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Epochal Anxieties and Fixations: Millennial Angst in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* (1998), and J.G. Ballard's *Super-Cannes* (2000).

by

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Abstract

This study reads four contemporary novels as both responses to and engagements with the cultural climate of the late twentieth-century. Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* (1998), and J.G. Ballard's *Super-Cannes* (2000) all gesture toward an interrogation of the value system of late-twentieth century life and an indictment of the cultural sphere. I employ the term 'epochal anxiety' to map the culturally specific phenomena that these novels internalise and reflect. Taking into account recent scholarly conversation on literature of the 1990s, this study will also consider the temporal significance of the texts in light of their proximity to the events of September 11.

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Introduction

In Allen Coulter's *Remember Me* (2010), the hero, Tyler Hawkins (Robert Pattinson), starts out as a character whose misplaced agency and millennial ennui serve to further dampen his already disenchanted life. Between silently mourning his older brother, providing succour for his maladjusted younger sister, and attempting to recuperate a relationship with his father – while courting existentially cheerless student, Ally Craig (Emilie De Ravin) – Hawkins' movement throughout the narrative is marked by his struggle for contentedness, for everything to run its course unimpeded by tragedy and loss. A dyad of serendipitous events function both formatively and destructively for Hawkins; one facilitates his introduction to and subsequent infatuation with Ally Craig, and the other is 9/11. For a film released nine years after the events of September 11, 2001, *Remember Me* has the capacity (and apparent license)¹ to revolve around the attacks on the World Trade Centre. Instead, notions of agency, temporality, and millennial angst form the central nucleus of the plot around which the characters' orbit. What *Remember Me* provides is an opportunity to consider the zeitgeist of the late twentieth-century at the human scale without allowing 9/11 to dominate its narrative.

The way *Remember Me* restricts 9/11 from trammelling its narrative arc and reductively categorising it as post-9/11 Americana – by consciously keeping the event as the literal and metaphorical endpoint – provides a useful thematic and conceptual allegory. In a similar fashion I too refrain from allowing the “post-Cold War and pre-9/11 status” (Kelly 4) of the decade to overshadow my analyses of what falls in between and also keep 9/11 as a fixed, chronological endpoint. In this study, I read four novels of the late twentieth-century and place them as both responses to and engagements with the epochal anxieties and fixations of the 1990s. I use the term ‘epochal anxiety’ to define a cultural force present in the zeitgeist that

¹ *United 93* (2002), *World Trade Center* (2006), and *9/11* (2006) are all examples of Hollywood dramatizations of 9/11 released within less than ten years of the event itself.

each novel engages with and responds to. Those that surface most frequently – masculinity, corporeality, marginality, and a desire for authenticity – function as the analytical framework of this dissertation and I read each anxiety and fixation against the texts chosen. The use of the term ‘authenticity’ is potentially problematic in relation to these four novels since the desire and subsequent search for authentic experience is undermined by the very fact it can be located instead of generated. As I show later, this is important to consider in the analysis of *Fight Club* where a search for authentic masculinity unwittingly evinces notions of a bygone, frontier version of masculinity.

Epochal fixations closely follow this term and more specifically denote an obsession with surfaces, visuality, and simulacral reproduction. These epochal fixations are in essence continuations of a Baudrillardian philosophy that contends that culture is now dominated by simulations” (Poster 1) and marks the movement into a “space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of the truth.” (Baudrillard 3). As reflectors of the zeitgeist, these texts are replete with epochal fixations and chart a movement into such a space. Paul Auster’s *Leviathan* (1992), Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996), Bret Easton Ellis’s *Glamorama* (1998), and J.G Ballard’s *Super-Cannes* (2000) all gesture toward an interrogation of the value system of late-twentieth century life and an indictment of the cultural sphere.

This fixation with simulation is not a phenomenon exclusive to the 1990s and its trajectory can be mapped to a point that precedes the texts examined here. While a delineation of this preoccupation with simulation would detract from the aims of this thesis, the 1990s and the cultural sphere merits attention. For the most part, the texts chosen articulate the defining aspects of the cultural sphere and the zeitgeist adequately. The zeitgeist of the 1990s is saturated with more than just grunge rock and the proliferation of the internet. For Ellis and Palahniuk, an accurate depiction of the cultural landscape is substituted in favour of a trivialized one. While both authors (Ellis more explicitly than Palahniuk) acknowledge the emergence of the internet and the advancement of media technology, they depict the effects of these at the human scale.

Fight Club and Glamorama track the proliferation of image manipulation, excessive consumption, and an obsession with perfection and completeness, and show the impact this has on the consciousness of the characters. The decade may have boasted more than the emergence of genetic manipulation, designer babies, and somatic cloning – ‘Dolly’ the first cloned sheep is created – yet Glamorama is inclusive of these aspects. As the narrative progresses we see that the protagonist, Victor Ward, is one of many Victor Ward ‘lookalikes’ or indeed cloned copies. The narrator in Fight Club effectively clones or copies himself and produces a version of his consciousness that can combat the enervating constructs that confine and control him. The other defining aspects of the decade, namely Operation Desert Storm, or the first Gulf War, is also alluded to – somewhat obliquely – in Glamorama. Ellis may not engage with the event proper but the thematic and conceptual constituents of the novel incorporate the increasing anxiety toward the threat of international terrorism. As far as economical and geopolitical changes in the decade are concerned – courtesy of neoliberalism – Leviathan and Super – Cannes, like Glamorama, acknowledge these aspects of the zeitgeist as peripheral concerns.

Building on a critical corpus that includes Samuel Cohen, Philip E. Wegner, and Adam Kelly as some of its main contributors, the critical lens of this argument is tinted with broader discussions of the 1990s, its cultural history, and the nascency of scholarly conversation on literature emerging from the decade. Despite the nebulosity of these critical discussions, what critics have so far agreed on is that literature emanating from the period is characterised by “a markedly retrospective quality” (Cohen 10). In *After the End of History*, Cohen uses a handful of historical novels by canonical literary figures – DeLillo, Morrison, Didion, Roth, Pynchon, and O’Brien – and suggests that they “connect the past to a future whose tenuousness places it at the centre of the contemporary American historical imagination” (4). Cohen emphasizes how these works re-establish a connection between past and present cultural modes in an attempt to “turn away from the stupefying contemporary reality toward textuality, self-reflexivity, and metafiction” (17).

This segment of late twentieth and early twenty-first century life is also considered to be a period marked by stagnation “in which events were on strike” (Baudrillard 2). I follow literary critics such as Adam Kelly and James Annesley, and cultural commentators (Susan Faludi), who attest to a literary transition during the 1990s (2). Wegner views the 1990s “as one of those transitional phases [...] a time offering utopian possibilities that now risk being forgotten, a moment of heated debate of the direction of the future” (1-9). This transitional aspect is realised not just through “historical formations” (Kelly 4), but through literary-historical formations, too. As Andrew Hoberek notes, novels of the 1990s begin to gesture toward a “contemporary transformation of what counts as serious fiction” (Hoberek, qtd in Kelly 5), which may help authors like Ellis to be taken seriously and considered alongside the more resonant names in postmodern Americana. Another facet of scholarly engagements with literature of the 1990s is concerned – sometimes overtly – with the notion that the decade bears “the signs of a transition beyond postmodernism” (Kelly 5).

By the early 2000s, critics were already “sounding the death-knell of postmodernism” (Kelly 5) and while I cannot entirely sidestep this critical discourse, I divert my attention to what is firmly rooted in the zeitgeist – problems of authenticity, masculinity, and marginality – since literary criticism in this period is too nascent to allow its most recent theoretical developments to dominate my analyses. I turn away from critics like Linda Hutcheon, Simon Malpas and Christian Moraru,² whose engagements with the decade are concerned largely with postmodernism as a phenomenon “on the wane” (Kelly 5). Postmodernism’s “waning influence” (Hoberek 233) is indeed exactly that; it does not suggest that we have surpassed it completely, or that searching for “some singular, dramatic, readily visible cultural

² The critics named here by no means form an exhaustive list of those who add their voice to the chorus of post-postmodern scholarship. Of those I mention, Linda Hutcheon calls postmodernism “a thing of the past” (165), Simon Malpas notes “if postmodernism named a space of critical debate, then the debate had already moved elsewhere” (1), and Moraru names this emergent phenomenon “cosmodernism”, that is, a “conjoining of cosmopolitanism with modernist aesthetics” (Kelly 5). Others, like Rachel Adams, suggest that postmodernism has been eclipsed by “American literary globalism” (248).

transformation” typifies it, but more that post-postmodernism “grows out of a range of uneven, tentative, local shifts” (Hoberek 241).

Instead, I follow critics, like Daniel Grassian, who refrain from engaging with post-postmodernism since “it suggests we have moved past postmodernism” when in fact the decade still boasts “a period of literary eclecticism and hybrid fictions, which utilize a wide variety of literary approaches, have conflicting viewpoints and blend media and technological forms” (2). Moreover, allowing the pre-millennial moment to be caught in the critical updraft of post-postmodernism is ultimately reductive since post-millennial events like the September 11 attacks (should) have clear demarcation lines drawn around them. In choosing to focus my efforts on literature that falls between two “paradigm-altering events” (Kelly 6), navigation between the bodies of postmodern and post-postmodern criticism will not overpower an engagement with these texts and the epochal anxieties (and fixations) woven into the fabric of their narratives.

Both Cohen’s and Wegner’s contributions operate at the same “post-Cold War and pre-9/11” intersection as I do in this study. While the use of the same cultural bookends does not radically separate my addition from the strand of scholarship that Cohen and Wegner establish, the texts I employ in this discussion diverge from it in their possession of a “retrospective quality”. The notion of retrospection is almost entirely absent in the narratives offered by Auster, Palahniuk, Ellis, and Ballard. Aside from the temporal flitting in *Leviathan* between the cultural climate of 1970s America and the 1990s, these writers embed their narrative roots deep in the last decade of the twentieth-century. A leitmotif in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* is constructed around the imperative to erase history instead of charting a cultural indebtedness to it. Similarly, in its advocacy of image alteration and manipulation, Bret Easton Ellis’s *Glamorama* displays how a late twentieth-century cultural modality negates the value of retrospection and instead suggests that history can be created (or destroyed) technologically. As *Leviathan*, *Super-Cannes*, *Glamorama*, and *Fight Club* seem to neglect any sense of retrospection in terms of

culture – but rather seek to generate new cultural and social phenomena – they collectively form a fragment of pre-millennial fiction that consciously ignores its postmodern forebears and the cultural factors that shaped them.

In choosing to focus on authors notably less canonical than those who form the triumvirate of (American) literary postmodernism in the 1990s – Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Philip Roth – this study aims for fresh engagements with the anxieties and fixations of the epoch, and instead of turning away from the stupefying contemporary reality, directly confronts it. As I intend to demonstrate in the coming chapters, a collision with the enervating structures of late twentieth-century life yields a cluster of narratives that reflect the epoch and its anxieties. Those writers who actively “break from the dissolute ways of the 1990s” (Wegener 25) and return to an earlier time potentially neglect a thematic engagement with the zeitgeist they emanate from, even if they are indebted to the dominant (in this case postmodern) aesthetic.³

Since this study is concerned specifically with novels that engage directly with epochal concerns and the cultural stimuli that both precipitate them and the paradigm they reflect, *Leviathan*, *Fight Club*, *Glamorama*, and *Super-Cannes* form a suitable basis to deal conceptually with the notion of the home-grown terrorist and his propensity to transgress as a result of a number of emergent and epochal anxieties that surround him, namely marginalisation, emasculation, and a desire for authenticity. While the received idea of the home-grown terrorist – the native and unpatriotic revolutionary – is by no means a new phenomenon, the inclusion of this figure in all four texts, coupled with their temporal proximity to the emergence of international terrorism proper, doubly enforces the basis for their grouping.

³ Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997), for example, is contextually situated around the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and is hailed as one of the acclaimed novels of the 1990s.

By concentrating on texts that have generally had their efficacy as epochal reflectors overlooked in favour of more popular – and sometimes more literary – millennial fictions,⁴ this study also suggests that these four novels might be reframed as serious contributions to literary postmodernism and valuable reflectors of the 1990s.⁵ Texts like *Glamorama* and *Fight Club*, for example, can be aligned with Cohen’s assertion that “the [pre-millennial] world is just too much, and our literature reflects this experiential, epistemological surplus” (17). As I highlight in my final chapter, *Glamorama* indeed boasts an “epistemological surplus”, if not a narrative and conceptual surplus too. Reaching its apotheosis in *Glamorama*, the absence of authentic experiences decimates the characters in the narrative and dissolves any epistemological and ontological security. As I maintain throughout each section, authentic and unsimulated experiences have been stifled and an epochal fixation with simulacral reproduction, surfaces, and visuality has occupied the space left vacant. The quickest way to access authenticity in these four narratives is often through violent transgression.

A discussion of violence in its numerous forms also comprises a portion of this argument. Although physical violence is the most widely practiced in the narratives, I also acknowledge the presence of structural, systemic, and political violence. *Fight Club*, *Glamorama*, and *Super-Cannes* provide examples of physical violence as a tool for accessing authenticity. *Glamorama* and *Super-Cannes* depict acts of physical violence as necessary for the maintenance of exclusion zones that ostracize the cultural Other. *Fight Club* similarly utilizes physical violence to gain unsimulated experience, though the emphasis is on dismantling capitalist and hyper-rational infrastructures, not bolstering them. In *Leviathan*, the violence depicted is (omitting

⁴ Pre-millennial fictions such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1991), Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* (1991) - among a plethora of other novels from eminent literary voices (Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, Sherman Alexie) – often receive more critical attention than the texts used here.

⁵ Paul Auster (and his oeuvre) is the exception here. Unlike Ellis and Palahniuk, Auster is already regarded as a canonical contributor to postmodern American literature based on both the lucid yet theoretically challenging nature of his prose, and his “overt intertextual allusions.” (Ciocia 1)

one physical incident) exclusively political. Benjamin Sachs relies on political violence as a tool for reclaiming affect since it enables the public to be enlightened about the nature of institutional power and the polity.

As I have noted, a desire for authenticity ultimately underlies these epochal anxieties. I adapt this concept from Alain Badiou and in the context of this thesis a passion for the real is spawned from complacency with a culture that promulgates the simulated and stifles the authentic (48). Žižek terms the passion for the real as an opposition to “the everyday social reality” (5), which in *Fight Club* is depicted as the banality of a bureaucratized life and in *Super-Cannes* as the hyper-rational infrastructure of Eden-Olympia. “Extreme violence”, Žižek asserts, is the penalty incurred for “peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (7). *Glamorama*, *Fight Club*, and *Super-Cannes* demonstrate how extreme physical violence is practiced in order to sate a passion for the real, while *Leviathan* evidences the efficacy of political violence in accessing the real – albeit through the reclamation of affect and authentic emotional response.

Marginality is also concomitant with these epochal anxieties and I apply it to describe the ghettoized communities of La Bocca and the Rue Valentin in *Super-Cannes*. While marginality is used as a definitional device for these diasporas, I also apply it to the enclave of Eden-Olympia and the Bowling Club. The rationale here is based on Eden-Olympia’s geographical and cultural distance from the rest of the Côte, which renders them as ostracized from the rest of the community as the ghettos they terrorize. Examining *Super-Cannes* through this lens reveals that an acute fear of otherness – the Bowling Club’s fear of these ghettoized communities – stimulates transgressive activity. By engaging in transgressive activity the Bowling Club simultaneously gain authentic experience since authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression. More generally, my application of this term follows Ostrowidzki’s claim which contends that marginality is not confinable to economically and socially displaced demographics but also to groups that are culturally and economically dominant (11). In

Leviathan, I use marginality to describe the position of Benjamin Sachs who uses his Otherness as a platform to engage in political violence and the reclamation of affect.

The three sections that comprise this dissertation read each of the outlined epochal anxieties embedded within the four texts. As I explain in greater detail below, chapter one reads *Fight Club* as an articulation of the desire to experience authenticity, denigrate a cultural sphere perceived by the characters as feminine, and reconfigure a value system informed by advertising. The second section considers marginality and how it is engaged in *Super-Cannes* and *Leviathan* while the third and final chapter suggests the importance of reading *Glamorama* as a text firmly attached to a pre-millennial moment. The foundations upon which this examination occurs attribute the presence of a passion for the real and a desire for authenticity – in conjunction with the stylistic and conceptual hallmarks of a postmodern aesthetic – to *Glamorama*'s indebtedness to the zeitgeist of the 1990s.

The first chapter examines the interrogation of late-twentieth century life offered by Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and how the new hard-body configured by the narrator becomes just as ornamented as the one it seeks to replace. The chapter uses emasculation and a desire for authenticity as epochal stimuli to justify the formation of an underground fight club and a paramilitary terrorist group. I consider the paradox central to the failure of both the fight clubs and Project Mayhem since these cults of authentic experience are ultimately undone by their fixation with simulation. I also consider how the hard-bodied image of cinematic figures – like John Rambo – are equally responsible for this paradigmatic shift in the received perception of masculinity. Throughout this section I call on the critical offerings made by James Annesley, Susan Faludi, and Henry A. Giroux (among others), and use their contributions to both supplement and challenge the formation of a new hard body in *Fight Club*.

This section equally aims to show how the gulf between authentic experience and a bureaucratised cultural mode is problematic to reconcile since the fight clubs and Project

Mayhem ultimately reproduce the structures of the dominant system they intend to overturn. Susan Faludi's notion of ornamental masculinity is used as a springboard for examining Tyler Durden's own brand of masculinity, one that gestures toward rejecting traditional (and specific) cultural signifiers – a hard-bodied aesthetic – before it eventually creates its own ornamental masculinity through the insistence on visible physical wounds and scars. The new hard-body in Palahniuk's *Fight Club* repudiates the tired John Rambo aesthetic of a chiselled and highly toned body as representative of the body politic and instead supplants this with a model for masculinity that is able to produce rather than simply consume. The new model for masculinity in *Fight Club* is not about being a receptacle for consumption but being a unit (or space) for production. David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation provides a more spectacular showcasing of the narrator's incorrigible fixation with simulation and simulacral reproduction. As I analyse toward the end of the chapter, the preoccupation with facial imprints – in blood and tears – is both undercut and valorised in Fincher's adaptation.

Leading on from the discussion of masculinity and authenticity, chapter two focuses on marginality as an epochal anxiety and examines how *Super-Cannes* and *Leviathan* make use of marginal positions as provinces for accessing authentic experience and transcending the torpor of a culture fixated with reproduction and simulation. The accessing of authentic experience is not the sole reasoning behind Benjamin Sachs' revolutionary scheme. Like the *Fight Club* narrator, Sachs is also invested in reforming a public politics and enlightening the populace about the nature of institutional power. The residents of Eden-Olympia in Ballard's *Super-Cannes* use their marginal positions to bolster the zone of exclusion that they have crafted for themselves.

I apply Sibley's notion of "geographies of exclusion" (45) to the enclave and suggest that Eden-Olympia is a voluntary zone of exclusion and is subsequently as marginal as the ghettoised communities at which it directs racist, physical violence. The distinction I draw here highlights how a marginal position spawned from complacency with the current value system – as

evidenced by Benjamin Sachs – attempts to shake people out of political apathy and misinformed patriotism. A marginal position that has resulted from being the cultural dominant and simultaneously the cultural other – the Eden-Olympian corporate elite – seeks to further the gulf between it and the rest of society. The maintenance of exclusion zones is heavily reliant upon this and this section analyses how marginality is both a tool for refreshing a diminished public politics and establishing a zone of exclusion that allows authentic experiences to be accessed. As William Stephenson notes, Super-Cannes can be seen to showcase a “terrorism of the rich, one that directs symbolic violence downward from a position of power” (479). In addition, the reading of *Leviathan* against marginality as an epochal anxiety displays how a culture that diminishes male sociality and fosters apathy – while waning affect – ultimately prevents individuals from attempting to reform a public politics. Those, like anti-hero Benjamin Sachs, who attempt to affect change are often ostracised. The secondary focus of this section therefore examines how fringe dwellers like Sachs precipitate change and why occupying a liminal space is advantageous to their attempts at reform.

The final chapter considers the world of international terrorism and its depiction as a glamorous outpost from which supermodels and celebrities engage in symbolic, physical, and political violence. Like Super-Cannes, *Glamorama* queries the “received idea of terrorism as the desperate violence of disenfranchised groups” (Stephenson 479) and repositions this view to suggest that the West is an “enclave of privilege that defends its status through aggression and terrorism” (Stephenson 480). Like *Leviathan*, *Glamorama* grapples with anxieties surrounding the nature of institutional power and the trappings of a society that promulgates chest-pounding Americanism. Where *Leviathan* indicts a culture through the eyes of one man (looking through the eyes of another), *Glamorama* projects its indictment back through the eyes of Victor Ward. Similarly, *Glamorama* – like Super-Cannes – partially neglects a literal representation of late twentieth-century capitalism and postmodern life. Instead of creating a realistic space in which to examine these aspects, it instead carves a metaphoric space in which to engage critically with them. Ultimately, *Glamorama* refutes Baudrillard’s “exclusive

attribution of symbolic violence to anti-Western terrorists,” since the novel implies that even before 9/11 “Western institutions had appropriated the right to enact violence on the symbolic plane” (Stephenson 479). The purpose of the final section is to read and examine *Glamorama* within a set of culturally specific associations. In doing so I ignore a wider and more contemporary set of associations that suggest the efficacy of the text resides in its power to phantasmatically prefigure 9/11. Scholarship that places the novel as a terrorist pretext is often convincing. However, I maintain that reading the text backwards in light of 9/11 is unlikely to unearth anything profound about the zeitgeist from which it emerges but only retrofit more recent anxieties onto the novel.

The close of this section places 9/11 and questions surrounding phantasmatic prefiguring into the argument as to why September 11 should remain an endpoint, and not a landmark to begin a reading of *Glamorama*. In doing so, this raises questions about the other texts used in this study, and how pre-millennial fictions bookended by a paradigm-altering, post-millennial moment, are susceptible to having their efficacy thwarted by retrospective suggestions of their prescient qualities. While I maintain that retrospective alignments and backward readings neglect the reflective power of epochal fiction, 9/11 – the defining post-millennial moment and the temporal proximity each of these texts has to it – might also function cohesively in unifying them as novels that exist on both a pre- and post-millennial plane.

“Carved out of wood”: Authenticity and The New Hard-Body in Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club (1996)

Fight Club is Chuck Palahniuk’s warped social handbook that offers a visceral critique of late twentieth-century life. It follows the narrator – a nameless malcontent and car recall coordinator – and his tussle with an acute existential malaise spawned from complacency with a society that has clandestinely swapped virility and potency for commodified goods. Coming to the realisation that white, heterosexual men have been divested of their agency, the narrator, along with his übermensch alter-ego Tyler Durden, sets about constructing an underground fight club in which men can regenerate a diminished sociality and shatter the superficial veneer of postmodern life. These exclusive cults of authentic experience and sincerity simultaneously allow men to form social bonds and reassert their agency as ‘do-ers’ and producers rather than consumers. The narrator and his rapidly deteriorating psyche soon extend beyond the blackened basements of fight club and into the highly organised, anti-capitalist terrorist group, Project Mayhem. Despite his initial desire to reconfigure a value system informed by advertising and consumerism, the narrator ends up emulating the structures of the dominant system he had hoped to overturn.

For most reviewers, scholars, and cultural commentators, Fight Club typifies a generational gripe with contemporary culture and engages a millennial angst so veraciously it outlives the fin de siècle and continues to signify the appeal of anti-consumerism – somewhat paradoxically – through numerous afterlives that stretch far beyond the 1990s.⁶ Because Fight Club – the novel, the blockbuster film, the video game, and the ‘fight club look’ showcased by Donatella

⁶ For a text that condemns rampant consumerism, both the novel and the film were – more or less – commercial success stories. Eventually, Palahniuk’s novel sold over 300,000 copies and Fincher’s adaptation grossed \$37,023,395 at the box office. The widely disparaged video game adaption was released in 2004.

Versace – captures a specific period of cultural history, the fact it remains so pertinent can be attributed to its status as a cult phenomenon. Mercer Schuchardt hails Palahniuk as an “existentialist paramedic: He won’t save you, and he won’t give you any medicine, but he’ll hold your hand all the way to the hospital.” (Schuchardt 3-4). Schuchardt writes so laudably of Palahniuk because of his apparent ability to write a novel about so many disparate and even contradictory anxieties. Schuchardt scaffolds his appreciation for *Fight Club* and Palahniuk around the plethora of interpretations the text and its author are able to conjure. Among the possible hermeneutic pathways scholars, reviewers, and casual readers may take, Schuchardt questions whether *Fight Club* is about “a generation that’s had its value system largely informed by advertising culture; a story of male anxiety in a metrosexual world; of ritual religion in a secular age; or of the genealogy of the doppelgänger figure in world literature?” (3). These potential points of departure are far more convincing than the remainder of Schuchardt’s suggestions, which become increasingly unviable: “Is it a veiled autobiographical confession of contracting AIDS? Is it a retelling of Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*? Of *American Beauty*? Of *The Matrix*? (3). Notwithstanding these more obscure (and anachronistic) interpretations, Schuchardt’s appraisal of Palahniuk’s ability to encompass and engage with the epoch in his fiction remains useful (if a little vague): “As the foremost American novelist with his diagnostic digit on the pulse of contemporary culture, Chuck Palahniuk is a documenter of our world of disparate contradictions” (3-4). Despite its ambiguity, Schuchardt’s statement does align with the intentions of this section, though what I demonstrate is how these “disparate contradictions” are not just identified and exploited by Palahniuk, but present in his work. The point of departure for this section is the visceral critique of the value system Palahniuk presents: specifically, the corporeal anxiety that surfaces in the text and the narrator’s response and revolutionary solution to a cultural climate devoid of authentic experience.

The cultural foundations upon which Palahniuk’s narrative is constructed depict Anglo-Western masculinity in crisis as a result of a cultural sphere perceived as feminized by the protagonist(s). The remedies formulated by the schizoid narrator’s alter ego – Tyler Durden –

seek to dismantle the current value system and reconfigure and repair a wounded masculinity. Though the solutions – an underground bare-knuckle fight club and then a paramilitary group – fail to reform a public politics, they do appear to function as gateways for accessing authentic experience. I analyse *Fight Club*'s interrogation of late twentieth-century life and how the cultural climate has divested men of their potency as producers, leaving them instead as “receptacles for consumption” (Giroux 10). I show how the gulf between authentic experience and a bureaucratised cultural mode is problematic to reconcile since the fight clubs and Project Mayhem ultimately reproduce the structures (and strictures) of the dominant system they intend to overturn.

Susan Faludi's notion of ornamental masculinity becomes a useful springboard for examining Tyler Durden's own brand of masculinity, one that gestures toward rejecting traditional (and specific) cultural signifiers – a hard-bodied⁷ aesthetic – before eventually creating its own ornamental masculinity through the insistence on visible physical wounds and scars. The paradox here does not make problematic the distinction between commodified and uncommodified (and authentic and inauthentic), but rather displays how *Fight Club* swaps one stylized aesthetic of masculinity for another. To examine this paradox, I also consider David Fincher's 1999 cinematic adaptation as a way of highlighting the implicit contradictions of the fight clubs (and Project Mayhem) and how the aestheticised image of the male body is disparaged in some sequences and then held aloft for its seductiveness in others. If nothing else than stylised kitsch, Fincher's adaptation at least offers a more accessible spectacle of *Fight Club*'s failure.⁸

⁷ Characters in Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho* – namely the protagonist and his colleagues – often refer to bodies (both their own and those of desirable females) – as ‘hard’ if they display exemplary musculature or can be deemed perfect and without physical flaws.

⁸ This is not solely indicative of the failure of the novel or the film, but more a failure of what *Fight Club* represents and how it does not precipitate the change it gestures toward delivering.

At the heart of Tyler Durden's revolutionary schema is a very specific image of masculinity, one that Annesley terms "antithetical to consumption" since it repudiates a synthetic version of masculinity and offers up a raw and more authentic exemplar (46). Before examining Tyler's new version of masculinity proper, it pays to consider the cultural stimuli that have precipitated this radical shift in masculine identity. As an epochal event, the crisis of heterosexual masculinity appears inflated in the 1990s and cultural commentators such as Susan Faludi identify the late twentieth-century as the period in which white, heterosexual men faced serious challenges surrounding agency and virility. The engendering of the consumer society as identifiably feminine hinges on the premise that women are natural consumers (Annesley 46), which is a potentially problematic account of the cultural sphere. Faludi argues that both sexes faced crises of selfhood in a society obsessed with surfaces and visibility but women fitted more easily into the new ethic. The new ethic Faludi describes is one that places representation (and simulation) above production and if, as Annesley points out, women are 'natural consumers', then the decline of production is less likely to stir a crisis of feminine, rather than masculine, selfhood.

The crisis of masculinity that arises here is the result of a deindustrialised economy in which the male body is no longer perceived as an agent of construction but as a repository for consumption. As Henry Giroux observes, the "male hero of the modern day workforce is no longer defined by the image of the tightly hewn worker using his body and labour to create the necessities for everyday life", but by the listless and vapid consumer whose life is dominated by ennui, domestication, and consumption (8). Furthermore, the lack of meaningful occupations in which men can engage serves to further displace their agency. It is also worth noting that *Fight Club's* exclusive account of white, heterosexual (and distinctly middle-class) masculinity is not the product of parochialism on Palahniuk's part, but of an astute cultural literacy that identifies middle-class (white) male bodies as separated from physical force (Connell 56). Though concerned more with labour and production than fighting, the notion of 'physical force'

being replaced by a more synthetic version of masculinity legitimises the construction of a cult in which physical power can be regained and used to access authentic experience.

For Tyler Durden, this shift in the perception of masculinity stimulates the creation of his anti-capitalist cult as he sees men diminished by consumption and simulation. The notion that consumerism is a tacitly feminine province aligns with the ways in which Tyler constructs the fight clubs since they are exclusively male and depict feminine agency as a malignant force. The fight clubs also promise an escape from an ornamental masculinity since the unsimulated act of physical violence – the impact of bone on bone – functions as a transcendental measure from the languor of a consumer society: “after a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down” (FC 49). That the ‘real world’ is muted after fight club members indulge in their hedonistic, ritualised brawling devalues the notion that fight club is serious about reshaping society. The basis for reforming a public politics is about raising critical awareness of cultural issues and probing to the fringes of society, not further isolating a group of already deracinated men.

The opportunity for men to be producers and contributors to society in an affective and meaningful way is all but redundant in late twentieth-century life since “the shiny flat surface of a commercial culture” prevents men from establishing a foothold from which they can display something other than a “crude semblance of masculinity” (Faludi, 46). Fight Club gestures toward undercutting and providing a more authentic alternative to the hard-bodied aesthetic that dominated perceptions of masculinity during the Reagan-era. The highly toned musculature of cinematic figures like John Rambo sought to aestheticize a body politic, one that stood to represent political (and ideological) power while simultaneously creating a corporeal anxiety for the generation of men to follow. In Fight Club, being a man is not about “looking the way a sculptor or an art director says” and achieving physical perfection, but about dismantling and destroying the body because “fight club isn’t about looking good”. It is about

becoming incomplete and deconstructing yourself. The new hard-body that Tyler envisages will be free from the trappings of rampant consumerism and excessive consumption (FC 50).

The body will regain its physical power and masculine agency not to reinforce a body politic but disavow it altogether and erode civilisation – “project mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the earth to recover” (FC 125). The new hard-bodied man will “hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of the Rockefeller Centre, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space-Needle at a forty-five degree angle”; he won’t be idealised for the physical spectacle of his physique but for his ability to produce rather than consume (FC 124). The “complete and right away destruction of civilisation” and the post-apocalyptic world that remains could only be inhabited by the roughly hewn figure that Tyler romanticises: “you’ll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life, and you’ll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower” (FC 125). Though this new aesthetic is never formed, its inversion of the value system is simple: representation, reproduction, and consumption are now subordinate to production and labour. The new hard-body in *Fight Club* may give the impression that it can transcend the enervating structures of consumer life, but given that it has been constructed (and imagined) by the narrator – who is unable to totally renounce his obsession with simulation and consumption – the probability of a sustainable new model of masculinity being cultivated is low.

The narrator’s inability to overcome fully his preoccupation with simulation and consumption is to the detriment of his new vision of masculinity as this also becomes dominated by simulation. The greatest shortcoming of *Fight Club* resides in its refusal to account for alternative modes of political reform and instead falling foul to the same processes of deracination that necessitated its formation in the first place. It follows then that Tyler’s paradigm of a ‘real’ man is concerned less with the reclamation of selfhood and identity in a society that depersonalises individuals, but instead with further deracination. This model of

masculinity is not fully realised until Project Mayhem is formed after which it becomes apparent that dismantling the self (and the body) is a precept taken – and enacted – literally.

Masquerading as the first step downward and closer to incompleteness, Tyler's lye kiss is a signifier – and an ornament – for his brand of masculinity. The narrator describes the lye kiss as “a bonfire or a branding iron” and the scar that will be left behind is “in the exact shape of Tyler's kiss” (FC 75). The narrator's experience of the lye kiss is, after the first fight club, his baptism into Tyler's (and his own) cult of authenticity. Though it eventually comes to represent a brand of masculinity, the authentic pain the narrator experiences during the chemical burn affirms his desire to hit bottom and achieve enlightenment. The axiom Tyler delivers as he administers the burn is supposed to instruct his proselytes in the history of soap making. Yet it ends up functioning as something insidious and exploitative since the “human sacrifices” made “in ancient history” are potentially the same sacrifices that Tyler expects the space monkeys to make: “the first soap was made of heroes [...] without their pain, without their death, without their sacrifice, we would have nothing” (FC 78).

All of Project Mayhem's space monkeys are similarly emblazoned with Tyler's lye stamp and eventually become walking advertisements for his paramilitary cult. If the lye kisses denote a semblance of male sociality post fight club, then the complete removal of their fingerprints – again with lye – and the shaving of their hair succeeds in reducing the space monkeys to homogeneous drones who “pull a lever, push a button, [...] don't understand any of it and just die” (FC 12). When the narrator encounters members of Project Mayhem outside of the Paper Street base camp, he sees only “twenty heads. Twenty shaved heads” (FC 187). Given that all of the space monkeys are spiritually enlightened by Tyler's fundamentalist dogma – which is simultaneously the narrator's dogma, too – the fact the narrator associates them with the physical spectacle of Tyler's brand of masculinity before he associates them with being reinvigorated men is indicative of Project Mayhem's value system.

Like the current system that it gestures toward reconfiguring, Project Mayhem has internalised the same cultural fixation with surfaces and visibility and the narrator is ill-equipped to provide a creative solution to this epochal issue. The lye kisses are not the only element of Tyler's ornamented masculinity that is subjected to simulacral reproduction. While the fight club lexicon is not as readily associated with forming the basis of a new hard-body, it is just as crucial to the construction thereof. The narrator's boss reproduces Tyler's words verbatim, as does every member of Project Mayhem and this trope is elevated to sit alongside the other ornaments of Tyler's masculine aesthetic: "Tyler's words come out of my boss", "the mechanic starts talking and it's pure Tyler Durden" (96; 149). It may in fact be that the dominant vocabulary of the fight clubs and the (initial) insistence on communicating the club's existence and its rules by linguistic rather than aesthetic means is an attempt at reclaiming a lost oral tradition.

Though Palahniuk refrains from depicting this as obvious, the numerous references to what Tyler is saying and the leitmotif of "words" coming out of mouths begins to gesture toward the importance of oration as much as it does simulacral reproduction. This motif can of course be read alongside the epochal anxiety it engages – copies of copies – yet if a reader aligns the fact that fight club is totally reliant on continual oration in order to (re-)communicate its rules then he/she will have to steer between two contrasting exegetic poles. On the one hand the importance of the spoken (rather than the written or the neon, billboard) word is in keeping with the simplistic and quasi-luddite ideals of the fight clubs, yet on the other it may be read as one more ornament atop Tyler's mantelpiece of constructed masculinity. It certainly seems unlikely that the mode of communication on which Fight Club's existence hinges would not in some way be suffused with the narrator/creator's own preoccupation with reproduction and simulacra.

Appearing, at least initially, to be unornamented (unlike Tyler's brand of masculinity), the fight clubs provide moments of truth, authenticity, and reality and offer an "antidote to synthetic

spectacles and the banality of everyday life” (Annesley, 47). However, it is no surprise that Tyler’s sadist-chic version of raw masculinity becomes just, if not more ornamented than the version he attempts to dismantle. The ornamentation of Tyler’s model for authentic masculinity hinges on his insistence that men celebrate their physical wounds and swap corporeal perfection for ‘narcissism and pain’ (Annesley, 49). More a fashion statement than a solid basis for political reform, the version of masculinity projected by the fight clubs constructs a binary opposite to the cultural imperative for completeness and perfection since “it’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body. You see those cars that are completely stock cherry, right out of a dealer’s showroom in 1955, I always think, what a waste” (FC 48). For the narrator (and for Tyler), a cultural reticence to engage the body in unsimulated experience and to deprive it of authentic pain is to forever render it a product. Only dismantling and destroying the body can offer an alternative to the “mundane currents of a consumer society” (Annesley, 47).

To combat these mundane currents requires physical violence as the transgressive measure and Fight Club advocates the legitimacy of such violence without question. By accepting physical violence as a restorative measure tout court and refusing to consider alternatives, the fight clubs and Project Mayhem sever any connections to stabilised and accessible reform. The ideological foundations of Fight Club are indeed ambitious and revolutionary but what comes to pass is ultimately a rudimentary form of what it seeks to address. Heralded by the narrator as a cult of authentic experience that offers a brief suspension from the torpor of a postmodern malaise, Fight Club never really exists: “you don’t say anything because fight club exists only in the hours between when fight club starts and fight club ends” (FC 48). “In the real world” the narrator is a recall campaign coordinator “in a shirt and tie” who measures his affective power and agency on how perfect a simulacrum of an IKEA catalogue he can make his condominium (FC 49). To contend that the fight clubs are genuine provinces of the authentic is undermined by the inculcation of a spatial and temporal dislocation that the narrator experiences during the hours in which fight club operates and those in which it ceases to exist. After fight club, the narrator experiences spatially a detachment from his colleagues and with “a black eye and half

[his] face swollen” from stitches inside his cheek, he is not situated alongside his co-workers but “off to one side of the room, in the dark” (FC 47).

The distinction between the everyday social reality and the world of fight club is also made problematic because of the narrator’s insistence on who the members are outside of fight club – “who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world” (FC 48). When a fellow member is seen outside of the club “you can’t tell him what a great fight he had” since fight club does not actually exist (FC 48). If the fight clubs offer moments of ‘truth, authenticity and reality’, then surely the ‘real world’ from which they annex themselves should be perceived as unreal since the oppressive structures that quash a primitive masculinity are in operation there, and not in the clubs. Fight clubs, therefore, are inherently inauthentic and not least because the narrator is an incorrigible consumer and fails to reconcile his preoccupation with simulacral reproduction, but the very foundations upon which the club is built already undermine a sense of authenticity. The rules of fight club are as follows: “the first rule about fight club is that you don’t talk about fight club” – the second rule is the same just doubly enforced – and “the third rule in fight club is when someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he’s just faking it, the fight is over” (FC 48-9 emphasis mine). The fights themselves – the act through which an authentic experience can be derived – are mired by an inauthentic failsafe that buffers members from total corporeal destruction.

That a dissimulating member can bring a fight to a close threatens to undercut “the other rule of fight club [...] the fights go on as long as they have to” (FC 49). When Durden and the narrator decide to engage in a drunken, yet consensual brawl, a tone is set that percolates every subsequent fight club. As Mark Pettus notes, the fight club participants are only capable of experiencing authenticity through the mediation of images (125) so when the narrator first hits Tyler, he swings his fist “in a roundhouse like every cowboy movie [he’d] ever seen” (FC 53). When Tyler returns the blow, the narrator again uses an image as referent: “Tyler [...] hit me straight on, pow, just like a cartoon boxing glove on a spring on Sunday morning cartoons”

(FC 53). After the first round of fighting, Tyler and the narrator engage in a brief sojourn and post-fight analysis, but rather than offer any meaningful existential exposition, the narrator is only able to conclude that they were “like the cat and mouse in cartoons, [...] still alive” (FC 53). An earlier narrative episode that occurs before the formation of the fight club and before the narrator had realised Tyler was both a consciousness (and the other half of his own), showcases another instance in which the narrator is momentarily preoccupied with simulation and inadvertently bypasses authentic experience.

Remaining Men Together, a testicular cancer support group that the narrator is advised to visit if he wants to “see real pain” (FC 19), becomes the site for the narrator’s first opportunity to engage in something authentic and unsimulated despite the fact he takes the doctor’s advice literally: he sees real pain but fails to feel it. While Big Bob’s embrace does stimulate a response from the narrator – “Bob wraps his arms around me, and I cry” (FC 17) – his desire to seek simulation overshadows the authenticity of the experience. After receiving an embrace from Bob, and something akin to male sociality – albeit a decidedly wounded and soft attempt – the narrator is distracted:

Bob was closing in around me with his arms, and his head was folding down to cover me. Then I was lost inside oblivion, dark and silent and complete, and when I finally stepped away from his soft chest, the front of Bob’s shirt was a wet mask of how I looked crying. (22)

The facial imprint trope recurs during fight club but its significance here also merits attention. To read the tear mask episode alongside the Deleuzian notion of faciality is to place Bob’s “bitch tits” (FC 21) as the white wall: “the breast as it approaches, getting larger and pressing flat” (188). The wet mask of how the narrator looks crying that remains on Bob’s chest accentuates how the face “is part of a surface-holes, holey-surface, system” and the

combination of the narrator's tears and the "volume-cavity elements" of his head are facialized (189).

Facialization and the valorising of a facial imprint – cast in both blood and tears – aligns with Deleuze's notation that the face is a politics, "and human beings have a destiny to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine" (188). While the narrator creates a cult in which men can dismantle their faces and gesture toward the destruction of a politics, his *id e fixe* with the simulacral reproductions of faces – usually his own – hinders him from breaking through the wall of the signifier and exiting the black hole of subjectivity (Deleuze 161). The facial imprint aesthetic is both more accessible and more spectacularly realised in David Fincher's screen adaptation, and indicates the type of engagement with epochal anxieties that Fincher attempts: aestheticizations over meaningful solutions. While the scenes that depict the narrator's recognition of his respective tear and blood masks are present in Palahniuk's text, cinematic techniques and shot-lengths utilised in the film version allow this trope to be elevated. In addition to this, the film adaptation also raises more pertinent issues surrounding the contradictions and failures of the fight clubs.

Released in 1999 and produced with a budget estimated to be upward of sixty million dollars, David Fincher's *Fight Club* was met with mixed reviews. Lauded by some for its creation of a "phantasmagorical structure" with which to excavate a lost masculinity (Maslin), it was also derided for allying itself with "with some of the intellectual and cultural paraphernalia of fascism", though lacked the "cerebral equipment" to maintain such an embattled and controversial stance (Bradshaw). Chuck Palahniuk comments on how the film "streamlines the plot [of the novel] and makes it so much more effective" (FC "Afterword" 218), though the extent to which this streamlining is Palahniuk's polite way of articulating a similar opinion to Giroux's – that Fincher is preoccupied with visual effects and in turn subordinates the visceral cultural critique – is unclear. In terms of narrative arc, Fincher's *Fight Club* retains the anachronistic mode set by Palahniuk and is largely faithful to the original, yet the most notable

and questionable expression of artistic license Fincher makes comes at the end of the film. Palahniuk's original ending is far less ambiguous about the return of Project Mayhem and Tyler Durden than Fincher's since the film version sees the narrator (named Jack in the shooting script) holding hands with Marla Singer while watching two towers collapse.⁹ As Petersen comments, the "impossible exit line" the narrator delivers to Marla – "listen, you met me at a really weird time in my life" – is subject to further implausibility given the "lame Hollywood ending" of the film that undercuts the "bleakly apocalyptic" (Petersen 139) ending of the novel. Palahniuk's ending begins:

In my father's house are many mansions.

Of course, when I pulled the trigger, I died.

Liar.

And Tyler died.

With the police helicopters thundering toward us, and Marla and all the support group people who couldn't save themselves, with all of them trying to save me, I had to pull the trigger.

This was better than real life

And your one perfect moment won't last forever. (206)

Unlike Fincher, whose ending tries to function as a denouement proper, Palahniuk refrains from granting the reader with any sense of finality. Though the steps the narrator takes in both versions are essentially the same, Fincher has his protagonist shoot himself, slump back into a chair, before partially renouncing his fundamental ways in a muffled, barely audible tone. Palahniuk depicts the narrator in some sort of late capitalist purgatory, in which everything is

⁹ For some commentators this final scene is integral to reading *Fight Club* as a terrorist pretext since it depicts two towers collapsing, one after the other, in a way that 'eerily foreshadows' the events of September 11th, 2001. I examine this (recent) trend in scholarship in my final chapter and argue that this type of exegetic engagement is misplaced both temporally and conceptually and ultimately threatens to pigeonhole texts like *Fight Club*.

“quiet, rubber-soled shoes” (206) and the angels “work in shifts [and] bring you your meals on a tray with a paper cup of meds” (207). The reality is in fact much more sinister and seems to – albeit disingenuously – ask more self-reflexive questions of the narrator and his schema than it provides answers for:

“Why?” Why did I cause so much pain? Didn’t I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness? Can’t I see how we are all manifestations of love? I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God’s got this all wrong. We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are, and what happens just happens. And God says, “No, that’s not right”

Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can’t teach God anything. (207)

In addition to this, the narrator also comes to realize just how culturally pervasive – and therefore effective – the fight clubs have proved to be. The narrator’s realization and subsequent fear do not threaten to negate the argument that the fight clubs and Project Mayhem fail to reinvigorate masculine selfhood, but rather how Tyler’s signifiers and ornaments for his own brand of masculinity are what remain. Although the members he encounters in his purgatorial/care home facility still believe in cultural overhaul (and their complicity in it), it pays for the reader to remember that this is still evidence of a wider failure of the clubs and Project Mayhem: they still have Tyler’s words coming out of their mouths. An insistence on the validity of simulacral reproduction – of Tyler’s words, of physical ornaments, of the clubs themselves – ultimately undoes any serious claim to reform the narrator tried to offer and diffuses the political charge of his efforts.

And if there was a telephone in Heaven, I would call Marla from Heaven and the moment she says, “Hello,” I wouldn’t hang up. I’d say, “Hi. What’s happening? Tell me every little thing.” But I don’t want to go back. Not yet.

Just because.

Because every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches and he says:

“We miss you, Mr. Durden.”

Or somebody with a broken nose pushes a mop past me and whispers:

“Everything’s going according to the plan.”

Whispers:

“We’re going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world.”

Whispers:

“We look forward to getting you back.” (208)

If Fincher had been totally faithful to Palahniuk’s original, this final scene – included over his flimsier albeit more spectacular apotheosis – would probably have subordinated the narrator’s self-reflexive examination and instead exacerbated the facial wounds of the incognito fight club members. Though Palahniuk includes the descriptions of the cuts and scars that denote their belonging to Tyler’s brand of masculinity, the reader’s attention is diverted to consider the implications of Tyler’s return – not the dismantled faces of his displaced proselytes. It is this celebration of spectacle and visuality that renders Fincher’s adaptation a more accessible (and more strident) articulation of *Fight Club’s* failure. An inclusion of Fincher’s adaptation should, however, provide another platform upon which the contradictions and innate shortcomings of the fight clubs can be examined. As I have previously mentioned, the cinematic signifiers of a hard, highly toned body – often in conjunction with political tropes that signify American dominance and the reheroicization¹⁰ of the Vietnam wars – are replete in the ‘high-concept’¹¹ films of the 1980s that valorize the masculine physique and make it “a key aesthetic signature” (Witham 2).

¹⁰ Lynne Hanley, ‘The Official Story: Imagining Vietnam’ in *Radical America* 21:6 (November-December 1987), p. 8.

¹¹ See Paul Grainge, Mark Jancovich and Sharon Monteith, *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.485.

In *Fight Club*, the narrator is intent on reclaiming the male body from the aesthetic elevation it endured during these ‘high concept’ cinematic years and the spectacle of the well-toned physique is subject to scrutiny. For aesthetic reasons, Fincher’s interpretation of Palahniuk’s corporeal critique of ornamented masculinity is not only more accessible but more straightforward. Even as the narrator seeks to reconfigure his own perceptions surrounding masculinity, he never makes explicit his own corporeal anxieties – at least not before he becomes Tyler. In both the novel and the film, the ornamented male body is disparaged for its completeness and alignment with a culture obsessed with perfection and reproduction. Although Palahniuk devotes very little description to the narrator’s physicality, Fincher’s casting of Edward Norton – not immediately renowned for his hulking physique – as one half of the narrator’s consciousness and Brad Pitt as the other appears to establish a facile opposition that simultaneously subverts and reinforces the corporeal anxieties extant in the 1990s. If the narrator is intent on deconstructing himself and unsubscribing to the unreality of corporeal perfection, raw sexuality and constructed (and misplaced) affect, then why does he romanticize his alter ego to “look how [he] wants to look and fucks how [he] wants to fuck”? (*Fight Club* Fincher, Uhls). Fincher ultimately magnifies how the narrator is culturally predisposed to consume and recreate what is peddled to him through advertising media.

While Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* unearths a corporeal anxiety that can only be addressed through authentic experience via physical violence (a method that proves impracticable), David Fincher’s *Fight Club* revels in a stylised aesthetic of physical violence that exacerbates the contradictions of fight club and project mayhem since Fincher both emphasises and trivialises the trope of a disenfranchised male populace. However, the scene that unabashedly subverts the politics of fight club takes place when the narrator (Norton) and Durden (Pitt) are sharpening their anti-consumerist tools while observing a Calvin Klein underwear poster. The narrator asks Tyler if that is how men are supposed to look and why, and Durden retorts, “self improvement is masturbation” (*Fight Club* Fincher, Uhls). Though the idealised male body is the butt of the joke here, the next scene features a famously toned Pitt in the middle of fight

club with a torso to match any underwear model. If nothing else, Fincher highlights Fight Club's refusal to engage critically with anything but the body and uses this obsession as a platform to undermine while simultaneously reinforce Palahniuk's efforts.¹²

Pitt's character also galvanises the perception of Tyler not as the ideological mastermind of a reformed public politics, but as a character that represents "the magnetism of the isolated hero" (Giroux 10) whose anti-consumerist fashion becomes "the classic image of cool" (Annesley 44). For Giroux, Fight Club does have the potential to attack the power strategies of domination and exploitation associated with neoliberalism but instead rebels against a consumer society that has dissolved male sociality and agency (6). The result may have been different had the narrator and Durden focused on sharpening their pedagogical tools as opposed to their anti-capitalist ones since their reformatory solution seeks to diagnose and ameliorate a problem that requires far more than physical violence and paramilitary action if it is to be solved. Fight Club does not critically engage with the epochal issues it gestures towards, but rather trivialises them through excessive physical violence and irrationality (Giroux 6). As I have mentioned, Project Mayhem provides the best example of how Fight Club reconstructs that which it is so desperate to dismantle; the fight clubs are also guilty of doing the very same thing. Aside from imbricating falsehood into the stipulated club rules, the fact "the fights go on as long as they have to" is – in addition to being in direct contradiction of fight club's third rule – an echo of the laissez-faire patterns of consumer capitalism (Annesley 49). Project Mayhem and its highly bureaucratized structures begin to mimic the hierarchical structures of the very corporations it attempts to topple. This is another contrasting element of Palahniuk's text that is subjected to a parodic reconstruction in Fincher's adaptation.

¹² As I have argued, Palahniuk gestures toward depicting a paradigm-overhaul but equips his narrator with an extremely limited understanding of what is needed for political reform (though clearly and obviously reflects how it is the cultural climate and value system that divests individuals of the necessary faculties). In both Fincher's and Palahniuk's versions, corporeal concerns are narrative dominants, though Fincher – through the medium of his re-representation – elevates the body to ironic and overpoweringly aesthetic extremes that ultimately undermine and unearth what Palahniuk attempts to suppress.

Is examining *Fight Club*'s attempt to reconfigure a value system that celebrates simulacral reproduction and deprives men of sociality and selfhood, not a re-articulation (and endorsement) of Alain Badiou's (and Slavoj Žižek's) assertion that trying to "distil the pure real from the elusive reality necessarily ends up in the opposite, in the obsession with pure appearance" (Žižek 11 emphasis added)? It may appear so since the narrator is insistent on distilling the real from an elusive and inauthentic reality, but instead ends up further consolidating his obsession with "pure appearance". As Žižek further notes, this search for the real "culminates in ritualistic stagings of a theatrical spectacle in the truth of which no one believes. The pursuit of the real thus equals total annihilation, a destructive fury within which the only way to trace the distinction between the semblance and the real, is, precisely, to stage a fake spectacle." (37). This is essentially what the fight clubs function as, a space in which to dismantle the body, the face, and a politics. The illusion here is that once the physically violent act has been perpetrated against the body – and against the hard body aesthetic the narrator and the members hope to denigrate – the new hard body should "emerge ex nihilo" (Žižek 34). This new hard body will ostensibly be freed from the trappings and corruptions that necessitated its formation in the first instance, yet in *Fight Club* this is not what comes to pass. The new hard body is freed from the signifiers of the cinematic hard body that stood metonymically for the body politic but is reliant on a new set of ornaments and signifiers that only recycle the same anxieties surrounding corporeality and masculinity.

While corporeality and masculinity are still concomitant with the desire for authenticity, the next chapter explores how an examination of marginality and alienation as epochal anxieties raises a set of new questions surrounding agency and a passion for the real. In much the same way as *Fight Club* and the theatrical staging of an inauthentic spectacle, *Super-Cannes* similarly evidences the problems of fabricating the unmediated spectacle – and the detrimental impact it has upon those individuals involved. The group of corporate executives in *Super-Cannes* that either partake directly in acts of racist, physical violence – or consume second-hand by

watching video recordings – do so to access authentic experience. The problem that arises here is, like the fight clubs, how an inauthentic staging of the spectacle fails to grant complete exposure to unsimulated experience. This chapter also pairs Leviathan alongside Super-Cannes, and considers how – like Fight Club – solitary male malcontents necessitate (or at the very least intimate with the necessary procedures for) political reform via anarchism and violent revolution. Reading Leviathan through the epochal lens of marginality allows another element of the zeitgeist and the cultural sphere to be examined. A culture that diminishes male sociality and fosters apathy – while waning affect – ultimately prevents individuals from attempting to reform a public politics. Those, like anti-hero Benjamin Sachs, who attempt to affect change are often ostracised. The secondary focus of this section is to therefore examine how fringe dwellers like Sachs precipitate change and why occupying a liminal space is advantageous to their attempts at reform.

“All this alienation . . . I could easily get used to it”: Marginality and Alienation in Paul Auster’s *Leviathan* (1992) and J.G Ballard’s *Super-Cannes* (2000)

While *Carved Out of Wood* examines how a cultural sphere that is both perceived as feminine and constructed upon a value system that renders male bodies as repositories for consumption precipitates transgressive action, this section reads *Leviathan* and *Super-Cannes* as engagements with another epochal anxiety: marginality. To examine marginality and the cultural stimuli that bring about involuntary and voluntary alienation – as evidenced in both texts this section engages with – also entails an engagement with cultural anxieties surrounding authenticity. As the first chapter illustrates, a desire for authenticity underwrites the epochal anxieties of emasculation and agency in *Fight Club* and a similar thread can be pulled through *Leviathan* and *Super-Cannes*. Although marginalised positions and spaces facilitate transgressive and revolutionary action, it is a fundamental anxiety surrounding authenticity and the desire to gain authentic experience that underlies and ultimately drives the need to transgress. While *Fight Club* and *Leviathan* converge in their depictions of disaffected men who seek to enlighten a disenfranchised and disenchanting populace, *Super-Cannes* instead focuses on individuals who actively disenfranchise others not to denigrate a capitalist culture and its value system but to reinforce it.

Published in 1992, *Leviathan* is the retrospective account of political essayist and postmodern novelist, Benjamin Sachs, and his life (and death) as told by close friend and fellow fiction writer, Peter Aaron. Popular reviews often consider *Leviathan* within a wider set of associations that bear the hallmarks of Auster’s prose and thematic circuitousness. Ginger Danto comments that readers “are sufficiently intrigued by the piecemeal accounts to want the larger picture” (1), but the mimetic pulse of the text is often encumbered by protracted reflection. Auster’s narratives are characterised by their devotion to male protagonists often plagued by acute, existential crises, “their overt intertextual illusions”, and “their inventive plots and lucid prose”

(Ciocia 1). Auster's terse – but nonetheless clear – prose in combination with his (sometimes) “theoretically challenging” narrative components have attracted responses that repudiate his style for being too cerebral and conceited, or celebrate it for the equilibrium between postmodern tricksiness and readability it achieves (Ciocia 2). Aside from this – and from being underpinned by powerful forces of fortuity and happenstance – Auster's oeuvre has cemented him as a canonical contributor to postmodern American literature. As Ciocia notes, a growing portion of the scholarly attention paid to *Leviathan* engages with it as an indictment of the “gambling economy of late capitalism” and how its “visible engagement with the state of late twentieth-century American culture constitutes ‘a sharp turn in a new literary direction for Auster’” (Washburn, qtd in Ciocia 2). In its and excoriation of American culture, *Leviathan* therefore provides a space in which to examine problems of agency and the reforming of a public politics. It also calls into question why marginal figures, like Benjamin Sachs, are pushed to the fringes of society and how they go about affecting political change from their marginalised position.

Arriving eight years after *Leviathan*, *Super-Cannes* was met with unwonted reviews for a Ballard text and subsequently endured a strange popular reception. As Geoff Nicholson comments, “[*Super-Cannes*] does contain plenty of the trademark prose that Ballard fans have come to expect” but the plot is “overcooked” and the “ponderousness [of the narrative] swamps the fable” (Nicholson 12). Nicholson constructs his diatribe on *Super-Cannes* around the extensive psycho-social (and philosophical) monologues Ballard grants Dr Wilder Penrose, citing them as the reason for a “shambling 390 page” exposition of Ballard's moral concern – that technology edits out our more ordinary, daily transgressions – when a shorter novel more indicative of his previous work may have sufficed¹³. Scholarly engagements with the novel concentrate primarily on its critique of late-capitalism (Stephenson 478-9) and its

¹³ Ballard's previous and most acclaimed novels often sit at around two-hundred and eighty to three-hundred pages, see *High Rise* (272 pages), *Concrete Island* (202 pages), and *Crash* (207 pages).

demonstration (and derision) of gated communities and the hegemonies they establish to maintain their structural integrity (Ostrowidzki 11, Sibley 45). I follow these responses to the text while considering how marginalised individuals who control the political and cultural hegemonies that marginalise others respond to their own alienation. Unlike *Leviathan*, notions of agency in *Super-Cannes* are not replete with desires to precipitate political change but instead show how a bureaucratised (and sanitised) life devoid of any authentic or unsimulated experiences causes individuals to act out and sate a passion for the real.

Through an analysis of *Super-Cannes* and *Leviathan*, this chapter therefore examines the extent to which marginality precipitates revolutionary activity and physically violent transgressions in order to dismantle political hypocrisy or establish zones of exclusion. The occupation of a marginal position and the platform it provides for the accessing of authentic experience – through physical violence or the reclamation of affect – will also be considered. While marginality more generally operates as a definitional device for a disenfranchised and displaced demographic, I show how groups and individuals considered to be culturally dominant are equally susceptible to marginalisation and alienation. To demonstrate how culturally dominant groups use their marginal positions to engage in physical violence and transgressive action, I explore *Super-Cannes*' representation of the 'Bowling Club'¹⁴ and revolutionary psychiatrist Dr Penrose.

The narrative premise of Ballard's text revolves around an elitist enclave of corporate professionals who engage in recreational disenfranchisement of the immigrant population. The discussion of *Super-Cannes* considers how the imperative to maintain a zone of exclusion that minimizes Otherness and inflates Western superiority has emerged from a fundamental anxiety

¹⁴ The protagonist, Paul Sinclair, witnesses the first "ratissage" in which a number of his corporate-elite neighbours – who are watching a Senegalese trinket salesman and a "thickset European in a cheap cream suit" get battered with truncheons – are clad "in leather jackets zipped up to the neck, like members of some Eden-Olympia bowling club" (*Super* 73).

toward the cultural Other. In *Leviathan*, the marginal position occupied by Benjamin Sachs is not the result of intolerance and fear of the cultural Other, but of a shift in the cultural climate that forces him closer to the margins. The narrator Peter Aaron, who is Benjamin's oldest and dearest friend, offers his retrospective account of Sachs's life and alights at every fortuitous and serendipitous stop along the way. In discussing *Leviathan*, I attribute Sachs's revolutionary campaign and his transformation from political essayist into the Phantom of Liberty – a terrorist who destroys small-scale replicas of the Statue of Liberty – to an acute cultural malaise emergent in late twentieth-century life. In addition, a number of episodes that gesture toward the transformative nature of being culturally displaced will also be examined.

As Eden-Olympia is a zone of exclusion that practices physical and structural violence against the ghettoized communities of La Bocca and the Rue Valentin, David Sibley's "geographies of exclusion" thesis becomes useful. Typically, "geographies of exclusion" practice "immoral, irrational, and pervasive behaviour" and often perpetuate "geopolitical purification of social spaces" (Sibley 24). This purification, as Sibley maintains, is heavily reliant on an established Other and "action on the part of the relatively powerless [Other] will register in the dominant vocabulary as deviance, threat, or subversion" (Sibley 24). In *Super-Cannes* the presence of a Senegalese trinket salesman is enough to constitute "deviance" and Wilder Penrose, the psychiatric mastermind behind the Bowling Club, "stares aggressively [...] as the trio [of salesmen] wander through the deserted café tables" (Super 19). It is also important to draw distinctions between the different types of violence that are being portrayed in both texts. On the other hand, the violence depicted in *Leviathan* is political and Sachs uses physical violence only (once) in self-defence. While he is the Phantom of Liberty, Sachs goes to great lengths to ensure the lowest possible risk to human life and meticulously studies the site of a potential bombing: "it would only take a single fragment of flying stone or metal to kill someone, and then the entire cause would be ruined. That was Sachs's greatest fear" (Lev 233) For Sachs,

political violence enables the reclamation of affect¹⁵ and can be a useful tool for “enlightening the public about the nature of institutional power” (Lev 126). Physical violence is the weapon of choice for Eden-Olympia’s corporate executives because it can be administered without prior warning and is almost impossible to become completely conditioned to. Moreover, physical violence is a useful tool for accessing authenticity, though this is not the sole focus here. Later discussions of how Eden-Olympia’s hyper-rational infrastructure inhibits authentic experience will further validate the use of physical violence.

Super-Cannes tracks a group of high-profile corporate elites as they launch into temporary episodes of racist physical violence against the ghettoized communities of La Bocca and Rue Valentin. As I have mentioned, marginality generally operates as a definitional device for a disenfranchised and displaced demographic but it can also be applied to those who inhabit the other end of the spectrum. Using Sibley’s “geographies of exclusion” (qtd, in Ostrowidzki 7), I show how gated communities like Eden-Olympia are as marginal as their ghettoized opposites and that it is possible to simultaneously be the cultural dominant and the cultural Other. The distinction to draw is that ghettos can be both voluntary and involuntary: affluent ghettos are voluntary and practice exclusivism, while involuntary ghettos function as punitive spaces and zones of ostracism for the impoverished and socially (and culturally) displaced. The enclaves of La Bocca and Rue Valentin are constructed in binary opposition to the curvilinear spaces of Eden-Olympia, yet enmeshed in this cultural, social, and economic gulf is a degree of chirality since both gated communities exist as counterparts.

Eden-Olympia serves to highlight (and hyperbolise) the neo-imperial¹⁶ dialectic of the “West and the Rest” and presents the enclave as a metaphoric space in which to examine Western anxieties (and intolerances) toward the cultural Other (Ostrowidzki 4). The Bowling Club’s

¹⁵ The reclamation of affect is integral to Sachs’s revolutionary plot since an emotive response is required to shake people out of apathy and political indifference.

¹⁶ Ballard makes use of a similarly (neo-) imperialist rhetoric. Paul Sinclair’s “neighbours were a Belgian couple, the Delages, among the earliest colonists of the business park” (Super 38 emphasis mine).

fear of the Other culminates in displays of pathological physical violence, exclusion, and racism. This epochal anxiety toward the Other reduces intercultural zones like La Bocca and the Rue Valentin to sites that pose an identifiable threat to “a [Western] way of life” (Sandercock qtd. in Ostrowidzki 4). The critique of this dialectic that Super-Cannes presents addresses a fear of Otherness, but at the same time it confronts (and provides a response to) the resultant alienation that plagues the Eden-Olympians. This alienation typifies the chiral relationship between Eden-Olympia and the slums of La Bocca and the Rue Valentin: opposites in nearly every socio-cultural aspect yet similarly alienated by their shared marginality.

If the residents of these Arabic enclaves are alienated involuntarily, then Eden-Olympians manufacture their own alienation by implementing a hyper-technological infrastructure that isolates and depersonalises residents. The expansive databank of resident records is just one example of this hyper-rationalist logic that subsequently removes Eden-Olympians from any notion of community and similarly absolves them of any civic duty. The hyper-rational logic that underscores Eden-Olympia represses and diverts adaptability and residents of the enclave have no reason to engage in authentic experience since every calculable odd is part of the infrastructure:

Intimacy and neighbourliness were not features of everyday life at Eden Olympia. An invisible infrastructure took the place of traditional civic virtues. At Eden-Olympia there were no parking problems, no fears of burglars or purse-snatchers, no rapes or muggings. The top-drawer professionals no longer needed to devote a moment's thought to each other, and had dispensed with the checks and balances of community life. [...] Civility and polity were designed into Eden-Olympia [...] representative democracy had been replaced by the surveillance service and the private police force.

(38)

The hyper-rationality encoded into Eden-Olympia's infrastructure becomes the cause of the malaise. For resident psychiatrist Dr Wilder Penrose, abject rationalism precipitates listlessness and manifests as psychological ailments and dermatological complaints. As a remedial measure, Penrose goes "back to old-fashioned depth psychology" (Super 258) since, for him, administering a basal level of madness best combats enervation: "at Eden-Olympia, madness is the cure, not the cause of the malaise" (Super 251). The alienation experienced by residents is remedied by temporary episodes of insanity. This solution is built upon the equation that, as Lear asserts, "Authentic experience and unthinking action underwrote a politics of regenerative violence. For revolutionaries and reactionaries alike [...] [authenticity] seemed an irresistible alternative to bourgeois torpor. [...] Fascism and anarchism are nothing if not cults of authentic experience" (16). "Unthinking action" and irrationality are achieved through the indulging of psychopathology as a measured dose of insanity allows residents to overcome their emotional alienation. It is the physically violent nature of the remedy that enables Penrose's patients to transcend the bureaucracy and corporate rigidity of Eden-Olympia. On the one hand this solution, as absurd and socially destructive as it is, permits residents to "indulge their psychopathologies" (Ostrowidzki 17) and allows them to overcome their emotional alienation. Yet on the other it sates a passion for the real since rationalism does not account for empiricism or authenticity. Each ratisage temporarily transcends the pervasive problem of alienation by destroying "the bodies and spaces of the Maghrebian diaspora" (Ostrowidzki 17), at the same time as addressing an acute fear of the Other by using physical violence as an ostracising measure.

For Sinclair, witnessing the destruction of Maghrebian bodies seems to ameliorate his listlessness and combat his alienation by providing him with authentic stimulation: "the heat and sweat of violence" (Super 163). Sinclair devotes the majority of his time to second-rate detective work through which he consolidates his position as a fringe-dweller, someone who dissimulates and is in radical opposition the seductive (psycho)therapy offered by Penrose. Despite his liminality, Sinclair is powerless to ward off the arousing and libidinal forces of

physical violence since witnessing the spectacle is enough to stir his inherent “curiosity about pain and death” (Super 263):

My mind was with the leather-clad men racing through the darkness in the Range Rovers. The speed and aggression of the robbers, their brutal efficiency, had almost winded me. I forced myself to breathe, gasping the night air with its reek of burnt insects, fear and Japanese scent. I felt the hair prickling on the nape of my neck, and a stream of sweat cooling beneath my shoulder blades. A potent odour lifted from my crutch, a deep hormonal call to [physical] violence. My penis thickened, and my scrotum gripped my testicles like a fist. (222)

The seductive power of the *ratissage* is substantial enough to divert Sinclair’s gaze from the “perspiration soaked” blouse of Frances Baring – an ambiguously available well-groomed blonde – and even the “dark roses of her breasts” (Super 222) fail to distract Sinclair from the blistering sequence of images that cloud his vision. By consuming the image of fear and physical brutality his distance from the Bowling Club (and Eden-Olympia at large) has been somewhat reduced and he is no longer on the outside looking in, but on the inside looking out.¹⁷ This “deep hormonal call to violence” is a unifying force that inheres within mankind and invites Sinclair to validate Penrose’s radical psychotherapy. So far, the legitimation of physical violence directed at the marginalised Other has been, at least from the similarly exclusive position of Eden-Olympia, based on the suggestion that such acts minimize Otherness while undercutting hyper-rationalism in order to dispel emotional alienation. Penrose’s psychotherapy is lauded as “unthinking action” that underwrites regenerative violence; it proffers a radical break from the etiolated infrastructure of Eden-Olympia. Yet, while this is in part true, such irrationality and temporary insanity are not as organic as its participants (and its

¹⁷ Sinclair is acutely aware that his position is no longer that of the roving, two-bit detective, but “for the first time [Penrose] had seen [him] as a patient” (Super 250).

observer) believe it to be. Penrose systematically configures his radical form of therapy and it is not the refuge of the criminally insane psychiatrist but of the logically sound. His programme evinces the “deviant impulses” (Super 263) coded into the central nervous systems of his boardroom elites and allows them to access authentic experience.

If the therapy classes are provinces of irrationality then the extensive and rational research that underpins them threatens the “unthinking” nature of the act(s). To bridge an emotional and psychological interstice, Penrose returns to classical psychoanalysis and achieves his first breakthrough with the ‘dream’. He realises that:

highly disciplined [and hyper-rational] professionals have very strange dreams. Fantasies filled with repressed yearnings for violence, and ugly narratives of anger and revenge, like the starvation dreams of death-camp prisoners. Despair was screaming through the bars of the corporate cage, the hunger of men and women exiled from their deeper selves. (258)

Penrose delineates the root cause of his patients’ emotional alienation and engages in his own (warped) form of rationalism. He identifies “insomnia, fungal infections, respiratory complaints, inexplicable migraines and attacks of hives” (Super 257) as physiological (and psychological) manifestations of an acute existential malaise. This malaise is concomitant with gated communities like Eden-Olympia, and residents lack the imperative to coalesce and instead divide into further enclaves¹⁸. While Penrose terms this phenomenon as the breeding “of a new race of deracinated people” (Super 256), his restorative suggestion is just as deracinating. Initially, Penrose recognises this fact and admits he “could hardly sit at [his] desk

¹⁸ Although the internal division of residents into separate enclaves is something Penrose seeks to address, the Bowling Club ultimately indulges the exclusivism he wishes to dispel.

in the clinic and tell some depressed CEO that he'd cure his insomnia by vandalizing a few Mercs in the Palais des Festivals car park" (Super 259).

After encountering a senior manager from Hoescht, Penrose begins to rationalise his solution. This senior manager had been "out of sorts for months" (Super 259), suffering from dermatitis and insomnia but after witnessing "a woman tourist in Cannes being mugged by an Arab youth" (Super 259) the manager acts out, giving the "fellow a good beating, kicked him so hard he broke two bones in his right foot" (Super 159). After returning to the clinic to have his cast removed, the manager, by nothing short of a restoratively violent miracle, is cured of his dermatitis and "felt buoyant and confident again [without] a trace of depression" (Super 259). This initial finding is the catalyst for Penrose's therapy programme and his professional advice to the manager is to "take one of the security men into La Bocca and provoke an incident with a passing immigrant" (Super 260). Needless to say, this course of action "worked a treat" (Super 260) and soon became a repeat prescription for whenever he "felt the blues coming on" (Super 260). These transgressions escalate rapidly and before long a "group with a dozen senior executives" are starting "brawls in Maghrebian bars, trashing any Arab cars that looked unroadworthy", and perpetrating acts of racist violence against the immigrant community (Super 260).

While the acts of racist and physical violence enacted by the Bowling Club serve to further disenfranchise the Maghrebian diaspora, they are paradoxically beneficial to the immigrant population since Eden-Olympia "hires a disproportionate number of North Africans as gardeners and road sweepers" (Super 260). It follows that the (ostensibly) purgatorial function of racist physical violence – and an ongoing conflict with the cultural Other – results in the "clearer heads of the people who do the hiring" (Super 260). The ratissages allow participating residents to legitimise their voluntary exclusion as a way of accessing authenticity and gaining temporary relief from the etiolated spaces that they occupy. Despite the fact that Eden-Olympia lords over the Cote, non-residents (not just those who constitute the other end of the cultural

extreme) view the enclave as a hostile zone. Upon his visit to the television studios that delivered coverage following Dr Greenwood's killing spree – an extra-narrative event – Sinclair gains an insight into the external reception of Eden-Olympia. In a dialogue suffused with military rhetoric, Meldrum, the television executive with whom Sinclair makes brief contact (to indulge his own curiosity, or else to satisfy a staple of detective-fiction), greets Paul with: “So, Mr Sinclair...you're reporting from the battle-front?” (Super 127). This can of course be read as the use of dead military metaphor, but after Sinclair continues: “Is there a war on?” Meldrum tells Sinclair he can “bet on it. Eden-Olympia versus the rest of the Cote” (Super 128). The remainder of the demographic – those who fall between the two gated-community bookends – look upon Eden-Olympia as unfavourably as they look upon the Rue Valentin. In Eden-Olympia, minimizing Otherness and purifying social spaces are part of the infrastructure; building community relations is not.

While Super-Cannes demonstrates how hyper-rationality alienates individuals and ultimately forces them to seek radical (and physically violent) solutions to overcome their languor, Paul Auster's *Leviathan* displays how marginality can be a tool for reclaiming affect. Through the testimony of Peter Aaron, the retrospective narrative follows Benjamin Sachs, the novel's anti-hero, as he rails against the polity. Sachs becomes increasingly marginalised throughout the text and it is during the 1980s that his position becomes “increasingly marginalized” (Lev 104). As a cultural commentator, Sachs's work was pushed to the margins during the Reagan era and his audience gradually grew smaller as the “magazines that published his work steadily became more obscure” (Lev 140). The 1980s mark the time in which “the Right was everywhere in the ascendant” (Lev 104) and it is during this decade that Sachs undergoes his most severe cultural alienation.

In his first novel, *The New Colossus*, Sachs sidesteps what Aaron terms the pitfall of debut-fiction, “a thinly veiled attempt to fictionalize the story of one's life” (Lev 36). Sachs's novel is a strident polemic against Americanism and the “dominant emotion was anger, a full blown,

lacerating anger that surged up on nearly every page: anger against America, anger against political hypocrisy, anger as a weapon to destroy national myths” (Lev 40). The polemical tone of the novel and its “peevisish, embattled edge” are best substantiated through retracing earlier episodes of Sachs’s alienation. It is during a visit to the Statue of Liberty that Sachs gains the first major victory of his life – mastery over his wardrobe. Triviality aside, Aaron includes this in his testimony to show that even at six years old, Sachs was more than capable of using political violence to necessitate change. Having no desire to be “a Fauntleroy in full regalia” but to wear “T-shirts, dungarees, and sneakers” (Lev 33), Sachs offers to make a bargain with his mother, the current chooser of his outfits. If the other children present were not clad in full celebratory garb Sachs was to be free of the “absolute dictatorship” that trampled his sartorial freedom underfoot. Indeed, Sachs is the outsider here since his peers are clad in regular garments and by default he has his first political victory: “I felt as if I’d struck a blow for democracy, as if I’d risen up in the name of oppressed peoples all over the world” (Lev 33). The Statue of Liberty is, as Mrs Sachs points out, “the symbol of [America] [...] we have to show it proper respect”, yet despite this, Sachs infers that he is “about to pay homage to the concept of freedom” but is himself in chains (Lev 33). The “blow for democracy” (Lev 33) Sachs struck that day galvanised his revolutionary mind-set, though it would remain latent, surfacing momentarily in articles, conversations, and his novel until it was fully revealed at the moment of his ‘fall’. What is of most importance here is that Sachs only embarks on his juvenile scheme because he feels excluded; he “wanted to look like a regular American boy” and not somebody marginal or on the periphery (Lev 33). This experience informs his later acts of political violence and terrorism, acts that are only possible when directed from a marginal position.

Aaron undermines the modicum of social normativity Sachs possesses during their first encounter: “he either looks like somebody with a bad toothache, or like some half-starved Russian soldier on the outskirts of Stalingrad” (Lev 12). Aaron then contends that the first image is “comic, and the second one forlorn” (Lev 12), yet stowed in the brevity of this sentence is a

terse summary of Sachs: an outwardly comic figure whose jauntiness and good humour hide “a deep reservoir of intolerance and scorn” (Lev 18). Similarly, Sachs’s gentleness could often give way to “savage fits of anger, truly terrifying outbursts of rage. These were not directed at people so much as the world at large [...]; the stupidities of the world appalled him” (Lev 18). Using his first lesson in political theory – and on the nature of freedom, which, as Sachs later adds “can be dangerous [...] if you don’t watch out, it can kill you” (Lev 35) – he builds his case against America, a case begun some twenty-nine years prior inside the Statue of Liberty. Sachs – as most six-year-old children do – has an aversion to being excluded, yet the very fact this trivial episode is retained in Aaron’s testimony (he may not be explicit about this) is suggestive of the validity he attaches to it. Aaron retains a number of events from Sachs’s life in his testimonial and the presence of each denotes something meaningful.

Sachs’s first political victory is the high point of his violent transgressions until the fall and his desire for authenticity is subsequently muted as he becomes ensconced in the “torpor of bourgeois life” (Lev 35) before he turns to anarchism. Sachs wants to join the cult of authentic experience and the fall grants him a window of existential examination. After the fall Sachs comes to realise that authentic experience resides in the act of violent transgression against political hypocrisy and Americanism and he can no longer rely on the written word to be his derisive force. Aaron attributes Sachs’s newfound malaise directly to the fall, or more precisely, what the fall unearthed:

Most men would have considered themselves lucky to have lived through what happened to Sachs that evening and then shrugged it off. But Sachs didn’t, and the fact he didn’t – or more precisely the fact he couldn’t – suggests the accident did not change him so much as make visible what had previously been hidden. (106)

To read Aaron’s appraisal of Sachs’s psychological state after the fall as injected with renewed purpose aligns with the trail of anarchism and experiential desire that Sachs drops – and Aaron

follows – along the way. The reader can make the following inferences based on this: the most obvious is that Sachs has always been a subversive voice in the chorus of “chest pounding Americanism” (Lev 104) and this subversive voice was latent and imperceptible: an unidentifiable (but nonetheless nagging) impulse that Sachs cannot decode or recognize. Authenticity, or unsimulated experience, is the decoding force here and only after ‘hitting bottom’ is Sachs able to utilise this impulse and alter his course.

During Sachs and Aaron’s last encounter, the extent to which the fall – and the subsequent events – provide Sachs with an ideological justification for his revolutionary activity is finally realised. The post-fall mentality that Sachs adopts is best expressed during his final conversation with Aaron:

I would be [able] to express my own convictions, to take a stand for what I believed in, to make the kind of difference I had never been able to make before. All of a sudden, my life seemed to make sense to me. Not just the past few months, but my whole life, all the way back to the beginning. It was a miraculous confluence, a startling conjunction of motives and ambition. I had found the unifying principle, and this one idea would bring all of the broken pieces of myself together. (228)

The fall and the events that follow allow Sachs to suture the fragmented pieces of himself together. This restorative process gives Sachs the momentum he requires to combat inertia and consolidate his position as the feared (and demonized) Other. His newfound purpose is in truth an enlargement of former “self-righteous opinions and embattled stances” (Lev 225) conveyed in articles and essays that denounced political hypocrisy but never sought to confront it. For all his “half-assed articles and literary pretensions” (Lev 225) Sachs resents the fact he never put himself “on the line” which in turn makes him just as hypocritical as the political entities he berates.

The imperative to act and gain authentic experience is clearly a motivational force at work here, but in order to access the authentic it seems you also have to be culturally annexed. Committing to a life of “journeys and disguises [...] [and] last minute escapes” (Lev 231) is a manageable contingency and a small fee to pay for Sachs’s rejuvenation: “I was no longer bewitched. I felt inspired, invigorated, cleansed¹⁹” (Lev 228). Sachs is able to reclaim affect and become a radical example to others by shaking them out of apathy. The affective power of the Phantom of Liberty – Sachs’s anarchist alter ego – is enough to challenge the apparently incontrovertible truths that the statue represents. Unlike the American flag “which tends to divide people as much as it brings them together”, the statue is a symbol that “causes no controversy” (Lev 215). For every American that “is proud of their flag, there are many others who feel ashamed of it, and for every person who regards it as a holy object, there is another who would like to spit on it” (Lev 215). The statue is “immune” from these conflicts and, as Aaron concludes, “one would be hard-pressed to find a single person willing to denounce the things it stands for [...] it represents hope rather than reality” (Lev 216). Sachs is the “solitary speck” (Lev 237) on an otherwise unblemished national reception of the statue, yet his influence as a revolutionary – his affective power – has attracted conflicting responses: he has been “excoriated as a menace to society” and “extolled as a man of the people” (Lev 215).

Though responses to Sachs and his campaign as the Phantom of Liberty are both laudatory and condemnatory, he nonetheless revives a suppressed emotive capacity since a previously apathetic populace – or at least those who have witnessed the actions of the Phantom – have begun to recognise the larger political aims of Sachs’s revolutionary agenda: small scale destruction is indicative of a burgeoning epochal complacency with the cultural sphere. What also reveals itself for engagement is how the statue – according to Aaron – represents “hope rather than reality” (Lev 216). Sachs’s sentimentality regarding the original statue and the first

¹⁹ The purgatorial function of authentic experience – via a marginal position – is something evidenced in both the physically violent machinations of the Bowling Club and in Sachs’s dedication to his new cause.

experience of political victory he achieved there might form part of his rationale for destroying the replicas. This notion gains weight when taking into consideration that Sachs is denigrating the value system that celebrates image reproduction and rampant commodification. This might have also made him defensive of the original and his intolerance toward the simulacral reproductions aligns with his desire to challenge the image-celebrating value system.

Despite the ideological constituents of Sachs's revolutionary agenda – and the minutiae of his plans for small-scale destruction – it is the revival of affect that valorises Sachs's revolutionary activity and the marginal position from which he operates. Only from a peripheral position is Sachs able to formulate his revolutionary plot that undercuts political hypocrisy and challenges national indifference towards the nature of and capacity for political change. For Wilder Penrose, the alienation that plagues residents of Eden-Olympia is utilised for its stimulatory force. Eden-Olympians' anxiety toward the cultural Other culminates in physically violent transgressions that enable a passion for the real to be fulfilled, yet at the same time creating a zone of exclusion which marginalizes them. This chapter has aimed to demonstrate how as an epochal anxiety marginality – the fear of the Other or the forces exerted on individuals when they are forced to be the Other – precipitates physical and political violence. The nature of the transgression is dependent upon the exact nature of the anxiety. Fear of the Other, or a violent aversion to the Other and their encroachment on Western socio-cultural interactions, is evidenced Super-Cannes. Creating and maintaining zones of exclusion is inherently (and paradoxically) alienating to those who seek to do so. Ultimately, alienation is a stimulatory force for the Eden-Olympia Bowling Club and their acute fear of Otherness provides the necessary momentum to violently transgress. Adjutant to this anxiety toward the cultural other is an acute and constructed alienation, spawned from the hyper-technological (and hyper-rational) infrastructure of Eden-Olympia and exclusivism governs the enclave. In *Leviathan*, cultural forces ostracize Sachs and the revolutionary fallout that follows gives him access to authentic and unsimulated experience. Super-Cannes aestheticizes marginality as a glamorous outpost from which acts of physical violence can be directed or practiced in order to maintain

a capitalist hegemony and a zone of exclusion. In both texts, marginality is a platform from which the real and the authentic can be accessed through both physically and politically violent means.

The notion of aestheticizing an epochal anxiety – like *Super-Cannes* does with marginality – is taken to greater satirical extremes by Bret Easton Ellis in *Glamorama*. The final chapter considers how the world of international terrorism is depicted as an equally glamorous outpost from which supermodels and celebrities bolster the vapid culture they are a part of. In much the same way as *Super-Cannes*, *Glamorama* also questions our “received idea of terrorism as the desperate violence of disenfranchised groups” (Stephenson 479) and reframes this perceived view to include the notion that the contemporary West is an “enclave of privilege that defends its status through aggression and terrorism”, echoing (and endorsing) Slavoj Žižek’s assertion that terrorism needs redefining to incorporate some Western powers (27).

While the thematic reach of *Glamorama* aligns with my earlier explorations of epochal anxieties toward authenticity, agency, and marginality, the wider aim of this next chapter is to read *Glamorama* forward and not backward. I argue that explorations of the text that extricate it from its temporal domain threaten to divest the novel of its efficacy as an epochal reflector and a cultural artefact. While scholarship that places the novel as a terrorist pretext is often convincing – on the basis of *Glamorama*’s conceptual framework and the epochal anxieties surrounding domestic and international terrorism that it trivialises – I maintain that reading the text backwards in light of 9/11 will not reveal anything profound about the zeitgeist from which it emerges but only retrofit more recent anxieties onto the novel. Taking this critical trend into account, while supplementing it with scholarly engagements that predate 9/11 and the Bush Administration’s ‘war on terror’, the final section also considers why *Glamorama* is a text suitable for examining the relationship between the zeitgeist, given its poor critical and popular reception and the notoriety of its author, Bret Easton Ellis.

“We are just reflectors of our time”: Reading it Forward in Bret Easton Ellis’s Glamorama (1998).

While the previous chapter focused specifically on *Leviathan* and *Super-Cannes*, *Glamorama* might also have been incorporated to enrich an exploration of the relay between marginality and revolutionary activity.²⁰ The point of departure for this chapter is to read *Glamorama* forward and reframe it as a text that grapples with fin de millennial anxieties and not as a literary landmark that solely prefigures 9/11. Extricating the text from its temporal domain and reading it backwards from September 11, 2001 is ultimately fruitless when considering the extent to which literature can shape (and be shaped by) the epoch it emanates from. I follow the critical trends established before 9/11 by David Punter, who focuses on anxieties surrounding the erosion of authenticity and the consumption of the real by the image (Mandel, 65).²¹ Critics such as Walter Benn Michaels, Alex Houen, and Per Serritslev Petersen write after 9/11 and use the events of that day as an opportunity for fresh engagements with the text.²² Such investigations of *Glamorama* consider its treatment of international (and domestic) terrorism, spectacle, and politics. While I do not intend to totally displace these critical offerings – the notion that *Glamorama* can be read as a terrorist pretext is convincing – I refrain from allowing this trend in scholarship to dominate my analysis. I do however acknowledge these critics’

²⁰ In *Glamorama*, the private worlds of celebrity and international terrorism are valorized as exclusive provinces from which physically violent acts can be practiced to maintain structural integrity.

²¹ See Claire Colebrook, *The Context of Humanism*, Sheli Ayers; *Glamorama Vanitas: Bret Easton Ellis’s Postmodern Allegory*; and David Punter, *e-textuality: Authenticity after the Postmodern*.

²² Benn Michaels, Walter. “Empires of the Senseless: (The Response to) Terror and (the End of) History”; Houen, Alex. “Novel spaces and taking place(s) in the wake of September 11.” Petersen, Per Serritslev. “9/11 and the Problem of Imagination: *Fight Club* and *Glamorama* as Terrorist Pretexts.”

utility – Petersen’s in particular – in supplementing my argument since *Glamorama* is a text that prefigures our current preoccupation with surfaces, technology, and visuality.²³

It is this fixation with surfaces and images that often prevents – somewhat paradoxically – *Glamorama* and Bret Easton Ellis from being hailed as paragons of both literary postmodernism and mimetic storytelling.²⁴ This chapter does not intend to reconsider the reception of Ellis and his work but it does depart from a critical corpus that shares many of its stylistic and conceptual complaints about the author (and his oeuvre) with non-scholarly engagements. Popular engagements with the novel often fail to detect how Ellis’s *modus operandi* revolves around sharp – and often hyperreal – indictments infused with even sharper satire. Like his 1991 sociopathic tome *American Psycho*, *Glamorama* is equally subject to harsh condemnation and derision. Michiko Kakutani vilifies the novel for its “sloppily contrived plot” and the “lugubrious, repetitious tale” that emerges in the place of what could have been an “amusing satire” (1). Kakutani’s response, like many others,²⁵ overlooks the conceptual originality of *Glamorama* since the critical framework employed is still constructed around Ellis’s earlier work - namely *American Psycho* and *Less Than Zero*. Even in these novels, which contain similar sequences of mutilation and terrorisation of the body in extremis, the strident cultural critique woven into the narrative fabric is seldom teased out.

²³ Arriving long before the plethora of social media and image sharing networks such as Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter, *Glamorama* foreshadows a contemporary cultural fixation with image reproduction and manipulation – ‘Photoshop’ (Photoshop for Windows ’98 in the novel), for example, is the dominant software used for image alteration.

²⁴ As David Schmid notes, Ellis is heralded pejoratively as the “poster boy of American literary postmodernism” (69-70). While critics acknowledge the abundant intertextual references to characters that have numerous afterlives in a number of his works, more trenchant critiques of his visceral and grisly narrative sequences overshadow his engagement with (and ironic undercutting of) a postmodern aesthetic.

²⁵ Daniel Mendelsohn disparages the novel on the grounds of it being another “paean to banality – a bloated, stultifying repetitive, overhyped novel about a gang of fabulously good looking and expensively dressed sociopaths” (Mendelsohn, qtd in Schmid 70). Adam Begley suggests that “a radically shortened *Glamorama*, amputated before the 200-page mark, would have been delightful: a fine satire, funny, bleak, biting” (71).

What Less Than Zero and American Psycho do for the vapidness and gluttony of the 1980s, Glamorama similarly does for the vacuousness of the 1990s. Yet despite this, Ellis remains underappreciated in his role as an astute chronicler of American postmodern culture and the human condition. As much of his earlier work has been categorised as “reportorial rather than novelistic” (Mendelsohn 2), Ellis’s oeuvre is in danger of being read as conceptual art that relies heavily on juxtapositions and ad copy to convey its cultural critique (Mendelsohn 3). American Psycho underwent categorisation that detracted from its efficacy as a cultural artefact that inflated the hedonism of the 1980s and in a way not dissimilar to this Glamorama has, in some publications, been pigeonholed as a precursor to 9/11 instead of being read as reflecting the zeitgeist.

Glamorama’s epochal acuity is largely “the product of its critical reception” (Mandel 65). Such receptions choose to focus on the novel’s “uneasy relation” to the events of September 11th, 2001, and retrospectively reposition the text to highlight its inadvertent prescience of the attacks on the World Trade Centre. As I demonstrate, situating this text temporally and reading it against the zeitgeist from which it emerges can reinstate a portion of its thematic and conceptual efficacy. There is an existing though somewhat nascent trend in scholarship that already values temporal situating over retrospective readings. In his study of American fiction in the 1990s, Adam Kelly proposes that novels reflective of a particular zeitgeist should remain temporally situated since excavating them from their epoch ultimately divests them of their cultural critique and engagement (8). Following Kelly’s rationale for analysis, I too refrain from lifting such texts from their temporal domains in favour of backward readings and instead look to examine them in their original assemblage. One of the most pertinent epochal anxieties that Glamorama engages with is a corporeal fixation articulated through terrorisation and destruction of the body in extremis. While on the one hand the body is subjected to destruction and evisceration – sating a cultural passion for the real and desire for authenticity – it is also celebrated for its power as a seductive tool since the value system of late capitalism is tipped in favour of surfaces and

visuality. *Glamorama* both exploits the value system and unscrupulously upholds it by perpetuating acts of physical violence while valorising and aestheticizing the body.

In addition, examining why this novel is seen to function prophetically instead of reflectively, this section takes into account the “dialectically synergised” (Petersen 143) relationship between cultural literacy and international (and domestic) terrorism. While the attacks on the World Trade Centre provide a chronological end point for this section (and study), I avoid the scholarly pitfall that opens when attempting to examine *Glamorama* as a terrorist pretext. Instead, I consider how the thematic and conceptual reach of the novel has been retrospectively (or anachronistically) channelled into something politically resonant and in some ways robbed the text of its efficacy in reflecting the epoch. While my examination in an earlier chapter does not necessarily convey this – in favour of grappling with anxieties surrounding authenticity – *Fight Club* is similarly at risk of being categorised as a terrorist pretext and is equally susceptible to backward readings that reposition the thematic and conceptual focus of the text to centre on 9/11.

While often paired for analysis as texts that grapple with the same fin de millennial anxieties, *Glamorama* and *Fight Club* offer distinctly different reflections of the 1990s zeitgeist. Like *Fight Club*, *Glamorama* is concerned with issues of authenticity and physical violence, though the intersection at which the narratives diverge is as follows. *Glamorama* articulates a passion for the real and a desire for authenticity not through the eyes of those oppressed by the strictures of capitalism and a feminized cultural sphere, but by those who are so far above it that they need to practice extreme physical violence and acts of international terrorism just to maintain its structural integrity. To take this further, Alex Blazer’s reading of *Fight Club* and *Glamorama* places the destruction of bodies, objects, and spaces within the texts as the “disastrous revenge of the psyche on the symbolic order that decimated it” (188). Blazer’s analysis of *Glamorama* centres not on the novel as a terrorist pretext but how it portrays a culture of “image-conscious [and] celebrity-driven narcissists” and its focus on “one particular narcissist” who is “driven

insane through the impossibility of bodily perfection” (183). Blazer includes what is often neglected in comparisons of the novels; specifically how *Glamorama* revels in a stylised irony that places terrorism and the world of celebrity culture as interchangeable. This provides a platform for the novel to raise pertinent questions about American postmodern culture and a world of high-tech simulacra in which everything recirculates in an endless feedback loop. This premise holds true following events like 9/11 in which the spectacle of terror and destruction – and the re-representation of the ‘real’ – is consumed endlessly. A forward reading of *Glamorama* can reposition this phenomenon culturally since endless consumption of the same spectacle is not forged during 9/11, but during an epoch in which image (re-)representation is congenital.

With mass media coverage of violent transgressions like 9/11, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine the “epistemological ground rule” (Petersen 142) of contemporary society: are we sliding down the surface of ‘real’ things – a notion called into question so frequently (and cyclically) in *Glamorama* – or are we caught in a reciprocal feedback loop in which our distance from the real is furthered at every juncture? Though this is a question posed yet never answered by Ellis (either through postmodern tricksiness or the fact that no ‘real’ answer exists), Palahniuk also subscribes to a metaphoric embodiment of this postmodern (and fin de millennial) disconnect between real and unreal, authentic and inauthentic, by depicting his nameless insomniac to be so affected by this schism that a psychogenic creation in the form of hard-talking, hard-hitting alter ego, Tyler Durden, emerges. Durden drastically reduces the narrator’s distance from the real and the authentic and allows him to reclaim a semblance of raw, masculine selfhood through ritualised exposure to authentic experience. This exposure begins as bareknuckle fighting and ends as domestic terrorism yet the real issue here is not so much what happens in between, but why this specific cultural mentality fosters apathy.

While parading as a narrative devoted to the celebration of banality and an advertisement for the benefits of being a slave to the flat surface of late twentieth-century existence, *Glamorama* blends two contemporaneous anxieties – a corporeal anxiety and an anxiety surrounding international terrorism – and illustrates how their coalescence is not as absurd as it first appears. Using the vapid world of modelling as a smokescreen, the perpetrators of international terrorism in *Glamorama* are not demonized cultural others or emasculated white-collar workers but celebrities and cover models. Victor – whose most frequently hailed dictum is “the better you look, the more you see” (112, 233) – is recruited by nefarious double agent, Fred Palakon, and national hunk and heartthrob Bobby Hughes, into the glamorous world of international terrorism. Chosen for his staggering stupidity and impossible indifference toward the nature of institutional power, Victor becomes an accessory to Bobby’s paramilitary sect. Though narcotics, alcohol, and the promise of stardom further cloud his questionable judgement (he is followed by two film crews) Victor’s brief stint as a terrorist grants him exposure to authentic experience. Revolving initially around Victor’s tussle with making a name for himself on the Manhattan club scene and securing a part in *Flatliners II*, the narrative is saturated with references to ‘real’ celebrities, brands, and frequently fails to offer anything that does not valorise surfaces and visuality. The narrative invites the reader to consider notions of authenticity and the ‘real’ and how a politics of postmodernism underwrites the cultural climate.

Though Ellis is often derided for his mono-dimensional characters that are typically indistinguishable from the flat backdrops they gyrate against, it pays to read them as metonyms and physical embodiments of their zeitgeist. Victor, for example, valorises the paradigm of both a constructed and ornamented masculinity and gives a pretty face to the cultural trope that identifies men as receptacles for consumption. He also comes to stand for a disenfranchised, deluded, unfulfilled, and image-obsessed populace. Bobby Hughes and Fred Palakon ultimately personify the duplicity and systemic malevolence of Western superpowers that entice a disenfranchised echelon of society – in this case emotionally cavernous celebrities and

supermodels – and exploit their political indifference. Victor is aware of his subscription to the value system of late twentieth-century life and while the following criteria form the basis of how lovers and friends are chosen, they also determine who is chosen for recruitment into international terrorism:

People were discarded because they were too old or too fat or too poor or they had too much hair or not enough, they were wrinkled, they had no muscles, no definition, no tone, they weren't hip, they weren't remotely famous. This was how you chose lovers. This was what decided friends. And I had to accept this if I wanted to get anywhere. (481)

Victor's brief sequence of quasi-existential reflection contradicts his earlier incognizance and malleability. As the reader learns the complexity of Victor's plight, his inability to make connections and affect change (if only to defend himself) becomes increasingly frustrating. While on the one hand the fragmentary nature of the plot mimics the disconnectedness of Victor's psyche, it also challenges the conceptual groundwork of the text. After one of the only insights given into Bobby's schema – courtesy of triple agent and femme-fatale Jamie Fields – Victor is brusquely informed as to why he is embroiled in an international terrorist plot:

“Look,” Bobby says. “I understand where you're coming from, Victor. We plant bombs. The government disappears suspects”. “The CIA has more blood soaked into its hands than the PLO and the IRA combined. The government is an enemy. My god, you of all people should know that, Victor.” “But Bobby, I'm not...political,” I blurt out vaguely. “Everyone is, Victor,” Bobby says, turning away. “It's something that you can't help”. (314)

Victor's apolitical outlook notwithstanding, it seems implausible that he has reached this stage in the plot – of both the text and the intra-filmic addition that he is, or is not a part of – without a modicum of suspicion surrounding his entry into the glossy world of terrorist-chic he is now so firmly involved in. As I intend to show later, the epistemological cracks that appear when considering how the narrative is both driven by Victor while simultaneously shifting and accelerating autonomously (and in different directions)²⁶ are best examined during episodes that deliberately invite the reader to consider the “epistemological ground-rule” (Petersen 142) of the text. What remains important here is that Bobby, despite having only met Victor some weeks prior, is able to warn him that he should be more aware of the government's ulterior agenda than most. While Ellis may in fact be paying ironic homage to a staple of conspiracy fiction – playfully gesturing to an unrealised truth which surfaces toward the dénouement but is consistently alluded to in increasingly banal ways – the reader is forced to accept that Victor's agency is defunct. Bobby's warning functions more as a question, essentially asking Victor if he has been lucid and present during the narrative because if he had, his current circumstances would not be as perplexing. On the one hand, Bobby is eager to enlighten Victor – by far his most intellectually challenged proselyte – by providing him with legitimisations and justifications for terrorist action. He invites Victor to consider how pervasive a nationalistic sentiment truly is, and how far (and for how long) being an “American” is a viable justification for denying the perpetuation of global violence:

“You need to get your worldview straightened out,” Bobby's telling me. “You need to get your information about the world straightened out.” “We're killing civilians,” I whisper. “Twenty-five thousand homicides were committed in our country last year, Victor.” “But...I didn't commit any of them, Bobby.” Bobby smiles patiently, making

²⁶ It may in fact be that this sprawling of the narrative is Ellis's attempt to depict the plight of the subject under the forces of postmodernity and an image obsessed culture.

his way back to where I'm sitting. "Is it so much better to be uninvolved, Victor? [...] Everyone's involved, that's something you need to know" (315)

The vital information upon which Victor's entire involvement hinges remains withheld until the latter part of the text.²⁷ Before he becomes aware of the larger motive behind his recruitment, Victor accepts Bobby's trust in him because he thinks that "the Gaza strip is a particularly lascivious move an erotic dancer makes [...] [and that] the PLO recorded the singles 'Don't Bring Me Down' and 'Evil Woman'" (Glam 315). Bobby's cultural complaints are somewhat simplified when he elucidates them to Victor and he favours ambiguity and elusiveness when articulating his rationale for revolution. While educating Jamie Fields, a sometime love interest and fellow terrorist, Bobby showcases his reluctance to submit to a straightforward articulation of his model for reform.

"Bobby would try and educate me...make me understand...what he was doing...where he was going with this whole thing...and he told me 'Baby, George Washington was a terrorist' and I'd look into that face and see those eyes...those lips...and things would just start unravelling and I became educated.... He would tell me that you show the world things and in showing the world you teach it what you want... He would give me E.M. Forster novels to read and I never understood them for some reason...Bobby was relieved by this.... He told me things like 'We are just reflectors of our time' and he never really got more precise than that." (310-11)

²⁷ As the plot evolves, Victor realizes that his father is partially responsible for his recruitment into Bobby's terrorist group. Due to a number of overlapping intentions between numerous organizations – the U.S. Senate, the 'Japanese' – Victor is essentially a bargaining tool and is used to carry out the work of multiple parties.

For Bobby, the imperative to be didactic is not fundamentally important to his cause; he preys on the vapidness of his recruits and the assumption that they will be caught in the updraft of celebrity and forget the malevolence of their complicity: “in New York we joked about never staying at an address that wasn’t a 10021 zip code...chartered 737s flew us to weddings...waiters never rushed us...we were allowed to smoke cigarettes wherever we wanted” (Glam 310; ellipses in original). When Bobby does try to educate Jamie he either reverts to sophistry or is deliberately imprecise. Unlike Bobby, Jamie is culturally illiterate and ultimately fails to align Bobby’s malaise with his desire to terrorise. Instead, she is preoccupied with visuality and the aesthetics of Bobby’s face – “those lips...those eyes...” – and bases her understanding of Bobby’s rationale on the completeness and perfection his face signifies. The use of signifiers as integral to cultural and ideological comprehension is a phenomenon embedded in the zeitgeist and is depicted in *Glamorama* (and the other three texts) as a total submission to the symbolic order. This type of exegesis neglects, almost totally, an inclusion of 9/11 and unsurprisingly retains a greater portion of the epochal fixations and anxieties that shape the text(s). The more recent aim of scholarship on *Glamorama* – as I have outlined – has been to appraise the prophetic quality of the narrative in favour of the epochal reflection it provides.

Although a number of post 9/11 engagements with *Glamorama* choose to ignore the culturally specific indictment it presents and instead read it within a set of wider and more contemporary anxieties, some, like Petersen, can still provide useful insights into the text. Petersen convincingly argues how a dialectic synergy exists between the cultural literacy of those hijackers who carried out 9/11 and the postmodern American imagination. The same synergy, to follow Petersen’s logic, should be locatable between postmodern Americana such as Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* (1991), Paul Auster’s *Leviathan* (1992), and Tom Clancy’s *Debt of Honor* (1994) and the cultural climate from which they emanate and reflect. *Fight Club*, according to Petersen (who focuses primarily on Fincher’s 1999 screen adaptation) constitutes American fin

de siècle cinema in its celebration of the millennial desire to seek out the passion for the real in all its violent harshness (138), redolent of Slavoj Žižek's notation in *Welcome to The Desert of The Real*: "authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression". Depicted most often as physical, this violent transgression dissolves the "everyday social reality" (Žižek 5) and allows authentic experience and the unmediated spectacle to be witnessed.

Though Petersen's contribution supplements *Glamorama*'s functionality in typifying the zeitgeist since he relates it to literature and cinema that grapple with similar anxieties, he subscribes to the type of engagement that proves counterproductive when reading a text against its epoch. This type of engagement neglects a sustained examination of the zeitgeist in favour of 9/11 and subsequently focuses on teasing out specific plot moments and determining if they can be held alongside the events of 9/11 – or as Petersen puts it "eerily foreshadowing the choreography of that September afternoon" (143).²⁸ For Petersen, American fin de siècle fiction has its postmodern terrorist par excellence in Bobby Hughes, whose "narcissistic fantasy ideology" (Harris, qtd in Petersen 142) can be neatly defined – in Bobby's words – as "I'm beautiful, I have a purpose, go back to your dream" (Glam 334). While Petersen is right to point out that Bobby has no real politics or emancipatory project like the fight club narrator, is his politics not a culmination of American geopolitical stratagems that masquerade as humanitarily sustainable solutions but in actuality further displace the diasporic, and perpetuate numerous forms of violence? As William Stephenson notes, *Glamorama* can be read as a text that refocuses 'terrorism' as a signifier that denotes a Western purchasing of status and power through aggression, in addition (and contradiction) to signifying the desperate violence of disenfranchised Others (479). Petersen's most useful notation on *Glamorama* is his placement of U2's 'Even Better Than The Real Thing' – a song referenced in the text – as an

²⁸ Petersen isolates a portion of the narrative that describes the intricacy of Bobby Hughes' last act of terrorism and places it – somewhat satirically – alongside 9/11: "There is also another kind of surreal Twilight Zone connected to Bobby's last terrorist bombing, which surely deserves to be savored [...] The [decoy] bomb was placed on a TWA flight leaving Charles de Gaulle Airport on November 15, that is, 11/15, and its flight number was – would you believe it – 511. Elevens galore, imaginary and real signifiers floating around in this post-modern [sic] world of ours." (143)

allegorical marker for the ground rule of the novel: does a reader slide down the surface of real things, or an “imaginary surface in a cinematically imagined fiction or nightmare?” (142).

To endorse Petersen’s assertion that the “epistemological ground rule” of *Glamorama* is whether or not you are sliding down the surface of real things, the following passage seems a fitting place to begin. Victor has just been instructed by the director to leave “Florent” – another cosmopolitan haunt for the emergent glitterati – since he is “not looking worried enough” (168). After exiting the diner, Victor seems to lose any sense of epistemological grounding since the presence of the camera crew and their function as a signifier for an impending conflation of the real and the inauthentic is iterated once more:

Outside, more light, some of it artificial, opens up the city, and the sidewalks on 14th Street are empty, devoid of extras, and above the sounds of faraway jackhammers I can hear someone singing “The Sunny Side of the Street” softly to himself and when I feel someone touch my shoulder I turn around but no one’s there. A dog races by going haywire. I call out to it. It stops, looks at me, runs on. “Disarm” by The Smashing Pumpkins starts playing on the soundtrack and the music overlaps a shot of the club I was going to open in TriBeCa and I walk into that frame, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street, four buildings down, that the cameraman pans to. (169)

The “sidewalks on 14th Street” are “devoid of extras” and the presence of both natural and artificial light illuminates the scene and Victor is once again subject to epistemological slippages between what Punter lists as: “[...] worlds, a sense of the real and the sense of the filmic, of being an actor in another script, of the virtual” (68). This sequence is essentially emblematic of *Glamorama*’s dissolving of the demarcation lines between authenticity and inauthenticity, of the artificial and the superficial. The “artificial” light, for example, may be the work of the camera crew or it may be “the simple artificiality of neon” (Punter 69).

Irrespective of the light and its origins, it serves to “open [] up the city” and as Punter notes, suffuse this sequence with temporal ambiguity.

The sense in which this ‘opening up’ of the city occurs is never specified and the reader is left to question whether Victor’s phrasing acts as a temporal marker. The notion seems unlikely since the only ‘opening’ that takes place is of the narrative frame, a visual effect that enables Victor to translocate from the empty sidewalk and into “a shot of the club in TriBeCa [he] was going to open” (168). Notwithstanding the impossibility of his seamless transition from sidewalk to club door, what is even more problematic about Victor’s account – and his migration across numerous narrative and filmic domains – is that he walks into the frame of a club that he has not yet opened. Like Punter observes, the overlapping is with “a picture of that which does not (yet) exist; the club in TriBeCa has not been opened (will, in fact, never be opened) but this does not prevent it from figuring in the film that is unfolding within/around/adjacent to Victor’s life” (69).

Punter’s suggestion that the film unfolds adjacent to Victor’s life is legitimised by the closing line of this paragraph; Victor strolls “into that frame, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street, four buildings down, that the cameraman pans to” (Glam169). If the reader is to measure Victor’s powers of cognition on the blissful incognizance with which he bumbles through the narrative, it seems unlikely that he is able to accurately describe a car, the length, the colour, and how many buildings away it is, despite the fact he never noticed it. It would also appear that the film unfolds within and around Victor’s life – Punter might be covering all possibilities since the lines of separation are continually blurred, if they existed in the first place – as he is somehow able to observe the actions of the cameraman who is simultaneously recording him. Victor’s epistemological uncertainty surrounding his involvement with – and control of – the film and script he is part of is also experienced corporeally. As the next passages show, this eschewing of any clear boundaries between real and artificial – flesh limbs or mannequin parts – takes a decidedly morbid turn.

This corporeal anxiety becomes apparent during a number of visceral passages in the text and those that evidence Victor's inability to mediate a spectacle he perceives as inauthentic allow the reader to plot his desensitisation from "breaking out in sobs" to realising "it's all so familiar" (Glam 283, 306). Before the narrative reaches this point, Victor displays something akin to a passion for inauthenticity and a passion for the simulated. During the first bomb-blast he witnesses, on "a street in Notting Hill" (Glam 237), the "epistemological ground rule" of the text is enforced almost immediately:

A street in Notting Hill. In a row: a new Gap, a Starbucks, a McDonald's. A couple walks out of the Crunch Fitness center, carrying Prada gym bags, appearing vaguely energised, Pulp's "Disco 2000" blaring out of the gym behind them as they pass a line of BMWs parked tightly along the curb on this street in Notting Hill. (237)

The "street in Notting Hill" is offered as a snapshot of the zeitgeist, a street in which "a new Gap, a Starbucks, [and] a McDonald's" line the road flanked by "thin-hipped, floppy-haired" teenagers who compare clothing purchases, share cigarettes, and stand in "the overall void" (Glam 237). This urban idyll is suddenly divested of its perceived innocence, firstly because of a jump in the soundtrack from "Pulp [to] an ominous Oasis track", and then as everybody ceases to be aimless: "people aren't moving causally enough – they look coordinated, almost programmed" (Glam 237). Before these automatons are mangled and ripped apart by the force of four separate explosions – one in each of the buildings that line the street – Jamie Fields emerges, "desperately waving her arms, yelling garbled warnings at people" (Glam 237). The schism between real and unreal remains and Victor is unsure if he is "sliding down the surface of real things" or consuming an inauthentic spectacle; the build-up seems as authentic as it could given that it emanates from Victor's perspective. Yet the subsequent descriptions of

“giant cumulus clouds of roaring flames and smoke” give way to the fact that the street is not really destroyed, just “vaguely wrecked” and the “mangled bodies” are really “dollies” (Glam 238). Victor is not, however, immediately aware of this fact:

Alarms are going off in every direction and the sky is lit up orange, coloured by two small subsequent explosions, the ground continually vibrating, hidden people yelling commands. Then, at last, silence, but only for maybe fifteen seconds, before people start screaming. The group of teenagers: incinerated. The businessman: blown in half by the Starbucks explosion. There is no sign of the Japanese tourist except for the camcorder, which is in pristine condition. The guy on the motorbike waiting at the stoplight: a charred skeleton hopelessly tangled in the wreckage of the motorbike, which he has now melded into. (239)

The gore that littered the streets now “looks inauthentic [...] as if someone had dumped barrels containing smashed tomatoes across sidewalks [...] and it just seems too red” (Glam 239).²⁹ While certain elements of this scene would fit seamlessly into any Hollywood film’s B-roll – the impossible close-up of the camcorder a Japanese tourist was holding, inexplicably in “pristine condition” bears the necessary hallmark (Glam 238) – there remain aspects that would not. The “guy on the motorbike” who enters the scene noisily before “waiting at the stoplight” (Glam 238) is now a “charred skeleton” (Glam 238) and is never retrieved by the crew members who waste no time in clearing the other debris and collecting “disconnected heads and arms and legs” that are made of polystyrene (Glam 239).

²⁹ Victor also adds, rather ominously: “But later I will find out that this particular color looks more real than I could have ever imagined standing on that street in Notting Hill” (Glam 239).

The presence of the film crew (not the same one that has accompanied Victor, we are told) relaxes Victor and assures him that explosions of this magnitude and destruction on this scale is all part of a script and his indifference is legitimised. The film crew also signify inauthenticity and during their absence Victor is notably distressed. During Bobby's (and his team's) torture and eventual murder of the Korean Ambassador's son, Sam Ho, Victor – who either is, or is not meant to³⁰ stumble upon the basement-gym and torture-chamber complex – is under the impression that the body in extremis “on the examination table” (Glam 283) is really a mannequin:

A mannequin made from wax covered in either oil or Vaseline, slathered with it, lies twisted on its back in some kind of horrible position [...] naked, both legs spread open and chained to stirrups, its scrotum and anus completely exposed, both arms locked back behind its head, which is held up by a rope connected to a hook in the ceiling (283).

Despite the fact that “somebody wearing a black ski-mask [...] is screaming at the mannequin in what sounds like Japanese” (Glam 283), and Bentley Harrolds – a recruit of Bobby's – is videoing the proceedings, Victor is smiling and confused, not by the brutality of the scene but “how inauthentic the waxwork looks” (Glam 283). Even when he becomes aware that “wires have been inserted into gashes and cuts [...] on the mannequin's nipples, fingers, testicles” (Glam 283), Victor still refuses to accept the fact that this is not a mannequin but the terrorised body of Sam Ho. It does not take long, however, for Victor to equate the absence of a camera crew with authenticity: “there is, I'm noticing, no camera crew around” (Glam 284). Upon the

³⁰ There is some ambiguity regarding the shooting script of the “film” Victor is starring in. He never reads it in its entirety and is “shocked” during certain moments. Here, for example, during the execution of Sam Ho, Bobby tells Victor: “you shouldn't be shocked by any of this [...] this is expected. This was in the script. You shouldn't be surprised by any of this” (Glam 286).

realisation that he has, for some time (though we are uncertain as to how much) assumed a role of spectatorial ambivalence and is inadvertently complicit in this scene, Victor begins “hyperventilating” and “breaking out in sobs” (Glam 284). What comes to pass here is Victor’s abreaction to both his corporeal anxieties and his latent passion for the real. Though it is Bobby and his entourage who are indulging their own sadistic passions, Victor is truly overwhelmed by the terrorisation of flesh, more so for having processed (and consumed) the images as nonchalantly as he did:

The mannequin springs grotesquely to life in the freezing room, screeching, arching its body up again and again, lifting itself off the examination table, tendons in its neck straining, and purple foam starts pouring out of its anus, which also has a wire, larger, thicker, inserted into it. Bunched around the wheels on the table legs are white towels spotted heavily with blood, some of it black. What looks like an intestine is slowly emerging, of its own accord, from another, wider slit across the mannequin’s belly.
(283)

Soon enough, Victor becomes desensitised to the terrorisation of flesh and the consumption of authentic, unmediated spectacles. Having been a witness to numerous atrocities following the planting and detonation of bombs, Victor is able to speak from first-hand experience of the authentic and the un simul: “From behind the cameras on rooftops and inside various vans so much of it is the usual [...] The shock, the sirens, a hundred-wounded – it’s all so familiar” (Glam 306). It could certainly be said that what Victor is experiencing is something akin to traumatic realism, though it becomes difficult to imagine him any emptier than he already is. Victor is noticeably lucid during the torture and execution of another political prisoner, the French Premiere’s son. Like the episode in which Sam Ho is murdered, the Premiere’s son is

chained to a chair, slowly being poisoned. He's naked, gleaming with sweat [...] His chest is almost completely blackened [...] and because of the poison Bruce keeps administering he's having trouble breathing. [...] A wire is inserted into a wound on his stomach, attached to his liver, lashing it with electricity (358).

After witnessing this scene, Victor is not "breaking out in sobs" but able to relay the spectacle despite its authenticity. Although he is "led downstairs at gunpoint to a room hidden within a room" (Glam 358), Victor is unflinching when acid is poured on the Premiere's son's hands (who incidentally Victor has now stopped referring to as the Premiere's son, but an "actor") and when "his leg is sawed off" (Glam 359). Despite this scene providing ample displays of authentic, unsimulated pain, Bobby is faraway and dislocated from the action; he "keeps folding his arms, staring up at the ceiling" because the actor is "not delivering the performance that Bobby wants" (Glam 359). Victor's exposure to the real has suppressed – almost to the point of indifference – his obsession with the minutiae of social interaction. Following the murder of the Premiere's son, Victor attends a dinner but is unable to convey the remotest sense of attachment; nothing can touch him now:

Just another conversation with a chic sadist obsessed with origami. [...] Just people tan and back from the Ariel Sands Beach Club in Bermuda [...] Just me, making connections based on fear, experiencing vertigo, drinking a Woo-Woo (360).

Despite his unconscious attempts to depart from the psychological abjection that postmodern culture creates, Victor's malaise is exacerbated by it. He is just as levelled by authenticity as he is by simulation and his continual exposure to violent transgressions (and acts of torture) creates more distance between his consciousness and the real. The passion for the real, if

indulged often, is likely to be displaced by the consumption of images.³¹ It may be sated at first, but ultimately, the more you see something “the more the meaning goes away [...] and the emptier you feel” (Foster 131).

Is the cultural response to 9/11 and its aftermath not an inflation of Hal Foster’s traumatic realism, on the basis that – like Victor discovers – copies of copies eventually create a vacuity in which a disconnect between authenticity and simulation is experienced epistemologically and ontologically? The issue that arises with endless consumption of the spectacle is that it not only deepens an existential, postmodern chasm, but also eradicates the signifying power. *Glamorama* evidences how this imperative to consume images endlessly until they signify their own emptiness is encoded into the zeitgeist. While this cultural phenomenon is exacerbated during the epoch since images saturate the cultural sphere, there seems to be a great imperative to place 9/11 and the image of the first plane colliding with the south tower as the abreaction to an unconscious desire to both sate a passion for the real and indulge the literary and cinematic American postmodern imagination. In some ways unfairly, it seems as though a cultural phenomenon that recurs throughout these texts of the 1990s (and before 9/11) is being transfixed to something it did not necessarily emanate from. It would therefore seem that epochal texts like *Glamorama* engage with and evince what is already encoded into the zeitgeist, and how (ab)reactions to events like 9/11 should really be informed by cultural literacy.

In this epoch American culture is underwritten by a politics of consumption and simulacral reproduction. In a climate that represses the real and promulgates the inauthentic, events like 9/11 – if a reader is to acknowledge Žižek’s and Baudrillard’s landmark contributions to this discussion³² – are essentially sought after. Jean Baudrillard asserts that a denial of ‘our’ longing

³¹ In *Glamorama*, everything is filmed and the consumption of this violence is interminable.

³² Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism* and Žižek’s *Welcome to The Desert of The Real*.

– whether conscious or unconscious – for an event of destruction and spectacle on this scale would eradicate any symbolic dimension and become “the murderous phantasmagoria of a few fanatics” (5).

All that has been said and written is evidence of a gigantic abreaction to the event itself, and the fascination it exerts. [...] The fact we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it – because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree – is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience. At a pinch, we can say that they did it, but we wished for it. (5)

For Žižek, the World Trade Centre attacks mark the end of a “process of virtualisation” while simultaneously perpetuating the recycling of images (11). Moreover, the attacks were events experienced televisually and the “oft-repeated shots of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower” are more redolent of spectacular shot framing from disaster movies (Žižek, 12). The collapse of the towers can therefore be perceived as “the cinematic conclusion of twentieth-century arts passion for the real” and, like Petersen’s observation suggests, a culmination of an epochal desire for authenticity.

Like Victor’s incessant consumption of unmediated spectacle and the ‘real’ destruction of flesh – and the vacuity such endless consumption creates – the defining images of 9/11 equally satisfy a compulsion to repeat. That the same shots were replayed continuously only certifies this cultural compulsion to re-consume and Victor experiences physically the effects of consumption ad nauseam after witnessing the same gruesome spectacle over and over:

We’re in one of the ash-gray bedrooms upstairs. I’m on the floor hugging Bobby’s legs, convulsing, unable to stop myself from moaning. Bobby keeps feeding me Xanax and for

short stretches of time the shuddering subsides. But then I'm in the bathroom – Bobby waiting patiently outside – vomiting until I'm just gagging up spit, retching. (284)

Although Victor eventually becomes indifferent to the destruction of bodies – after having been a spectator and a participator in numerous incidences – the interminable sequence of repetition he is locked in both creates and exacerbates his malaise. As I have made reference to previously, Ellis has a penchant for inflecting his cultural critique with incisive satire, so where a populace might unconsciously be affected by a compulsion to repeat (ad nauseam), Victor internalises this epochal facet and literally vomits.

Through an engagement, interrogation, and reflection of the 1990s zeitgeist – and an incorporation of the epochal anxieties – *Glamorama* indeed forms an adequate basis for exploring the importance of reading texts bookended by moments of crisis forward, not backward. Instead of using 9/11 as a cultural signpost to backdate a critique of *Glamorama*, the novel should be the initial focus. As a text that critically engages and interrogates the value system of late twentieth-century life and incorporates the epochal anxieties and fixations embedded in the cultural matrix, *Glamorama* deserves to be examined independently of 9/11. While *Glamorama* purchases this independence through a satiric undercutting of the zeitgeist (and not just its temporal proximity), its conceptual and thematic reach render it an inviting prospect for retrospective readings. Moreover, there is a clear literary and cultural utility in prognostic assessments of millennial fiction, but why glance backwards from the culmination or apotheosis of an epoch and retrofit anxieties when an extant cultural document already contains them? This also raises a further question (one that endorses both Žižek's and Baudrillard's disquisitions surrounding an abreaction to 9/11 as opposed to an authentic reaction): if the imperative to transgress against the value system – spurred by an epochal anxiety – is encoded into the zeitgeist, then where is the surprise when it comes to events like 9/11? The postmodern American imagination is responsible for spawning texts like *Glamorama*

and the functional element in reading the novel as a terrorist pretext resides in an indictment of this imagination, not of the text.

Conclusion

This study has examined four contemporary novels and considered their responses to epochal anxieties, fixations, and cultural forces – masculinity, marginality, and authenticity – and what such engagements entail. My analysis has concentrated on current scholarship, both challenging and following a number of critical stances offered by eminent critics who focus on the decade. The first chapter concluded that despite an intention to reconfigure the value system of late-twentieth century life – through physical force and corporeal deconstruction – the Fight Club narrator failed to remedy his incorrigible preoccupation with simulacral reproduction. Despite his best efforts to refresh a diminished male sociality and create a hard-body free from the signifiers of the prevailing aesthetic he (along with his psychogenically formed alter-ego ends up reproducing the structures of the system he vowed to dismantle.

In the second chapter, Leviathan and Super-Cannes were examined for their engagement with the relationship between marginality and how being marginalised – either through voluntary or involuntary means – enables political reform to be generated and authentic experience to be accessed. The discussion of both texts hinged on their fundamentally different depictions of marginality. In Leviathan, the marginal position occupied by Benjamin Sachs enables him to challenge the polity and the value system through political violence. His marginalisation is involuntary since his complacency with the sphere of society and his burgeoning desire to transcend the limits of (his own) fiction force him to the fringes. What comes to pass in Super-Cannes is how a voluntary alienation from the rest of society – purchased through elitism and displacement of immigrant communities – grants individuals access to authenticity through physical violence. Despite the differing depictions offered by both texts, marginality can be utilised to denigrate a late-capitalist value system or indeed bolster it.

The final chapter considered how Glamorama – in a way not dissimilar to Fight Club – grapples with a desire for authenticity and advocates the use of physical violence and corporeal

deconstruction as an effective tool for doing so. In addition to considering the epistemological fragility of the protagonist's world(s), the latter part of the chapter pays closer attention to the novel's somewhat forced categorisation as a terrorist pretext. The purpose of withholding the more recent attribution of the novel to the events of 9/11 served to keep the events of that day as a fixed, chronological endpoint. Now this endpoint has been reached, I can further interrogate not just the shortcomings of reading *Glamorama* as a prophetic narrative but consider the potential benefits such engagements may return.

The difficulty with aligning any text retrospectively in an attempt to map the zeitgeist at a paradigm-altering intersection is how to avoid uprooting it completely and neglecting its cultural foundations. Readings that neglect the cultural forces that shape a text might erroneously reposition its focus, but are they always reductive? I suggested in the final chapter that a careful balance between pre- and post-millennial culture – coupled with the plotting of a culturally specific progression from the texts to the post-millennial moment – can sometimes enrich and multiply the exegetic possibilities offered by the text. To achieve this equilibrium requires not just the separation of the text from its temporal domain (which is ultimately damaging), but a movement that includes the cultural phenomena it engages with. Inclusive of these epochal aspects, a post-millennial reading of a pre-millennial text can sometimes avoid pigeonholing a narrative. As I demonstrated previously, the usefulness of Petersen's contribution hinges on the balance he achieves between an assessment of the 1990s zeitgeist – namely the postmodern forces that underlie it – and how this informs the thematic and conceptual (and stylistic) elements of *Glamorama*. Only after this has been established does he focus his argument on the reverse-representation of events in the novel that might signify some profound and impossible prognostication in relation to 9/11. In any case, the balance is present and Petersen's contribution attests to the importance of retaining it.

Perhaps scholarly engagements that place *Glamorama* and *Fight Club* as terrorist pretexts can in fact be explored in a different light. As I considered at the start of this study, what if their

inadvertent prescience to 9/11 – as post 9/11 readings suggest – and their reflections of a pre-millennial moment might also be what ties them and the other novels used in this study together?³³ While I maintain that retrospective alignments and backward readings neglect the reflective power of epochal fiction, in the case of *Glamorama* and *Fight Club*, 9/11 can in fact provide a platform for wider discussions of the texts. While this discussion aids the justification of pre-textual readings, it raises a further question that merits addressing: how can a zeitgeist be demarcated with such clarity, and how can the zeitgeist of the 1990s be so distinct from the zeitgeist that was formed post-millennium? It would seem the cultural landmarks that bookend this study – the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11 – are indeed paradigm-altering and by and large precipitate two very distinct zeitgeists, but notwithstanding this there is undoubtedly some degree of imbrication. The potentially unanswerable question is exactly how much overlap is there between a pre- and post-millennial zeitgeist, given that 9/11 is widely regarded as the moment that changed ‘everything’?

While we are currently at a considerable distance from the events of September 11 and the pre-millennial zeitgeist, a number of their more pervasive aspects (as reflected in these texts) are still extant. Witness *Glamorama*’s interminable celebration of simulacra and images and the power to manipulate them – does this not typify a current cultural compulsion to create, manipulate, and reproduce images? Or how *Fight Club*’s valorisation of physical violence and corporeal deconstruction resulted in “nightclub fist fighting in Brazil” (FC “Afterword” 211), or how a conflation of the quest for authenticity and fixation with simulacral reproduction yielded websites like “WorldStarHipHop.com” that receive amateur footage of men engaging in ritualised brawls, before allowing them to circulate endlessly on the web (Schuchardt 6)?

³³ This ultimately questions how these texts might have been read if 9/11 never occurred and therefore poses the larger question: can 9/11 be considered a unifying literary event? I suggested that the WTC attacks function cohesively as far as all four novels are concerned; in as far as my rationale for selecting them – after their thematic and conceptual similarities – was largely based on their proximity to the event.

In addition, how might a different progression be charted if each novel's publication date was used to precisely situate it in the epoch? The notion is an interesting one but based on the authors used in this study and the stylistic variations of their prose, it may be unviable. *Leviathan*, published in 1992, is of course replete with Auster's writerly hallmarks – his penchant for lucidity and parataxis – and thematically it deals with the brooding anarchist engaged in pursuits far more intellectual than those protagonists in the remaining texts. On this seemingly facile basis, we might contend that the start of the decade is marked by a more cerebral approach to reforming a public politics.³⁴

Extending this rationale to *Fight Club* (1996) and *Glamorama* (1998) would suggest that the mid to latter part of the decade is underscored with a frenetic and physically violent approach to reconfiguring the value system. This could, in part, be attributed to both Ellis' and Palahniuk's notoriety for gruesome satire and the emotionally uninflected prose that drives their respective narratives. Likewise, it could be indicative of a burgeoning cultural desire to violently transgress and move beyond the calculated (and politically informed) mentality present earlier in the decade. *Super-Cannes* should provide the most accurate reflection of the zeitgeist since its publication date of 2000 technically places it as belonging to a pre- and post-millennial moment. Additionally, it should therefore depict a cultural mentality on the brink of symbolic collapse, over-encumbered by the terminal precession of simulacra and endless recirculation of images. In essence, *Super-Cannes* instead reflects a technocratic enclave that has totally isolated itself from the realm of society and is able to perpetuate its own violent

³⁴ This might also suggest that we can only extract this view of *Leviathan* as a result of Auster's prose, and not necessarily through an alignment with the early part of the decade. Interestingly, however, Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, published in 1991, adopts a similarly brooding approach to political inclemency and terrorism. Like Sachs, DeLillo's protagonist, Bill Gray, is a novelist who prefers to exist on the periphery, aloof (or rather annexed) from society. On the one hand, there could be an argument to suggest that this early part of the decade was characterized by cerebral figures who share an anxiety toward mass-production and how it divests artistic and intellectual pursuits of their fecundity. On the other, and this seems much more plausible given the comparison, this connection is based on the fact Auster and DeLillo are contemporaries (and friends), and are generally well received as postmodern authors who often focus on the plight of the artist as a trope in their fictions.

machinations in order to maintain structural integrity. As I highlighted in the earlier chapter on marginality, Super-Cannes and its enclave, Eden-Olympia, stand metonymically for a Western superstructure that enacts numerous forms of violence throughout the globe. Granted that Super-Cannes depicts a microcosmic and metaphoric version of this Western superstructure, it still intimates – albeit on a smaller-scale – with the methods practiced on a global scale by some Western powers. The notion that a pre-millennial mentality has shifted from the imperative to transgress physically as *Fight Club* suggests, to an ideological revolution replete with cultural and social phenomena (and societal infrastructure) frightfully reminiscent of our own, is an unsettling one. This suggestion is, like those I made previously, prone to invalidation since Ballard's prose often revolves around the psychological levelling of the subject as a result of nullifying social constructs. Eden-Olympia perfectly evidences this Ballardian aesthetic since residents practice physical violence in order to break the etiolating ties that bind them to a hyper-rational infrastructure.

Suggesting that each of these four novels can have their epochal reflection enhanced by paying closer attention to their publication dates and how these relate to a progression of the pre-millennial mentality (and zeitgeist) may be contentious. Regardless of whether or not this premise holds true, as readers and critics we have two other avenues for exploration. We can wait for the next paradigm-altering event to pass and then retrofit the anxieties specific to that moment onto the literature that predates it, or we can turn to the fiction emanating from this epoch – our continuing post-millennial moment – and start mapping the anxieties and fixations that are emerging currently. If nothing else, we might be able to save ourselves from the shock of the unknown.

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