casual drug taking, homosexuals in the military, teenage sexuality, the post-Columbine obsession with what’s really going on in the house next door to you, and the great love that exists in even the most combative of families (not to mention a film whose pivotal moment is a dancing plastic bag) could have been embraced and understood as it has been. (Mendes, DVD sleeve notes)

The elements of the narrative Mendes describes, although taboo and in reality often left undiscussed like the elephant in the room, truly are the familiar and recognizable, everyday parts of life postmodern citizens have come to know firsthand, and in turn, possibly at the heart of why the film was so overwhelmingly “embraced and understood.” Escapist entertainment denies our reality, but films like American Beauty confirm it. And that is what makes it truly effective art.

Realistic depiction of the pain and sourness tied to postmodern existence is further exposed in Fight Club. In his review of the film, Gary Crowdus asserts its effectiveness in inspiring viewers to think about their real-life situations:

*Fight Club* engages and challenges moviegoers on an intellectual as well as an emotional and visceral level, refusing to spoon-feed them an easily digestible moral lesson, instead insisting that viewers think through for themselves the many provocative themes and issues it broaches. (3)

Crowdus’ comments on the film go hand-in-hand with Robert Stam’s earlier reflections on the manner in which art can provide a cultural awakening, “heighten[ing] perception and short-circuit[ing] automatized perceptions” (48), essentially challenging assumptions and breaking us out of our comfort zones, while simultaneously providing us with the tools for breaking ourselves out of our self-made cages.

In many ways, a number of postmodern films provide fulfillment of a fantasy. American Beauty, Fight Club, The Matrix, and especially Office Space, all portray the protagonist rebelling against the system, refusing to follow the rules any longer, telling off their bosses, perhaps simply the scapegoats of their overall systemic oppression. But whether against the true enemy or not, fighting back gives an ultimate and long-overdue sense of
satisfaction. And the viewers are able to live vicariously through the protagonists’ transformation and newfound freedom, even if that freedom leads to an appropriately postmodern outcome of death and/or destruction. Yet, with the dire outcome, the cathartic effect remains poignant and refreshing. One element shared by these films is that in the protagonists’ rejection of capitalist ideals, they also get back to their macho, almost animal-like nature, which at many moments escalates into violence. The anxiety they have been feeling for possibly their entire lives now has an outlet. These protagonists are antiheroes, determining their enemies for themselves. In contrast, the capitalist system often determines a fictive enemy designed to function as a distraction from individuals’ capabilities of finding a weak link in the system. Violence, manipulatively deployed, has a positive function under the regime of capitalism. Yet, in using that violence, the tool of the oppressor, to reclaim their masculinity, the protagonists are able to also reclaim their sense of agency from an oppressive system, thereby rising up from their postmodern existence.

Of particular interest is the fact that many of the protagonists in violent postmodern narratives are male. This is not to deflect from the fact that females suffer from some of the same confictions and emotional duress caused by the overwhelming contradictions present in capitalistic society. However, the fact that males often exhibit more outwardly violent reactions to their struggles is an issue deserving of further analysis beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet, one possibility is in the cultural expectations imposed upon males to be pillars of strength, while also gentle and loving; to be good providers, while enduring misery at work; to materialistically keep up with the Joneses, while neglecting their physical natures. All the while never is it acceptable to ask for help without fear of appearing weak. Perhaps this restrained method of social survival tied up with oppressive patriarchal dominant narratives is to blame for the twisted manner in which discontent often emerges – typically in violent form and attached to a male body.

**The Evolution of Violence**

Postmodernist culture and its consequences manifest slowly and progressively through the years as depicted in the art of the times. One can see how the earlier narratives, *Winter* and *Revolutionary*, begin with more internalized and hidden realizations by the protagonists of what Boggs and Pollard refer to as the “deep internal flaws, limits, and
contradictions” of their culture’s ideologies. These texts depict modernism’s “idea of human progress tied to science, technology, and material growth” as both the ultimate solution and the ultimate problem in capitalist society, inevitably resulting in internal conflict for many individuals. The primary consequence depicted is the demise of the nuclear family (Boggs and Pollard xi). Contradictions inherent to capitalism abound in a society that professes the importance of family and a simple life coexisting within a template for constant growth and perpetual dissatisfaction. As Jean Baudrillard states regarding the growth society, “aspiration is irreversible and unlimited, and develops to a rhythm of accelerated socio-differentiation and generalized interrelativity” (Consumer 63). One will never be able to keep up with the Joneses, but will forever be compelled to try. The only possible result can be discontent, perpetually magnified. Violent response to perpetual discontent is often depicted with aggression toward an unknown assailant – anxiety, fear, and anger, all variations of the same emotion, are projected onto any number of innocent bystanders – family, employers, random strangers. How is it possible to fight a looming presence such as the capitalist system, which has no face, no name, no body?

Some of the more obvious signs of violence apparent within the capitalist regime might make themselves visible via the middle-aged white male going “postal,” particularly after being trapped in a traffic jam, as in Falling Down. Or perhaps telling off one’s boss and even blackmailing him, every corporate underling’s fantasy come true, as in American Beauty and Fight Club. Or stealing money from the company responsible for one’s years of misery and oppression via confinement to a cubicle, as in Office Space. Or becoming part of an intricately planned terrorist group, as in Fight Club, or of a heavily-armed resistance at war against the system, as in The Matrix. However, in contrast to such rebel fantasies, some of the more subtle signs of violence become apparent with the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family unit.

The concept of family is understood as a microcosm of society as a whole. When strained relations and internal strife are present within the household, this becomes the primary source of discontent, and it often bleeds out into the external world. Within the family household, each member must make compromises, and this is also the case outside in other areas of life. As individuals eventually end up making compromise after compromise – whether for others such as loved ones or employers, or for the system itself – loss of
individuality inevitably results. Individual desires are never truly fulfilled. This is one of the 
areas in which cognitive dissonance results from the inner struggle between what the 
individual wants and needs personally versus all of the areas in his or her outer life pulling 
against that, degrading the individual’s integrity and sense of self. One may spend years in a 
dissonant state yet trying to accept conflicting beliefs, or pretending away the contradictions 
saturating his or her life, but psychological consequences are inevitable and come to reveal 
themselves in countless ways.

Ethan, the protagonist of The Winter of Our Discontent, wants to please his family 
members, each of whom want more and more material wealth. Although a good moral man, 
Ethan also resents his loss of social status, and commits criminal acts in order to live up to 
society’s and his family’s material expectations. His confliction eventually leads to an 
assumed suicide. Frank, the protagonist in Revolutionary Road, also finds discontent in a life 
based on material wealth and appearances. He seems to have acquired everything that 
capitalist society says he should want, but he remains unsatisfied. The stability of his 
marriage is challenged, as he has affairs, drinks too much, and questions everything on which 
he has based his identity thus far. His wife, April, follows suit. As she ends up pregnant with 
a third child, and they each come to realize that their dreams of getting away from the 
clutches of capitalism are not possible, she commits suicide by aborting her own fetus and 
bleeding to death.

Progressing from early postmodernism’s “demise of the nuclear family,” the violence 
slowly manifests itself more and more outwardly, as depicted in such films as Heathers 
(1988), Do the Right Thing (1989), Falling Down (1993), and Fight Club (1999). And in 
American Beauty (1999), we see a somewhat unique portrayal merging postmodern angst, 
family self-destruction, and outward violence. Within its narrative, Lester Burnham, like 
Winter’s Ethan Hawley, is numb and apathetic, but unlike Ethan, whose rebellious feelings 
and behavior are enveloped in secrecy, Lester chooses to rebel openly. His discontent moves 
from identity crisis to employment jeopardy to blackmail to marital strife to borderline 
pedophilia to family breakdown to neighborhood breakdown to murder. His self-destruction 
causes the psychological destruction of everything and everyone he comes in contact with. 
The highly infectious nature of the protagonist’s conflict on his surroundings is also a 
recurring theme throughout many other postmodern narratives.
The striking similarities between both 1961’s *Winter of Our Discontent* and *Revolutionary Road* and 1999’s *American Beauty* offer evidence that the cultural malaise over a forty-year time span remains remarkably relevant today, yet has progressively transformed, becoming much more outwardly visible and much more violent. Another significant connection of the then to now is evident in the fact that 1961’s *Revolutionary Road* was later adapted into a film released in 2008, a moment in our post-9/11 era when the disenchantment of the promise of capitalism continues to permeate those very structures held most dear by our culture’s ideological foundation – work, family, and home. And perhaps it is no coincidence that Sam Mendes, the director of *American Beauty*, also chose to take on direction of the film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road*, with their similar themes of exposing the cracks in the ideological framework of capitalist America.

Like many postmodern works, *Revolutionary Road* confronts a mythical ideology that simply doesn’t seem to work. In turn, it shows us the consequences of living a life based on such myths. Charles McGrath states in his review from *The New York Times* that *Revolutionary Road* is not the typical entertainment piece usually produced by Hollywood; it “is among the bleakest books ever written. It ends unhappily, with a gruesome death.” McGrath also references how discussions were in the works at the time of original publication in 1961 on making a film adaptation, but the idea was discounted, with the author, Richard Yates, later citing the argument that “the movie-going public ‘is not ready for a story of such unrelieved tragedy.’” The narrative critique of capitalist ideologies along with the bleak ending offering no solutions make the novel definitively postmodern before postmodernism truly came into being, and perhaps before anyone truly wanted to acknowledge the existence of modernism’s failures.

The transformation of fear and violence is evident within the various narratives produced throughout the decades. Sometimes the counter-attack is an actual entity, sometimes more vented toward an intangible idealism, or perhaps even on what feels like seemingly unattainable expectations placed on the American citizen by the system itself. Many 1970s cinematic interpretations appear to place blame of the social situation on scapegoat entities like the mafia, as in *The Godfather* (1972), or blame on conglomerates like the news media, as in *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) or *Network* (1976). By the late 1980s, placing a face on an enemy turned into two quite oppositional extremes – either drugs or
Russians on one end of the spectrum, to outright cynicism and disrespect toward authority on
the other. Numerous youth films of the decade depict middle- to upper-middle-class youthful

The sense of rebellion evolved throughout the 1990s into a frustration and resulting
violent attack on anyone and anything, but particularly on capitalist expectations, or what
might be referred to as the capitalist belief system – the inevitable disappointment of
conforming to the capitalist ideals of working hard, playing by the rules, and serving one’s
assigned role. Many of Quentin Tarantino’s films portray protagonists as non-conformist
violent antiheroes. Take Pulp Fiction (1994), for example, in which we see a search for an
enemy, characters seeking any face on which to target their frustrations, almost as if it does
not matter who at all, as long as they find some outlet for their built-up aggression.
Tarantino’s characters are typically part of a subculture living outside the norms of capitalist
society, perhaps not outright rebels with a political agenda, but simply an agenda of not
fitting into a conformist ideal of obedient consumer-citizen. In some ways this is a fantasy
fulfillment. Boggs and Pollard refer to the prevalence of violence in many 1990s films as a
“new war mythology,” in which there was a “rise of paramilitary groups and domestic
terrorist incidents [that] has filled a psychological void for millions of men who feel
disenfranchised” (14). This feeling of being disenfranchised in some ways manifests itself in
a sort of reverse competition – rather than continue to comply with traditional consumerism
in which one competes to fit in while simultaneously competing for distinction – an
inherently conflicting system of competition that can never truly have a winner – these
individuals choose to compete with the system itself. The response to years of being
downtrodden and feeling like they can never get ahead, and the inevitable numbness that
occurs as a result, they in turn compete against the very system they view as the cause of
their situation, the source of their discontent.

Specifically in 1999, numerous films appeared that depicted explicit rejection of both
authority and capitalist ideals, such as Office Space, American Beauty, Fight Club, and The
Matrix. Here, we see postmodern anxiety reflected as fear of a loss of identity, a loss of
status, a loss of autonomy, and an overall loss of significance and meaning. The search is for
an actual enemy to fear – monster, terrorist, the man, the system – versus a life plagued with
anxiety, a fear of the unknown. The protagonists are saturated with an existential anxiety. Their search is for a tangible adversary other than the self.

**Ecological Crisis**

Another manner in which violence manifests itself is in *ecological crisis*, as Boggs and Pollard include in their definition of postmodernism (xi). What Baudrillard coins as “spectacular squandering” (*Consumer* 46), exemplified in the mass media by the excessive lifestyles of movie stars, is designed as a social model for waste: “Its function is to provide the economic stimulus for mass consumption” (46). Overconsumption and waste, types of violence inflicted upon the earth, are specifically addressed in the later postmodern narratives *Fight Club* and *Feed*. However, the issue has been tackled previously in a number of science fiction novels and films, including the 1973 film *Soylent Green* (roughly based on a 1966 science fiction novel entitled *Make Room! Make Room!*). Here, we see mass pollution, global warming, and overconsumption, leading to depleted resources and, in turn, shockingly creative means for replenishment – recycling deceased humans into food. Similar themes are present in numerous other futuristic science fiction narratives throughout the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century, such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* series of films (1984, 1991, 2003, 2009), *Waterworld* (1995), and *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), all of which tackle fear of technology, rampant war and destruction, and ecological crisis.

Some of the works released specifically near the turn of the millennium bring with them more cynicism and humor in addressing consumption and waste, as depicted in *Fight Club* (1999) and *Feed* (2002), as well as Mike Judge’s 2006 science fiction satire, *Idiocracy*. Like *Feed*, the film *Idiocracy* uses extensive exaggeration in depicting a futuristic wasteland overrun by corporate domination, food shortage, overpopulation, massive waste, and a collective decline in overall intelligence [see Figure 1]. Even many of the characters’ names are brand names, such as Tylenol, Velveeta, Frito, Beef Supreme, and of course, President Dwayne Elizondo “Mountain Dew” Herbert Camacho, a former wrestling and porn star, who uses flame-throwers in his speeches. As seen in *Idiocracy*, the transition from the serious nature of tackling such issues, to use of exaggeration, humor, and satire, may well be a sign that what was previously a prediction is now closer to reality, and perhaps hyperbolic humor is the only remaining method of making a noticeable statement.
Beyond the widely accepted notions of waste in terms of ecological crisis, some postmodern narratives, including *Fight Club* and *Feed*, also extend the concept of waste to the human body itself. Overconsumption is related to both the external world, as in objects or commodities, as well as the internal world, living a life of excess. In *Fight Club*, the use of satire and irony are reflected in the humorous depiction of the characters stealing human fat derived by liposuction from a plastic surgery clinic to make expensive designer soap [see Figure 2]. The character Tyler Durden explicitly states the irony: “It was beautiful. We were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them.”

*Fight Club* effectively uses humor and satire in order to critique the excesses of capitalism and the psychological ramifications of a materialist lifestyle. In this regard, Crowdus’ review is to the point:

What truly distinguishes *Fight Club*, however, is its pungent satire, whose numerous targets include the soul-deadening consequences of excessive materialism, cynical corporate policies based on an indifference to human life, festering workplace discontent, repressed male rage and gender-role anxiety, class resentment, New Age psychobabble, the emotional legacy for a generation of young men of physically or emotionally absent fathers, and a critique of the personality types who are attracted to political cults. (3)
Crowdus helps us to glean a key point: *Fight Club* may appear to be just another blockbuster film glorifying male violence, but upon closer examination, evidence abounds that it is a complex critique of the very thing it pretends to be on surface. Which is what makes it so effective.
CHAPTER 2

INHERENT CONTRADICTIONS: THE DUPLICITOUS FACE OF CAPITALISM

[A]ffluence and violence go together; they have to be analysed together.

–Jean Baudrillard
The Consumer Society

The negativity and violence embedded in postmodern culture has its links to an affluent capitalist lifestyle. Boggs and Pollard’s definition of modernism echoes the American ideological sentiment of a “liberal-capitalist mode of development” as tied to “science, technology, and material growth” (xi), while their definition of postmodernism references the “dark side” of modernism. This dark side is integral to the success of capitalism, and is a direct result of what French theorist Jean Baudrillard refers to as a growth society, in which “growth produces, reproduces and restores social inequality, privileges, disequilibria, etc.” (Consumer 52).

BAUDRILLARD’S AFFLUENT SOCIETY

According to Baudrillard, inequality is produced as a direct result of capitalism, and is necessary for the continued functioning of the capitalist system: “[T]he system stabilizes around a certain rate of distortion or, in other words, stabilizes, whatever the absolute volume of wealth, at a point which includes a systematic inequality” (Consumer 52). Baudrillard’s concept of systematic inequality explains the complicated dual nature in which capitalism functions. Inequality is a phenomenon that promotes further consumption, a positive for the system itself, while also manipulatively presented as a positive for the consumer – to be able to acquire anything he or she may want or need, and even more so, to have the opportunity of living a life of luxury and leisure. At the same time, while inequality stimulates continued consumption, individuals find themselves incessantly reaching toward an enigmatic and
unattainable threshold of satisfaction. Often, the unending search for meaning and completion through consumption is eventually directed inward, transforming into a sort of internalized consumption, or eating away at the individual self. In turn, the negative psychological effects of never quite feeling satisfied, adequate, accomplished, or complete often leads to a complicated amalgamation of spiritual erosion intertwined with an impending emotional and physical combustion, with outward expression often leading down an inevitable path to violence.

The signs of inequality are never more present than in a truly affluent society. The richer a society becomes, the richer a select few privileged become, and the poorer the rest feel. Although true poverty certainly exists in capitalist societies, in many cases the feeling of poverty is more imagined than real – one is poor only in relative comparison to others. Systematic inequality incites a socially signified fear and anxiety in consumers, which author Joanna Bourke discusses in *The Culture of Fear* (2005): “In the West, people do not fear starvation but are anxious about relative impoverishment, such as being forced to sell their home or car,” or even worse “fear of loss of others’ respect and of self-esteem, rather than riches flying away” (5).

The feeling of perpetual angst produced by a sense of inequality serves to increase consumption as individuals strive to attain more material wealth in an attempt to attain social status. Material goods lose their utilitarian value only to be replaced by a social value, what Baudrillard refers to as:

> the *social logic* of consumption […] It is a logic not of satisfaction, but of the production and manipulation of social signifiers. […] you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status. (*Consumer* 61)

And that is one of the primary purposes of consumption under capitalism, to both *fit in* as well as to “distinguish” oneself as *better than* others.

Evidence abounds regarding the manner in which the “social logic” of consumption plays a central role in many postmodern narratives, in which the protagonists search for happiness through material signs of wealth and distinction. In *American Beauty*, Lester Burnham and his entire social circle focus on appearances, as displayed via the suburban
neighborhood – beautiful houses, beautiful gardens, beautiful cars, beautiful interior décor, complete with beautiful people – significant and identity-defining collections on display [see Figures 3 and 4].

Similarly in Fight Club, the Narrator bases his entire life and sense of meaning and completeness on acquiring everything his society says he is supposed to attain, “slave” to what he refers to as the “Ikea nesting instinct,” building a life around a catalog depiction, and looking how his society says he is supposed to look [see Figure 5].

Likewise, the desire to be in style and fit in are evident in Feed, yet exaggerated through hyper-temporality, with the lifespan of fashion lasting only minutes, and the characters exhibiting severe anxiety in attempts to always be on trend. Often the protagonists in postmodern narratives have acquired everything their culture has designated as appropriate, everything that should define happiness, yet they still always feel something is missing, a sentiment appropriate to capitalist ideology and the basis of future purchases, and they are inevitably plagued by anxiety as a result.

Ironically, the quest for happiness as defined in social comparison to others appears to include a sort of requisite anxiety, perhaps due to its mythic and unachievable quality.

Figure 4. Carolyn Burnham is the image of perfection and happiness. Source: *American Beauty*. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, and Chris Cooper. Dreamworks, 1999. DVD.

Figure 5. Scene from *Fight Club* in which items in the protagonist's condo reflect their Ikea catalog descriptions. Source: *Fight Club*. Dir. David Fincher. Perf. Edward Norton, Brad Pitt, and Helena Bonham Carter. 20th Century Fox, 1999. DVD.
Baudrillard further elaborates on the social logic of consumption, in terms of a search for happiness:

[T]he myth of happiness is the one in which, in modern societies, takes up and comes to embody the myth of Equality. [...] the consumer ideal in which happiness is, first and foremost, the demand for equality (or distinction, of course) and must, accordingly, always signify with ‘regard’ to visible criteria. (Consumer 49)

Baudrillard’s concept of “the myth of Equality” essentially equates to the oft referred to phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” – happiness as defined in the “visible” comparison to others. The constant struggle to compete with the next person, to attain both equality and superiority, is at the heart of capitalism and keys to its success.

The idea of possibility, the land of opportunity – the ability to improve one’s stature, no matter the meager beginnings – is fundamental to the American dream of rising to the top, and fundamental to the capitalist system. The myth of equality depends on the presence of its opposite: inequality. Baudrillard builds on the concept of systematic inequality contained within the affluent society, referring to the symbolic class distinction requisite to the capitalist system as structural penury:

Before being a society productive of goods, it is in fact a society productive of privileges. Now, there is a necessary, sociologically definable relationship between privilege and penury. There could not (in any society whatever) be privilege without penury. The two are structurally linked. Growth is, therefore, by its social logic, paradoxically defined by the reproduction of a structural penury. [...] it is systemized as a booster function and power strategy in the very logic of the order of growth. (Consumer 66)

Structural penury, serving as a “booster function” to growth, also serves to further individual dissatisfaction under capitalism. Dissatisfaction has a positive purpose in that it becomes fuel for further consumption. And so capitalism as a system thrives. However, for the consumer, the inability to become fully equal or complete, after years and years and even a lifetime, takes its toll. Negative psychological consequences occur resulting from the growth society model – one is never quite satisfied with his or her lot in life, never quite fulfilled, plagued by fear and anxiety, always striving for more and more. Growth society is based on, and depends on, a deep sense of dissatisfaction, as well as a deeply ingrained sense of competition.
The seeds of violence begin as competition. Competition spurs growth. Anxiety spurs growth. And they are both sources at the heart of a search for happiness, as well as key factors in the byproduct of violence. Baudrillard describes the links between happiness and violence:

A gigantic process of primitive accumulation of anxiety, guilt and rejection runs parallel to the process of expansion and satisfaction and it is this source of discontent which fuels the violent, impulsive subversion of – and murderous ‘acting-out’ against – the very order of happiness. (Consumer 176)

Growth society is an inherently competitive and, in turn, violent society. The search for happiness is a search for equality in a land of inequality. The system is designed with this contradiction at its core. Impossibility and anxiety – the two very factors that keep the capitalist system alive. No wonder violence becomes a part of the system.

In the narratives in which affluence is relatively lacking – particularly “relative” poverty as in comparison to others, such as The Winter of Our Discontent – what Baudrillard coins as a “subversion of […] the very order of happiness” (Consumer 176) is based on the character’s perceived inability to rise up the social ladder, no matter the actual degree of comfort and security the individual may currently possess. As Baudrillard previously described, structural penury is a key component to the success of capitalism, significant in the incessant struggle toward an ever-intangible happiness, as well as a key cause to the perpetual discontent plaguing individuals and postmodern culture as a whole.

Theorist Slavoj Žižek also discusses the idea of perpetual discontent, comparing desire versus need:

Desiring property and power is legitimate insofar as it enables an individual to achieve independence from others. Adversaries in a conflict, however, each have a natural tendency always to demand more. Nothing is enough for them, and they are never satisfied. They do not know how to stop themselves; they know no limits. Desire demands more, much more, than need. (63)

The constant bombardment of images, psychologically manipulating viewers to “want” things they likely do not “need,” is at the heart of the enigmatic search for “happiness,” creating a culturally collective “desire” for everything that capitalism symbolizes, i.e. independence, security, comfort, wealth, distinction – leading to all of the consequences inherent to the system, i.e. overconsumption, obesity, anxiety, dissatisfaction, waste,
destruction, and violence. Consumers are both internally compelled and externally driven to consume, on an eternal scale: “they know no limits.”

Advertising is a key component to the sense of dissatisfaction plaguing consumers, and utilizes the consumer’s internal drive toward competition. Baudrillard analyzes the masculine model of advertising, particularly as it relates to competition and the role of freedom of choice:

All masculine advertising stresses the rule of choice […] The modern man of quality is particular or demanding. He will countenance no failing and he neglects no detail. […] There is no question of letting himself go or indulging himself; his aim is to achieve distinction. […] The masculine model is, then, a model of competitive or selective virtue. Much more deeply, choice […] is the counterpart in our societies to the rite of challenge and competition in primitive ones: it confers status. (Consumer 96-97)

One of the fundamental capacities ingrained within capitalism, perhaps its greatest achievement, is in its ability to manipulate the consumer into believing he or she has a choice in the matter. Of course a person can choose which items to purchase or not, but the selection from which each and every choice is made is controlled by the system itself. The illusion of choice provides the delusion of power, which in actuality has been surrendered.

The individual ego is perhaps one of the most significant pieces to the success of capitalism in post-industrial society. The ego is involved to some degree in every consumer purchase, sometimes even coming down to which tomatoes to buy – asking oneself, “If I purchase organic tomatoes, how does that define me as a person?” The object purchased is done so from a conscious level of what that object represents, how it makes the consumer look in the eyes of others, rather than its utilitarian value. This “social logic of consumption,” as Baudrillard coins it (Consumer 60), has the intended result of differentiation and distinction, yet in turn, also the unintended result of isolation and loneliness. The yearning to stand out, to overcome mediocrity, particularly through consumption based on the premise of defining ourselves through our possessions, inevitably leads to an overwhelming sense of alienation, to which Baudrillard further attests: “The consumer object isolates” (Consumer 85). Beyond the sense of distinction and resulting isolation, the irony of capitalism comes into play, whereas “to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, […] and therefore to relinquish any real difference […] This is the miracle and the tragedy of differentiation” (Consumer 88).
Baudrillard’s comments regarding the social logic of consumption also address the issue of conformity, particularly as it pertains to the other-directed character type, outlined by sociologist David Riesman, et al. in The Lonely Crowd. In this ground-breaking work published in 1950, Riesman et al. describe the changes of the dominant social character in America following World War II as it evolved with society’s transition to a consumer economy from inner-directed, based on self-reliance and firm principles, to other-directed:

What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. This source is of course “internalized” in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life. (21)

Where inner-directed character was focused on production and guidance from an internal compass, outer-directed focused on consumption and guidance from observation of the preferences of others. The fast-changing atmosphere present in American capitalist society – with the “goals toward which the other-directed person strives” constantly “shift[ing]” – inevitably leads to the perpetual discontent that would come to plague individuals, arguably to an exponentially larger degree since the book’s original publication in 1950.

This concept is visually portrayed with an unnerving sense of loneliness and despair in the film adaptation of Revolutionary Road, in which Frank is shown on his daily train commute [see Figures 6 and 7]. All of the male workers are dressed the same, in gray suit and fedora hat, each one blending in with all the others. As they descend the stairs in the train station, no single figure stands out, and even their faces are dark and anonymous – nameless, faceless, with all elements of a unique identity relinquished. Each has given up their individuality for the capitalist way of life, just as Baudrillard describes: “to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, […] and therefore to relinquish any real difference” (Consumer 88). Frank, in the center, is drowning in a sea of anomie, alienation, and meaninglessness, which is the spark that eventually engulfs his world, leading to the tragic conclusion. Riesman et al. close The Lonely Crowd on an appropriately postmodern, unpromising note: “The idea that men are created free and equal is both true and misleading:
Figure 6. Frank waiting for train. Source: *Revolutionary Road*. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. Dreamworks SKG, 2008. DVD.

Figure 7. Frank lost in the shadows of the lonely crowd. Source: *Revolutionary Road*. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. Dreamworks SKG, 2008. DVD.
men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other” (307).

MODERN SHACKLES

Numerous modern developments designed as signifiers for privilege have evolved to encompass more negative connotations in postmodern society. The development and social transformation of the privately owned automobile is a prime example. In his “Situationist Theses on Traffic,” theorist Guy Debord discusses the relevance of the automobile to capitalism:

[T]he private automobile […] is the most notable material symbol of the notion of happiness that developed capitalism tends to spread throughout the society. The automobile is at the heart of this general propaganda, both as supreme good of an alienated life and as essential product of the capitalist market. (69)

Although individual automobile purchases are intended to provide joy and prestige to the owners, Guy Debord further comments on one of the negative byproducts: “Commuting time […] is a surplus labor which correspondingly reduces the amount of ‘free’ time” (69).

Privately-owned vehicles were originally designed as a convenience for the privileged few in society, both to decrease commute time thereby providing more leisure time, as well as to provide distinction and elevated social status above the masses that use mass transit. Following the growth society model, the privilege of private automobile ownership produced desire in those who felt relative poverty in their lack of ownership, which served as a booster function for further automobile production and consumption. Accordingly, when the privileged few somehow became the privileged many, structural penury loosened its grip, and individuals inevitably began a search for visible distinction once more. Now that almost everyone has an automobile, which model with which luxury features become the signs of distinction. The superfluity of automobile models present today is a direct result of not just the growth society model, but also of the search for identity and distinction through materialism. Even further, the overwhelming degree of private automobile ownership has become a negative byproduct of consumption and a notorious component of postmodern cultural malaise, due to traffic jams, pollution, and numerous other resulting issues.

Jean Baudrillard analyzes the individualist versus collectivist contradictions inherent to the capitalist system, ideological contradictions that result in the violence that is also now
an undeniably component to the system. In his discussion, he uses the example of the traffic jam:

The automobile and traffic provide the classic example of all these contradictions: unlimited promotion of individual consumption sits alongside desperate calls for collective responsibility and social morality and increasingly severe constraints. (Consumer 84)

The “irresolvable contradictions” (Consumer 84) built into the capitalist system and the resulting guilt felt by the individualist consumer rarely leads to the consumer’s change of heart when it comes to “collective responsibility,” as one lives a life of fetishist disavowal. He or she does not, or rather cannot, simply decide to stop being a part of the problem and become part of the solution – the mixed messages produced by the system ensure the impossibility of such action. As a result, when individuals are sitting in traffic, getting nowhere, they might feel an inkling of guilt for a split second for contributing to the problem (i.e. a single individual in a single car, in line with so many other single individuals in their cars, all the direct cause not only of gas consumption and pollution, but also of the very traffic jam each of them is painfully experiencing at that moment); however, that feeling of guilt soon turns to a sense of entitlement encapsulated in anger and hostility over the fact that they do not deserve to suffer like this; they work hard and deserve this car, deserve to be able to get to work in peace on their own schedule; they should not have to share anything with anyone, transportation or otherwise. With typical projection of guilt, they feel it is someone else who is causing this traffic jam, and that someone else must be punished. Such feelings of cognitive dissonance often transform into road rage, a problem plaguing the American landscape, as well as the American dream. This individualist ideology promoted by the capitalist system is the very reason for traffic jams in the first place; and although the government steps in with “calls for collective responsibility” like carpool lanes – a beneficent or “altruistic” move by all appearances – such social constraints are in many ways simply present to pacify and ease the minds of the semi-conscious consumer, as well as to offer another opportunity for distinction.

A number of American films from the 1990s depict the traffic jam and the resulting suffering imposed on the postmodern individual, including Office Space (1999) and Falling Down (1993) [See Figures 8-11]. In Office Space, the film depicts several of the individual characters in their cars, with emotions ranging from sheer numbness, to screaming rap music,
Figure 8. Traffic jam during morning commute. Source: *Office Space*. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston and Jennifer Aniston. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. DVD.

Figure 9. Samir in traffic expressing frustration and anger. Source: *Office Space*. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston and Jennifer Aniston. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. DVD.

to utter rage. All the while, they are getting nowhere. In *Falling Down*, the protagonist has lost his family through divorce, and then later also lost his job. Beyond that, part of his daily routine involves continually being forced to endure the agony of traffic jams. Anger builds up as these characters feel an inability to progress forward not only at that moment sitting in traffic, but also spiritually in their lives as a whole – they feel stuck, like something or someone is blocking them from getting ahead in the world.

Traffic jams are a postmodern form of imprisonment, and so too is the traditional office cubicle. Both are examples of the purest irony – with the illusion of freedom they are meant to provide, yet with prison-like results. The individual sits in traffic on the way to work, inside a lonely motorized prison cell which he or she has chosen as a method of avoiding others, a convenient form of freedom via confinement, only to reach a destination within another form of confinement or prison, i.e. the cubicle. Numerous postmodern films depict the protagonists in miserable and almost catatonic states as they work within their virtual prison cells, such as *The Matrix*, *Office Space*, *American Beauty*, and *Fight Club* [see Figures 12-15.]. The concept of escape is visually depicted in *Office Space* with Peter eventually knocking down the walls of his cubicle and his leaning back with a smile on his face and a deep sense of satisfaction [see Figure 14]. Additionally, the film contains a side narrative focusing on one of the minor characters, Milton, in which he is slowly edged out of significance. Progressively throughout the film, the walls of Milton’s cubicle close in on him [see Figure 15], and he is eventually ousted to the basement. The film ends on an appropriately destructive note with Milton setting the office building on fire, freeing everyone [see Figure 16].

Similarly, in *Falling Down*, the protagonist exacts his escape as a switch goes off while stuck in traffic. He has a mental breakdown, comes to feel he has nothing else to lose, and steps out of his car and embarks upon a violent rampage throughout the city on foot – going native in the urban jungle. The tagline for the film reads, “The adventures of an ordinary man at war with the everyday world.” On the poster we see him standing on the ruins of old concrete steps sprayed with graffiti, wearing the appropriate tie and white collar, and carrying a briefcase and a shotgun, an ironic juxtaposition explicitly illustrating the connection between the corporate American lifestyle and violence [see Figure 17].
Figure 12. Lester’s computer screen evokes image of bars from a prison cell, reflecting his emotional imprisonment. Source: *American Beauty*. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, and Chris Cooper. Dreamworks, 1999. DVD.

Figure 13. Peter in his cubicle expressing frustration. Source: *Office Space*. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston and Jennifer Aniston. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. DVD.
Figure 14. Peter expressing satisfaction after knocking down his cubicle wall. Source: *Office Space*. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston and Jennifer Aniston. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. DVD.

Figure 15. Milton with his cubicle slowly closing in on him. Source: *Office Space*. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston and Jennifer Aniston. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. DVD.
In many ways, everywhere the postmodern individual goes is another form of prison. The car, the office cubicle, and even the home. Suburbia is simply another place of isolation and dissatisfaction. Surrounded by all of the material possessions society has defined as ideal to one’s happiness, the home of the postmodern individual often leaves a sense of quite the opposite, discontent and entrapment.Appearances are of utmost importance, signifiers for happiness. Job, house, car, wife, children, etc. – the picture of happiness.

In the pivotal dining room scene in *American Beauty*, in which each family member is depicted as miserable when they are together [see Figure 18], Lester’s feelings of oppression begin to leach out violently, as he expresses that he is not going to take it anymore, with lines such as: “And your mother seems to prefer I go through life like a fucking prisoner while she keeps my dick in a Mason jar under the sink.” Or “I am sick and tired of being treated like I don't exist. You two do whatever you want to do, whenever you want to do it, and I don't complain. Now all I want is the same.” In contrast their neighbors sit in front of the television after a quiet dinner, appearing completely disconnected, never speaking to or even touching each other, each in a zombie-like trance [see Figure 19].

PRIVILEGE AND ALIENATION

In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard describes the two sides to capitalism: “[T]he sign or mark of distinction is always both a positive and a negative difference – this is why it refers on indefinitely to other signs and impels the consumer on to definitive dissatisfaction” (61-62). The multitude of possible choices offered by consumer society should be definitive of freedom, which leads to the question, why do individuals feel an overwhelming sense of imprisonment? The getting-away-from-everyone-else offered by the private automobile, the cubicle, the single-family home in the suburban neighborhood – each developed as a form of distinction and privilege – also have the negative function of isolation and confinement, becoming modern shackles. So too are one’s possessions, consumed with the duplicitous purpose of both equality and distinction. As Tyler Durden of *Fight Club* states, “The things you own end up owning you.” It becomes a cycle of imprisonment acted out according to capitalism’s diabolical plan. One must work to provide food, clothing, and shelter. In order to work, one needs a mode of transportation. The food becomes necessarily more expensive, as do the clothing, vehicle, and home. One goes further and further into debt, and must work more and more. The capitalist drive ultimately functions as a masochistic mode of self-imprisonment. Baudrillard describes the emotional impact of modern work and the sense of powerlessness:

Political ‘indifference’, that catatonia of the modern citizen, is the indifference of the individual deprived of any decision-making powers and left only with the sop of universal suffrage. And the physical and mental monotony of work on the production line or in the office plays its part, too. (*Consumer* 183)

Baudrillard’s description of modern life as catatonic, with “individual[s] deprived of any decision-making powers” taken along with the “monotony of work” are reminiscent of the concept of *alienated labor* as theorized by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels: “The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself” (Marx and Engels 767). The resulting estrangement derives from the fact that his work “is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another” (767). When the worker is estranged from the products of his labor, working for someone else, work becomes “therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it” (767) – in this case the need for money. To spend. To be good consumers as defined by capitalist society. Even with the so-called privileges of the
private automobile, the privacy of the office cubicle, the privacy of the suburban home, none of these signs of affluence could ever be cures for the apathy and numbness inherent to the postmodern condition, because they come with strings attached – someone else is in charge. The sense of powerlessness is a direct antecedent to the saturating feelings of monotony and catatonia described by Baudrillard and suffered by postmodern citizens of the consumer society. Yet by all appearances, life is good.

We can see evidence of such numbness in virtually all of the male protagonists of postmodern narratives. Lester of *American Beauty* describes the high point of his day as when he masturbates in the shower each morning. Peter of *Office Space* is literally hypnotized with the satirical purpose of exaggerating the feeling of catatonia he experiences each day while deploying to work from his apartment to his car, where he is trapped in a traffic jam, only to transfer into another numbing vessel, the office cubicle. Neo of *The Matrix* lives a life of isolation and meaninglessness, of non-reality, as if he is not even present. Jack of *Fight Club* walks around in a daze of insomnia, asleep while awake, day after day [see Figure 20]. Beyond postmodern films, the imprisoned and numb feeling has even been parodied in comics, humorously anthropomorphizing human qualities onto dogs [see Figure 21]. All of these characters, whether cartoon dog, literary fictional character, or human film protagonist, are depicted as not only feeling as if something is missing, but as if they are spiritually dead. The only way to escape is through literal breakdown, breaking out of the “cages” they have made for themselves, breaking through to an alternate reality, a pre-capitalist primordial animalistic reawakening.

The inherent contradictions tied to capitalism inevitably lead to negative psychological consequences for its followers: “Instead of equalizing opportunities and reducing social competition (economic and status competition), the consumption process makes competition more violent and more acute in all its forms” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 182). Built into the capitalist system are such contradictions, a back-and-forth, unsteady ideology for the consumer to not only live by, but on which to base his or her whole identity – to be like everyone else, yet to be different; to fit in, yet stand out. Always striving to be better than the next guy. The end result, perpetual dissatisfaction; the final product, anything but final. Every individual remains infinitely stressed, living an incessantly anxious state of being. With every purchase, the immediate need for a different purchase follows. The

Figure 21. Cartoon by Gary McCoy, from unknown issue of USA Weekend magazine.
capitalist system is thoroughly imbedded with contradictions at every turn, a complicated web of conflicting intricacies on which it ironically thrives. Thus the capitalist system survives, specifically subsisting on and exploiting the angst of the consumer. What happens after years of perpetual dissatisfaction? Anger. Outbursts. Rebellion. Violence.

**Žižek’s Systemic Violence**

Further elaborating the “dark side” of modernism definitive of postmodernism, Baudrillard’s concept of *systematic inequality* goes hand-in-hand with Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek’s concept of *systemic violence*. Žižek asserts that the American capitalist system cannot survive without the use of fear. Even more so, violence has a positive purpose under capitalism.

Žižek contrasts what he refers to as a “triumvirate” of three types of violence that function together within capitalism. First, *subjective violence* is the more “directly visible” form, or a “violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (1). The other two, *symbolic violence* and *systemic violence*, he describes as “objective kinds of violence.” *Symbolic violence* is that which is “embodied in language” and “relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech” (1-2). *Systemic violence* Žižek shrewdly defines as “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (2). He describes it as perhaps the most significant of the triumvirate, a much more hidden form of violence, one so elusive that it ironically “sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance” (1). Systemic violence is the “background which generates such outbursts” of subjective violence typical of postmodern life, and depicted in many of its narratives.

Under Žižek’s analysis, systemic violence is just as significant to capitalism as money, and even more so, develops as a direct result of the socially symbolic importance of money, as he describes:

[I]t is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions, but is purely ‘objective,’ systemic, anonymous. (12-13)
The systemic violence Žižek describes could also be explained to encompass more of a feeling or emotion, perhaps an amalgamation of the many facets of postmodern angst. The anonymous quality of this type of violence is what gives it so much power. Any attempts to resist or eradicate it are futile because it can never be truly uncovered or identified. The often unexplainable violence characteristic of postmodern society is a direct response to systemic anonymous violence.

In Joanna Bourke’s *Fear: A Cultural History*, she offers a historical account of the manner in which the human emotion of fear has been projected culturally throughout history. She poignantly clarifies the difference between *fear* and *anxiety*:

> In analysing responses to fear, a distinction is often made between ‘fear’ and ‘anxiety’. In one case a frightening person or dangerous object can be identified: the flames searing patterns on the ceiling, the hydrogen bomb, the terrorist. More often, anxiety overpowers us from some source ‘within’: there is an irrational panic about venturing outside, a dread of failure, a premonition of doom. Therefore, according to most commentators, the word ‘fear’ is used to refer to an immediate, objective threat, while anxiety refers to an anticipated, subjective threat. Anxiety is described as a more generalised state, while fear is more specific and immediate. The ‘danger object’ seems to be in front of us in fear states, while in anxiety states the individual is not consciously aware of what endangers him or her. (189)

Anxiety is the more significant and damaging manifestation of fear in postmodern existence. In contrast to fear of an actual entity, external and visible, anxiety is an internal state, and as such, the individual becomes both enemy and victim, attacking oneself from within.

**Consumption of Violence**

As depicted in postmodern narratives, connections are apparent between the evolution of discontent in society and the evolution of fear and anxiety. In some ways, the decades of the latter half of the twentieth century show evidence of an attempt at putting a face on the source of terror, placing blame on a “believed” enemy, in some cases falsely believed. Joanna Bourke extends her analysis by describing the function of projecting fear onto a “believed” enemy as both political and systemic:

> The uncertainty of anxiety can be whisked away by processes of naming an enemy […] converting anxiety into fear. The ‘work’ of fear is commercial work: converting anxieties into fears is the function of a range of new professionals and, in pharmaceutical terms, is big business. It also has a political function: scapegoating. (190)
The negative psychological impact of scapegoating is certainly a relevant topic worthy of deeper investigation, but looking at the social ramifications, no doubt exists regarding its positive political function for the capitalist system. Scapegoating as Bourke describes it relates to Žižek’s analysis of subjective violence: “[S]ubjective violence is just the most visible” (11) and has a political function, working as an intentional distraction from the more hidden systemic violence, thereby aiding the perpetuation of the capitalist system. Fear is transformed – it moves from consuming the individual (i.e., anxiety) to the individual consuming fear, particularly on television. The fear up for consumption is often portrayed visually and violently by the media.

Jean Baudrillard’s explanation of consumption is pointed and evocative; he defines “the locus of consumption” as “daily life” (Consumer 34) and with that, the individual’s sense of “everydayness” as a manner of “reinterpret[ing] the world ‘for internal consumption’” (Consumer 35). Baudrillard goes further, linking everydayness with the security and comfort that ironically results from the consumption of violent images:

Everydayness as closure […] would be unbearable without the simulacrum of the world, without the alibi of participation in the world. It has to be fueled by the images, the repeated signs of that transcendence. As we have seen, its tranquility needs the vertiginous spin of reality and history. Its tranquility requires perpetual consumed violence for its own exaltation. That is its particular obscenity. It is partial to events and violence, provided the violence is served up at room temperature. The caricature image of this has the TV viewer lounging in front of images of the Vietnam War. The TV image, like a window turned outside-in, opens initially on to a room and, in that room, the cruel exteriority of the world becomes something intimate and warm – warm with a perverse warmth. (Consumer 35)

It is almost as if the function of consuming violent images provides comfort for the viewer, able to say to one’s self, “At least it’s not me.” All that horrible stuff is happening somewhere else, to someone else – how fortunate. And of course, in the 21st century, one can easily imagine replacing the “TV viewer lounging in front of images of the Vietnam War” with images of the 9/11 attacks.

For the capitalist system, the political benefits of consuming violent imagery are numerous. First, it has the intended effect of desensitization, in which individuals simply get accustomed to violence and come to accept it as an inevitable part of life. This has the added political bonus for the powers-that-be of decreasing the drive to resist, rebel, or fight back.
against the system. Slavoj Žižek describes the political function of this visible, *subjective violence*:

> Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence – that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn’t it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them? (10-11)

According to Žižek, the constant bombardment of violent imagery functions as an intended distraction from other much more psychologically violent aspects covertly imbedded within the capitalist system. Even more so, as Baudrillard argues, the repetition of violent imagery as part of “daily life” (*Consumer* 34) becomes not only comfortable, “intimate and warm,” (*Consumer* 35) but even intensely desired. The chronic vacillation between desensitization, or numbness, and anxiety lead to what can be compared to as a drug addiction. The somatic sensations produced by fear and anxiety become desired; they need to be fed in regular doses or the consumer is left hungry, and even further dissatisfied. We need something to fear, or the anxiety will eat us alive, which indeed it appears to do in some form anyway. Is it possible to be addicted to fear? Perhaps, if the anxiety caused by the system has no identifiable agent and we are defensively driven to reconstitute it, directing it onto that violence which we conveniently see right in front of us. As Žižek so appropriately states, “the task is precisely to *change the topic*” (11).

The media and advertisers not only exploit consumer dissatisfaction, and fear, but they also exacerbate it, creating anxiety and a never-ending cycle of fear and violence, as Boggs and Pollard argue:

> The media and popular culture images of the postmodern environment reflect and help reproduce precisely this chaotic universe where civic violence, corruption, rampant white-collar crime, poverty, and urban deterioration are the order of the day. The psychological consequences involve a sense of displacement, dread, and paranoia that, sooner or later, find their way into the contemporary narratives, styles, and spectacles of American film. (13)

As the authors explain, the subject matter of postmodern narratives is direct evidence of the afflictions plaguing individuals, and their search for meaning through art.
**Postmodernism Transformed: A New Era**

Whether through humor and satire, or realistic portrayals of sadness and anger, the manner in which cultural narratives depict the collective psychological struggles present in society evolves in parallel response to the changing culture. Earlier postmodern conflicts appear to be focused on the everyday ideological contradictions of materialism, while they later come to address war, disease, violent crime, and ecological crisis. More recently, a new breed of fear and violence – terrorism – has become an additional focus of many narratives. Postmodernism has in some ways transformed into a new, perhaps as-yet-unnamed, post-9/11 era of thought and artistic expression, with more current narrative critiques of consumerism, dissatisfaction, apathy, anxiety, and violence being reinterpreted and compounded within a new fear of the enigmatic and faceless terrorist. Prime examples are Lance Olsen’s *10:01* and M. T. Anderson’s *Feed*.

In *Feed* and *10:01*, the authors use a similar approach to that which Robert Stam describes: “at first sight seem[ing] to be under the sway of the dominant ideology” (141). Anderson’s *Feed* begins with a teenager living in a not-so-distant future, with the same priorities as teens of present-day, hanging out with friends, focusing on fashion trends and possible love interests, going to school and shopping. The author depicts a futuristic society with some obvious differences from the present, but overall, the everydayness remains part of the cultural mindset, with waste and consumerism portrayed as just as substantial as food and sex to the average way of life. Anderson gradually throws in little problems for the reader, which eventually become big problems, revealing “cracks and faultlines.”

Lance Olsen’s *10:01* also begins in a very familiar arena, inside a movie theater inside a shopping mall, an everyday locale as American as apple pie – and not just any shopping mall, but the Mall of America, an icon of capitalism. With each passing description of the hidden thoughts inside the minds of each character, the reader is exposed to more and more of a typically unseen secrecy which each member of society is always carrying within them, opening up an awareness for the reader of the questionable morality and sometimes even dangers we are inches away from at any moment. Olsen exposes many “cracks and faultlines” merely by revealing private thoughts, essentially showing the reader that the dominant ideology of society is actually composed of an amalgamation of numerous fragile and separate individual ideologies pretending to go along with the order of the day,
pretending to follow the dominant ideology. Even more so, Olsen makes evident the overwhelming and almost disease-like affliction plaguing individuals in postmodern, post-9/11 society – anxiety – the fear of an unknown yet interminably dangerous enemy, who could attack at any moment. Terrorism itself is a unique monster – it is a real threat and in turn instills real fear, yet at the same time it is a hovering unknowable menace difficult to target, thereby circling individuals back around to internalizing the fear in the form of chronic anxiety. Perfect for capitalism, that anxiety is transferred onto new targets which consumer society manipulates individuals into worrying about – fashion, money, social distinction – anything but the true horrors taking place outside our minds in the real world.

**CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY**

Terrorist acts exacerbate fear and anxiety and essentially reinforce consumerist behavior. The government is well aware of this correlation, and often fuels it by both further heightening fear while simultaneously promoting spending as a patriotic requirement of what it means to be a good citizen. One consumer psychology study by Jamie Arndt, et al. (2004), has shown a correlation between terrorist acts and consumer spending. Following the events of 9/11, researchers cited an approximate 6% increase in spending compared to previous annual rates. An increase in movie attendance was also noted following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which is evidence of an increase in not only material spending but also in the consumption of images (Arndt et al. 198). Additionally, in *A World in Chaos*, authors Boggs and Pollard discuss the increase in movie-going following 9/11:

> In 2002 more Americans went to the movies – attended showings in theaters – than at any time since immediately after World War II […] no doubt part of an undercurrent of escapism resulting from the aftereffects of the terrorist attacks (including fear of future attacks). (x)

Not only did the American public chose to go to the movies as a form of escapism, they were also glued to their televisions and the multitude of real-life violent imagery the media offered up at “room temperature,” in Baudrillard’s words (*Consumer 35*), as discussed earlier. Citizens’ needs to “reinterpret the world” (*Consumer 35*) require them to feel simultaneously close to it while also a safe distance from it. What Baudrillard refers to as “the simulacrum of the world,” depicted as violent images, provides a method for accepting “the cruel exteriority of the world” (*Consumer 35*). Even more so, the government also uses the mass media to
propagandize its political objectives, which includes creating even more fear with continuous terror alerts, promoting a war agenda, as well as consumerism.

Further studies have linked Freud’s concept of death anxiety to consumerism. The human ego defense mechanism commonly enlisted to tackle death anxiety is that of “denial,” which is enacted in many forms, including increased consumption, violating social norms, and violence, often leading to even more social and psychological damage. The field of Terror Management Theory focuses on the phenomenon of consumerism and/or materialism as methods of coping behaviors enlisted in the face of death or other traumatic experiences. Essentially, shopping makes one forget about things for a while; however, in denial form, consumer behavior is typically excessive and can lead to even more severe anxiety. We can see such defensive behaviors in the protagonists of many postmodern narratives, whether exhibited as shopping sprees, blatant disregard for authority, slothful laziness, criminal behaviors, family violence, alcohol abuse, destructive sexual behaviors – the list is endless. In Fear: A Cultural History, Bourke reflects on the possible reasons for the apparent transformation in the manifestations of fear and anxiety:

Instead of tangible threats to corporeal existence that are occasioned by war, the last few decades of the twentieth century are characterised by more nebulous anxiety states, focusing on fatigued environments of flesh and fellowship. Cancer and crime, pain and pollution: these fears isolate us. The acceleration of rates of change and the fact that threats seem to be everywhere – in the earth, air and sun – is bewildering. The fact that many of these risks are invisible and global also makes them more frightening because they are impossible to manage or avoid.

(293)

A more real yet unidentifiable enemy with an ever-looming presence not only transforms the manner in which we feel fear, but has also transformed the function of our art.

One major contrast between most of the late-20th-century postmodern narratives and those that have appeared after 9/11 – the individual rising up, reclaiming power, and rejecting consumer society’s domination – is nowhere to be found. No heroes come out of the woodwork to lead an army against the machines, such as Neo from The Matrix, or John Connor from The Terminator. No inspirational rebels are brave enough to break out of the mold in which society has defined for them, such as Lester Burnham in American Beauty, Peter Gibbons in Office Space, or the Narrator/Tyler Durden in Fight Club. With the real-world events of 9/11, any fantasy of rebellion against the system of oppression was crushed.
The new purpose of art, a la post-9/11-postmodernism, could very well be a search for a new ideology by which to live – one with real purpose rather than the superficiality capitalist society has crammed down the throats of citizens. In the 2008 documentary film *Examined Life*, theorist Slavoj Žižek discusses the link between ideology and catastrophes:

Ideology addresses very real problems, but mystifies them. One of the elementary ideological mechanisms, I claim, is what I call the *temptation of meaning*. When something horrible happens, our spontaneous tendency is to search for meaning. It must mean something. (59:18)

Žižek is standing in a landfill when he makes this statement, specifically referring to the environmental movement [see Figure 22]. He continues by stating that “ecology will slowly turn maybe into the new opium of the masses.”

![Figure 22. Interview with Slavoj Žižek. Source: *Examined Life*. Dir. Astra Taylor. Perf. Judith Butler, Cornel West, and Slavoj Žižek. Sphinx Productions, 2008. DVD.](image)

Žižek’s statements remind us that no matter what the most recent catastrophe may be, mankind is always in search for new meaning to replace the current one because true meaning, in the existential sense, is always on the run, somehow just out of reach. Ideology and man’s search for meaning, what Žižek calls the *temptation of meaning*, coincides with what Jameson refers to as the search for an “imaginary resolution to a real contradiction.”
With each new event comes a new search, or a further sign that the search will never end. But perhaps the one benefit of catastrophes may be to give us further fuel, a muse for our burning desires for meaning and completion. These real contradictions, and their many “gifts” of confliction, can be one of two things: either the death of us, or the breath of us. At the very least, the search for meaning through art will hopefully aid individuals to find some inner-directed source of agency.
CHAPTER 3

SYSTEMIC WASTE: CONSUMPTION, TRASH, 
AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

[D]oes not affluence ultimately only have meaning in wastage?
–Jean Baudrillard

The Consumer Society

In the statement above from The Consumer Society, Jean Baudrillard sums up one of the more deeply disturbing elements of capitalism. Waste is integral to the capitalist system, both figuratively a positive sign of affluence, as well as physically a negative consequence of consumption. The social advantages waste brings to one’s reputation via prestige are at least part of the reason it has long been accepted, and then much too late, in the postmodern age, is now viewed as a major problem in society with no real cure. As critiqued in many postmodern narratives such as Feed and Fight Club, consumers are aware of the ecological crisis caused by waste, but appear to have essentially accepted it, a la the psychological mechanisms of cognitive dissonance or Žižek’s fetishist disavowal. The cultural sentiment is that it is easier to continue to consume rather than fight an inevitable monster, a beast inherent to capitalism, one that will always win no matter the brave opponent doused in denial and futility. Yet, beyond the negative factors ensconced in the issue of waste, it also holds a positive social value, thereby corresponding with the contradictions typical of postmodern life.

The act of consumption feeds a survivalist need for an almost inherent yet unseen drive within the human psyche for always wanting more, which Baudrillard discusses further:

All societies have always wasted, squandered, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly necessary for the simple reason that it is in the consumption of a surplus, of a superfluity that the individual – and society – feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive. (Consumer 43)
This feeling of being “alive” essentially stems back to humans’ more primitive competitive nature, relevant to the concept of survival of the fittest, yet transformed in modern times to a more superficial and symbolic evolution of social survival – whoever has the most stuff, the biggest this, the flashiest that, will live the best life, will be the best. Beyond the baser nature of physical survival comes the social significance of the visible accumulation of material wealth.

In his article “What was Fight Club? Theses on the value worlds of trash capitalism,” George L. Henderson analyzes the prominence of trash within the Fight Club narrative, particularly as it is fundamentally entwined with capitalism:

[T]rash infects the circulation of value as such – it becomes a form of value. That is to say, trash enters into commodity production and exchange, rather than being ruled out by it. Trash becomes part of the very sociality that is requisite to and reproduced by commodity production and exchange: it forces a rethinking of value as such and, thereby, of what the work of capital might be. (144)

Here, Henderson answers Baudrillard’s question “does not affluence ultimately only have meaning in wastage” with a firm and undeniable YES. In postmodern culture, trash is a form of social currency, and as such, has positive value as a sign of affluence, as Baudrillard explains:

[W]aste, far from being an irrational residue, takes on a positive function, taking over where rational utility leaves off to play its part in a higher social functionality – a social logic in which waste even appears ultimately as the essential function, the extra degree of expenditure, superfluity, the ritual uselessness of ‘expenditure for nothing’ becoming the site of production of values, differences and meanings on both the individual and the social level. (Consumer 43)

In many ways, trash or waste functions as a sign of an enviable life of leisure. Part of being affluent is having the privilege of not worrying about running out of things. One can see an image of the rich and powerful literally throwing money to the wind, wastefully – an image of a life of luxury to be desired by everyone yet attained by few. The privilege of being wasteful is part of capitalist ideology, a ritual fantasy that must be pursued and practiced. Yet, words such as excess, surplus, and superfluity have a dualistic meaning – bringing to mind the question: where does all the extra go?

The irony of waste is physically evident in the landfill, emblematic of postmodern life, or as Baudrillard wisely puts it: “What is produced today is not produced for its use-
value or its possible durability, but rather with an eye to its death” (Consumer 46). In turn, the capitalist mindset of “out-with-the-old, in-with-the-new” brings up the issue of space – the “old” must go somewhere. While spending and accumulation of possessions may make individuals feel “alive,” particularly when they can look at their surroundings and see visible evidence of a happy life fully-lived – however illusory – a lack of space and an over-abundance of possessions, especially “old” ones, requires a person to make a choice, to continually redefine “trash.” And the act of discarding the old, the used, the refuse, provides a deep sense of satisfaction, a sense of distinction and affluence. Conversely, where spending and accumulation of material possessions can make a person feel alive, the landfill is an eerie reminder of the loss of utility and the end of life – the landfill is the visible embodiment of “death.” A visible reminder of our own impending deaths, something we prefer not to see. Trash pulls out of our subconscious a deeply-ingrained death anxiety. And an almost instinctual defense mechanism of denial comes into play. The landfill provides the solution – out of sight, out of mind. Yet, our attempts at fetishist disavowal are ultimately not so effective; just because we choose not to see it does not mean we truly forget that it is there. Anxiety and confliction, cognitive dissonance – perfectly symbolized in the landfill – become the plague to our postmodern way of life. The ignorantly assumed privilege of not worrying about running out of things ironically forces an adaptation to a new environment, one in which a fear of running out of space seizes the mind, body, and soul.

In the aptly relevant song “Society,” rocker Eddie Vedder expresses confusion and disgust as he sings about such a conflicted existence:

“Society”

It's a mystery to me
we have a greed
with which we have agreed

You think you have to want
more than you need
until you have it all you won't be free

[...]

When you want more than you have
you think you need
and when you think more than you want
your thoughts begin to bleed
I think I need to find a bigger place
’cos when you have more than you think
you need more space

**PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE**

The system of production is designed for consumption and waste, for easy disposability – the primary source of violence enacted upon the earth. The landfill is a direct result of a culture based on planned obsolescence. As Baudrillard argues, each item produced is entered into the marketplace by its creator with an “eye to its” inevitable and planned “death” and its planned successor (*Consumer* 46). Objects are designed with an inherent violence, created with the purpose of being destroyed:

\[
\text{PRODUCTION} = \text{CONSUMPTION} = \text{DESTRUCTION}
\]

One could call this *destructive production*, or perhaps *productive destruction*, but no doubt the long-accepted and less alarming way of saying it, *planned obsolescence*, is destructive at heart. Consumption is essentially a form of violence, because it can only ever lead to waste.

Baudrillard’s chilling statement regarding the human need to destroy (as presented earlier in the epigraph to this thesis) deserves further observation:

> The consumer society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to destroy them. The use of objects leads only to their dwindling disappearance. The value created is much more intense in violent loss. This is why destruction remains the fundamental alternative to production: consumption is merely an intermediate term between the two. […] Only in destruction are objects there in excess and only then, in their disappearance, do they attest to wealth. At any rate, it is clear that destruction […] is fated to become one of the preponderant functions of post-industrial society. (*Consumer* 47)

Destruction has a positive function, both socially as well as systemically. And perhaps all the comforts offered by industrial advancements and capitalist ideology simply cannot take the animal out of the human – violence is a core component to the human condition. And the violence is most often inflicted right back upon that which is the source of the bounty – the earth. In this manner, postmodern culture is an egocentric way of life, a further sign of the self-absorption saturating the psyches of postmodern individuals. The landfill is a chosen destination of disregard. Like a red-headed step-child not even worthy of being hated, but worse, simply left ignored.

But it cannot be ignored – it will not be. Freud’s classic theory of psychoanalysis includes several ego defense mechanisms, such as denial, displacement, regression,
repression, projection, sublimation, or suppression. Although effective coping skills that allow humans to tolerate the inevitable troubles of life, relying too heavily on any of these mechanisms can have numerous negative emotional consequences. As concerning the postmodern condition, and the overconsumption, waste, and destruction inherently present, the “buried” objects of waste and pain will inevitably come out in another likely pathological form. George Henderson further elaborates on the emotional impact that waste has on the postmodern psyche, as depicted in *Fight Club*:

In the world *Fight Club* imagines materials do not disappear after use, they reappear, persistently boiling up from below. *Fight Club* creates a world in which waste keeps changing places with that which is not waste, until the distinction between the two becomes impossible to make. (149)

The image Henderson so powerfully describes of trash “boiling up from below” has a frightening effect – waste becomes a lurking monster, never to disappear despite our incessant attempts at trying (i.e., denial, displacement, etc.). The need to continually redefine trash, in, as Henderson puts it, “a world in which waste keeps changing places with that which is not waste,” also leads to continually redefining other internal mechanisms – values, self-identity – to the point of inevitable emotional crisis. Just because you call something trash does not make it true, nor does it make it disappear. The lines between fiction and reality become blurred, as does emotional stability.

References to the concept of *waste* are prevalent throughout Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, particularly as it pertains to the capitalist system. In fact, the dilapidated house on Paper Street becomes a safe haven for the Narrator. He begins his transformation by surrounding himself with signs opposed to those of his oppressor, capitalism. Old and dirty, filled with ancient unwanted and forgotten relics, the house and especially the basement are depicted as literal contrasts to the capitalist ideals of consumption of the shiny and new. The house is an embodiment of the signs of waste, a side effect of capitalism also addressed in the film. Yet conversely, the Narrator finds comfort in waste, relief from years of denial and passive avoidance.

The characters in *Fight Club* discuss waste from multiple angles. One angle relates to “perfection,” in which something is simply collected for sheer materialist reasons rather than its actual intended use:
I just don’t want to die without a few scars [...] It’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body. You see those cars that are completely stock cherry, right out of the dealer’s showroom in 1955, I always think, what a waste. (Palahniuk 39)

Here, the Narrator compares his own body to the body of a collectible automobile, each of which is, in his opinion, too perfect. On occasion, the Narrator asks Tyler for help: “Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete” (36). This modern existence of a search for completion and perfection is unfulfilling, a sign of a wasted life. He is tired of being a gatherer; he wants to be a hunter. He wants to live, to use his male body for all that is was originally designed for. To just look at a beautiful car, and not actually enjoy it by speeding down the highway, is a waste. The Narrator wants a few scars, some sign of a life truly lived. He wants rips in the leather upholstery; he wants cracked rubber on the windshield wipers, a dangling headlight, a squeaky door. In sum, he wants to be unique.

At other times in the novel, waste is discussed in the sense of “trash,” where something is loved and used, and then discarded: “What Marla loves [...] is all the things that people love intensely and then dump an hour or a day after” (Palahniuk 58). The character of Marla in some ways serves as an antithetical figure, living a life in opposition to that desired by the capitalist system, loving old trash and rejecting new production. Like Tyler, she is meant to shake the Narrator from his trance-like, life-unlived existence. Yet, in contrast to Tyler’s appeal as being different in a cool, uber-masculine-rebel sort of way, Marla is initially depicted as unusual, almost freakish, and ultimately threatening to the Narrator’s conformist identity, as well as his masculinity, and capitalism as a whole.

Later in the novel, the Narrator and Tyler are hanging out inside an old clunker, where again he thinks about waste: “Cars that people loved and then dumped. Animals at the pound. Bridesmaid dresses at the Goodwill” (Palahniuk 78). He appreciates the distinctive and varied character of all things used. New and perfect objects are a dime a dozen – “a copy of a copy of a copy” – but the worn and scarred are unique, they have a story to tell, one that does not compare to any other. He wants this for himself.

Further and more abstractly, waste becomes a metaphor for the modern human: “The crap and the trash of the world. Post-consumer human butt wipe that no one would ever go to the trouble to recycle” (Palahniuk 100). The sense that many of the young men in the narrative have been discarded, considered of no value to capitalist society, not contributing to
the gross national product, the Fight Club becomes the locus of their being repurposed. Tyler and the Narrator recycle them into powerful masculine beings as they were born to be. With the development of the terrorist group, Tyler takes the discarded youth and reuses them for his political agenda, giving them a new purpose.

What makes Fight Club a love story is evident in Marla’s love for the used and discarded waste of the world. Her penchant for recycling Goodwill items in turn becomes a compassion and affection for the scarred Narrator. The more imperfect he becomes, the more real and unique he becomes, and the more she wants him. Even more so, the more real and unique he feels, the more he accepts and loves himself. A truly postmodern love story.

The presence of so many varied conflicting attitudes surrounding the concept of waste in Fight Club is undeniable evidence of the internal confliction within the characters and society as a whole. Waste has both positive and negative connotations in capitalist society, and in turn causes severe anxiety in its citizens.

The same confliction surrounding consumption and waste is depicted within the characters in M. T. Anderson’s Feed. Additionally, Anderson also brings to light an almost debilitating fear of running out of things. In The Consumer Society, Baudrillard directly addresses this all-too-common fear:

The ascendency of the urban and industrial milieu is producing new examples of shortage: shortages of space and time, fresh air, greenery, water, silence. Certain goods, which were once free and abundantly available, are becoming luxuries accessible only to the privileged, while manufactured goods or services are offered on a mass scale. (57)

Beyond the conflicting sense which waste embodies within the capitalist system – a source of major psychological turmoil for postmodern individuals – waste also becomes a marker of distinction based on its social logic. Anxiety over running out of things is the intended driver for the competitive capitalist process. This controlled fear also functions as a distraction, spawning a sense of social competition intended to divert individuals from concern about the more inherent problems sneaking around within the system itself – subjective violence enacted as a minion of the systemic violence behind the curtain. Rather than fighting the system, citizens end up fighting themselves

Going back to Freud’s theories, each of the ego defense mechanisms is pivotal to human existence, and even more so to postmodern existence. Arguably coming in a close
second behind denial, the other defense mechanism that seems to get a lot of play in postmodern society is sublimation. On an individual level, sublimation involves taking socially unacceptable impulses and converting them into socially acceptable behaviors – such as converting aggressive impulses into becoming an athlete. Applying the concept of sublimation on a more collective scale, perhaps something like recycling could be the sublimation of a tendency toward being wasteful converted into being more socially responsible. Of course, sublimation does not make the original impulse go away, it simply covers it up in some way. Baudrillard creates a similar argument, criticizing consumer culture’s response to the negative consequences (i.e. environmental nuisances) of technological progress, what he refers to as “homeopathic treatment of growth by growth” (Consumer 39):

Does the flourishing mineral water industry permit us to speak of a real increase in ‘affluence’ since, to a large extent, it is merely a response to the deficient quality of urban water? […] We should never be done with listing all the productive and consumer activities which merely counteract internal nuisances generated by the system of growth. (Consumer 39)

As his discussion describes, treatment or cure of social problems is often disguised as production and progress and growth, treating the symptom but not the cause. Baudrillard’s argument here is aptly dramatized in Feed, particularly as it concerns the environmental nuisance of “lesions” present in the narrative. Every sign of self-destruction brings with it both another urgent necessity to distract the consumer while also the rushed opportunity to make a dollar. Ecological crisis is exploited for financial gain.

However depicted, waste is an issue addressed in our fiction because it is an issue in our reality that directly results from the dominant capitalist lifestyle. Dramatic presentation is perhaps an attempt at finding what Fredric Jameson refers to as “the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction.” Authors and filmmakers often use exaggeration to elicit an emotional response from readers/viewers, to force them to see rather than continue to ignore as they have become accustomed to doing. Hyperbolic presentation has the intended function of awareness, with the hope of making a significant impact.

In Feed, the extremity of the self-destructive state of society and its impact on the earth is evident in a number of exaggerated narrative moves, including: the need for an artificial sun turned on with a light switch, homes enclosed in protective domes, whales
coated with membranes to protect them from toxic waste in the oceans, disposable dining tables, and so on. Waste, excess, and disposability are defining elements of self-destruction, which Baudrillard discusses:

We know how much the affluence of rich societies is linked to waste […] But the statistics of waste and rubbish are not interesting in themselves: they are merely a redundant marker of the volume of goods on offer, and their profusion. […] In short, waste is always considered a kind of madness, of insanity, of instinctual dysfunction, which causes man to burn his reserves and compromise his survival conditions by irrational practice. (Consumer 42-43)

Similarly, Anderson’s hyperbolic depiction of self-destruction in Feed undoubtedly reflects “a kind of madness, of insanity, of instinctual dysfunction.” And the characters’ continued denial eats away at their emotional stability, as well as their physical health. In contrast, where Feed leaves no resolution, simply a life of burning reserves and compromising survival (to paraphrase Baudrillard), Fight Club uses exaggeration to offer a rebellion fantasy, a rejection of a life of further consumption, dysfunction, and hyper-destructive wastage on a mass scale. In a humorous modification of one of America’s most patriotic songs, George Carlin conveys the irony so well:

Oh Beautiful, for smoggy skies,
insecticided grain,
For strip-mined mountain’s majesty
above the asphalt plain.
America, America,
man sheds his waste on thee,
And hides the pines with billboard signs,
from sea to oily sea.

THE HUMAN BODY = WASTE

Overpopulation is directly tied to overconsumption and waste. The concept of planned obsolescence extends from material objects to humans. Like commodities, we too are created to be used and discarded, we are wasting away, we are future trash. Henderson’s earlier statement analyzing the world of Fight Club as a place in which “waste keeps changing places with that which is not waste” certainly brings to mind the manner in which waste crosses over from the material to the human. Jean Baudrillard extends his discussion, analyzing the relationship between consumption and the human body:

[E]verywhere we see the historical disintegration of certain structures celebrating, as it were, under the sign of consumption, both their real disappearance and their
caricatural resurrection. [...] the body is glorified precisely as its real possibilities are atrophying and it is increasingly harassed by the system of urban, professional and bureaucratic control and constraints. (*Consumer* 99-100)

Just as commodities become scarce through overconsumption, so too does the human body in its healthy form. This violence to the human form inflicted by the capitalist system leads to further psychological decay, particularly in a sense of loss of masculine identity for many of the male protagonists. Even more so, the system is designed to both increase the deterioration of the human form, while also increasing dissatisfaction with one’s body image, another inherent contradiction that can only exacerbate one’s feelings of confliction and anxiety. 

Irony abounds in the fact that the very system that promotes the “atrophying” body also turns around and uses that image against the consumer, manipulatively making him or her feel inadequate – another area for perpetual discontent – stimulating the financial growth of a number of capitalist factions, such as the fitness industry, the health food industry, the medical industry, and more – “which merely counteract internal nuisances generated by the system of growth” (*Baudrillard, Consumer* 39).

In some ways, the capitalist system thrives on destruction, perhaps intentionally. In terms of the concept of “shortage” to which Baudrillard has referred, destruction leads to increased value in endangered objects. This can transfer over to the glorification of the body.

The new focus is on replenishment, returning the body to its perfect form, through materialist pursuits, just as the capitalist system requires. Ironically, the system is both the cause while it professes to be the cure of human physical decay. Baudrillard adds to the issue of the atrophying human body as more than simply a sign of the destructive nature of capitalism, but also the social logic of the human body as a form of capital or social status: “[B]eauty is such an absolute imperative only because it is a form of capital” (*Consumer* 132). As more and more bodies become less “attractive” and less healthy, those that retain some socially signified sense of “beauty” become much more valuable.

Many of the male protagonists attempt to reclaim their masculinity and strength by rebelling against what corporate America has done to them, transforming their soft and weakened corpses into pillars of masculine strength. Their bodies had been turned into shells of former men by capitalism, wasting away. By salvaging their lost manhood, they also reject consumerist ideology. In *American Beauty*, we see Lester begin to work out, rejecting what
corporate life has done to his body. In *Fight Club*, the Narrator and other oppressed males get back in touch with their primal nature, also rejecting what materialism has done to them, reclaiming their animal strength. Yet, we can see that for Lester, getting back in shape conforms to the social logic of the human body with beauty serving as a form of capital. In contrast, self-inflicted violence as depicted in *Fight Club* serves a stronger nonconformist rebellion against capitalism, in that it is a blatant rejection of the system’s models of appearance and behavior, and an in-your-face refusal to allow the body to be owned by the system. These men refuse to be pretty; they refuse to be other-directed, no longer allowing their value be defined by an oppressive system. Gary Crowdus discusses the postmodern male condition that undoubtedly inspired *Fight Club*:

> [T]he film is clearly posing in absurd terms the extent to which Jack and other *Fight Club* members have become so physically impassive, so emotionally anesthetized, and so spiritually numb, that it takes a broken nose, a split lip, or a few cracked ribs to reawaken their deadened nervous systems and to provide them with a meaningful sense of male identity. (4)

The apathy and numbness that often results from perpetual discontent, in some ways, may only be relieved through physical pain. Or any form of violence. The Narrator/Jack in *Fight Club* decides to treat his numbness with a defiant act of violence – beating himself up and blaming it on his boss as a form of blackmail [see Figure 23]. This seeming act of desperation and self-destruction brings great rewards, as he walks away with a large financial sum and leaves the mind-numbing soul-sucking job he so despises [see Figure 24]. As he walks out with a blood-soaked face escorted by security, he whistles contently looking forward to his new life of freedom.

**THE ATTACK ON MASCULINE IDENTITY: A SPIRITUAL WAR**

Capitalism’s implicit attack on the male sense of power and masculinity has been analyzed and critiqued extensively over the years, particularly as it pertains to the male identity as tied to financial wealth and material appearances. Baudrillard has analyzed capitalism as it relates to emasculation, in that “what we are seeing very generally today is the extension of the feminine model to the whole field of consumption” (Consumer 98). The concept of the *metrosexual* is a prime example, in which men of the post-industrial age have

replaced their masculine hunter drive with a modified drive for shopping to look good. *Fight Club* in particular is a direct response to this feminine model of consumption.

In some sense, materialism itself has had an emasculating effect on males, with added leisure time causing them to feel that they have no purpose, compared to previous pre-industrial, pre-modern generations who had not yet benefited from the conveniences of technological advances. In a 1999 *Newsweek* article, author Susan Faludi discusses the film *Fight Club*, describing the protagonist narrator’s situation as:

the modern male predicament: [The Narrator is] fatherless, trapped in a cubicle in an anonymous corporate job, trying to glean an identity from IKEA brochures, entertainment magazines, and self-help gatherings. [He] traverses a barren landscape...a world stripped of socially useful male roles and saturated with commercial images of masculinity. (“It’s ‘Thelma’ 1-2)

Faludi goes further, describing the angst of the postmodern male in contrast to females. Women know who their opponent is – patriarchy; their fight is against male dominance. In contrast, men are confused as to where to point the finger, exactly whom to wage war against. This feeling intersects with Žižek’s concept of *systemic violence* – the enemy is not easily identifiable, it has no face because it is the system itself. Very late in *Fight Club*, the Narrator has a “revelation that the real battle for men is within” (Palahniuk 2).

The identity conflict that results from consumerism and its emasculation is also evident in *Fight Club* through the ambivalence of the never quite revealed name of the protagonist, except in the end credits as “Narrator,” which further exemplifies his alienation. A third of the way into the film, he begins to refer to himself in the third person as “Jack” based on old pamphlets he finds in the basement of the abandoned, rotting house on Paper Street. With titles such as “I am Jack’s colon” or “I am Jack’s medulla oblongata,” he discovers a disconnected way to express how he is feeling at the moment, as in “I am Jack’s broken heart,” without actually assigning himself with any real feelings. He forms an identity for himself that lacks a true essential definition of who he really is or feels himself to be. His identity is one enveloped in alienation.

Capitalism becomes a form of fascism, essentially controlling the activities of all its citizens by subliminally defining how everyone should look, act, live – fundamentally *be* – in this case, materially. The models of the way an individual should be can only predetermine the individual’s alienation. Alienation results when the individual attempts to transform
himself into an assumed ideal established by society, an image which Jacques Lacan refers to as an inverted symmetry, or “Gestalt,” in which “its appearance symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination” (1286). For his entire life, Jack has been attempting to conform to society’s established ideal, yet he has never seemed to fit – no identity, no purpose or meaning. He has done everything he is supposed to do, but remains lost. The capitalist-fascist society in which he lives has betrayed him, a fact which he recognizes in the beginning of the film: “Like so many others, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct, asking ‘what kind of dining set defines me as a person?’” (Fight Club). His six-month bout with insomnia, a result of his automatized lifestyle as dictated by capitalism, deadens his senses to reality, to his temporal present, as if he were no longer living: “When you have insomnia, you’re never really asleep, and you’re never really awake” (Fight Club). Reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s idea of mechanical reproduction, where the value of virtually anything decreases when its quantity increases, Jack’s daily routine, as well as that of many adherents to the consumer lifestyle, is one in which everyone has insomnia, where “nothing’s real, everything’s far away, everything’s a copy of a copy of a copy” – life in a postmodern society has lost its value, its purpose. Without purpose, there can be no value.

Early in the narrative, before his psychological awakening and consequent empowerment, Jack befriends Tyler Durden, his alter ego, the ultimate model for the masculine rebel every modern angst-ridden male wants to be. The “commercial images of masculinity” to which Faludi refers are embodied in Brad Pitt as Tyler Durden. Tyler is muscular, confident, and seemingly fearless. He inspires Jack, and an eventual cult following, by explicitly stating what the entire film implies, what every man has always felt but feared to admit:

An entire generation, pumping gas, waiting tables – slaves with white-collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate. We buy shit we don’t need. We’re the middle children of history, man, no purpose or place. We have no great war, no great depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day we’ll all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars – but we won’t – we’re slowly learning that fact – and we’re very, very pissed off. (Fight Club)

Tyler’s words give Jack and the other postmodern males of Fight Club a reason to fight, something to cling to – their masculinity. He becomes a god to them, especially to Jack.
Ironically, Tyler’s words develop much more meaning later in the film when Jack comes to fear him: “Our fathers were models for God. If our fathers failed, what does that tell you about God?” As it turns out, Jack must eventually destroy his god, Tyler, in order to complete the task of reclaiming his true identity. But first, Jack must overcome his fears in order to see the truth and gain control of his own life, rather than continue to be controlled by others.

One intense fear with which Jack struggles throughout the film is that of the opposite sex. And as he turns out to suffer from dissociative disorder, with he and Tyler being the same person, Tyler is also stricken with the same fear. Marla, the woman with whom Jack comes to identify, challenges his longstanding adherence to an emasculating materialist lifestyle. Prior to Tyler’s appearance, Jack frequents support groups for the terminally ill, and he begins to see Marla at many of them. He knows she is an imposter, just as he is. Her presence hinders the cathartic effect that the meetings initially evoked, so he and Marla agree to split the meetings evenly between them, arguing over the various body parts afflicted in the process. When Jack says, “You can’t have the whole brain,” he is referring to more than just support groups; he is defending his masculinity, protecting himself from total female invasion. Soon after this scene Tyler appears, as a defensive response to threat, emerging to fight against Marla, the mysterious woman attempting to lay claim to his mind. Yet, ultimately, Marla is more than a female figure; she is emblematic of materialism itself, as well as its emasculating effects on the postmodern male. Just as Tyler turns out to represent a psychological aspect to the Narrator’s identity, so too does Marla.

We turn now to the writings of Laura Mulvey on Freud’s idea of phallocentrism, which “depends on the image of the castrated woman” (2182), represented in the film by Marla. Mulvey describes the male “castration complex” as “the fear of becoming ‘castrated’ like women that leads men to cling to masculinity” (2182, footnote 1). In Fight Club, the fear of woman also translates into a fear of materialism, coinciding with Baudrillard’s concept of the feminine model of consumption. The night Jack’s condo explodes, he later meets with Tyler, who begins their long conversation with a sly reference to Lorena Bobbitt’s literal severing of her husband’s penis, an event spectacularized in the news media, and exploited as symbolic of the most primal male fear of castration: “Well, man, it could be worse. A woman could cut off your penis and toss it out of a moving vehicle.” The discussion that follows
mostly centers around Jack’s sacred material possessions that were lost in the explosion, which in the postmodern world can be equated to the male penis, and in turn the loss of which can be the equivalent of castration. As Jack explains, the importance of a sofa is an allegory for the importance of settling down with one woman, a concept that Tyler quickly denounces. Jack says, “When you buy furniture for yourself, that’s it, that’s the last sofa I’m gonna need. Whatever else happens, I’ve got that sofa problem handled.” He goes on about losing a great stereo and a wardrobe that was almost complete. Tyler reassures Jack, as if his loss is a good thing: “I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. I say let’s evolve. Let the chips fall where they may…what you own ends up owning you.” As realized later in the film, what Tyler is really telling Jack at this moment is to do the opposite of what capitalist society expects of him, to avoid becoming part of the tradition of settling down with a woman, to avoid becoming a possession, or a slave with a white collar. He goes even further, stating that he is tired of being defined by women: “We are a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.” Rejecting the female grasp, along with feminizing materialist ideology as a whole, Jack and Tyler set out to reclaim their masculinity.

The poster for Fight Club creatively exposes the distinctions between the feminine model of consumption, represented by the image of Jack in a capitalist-appropriate white shirt and tie with a serious and deadened look on his face, in contrast to Tyler, depicted as more in touch with his animal-masculine nature wearing a leather jacket, blood on his face, messy hair, yet smiling happily [see Figure 25]. And representative of woman and materialism is the bar of soap, with a focus on cleanliness and civility, although ironically this soap is created by recycling human fat or waste and capitalizing on it; as Tyler so eloquently states, “We were selling women their fat asses back to them,” providing a chide insult to consumption. The soap also symbolizes a cure for the excess and waste of consumerism, which need to be “cleaned up.”

No matter how much the system chews up and spits out, these men refuse to be a part of it any longer – and even more so, they refuse to allow themselves and their male bodies to continue to go to waste. Through violence, they reclaim their physical strength; through beating each other to a pulp, “emasculated, feminized modern man can find the meaning corporate society denies him” (Ansen 2). Jack and Tyler attack their postmodern capitalist
culture while simultaneously defending their manhood. In the process, they try exhaustively to destroy all things in their lives that may even remotely appear feminized or feminizing, those things that rob them of their masculinity, essentially anything tied to consumerism and materialism. Jack chooses not to shave, purposely neglects to iron his shirt. He no longer makes any attempt to look pretty and perfect, or to live in a pretty, perfect world. Jack finds meaning in his new lifestyle: “Fight Club became the reason to cut your hair short or trim your fingernails.” Nothing is out of vanity; everything has a true purpose. Tyler directs him saying, “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything.” That freedom transforms itself into an erotic male festival of bloodshed.

At one point, Tyler refers to Marla as “a predator posing as a housepet,” which is a perfect reference to capitalism — it is supposed to be a friend to people, yet in many cases can end up destroying them. In Fight Club, capitalism is the equivalent of the castrating female. Both threaten the masculinity of every man. If as Mulvey states, “the meaning of woman is sexual difference” (2188), and woman is equal to capitalism, then a man’s material possessions can never bring him to the level of identity he seeks through capitalism. He cannot be a woman, nor does he want to be. Jack realizes this and then begins to reclaim his masculinity because it is the only thing woman lacks, the one thing she can never have, the one thing man has in his favor, that gives him a purpose and an identity separate and apart from anything else. He reclaims an identity based on phallocentrism, and in turn, violence. Tyler becomes like a god to Jack and all the other members of Fight Club, showing them the way. In fact, he comes to replace possessions, or capitalism in general. Within their “fascist bonds of blood and obedience” (Goldman 2), the members are simply becoming what Tyler wants them to become, replacing what the corporate world had always driven them to become in the past. Tyler is now in control. Jack begins to realize how he had not really freed himself from the clutches of capitalism, but had simply moved from one god of worship to another, stating, “Sooner or later, we all became what Tyler wanted us to be.” Although Jack may no longer bow to the material, he realizes that people will always find a leader to follow. The “cultlike nature” of the Fight Club reveals “that they have become as manipulated and dehumanized by their leader as they ever were by the corporate civilization from which [Tyler] is trying to rescue them” (Crowdus 5). As individuals living by an other-directed
ideology, they are easily influenced, always searching for an identity through something external. And Tyler knows this and takes full advantage of it.

Jack’s fear of the female figure drives him to create an all-male force to wipe out feminism and capitalism for good, including creating Tyler as his alter ego. The Fight Club, with its intense male-bonding, violence, and terrorist acts, sets up the perfect battleground. Yet, in the end, Jack destroys Tyler, and he and Marla bond together watching the destruction of the corporate towers emblematic of capitalism, a form of redemption [see Figure 26]. Faludi sees the ending as inevitable: “For men facing an increasingly hollow, consumerized world, [the] path lies not in conquering women but in uniting with them against the hollowness” (“It’s ‘Thelma’ 2). Capitalism is both friend and enemy. It is up to the individual to look within and form an identity not through the material, but with it.

CHAPTER 4

POSTMODERN MALE ANGST: “I HATE MY JOB AND I’M SCARED I’LL LOSE IT”

John Steinbeck prefaces his 1961 novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* with a significant statement regarding his intentions in writing it: “Readers seeking to identify the fictional people and places here described would do better to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today” (1). His prophetic narrative epitomizes the now all too familiar melancholic American male, as fictionalized in the character of Ethan Hawley, a representative embodiment of the cultural malaise that has come to plague many citizens of postmodern capitalistic society. Whether Steinbeck himself had some uncanny ability to foretell this bleak future or not is up for argument, but the later appearance of a number of literary narratives and films that depict and analyze postmodern discontent could easily have drawn upon Steinbeck’s final novel. Almost forty years later, several films of the late 1990s tackled similar postmodern themes of alienation, complacency, unhappiness, and sheer zombie-like existence, as experienced by a male protagonist seemingly lost and wavering aimlessly with no sense of purpose in life. The dissatisfaction of everyday life, particularly as felt in the workplace environment, is a common theme in films such as *Office Space, Fight Club, The Matrix,* and *American Beauty,* among others. Tellingly, the films listed here were all released in 1999, reflecting the dreary postmodern millennial mind-set afflicting society at the time. Specifically, the film *American Beauty* illustrates numerous thematic parallels with *The Winter of Our Discontent* – alienation, dissatisfaction, powerlessness, complacency – though the protagonists take different paths toward resolution of their individual crises.

Ethan Hawley of *The Winter of Our Discontent* and Lester Burnham of *American Beauty* share a sense of incompleteness and imperfection, common results or side effects of capitalism. Setting aside each narrative’s obvious time differences as they relate to a forty-
year gap in the evolution of social standards, Ethan and Lester struggle with many of the same issues – dissatisfaction with their jobs, feelings of alienation and powerlessness both at home and work, and identity conflicts. The point at which each narrative begins portrays both Ethan and Lester as complacent, apparently having settled for a life that feels incomplete and imprisoning. Because they have come to perceive themselves as unable to change anything, they no longer try. They wander through life in a state of learned helplessness, a psychological mindset in which they behave in a powerless manner even when possible opportunities for change or escape present themselves. In many ways, “Learned helplessness results from being trained to be locked into a system. The system may be a family, a community, a culture, a tradition, a profession or an institution” (K. McLeod). For Lester and Ethan, they have become helpless and mentally imprisoned by all of these systems. They know they are essentially prisoners, they feel trapped, but they keep up with the façade that each system requires. Though they want more out of life, they pretend to be satisfied, deluding themselves, going through the motions; they are complacent, as the system requires them to be. This complacency is what Steinbeck and the creators of the film American Beauty attempt to address.

Just as Steinbeck asks his readers to “inspect their own communities and search their own hearts” when responding to the issues he raises in The Winter of Our Discontent, the creators of American Beauty ask the same of their viewers, stated explicitly in the movie poster: “…look closer.” Early in the film Lester is at work speaking on the phone in his cubicle. An observant viewer might notice that tacked to the felt wall between the computer monitor and the telephone is a small white sign that says “look closer,” reiterating the movie poster’s instructions. Perhaps this is a creative maneuver on the part of the filmmakers to test the audience’s observation skills. Or perhaps it is meant to imply that Lester must deliberately remind himself to look closer, to remain conscious of his imprisonment, visualized by his partial confinement in a cubicle – a postmodern shackle. He appears to be free, but he is not. His family appears to be happy and complete, but they are not. In the same way, Ethan’s apparent contentment is just the opposite – discontent – and we are meant to look beyond such appearances.

Both Ethan and Lester are dissatisfied with their jobs, feeling trapped working for someone else, having no sense of true purpose. They simply work to pay the bills, support
their families, go through the motions, and as a result, they each feel displaced. Others identify them via their particular occupations, yet, as time progresses, they realize that this is not how they identify themselves. They feel estranged and mortified or deadened by their daily work, as Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels theorize: “The worker […] only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself” (767). Their personal sense of identity is in conflict with their public persona. They feel powerless and emasculated as they are dependent on someone else – the companies for which they work – to support themselves and their families, to physically survive. Ethan expresses embarrassment regarding his status: “Would my great ancestors be proud to know they produced a goddamn grocery clerk in a goddamn wop store in a town they used to own?” (Steinbeck 4). Such a feeling eats away at him; he describes it further, as he feels it devouring his very existence:

Men don’t get knocked out, or I mean they can fight back against big things. What kills them is erosion; they get nudged into failure. They get slowly scared. I’m scared. […] It’s slow. It rots out your guts. I can’t think beyond next month’s payment on the refrigerator. I hate my job and I’m scared I’ll lose it. (14)

Ethan’s dissatisfaction with and resentment for his job, and essentially his status in society, is not so different from Lester’s. In the initial scenes of American Beauty, we see Lester’s daily routine, and he voices his sense of boredom, low self-esteem, and overall dissatisfaction with his life, with such statements as “Look at me, jerking off in the shower…This will be the high point of my day; it’s all downhill from here.” Like Ethan, Lester also hates his job, yet feels a learned helplessness, trapped and unable to fight the system.

Feelings of alienation are a common theme in Marxist theory, where the worker (i.e. proletariat), presumed to be male, is set apart from the products of his work. Being forced to work for someone else, he feels no sense of fulfillment or satisfaction. The worker’s labor, or “forced labour” as Marx and Engels term it, “is therefore not performed for the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it” (767) – to receive a wage and support oneself and one’s family. This alienated labor “is not his own, but someone else’s, […] it does not belong to him, […] in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.” Such a sense of enslavement and powerlessness is a dominant theme in many postmodern narratives, including Revolutionary Road, Office Space and Fight Club, as well as American Beauty and The Winter of Our Discontent, and is perhaps the primary issue Ethan and Lester struggle with themselves.
In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), author Susan Faludi analyzes the contradictions inherent to male life in post-WWII America, a society in which cultural expectations of male power, strength, and confidence conflict with the loss of individual power in the limiting structure of corporate-controlled existence:

If men are the masters of their fate, what do they do about the unspoken sense that they are being mastered, in the marketplace and at home, by forces that seem to be sweeping away the soil beneath their feet? If men are mythologized as the ones who *make things happen*, then how can they begin to analyze what is *happening to them*? (13)

The contradictions to which Faludi calls attention directly relate to the male identity struggle that is now familiar territory in many postmodern narratives that attempt to tackle the destructive nature of capitalism. For Ethan, when pure bad luck causes him to lose everything, and years of hard work, devotion, and good moral character get him nowhere, what is he to do? When his wife and children consistently voice their desires for money and prestige, and he struggles and toils but is still unable to deliver, how else is he to feel but powerless and emasculated? What is a man to think when his wife says to him, “Everybody’s laughing at you. A grand gentleman without money is a bum” (Steinbeck 34) – perhaps this is one of many corrosive elements responsible for the “erosion” Ethan references.

Unfortunately for Ethan and Lester, as well as for many individuals in postmodern times, the home offers no consolation to the alienation and discontent experienced in the workplace. Their dissatisfaction at work is only exacerbated in the home. Though by all appearances, they should be happy, the home merely represents further demands and obligations that continuously pull at them; they can find no peace; they are part of the postmodern lonely crowd – alone at work, alone at home, alone in the world. Ethan expresses such sentiments: “A man is a lonely thing” (Steinbeck 171). Each of them feels out of place, like there is nowhere that they can go to feel like themselves.

The importance of a place to think and just *be* becomes significant to their self-identities. Ethan narrates his need for peace and privacy, which he continually struggles to attain:

A clerk in a grocery store – Marullo’s grocery store – a man with a wife and two darling children. When is he alone, when can he be alone? Customers in the daytime, wife and kiddies in the evening; wife at night, customers in the daytime,
wife and kiddies in the evening. “Bathroom – that’s when,” […] Oh! The dusky, musky, smelly-welly, silly-billy time – the slovenly-lovely time. (Steinbeck 11)

For Ethan, the bathroom is a location for personal reflection, a getaway, almost a vacation destination. He hides there not only when at home, but at work too. He does some of his best thinking there. He plans out his bank robbery scheme, his reporting of Marullo to immigration. He even uses the toilet as an element of disguise, an unexpected ordinary item pivotal to his financial and personal success. In this way, the toilet is likened to Ethan himself – innocent, ordinary, harmless – but the key instrument in a master plan of crime. No one would ever expect a toilet to be anything but a toilet; no one would ever expect a hard-working grocery clerk to be anything but a grocery clerk. Ironically, the bathroom is one of the only places where Ethan can feel free and safe, though small and confining as it is, in contrast to his feelings of imprisonment out in the big world:

It is odd how a man believes he can think better in a special place. I have such a place, have always had it, but I know it isn’t thinking I do there, but feeling and experiencing and remembering. It’s a safety place – everyone must have one, although I never heard a man tell of it. […] I caused myself to need the bathroom, and when it was so, got up and went. (Steinbeck 36-37)

Like Ethan, the bathroom is also a safe haven for Lester, the only place where he can enjoy himself, “the high point” of his day. Following his rebellion against the system, he later takes up a new location of comfort and self-reflection – the garage – the modern man cave [see Figure 27]. He begins working out, smoking marijuana, listening to classic rock – he regresses back to a moment in his life where he felt truly happy and free.

Lester’s garage is similar to Ethan’s other special Place, the small man cave by the harbor:

On the edge of the silted and sanded up Old Harbor […] That is my Place, the place everybody needs. Inside it you are out of sight except from seaward. (43) […] It’s big changes take me there – big changes. (44) […] I wondered whether all men have a Place, or need a Place, or want one and have none. Sometimes I’ve seen a look in eyes, a frenzied animal look as of need for a quiet, secret place where soul-shivers can abate, where a man is one and can take stock of it. Of course I know of the theories of back to the womb and the death-wish, and these may be true of some men but I don’t think they are true of me, except as easy ways of saying something that isn’t easy. I call whatever happens in the Place ‘taking stock.’ […] What happens is right for me, whether or not it is good. (Steinbeck 44-45)
The “frenzied animal-look” to which Ethan refers is visible on Lester’s face in *American Beauty*, a sign of sure change to come. The bathroom, the garage, the Place – these are locations of change for Ethan and Lester. They feel the changes coming inside themselves, and they go to these physical places to make the changes become reality. Narratively, they are changing subjects – perhaps not becoming someone new, but returning to someone true, their former selves, their real selves, whoever they were before the capitalist system shackled them into captivity. They choose to take initiative, to fight, to reject helplessness and become powerful men once again.

Their reasons for change are multitudinous, with various factors all lining up perfectly, like the wheels in a combination safe all turning and meeting at just the right point, opening up new possibilities, financial and otherwise. For Lester, the year is 1999, the coming millennium bringing with it a fear of death, of a life unlived and unseen. According to theorist Jean Baudrillard, “We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end” (*Simulacra* 10). As part of Lester’s mid-
life/identity crisis, or transformation, he buys a 1970 Pontiac Firebird, for him, a visible signifier of both a lost, happy past and a fulfilling life – each of which he attempts to reclaim.

For Ethan, the year is 1960, which he believes to be a significant point in time:

It must be that there are years unlike other years, as different in climate and direction and mood as one day can be from another day. This year of 1960 was a year of change, a year when secret fears come into the open, when discontent stops being dormant and changes gradually to anger. [...] And it wasn’t only the nation; the whole world stirred with restlessness and uneasiness as discontent moved to anger and anger tries to find an outlet in action, any action so long as it was violent. (Steinbeck 251)

Ethan may be speaking about the times here, but he is also speaking about himself; he feels a change slowly brewing. This moment of clarity comes late in the novel, after Ethan has already begun to transform himself and his life, compromised his own morality in order to grasp a new beginning as well as a return to what he believes to be his true identity, masculine and strong, as well as affluent. Like Lester, he is tired of being downtrodden, of feeling powerless inability to rise up and be his own man, in control of his destiny. For each of them, discontent is becoming anger. We see the sparks of rebellion. The violence to which Ethan refers can relate to their newfound anger, their preparing for battle:

You see it in war a lot – a coward turning hero and a brave man crashing in flames. Or you read in the morning paper about a nice, kind family man who cuts down wife and children with an ax. I think I believe that a man is changing all the time. But there are certain moments when the change becomes noticeable. If I wanted to dig deep enough, I could probably trace the seeds of my change right back to my birth or before. Recently many little things had begun to form a pattern of larger things. It’s as though events and experiences nudged and jostled me in a direction contrary to my normal one or the one I had come to think was normal – the direction of the grocery clerk, the failure, the man without real hope or drive, barred in by responsibilities for filling the bellies and clothing the bodies of his family, caged by habits and attitudes I thought of as being moral, even virtuous. And it may be that I had a smugness about being what I called a “Good Man.” (Steinbeck 88)

This early moment in the text provides firm evidence of Steinbeck’s creation of a narrative with a postmodern theme. It describes Ethan’s sense that he is doing all that his society says he is supposed to, yet feels wholly inadequate and dissatisfied. The later reference, on page 251, to the year 1960 as a year of change, of anger, of a need for violent action, further serves to solidify the postmodern theme. The feelings Ethan describes could well be those of a
number of postmodern male protagonists, including the Narrator in *Fight Club*, Peter in *Office Space*, and certainly Lester in *American Beauty*.

As both Ethan and Lester prepare to fight the good fight against the system, they are more than soldiers on a battlefield, fighting for a country’s cause. This is more than a job or a duty. They are moving from Marxist alienation and forced labour, to something more meaningful, more personal, to which Ethan refers: “They say a good soldier fights a battle, never a war. That’s for civilians” (Steinbeck 46). War is more personal. Ethan chooses his position carefully, quietly, discretely, and undercover. But make no mistake – this is war.

In contrast, moving almost forty years into the future, Lester’s tactics are more in your face, more outspoken rebellion. He has something to prove. When Lester witnesses his young neighbor, Ricky, quit his job, telling his boss off in the process, he is in sheer awe of Ricky’s power and confidence at that moment: “I think you just became my personal hero. Doesn’t it make you nervous quitting your job like that?” (*American Beauty*). This may be the very moment in which the seeds of rebellion start to sprout and Lester begins to transform himself, to reclaim his masculinity and his lost sense of identity – the moment he chooses to go to war. He narrates his changing attitude: “Both my wife and daughter think I’m this gigantic loser and they’re right, I have lost something. I’m not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn't always feel this... sedated. But you know what? It's never too late to get it back” (*American Beauty*). And later, he voices his newfound vision of hope and possibility: “I feel like I've been in a coma for the past twenty years. And I'm just now waking up” (*American Beauty*).

When Lester’s company hires an efficiency consultant, Brad Dupree, an effort that has come to signify job instability in the corporate world, they request that he write a job description. Lester can no longer keep up with the façade and can no longer contain his frustration – his discontent has transformed into anger:

**Brad Dupree: [reading Lester's job description]** “My job consists of basically masking my contempt for the assholes in charge, and, at least once a day, retiring to the men's room so I can jerk off while I fantasize about a life that doesn't so closely resemble Hell.” Well, you have absolutely no interest in saving yourself.

**Lester Burnham:** Brad, for 14 years I've been a whore for the advertising industry. The only way I could save myself now is if I start firebombing.

(*American Beauty*)
Rather than take violent action as a form of salvation, Lester chooses to take a more productive and personally rewarding approach. He blackmails the company by threatening to expose one of the corporate mogul’s less than moral behavior using company money for personal entertainment and prostitution. Lester becomes the postmodern anti-hero, fighting against the man, the system, raging against the machine. Adding to the irony is the fact that Lester worked in the advertising industry, a key component to the capitalist system; yet he turns on it, fighting the very system he was once a part. Similar rebellion against one’s employer is also depicted in *Fight Club* and *Office Space*. Here, too, Lester walks out with a year’s salary and the deepest sense of satisfaction apparent in the smug smile on his face [see Figure 28].

![Lester expressing sheer joy after blackmailing his boss and quitting his job.](image)

**Figure 28.** Lester expressing sheer joy after blackmailing his boss and quitting his job. *Source: American Beauty*. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, and Chris Cooper. Dreamworks, 1999. DVD.

Lester’s behavior is consistent with Ethan’s opinion on the matter: “Where money is concerned, the ordinary rules of conduct take a holiday” (Steinbeck 58). Lester understands his position, and has no qualms about who he is:

*Brad Dupree:* Man, you are one twisted fuck.

*Lester Burnham:* Nope. I’m just an ordinary guy who has nothing to lose.

(*American Beauty*)

Lester is not looking for salvation in any sort of spiritual sense. He is looking for himself. He has been wandering lost for years, and can almost not even remember who he once was. He
is tired of forgetting, but even more so, tired of being forgotten and going unnoticed. Ethan voices a similar state of mind, of having “nothing to lose” in this war:

When a condition or a problem becomes too great, humans have the protection of not thinking about it. But it goes inward and minces up with a lot of other things already there and what comes out is discontent and uneasiness, guilt and a compulsion to get something – anything – before it is all gone. […] It does seem to me that nearly everyone I see is nervous and restless and a little loud and gaily crazy like people getting drunk on New Year’s Eve. (Steinbeck 154-155)

Ethan’s statement regarding the nature of the human mind, to “have the protection of not thinking about it,” resonates with Slavoj Žižek’s concept of fetishist disavowal: “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know” (53). The feeling Ethan conveys of running out of time also goes hand in hand with Baudrillard’s argument regarding the consumer and fear: “You have to try everything, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of ‘missing’ something, some form of enjoyment or other [...] a generalized curiosity, driven by a vague sense of unease” (Consumer 80). For many of the male protagonists in postmodern narratives, perhaps their long-enduring confliction and discontent really drives home this sense of impending death. They become saturated by death anxiety as years of denial eat away at them and begin to manifest itself – hurriedly, violently.

The erosion becomes desperation becomes a false appearance of celebration. The perpetual dissatisfaction inherent in the capitalist system can only go so far before the dissatisfied individual becomes like an animal, savage and angry. Ethan and Lester were accustomed to dissatisfaction, accepting that this is the way life is, content to be obedient minions to the system. Yet inherent contradictions abound, and as they coast along, factors come into play, converging at just the right moment when our two complacent pawns each feel that they are backed into a corner and left with no other alternative but to…attack or die…eat or be eaten. This is when their individual transformations begin. Ethan asks, “Can a man think out his life, or must he just tag along?” (Steinbeck 36). Does a man have any power in determining his own fate? Both Ethan and Lester set out to do just that. As opportunities make themselves apparent to Ethan, he tries to justify his slow plan of action:

There are the eaters and the eaten. That’s a good rule to start with. Are the eaters more immoral than the eaten? In the end all are eaten – all – gobbled up by the earth, even the fiercest and the most crafty. (Steinbeck 46-47)
With that, Ethan slowly begins to compromise his own integrity, an early sign of the violence later to come.

In her introduction to the 2008 Penguin edition of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Susan Shillinglaw addresses Steinbeck’s possible agenda, stating that the novel “is, seemingly, a patchwork of intentions, all meant to shake a reader’s complacency” (viii). Shillinglaw further discusses the novel’s indefinite conclusion, declaring that “its irresolution and allusiveness are, in fact, central to its meaning” (viii). The same could be said of *American Beauty*. Both narratives end on dire notes, definitive of postmodern texts. For Lester, his circuitous transformation, with self-destruction spreading like a virus to everyone and everything he comes in contact with, then returning him to a more hopeful state, ironically follows with his murder [see Figure 29].

![Figure 29. Image of Lester following his murder. Source: *American Beauty*. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, and Chris Cooper. Dreamworks, 1999. DVD.](image)

For Ethan, the success of his transformation is blown with the discovery of his son’s dishonesty, an ironic moment of awakening, pushing him to the brink of suicide. Each narrative leaves the reader or viewer with no definite sense of closure, effectively obliging the reader/viewer to a continual return to each story long after its conclusion. True art demands repeat consumption. In *Winter*, the reader wonders, perhaps indefinitely, whether Ethan goes through with his suicide mission. Is it necessary, or even warranted? What if he had not set aside his virtuous morality to reclaim some false sense of propriety? Is it too late
for his redemption? Similarly, in *American Beauty*, the viewer is left to ponder Lester’s
demise and all of the factors that lead up to it – his difficult struggle that finally brings him a
sense of meaning, completion, purpose, and happiness, and the ironic snowball effect it has
on everyone else around him. Both stories undoubtedly require multiple readings and/or
viewings, forcing the audience to analyze and re-analyze the various complex elements that
lead the characters to their respective fates. As Shillinglaw previously states, such open-
ended narrative stylings typical of postmodern texts are “meant to shake a reader’s
complacency” and are “central to [their] meaning” (viii). Complacency eats away; frustration
has no outlet, except for perhaps that which we make for ourselves, and not for the
satisfaction of the capitalist system. For the fictional protagonists, it may well be too late for
any sense of redemption. However, for the readers and viewers, this is the purpose of art, to
force an awareness of the potential consequences of complacency and discontent, and
hopefully provide a path toward finding the ability to resist them.
CHAPTER 5

DESIRE & FEAR: THE DULCITOUS FACE OF ADVERTISING

Advertising as a critical factor in society’s destruction is a prevalent theme in many postmodern dystopian texts. Take, for instance, M. T. Anderson’s *Feed*, which depicts a society in which individuals appear powerless, having relinquished all control over to the commodity, or more specifically, to the image of the commodity via media advertising. The image, or “spectacle” in theorist Guy Debord’s terms, becomes worth more than the actual object; the illusion is more valuable than reality. Within the narrative, many negative events ensue as a result of such commodity fetishism, and the characters are plagued with a lack of understanding and an inability to cope when faced with the dire reality of their situation. Their response to the fear of reality? To shop. Most significantly, the corporations and the government both know this, and exploit consumer fear for their own political and financial agendas. In turn, overconsumption leads down a self-destructive path with devastating consequences, including emotional distress, poor health, and ecological crisis.

The Marxist concept of “commodity fetishism” is commonly considered a negative consequence of capitalism. However, many of its victims are passive absorbers and unaware of their servitude, thus allowing for the subsistence of the capitalist system. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord cites Karl Marx and loosely defines commodity fetishism as “the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things’” (36). The society present in *Feed* is an image that resonates with Debord’s definition of commodity fetishism in action. Characters are physically hard-wired to go shopping; it has become more than a fetish, but a biological urge, likened to the need for food and sex. They cannot live, or even think, without the feed, without the images, or spectacle, the feed provides.

Anderson portrays the characters in *Feed* as virtually incapable of thinking for themselves, depending on the media, the “feed,” to tell them what to think, what to like, how
to feel, and more. As evidenced in the protagonist Titus’ description, these individuals are disillusioned and brainwashed into thinking the feed is a beneficent entity:

> [The feed] knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you know what those things are. It can tell you how to get them, and help you make buying decisions that are hard. Everything we think and feel is taken in by the corporations […] and they make a special profile, one that’s keyed just to you […] and they can get to know what it is we need, so all you have to do is want something and there’s a chance it will be yours. (48)

Such ideas are nothing new, having previously been discussed by many theorists and portrayed in various postmodern and science fiction narratives. Here, one can easily find similar themes to such classics as George Orwell’s *1984*, or Phillip K. Dick’s *Minority Report*, and numerous other futuristic dystopian narratives that provide a critical analysis of the idea of always being watched by the powers that be. Orwell refers to the feeling as “Big Brother is always watching.” Dick portrays the idea of spy-based personalized advertising, with the advertisers doing just as described by Titus in *Feed*, “Everything we think and feel is taken in by the corporations […] and they make a special profile, one that’s keyed just to you” (Anderson 48). Anderson obviously draws from these earlier ideas, yet takes it a step further by incorporating modern technology present in today’s society and an integral component to everyday life, namely the internet.

Anderson’s approach is arguably more startling in its closeness to modern reality, an idea not as far-fetched as one might initially assume. Though in the real world, individuals have not had feeds implanted into their brains – yet – one can see a virtual similarity with the present-day attachment to highly-technological electronic gadgets, such as smart phones. The name itself – smart phone – is an eerie prophecy to the “dumbing down” of humans via their dependence upon these electronics. Whether attached to the hand or the brain, many individuals are unable to let go and disconnect from technology, essentially addicted to the constant “feed” of information. There is no need to think, the advertisers will do it for you; here, advertising becomes a form of thought control.

The subversive character, Violet, implanted with the feed somewhat later in life and, as a result, more consciously aware of its effects, offers one of the text’s few critical moments on the feed’s unfortunate snatching of human independence:

> Everything we do gets thrown into a big calculation. Like they’re watching us right now. They can tell where you’re looking. They want to know what you want
They're also waiting to make you want things. Everything we’ve grown up with – the stories on the feed, the games, all of that – it’s all streamlining our personalities so we’re easier to sell to. [...] They keep making everything more basic so it will appeal to everyone. And gradually, everyone gets used to everything being basic, so we get less and less varied as a people, more simple. So the corps make everything simpler. And it goes on and on. (Anderson 97)

Violet’s statement also refers to being watched, yet in contrast to Titus’ description, she views this negatively. The feed is not a beneficent giver of awesome commodities, but a manipulative taker of independent thought.

Violet’s critique harks back to Guy Debord’s description of the manner in which advertising and propaganda trick consumers into thinking they have a choice in how, why, and what they consume, when in reality they are being spoon-fed by the spectacle/feed:

[T]he spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. [...] In all of its particular manifestations – news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment – the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. (Society 6)

Not only does Debord refer to the overall plan corporations have for controlling the consumer via product limitations disguised as abundance, he discusses the manner in which capitalism and consumerism become tied to the visual image, or more specifically, the overwhelming bombardment of images, arguably with anxiety-producing effects. In Feed, Anderson expands on the concept by literally placing those images within the individual’s mind via the implantation of a constant internet “feed” – the key word being constant. There is no escaping the images of commodification within the spectacle. Where previously one had the choice to avoid the attack of images by simply turning off the television or closing one’s eyes, now even any attempt to rest and arrest the images, to sleep and recharge, is impossible. The citizens of the society in Feed are plagued by anxiety and unrest caused by never-ending images intended to drive consumption. Their minds are meant to forever be thinking about their next purchase. Incessant thought and pursuit lead to exhaustion, and a desperate need to unplug. Likened to drug use, those who attempt to stop images for a while, what is referred to in the novel as to go “mal,” risk their lives in doing so.

In the society of Feed, even one’s dreams are controlled by the spectacle. Though in reality our dreams are influenced and even partially controlled by the media without
implantation of the feed, Anderson gives us the literal vision of such an idea at work. In many ways, Anderson’s narrative resonates with Debord’s theories, almost to the point that it seems Debord prophesied the future society present in *Feed*:

> The fetishism of the commodity – the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things’ – attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality. *(Society 36)*

Albeit, an intangible reality. Debord’s words “where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it” *(Society 36)* – this is the world of *Feed*. The inhabitants of a dim future with gray water and gray skies, and the need for an artificial sun (to replace the real one that has been used up and is no longer attractive) and a protective bubble over each home – this is Titus’ world. Is it any wonder that reality has been replaced by a more attractive image?

Many images, too many from which to choose – so many as to keep the consumer busily distracted with an overwhelming abundance of choice, yet ironically limited by the options provided by those in charge of production, masters of manipulation, capable of making consumers feel as if they have a choice. Illusions of choice, these images are false and propagandized, but they are still more seductive than reality. The spectacle “projected above” within each individual’s mind is there intentionally to distract from reality. A dire, frightening reality. And when faced with that reality, the consumer does all he or she can to get back to the feed, back to the fantasy it provides. And this is what the powers that be – the corporations, the government – want: for consumers to figuratively “buy” into the fantasy via literal buying. More often than not, the media messages are a mix of government and corporate propaganda, the two entities working together, one helping the other, in a sort of symbiotic relationship. In many ways, it is difficult to find a distinction between the two, and this blurring of the lines is satirically exaggerated in *Feed* via the privatization of schools and clouds – or Schools™ and Clouds™.

Numerous factors are pivotal to the success of government and corporate propaganda on the consumer, including the assumed benevolence of those in power. Titus appears to have been successfully indoctrinated into the system, an ideal citizen as evidenced by his description of the privatized Schools™.
Now that School™ is run by the corporations, it’s pretty brag, because it teaches us how the world can be used, like mainly how to use our feeds. Also, it’s good because that way we know the big corps are made up of real human beings, and not just jerks out for money, because taking care of children, they care about America’s future. It’s an investment in tomorrow. […] Now we do stuff in classes about how to work technology and how to find bargains and what’s the best way to get a job and how to decorate our bedroom. (Anderson 109-10)

Titus’ description here, “an investment in tomorrow,” sounds like a cliché advertising slogan. And the corporations’ focus on technology and finding bargains and getting a job and decorating – the appearance of concern and generosity are actually imbedded with self-interest. The corporations via the schools teach how to shop, how to use technology to shop, how to retain employment and thereby an income allowing one the continued ability to shop. Perhaps more significant, they teach “how the world can be used,” selfishly consumed, exploited, and eventually destroyed. Like consumer products, the world becomes disposable, too.

In Anderson’s fictional world, the corporation has become the educator. The instructional material on the syllabus might list specific goals, such as how to be a good and submissive consumer, how to simply accept and not ask questions, and to never think about possible consequences. To do so would be the end of the corporation, the end of capitalism as we know it. Consumption without self-control is what keeps it going. To hear the arguments against the system, and still accept it is perhaps the only way of life – such is a model to which Titus appears to knowingly adhere:

Of course, everyone is like, da dada, evil corporations, oh they’re so bad, we all say that, and we all know they control everything. […] But they’re the only way to get all this stuff, and it’s no good getting pissy about it, because they’re still going to control everything whether you like it or not. Plus, they keep like everyone in the world employed, so it’s not like we could do without them. (49)

Those that control the spectacle offer no other options, so therefore, to the consumer, no other options exist. This idea of learned helplessness, accepting the status quo without putting up a fight, begins almost immediately after birth. Training starts with the bombardment of images, the blinking lights of the spectacle, in all environments – in the home, in schools, and out in the marketplace. Submission is ingrained in the brain early on, both psychologically, as well as literally, through the implantation of the feed.
In addition to the acceptance of the system as benevolent, as well as learned helplessness, is the concept of planned obsolescence, key to the success of government and corporate propaganda. The capitalist system survives on the implementation of planned obsolescence, in which commodities are intentionally produced to have a short lifespan, therefore furthering the production of new commodities and new spending. This practice is no secret, long accepted by consumers, who consciously purchase items with the knowledge that they will be popular only for a short while, fated to lose fashion value long before utilitarian value is lost. Acceptance of planned obsolescence is another form of learned helplessness; or perhaps Žižek’s concept of fetishist disavowal – “I know but I don’t want to know, so I don’t know” – yet, they know, and they buy it anyway.

**PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE: WASTE & ANXIETY**

At the heart of planned obsolescence is waste. The two go hand in hand. Consumption is good, and waste is its inevitable by-product. Also entwined in the practice is the psychological component. The thrill of getting the latest new popular product, all too quickly followed by the anxiety that it may no longer be popular, followed by the uncontrollable need to make a new purchase:

**PRODUCTION**

\[ \text{CONSUMPTION/WASTE} = \text{ANXIETY/FEAR} \]

The negative psychological result of consumption inherently leads to more consumption – and the system continues to thrive.

In *Feed*, Anderson superbly depicts the anxiety that comes along with consumption, again using exaggeration to point out the absurdity of capitalism and planned obsolescence. When skating on the moon, some of Titus’ female friends escape to the bathroom in an anxiety-infused fury to alter their hairstyles because the current fashion has suddenly changed in what may as well have been moments of leaving home. Another example of Anderson’s use of exaggeration is in the daily after-dinner activities at Titus’ home. His father “rattled [the dishes] against the rim of the junktube as he threw them away. They
crashed down into the thing, the incinerator” (128); and his mother and little brother “crinkled up the disposable table together and threw it away” (129). The hyper-obsolescence of these disposable artifacts not only addresses the extremity of planned obsolescence, but also the result of waste as an inevitable byproduct of the capitalist system. The author’s hyperbolic depiction of waste forces the reader to question: How does the idea of waste translate over to human relations? In what ways does commodity obsolescence prophesize human commodification and obsolescence? Humans become the commodities of the system, defined by what is popular at the moment. And they can just as easily be tossed aside. Forced into a “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality, one must continually consume to stay in the game. Mind you, this is a game that can never be won, but it’s all the average consumer can do to simply avoid be a “loser.” This is one instance in which consumer fear, of not fitting in, is psychologically exploited for capital gain.

When some individuals develop lesions as a side effect of human population of the moon, they are initially outcasts for being different. However, because the government and corporations want the human population of the moon to persist, as it is to their political and financial advantage, these entities “feed” propaganda through the media to advance the popularity of the lesions. The goal: for citizens to see lesions as positive rather than negative. The fictional popular television show “Oh? Wow! Thing!” utilizes its actors’ lesions to its advantage, depicting them as cool, just like another new fashion trend. As a result, lesions become popular, and in turn, individuals with lesions are popular. Although the lesions themselves are inherently signs of human illness or deterioration, they become a new desirable commodity, available for purchase. Initially a frightening image of mortality, those in power exploit that image and its resulting fear, subtly transforming it into a benign, or better yet, a positive image. The masses become victims without even knowing it, their fear redirected into another reason to shop. This is the true purpose of the feed, as intended by the corporations and government:

[T]he feed spoke to me real quiet about new trends, about pants that should be shorter or longer, and bands I should know, and games with new levels and stalactites and fields of diamonds, and friends of many colors were all drinking Coke, and beer was washing through mountain passes, and the stars of “Oh? Wow! Thing!” had got lesions, so lesions were hip now, real hip, and mine looked like a million dollars. (Anderson 147)
The bloody, oozing, skin-falling-off lesions are likened to popular music, refreshing drinks, jewelry, and fashion – and most importantly, the image of happiness. Yet, ironically, even the run-on-sentence exudes a sense of hurry and anxiety. For citizens, rather than being compelled to freak out and run screaming out of fear of death, are fed messages compelling them to run screaming to the next retailer or aesthetician that can provide them with the beautiful and popular lesions (or _______ [place any commodity here]). They become more frightened of not having them, of not being a consumer of the next trend, of not fitting in, afraid of lacking that pivotal, popular something. Hurry before it runs out. Their fear is transformed, from fear of biological death to fear of loss of social status. Whatever the specific commodity, effectively insignificant in its tangible form, more important is the image of that commodity, and the image or sign value it provides the individual. The image is more powerful than the actual item itself. The fear of not having it is more incentive to purchase it.

Advertisers often explicitly use fear to convince consumers to purchase their products. A real-world example is during the Y2K craze, when society feared the encroaching millennium as some prophesized the end of the world. One way corporations capitalized on that fear was in selling Y2K emergency kits, essentially just glorified versions of first-aid or emergency roadside kits, albeit only different semantics-wise. One of many instances in *Feed* in which this tactic is similarly utilized by advertisers is when Violet contacts FeedTech customer service for help. Of course, they always start help calls with an advertisement:

> Hi, I’m Nina, your FeedTech assistance representative. Have you noticed panic can lead to big-time underarm odor? A lot of girls do. No sweat! Why not check out the brag collection of perspiration-control devises at the DVS Superpharmacy Hypersite? But that’s not while I’m here, Violet. (Anderson 246)

Appealing to the consumers’ fear, using adolescent slang from the target demographic information the company has on Violet, all while pretending to be a buddy there to help – this is another of Anderson’s effective narrative exaggerations, yet not far off the reality mark of advertising strategies in use today.

In the 2004 article “Urge to Splurge: A Terror Management Account of Materialism and Consumer Behavior,” researchers utilize terror management theory to study the effects of fear and anxiety on consumer behavior. Evidence abounds that often, in the face of
awareness of mortality, one method of coping is through consuming. The link between death anxiety and materialism not only functions in the realm of shopping and consuming material goods, but also in consuming images of violence. The media forces images of war, death, and terror onto the consumer, further increasing fear and anxiety.

Such violent imagery depicted in *Feed* is evident with the riots that take place in the background of the narrative:

> On the news, there were underground explosions that no one could explain in New Jersey, and a riot had started a few hours before in a mall in California, and was spreading, with feed coverage of people stampeding for safety and children falling and professional people beating the shit out of each other with chairs and a body floating in a fountain while Muzak played a waltz. (Anderson 284)

Such an image of violence intertwined with classical music is reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange* (based on the novel by Anthony Burgess). Anderson undoubtedly offers a touch of homage to the classic novel, both with this scene, as well as with the looming presence of unique teenage slang throughout *Feed*, similarly depicted in *Clockwork*. Beyond this, and more significantly, Anderson critiques the often televised images of violence tied to shopping stampedes, particularly as often seen during holiday seasons when parents are all but ready to kill and maim to get the latest popular toy for their children. With this image, Anderson also analyzes the manner in which the news media and corporations work together to capitalize on violent imagery, evident in his depiction of the fashion fads that follow the riots in *Feed*: “It’s Riot Gear. It’s retro. It’s beat up to look like one of the big twentieth-century riots. It’s been big since earlier this week” (159). The financial exploitation of the violence is also shown with the names given to the fashions trends: “Kent State collection” (159) or “Watts Riot top” (163).

Aside from the media’s effects on popular culture and fashion fads, the media also has an overwhelming effect on the collective psychological state of society as a whole. Considering the fact that the government and the media conglomerates are often in bed together in some way, many televised images can be perceived as forms of government propaganda. The researchers of “Urge to Splurge” cite President George W. Bush’s comments after the events of 9/11 transpired (October 12, 2011):

> We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don’t conduct business, where people don’t shop…Mrs. Bush and I want to encourage Americans to go out shopping. (Arndt et al. 198)
The former president’s statement above arguably sounds like something right out of a narrative like *Feed*, or any number of other postmodern, pre-apocalyptic films or novels in which violence abounds and society and the world appear to be on the brink of destruction. Such exaggerated fictional presentations offer an awareness of the sometimes ridiculous connection between destruction and materialism and politics. Yet, ironically, this statement by President Bush is not fiction. Somehow he and his wife make a connection between shopping and terror – likely with a dual purpose, both financial for the government and distractive for the consumer.

In the months that followed the president’s comments to the American people, the terror management researchers offer some interesting consumer statistics: “From October through December, consumption soared at 6% annual rate” (198). Even the film industry experienced a boom in moviegoer spending in response to the attacks. The American people, following the terror of 9/11 and the resulting feelings of fear and anxiety, were compelled to consume, both commodities and images, likely as a form of avoidant behavior tied to a psychological defense mechanism. Such a response is similar to that of many characters in *Feed*.

Titus’ hyper-glitched-out consumer behavior in the face of Violet’s impending death is further evidence of the link between fear and consumption:

I ordered the draft pants from Multitude. It was a real bargain. / I ordered another pair. I ordered pair after pair. I ordered them all in the same color. They were slate. I was ordering them as quickly as I could. […] I stayed up all through the morning, shivering, ordering, ordering. (Anderson 293-294)

When Titus is faced with the idea of Violet’s mortality, i.e. disposability, he is essentially traumatized. Like other capitalist citizens, he has become accustomed, or trained, to accept the easy disposability of the everyday commodity. Yet when translating over to the impending obsolescence of a human as commodity, he does not know how to respond. His solution is simply to shop – the postmodern solution to everything. Perhaps because of the implantation of the feed, his neural pathways are only capable of responding to most stimuli with some form of consumption. In Titus’ case, it becomes a sort of neurotic compulsion; and his behavior can easily be compared to a computer malfunction. Yet his response of consumption is exactly what the computer is designed to do. He orders the same pair of pants over and over, perhaps as a way of implying that he wants that exact pair of pants forever,
buying multiple pairs as a sort of backup, protection against disposability – in turn, his consumer-minded way of attempting to keep Violet alive forever.

One of the most significant purposes of the spectacle is the dumbing down of individuals, and it comes in many forms: learned helplessness; assumed benevolence of the system; the reduction of fear in the face of something frightening. Enough bright lights and blinking images to distract the individual into simply not thinking about it. If society is made to feel comfortable in the presence of inherently negative events – to accept certain images the-powers-that-be want to be accepted as normal – such desensitization is key to one’s submission to the system, as well as one’s optimal behavior as a consumer. Lesions are normal. Violence is normal. Fear is normal. More importantly, they are all big moneymakers.
CHAPTER 6

CONSUMER IDENTITY: SHOPPING FOR AN IMAGE TO FILL THE VOID

Lance Olsen’s 2005 novella *10:01* continues the postmodern critique of consumer society with a hyper-realistic depiction of perpetual dissatisfaction. The narrative action takes place inside the Mall of America, an icon of capitalism. While surrounded by what should equal happiness in America – moving images, shopping, instant gratification – each character sits in the dark worrying, plagued by anxiety, attempting to escape, yet in turn feeling trapped and imprisoned. With each passing description of the hidden thoughts inside the minds of each character, the novel directly confronts a number of issues plaguing postmodern existence – confusion between reality and fantasy, commodity fetishism, voyeurism, and links between violence and consumerism, only to name a few. Olsen effectively exposes the connections among the many themes he addresses, each functioning to promulgate all the others, essentially an all-encompassing symbiotic universe, elemental to the survival of the capitalist system. Of key note is the manner in which sex, violence, and consumerism work together, sustaining each other. The narrative moves in the direction of a sexual climax via the final explosion, all aroused by the commodity fetishism and voyeurism inhabited within the Mall of America. And the entire lustful act lasts only ten minutes and one second.

The design of the mall is not unlike a carnival, an enticing voyeuristic experience, thriving on human beings’ baser animal nature. Consumable goods flicker, jumping out at the passersby, asking to be looked at. They seduce. Walking through the mall is likened to walking through a red light district. That pair of jeans on display in the window at The Gap is like a pair of breasts at a live nude show. They want to be seen. They want the consumer to fantasize about them. Most importantly, they want the consumer to hand over a few dollars for the privilege. Yet as a carnival, everything is fabricated and deceptive; all is a mere performance.
Inside the Mall of America is its own little film, with actors playing their roles as consumers, being consumed. Perhaps this film within a novel, within a movie theater within a mall, is what Olsen’s character Vito Paluso calls Where the Smiling Ends, the moment after the consumer/actor/tourist is photographed – “when people slowly stop smiling after the shot has been snapped and you can actually see their public masks soften and melt back into everyday blandness” (17). Odd that tourists go to a shopping mall and take photographs of each other, like it is some grand tourist destination; such is the iconic consumer culture, the Mall of America, likened to a place like Disneyland. The mall itself is a movie, the mall patron a voyeur, with a commodity fetish and a fondness for watching consumption in action.

Watching is one of the more satisfying ingredients imbedded in the act of consumption, discharged with an almost sexual transcendence. The character of Celan Solen, author Lance Olsen’s alter ego, epitomizes the postmodern voyeur: “Put Celan in front of a flickering screen and he’s happy” (41). Olsen’s description of Celan addresses the concept of the spectacle as elaborated on by theorist Guy Debord: “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (Society 7). And that representation, the spectacle, is preferred over reality. Celan expresses desire for the spectacle, believing that “reality feels so inadequate simply because you can’t look at it through a frame like you can a movie” (Olsen 143).

No one even notices reality anymore. Consumer attention is only driven toward the unreal, the dreamlike and imaginary. They are unaware of reality until it is detached from itself, drawing their focus through an artificial, mediated, commodified form. Consumers hunger for the “desired” object, one that is not truly present but exists along a fantasy continuum upon which one’s life floats along in a dreamlike trance. Debord describes the almost drug-like addictive quality of the commodity:

The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity. (Society 21) The all-illusive commodity becomes the only thing that matters. In many ways, the spectacle has a hypnotizing and therefore almost debilitating presence. It is in control.
Although surrounded by others, all characters in a carnival show, the consumer becomes oblivious to anything except an unending hunger that it seems can never be satisfied. The postmodern consumer is part of the *lonely crowd*, perhaps made even more visually obvious in the setting of the Mall of America. Individuals meander through the crowds, seeking some sense of completion, something to make them feel good – almost like a romance, searching for the perfect mate – yet they never fully reach gratification. And it can be absolutely exhausting.

Why does each of the novel’s characters end up inside the movie theater within the Mall of America? Perhaps they are going there for a little distraction from reality, a little fantasy fulfillment. It is doubtful they are going in there to think, which is likely the last thing they want to do. However, as the narrative elucidates, thinking is what most of them end up doing extensively, particularly during the previews. Yet in this case, it is as if the thinking is beyond their control, a puppet master is pulling the strings. They are not allowed to disconnect: “The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep” (Debord, *Society* 12). The flashing of various images during the previews functions as a sort of foreplay, stimulating the minds of viewers, all awaiting the ultimate climax. The film patron, a consumer of images, is essentially a voyeur, yet he or she watches images with permission, paying a fee for a few moments of fantasy and escape. The modern movie theater has replaced the brothel. The images on the screen have replaced the stripper on stage. And in the mall itself, the commodity has replaced the hand job.

While shopping and seeking meaning, consumers are enticed to go to the movies to forget about the lack of meaning in their lives. They go there in search of comfort, to escape life for a while – to be *distracted*. Upon entering the movie theater, one becomes a part of the film itself, pretending to be the beautiful hero or heroine, with loneliness vicariously replaced by the fictional relationships and excitement portrayed on screen. Just as a person may go shopping to fill a void, so too does the postmodern voyeur, shopping for images to replace one’s *life* – replacing reality with fantasy. As Debord sees it, reality is nonexistent in postmodern life, and the illusion has become its lifesource: “The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is the materialised illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression” (*Society* 24). The postmodern era is dominated by filmic perception, and
film has forced us to “see” in a different way – distanced and disconnected, as well as fictionalized.

Character Kate Frazey lives this way. She enters the theater and imagines herself as part of the film, “seeing herself as she does so as if from a crane shot among these other filmgoers filtering in and settling down around her” (Olsen 1). Olsen’s intention with such comments regarding Kate’s character, present on the very first page, is undoubtedly to call attention to the fictional quality of the narrative itself, also a consumer object or commodity, and thereby alluding to the concept of metafiction – the text within the text – setting up the interpretive framework for the reader for the remainder of the narrative. Shoppers and/or viewers are in the theater to watch a movie, but Kate calls attention to the fact that they are also being watched, each acting his or her assigned part in the movie of consumption. They watch commodities, watch movies, and watch each other, all while they are also in some sense being watched by the mall, the corporations, the government, as well as the reader. They are part of the fiction that is consumerism. Kate explicitly comments on the movie going on within the mall and the theater, while at the same time critiquing the fictionality, or fabricated nature, of the entire consumer lifestyle. She may critique it, but she is also a complicit participant, just another voyeur, getting off.

Other characters offer perspectives of the fictional quality of postmodern life, particularly as it manifests itself in the Mall of America. As Leon Mopati suggests, “[E]everyone is working off a script he doesn’t have access to” (Olsen 162). In some way, all of our actions are scripted, but they may not have been scripted by us. Or by Olsen for that matter.

Character Trudi Chan understands the theatrical stage of consumption – she is there to watch. But she is also part of the flick; she too is an actor, unaware, being watched. Though she feels aware, like she knows something all of the other mall patrons don’t know:

She is drifting in the soothing amniotic awareness that everyone around her is part of a much larger project than he or she suspects. This is because the cosmos, Trudi trusts, only appears chaotic, but is in reality an orderly place marked by harmony, synchronicity, and cooperation. All you have to do is look. All you have to do is pay attention. (Olsen 21)

This world of harmony – capitalism – subsists on looking, on paying attention. This is all it requires to then suck the consumer voyeur in. After first paying attention, he or she will in
turn pay dollars. And the appearance of chaos – i.e. violence – is all part of the system. A harmonious system indeed.

The presence of Josh Hartnett as a real-life celebrity, within a movie theater, within the fictional narrative, not only draws attention to the text’s metafictional qualities, but also elaborates on the function of celebrities themselves as a sort of commodity. Olsen also throws in a bit of satire when Hartnett, who has some degree of artificial identity as an action hero due to his work in such films as *Black Hawk Down*, initially thinks he’s acting the heroic role, yet then taking a 180-degree turn, panics when he realizes the reality of the disaster taking place in the narrative: “This isn’t a stupid movie. He’s no Army Ranger. This is the real deal, and he’s just Josh Hartnett, the schmuck with the really nice eyes. […] ‘Help us!’ He screams. ‘Oh, god, help us! Help us! We’re all gonna die!’” (177). The satirical approach at this moment in the narrative enlightens the reader to the absurdity of the confusion between reality and fiction, with the occasional difficulty discerning real acts of violence from fictional drama. And Hartnett himself, as an action hero, confuses his real role in life with that of his many fictional roles as a hero. His thoughts, presented from the narrator’s perspective, are depicted with a narcissistic element, as he presumably feels almost insulted that no one recognizes him, their eyes are not on him as they should be in the society of the spectacle; he is supposed to be the spectacle, yet he too is confused as to which is the Symbolic and which is the Real.

The confusion of the spectacle goes hand-in-hand with the search for meaning. Olsen’s character Arnold Frankenheimer, another all-too-typical corporate drone imprisoned daily within an office cubicle, sits in the movie theater at the Mall of America, and thinks about the quest for meaning in postmodern life: “Once upon a time, it struck him, sitting there, a sense of meaning derived from what you produced. […] These days, meaning derives from what you consume” (Olsen 78). While obviously touching on the Marxist concept of alienated labor, Arnold’s statement is also reminiscent of sociologist David Riesman’s analysis comparing the inner-directed social character to the consumer-based other-directed character. Man’s once intrinsically motivated quest for meaning has been replaced by an extrinsically motivated quest to appear to have meaning, or more appropriately, to have monetary, materialistic value, in relative comparison to others – ironically, a value that is ultimately meaningless. The basis of consumption is through the images of consumption,
infinitely present within the shopping mall. And images or appearances – the spectacle – have replaced meaning.

For Arnold, the lack of meaning derived from his consumerist lifestyle leads him to acknowledge a dire reality. Similar to the all-or-nothing methods of rebellion exhibited by Lester in *American Beauty*, the Narrator in *Fight Club*, and Peter in *Office Space*, Arnold recently told off his boss via an email resignation, and now plans to take the destructive path to freedom by slamming his car into the mall after the movie to cash in on the insurance money. If his plan works, in all likelihood, with a large amount of cash in hand, Arnold would simply continue along the same consumerist path of searching for meaning through materialist pursuits. Yet, in perfect postmodern fashion, the chances of it working are slim to none; destruction is the usual order of the day.

Olsen offers readers a vast plurality of perspectives. The many characters within the narrative come from a wide variety of backgrounds: some young, some old; some American, some not; some sweet and innocent, some with dark secrets. Yet, here they all are, united, in the Mall of America, inside this movie theater. They are all the same, united in their complicit participation – they are consumers. They are voyeurs plagued by commodity fetishism. The theme of sameness is explicitly addressed by some of the characters, for different reasons. For Betty and Joe Roemer, sameness elicits a positive feeling: “[T]he comforting thing about malls is the comforting thing about fastfood franchises: they are essentially the same wherever you go” (Olsen 64). For Leon, he despises the idea: “What a terrible place to be, thinks Leon: shopping. Unending space crowded with an excess of sameness. Makes you feel lost even when you’re not. Distracted. Unmoored” (Olsen 53).

Trudi is enthralled with the sociological phenomenon of sameness:

> Trudi wants to witness unsoiled concord in action. She wants to watch people dance a dance they don’t even know they’re dancing. She is interested in how these places concentrate our culture’s favorite socially acceptable – seeing, eating, and buying – beneath one roof in a single, collective, complexly meshed instant. (Olsen 28)

Olsen’s depiction of the various attitudes regarding sameness are reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard’s discussion of the shopping mall as a *homogenization*, a place in which everything is so blended together that all sense of identity is lost, and with it all meaning:
[T]he shopping centre, the city of the future is the *sublimate* of all real life, of all objective social life, in which not only work and money disappear, but also the seasons, those distant vestiges of a cycle which has at last also been homogenized! Work, leisure, nature and culture: all these things which were once dispersed, which once generated anxiety and complexity in real life […] are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping. […] All at last *digested* and turned into the same homogeneous faecal matter […] *Controlled*, lubricated, *consumed* faecality has passed into things; it seeps everywhere into the indistinctness of things and social relations. […] The substance of life unified in this way, in this universal digest, can no longer have in it any *meaning*. (Consumer 29-30)

Based on Baudrillard’s description, in some ways, the mall can be likened to the landfill. Both are collections of a vast variety, fused together into an existence of sameness, a homogenous mixture. Where once each individual item or person stood out and was unique and had value – and meaning – now they are “mixed and blended” and have lost their value. They have become trash, or “faecal matter,” and in turn have no meaning.

It may be argued that we as individuals must make our own meaning; however, to do so is virtually impossible in a society complexly plagued by incessant distraction and systematic manipulation into acquiring meaning through material objects. With one’s perception of reality always invaded and in a constant state of distraction, with capitalist society encouraging that distraction, perceptions are distorted, reality is distorted, and true critical thinking is virtually impossible. And the easiest response is simply to continue to consume. Yet, the consumer society itself is under attack, which adds fodder to the confliction.

As a post-9/11 narrative, *10:01* presents some degree of connection between the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, a symbol of capitalism, and a terrorist bombing in the Mall of America, another symbol of capitalism. Olsen intermingles the voyeuristic quality to violence, indirectly alluding to the news media coverage of 9/11, by satirically portraying in his novella the characters’ erroneous assumptions that the real violence taking place in the theater is a fictional spectacle presented for their entertainment. Incessant consumption of violence and the resulting desensitization that inevitably changes the wiring of cognition leaves the postmodern individual with no ability to discern reality from fiction, true violence from spectacular violence.
Where Fredric Jameson discusses the purpose of art to be the “imaginary resolution” of a “real contradiction,” he also argues that such attempts are a relatively futile endeavor in post-industrial, late-capitalist societies. Stephen-Paul Martin’s review of Olsen’s 10:01 evokes Jameson’s argument, claiming how:

even the most progressive artistic and intellectual efforts are inevitably caught up in the cultural logic of late capitalism, since their primary tools of opposition – irony and surrealist imagery – have already become tools of consumer manipulation, techniques frequently used to sell commodities, personalities, and lifestyles. (3)

Martin’s argument attests to the commonly held notion that in order to fight effectively, sometimes joining the enemy is the only way to truly win a battle. Because people typically are resistant to change or anything that challenges their beliefs, complicit consumers will unlikely freely accept art that directly opposes their way of life. As previously discussed, Althusser’s concept of realism asserts that critiquing the public’s reality must be done so delicately in order for them to be open to viewing it from an oppositional perspective. As Martin describes, the tools of rebellion have been high-jacked by the oppressor, which is often the case. Yet through art, the oppressed can become more aware of their loss of power, which is the first step toward freedom.

Perhaps Olsen realizes the impossibility of finding any sort of real resolution through his metafictional creation. This may be why he leaves the ending up for grabs – was the entire thing a fantasy, just another movie with a big explosion? Is there at least some sense of satisfaction derived from being part of the spectacle? Is the explosion at the end the long-awaited sexual climax of the voyeuristic act of consumption – or is the reader left unsatisfied from premature ejaculation? Can satisfaction ever truly be experienced when individuals have become numb and catatonic in their submersion, passively drowning in the pool of violence and “faecal matter” that is now the spectacle – a place where the Real no longer even exists?

Olsen’s exhaustive exploration of ten minutes and one second enhances the reality of consumerism. Again through Trudi Chan, Olsen enlightens us to the truth – that the shopping mall is the ground zero of the symbiotic capitalist universe: “The more you look, the more you see. The more you see, the more you want. The more you want, the more you look. Malls are the only utopias that actually work” (29). While adhering to capitalist ideology by
depicting a sense of the suburban shopping mall as, in some ways, a home away from home, a haven of solace and comfort, and even an embodiment of meaning, Olsen’s narrative is also a postmodern artistic and critical endeavor to bring awareness to consumers. He is not asking for individuals to reject capitalism outright, and assuredly knows the impossibility of doing so, and the danger of such violent attempts as portrayed in the explosion. Although no answers are offered, awareness is the primary function. Postmodern art as both educator and entertainer – rather than maintaining the status quo and blindly consuming future waste as usual, by consuming art like Olsen’s, we can productively consume knowledge and gain perspective, enlightenment, and fuel for possible change one consumer at a time. And if we can get off in the process, even better.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: POST-9/11-ISM: MEANING AMID THE CHAOS

[T]he most pervasive emotion of modern society: fear.

–Joanna Bourke

*Fear: A Cultural History*

The slowly increasing evolution of violence in upper-income, suburban, “safe” areas of capitalist America, as it progresses from post-WWII to post-9/11, is made all the more evident as it is depicted in many postmodern narratives. In films like *Falling Down, Office Space, American Beauty,* and *Fight Club,* as well as novels *The Winter of Our Discontent* and *Revolutionary Road,* we see the typical white male protagonist evolve from obedient worker-consumer to, in varying degrees, resentful and angry nonconformist rebel. These late 20th-century narratives are preludes to what has evolved in post-9/11 society, as depicted in the novels *Feed* and *10:01,* among others. The violence imbedded in our culture has become integral to our existence – and paradoxically one of its biggest threats. Perhaps the most significant negative impact, or attack, is on the psychological well-being of individuals, with emotional turmoil only faintly hidden via ever-present slyly manipulative distractions. Yet, it is as if we cannot survive without violence. And the fear that results is tied to our postmodern, post-9/11-terror-stricken identities.

In *The Consumer Society,* published in 1998 at the cusp of millennial malaise, Jean Baudrillard seemingly prophesied the condition in which we now find ourselves, although its truth and relevance has perhaps increased exponentially post-9/11:

The consumer society is at one and the same time a society of solicitude and a society of repression, a pacified society and a society of violence. We have seen that ‘pacified’ daily life thrives on a daily diet of consumed violence, ‘allusive’ violence: news reports of accidents, murders, revolutions, the atomic or bacteriologic threat – the whole apocalyptic stock-in-trade of the mass media. We have seen that the affinity between violence and the obsession with security and
well-being is not accidental: ‘spectacular’ violence and the pacification of daily life are homogeneous because they are each equally abstract and each is a thing of myths and signs. (174)

As Baudrillard describes, violence, pacification, and security are almost mythical abstractions. Intangible, illusive, hovering, and powerful. We can see the twisted dynamic between both the fear of, and the attraction to, violence, and in turn, the resulting confliction at the heart of the collective mindset present throughout society today, as safety and well-being become of highest concern with each passing moment. Moreover, in the face of distress with no real security apparent, denial takes over, often through our cultural myths.

In *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, author John Storey discusses anthropologist and structural theorist Claude Levi-Strauss’ concept of myths: “[A]ll myths have a similar socio-cultural function within society: to resolve magically a society’s problems and contradictions” (74-75). He goes further, stating that “myths are stories we tell ourselves as a culture in order to banish contradictions and make the world explicable and therefore habitable” (75). Levi-Strauss’ concepts of myths overlaps with Jameson’s discussion regarding art as “an imaginary resolution to a real contradiction.” However, myths often become so culturally embedded and possess enormous power, to the sometimes dangerous point of individuals lacking any awareness between fiction and reality.

In *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, author Susan Faludi expands on the purpose of myths, with their appearance as a collective response to the events of 9/11. In particular, she describes the manner in which Americans seemingly regressed back to various earlier stages in our history, searching for heroes along with their requisite damsels in distress needing saving. She describes the necessity of such myths for providing emotional comfort in the face of distressing situations, in this case immediately following 9/11: “The anxieties it awakened reside deep in our cultural memory. And the myth we deployed to keep those anxieties buried is one we’ve been constructing for more than three hundred years” (*Terror Dream* 13). Many narratives constructed immediately after 9/11, both in film and in the news media, focused on male heroes and female victims, tied to what Faludi refers to as “a mythical male strength” and “a mythical female weakness,” the response “to real threats to our nation by distracting ourselves with imagined threats to
femininity and family life” (295). Furthermore, as Faludi explains, the delusional aspect to these cultural myths, or what she calls a “cultural affliction” (295), come at a cost:

By September 12, our culture was already reworking a national tragedy into a national fantasy of virtuous might and triumph. No doubt, the fantasy consoled many. But rather than make us any safer, it misled us into danger, damaging the very security the myth was supposed to bolster. There are consequences to living in a dream. (289)

A cultural myth is not only a fantasy, but it constitutes cultural denial. It is a collective defense mechanism, both political and sociocultural. The most destructive element of its power is seen in the psychological blocks it creates in individuals, making them unable to face the true impacts of unexpected traumatic events, freezing them into inaction. They instead return back in time, a la Freud’s ego defense mechanism of regression, and cling to a myth that they hope can carry them through, like magic.

Arianna Huffington satirically addresses the often ignorant aspect of adherence to cultural myths, particularly as it impacts the current ecological state of our environment:

Why worry about minor little details like clean air, clean water, safe ports and the safety net when Jesus is going to give the world an “Extreme Makeover: Planet Edition” right after he finishes putting Satan in his place once and for all?

Huffington’s exaggerated presentation here addresses the manner in which individuals experience life and their inner spirituality as mediated through television and mythical fantasies while pleading ignorance to the truth of their condition and their complicity in its making – perhaps not so far-fetched from the reality of the human condition today. Whatever beliefs or doctrine to which one might adhere, the choice of inaction is not only irresponsible, but is also a sign of an unhealthy defensive denial. Such beliefs may be effective for a brief moment, but unfortunately, reality rarely allows magical thinking to work for long. Anxiety comes to rule the day, whether individuals are aware or not, with emotional and physiological damage felt often for years to come. Inevitably, those who are aware of that anxiety take advantage of others’ suffering in the most politically and financially marketable ways possible, in true capitalistic fashion. Of course, tragedies have been happening throughout time long before 2001, such as the attack on Pearl Harbor that was the decisive factor for the United States to become involved in WWII. But an event like 9/11 occurred at a unique moment in time in which the 24-hour-news media, as well as the internet and social media, are so deeply imbedded in our culture and have such unquantifiable power. Unable to
disconnect from the outer world, individuals can watch the violence over and over, hear pundits talk about it, listen to stories of tragedy and heroism, and be bombarded with political propaganda and advertising messages literally nonstop. Anxiety is much more pervasive, as well as invasive, in the 21st century. Myths take on an enormously unfathomable life of their own in such an environment without restraint. And unfortunately, many people are never even aware of their existence.

No doubt anxiety, fear, and violence were social control mechanisms prior to 9/11, but they have become even more powerfully effective since. As Joanna Bourke argues in *Fear: A Cultural History*, “[F]ear has become the emotion through which public life is administered” (x). More specifically regarding the pervasive fear tied to terrorism, Bourke goes further: “The spectre of ‘the Terrorist’ has taken on a god-like power, equivalent to the plague of earlier times or the Satan of religion” (x).

Considering the fact that consumption often increases as anxiety and fear increase, the act of consumption can quickly transform from functional to dysfunctional in the face of something like terrorism, and is further exploited by the powers-that-be as a part of the capitalist growth system, arguably often without intent or awareness of the real effects. Baudrillard analyzes the self-destructive nature of dysfunctional consumption:

[W]e are everywhere reaching a point where the dynamic of growth and affluence is becoming circular and generating only wheelspin and where, increasingly, the system is exhausting itself in its own reproduction. [...] With ‘dysfunctional’ consumption, both individual and collective, rising more quickly than the ‘functional’, the system is basically becoming parasitic upon itself. (*Consumer 41*)

Wheelspin – responsible for landfills, overpopulation, depletion of resources. Such dysfunctional consumption transforms the human race itself, the human body, from a unique biological wonder to sheer waste. Human waste. As consumption increases, violence increases, in some ways as if we are eating each other, like parasites. The transformation of consumerism is one from literal consumption, to self-consumption, to all out destruction.

From the numerous hero myths evident immediately following 9/11, eventually more alarmingly dire narratives began to surface, as evident in 2002’s *Feed* and 2005’s *10:01*, and even 2006’s *Idiocracy*. These narratives depict an inevitable state of destruction and disrepair for which, it seems, there is no cure. While *10:01* is a present-day realistic portrayal linking
consumption, desensitization, and violence, *Feed* and *Idiocracy* are futuristic hyperbolic presentations of what might happen to mankind and the earth if capitalism continues in its present course.

Approaching a form of attack on cultural myths, postmodern narratives, particularly those that have been produced since 9/11, are trying to tell us something. Each is an attempt at an “imaginary resolution to a real contradiction” – yes they are fiction, created with the intent for the viewer/reader to acknowledge their fictional existence, while at the same time, confronting the possibility of their truth. More importantly, they allow us the opportunity to find meaning and a reason to continue to exist in the face of so many elements, situations, and events that seem to want to crush our very existence. This is the function of art. In some ways, art is more real than our cultural myths – we approach art knowing it is fiction, yet treating it as if it is more real than our actual reality. In many ways, where myths are like band-aids simply covering the wounds, art gets at the root of the pain. Art as a mediator is a conduit of healing.

**META-FICTION**

Where myths can often be overwhelmingly dysfunctional, art on the other hand could arguably be the most functional, and therefore most beneficial, response to the inherent contradictions present in daily life. Approaching our fictions without the disillusionment that they are anything otherwise allows us to see the intended messages much more clearly. This is key to realist works, acting as mediators of the truth and pain depicted, thereby allowing viewers and readers enough distance to not be traumatized, but enough closeness to shake them out of the contrived comfort of their fabricated seats. Even more so, metafictional narratives can perhaps have the most impact, stepping out of the fiction and talking directly to reality, perhaps directly to the viewer or reader.

Just as Olsen’s *10:01* is imbedded with self-references to its existence as fiction, so too are several other postmodern narratives. The metafictional quality of *American Beauty* is evident in its first moments, with the first lines spoken by Lester Burnham, after his death: “My name is Lester Burnham. I’m forty-two-years-old, and in less than a year, I’ll be dead. Of course, I don’t know that yet. And, in a way, I’m dead already.” Lester’s pre-posthumous revelation in which he refers to himself and his coming death revealed in the beginning of the
film sets up the viewer’s framework of interpretation for the remainder of the film. The fact that Lester is speaking, even though he is dead, makes obvious the fact that this is fiction. Later, the sign in his cubicle, stating “look closer,” likely a daily reminder for Lester to wake up from his comatose imprisoned existence, also alerts the viewer that something is awry, that this is not real. Yet, the dismal reality depicted throughout the film is so painfully realistic, that perhaps these metafictional moments are necessary to allow the viewer to survive the emotional turmoil they are not only watching, but inevitably feeling indirectly through the film’s poignantly effective realism. Just as Steinbeck prefaces *The Winter of Our Discontent* by asking the readers to look at their own lives, he sets them up to critique the society he depicts in comparison to their own, while reminding them that this is a work of fiction before they even read it.

*Fight Club* is also imbedded with metafictional moments, particularly with the narration throughout. Early in the film the Narrator/Jack discusses how Tyler works in a movie theater at night, and splices bits of porn into children’s movies. Here, in a moment of foreshadowing, he refers to the technique called “cigarette burns” that notify the theater worker of the time to change reels. Later in the film, following the discovery of the Narrator’s dissociative disorder, and in turn the nonexistence of the alter personality, Tyler Durden, the film directly refers to its fictional aspects. The Narrator goes back to previous scenes, showing the viewer that Tyler was an illusion, that he was not really there when we thought he was; and at other times, he was there when we did not see him. Here, he brings up the technique of “cigarette burns” again – and the method used to splice Tyler into the very film we have been watching, in turn tricking us, the viewers, all along. Even the DVD release of the film adds a message from Tyler Durden to the viewers, addressing both the fact that this is a work of fiction, while at the same time “warning” them of their complicit behaviors which are part of the problems being critiqued by the narrative:

Warning: If you are reading this then this warning is for you. Every word you read of this useless fine print is another second off your life. Don't you have other things to do? Is your life so empty that you honestly can’t think of a better way to spend these moments? Or are you so impressed with authority that you give respect and credence to all that claim it? Do you read everything you're supposed to read? Do you think every thing you're supposed to think? Buy what you're told to want? Get out of your apartment. Meet a member of the opposite sex. Stop the excessive shopping and masturbation. Quit your job. Start a fight. Prove you're
alive. If you don't claim your humanity you will become a statistic. You have been warned. - Tyler. *Fight Club*

These self-referential moments of the film describing itself as fiction, only serve to remind the viewer that these images on the screen, although they may seem real, are an illusion. That the viewers are part of the spectacle.

Beyond self-reference, *American Beauty* takes an additional quasi-metafictional approach through the use of a literal signifier for waste. The dancing plastic bag, though a minor character, becomes a focal point representative of the entire film. The bag symbolizes consumerism and waste, ecological crisis – the dance of waste – while it is also emblematic of the characters floating, searching for meaning, for an identity to cling to, yet getting tossed around erratically and going nowhere. In some ways, the focus on the plastic bag allows viewers to both disconnect from the narrative, coming back to the reality of their own lives, while also being hypnotized by the image, returning to some imaginary realm. As a form of metafiction, the bag speaks directly to the viewers without a verbal language, but a visual and almost visceral one. It brings attention to the fact that this is not fiction, it is the real world, but at the same time attention to the fact that this is a story, a film you are watching. The focus on the bag makes the viewer mindfully come back to awareness and realize the world on the screen is both *not real*, yet *real* all the same. Through a *hyper-real* image, a piece of litter, representative of consumerism and waste – perhaps the most real moment in the entire film. Not fiction at all, but part of the fiction we create for ourselves.

**Imaginary Resolutions: (Non)Reality/(Non)Fiction**

The paradox of literature and any art form in general is reflected in the fact that the writer/artist brings his or her own experience into the artistic product, while at the same time mediating that experience into the imaginary realm. In this sense, the “real” becomes “unreal.” But this does not mean that the art itself cannot be relevant to the reality of any person in any time or place.

The inspiration for art is the “real” life experience that it both reflects (from the artist) and conveys (to the viewer/reader). These life experiences are subjective both within the individual artist, as well as within the art consumer. However, that subjectivity is transcendental and dynamic. No matter what the artist’s original inspiration or intention in
producing the work of art, the “meaning” will inevitably change, being transmuted by the varying personal experiences of its countless audiences, as well as throughout time, which brings with it changing political situations and experiences.

The meaning of the artwork changes — its significance to the individual and the ever-changing social situation throughout time are links in the signifying chain, with each link apparently similar but inherently different. The point of “good” art, perhaps its most defining aspect, is that it never loses meaning; it is dynamic, in turn meaning different things to different people in different eras, but still, hopefully, remains as poignant as ever.

The purpose for authors and directors may or may not be to illuminate the masses; one can only speculate. One element each of the narratives featured in this study shares is an existentialist philosophy, implying that life is inherently meaningless. Being left with no imaginary resolution to the conflicts inherent in life, the only true conclusion offered by the typically dire postmodern ending is perhaps the realization that as individuals, our lives are what we make them. We create our own meaning. And if art is any indication of reality, then we make our lives, our culture, and our world very violent indeed. The trick is to find meaning amid the chaos.
WORKS CITED


