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Errancies of Desire: Subjectivity, Difference, and Proximity in Transnational Film and Literature

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Errancies of Desire: Subjectivity, Difference, and Proximity
in Transnational Film and Literature


A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of


Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Vartan Patrick Messier

March 2011

Dissertation Committee:
        Dr. Marguerite Waller, Co-Chairperson
        Dr. Marcel Hénaff, Co-Chairperson
        Dr. Sabine Doran
        Dr. Jennifer Doyle

The Dissertation of Vartan P. Messier is approved:

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                                                        Committee Co-Chairperson

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                                                        Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION


Errancies of Desire: Subjectivity, Difference, and Proximity
in Transnational Film and Literature

by

Vartan Patrick Messier


Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
University of California, Riverside, March 2011
Dr. Marguerite Waller, Co-Chairperson
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This dissertation is concerned with the role of desire in the aesthetic experience; more specifically, it focuses on the ways in which we project and respond affectively to a work of art as formative processes of subjectivity. Inspired by Maurice Blanchot's "The Gaze of Orpheus," which links desire to errancy and "*errance*" (the French for wandering) and situates them as constitutive artistic forces, the guiding hypothesis is that the aesthetic experience is channeled via the mechanics of language and the gaze by the "errancies of desire"—the wanderings and errs of the desiring subject. Consequently, because desire is fluid and unpredictable, it produces heterogeneous and nomadic forms of subjectivity that undermine essentialist notions of cultural difference and specificity.

Adopting a transnational perspective, this dissertation examines a culturally diverse corpus of contemporary works, including postmodern American fiction,

postcolonial African novels, and Taiwanese Second Wave cinema. Methodologically, it first highlights the functions of the errancies of desire in each work as a twofold process of affective projection and response, and second, it analyzes how instances of transnational intertextuality position contextual experiences of subjectivity in proximity to one another by bridging differences inscribed within geo-political time and space.

Two interconnected thematic lenses structure my approach, each corresponding to a section of the dissertation: the first section investigates the errancies of the viewer's desire in films by Michael Haneke, Spike Jonze, and Tsai Ming-Liang by focusing on the aesthetical and ethical dimensions of subjectivization in film spectatorship; the second analyzes the errancies of male desire in novels by Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq, and Alain Mabanckou as it pertains to hegemonic constructs of masculinity and culturally-sanctioned forms of imperial violence.

By utilizing a comparative methodology to highlight the role of affect and desire and the effect of cross-cultural intertextuality on apperception, this dissertation demonstrates how each text unsettles perceptions of cultural difference by producing new transnational subjectivities. Therefore, the aesthetical inquiries of this project further contribute to the poststructuralist critique of metaphysics by investigating ethical issues of difference and subjectivity in specific instances wherein we bare witness to the virtual dissolution of national boundaries.

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**INTRODUCTION**

> Seul la lecture aime l'œuvre, entretient
> avec elle un rapport de désir. Lire, c'est
> désirer l'œuvre …
> —Roland Barthes, *Critique et Vérité*

In "The Gaze of Orpheus," Maurice Blanchot recounts the Greek myth of the poet who ventures into the underworld to reclaim his wife Eurydice from Hades. Seduced by the music of Orpheus, the god of the underworld agrees to release Eurydice on condition that the poet does not look back at her throughout their journey to the world of the living. This, however, proves to be unbearable for Orpheus, whose impatient gaze causes his wife to disappear, sending her back to Hades forever. Blanchot reads Orpheus' venture in the underworld as a metaphor for a journey through *The Space of Literature*, a journey that links desire and the gaze to error and *errance*, the French for wandering.

For Blanchot, the myth of Orpheus exemplifies how desire as a source of inspiration acts as an essential component of the *oeuvre*, which partly relies on the constitutive powers of *errance* and errancy. Orpheus' desire to hold and behold Eurydice is marked by the two notable transgressions that punctuate his journey to the underworld and back: on the one hand, he wanders into the forbidden space of the underworld and on the other, he errs in looking back at Eurydice. However, desire is also constitutive of the work of art, because without desire, there would be no transgression, and no myth; in fact, they *are* the myth. But the myth is also that of the *impossible* origin of the work of

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art, as it evokes the impossibility of holding and beholding its very subject, as Orpheus fails to possess and gaze on Eurydice.

Blanchot posits that in producing the book, the author betrays the *oeuvre* by trying to impose finitude on a *parole* which, like that of Orpheus, echoes to infinity. A clear point of origin would undermine the indeterminacy of the *récit* as a free floating narrative that approaches the event without ever attaining it, and therefore enclose the *oeuvre* within a stable matrix of meaning and signification. In mentioning the work/*oeuvre* of Kafka, Rilke, and Proust, Blanchot speaks of *écriture* rather than literature. Écriture is the collapse of the "I" through metamorphosis and the creation of an imaginary wherein the writers themselves become imaginary characters. Performing the gesture, Blanchot writes, "*Le Je de l'écriture est un jeu*" the "I" of *écriture* is a game; *une parole neutre,* the neuter, an *œuvre* which liberates itself from discourse and which maintains itself in indeterminacy. Blanchot associates critical commentary with *discourse* or *dialectic language*, which attemps to overcome its object. Poetic language, the *écriture* of literature, needs to escape from the Hegelian system and the dialectic that imposes itself as its master. For that purpose, poetic language becomes « *parole sans parole*, *écriture sans écriture* », it is in continuous deconstruction, it erases itself as it writes itself, it destroys the sign and subtracts itself from the violent inscription of the dialectic[1].

Blanchot in fact raises the prospect that writing itself is an event and so is subject to indeterminacy. Mallarmé's "Roll of the Dice" expresses the notion that the true event

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[1] Philippe Fries argues that Blanchot's writing as *écriture* "*substitu[e]… à la machine à écrire, quelque paradoxale machine à effacer*" [substitutes the writing machine by a paradoxical erasing machine, *translation mine*] (9).

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of language is chance and that reading this event is equal to replaying the indeterminacy of language by repeating the event differentially as the *eternal recurrence* of difference. In the myth, Orpheus wanders, disoriented; there is a sense in which the writer does not go where his writing is going. This required errancy offers the deepest sense of the notion of the solitude and the autonomy of writing. As Orpheus' muse, Eurydice is the elusive point of the origin of the world, towards which art, desire, and death all seem to converge, but without ever attaining it. Orpheus' quest is the expression of this movement towards infinity, of a passage through the invisibility of the night and death, towards the visibility of the day and life, but which auto-destructs before reaching the light of day because of the *desire* to uncover its origin.

But Blanchot insists that the entire *oeuvre* is contingent on the gaze. To that effect, the myth also reveals the power of desire as it directs the gaze, and both haunts and fascinates the beholder. Blanchot stresses the fact that the gaze plays an essential role in marking the *beginning* of the myth, for if Orpheus hadn't looked at Eurydice, he wouldn't have been attracted to her (*EL* 227). But when Orpheus gazes at what attracts him, Eurydice, the entire *oeuvre* opens and spreads itself towards infinity and indeterminacy. The gaze itself is the event that marks the freedom of the *œuvre*, the moment wherein the *œuvre* frees itself from its creator, and where its being converges with its becoming and becomes its own being.

This movement towards freedom, the concept that the work of art can never be traced back to its point of origin is echoed in Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author." In this essay, Barthes demystifies the concept of an "Author-God" by derriding the

endeavor to confine a text within a single "theological" interpretation that can be traced back to an authorial intention. For Barthes (as for Blanchot), a text ought to be liberated from any singular source or origin (such as the author) that imposes limits on its possible interpretations. Echoing Blanchot's ideas that the space of literature is infinite and that the *oeuvre* has neither an origin nor an end, Barthes argues that the text "is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture." This "multiple writing," as Barthes calls it, also discredits the notion that the critic is capable of "deciphering" a text from a privileged hermeneutic position. To understand a text's plurality, we must refuse to assign a meaning to a text, to confine it within "reason, science, the law." Barthes explains that there is a space wherein the "whole being of writing" can be accessed: "this place is not the author … but the reader." Because the reader is a "man without history, without biography, without psychology," he is not subjected to the tyranny of these systems of signification and can freely collect the multiplicity of writing. But Barthes warns us, "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author."

Stéphane Mallarmé articulates the notion that with the crisis of representation that characterized the aftermath of the French revolution, wherein all writing becomes fictional, poetic language, or *écriture*, becomes the purest expression of thought. As the crisis of representation also signaled that of modernity, Mallarmé sensed the ways in which in the absence of a transcendental signified, in a modern world void of truth and meaning, it was language itself as the medium of human subjectivity that appeared at the

point of rupture.  If we were to consider European modernity—and modernization—as a continuous series of crises articulated around the axiom of a triple murder sequence—regicide, deicide, and patricide—wherein transcendental, patriarchal systems of thought characterized by the figures of the King, God, and the Father, are gradually eradicated, then we can direct our gaze to the extreme point of murder, which is no other than the murder of the self itself: suicide.  And what better figure is there to express the effects and affects of suicide than Charles Baudelaire, the father figure of European modernity?

Amidst his repeated failures—*Les Fleurs du Mal* having been censored by the authorities of the second empire and his application to the *Académie* rejected by his "friend" Sainte-Beuve—Baudelaire chooses not to comply with the exigencies of a literary scene dominated by the value-laden economies of bourgeois ideology. Baudelaire got indicted as a subject of the second empire by the *doxa* of the capitalist bourgeoisie, which misread and/or misunderstood the implications of modernity. Entrenched in the mimetic order of representation, the second republic indicts both Baudelaire and Flaubert because it is incapable of comprehending the notion of "modernity" that their *oeuvre* incarnates.  Flaubert kills his heroine in an attempt to liberate art from the suffocating hands of a bourgeoisie who falsely conflate art with life[2]. Baudelaire is more radical: having witnessed the *mise à procès* of art for art's sake, he finds no other solution that to mark his death sentence as the necessary self-sacrifice of a literary suicide.  The "I" is called in by the poetic voice when it stumbles upon the remnants of Art as a carcass. "*Charogne,*" is the composition of a decomposition which

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[2] See Jacques Rancière's excellent essay "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed?"

decomposes itself in its composition; a pure movement of *écriture* as de(con)struction, where the work of art vehicles its own destruction and announces the fragmentation and annihilation of art as a mode of representation.  Baudelaire becomes the prism through which the death of the speaking subject, the "I", and the death of art as representation converge to give way to the possibility for them to return, but a return that remains complicit with a gesture that marks their own disappearance.

For Baudelaire, the autonomy of art does not solely point to the ways in which art breaks away from the servitude of moral and social imperatives, but also breaks away form the paradigm of representation, from any real point of origin outside the genesis of its own creation.  In the aftermath of a trial that left an indelible scar on his identity as an artist, Baudelaire realized that as long as art was associated with a subject to which intentionality could be traced back, art could not be truly autonomous. Baudelaire's literary suicide and his emergence as a *poète maudit* not only reinforces the position of death as a privileged topos of modernity, but also, simultaneously, marks the ways in which the "Death of the Author" liberates the text or the *oeuvre* from its point of origin and allows it to enter the "Space of Literature." *Les Fleurs du Mal* absorvs the crisis of representation completely, whereas poetry is not the expression of a reality transfigured by the sensibility of the artist but rather becomes the reflection of its own creation. Poetry becomes itself an image: an image of thoughts and sensations expressed *as* images, where words do not refer to objects of the real world but ar the subjects of their own reflection.  They are images produced by an infinite imaginary: reflecting the ways

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in which in poetic language, words do not signify, but only reveal the indeterminacy and errancy of language.

This suicide constitutes the final threshold towards a complete emancipation of the text from the authority of a transcendental signifier and gives birth to the reader. In turn, this reader is not the man of "genius"—the unitary, rational subjectivity of the modern subject. Rather, the reader is herself a multiplicity or plurality who intersects with the plurality or "multiple writings" of which the text is constituted.[3] This multiplicity is an intrinsic characteristic of the postmodern subject, whose existence does not orbit around any given (phallocratic) "center" of rational thought. Accordingly, as Deleuze and Guattari argue in *The Anti-Oedipus*, in advanced capitalistic socieites the postmodern/posthuman subject becomes a desiring-machine for which desire is not the Lacanian "lack" but a productive force. As a reconfiguration of the Nietzschean will to power, this desire is similar to that expressed by the Barthesian "Lover"[4]. As a reader or spectator, the Lover is a locus of affect and sensation; it is as much a *scripteur*, who is born with and gives birth to the text, as an *injet*[5]. In its contemplative consumption of the other, it is a site of (re)production and recreates the blocs of sensations that is the work of art[6].

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[3] In *s/Z*, Barthes explains, « *Interpréter un texte, ce n'est pas lui donner un sens, c'est au contraire apprécier de quel pluriel il est fait* » (*s/Z* 123), to which he adds, « *Ce 'moi' qui s'approche du texte est déjà lui-même une pluralité d'autres textes* » (*s/Z* 126).
[4] See *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*.
[5] « Contempler, c'est créer, mystère de la création passive, sensation. La sensation remplit le plan de composition, et se remplit de soi-même en se remplissant de ce qu'elle contemple : elle est « enjoyment », et « self-enjoyment ». C'est un sujet ou plutôt un *injet* » (Deleuze et Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?* p.200)
[6] « Ce qui se conserve, la chose ou l'oeuvre d'art, est *un bloc de sensations, c'est-à-dire un composé de percepts et d'affects* » (Deleuze et Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?* p.154).

Consequently, the "Space of Literature" is a space is of proximity and closeness, wherein the desiring subject is immersed in sensory and affective corporal absorption. The Lover's affective response to the work of art becomes the site of an aesthetic experience of desiring-production. Insofar as the work of art, the *oeuvre*, circulates outside of the doxa and breaks free from the limits of representation, it becomes complicit in the movement to free the modern subject from her overdetermination by privileging multiplicity over singularity. Thus severed from any unitary source of meaning, the space of the work of art is in continuous deterritorialization and reterritorialization, it has no clear point of origin, nor any foreseeable end; it is, as Blanchot puts it, the site of an *Infinite Conversation*.

In *Errancies of Desire*, I am invested in continuing this conversation by examining the role of desire in the aesthetic experience and analyzing, more specifically, the ways in which we project and respond affectively to a work of art as a formative process of subjectivity. Inspired by the ways in which Blanchot's "The Gaze of Orpheus" links desire to errancy and "errance" and situates them as constitutive artistic forces, my guiding hypothesis is that the aesthetic experience is channeled via the mechanics of language and the gaze by the "errancies of desire"—the wanderings and errs of the desiring subject. Consequently, I argue that because desire is fluid/disruptive and regenerative, it produces heterogeneous and nomadic forms of subjectivity that interrogate essentialist notions of cultural difference and specificity.

Conceptually, my approach departs from the Kantian concept of aesthetic experience that is disinterested and universal. It also questions the ontological

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foundations of subjectivity based on a fixed and homogeneous notion of personal identity. By acknowledging the ways in which our experiences are shaped by the ever-changing contextual predisposition of desire, I consider subjectivity to be fluid and heterogeneous. In other words, following Deleuze[7], my dissertation requires a conceptual shift from a singular ontology of *being* as unitary and sedentary to the multiple and nomadic ontologies of *becoming*. To mark this transition, I take a closer look at the ways in which the centrality of experience as situated in the concept of a transcendental human consciousness is dislocated and/or disrupted by the types of immanent experiences—such as those experienced by the body or the experiences of alterity—that have been neglected and/or negated in the Western metaphysical tradition. Although we might understand art at a cognitive level of representation that is culturally situated, we experience art through our senses; the sensory experience and the affective responses it triggers create zones of contact wherein multiple subjectivities are brought within proximity. Therefore, some of my inquiries not only relate to the ways in which works of art produces fluid and hybrid forms of subjectivity through the contextual fluctuations of desire, but also investigate how the constructed binaries of mind/body, subject/object, and self/other characteristic of the Hegelian dialectic are undermined as the generative potentiality of difference is maintained. In this sense, the aesthetic experience does not take the shape of a dialectical struggle. Rather, the aesthetic experience is a continuous dialogical process of becoming and loss of being: a dance of desire performed again and again, wherein neither subject negates or overcomes the other, but perpetually engages the other.

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[7] See for example *A Thousand Plateaux* wherein Deleuze alongside Félix Guattari expands on the concept of becoming which he first articulated in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* and *Difference and Repetition*.

The decentralizing ethos of my project is informed by a transnational perspective that respects the heterogeneity and multiplicity of subjective differences and rejects the homogenizing and dominant model proposed by capitalist globalization.[8] By using a comparative, transnational methodology to examine works of literature and film from the U.S., continental Europe, Taiwan, and sub-Sahara Africa, *Errancies of Desire* also theorizes the ways in which our understanding and perceptions of cultural difference are affected by the processes through which artworks draw explicit and/or implicit, sometimes skewed, references to works of art produced across geo-political contexts. Speaking of the text[9], Barthes reminds us that the work of art is plural, that it is prone to the explosion of its dissemination:  it is a *productivity*. Accordingly, Barthes and Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality" promotes the idea that a text's production of meaning(s) is informed by its intersection with other texts and that hence, works of art do not exist in isolation but rather, in close proximity to other works of art.  Gérard Genette's concept of "transtextuality" draws a precise categorization of the different kinds of textual relationships[10] and as I emphasize it in Chapter 2, my interest in his taxomony resides in outlining the ways in which these relationships are fluid and heterogeneous; that any given text can simultaneously entertain multiple and shifting relationships with a multitude of other texts.  Consequently, texts further elude permanent

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[8] My definition of the transnational is derived from Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's "Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally" in *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005).
[9] See *De l'oeuvre au texte* in *OC III* (908-916) and *Text (théorie du)* in *OC IV* (443-459).
[10] See *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré*. (Paris: Seuil, 1982). Genette defines "transtextuality" as "*tout ce qui met le texte en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d'autres textes*" [that which puts a text in relation, whether manifest or secret, with other texts] (*Palimpsestes* 7) and further marks the distinction between five types of relations: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, and hypertextuality (7-10).  I explore Genette's work more in detail in Chapter 2.

inscription as the production of meaning(s) multiplies and propagates across national and cultural boundaries. As any text errs indefinitely in this way, it repeats the experience of difference, and propelled by the lover's desire, it privileges connections over ruptures, revealing a transnational, rhizomatic network of transtextualities. In tracing out these relationships and the ways in which they inform the twofold process of projection and desire characteristic of our aesthetic experiences, part of my objective is to highlight the role of desire in shaping our subjective perceptions of cultural and/or national specificity.

My comparative approach in *Errancies of Desire* is invested in identifying the ways in which the works I consider in this study can be read as "lines of flight"[11]: points of departure that interconnect differential processes of subject formation across seemingly distinct cultural traditions. To analyze these processes, my methodology is twofold: first, I highlight the role played by the errancies of desire in each work; and second, I analyze how processes and instances of cross-cultural referentiality position experiences of subjectivity in proximity to one another by bridging the cultural and/or national differences that may inform geo-political time and space. Two interconnected thematic lenses structure my approach, each corresponding to a section of the dissertation: the first section focuses on film and investigates the errancies of the viewer's desire by focusing on the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of subjectivation in film spectatorship; the second section, which considers works of literary fiction, analyzes the errancies of male desire as they pertain to hegemonic concepts of masculinity constructed

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[11] See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): "Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities" (9).

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on culturally-sanctioned forms of imperial violence and oppression. Throughout this project, and regardless of the medium that artificially, yet fittingly categorizes each section, my intent is to explore the regenetative potential of heterogeneous desire and multiplicity and to highlight the errancy of unitary and dialectical modes of desire and subjectivity. By using a comparative methodology to highlight the role of desire and trace the effect of cross-cultural intertextuality on apperception, I demonstrate how each text unsettles perceptions of cultural and/or national difference by producing new transnational subjectivities.

The first chapter focuses on the film *Adaptation* (2002), written by Charlie Kaufmann and directed by Spike Jonze. Operating from a perspective that undermines the distinction between theory and artistic practice, my objective here is twofold. On the one hand, I will demonstrate how the film illustrates the errancies of the desiring subject, as the projections of desire of Charlie, the main protagonist, produces a series of fragmentary scenes and sequences. On the other, I will investigate the ways in which the process of cinematic adaptation outlined in the film can be considered a form of critical praxis. I argue that self-reflexive artworks such as *Adaptation* not only contain their own immanent critique—with regards to both medium as form and narrativized content—but also reflect and anticipate the critical discourses to which they are subjected. In laying bare the ideological apparatus imbedded in the filmic adaptation process, the film performs a series of deconstructive sublations, where the binaries of text and adaptation, fiction and theory, are subverted. In so doing, the film also returns the gaze onto itself and pre-empts the possibility for authority and/or authorial intentionality to be traced

back to an authorial figure, thereby highlighting the role of the reader's desire as a producer of meaning.

Rather than emphasizing a paradigm of fidelity, this discussion of *Adaptation* shows that it is more engaging and productive to address the processes at work in the translation of written language to cinematic language from the multidimensional matrix that Robert Stam has dubbed "intertextual dialogism"[12]. This not only takes into account the various material dimensions of cinematic production in adaptation studies in particular, but also emphasizes a pluricentric approach to film studies in general. Consequently, this leads me to the cinematic work of Tsai Ming-Liang, a Taiwanese director who uses intertextual references extensively. One of the particularities of Tsai's work is that his choice of cinematic references is both self-reflexive and cross-cultural. In using Genette's taxonomy of "transtextuality" I will reveal the ways in which the connections among these texts are fluid, heterogeneous, and dynamic. These nomadic transtextualities emphasize *errance* and errancy as instances of spatial dislocation and temporal dystrophia. Consequently, the transnational ethos of decentralization that characterizes Tsai's work as a filmmaker criticizes the cultural logic of colonial time and space as well as the Orientalist/Occidentalist discourses that underlie the homogenizing forces of cinematic globalization. But Tsai's work also casts a critical eye onto the role of the spectator in the production of meaning, performing a unique reversal of the gaze from screen to spectator, thereby similarly undermining the critic/artwork binary. In thus

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[12] See Stam's introduction to *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

exposing the audience's productive input, these films interrogate the nature and motivation of the viewer's desire.

This criticism of the role of the audience is acerbated in Chapter 3, which focuses on Michael Haneke's *Funny Games U.S*, a faithful American remake of one of his earlier European films about a bourgeois couple being terrorized at their lakeside property by a pair of debonair young men. In the first part of my analysis, I explain how by undermining and exploiting the conventions of the horror genre, Haneke's film aims to unsettle audience expectations. Although most of the violence happens off-screen, the stark realism achieved through the effective use of cinematic techniques reveal the affective potentialities of duration. Watching *Funny Games* is particularly troubling, as it provides no catharsis or rational, logical explanation of the perpetrators' motivation. The Brechtian aesthetics of the film turn the tables on the viewer, and question the motivation of the spectator to consume accounts of representational violence. I conclude the chapter by addressing issues of cinematic remakes and cultural variation, arguing that the minute differences of setting and characters between the two versions of the film only aim to reinforce their similarities, thereby rendering the affective experience of watching the films almost identical. Consequently, by critiquing international audiences' encounter with aesthetic forms of representational violence, Haneke's films recast our understanding of the locality and cultural specificity of film spectatorship.

The fourth chapter discusses Michel Houellebecq's 1998 award-winning novel *Les Particules élémentaires*, which draws a sharp critique of modern consumer society's economies of desire. The text suggests that as the by-product of the cultural upheaval of

May 1968, a sexually liberalized society merely displaces the mechanisms of oppression without undermining them. In its wake, Houellebecq's novel also articulates a vigorous critique of post-structuralist thought that runs parallel to the *nouveaux philosophes'* refutation of the radicalism of the previous generation of philosophers. However, I will argue that the novel's localized critique of the contestatory movements of '68 and the post-structuralist philosophies of desire falters because it relies on a reactionary form of traditional historicism and inscribes desire within a model of a restricted economy following the Lacanian conception of desire as "lack." Conversely, I demonstrate that a post-structuralist reading highlights the ways in which *Les Particules élémentaires* provides a noteworthy illustration of the problematics of sexual desire within contemporary consumer society. Far from being the inherited condition of the post-war generation's advocacy for self-expression and free will, contemporary social alienation is in fact the perverse production of a society of control operating under the spectacular consumption model of the culture industries.

Under this perspective, *Les Particules élémentaires* comes within sight of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, the subject work of Chapter 5. Although both novels address some of the main theses of Guy Debord's *La Société du spectacle*, I examine how they do so through different agents: Houellebecqu's novel attempts to shape a critique of the economies of sexual desire by drawing precise individuated pathologies whereas Ellis' text provides an ideological critique of consumer capitalism by voiding the psychological background of its main character Patrick Bateman. By contrasting the narrative strategies of these two symptomatic texts of contemporary consumer culture, I

demonstrate how in Ellis' text, the distance between reader and narrator is narrowed through a forced process of narrativized identification, thus producing a visceral critique of consumer culture by relegating the responsibility of Bateman's action to the reader. *American Psycho* emphasizes the multiple shifting subjectivities of the *writerly* by providing a subjectivizing "I" whose experiences are relived, re-experienced, and reproduced by the reader. In contrast, *Les Particules élémentatires* draws a precise portrait of its protagonist as a discernable "other" by emphasizing the castrated (in)ability for Bruno to fulfill his libidinal wishes as a result of his individuated failure to resolve the pre-oedipal and oedipal stages of sexual maturity.

This discussion of *American Psycho* will then be juxtaposed in Chapter 6 to an examination of Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho*, whose paratextual reference to Ellis' text establishes a dialogic relationship between the two novels. The title of Mabanckou's work creates a zone of proximity that engages both the "America-ness" and the "psycho-ness" of the figure presented in Ellis' text by transposing it in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. In my analysis, I address the transformation of the figure of the psycho as it crosses the Atlantic, considering the ways in which its configuration relies (or not) on assumptions of cultural difference. I thereby investigate how this transfiguration redistributes or renegotiates the multiple subjectivities of consumer psychosis in a postcolonial context whose political, economic, and social histories have been largely affected by capitalist excess. To examine Mabanckou's (re)construction of the psycho figure and the production of modern subjectivities in the postcolonial nation-state, I utilize primarily the psychoanalytic frameworks articulated by Fanon's *Black Skins,*

*White Masks*.    Consequently, I argue that the expression of dialectical desire in

Mabanckou's *African Psycho* questions seemingly fixed and antithetical notions of

continental identity and consciousness through the first-hand experiences of the

characters and their media-induced neuroses.

The transnational modes of proximity and intersubjectivity I outline throughout

*Errancies of Desire* illustrate that the aesthetic experience is not necessarily inscribed

within a dialectical struggle towards transcendental knowledge and Western

spatiotemporality.  Rather, the aesthetic experience is a dialogical process of becoming

that spans much more varied and hybrid territories. In that sense, this project further

contributes to the poststructuralist critique of metaphysics by investigating ethical issues

of difference and subjectivity in those specific instances wherein we bear witness to the

virtual dissolution of national boundaries.

Therefore, the questions of difference and subjectivity I investigate address many

of the concerns shared by scholars in postcolonial and gender studies.  In addition, by

analyzing how cultural and national differences are renegotiated through instances of

cross-cultural referentiality, this project also focuses on many contemporary discourses in

transnational studies.  These approaches lend themselves well to the interdisciplinary

emphasis that informs the metaphysical and aesthetic inquiries of my project.  For

example, the discussion of the cross-cultural properties of the work of Taiwanese director

Tsai Ming-Liang and Austrian director Michael Haneke speaks to the permeability of

national cinemas as they address increasingly more diverse audiences. Part of my

argument is that these instances give rise to a renewed understanding of cultural

specificity and national difference, and that the creative tension generated by their encounters clearly positions the role of the reader/viewer as a locus of reproductive energy. Both resisting and responding to Frederic Jameson's cry to "Always historicize!"[13] this text is not concerned with the historical context of an artistic mode of production but rather with the transnational potentialities of affective reproduction.

Barthes famously articulated the notion of a *texte de jouissance* [text of bliss], a reconfiguration of the *texte scriptable* [writerly text], as that which "imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts …, unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions."[14]   Under this perspective, the aesthetic experience is a double process of subjectivation and desubjectivation; a process that not only produces perpetually differentiated experiences of subjectivity[15] but also position the reader/viewer as a producer of the work. The "Death of God/the Author," or the affirmation of the absence of a transcendental signified, announces the very possibility of affirmation. The transmutation of all values is the affirmation of the will to power, and the desire of Barthes' *Lover* is but one of its many transfigurations as she echoes Zarathustra's "yes": the eternal recurrence that affirms *difference in its return*.[16] Following Blanchot, the

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[13] See Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).
[14] See Barthes, Roland.  *The Pleasure of the Text* (London: Cape, 1976), p. 14.
[15] I lift this set of interconnected ideas from my reading of Bataille, Barthes, and Blanchot who have all similarly investigated through a series of converging concepts the ways in which the aesthetic experience as an infinity of possibilities takes place outside of a dialectical encounter between subject and object wherein the latter is sublated in the transcendental movement toward self-consciousness.
[16] « *Ce que j'ai affirmé une première fois, je puis de nouveau l'affirmer, sans le répéter, car alors ce que j'affirme, c'est l'affirmation, non sa contingence: j'affirme la première rencontre dans sa différence, je veux son retour, non sa répétition.  Je dis à l'autre (ancien ou nouveau) : Recommençons* » (*OC V*  Paris : Seuil, 2002 : 53)

aesthetic experience is the "open" where the cry of Nietzsche's aphorisms resonate endlessly, confirming the *errancy* of *being* and revealing the *erring* of *becoming*.

# CHAPTER 1

## Desire and the "Deconstructionist": *Adaptation* as Writerly Praxis

> L'enjeu du travail littéraire (de la littérature comme travail), c'est de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte.
>
> —Roland Barthes, *s/Z*

> You can't have a protagonist without desire. It doesn't make sense!
>
> —Robert McKee, *Adaptation*

> You are what you love, not what loves you.
>
> -Donald, *Adaptation*

In *S/Z*, Barthes expands on concepts he already articulated in "The Death of the Author," wherein, echoing Blanchot's idea of the "Space of Literature," he maintained that a text is a "multiple writing" whose interpretation is not contingent on authorial intention. Drawing on Nietzsche this time, Barthes further explains that the aim of interpretation is not to ascribe a meaning to a text but rather to reveal its *plurality*[1], a multiplicity which intersects with the plurality of the reader[2]. By severing authority from authorship and pointing to the dialogic, intertextual dimension of interpretation, Barthes privileges multiplicity over singularity and configures reading as a will-to-power that affirms the perpetual *difference* of which each text is the return[3]. Through her desire for the *oeuvre* as well as the "work" invested in her reading—a result of her perceptions,

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[1] « *Interpréter un texte, ce n'est pas lui donner un sens, c'est au contraire apprécier de quel pluriel il est fait* » (*s/Z* 123).

[2] « *Ce 'moi' qui s'approche du texte est déjà lui-même une pluralité d'autres textes* » (*s/Z* 126).

[3] « *Cette différence [du texte] ... est une différence qui ne s'arrête pas et s'articule sur l'infini des textes, des langages, des systèmes : une différence dont chaque texte est le retour* » (*s/Z* 121).

impressions, and sensations--the reader does not consume the text passively, but is actively involved in the perpetual *becoming* of its (re)writing as a *producer of the text*.[4]

In this chapter, I examine how cinematic adaptations of written texts provide a lavish  platform from which to address the decentering ethos of Barthes' proposition and investigate the generative, *writerly* role of the reader's *desire* in producing meanings and interpretations.  The task of translating words into images also speaks quite eloquently of the emancipating possibilities played by a reader's imaginary—her visualizations and projections—as she looks at the descriptive frame, peers out the window, enters the text, and makes it her own.  This transformative process, already hinted at in Barthes' *Critique et Vérité*, is where the discourse recounting the relationship between the book and the reader becomes that of the Lover for her beloved: *The Lover's Discourse*.

### The Lover's Infidelity: *Adaptation* as Assemblage

Writing in the early 60s, André Bazin famously claimed, "the film-maker has everything to gain from fidelity" (65) and that consequently, "a good adaptation should result in a restoration of the essence of the letter and the spirit" (67).  Conversely, recent scholarship on film adaptation[5] has argued that approaching adaptations from this

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[4] *« L'enjeu du travail littéraire (de la littérature comme travail), c'est de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte »* (*s/Z* 122).

[5] For an informative overview, I refer the reader to Elliott Kamila's *Rethinking the novel/film debate*, Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, the introductory essays by Andew Dudley, James Naremore, and Robert Ray in *Film Adaptation*, the impressive—yet somewhat overbearing—three consecutive collections of essays edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, *Literature and Film*, *Literature through Film*, and *The Companion to Literature and Film* published simultaneously in 2004, and Imelda Whelehan's "Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas".  Please note that although there continues to be some debate as to what expression would best designate the process through which a literary text marks its passage to the screen (see for example Lawrence Venuti's "Adaptation, Translation, Critique," in *The Journal of Visual Culture* 6.1 (2007): 25-43), the term "adaptation" seems to have been the most widely adopted.

unilateral perspective of fidelity inevitably leads to an impasse; it essentializes both literature and film by relying heavily on pre-paradigmatic, hermeneutic approaches based on authority and authorial intention and overlooks the complex and multifaceted character of both mediums. As intimated earlier, Barthes and other poststructuralists have aimed to decentralize such fixed and stable concepts by demonstrating that through cultural dissemination, texts are subjected to a shifting hermeneutic as their perceived meanings vary according to their subsequent audiences and the contexts in which they are received. Following on this train of thought, Dudley Andrew configures cinematic adaptations as a variation of Barthesian *écriture*, which affirms *difference* rather than similarity. The view of cinematic adaptation as a process of differentiation highlights the ways in which reading is a *writerly* act, wherein the film director and/or screenwriter *rewrites* the text by producing new images, ideas, and associations.

If adaptation is, as Dudley Andrew points out, "both a leap and a process" (29), it places the text and its adaptation within *proximity* to one other while at the same time affirming their fundamental *difference*. Because the parameter of fidelity relies on values of *same*-ness or similarity that are fixed and stationary, it is unproductive and degenerative. In the amorous discourse favored by Barthes, fidelity is sterile: it is incapable of satiating the Lover's desire for the *Other* (the text) who embodies a perpetual *difference*. However, by approaching adaptations as intertextual and *creative* cross-medium (or "intermedial") processes, the shortsightedness of an absolutist, centric approach bound to fidelity can be swept away. For adaptation to be a creative, generative

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process of desiring production[6], Barthes' reader needs to be an *unfaithful* Lover. For the Lover, adaptation thus presents itself as a paradox: for if the Lover is faithful to her desire, she must be unfaithful to her beloved.

Written by Charlie (and Donald) Kaufmann and directed by Spike Jonze, *Adaptation* (2002) incarnates and illustrates the transfigurative and connective possibilities of adaptation as a creative artistic process of desiring production. Not only does *Adaptation* subvert the paradigm of fidelity and undermine the privileged hermeneutic position of the author within systems of transcendental signification, but it also realizes the desire of Barthes' Lover in the ways in which it reproduces *difference* in a multiple, fragementary series of visual flows. In reenacting its own creation, the film performs a self-relfexive commentary on the *errancies* of desire by drawing and connecting various lines of flight. The resulting *assemblage* serves as testimony of desire as a productive force that explores new connections and paradigms for subjectivity.[7]

The film is reportedly based on a true story. After the success of *Being John Malkovich*, for which Charlie Kaufmann wrote the critically-acclaimed screenplay,[8] he was hired to adapt *The Orchid Thief*, a book by *The New Yorker* staff writer Susan Orlean on a South Florida flower poacher. However, Kaufmann soon realized that because the book lacks narrative structure, it could not be adapted—at least not in the form of a traditional story. After numerous failed attempts, he turned the gaze of the camera on

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[6] See Deleuze and Guattari *L'Anti-Oedipe* (33-36).
[7] In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explain "an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities … so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject" (22-23).
[8] Both the screenplay and the film were nominated for the Oscars and the Césars, Kaufmann's screenplay won the British BAFTA award and the Independent Spirit Awards amongst others.

himself and wrote a script on his struggle to write a screenplay about a book that he percieved couldn't be adapted into a film.  Under increasing pressure from his agent and the studio executives who had hired him, Kaufman delivered his self-reflexive script, thinking that it would have a negative impact on his career as a screenwriter.  Ironically, it had the adverse effect; the producers abandoned the original project and decided to follow through with Kaufmann's screenplay instead.[9]

As an *assemblage* of intertextual, self-reflexive multiplicities, *Adaptation* narrativizes the screenwriter's repeated attempts to adapt the source material, wherein Kaufman's/Charlie's story acts as a connective tissue through which the protagonist communicates his reading (and writing) of Orlean's book to the viewer.  The juxtaposition of Charlie's projected ideas for the adaptation with digressions showing various writers/characters (e.g. Charlie Kaufmann, Susan Orleans, and Charles Darwin) engrossed in writerly activities, as well as the intertextual flash-forward and flash-backs between the actual screenplay and its own genesis, position the film as a self-reflexive narrative.  Moreover, the film also retraces—or rather, "incarnates" or "realizes"[10]—

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[9] Of course, in exchange for artistic freedom, Jonze and Kaufmann accepted a more limited budget than if they had allowed for the production company, Sony, to intervene in the making of the movie.  See Kaufmann's interview in "Why Charlie Kaufmann doesn't watch movies anymore" (*reverse shot* (spring 2005) <http://www.reverseshot.com/legacy/spring05/kaufman.html>).  Regardless of the budget, the film was nominated for the Academy Awards and like their previous contribution, both Jonze and Kaufman won a number of prizes at international film festivals.

[10] I am borrowing the terms "incarnation" and "realization" from Kamilia Elliot, who draws on Martin Meisel's definition of realization inspired by the various interart exchanges of the previous centuries, to explain that "the term "realization" implies both a lack in the original and the greater realism of the adapted art" even though "realism is a relative and unstable concept" (162).  Elliott notes that from the perspective of phenomenology, film may appear more real, yet adaptations, as representations of a representation, could easily be understood to be even further remote from reality.  In parallel, Elliott also picks up on Pater's account which retraces interart analogies through the aspiration to re-represent the *forms* of other arts, and not their content, to argue that "the incarnational concept of adaptation maintains that the word seeks incarnation as ardently as it is sought by incarnating forms" whereas the process at work is that which matches signifiers with other signifiers (163-4).

many of the critical issues related to the adaptation process in its narrative diegesis. In this sense, the film is an incarnate meta-commentary on the critical discourse drawn by adaptation theorists: through the reenactment of Charlie's struggle to find a suitable approach to adapt the book, the film addresses many of the ideologies, guiding principles, and aesthetic considerations on the practices of adaptation. Similar to certain parasitic plants and orchids mentioned in both the film and the book, both the narrative and the commentary feed off the other to exist; in so doing, they reveal the plurality of *The Orchid Thief* as the products of Charlie's successive reading experiences.

In performing and illustrating some of the debates pertaining to the poetics and politics of adaptation, the movie charts a discursive route through the theoretical cartography drawn by adaptation scholars endeavoring to move beyond the unilateral discourse on fidelity. In addition, following in Barthes and Blanchot's footsteps, *Adaptation* also prompts us to reconsider the distinction between theory and practice, configuring them not as incommensurable dimensions, but rather, as some have suggested, as interacting and intersecting planes of discourse. For instance, Robert Ray suggests that studies in adaptation should take into consideration the historiographic, pragmatic, and discursive dimensions of film and literature, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the "transactional" components of film may be used as critical tools (48-9). By taking as example antecedents of discursive transactions between word and image (Freud, Eisenstein, Barthes, Godard, Eikhenbaum, Derrida, and Austruc), Ray concludes that "[t]he task facing all of us, especially film and literature scholars, involves rethinking the media's fait accompli, imagining new ways in

which words and images can be adapted or combined, as well as new purposes for those combinations" (49). More pervasively, Kamillia Elliott confronts aesthetic theory with its praxis; she considers that the former has "obfuscated" the dynamics of intra- and interdisciplinary aesthetic practices, arguing that "[n]ovel and film studies are particularly hospitable to a critique of theory from practice, since there is often no clear demarcation between theorists, academic critics, novelists, filmmakers, reviewers, and reader-viewers" (6). Consequently, I will argue that, as my title evokes, *Adaptation* not only incarnates the *writerly* production of meanings, but the double gesture of Derridean deconstruction as well. First, the film overturns the hierarchies between theory and practice, text and adaptation, source and copy, author/*auteur* and reader/viewer, Hollywood film and art film, linear and disjunctive time. Secondly, as the film also becomes the vehicle through which these classical oppositions are articulated, their displacement is made possible by the screenwriter who, as a reader, undermines all authoritative claims on the interpretation of the original text by projecting himself and his desires onto the diegetic space of the film.

This patchwork of self-reflexive narrative and commentary revolving around Charlie's repeated endeavors to adapt the book is interwoven on screen by his attempts to adjust to the psycho-pathological realities of his everyday existence. In this sense, *Adaptation* bears witness to one of these instances of reading when, as Barthes puts it, "the 'literary' text (the Book) transmigrates into our lives, when another writing (the Other's writing) succeeds in writing fragments of our own daily lives, in brief when there

is *co-existence*" (Translation mine).[11] The fragmentary and digressive narrative pattern of the film is one that affirms *difference* and *repetition* as it follows the *errancies* of Kaufmann's/Charlie's (amorous) desire. The narrative arc of the film wanders in and out of smaller, differentiated scenes and sequences triggered by Charlie's desire to adapt Orlean's piece and the imaginary, phantasmic space in which he projects himself as Lover—of both books and women. Following a variety of creative ideas and aspirations, each visualized attempt is interwoven with the character's own phantasmagoric projections in a series of fragmentary episodes. In one instance, a waitress at a diner tells Charlie she loves orchids after she spots him reading *The Orchid Thief*. The scene fades into the next one, where Charlie fantasizes about going to an Orchid convention with the waitress and ends up making love to her, where in fact he is in bed at night, masturbating. Later, eager to turn fantasy into reality, he is back at the diner to ask her if she would like to travel to the convention with him, only to be coldly rebuked. These repeated, interconnected series of phantasmagoric projections highlight the role of Charlie's desire as desiring production, effectively positioning the protagonist/reader as producer of the text.

### Narrative Errancy and the Errancy of Fidelity

In one of the opening scenes of the movie, Charlie meets with Valerie, the studio executive who commissions the book's adaptation, and he states that his intention is to remain "true" to the book, declaring that he wants it to "exist" rather than be "artificially

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[11] « *... lorsque le texte 'littéraire' (le Livre) transmigre dans notre vie, lorsqu'une autre écriture (l'écriture de l'Autre) parvient à écrire des fragments de notre propre quotidien, bref quand il se produit une* co-existence » (*Sade, Fourier, Loyola* in *OC III* 704).

plot-driven." Charlie's comment brings forth two central and interrelated issues related to the cinematic adaptation process: fidelity and narrativity. On the one hand, the issue of fidelity has traditionally been a determining paradigm in both the production and reception of cinematic adaptation. On the other, the arrangement of events in narrative form has dominated both literature and film and their intersections to the extent that the preferred subject of adaptations have predominantly been 19th century works of realist fiction that relied heavily on plot structure.[12]

Charlie's desire to remain "true" to the book is his first err—an errancy that, like Orpheus' gaze in Blanchot's retelling of the myth, is not only constitutive of the story as it turns Charlie's ensuing struggle of adapting *The Orchid Thief* into the film's subject, but also acts as its premise. However, his stated intention also points to the ways in which many of us, as readers of books and viewers of their film adaptations, approach such works. Barthes calls this interactive space, *"un espace de jouissance,"*[13] and as Stam observes, the issue of fidelity relates to the ways in which we feel the director has usurped or hijacked the phantasmatic possibilities associated with readership:

> We read a novel through our introjected desires, hopes, and utopias, and as we read we fashion our own imaginary mise-en-scène of the novel on the private stages of ours minds. When we are confronted with someone else's phantasy, as Christian Metz pointed out long ago, we feel the loss of our own phantasmatic relation to the novel … (54-55)

Similarly, Whelehan points out that case studies obsessed with fidelity have been guided by distinct hostility towards the adaptation because it supposedly "betrays" the original

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[12] For instance, Imelda Whelehan refers to and draws from Giddings et al.'s observation regarding the narrative nature of both film and 19th century realist fiction to conclude that it is with regards to their structural similarity that the latter has become the privileged source material for adaptations (10).
[13] See *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 220.

(7).  If the reading experience—and by extension, the adaptation process[14]—is an experience in translation, then it is inevitably also an exercise in betrayal[15]. But betrayal is also the constitutive, and paradoxical, gesture of the work of art: Blanchot reminds us that Orpheus' "betrayal" is constitutive of the *oeuvre*; if he had not gazed at Eurydice, he would have betrayed or been *unfaithful* to his own desire, without which there would be no myth and no *oeuvre*.

The film questions Charlie's purpose to be "true" to the book; if he really wants to remain faithful to Orlean's intended meaning, why does he repeatedly avoid meeting with her to discuss the book and its adaptation?  In one scene, Charlie runs into Valerie at a restaurant where she is having lunch with Orlean.  She urges him to have seat so that he can meet her, but he refuses, explaining to the perplexed Valerie that "once you meet somebody that you've already been writing about it becomes very hard to separate." Perhaps Charlie does not have as much integrity as he says.  As he readily admits, his reluctance to meet Orleans could be easily traced back to his pathetic timidity.  But another interpretation is that he wants to preserve his own "phantasmic relation" to the novel, which is metaphorized visually in the preceding scene wherein he fantasizes having sex with the author and imagines her telling him to "focus on one thing he cares passionately about, and then write about that."  In other words, meeting the "real" Orlean might interfere with or even completely shatter his love for the novel, and the film he

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[14] As mentioned earlier, some have argued that in fact, "translation" is a more apt term than "adaptation" to describe the intermedial, transformative process between literature and film (see for example, Lawrence Venuti's ""Adaptation, Translation, Critique").

[15] For a succinct overview on the perspective that every translation betrays the original, I refer the reader to Alexis Nouss' "*Éloge de la trahison*."

started re-writing, a film which centers on that "one thing he cares passionately about": Orlean, or rather his own *vision* of her, what he *imagines* or *envisions* of her life.

The concept of fidelity does not account for the individuation of desire; it is precisely because we experience texts from our own affective predispositions that our individual reading/viewing experiences do not—and cannot—entirely conflate with one another or with that of the other. While adaptation scholars would like to see fidelity recede and thus allow for adaptation to become more of a "leap and a process" as pointed out above, certain earlier scenes of the movie bear witness to the fact that Charlie has remained faithful to some extent to what he perceives to be the "essence"—or "spirit" to adopt Bazin's term—of the book. "It's about flowers" he says on numerous occasions, telling Valerie, the studio-exec, that "Orleans makes orchids so fascinating." In fact, the film devotes considerable screen time to depicting orchids beautifully in series of close-ups and long takes, reproducing the ways in which Charlie *sees* them in reading Orleans' book. However, these instances are an imprint of Charlie's own authenticity, of the ways in which Charlie is faithful to *himself* and *his* interpretation of *The Orchid Thief*, rather than being faithful to its "letter and spirit." For example, in her review of the book on *Salon.com*, Sally Eckhoff reads it as a look at "orchid nuts," and Ted Conover in *The New York Times Book Review* assumes that "the book's true subject is the monomania of collectors." These differences in interpretation attest to the *plurality* of the text, wherein each reader and each reading produces different meanings and as it turns out, both *The Orchid Thief* and *Adaptation* are as much "about flowers" as they are about love and desire—and deception.

Charlie's desire to remain faithful to what he perceives as the "essence" of Orlean's book conflicts with his own "introjected desires, hopes, and utopias"—the imaginative associative space he writes while he reads "*looking up*"[16]—transfigured visually in the phantasmic projections of his desires. Charlie's inner conflicts lead to his repeated failures and reciprocally, a dialectic that can be traced to his err in believing that the book has an "essence"—i.e. a singular, transcendental meaning or interpretation,-- whereas in fact, this "essence" is *ab initio* the product of his own subjective interpretation as guided by his own desire and affective disposition. As indicated above, the "essence" that Charlie situates in *The Orchid Thief*—i.e. his perception that it is "about flowers"—is merely *one* amongst many, *plural* meanings contained in the book. Under the reading conditions (whether real or fictitious) presented in *Adaptation*, it appears impossible to remain faithful to only *one* meaning or interpretation for it would necessitate curtailing the creative potential of desire, and by implication, to *not* read, or to not *exist*.

In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Barthes reminds us that narrative has always played an essential role in our understanding of the world and the transmission of the human experience. Accordingly, the disjunctive and fragmentary narrative structure of the film is a direct result of Charlie's experience: his perceived incapacity to faithfully reproduce the book due to his flawed approach. In other words, the narrative *errancy* that characterizes the different semiotic flows of the movie are inherently linked to the *errancy* of fidelity.

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[16] « *Ne vous est-il jamais arrivé, lisant un livre, de vous arrêter sans cesse dans votre lecture … par afflux d'idées, d'excitations, d'associations ?  En un mot, ne vous est-il pas arrivé de* lire en levant la tête ? » (Barthes *Écrire la lecture* in *OC III* 602, his emphasis)

In another exemplary scene, Charlie meets with Marty, his agent, to explain why he has not been able to write the screenplay and asks him if he can't find him a way out of the deal. To illustrate his point, Charlie pulls out a newspaper and reads out loud:

> 'There's not nearly enough of him to fill a book,' so Orlean 'digresses in long passages.' Blah, blah, blah. 'No narrative unites these passages.' *New York Times Book Review*. I can't structure this. It's that sprawling *New Yorker* shit.

Although Marty interrupts Charlie by making a sexist remark towards a female employee, Charlie insists, "The book has no story. There's no story." To this, the agent tells him to "make one up," but Charlie insists on being faithful by declaring that it is someone else's material and that he has a "responsibility to Susan" and wondering why he can't "show people how amazing flowers are."

For Charlie, the journalistic style of Orlean's writing—which is an assortment of digressions, stories, personal insights and descriptive passages—lacks the type of narrative structure characteristic of traditional cinema. Consequently, he finds himself at an impasse because what he perceives to be his "responsibility" conflicts with his opinion that the non-narrative structure of the book cannot be translated/transfigured/transformed visually. Yet, Charlie's "responsibility" might be slightly misguided because in aiming for fidelity, he remains at first impervious to other creative possibilities. Charlie finds himself in a paradoxical situation of his own making. On the one hand, he wants to remain faithful to the book's perceived subject, i.e. "it's about flowers," and its non-narrative structure by wanting to "let the movie *exist* rather than be artificially plot-driven," but on the other, manifested by his frustration in his agent's office, he is under

the impression that a movie *requires* narrative structure to be adapted and is thus unable to think outside of the type of plot-driven story he wants to avoid at all costs.

The ways in which *Adaptation* cuts between scenes can be interpreted as the way in which Charlie is capable of adapting the loose narrative structure of Orelan's book. The film wanders among various fragmentary sequences: Charlie's existential crisis and the dramatization of his struggle to adapt the book, his visual projections of sections from Orelan's book accompanied by her voice-over narration, and his fantasies about sleeping with various female characters. At a given point, however, the logic of narrative imposes itself. The transition is so obvious though, that it draws attention to itself, divulging the political and economic factors embedded in the cinematic industry's tendency towards narrativization. Finding his own presence in the script to be both narcissistic and self-indulgent, Charlie travels to New York to meet with Orlean, determined to overcome his self-avowed pathetic timidity. His shyness fails him once more: when she enters the elevator in the *New Yorker* office building, he is incapable of approaching her. In fact, it is his twin brother and alter-ego, Donald, who finally meets with Orleans. Following this event, the structure of the film begins to mutate: from the self-reflexive assemblage of non-linear, fragmentary and somewhat schizoid episodes that illustrate Charlie's physical realities and phantasmagorical projections to the straightforward, Oedipal narrative that blends sex, drugs, and violence—the type of Hollywood formula Charlie was determined to avoid when he first spoke with Valerie at the beginning of the film.[17] This transition is

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[17] This shift is expressly marked in the instance where, after Orlean gets high off the Ghost Orchid pollen, LaRoche tells her on the phone "If I waited long enough someone would come and you know … understand me. Like my mom. Except someone else," and the shot cuts to the two of them making love in his van.

expressly marked in the sequence when LaRoche has a conversation with Orlean on the phone while she is high off the Ghost Orchid pollen he sent her, and he tells her "If I waited long enough someone would come and you know … understand me. Like my mom. Except someone else," and the shot cuts to the two of them making love in his van.

### The Glass of the Window: Towards a Cinematics of Modernity

In his reading of Mallarmé's "Les Fenêtres," Laurent Jenny suggests that artistic modernity was triggered when the distinction between interior and exterior was no longer significant and the glass of the window, the medium itself, became the subject of art (79-84). In *Adaptation*, the screenwriter writes himself into the screenplay and turns the camera onto himself; the subject of the film is the genesis of its own creation. In one of its many twists, however, the movie also hints at the indeterminacy of the medium of film to definitely mark the transition into modernity.

While modernism (and postmodernism) has fostered linguistic and structural experimentation in literature, film has for the most part relied on the narrative modes of the 19th century realist novel. Stam calls this "a pre-modernist aesthetic" and amongst others he laments the fact that although film is undeniably a modern medium and particularly apt in juggling with multiple spatialities and temporalities , it embedded engrained in conventional structures of narrativity.[18] Stam claims that "we find a kind of

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[18] Stam indicates that the attempts to adapt the experimental aesthetic of modernist novels such as *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway* into traditional narratives have been for the most part very disappointing ("Introduction" 15). In a slightly different context, Stam refers to the self-reflexive and aesthetic qualities of novels such as *Tom Jones*, *Lolita*, and *Madame Bovary* to discuss the area of comparative stylistics, asking the question, "to what extent are the source novel and the film adaptation innovative in aesthetic terms, and if they are

ideologically driven failure of nerve to deal with the aesthetic implications of novelistic modernism" ("Beyond Film" 75).

In *Adaptation*, the scene between Charlie and his agent cited earlier not only underlines the propensity towards narrativization in both literature and film, it also hints at issues related to the ways in which alternate formal arrangements are not easily translated from one medium to the other. Departing from Giddings et al.'s observation on the narrative emphasis in both classical film and 19th century realist fiction—which, coincidentally is also the privileged source material for adaptations—Whelehan compares the ways in which narrative strategies from one medium are transferred to the other. Citing Brian McFarlane's *Novel in Film*, Whelehan retraces Barthes' approach to narratives and suggests, "a narratological approach to the problem [of adaptation] is a recognition that the differing conditions within which fiction and film narrative are situated upon the necessity of 'violating' the originary text" (10). McFarlane denotes that a narrative's "distributional functions," i.e. Barthes' distributional/functional unit—the unit which usually guides the film-maker's preoccupation with fidelilty—are to some extent transferable. In contrast, integrational units, i.e. "indices," those that indicate the "atmospheric" dimension of characterization, are considerably more complex and require careful and considerate "adaptation." This difficulty is particularly relevant to issues of point of view and focalization, especially with regards to the (im)possibilities of

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innovative, are they innovative in the same way?" Stam claims that these questions become especially crucial with regards to *Madame Bovary* under the consideration that it has been regarded as "protocinematic" (74). Even though he argues that the concept of "cinematic novel" has been somewhat abused it is nonetheless applicable to Flaubert's novel and his discussion of the various film adaptations of *Madame Bovary* lead him to conclude that "mainstreaming" has unfortunately given root to a form of "aesthetic censorship" (75), especially with regards to modernist novels.

replicating and/or reproducing a first-person narrative into the cinematic gaze of the camera lens: "In the case of point of view, we move from narrative focalization to *mise en scène* and arguably the less discrimate 'eye' of the camera, which cannot help but afford us a sense of omniscient perspective, even while it is depicting the viewpoint of a single character" (11). In fact, I would argue that it is only through experimenting with cinematic space and time, frame, shot, and montage, that film could reproduce and/or recreate the aesthetics of literary forms that do not rely on conventional narratives.

Although *the Orchid Thief* can hardly be considered an "experimental" literary work of "high" modernism, it does borrow some of its tropes, most notably, the disjunctive, digressive style that combines "stream of consciousness" passages such as Orlean's philosophical musings on orchids and the various personal insights scattered throughout. These tropes do not comply with the conventions of narrative structure, and Charlie's challenge is understandable, which explains why he feels he is failing to rise to the test. It is undeniable that certain pragmatic, economic, and political choices have established traditional narratives as the dominant cinematic genre, but as the likes of Ray and Stam have argued, because adaptation addresses two mediums simultaneously, it could—and very well should—promote experimental and alternative forms of cinema. In light of this, even though the cathartic ending might suggest that narrative conventions are unavoidable in mainstream cinema, the montage of Charlie's various attempts is a transconfiguration of Orlean's digressive and disjunctive text. The juxtaposition of his own narrative, fantasies, and self-reflections—ostensibly as that which potentially

mimics Orlean's style—could be read as an indication of the ways in which adaptations can act as springboards to investigate alternatives to traditional narrativization.

Conceptually, *Adaptation* not only criticizes the concept of authorship by illustrating the notion of "multiple writing"—Orlean, Charlie, and Donald have all contributed to producing the text—it also delineates the new conditions under which alternatives to linear story telling can emerge. Charlie's twin brother, Donald, is a fabrication, an imaginary figure who, in many ways, acts and thinks as his polar opposite. The ongoing dialogue between the them, as well as their respective script ideas illustrate many of the issues related to the politics and mechanics of scriptwriting. Donald's script, titled *The 3*, about a protagonist who has multiple personalities disorder is of course no coincidence. In fact, it could easily be argued that *Adaptation* borrows extensively from that script, or at least from its "structure," especially if we think that the life-narratives of Orleans and Laroche are in fact the product of Charlie's own projections. By implementing various *mise en abîmes* and jumping in and out of them throughout the film, *Adaptation* reproduces the multiple points-of-view and life-narratives of its three main protagonists: Charlie, Orleans, and Laroche. The screen alternates between Charlie's visualizations of Orlean's life in New Work as she is writing the book, Orlean's recollections of her time in Florida with Laroche, and Laroche recounting certain events of his own life, and back again to Charlie potentially imagining all of this.

**Fragments of a Mirror: Hollywood, the Screenwriter, and the Dialogics of Desire**

While the climactic third-act blend of sex, drugs, and violence might bear witness to the undeniable cultural logic of narrative structure, it could also be argued that within

the economics and politics of cinematic adaptation, by and large still concerned with issues of fidelity, Charlie/Kaufman opted for an approach to adaptation that Elliott has dubbed the "trumping concept." Trumping inverts the common direction of adaptation criticism by considering not what's presumably "wrong" with the adaptation, but rather what could be wrong with the original which would require the adaptation to "trump" it-- literally. Implicit within this approach is the idea that the film medium can better represent the signifier: "[u]nder the trumping concept of adaptation, the novel's sign loses representational authority in the name of a signified that the novel "meant to" or "tried to" or "should have" represented" (174). From this perspective, an adaptation contributes to the critical discourses on cultural production, providing a distinctive approach to the original text. By drawing and referring to the review of *The Orchid Thief*, Charlie has also entered a discursive space that mediates his critical disposition towards the book. And so, the final product, which combines an assemblage of multiple point-of-views and digressions as well as a more linear and climactic ending, can be interpreted as an adaptation that has "trumped" the original in order to palliate its perceived flaws. Confronted with the eventual conflict between his ideal for total fidelity and the reality of narrative screenwriting, Charlie weaves a web of dialogic intertextuality around the source text that spreads in multiple directions simultaneously. The end product is an affirmation of the concept that adaptation, as a creative endeavor, is a process that eludes fidelity; for the Reader/Lover, this "betrayal" is a result of the ways in which she is subjected to the fluctuations of her own uncontrollable and unpredictable desires.

As a discursive commentary, *Adaptation* illustrates the type of decisions that guide the screenwriting process, but it also reveals the conditions under which conventions prevail by laying bare the movie-making apparatus and the ideologies that guide cinematic adaptations. More than incarnating the debate on fidelity, Charlie's struggle is also indicative of the inherent difficulty—and potential success, depending on how one chooses to interpret the ending—of finding an ideological compromise with an intertextual genre that has historically been subservient to the *doxa*, the narrative form of classic cinema canonized by Hollywood.

In the determining opening scene where Charlie discusses his plan for the adaptation with Valerie, he insists on attempting to undermine the Hollywood genre and write the screenplay in a manner that would render the movie more lifelike. In the subsequent dialogues with Donald, Charlie feels very strongly about a certain work ethic that should guide screenwriters to strive for originality rather than resort systematically to the most pervasive clichés of the "industry." When Donald announces that he is going to go to one of Bob McKee's screenwriting seminars,[19]Charlie claims that people like McKee are "dangerous if you try to do something new," adding, "a writer should always have that goal. Writing is a journey into the unknown". There is undoubtedly some irony in Charlie's claim; for isn't his assertion a cliché as well? Aren't "originality" and "journey" as much part of the terminology used by the marketers of the "industry" Charlie so loudly despises when they launch their cinematic product in the marketplace to

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[19] McKee is a real world screenplay coach. For an informative comparison between the real McKee and the character played by Brian Cox, see "McKee and Me" a conversation between Henry Bean and the actor (*Sight and Sound* 13.3 (2003): 21).

attract audiences?  The irony is perhaps part of the point as it highlights Charlie's mistaken ideal of combining fidelity and originality, and overlooking the concept that every text, and especially a cinematic adaptation, is already an intertext drawing from a "thousand points of culture," which eludes both of Charlie's ideals.

While Charlie embarks upon his journey to find a suitable and original approach to his adaptation project, he systematically and contemptuously snarls at Donald's "pitch" about a character that has a multiple personality disorder, arguing that on the one hand, it is the "most overused" ideas in cop thrillers, and that on the other, such a narrative device is visually unrealizable.  As indicated above, Charlie's response is actually directed towards himself, for Donald's script, *The 3*, is an implicit -reference to Charlie's project of writing himself in his script and incorporating Orlean's and Laroche's narrative perspectives.  But additionally, Charlie's remark, "there's no way to write this,"—the implication of which is reinforced by Charlie's inability to explain this impossibility— also indicates that a screenwriter needs to be aware of the mechanics and economics of movie-making; because of the image/text/sound interface, screenwriters are confronted with a different set of parameters than novel writers are in relation to their own medium. Although improvements in cinematic technology have permitted the exploration of visual possibilities that were previously unthinkable, these advances remain attainable mostly for the major studios' big-budget productions.[20]  The awareness of the material and

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[20] While Ray explains that cinema devoted itself to narrative storytelling mostly for historical reasons that were—and still are—economically grounded, I would add that it is also the reason why the Hollywood cinema industry—due to the demands of its various shareholders—rely heavily on tried and proven conventions.  In contrast to writing, filmmaking is considerably more costly, and consequently in able to be economically viable, it has to consider the tastes and wishes of its audience, which are predominantly

economic conditions of filmmaking might very well be what drives most screenwriters to resort to conventions, i.e. what Donald calls McKee's "principles," rather than to strive for originality.

While Charlie's struggle triggers his idea of writing about it, the narrative of the screenwriting process becomes the meta-narrative that guides the film, or as he puts it, works to "tie all of history together," or, tie all of *his* stories together. Whether the self-reflexive narrative is as "original" as Charlie might think it is, or want it to be, is relative, yet it certainly serves the purpose of highlighting certain particular aspects of the movie-making process. If cinematic adaptation ought to be approached through a shifting hermeneutic and a dialogic process of intertextuality as some critics have observed, then *Adaptation* does retrace this "journey," as Charlie calls it, to some extent. This is one way to contest the existing hegemonic conventions of screenwriting and, ostensibly, the sometimes tyrannical expectations of the movie-going audiences.

Stam explains that artistic reflexivity "refers to the process by which texts, whether literary or filmic, foreground their own production, their authorship, their textual procedures, their intertextual influences, or their reception" (12). He points out that it is an important ideological consideration in adaptation theory for "reflexive texts subvert the assumption that art can be a transparent medium of communication, a window on the world, a mirror promenading down a highway" (12). In one episode, Charlie becomes confident about the originality of his self-reflexive script—which is portrayed visually in the  accelerated sequencewhere Charlie, excited, describes some of the movie's scenes on

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informed large in a large by a somewhat conservative bourgeois aesthetic that, not so surprisingly, also gave rise to the popular novels in the marketplace of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the dawn of literary capitalism.

his tape recorder and then listens to them while writing on his typewriter—Donald interrupts by announcing that he has finished his script and asks Charlie to show it to his agent.  Donald tells him that he changed Charlie's earlier suggestion of having the psychotic killer oblige his victim to eat chunks of their own body parts.  Inspired by one of his girlfriend's tattoo's depicting a snake that is eating its own tail, Donald explains that since victim and killer are one and the same in his script, the former is really eating himself to death.  At that moment, Charlie realizes that he is that character: he is "Ourobouros," the self-consuming snake that inspired Donald and symbolizes self-reflexivity.  This realization casts a shadow on Charlie's confidence.  He thinks that including himself in the movie is "self-indulgent, narcissistic, solipsistic, and pathetic," a result of his inability to function in the "real world" and get over his timidity to meet Orlean.  In turn, this could also indicate that his struggle to adapt the book and write the script allegorizes his own inability to communicate with the women he desires.  But this shortcoming is also what allows the fantasy—and the movie—to *exist*, in the very same way he intended it in the opening scene with Valerie.  One could interpret the self-reflexive aspect of the movie not only as a gesture that connects with Orlean's writing style where the reader feels—as Charlie has—the subjective presence of the person behind the words, but also the lack of a divide between interiority and exteriority as everything situates itself on the same plane, in that infinite cycle that Ourobouros symbolizes.

This is perhaps where, as Stam has suggested, the glass becomes transparent and the movie reveals its ideological purpose.  In the popular perception of movie production,

the position of the screenwriter is usually overshadowed by the primacy attributed to the director and actors in genre, *auteur*, and star studies.  Certain scenes in *Adaptiation* point to the idea that once the script is delivered the screenwriter's presence is almost parasitic,[21] such as the scene that depicts the shooting of *Being John Malkovich*: Charlie not only remains unnoticed by the actors (John Cusack, Catherine Keener), he is ultimately asked to leave the set by one of the operatives because he is "in the eyeline"— " Nobody knows my name" Charlie laments.

In "Self Made Heroes," Henry Bean compares *Adaptation* to *Paris – When It Sizzles*, arguing that although the main characters are perfect opposites, the two films are similar conceptually; by focusing on the screenwriter and turning him into the main character of the movie, they are both about the process of screenwriting and its difficulties.   Yet Bean contends that whereas *Paris – When It Sizzles* is rather conventional, *Adaptation* is more daring: "It is the revenge of the writer." Seen from this perspective, *Adaptation* aims to alter the common perception that privileges the director as laying exclusive artistic claims to the final product. But at another lever, the film also proposes that the screenwriter *as a* reader is a much an *auteur* or author as the director or writer.   In highlighting the multiple writing that informs its own genesis, *Adaptation* decentralizes the concept of authorship, and invites us to reconsider the metaphysical question about the origin of film as a technological work of art that mirrors the political and socio-economic realities of cinematic production.

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[21] This is the opinion of the "real" Kaufman.  See "Why Charlie" op. cit.

**Cutting into Adaptation: *Adaptation* as "The Deconstructionist"**

If the ideological purpose of *Adaptation* is to criticize the economic logic that requires screenwriters to conform to the formulaic clichés of narrative conventions, why does the self-reflexive narrative suddenly turn into what it so self-consciously attempts to undermine? Why does the schizo turn into Oedipus? What possible interpretation can this gesture signify? Amidst the obvious irony in such a radical twist, isn't this conventional "end" an ultimate cop-out? The reviews of the film are divided on this topic, and while some critics claim that the ending is more "calculated" than speculative, others argue that by offering a cathartic ending that ultimately disappoints, *Adaptation* clearly lays bare the limitations of the Hollywood formula. For example, Jared Rapfogel argues that:

> The disappointing thing about *Adaptation*, for all its promise and intelligence, is that despite its self-consciousness and inventiveness it seems to share with so many pedestrian films a determination to answer questions rather than simply raise them, to choose some kind of concrete ending rather than a radical openness.[22]

He compares *Adaptation* with Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, arguing that the former lacks the latter's sense of urgency, which makes it appear "calculated" rather than truly speculative. He concludes pessimistically by claiming that this is "a sign of the lack of a truly healthy alternative cinema that someone as creative and apparently adventurous as Charlie Kaufmann ultimately plays by the rules; bend them though he may."

There is undoubtedly some truth in Rapfogel's critique. But his opinion is certainly not universal. For example, adding to his interpretation that the aim of

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[22] See Jared Rapfogel's review in *Senses of Cinema* <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/24/adaptation.htm>

*Adaptation* is to emphasize the importance of the screenwriter in the filmmaking process, Harry Bean argues that whereas *Paris – When It Sizzles* implies that there are no alternatives to repeating the clichéd and overused Hollywood conventions of movie making, "*Adaptation* knows there are alternatives.  It is one"[23].  He claims that in the vein of commercial films that "adopt unexpected formal devices" such as *Se7en* and *The Usual Suspects*, *Adaptation* is more "radical" because it points out that even the Hollywood formula can fail as the cathartic ending itself proves to be disappointing.  In the book, Orlean never gets to see the coveted Ghost Orchid and so, when Charlie is asked by McKee what the book is about, he answers, "about disappointment." Interestingly, this later interpretation has shifted from his previous one, but more importantly, depending on how one experiences the film, one is potentially also disappointed, as Rapfogel undoubtedly was.  Consequently, Bean adds that "[Charlie] can finish his script only by copping to his obsession and making it about himself," turning his failure into his triumph, which "gives us hope."

This difference in appraisal only reinforces the ways in which the critical reception of a given text is informed by specific ideologies that are themselves influenced by the dialogic nature of critical discourses.  This is manifest in the two reviews cited above which are both prone to eventually "judge" a text by comparing it another text. Stam argues that even though fidelity has been surpassed, judgment has not entirely been dismissed: "we can still speak of successful or unsuccessful adaptations, but this time oriented not by inchoate notions of "fidelity" but rather by attention to specific discursive

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[23] See "Self Made Heroes" by Harry Bean in *Sight & Sound* 13.3 (2003): 19-21.

responses, to "readings" and "critiques" and "interpretations" and "rewritings" of source novels" ("Introduction" 5). Yet, I would argue that remaining entrenched in a position that ultimately seeks to judge the film is somewhat short-sighted, especially when we approach it in terms of how well it corresponds to our expectations and political ideals. This predisposition is as essentializing as the politics of fidelity and the cultural logic that informs what Eve Sedgwick has dubbed a "paranoid reading." More damaging than illuminating, a paranoid reading re-instates hierarchical thinking rather than focusing on the ways in which a text eludes determination and becomes culturally relevant through its dissemination. Although, I concur with Bean's view, disappointment might very well be part of watching *Adaptation*, but the disappointment is more related to the restrictive possibilities of the formulaic cathartic ending that the movie parodies, than with the movie itself. By taking a closer look at the meta-discursive dimension of *Adaptation*, we can approach the film as both a symptom and syndrome of the Hollywood film industry. Within the genre of cinematic adaptations, the push towards creative originality is quickly subverted by the politics and economies of adaptation that rely on narrative conventions, but that at the same time, it is this reliance that ultimately disappoints.

As in *Being John Malkovich* (making a cameo appearance at the beginning of *Adaptation*), the Spike Jonze-Charlie Kaufmann pair seem to be particularly keen on producing bedazzling and surrealist self-reflexive postmodern cinema. By narrativizing and thus prioritizing—albeit anachronistically—the struggles of Charlie Kaufman rather than Orlean's book, *Adaptation* lays bare the apparatus imbedded in film production as it pertains to screenwriting in the adaptation processes. Simultaneously, the film also

produces a meta-commentary on the broader context of film production and screenwriting by incarnating in the figures of Charlie Kaufmann and his fictitious brother (or alter ego), Donald, the ideological conflict between art-cinema and Hollywood blockbuster. But as stated above, the film is also a critique of narrative structure and a narrative commentary on the differences between fact and fiction (or lack thereof). The film not only represents Charlie Kaufmann struggling to write the screenplay, but also represents the writing process as a creative endeavor—especially when on supposedly strives for "originality"—and the poetics of language (both written and cinematic) as a system of signs and representation.

Interestingly, the connective tissue that digests the various spatial and temporal digressions of the various individual life-stories of its characters is supposedly inspired by the "real-life" struggle to adapt a non-fiction, anti-narrative book into a dramatic narrative. Traditionally absent from film adaptation criticism, in *Adaptation*, the (fictional?) personal narrative of the screenwriter hijacks both interpretation and critique. The oppositional binaries of literature and film, source and copy, author and auteur, fact and fiction, Hollywood blockbuster and art film, linear and disjunctive narrative act as the film's "blind spots," structures of discourse that are necessary to help the progression of the movie but whose dialectical resolution remains suspended.

Amidst the abrupt tonal shifts between the nonlinear collage of self-reflexive scenes and the supposedly climactic ending of the third act, and the failure of the *deus ex machina* to provide catharsis, Charlie's voice is still heard in the concluding sequence—in voice-over. But in the very final scene of the movie, Charlie drives away and the

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camera slowly pans on a bed of flowers in the foreground. The stationary shot brings the flowers in sharp focus as it blurs the background, and time is sped forward through several days' cycles, the flowers closing and blossoming in accordance to the light of day. In that brilliant moment where words and the gaze converge—"it's about flowers"—the camera substitutes for the voice and Charlie erases himself as "Ourobouros," the serpent symbolizing self-reflexivity that has eaten itself to death. The film *is*, quite literally, "The Deconstructionist," the same character that Charlie names in the movie's diegesis. *Adaptation* incarnates deconstructive theory through theoretical praxis. By performing its own self-reflexive critique, the film turns the gaze onto itself *and* digests itself. In other words, it "cuts off little chunks from his victims' bodies until they die," only to find out that he is both victim and executioner.

**CHAPTER 2:**

**The Nomadic Transtextualities of Desire: *Errance* and Errancy in**

**Tsai Ming-Liang's *What Time is it There?* and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn***

> This is no longer a sensory-motor situation, but a purely optical and sound situation, where the seer [*voyant*] has replaced the agent [*actant*]: a "description."
>
> —Gilles Deleuze

> Films become films about films. For me the key moment comes in Godard's *Breathless* (1960), when the Belmondo character looks at a poster of Humphrey Bogart and rubs his thumb across his lips in Bogart's characteristic gesture. At that moment this film becomes a movie about a man in a movie. Nowadays it has become routine for film critics to identify the hommages in a new movie, the visual echoes of earlier films and directors.
>
> —Norman Holland

Gilles Deleuze's objective in his study of Cinema is twofold. On the one hand, inspired by his reading of Bergson's notions of image and *durée*[1] and Pierce's semiology, he wants to articulate a number of philosophical concepts that are proper to cinema as an art form. These concepts give birth to a taxonomy of signs that relate to both movement

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[1] Deleuze borrows the concept of the image from Bergson's argument that the subject-object oppositional problematic can be overcome if we assume that the world is entirely made up of images. In Bergsonian *durée*, time is not constructed as a linear succession of separate moments, but as a continuous flow of temporality, where every past is contained within the present and thus every moment has its place. Deleuze uses the distinction of the "virtual" and the "actual" to designate the ways in which the past and the present co-exist, whereas the past is "virtually" present at any given moment, thus establishing an internal relationship between the past, the present (and the future). See *Bergsonism*.

and time which he appropriately places into two broad categories of images: the movement-image and the time-image[2]—the subtitles of the two-volumes of his study. On the other, following—yet not abiding to—the distinction between movement-image and time-image, he develops a history of cinema which is divided into two distinct periods, that of the 'classical' cinemas of pre-war French directors, Griffith, Eisenstein and the Soviet school, and German expressionism, and that of postwar 'new' cinemas of Welles, Italian neo-realism, and the French New Wave, situating the rupture most notably in the second world war and the rise of Hitler as a film-maker.

Although Deleuze freely crosses the period divide to suit his purposes, he is careful not to mix the notions of 'classical' cinema, which correspond to a 'sensory-motor schema' of perception, affect, action that drives a linear narrative structure, and a 'new' or 'experimental' cinema that creates disjunctions of time and movement by breaking down the established pattern of the sensory-motor schema. Deleuze argues that the movement-image of classical cinema is an 'empirical form,' it is a number that gives us both a unity of time and a maximum of movement. In the movement-image, the succession of shots in montage can only represent events in a linear chain of causality, which is an indirect representation of time. In contrast, the time-image of modern cinema is no longer empirical, it does not follow a linear representation of time; it is disjuncted, and as such time reveals itself in a pure form, as *durée*, wherein singular events in time are capable of coexisting.

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[2] Deleuze explains that although the movement-image and the time-image are distinct from each other, there are many possible combinations and transformations in the passage from one to another, but that neither should be considered as superior to the other, and that it would be inaccurate to believe that the movement-image logically gives us the time-image.

Holland similarly argues that the "new" post-war cinemas—such as the early work of Jean-Luc Godard—also mark a distinct turn in the history of cinema by making specific usage of cinematic references[3] to highlight the genesis of their own creation through self-referentiality.  While *Adaptation* may very well support the latter part of Holland's argument regarding the fact that this type of referencing technique has now become commonplace, Holland proposes that citing, referring and/or alluding to another film is often perceived as a form of homage or tribute.  Likewise, in his analysis of self-referentiality in *Funny Games,* the subject of the next chapter, Frank Philip argues that movies "have always paid homage to other films and directors" and cites H.C. Potter's *Hellzapoppin'* (1942) reference to Orson Welles *Citizen Kane* (1941) as an early example (1-2).  But I would contend that cinematic references equally serve the purposes of illustrating, arguing, and/or reinforcing an idea within the film's diegesis, and in that sense, references play an important role in the intertextual production of meanings.

The previous chapter partly focused on explaining how *Adaptation* visually stages the ways in which the *projection* of desire functions in the reading and intertextual process of cinematic translation.  In slight contrast, in the example cited by Holland, the mimetic gesture of Michel Poiccard (the character played by Jean-Paul Belmondo) points to the *identification* processes of desire as they apply to spectatorship and the mechanics of the gaze.  In other words, Godard may very well be paying tribute to *Casablanca*, to the Epstein's screenplay, or Curtiz' direction, but the intertextual reference can also suggest that Michel Poiccard, the character played by Jean-Paul Belmondo, identifies

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[3] For the purposes of the discussion, I will define "cinematic references" as references, implicit or explicit, made to literary or cinematic works within a movie's diegesis.

with Humphrey Bogart or his character, Rick Blaine. Consequently, the reference to *Casablanca* prompts us to consider two things: on the one hand, what are the possible meanings produced by the fact that Poiccard identifies with Rick Blaine or Bogart, and on the other, the fact that the character is positioned as a viewer brings into focus the process of spectatorial identification as a product of the viewer's desire.

The cinematic work of Taiwanese Second Wave director Tsai Ming-Liang intersects the concepts outlined above quite remarkably. Through a precise usage of cinematic references, Tsai's films examine the implications of intertextuality and self-reflexivity as it pertains to the positionality of the spectator. By focusing on the body of the viewer through a reversal of the gaze, Tsai provides us with a formal frame of reference that highlights the processes of projection and identification. At the same time, his work explores issues of temporal and spatial dislocation in ways that are relevant to contemporary political discourses on cultural difference and specificity.

Perhaps it is because he considers François Truffaut as one of his foremost influences that Tsai shares a similar disposition towards cinematic references. But in contrast to Truffaut, Tsai makes references almost exclusively to film, including the films of the French filmmaker. In addition to this type of formal, intramedial gesture, Tsai's work also investigates issues pertaining to globalization in ways that have piqued the interest of many critics and scholars.[4] As Michelle Bloom, Kenneth Chan, Jan Martin, and Chris Wood have pointed out, films such as *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* and *What Time is*

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[4] Tsai Ming-Liang have gathered significant cultural capital; in addition to a growing number of scholarly articles on Tsai and his oeuvre, the recently started *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* has devoted its entire second issue to his cinematic work. The recurrence of specific cinematic techniques and the emphasis—either by repetition or reiteration—of certain themes render his work particularly suitable for auteurism/authorship approaches.

*it There?* investigate the dialogic of time and space through self-reflexivity and intertextuality to challenge both Orientalist and Occidentalist discourses, to confront the commodification of national/cultural nostalgia in the transnational economies of global capitalism, and to blur the boundaries between audience, film, and medium.

It is through these deconstructive lenses of displacement and transposition that I examine Tsai's work in this chapter. After outlining the fluid properties of intertextuality—or "transtextuality" to refer to Gerard Genette's framework—I will investigate the ways in which Tsai uses cinematic references to deconstruct the formal mechanics of the gaze, as well as the geo-political configurations of time and space. On the one hand, with regards to the structures of spectatorship, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* and *What Time is it There?* frame the viewer in the act of viewing and highlight the role of her desire(s) in the production of meanings. On the other, the visual reconfiguration of the concepts of *errance* and errancy in these two films transposes time and space to bridge and collapse cultural and national differences.

**From Intertextuality to Transtextuality**

Derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's work on dialogism in *The Dialogic Imagination*, where the Russian theorist posits that a given text is in a continuous dialogue with previous existing texts, Julia Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality" in *Sèméiôtikè* to conceptualize the ways in which a text's production of meaning(s) is informed by its intersection with previous texts. Many literature and film scholars have adopted Kristeva's concept of intertextuality as "the process by which other texts are incorporated into other texts either by allusion or direct insertion" (106).

However, inspired by Robert Stam's reference to Genette's notion of "transtextuality" to articulate the concept of "intertextual dialogism,"[5] we may open the aperture through which we study textual intersections. Genette's precise taxonomy more aptly suited to appreciate the various types of intertextual relationships as well as the productive processes of re-codification and transfiguration emerging from cinematic production. Genette's categories are conducive to understanding the critical implications of the relationships between textual layers as they occur in self-reflexive works. Consequently, we can come to explore the fluidity and multiplicity of these filmic connections as they operate in and out of intertextual formations.

Tsai's *oeuvre* comprises a number of distinct intertexts: his own films, those of other directors, as well as the criticism his work has generated. Genette's framework not only details the different types of relationship among these texts, but also the ways in which the connections between them are continually transposed, thereby eluding permanent signification. Consequently, while texts evade stable inscription (from being "text" to becoming "hypotext," "hypertext," "intertext," "paratext," and/or "meta-text") these relationships, like the texts themselves, are both fluid and nomadic, in continuous deterritorialization,[6] and accordingly, intertextual meanings also shift as connections between intertexts change and propagate.

Genette defines "transtextuality" as "*tout ce qui met le texte en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d'autres textes*" [that which puts a text in relation, whether manifest or

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[5] See "Beyond Film: The Dialogics of Adaptation."

[6] I employ the terms "nomadic" and "deterritoralization" in the Blanchotian/Deleuzian sense to stress multiplicity and errancy (*errance*) over singularity and stability. See *L'Entretien Infini* and *Anti-Oedipus*

secret, with other texts] (*Palimpsestes* 7) and subdivides it into five categories:

intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, and hypertextuality.

Following Kristeva, Genette explains that intertextuality is "*la relation de coprésence*

*entre deux ou plusieurs textes, c'est-à-dire, eidétiquement et le plus souvent, par la*

*présence effective d'un texte dans un autre*" [the relation of co-presence between two or

more texts, eidetically and oftentimes, through the effective presence of one text in

another] (8), which can further be identified as *citation* in its most literal and explicit

expression, in quotation marks with or without precise references; *plagiarism*, which is

less canonical and less explicit but as literal, and *allusion*, whose strength is dependent

upon the reader's perception of the reference. Genette's distinction between citation,

plagiarism, and allusion is quite relevant, but before elaborating these sub-categories, it

would be informative to review Genette's taxonomy in its totality to better appreciate the

multi-dimensional properties of Tsai's transtextual praxis.

Paratextuality is "*la relation, généralement moins explicite et plus distante, que …*

*le texte proprement dit entrentient avec ce que l'on ne peut guère nommer que son*

*paratexte*" [the less explicit and more distant relation between the text proper and its

paratext] (9), which comprises all the messages and commentaries surrounding a text,

such as titles, sub-titles, prefaces, notes, epigraphs, etc. Stam considers that a director's

comment on his own film would fall under this category, and so Tsai's director's notes

for *What Time?* are some of the film's paratext[7]. Genette's third category, metatextuality

is the relation "*dite de commentaire*," or, "*la relation critique*" [the critical

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[7] Available at http://diaphana.fr/etlabas/rea_notes.html.

relation/commentary] (10).  As Genette points out, metatextuality could also be further declined into meta-metatextuality, in the case of a text commenting on a commentary of another text—which the present study will perform to some extent.  The fourth and fifth categories, hypertextuality and architextuality, are the foci of his previous study, *Introduction à l'architexte* and the present one, *Palimpsestes*.  Hypertextuality is the relation between one text, which Genette calls "hypertext," to a previous text, or "hypotext," which the hypertext transforms, modifies, or extends.  As an illustration, Genette cites Joyce's *Ulysses* as a hypertext, amongst many others, of Homer's *Odyssey*. Architextuality relates almost exclusively to what is disclosed in a title and has to do with the artist's willingness to give a text a generic attribute (essay, poem, novel, etc…).  Stam believes that this becomes "explicitly relevant in the case where a filmmaker purposely decides to change the title of the original as part of a critical gesture" (65).

Concurring with the wide adoption of Kristeva's initial terminology, what I've dubbed "cinematic references" appear to fall into the category of intertextuality.  As cited above, Genette reworked Kristeva's term as a category of his more comprehensive framework and further subdivided it into three groups: citation, plagiarism, and allusion. Of course, each of these could be further subdivided into formal categories, but the point of such an endeavor appears excessive unless this attempt at taxonomy aims to demonstrate that it is inherently flawed; not only would we arrive at an infinite number of variations, but each variation would also permit a number of heuristic possibilities and hermeneutic approaches.  In this sense, the interest of articulating a taxonomy resides in outlining the ways in which formal possibilities multiply and propagate indefinitely and

that hence, the hermeneutic field of a given text is fluid and regenerative. In addition, because the medium of film is capable of combining image, text, and sound, in multidinous ways, it has the potential of further accelerating the potentialities for expansion and deterritorialization.

Inspired by Genette's taxonomy, in "The Art of Quotation: Essay on a Typology of the Transtextuality of the Cinematographic Image," Valeriu Deac endeavors to draw a taxonomy that pertains more specifically to the ways in which the filmic text enters into various relationships with different visual and textual elements, thus opening the possibility for a hermeneutics of interrelationality, an approach which she likens to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. Deac further notes that the interplay of cinematic references lies mostly within the category of hypertextuality, arguing that the relationship can either be a derivation/transformation, or even a quotation, which she calls "*hyperfilmicity*" between a so-called "*hypofilm*" or "*hypoimage*" and a "*hyperfilm*" or "*hyperimage*". While Deac seems to favor the framework of hypertextuality—or as she calls is "*hyperfilmicity*"—over intertextuality, Genette notes the five types of transtextuality are not mutually exclusive. In addition, whereas Deac's appeal to an opening of the text through its relations with other texts is certainly compelling, as examined below, many critics of Tsai's work find the paradigm of "influence" problematic.

The first part of Deac's article performs an interesting, though non-exhaustive, survey of the formal techniques in which one given film can make reference to another film—visually, textually, in and out of the cinematic frame, partially, in diegesis, or

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through an allusion, etc.—thus reinforcing my point above regarding the multitudinous possibilities of transtextuality in film. Deac study reveals the fact that the connections between texts are quite numerous, allowing one given text to enter into various transtextual relationships with other texts. This position supports my contention regarding the fluidity of textual practices, a fluidity that is made particularly evident through the modular, flexible architecture of transtextual relationships.

As explored in the first chapter, cinematic adaptations are the exemplary hypertext; their relationship with the original, i.e. the hypotext, is sometimes the product of what Bloom would consider the most creative "misreading."[8] The multiple strands of Genette's transtextuality prompt Stam to note that cinematic adaptations "are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual references and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" (66). However, I would contend that even films that make more sporadic references to other texts are similarly entangled in complex transtextual relationships in terms of formal experimentation and cultural signification.

### Transtextuality and Self-Reflexivity: From Spectator to Spectacle

If we take the intersection of various texts as nodal points of some type of Deleuzian "lines of flight," it transpires that the multitudinous meanings produced by transtextual relationships only reinforce deterritorialization insofar as certain texts, such as Tsai's films, challenge stable signification and cultural inscription. Tsai's *Goodbye,*

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[8] For a succinct summary of Bloom's thesis in *The Anxiety of Influence*, see Marguerite Waller's "Poetic Influence in Hollywood."

*Dragon Inn* is set in the decaying Fu Ho Theatre, a celebrated venue for the *wu xia pian* (Chinese sword-fighting movie) during what appears to be the Theatre's last screening of King Hu's 1966 classic *Dragon Gate Inn*. The film is not organized following a dramatic plot line other than the occasion provoked by the screening as a consequence of the theatre closing down, although there are brief sketches of several subplots involving the few characters present (the ticket-lady, an aging actor and his grandson, a gay tourist cruising the hallways). There is very little dialogue or diegetic action and the film is mostly constituted of a number of very long takes which draw attention to the ways in which duration (in both a common and Bergsonian sense) and intertextuality intersect with one another to produce various series of affects and sensations.

Considering Tsai's continuous reference to King Hu's film in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, Kenneth Chan notes that the film "functions as a tribute to the *wu xia pian*" (90) and given that a reference is undeniably a form of reverence, it appears that Chan's observation is accurate. Even when the "action" is *not* situated in the viewing room, i.e. in the hallways or backstage, the presence of Hu's film is felt either through its sound and dialogue, or through the presence of a motif alluding to the rotating reel of the camera—e.g. the shadow of the fan during the encounter between the two men in the hallways, the sound of the projector during the ticket-lady's *va-et-vient*s throughout the theatre, and the shot of the projectionist rewinding the reel.

Tsai's *hyperfilm*—to use Deac's "typology"—incorporates Hu's *hypofilm* by making continuous direct visual, textual, and audio citations to *Dragon Gate Inn*. For instance, the opening sequence consists of a succession of audiovisual citations. To

begin, the voice-over of Hu's film's opening sequence plays while the opening credits of Tsai's movie unfold on the screen. The image then cuts to Hu's hypofilm occupying the entire frame of the hyperfilm. The next series of establishing shots are a series of medium/long takes from various vantage points situated directly behind the audience as well as left and right over-the-shoulder shots, in which Hu's film is clearly seen in deep focus, except in the last shot, being in short focus, where the screen is blurred and the backs of two audience members' heads are in focus. This sequence of consecutive *mise-en-abîmes* and the framing of the screen by the audience not only underline the dialogic between film and viewer, but also initiate a shift in the direction of the camera's gaze; the camera changes position from behind the audience to facing it in another series of long takes, where the sound of Hu's hypotext plays in real time. This movement of the camera culminates in a series of close-up shots on two of the now aged actors of Hu's film, one teary-eyed as he witnesses one of the very last times he will appear as a character on the big screen.

The progression of this sequence towards its conclusion provides an instantiation wherein Tsai's usage of intertextuality clearly intersects with Deleuze's philosophy of the cinema:

> These are pure optical or sound situations in which the character does not know how to respond, abandoned spaces in which he ceases to experience and act so that he enters into flight, goes on a trip, vaguely indifferent to what happens to him, undecided as to what must be done. But he has gained an ability to see what he has lost in action or reaction; he SEES so that the viewer's problem becomes 'what is there to see in the image?' (and not 'what are we going to see in the next image?') The situation no longer extends into action through the intermediary of affections. It is cut off from its extensions, it is now important only for itself, having absorbed all its affective intensities, all its active extensions. This is no longer a

sensory-motor situation, but a purely optical and sound situation, where the seer [*voyant*] has replaced the agent [*actant*]: a 'description'. (272)

Reading *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* through a Deleuzian lens, Nicholas de Villiers explains that Tsai's film

> presents us with a direct image of time and emphasizes the mutual implication of the actual and the virtual. What Tsai seems to be presenting us with is the actual death of cinema, but in his rather tongue-in-cheek invocation of "ghosts" — such as the intertextual reference of featuring the poster for the Hong Kong ghost film *The Eye* (2002) — he makes it clear that the virtual possibilities of contact that the cinema facilitated do not completely vanish.

The sequence described earlier displays the past (the historical epoch of Hu's film, the historicity of the Fu Ho theatre, and the on-screen presence of the younger actor), present (the actual projection of the film in the decaying theatre in front of the now aging actor), and future (the "death" of the theatre as a sign of death for both the actor and the *wu xia pan*) as co-existing planes of time, and is so doing it aptly illustrates Deleuze's concept of the time-image as a close manifestation of Bergsonian *durée*. We can read this scene as what Deleuze calls a "hyalosign," or "time-crystal," which draws form Bergson's idea that for memory to be formed, the actual present needs to be doubled by a coexisting virtual past. In this case, memory is formed—for the *wu xia pan*, the Fu Ho theatre, and the aging actor—as a result of the virtual presence of the various "pasts" represented in King Hu's film: the historical epoch in which the fiction of the film takes place and the "golden years" of both the *wu xia pan* and the actor.

Although *Dragon Gate Inn* is Tsai's *hypofilm* and the only intertext introduced as a direct citation, there are at least two other intertexts, which do not exclude the possibility of there being even more. The theatre lobby contains several pertinent movie

posters; one is the poster for The Pang Brother's *The Eye* (2002), a Hong Kong horror/thriller movie, which was remade in Hollywood starring Naomi Watts; this possibly marks the arrival of the "new" popular genre that replaced the *wu xia* as the Chinese audience's favorite transnational genre, and underlines the focus on spectatorship through the allusion to seeing/sight. This allusion could also emphasize the idea that the "theatre is haunted" as one of the characters suggests, for the Pangs' film tells the story of a girl who sees ghosts following a cornea transplant. More subtly, however, as the movie/restroom scene in *What Time is it There?* also takes place in the Fu Ho theatre, one could interpret the scene in the men's restroom in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* as an allusion to What Time?.

But Tsai's work not only explores the different avenues of transtextuality, it also provides a metatextual commentary through the use of self-reflexivity. For instance, during large sequences of *Goodbye Dragon Inn* the camera focuses on the audience watching King Hu's *Dragon Gate Inn*, whose dialogue is heard diegetically without the image. Although this would fall into the category of a direct citation, it is only a partial citation since it cites only the dialogue—i.e. the "text"— of Hu's movie while the camera focuses on the attitudes of the audience in a series of long take/deep focus shots. Tsai turns the camera on the audience, performing a unique reversal of the gaze, not between movie characters or between sexualized subjects, but between spectator and film, thus constructing a critical commentary on spectatorship and the practices of cinematic consumption. The spectator becomes the spectacle. In a sense, Tsai's movie challenges the *direction* of the dialogics of interpretation, positioning the film, and not the viewer, as

the critic. This self-reflexive gesture enables the intertextual relationship between Hu's movie and Tsai's to serve the purpose of producing textual meaning while also positioning *Goodbye Dragon Inn* as a work of criticism, a metatext on spectatorship and the intertextual production of meaning.

The camera's gaze on the audience functions as a metatextual commentary on the role of the viewer's desire in the twofold process of projection and response characteristic of spectatorship. In a first instance, the sequence created by a rapid series of counter cuts—rather unusual for a film by Tsai, which are usually composed of (very) long takes—between the ticket-lady watching the screen and the fight sequence involving a female swordfighter that is being projected, implies that the partly disabled ticket-lady *projects* herself as a fearless and flawless heroine. Likewise, the conclusion of the opening scene with the aged actor's nostalgic reaction to watching his younger self as an action hero highlights the ways in which one *responds* affectively to images on the screen. These projections and responses reinforce the role of *the body* in the experience of sense and sensation. Whereas the seemingly passive pose of their bodies reinforces the dialectic opposition between the action depicted on the screen and the act of viewing, their affective responses bring them in closer proximity, even if their sensation does not replicate that of the characters on screen. There is a temporal and spatial dislocation at work here that perturbs the processes of identification characteristic of the gaze in 'classical' narrative cinema[9]. It is this misrecognition that produces the feelings of

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[9] See Christian Metz' "The Imaginary Signifier: Identification, Mirror."

longing and nostalgia in the characters, which is further reinforced by the fact that the spectators' bodies are aged and/or disabled.

This type of metatextual commentary is not limited to *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*; *What Time is it There?* also performs a similar self-reflexive gesture. In addition to listing Truffaut as one of his major influences, Tsai readily admits that *The 400 Blows* is one of his all-time favorite films (Ciment and Tobin qtd. in Bloom, 318), and so his references to the *Nouvelle vague* film in *What Time is it There?* could also be read as a tribute or ref/verence.  By applying Deac's typology, Truffaut's film would then constitute the *hypofilm* to Tsai's *hyperfilm* (as Hu's film was), but *What Time is it There?* is also a metatext to *The 400 Blows*, as will be explained later.

Tsai's film explores the disjunctions and dysfunctions of flawed interrelationships and missed encounters.  The narrative interweaves scenes from the bleak family life of Hsiao Kang, a young street vendor, with the somewhat bittersweet Parisian adventures of Shiang-chyi a female customer he falls for on the eve of her departure.  To affirm his connection with her, he resets every clock in Taipei to French time and starts watching *The 400 Blows*.  The *Nouvelle vague* classic is first cited textually by the vendor at a DVD stand in the streets of Taipei before it actually invests the diegetic space of the screen on two remarkable occasions[10].  In the first instance, the gravitron scene of *The 400 Blows* is playing on Hsiao Kang's VCR in his bedroom, at a sharp angle on the right side of the frame, while the remaining shot is occupied by the almost completely

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[10] For a precise and didactic description of the ways in which Truffaut's film is cited in Tsai's, I refer the reader to Michelle Bloom's article, entitled, "Contemporary Franco-Chinese Cinema: Translation, Citation and Imitation in Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and Tsai Ming-Liang's *What Time is it There?*" (Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 22:4, 311-325).

immobile figure of Hsiao Kang watching the movie[11].  In this sense, *What Time is it There?* produces a commentary on  spectatorship similar to the one  performed in *Goodbye Dragon Inn*.  To that effect, Bloom observes that "[i]n addition to underscoring the concept of cinema and the movement or lack thereof that it entails, Tsai highlights the notion of viewing that is central to film and film theory through his citation of the seminal Truffaut film" (320).  But in contrast to *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, where the sequence moves from a full quotation—i.e. the juxtaposition of *hypofilm* and *hyperfilm,* wherein Hu's film occupies the entire audiovisual and spatiotemporal coordinates of Tsai's film—to an exclusive shot of the audience, the sequence in *What Time?* moves in the opposite direction: from the audience to full quotation, as the next shot in this sequence is that of Truffaut's film filling out the entire frame of the shot.  This movement from audience to film is replicated in the second cited sequence, where Hsiao Kang is first seen waking up in Bed and sitting up, before he picks up the remote and starts playing *The 400 blows*, which, following a jump cut, is directly displayed in full citation.

   This movement of formal reciprocity between the two films not only underlines the dialogic reciprocity of desire at work in the viewer's production of meaning but also points to the ways in which desire functions as a means to create zones of proximity. As viewers, we understand Hsiao's feeling of alienation in terms of Antoine's own alienation, and  we can also retrace the trajectory of Hsiao's desire to identify with and respond to Antoine's situation.  In addition, Hsiao's desire to reset every clock to French

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[11] Michelle Bloom provides an excellent analysis of this scene in her article (319-320)

time and watch a film about Paris emerges from his desire to abridge the spatio-temporal as well as the emotional and physical distance between him and Shiang-chyi.

## Metatextual Errancies: Realism, Haunting, Lingering, and Fusion

Tsai's work has generated a considerable amount of critical commentary and it would seem appropriate to construct a comprehensive cartography of these discourses to further examine Tsai's work and the fluid and heterogeneous relationships between the films he cites. To build this road map, I will pay particular attention to the essays of Fran Martin and Michelle Bloom on *What Time is it There?* and Chris Wood and Kenneth Chan's articles on *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*.

In her discussion of *What Time is it There?* Fran Martin considers the ghostly European presences—textual, intertextual, as well as metatextual and hypertextual—that haunt Tsai's work. Martin is primarily interested in investigating "the relationship between Taiwanese film and European art cinema." Yet, she notes that "Tsai's films also perform parallel citations of Chinese cinemas," thus eliminating an exclusive and unilateral East/West reading of Tsai's work. Of course, there are undeniable traces of the French New Wave in Tsai's cinema and so, in a wise gesture not guided by blind ideology, Martin does not entirely dismiss the paradigm of influence in Tsai's work and invites further studies to be performed on the topic.[12] Thus, Martin approaches *What Time?* from a postcolonial perspective, adopting the concept of "temporal dysphoria," which he defines as "a disorientation in relation to time rather than space," as derived

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[12] Martin believes that "the play of citations in historical context is too complex for the simple notion of "influence" to retain much analytic bite in this situation" and stresses the importance of a contextual dimension of international cinematic production."

from Homi Bhabha's and Franz Fanon's idea of "postcolonial time-lag." Martin's approach is particularly well suited to discuss *What Time is it There?* not only for the reason made obvious in the film's title, but also because this paradigm can be applied at both the textual and hypertextual level: in the disjunction in time between the various characters of the movie—between Hsiao Kang, his father, mother, and Shiang-chyi—as well as between the French New Wave and the Taiwanese Second Wave—wherein the latter performs a type of "cinematic recycling" of the former.

Although Michelle Bloom notes that the representational relationship between France and China has been not exempt from exhibiting orientalist/occidentalist tendencies, she claims that "we cannot reduce contemporary French/East Asian aesthetic and cultural interplay to the fascination with exoticism characteristic of nineteenth-century Orientalism or the ongoing Occidentalist phenomenon of Francophilia, which stereotypes France as sexy, mysterious and sophisticated" (311). For instance, her discussion of Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Seamstress* and Tsai Ming-Liang's *What Time?* aims to demonstrate that "rather than the simplistic one-directional Chinese reverence toward things French, despite possible appearances to the contrary, these films entail complex Franco-Chinese interplay" (313). Following Martin's claim regarding the paradigm of "influence" as both simplistic and Eurocentric, Bloom argues that, although not irrelevant, "influence" is too vague a concept, and so, she proposes to examine the referential interplay between Chinese and French cinema in terms of "citation, translation, and imitation," arguing that they "are useful tools to examine the fluid, reciprocal connections between China and France in Dai's and Tsai's films and beyond,

ultimately helping us arrive at the fusion between China and France, East and West in contemporary film, the arts and culture" (313). I find Bloom's use of the term "fluid connection" and the concept of "fusion" quite interesting, and I will examine them more in depth below.

It is undeniable that "influence" might unjustly/inappropriately narrow the hermeneutic field by favoring what could be dubbed, following Genette's terminology, the "hypotext" or its author, insofar as we can appoint precedence and perceived influence, yet I somewhat regret that both Martin and Bloom dismiss it almost too readily. Influence does not forcefully diminish/reduce the work of the hypertext, but following the work of Harold Bloom, and the subsequent critical explorations of both Genette and Deac on hypertextuality/filmicity, the influenced artwork could easily be interpreted as a creative re-working in the form of a postmodern pastiche or a recontextualisation in the manner of cinematic adaptation. In addition, as will be explained later, the erroneous reference to Marguerite Duras *Hiroshima, mon amour* as a "film about Paris," seems to playfully point to Harold Bloom's idea that "strong misreadings" give rise to the most original work,[13] potentially even as a means to subvert the Oedipal and colonial implications of Bloom's paradigm of anxiety. With regards to the relationship between Tsai and Truffaut, the possibility of reading Tsai's film as both a commentary and an adaptation—transfiguration/modification—of Truffaut's text—or any other intertext, for that matter—by emphasizing the diachronic, illustrative dimensions of Tsai's references to *The 400 Blows* is not given full consideration by Michelle Bloom and

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[13] See Waller, p.2.

Martin.  For instance, Bloom reads the citation of Antoine's stealing the milk bottle as foreshadowing Hsiao Kang's stealing in the control room.   However, read anachronistically or even synchronically, one could use Hsiao Kang's alienation from his mother outlined in the previous scene as a critical insight into Antoine's own alienation, and the bottle of milk acts as a metaphor of motherly love.

This being said, Michelle Bloom's hermeneutic topography of Tsai's intertextual references to *The 400 Blows* is not only exhaustive and insightful, performing a remarkable opening of the text that outlines both the "fluid connections" and the "fusion" of French/East Asian cultures in *What Time is it There?* Most interestingly, it also sets the foundation for the metatextual critique of spectatorship, which, as will be revealed below in the discussion of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, occupies almost the entire discursive space of that film.   Thus, I would like to borrow Bloom's terminology and apply the terms of "fluid connections" and "fusion" to the ways in which the various transtextual relationships ought to be considered, emphasizing the fluidity of the connections between intersecting texts and the fusion of transtextual categories that a text can perform, becoming simultaneously intertext, hypotext, hypertext, and metatext.

Chris Wood's reading of Tsai's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* focuses on the use of deep focus and intertextuality, positing that the former technique "produce[s] effects of disorientation and humour" while the latter "confuse[s] the boundaries between *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and King Hu's *Dragon Gate Inn* as well as between the viewer, the medium of film and the cinema space" (105).   Wood posits that, contrary to André Bazin's argument that deep focus and the long take produce an "accurate impression of reality"

by preserving the integrity of space and time respectively, Tsai's "excessive" or "exaggerated" use of these techniques in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* are meant to subvert the idea of realism by drawing attention to their performative and self-reflexive properties (108). Wood sees a comic effect and warns the reader against exhaustive critical analyses of Tsai's film that overlook the role of humor. Although I concur with Wood's warning, I would also like to contend that, similarly wary of any attempt to re-territorialize these texts within the hermeneutic logic of political ideologies, regardless of how well-intentioned they may be, every act of criticism, insofar as it aims to produce meaning from a stable framework of interpretation, is an act of violence directed against a text. In contrast to a *closed* reading, an *open* reading would stay clear of drawing conclusions. Its aim would be instead to reveal the fluidity of a text and thus unlock the possibilities of interpretation, or what Barthes and Kristeva have called, the "plurality" of a text. In other words, a work of criticism, as it enters into a meta-textual relationship with a text, *in lieu* of assigning meaning, of providing seemingly seamless answers, should merely endeavor to add another nodal correspondence from which the web of intertextuality can expand exponentially, thus avoiding potential reterritorialization. Consequently, I respond to certain trends in postcolonial criticism and cultural studies that overemphasize the political, contextual ramifications of a works' content at the expense of the ways in which form and aesthetics can also perform such critical gestures.

In Tsai's movies, gestures are enacted through what Kenneth Chan has dubbed "the cinematic aesthetics of lingering." In his article, Chan describes the genre of the *wu xia pian*—the Chinese sword fighting movie—and explains that films in the genre were

typically set in a historical, if not mythical, Ancient China and that they displayed a spectacular array of martial arts and sword fighting, thus developing "a popular aesthetic of Chinese-ness that appeals to many ethnic Chinese" (89). But Chan also notes that given the transnationality of the recent international success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*, two films that draw heavily from the *wu xia* aesthetic, it is undeniable that this image of "Chinese-ness" seems to comply with the cultural perceptions of a global audience who, in the mode of spectacular consumption, have wholeheartedly associated martial arts with China.[14] Chan points out that the intersection between the reference to King Hu's film and the space of the Fu Ho Theatre with its community of marginalized gay men produces a critical disjunction in the nostalgia that the *wu xia* might evoke as a global, transnational commodity. In Chan's own words:

> by marrying a classic instance of the *wu xia pian*, a theatrical space of a bygone era, and a marginalized 'community' of gay men, Tsai engages a localized politics of *place* to disrupt the seamless co-optation of nostalgia into the transnational capitalist structures and networks of cultural consumption, represented metonymically by this resurgent interest in the contemporary *wu xia pian*. I call Tsai's place-based politics a cinematic aesthetic of lingering. (90)

Chan refers to the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "to linger"—"to stay on or hand about in a place beyond the proper or usual time"—to suggest that lingering implies a voluntary reduction of one's pace in order to "appreciate, to relish, to study, or to reminisce," arguing that Tsai's mise-en-scene—composed of long single-take shots— accentuates the lingering (90-91). Because of this "cinematic aesthetics of lingering"

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[14] It is important to note, however, that this cultural perception might not apply to local, Sinophone audiences, who did not receive *Crouching Tiger* so favorably. See for example Shu-mei Shi's introductory chapter in *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*.

Chan observes that Tsai's use of the Fu Ho Theatre aims at pdroducing a sense of nostalgia.  Yet, he contends that by displaying the theatre *not* in its heyday, but rather as a "haunted" space in decay, and by juxtaposing the abject potential of public sex in the form of gay cruising[15], Tsai is actually challenging the "cultural commodification of Chinese culture in the recent Hollywood interest in the *wu xia pian*" (92).  I am underlining Chan's notions of lingering and haunting, because as I will demonstrate below, not only do they constitute an interesting metatext to *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, but they also underline the errancies of the citation of *Hiroshima mon amour* brought up in *What Time is it There?*

## From Transtextual Errancies to Metatextual Departures:

## Hiroshima, Nevers, Paris, Taipei

As it is the case with *Goodbye Dragon Inn*'s non-exclusive transtextual relationship to *Dragon Gate Inn*, *The 400 Blows* is not the only movie cited in *What Time?*  The other references include films by Yu Ming, Grace Chang, and Lin Dai, and most notably, *Hiroshima, mon amour* by Alain Resnais.  The latter is brought up when Hsiao is looking to buy a "film about Paris" and the street merchant mentions both Truffaut's and Resnais' films.  Martin claims that "This double citation of European art film, on the one hand, and popular Taiwan and Hong Kong cinema, on the other, demonstrates that cinematic citation in Tsai's films is a complex, hybrid practice, rather than any simple emulation of European film modernism" (3), and Bloom observes that

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[15] As Chan notes, gay cruising, which implies sex in public spaces, immediately conjures notions of the abject, the taboo, and possibly the pornographic.  Using Slavoj Zizek's opposition between nostalgia and pornography, Chan argues that "the depictions of gay cruising in Tsai's film puncture the nostalgic text of *Dragon Gate Inn*" (100).

"Rather than 'balancing' East and West, the Chang et. al. and Truffaut references complicate a sequence which might erroneously be read as a simplistic gesturing toward the West by an Eastern director if we ignore the self-reflexive reference to Tsai's own previous film, *The Hole*" (319). While these comments are certainly accurate, I would emphasize the apparent misquotation of Resnais' film as a film about Paris. As Bloom notes, "While Hsiao Kang may arbitrarily select it rather than the other proposed title, *Hiroshima mon amour*, also a 1959 film but one that is not really about Paris at all, clearly Tsai does not 'borrow' the film accidentally" (319). In fact, I will investigate the possibility that, following the argument made above regarding the movement of transtextual relationships from intertext and *hyperfilm* to metatext, one could use the transtextual relationships constructed around Tsais' film to perform a metatextual reading of Resnais.

Although the textual citation of Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* in *What Time is it There?* appears misplaced, misguided, or even erroneous, it is not at all incongruent. Based on Marguerite Duras' screenplay, Resnais' film performs a disjoined re-enactment of a personal and traumatic event through a complex and intersubjective juxtaposition of time and space. The Japanese man with whom "Elle" is having a love affair in 1959 Hiroshima reminds her of the relationship she had with a German soldier during the second World War in Nevers, France, and its tragic consequences when the war came to an end. An instantiation of Deleuzian time-image,[16] *Hiroshima mon amour* formally juxtaposes documentary images with the fictive representation of the couple's

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[16] Deleuze makes multiple references to the film in *Cinema 2*.

encounters in a variety of public spaces and with a series of flashbacks that disrupts the linear narrative.  As Rey Chow observes:

> In *Hiroshima mon amour* the point is rather to experiment with nonlinear narrative, in which memory takes the place of external events to constitute the main action. Instead of a well-plotted story, then, we are looking at psychodrama, the involuntary and unexpected remembrance of the woman's past.  By juxtaposing such psychodrama with the documentary images of what happened to the people in Hiroshima because of the atomic bomb, the film thus problematizes the limits of representation in a self-conscious manner that is characteristic of high modernist and avant-garde works.  (150)

Just as memory—or nostalgia—of the *wu xia pian* and the European art film "haunts" both *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* and *What Time?* the memory of her love affair with the German "haunts" Elle.  And so, like Tsai, it appears that Resnais also performs a self-reflexive and intertextual gesture.  Although these connections could be considered as little more than interesting points of comparison, I would like to think of them as laying the groundwork for a metatextual relationship of reciprocity.

Just as the Japanese-ness (or lack thereof) of both Elle's Lover and Hiroshima act as a prism—a "hyalosign" or time crystal—that fragments present reality and reflects the light of her traumatic memories, so the citation of *Hiroshima mon amour*'s "Paris-ness" fragments the unity of the direct citation and reflects it as various metatextual connective strands of light.  The apparent misquotation of *Hiroshima mon amour* as "a film on Paris" performs a commentary that emphasizes the film's spatial disjunction, its spatial "dysphoria," to use Martin's terminology.  In other words, according to *What Time is it There?* Resnais' film is as much about Paris as it is about Hiroshima.  This disjunction subverts the apparent fixity and "locality"—the "There"—of *What Time is it There?* to

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reveal the ways in which Tsai juxtaposes Paris with Taipei, both formally, in alternating between scenes shot in each location and the citations to *The 400 Blows*, and representationally, in depicting Hsiao Kang changing the clocks to Paris time. In turn, the aesthetics of what Martin has dubbed "dysphoria" in *What Time is it There?* reveal the ways in which time *and* spatial differences between two points on the globe are irrelevant, an illusion of Derridean *différance*. By pointing to the *synchronicity* between Hsiao Kang's life in Taipei and Shiang-chyi's adventures (or lack thereof) in Paris, Tsai also emphasizes the ways in which the gap between past and present, between Paris and Hiroshima, between individual and collective memory, personal trauma and historical catastrophe, can be bridged by actualizing the virtuality of time, space, and the Other through the technics of intertextuality.

In addition, by undermining the *différances* between past and present, Nevers, Hiroshima, Paris and Taipei, both films subvert the colonial axioms of time and space. As I've demonstrated, Tsai also achieves this subversion through a reconfiguration of the errancies of desire; through the "wandering" and/or "cruising" pathos that animate his characters in their nostalgic and yearning projections as well as through what Chan has dubbed his "cinematic aesthetics of lingering." At the same time, by virtue of the "fluid connections," to use Bloom's term, that shape their transtextual relationship and their ability to move in and out of Genette's various categories, they emphasize the ways in which a text can become a "fusion" or "blend" between intertext, hypertext, and metatext. By transposing and/or transgressing these differences, both texts reveal their nomadic

potential by avoiding re-territorialization through an *ethos* of time and place that

emphasizes fluidity, proximity, and temporality over fixity, locality, and historicity.

**CHAPTER 3**

**The Play of Horror: Affect and Desire in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games***

> Elle jouait gaiement sur les mots, disant tantôt casser un œil, tantôt crever un œuf, tenant d'insoutenables raisonnements.
>
> -Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil*

In a 2008 column for *Entertainment Weekly*, Stephen King lists what he considers the top 10 movies of the year. While King's literary merit might be a site of debate for conservative critics and arbitrators of taste—in an editorial for *The Boston Globe*, Harold Bloom condemns the National Book Foundation for granting him a lifetime achievement award in 2003[1]—his immense success as an author and director of horror and suspense thrillers undoubtedly confers him with the credentials to make pointed recommendations in these extremely popular genres. Love him or hate him, the "Master of Horror," as Jack Perkins and other admirers have called him, knows how to enthrall his audiences, and in turn, they want to know what fascinates him.

While his list is not only comprised of blood-curling horror movies, positioned at number five on King's list is *Funny Games* (2008) by Michael Haneke, an American

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[1] In "Dumbing Down American Readers," Bloom writes:

> The decision to give the National Book Foundation's annual award for "distinguished contribution" to Stephen King is extraordinary, another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life. I've described King in the past as a writer of penny dreadfuls, but perhaps even that is too kind. He shares nothing with Edgar Allan Poe. What he is is an immensely inadequate writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis. The publishing industry has stooped terribly low to bestow on King a lifetime award that has previously gone to the novelists Saul Bellow and Philip Roth and to playwright Arthur Miller. By awarding it to King they recognize nothing but the commercial value of his books, which sell in the millions but do little more for humanity than keep the publishing world afloat.

remake of his 1997 Austrian angst-driven thriller of the same name. Starring Naomi Watts and Tim Roth as the well-to-do couple of a family of three terrorized by a debonair pair of sadistic young men (played with chilling precision by Michael Pitt and Brady Corbet) in their Long island vacation home, *Funny Games* stages a visceral, painstaking twist on the home invasion/family in peril genre. The film opens quite unassumingly with Ann and George Farber (Watts and Roth) playing operatic guessing games in their SUV on their way to their vacation home with their young son Georgie (Devon Gearhart) and their dog Rolfie. This idyllic portrait of bourgeois existence is soon disrupted when the soundtrack suddenly jumps from the melodious arrangement of Handel to the screaming antics of John Zorn's thrash metal band Naked City—an announcement of the disturbing events to come. En route, they stop by the property of Fred and Eva, their next-door neighbors, who introduce them to Paul and Peter, two young men dressed in Tennis whites. Soon thereafter, Peter makes an ostensibly innocent request to borrow some eggs on behalf of Eva. Upon exiting, he drops the eggs and apologizes profusely for his clumsiness. Peter watches on as Ann cleans up the mess, and the situation quickly becomes both awkward and tense when he asks Ann if she is willing to give him more eggs and he accidentally pushes the phone into the sink. Eager to get rid of him, Ann reluctantly accepts to do so, but he returns after a short while with his friend Paul, complaining about the dog's hostility. Paul apologizes for Peter's cowardice and asks if he can borrow George's golf clubs to practice his swing (as it turns out, on the Farber's dog) on the pretense of being a golf enthusiast. As the dog caused Peter to drop the eggs once more, the young men ask Ann for more eggs, but she gets increasingly impatient

and, irritated by their and stubborn persistence, she sternly demands they leave. Her husband and son enter the scene wondering what is occurring. As George sides with his wife, Paul smashes his kneecap with the golf club and reprimands them for being rude. In fact, Paul and Peter have no intent on leaving and as the family is taken hostage in their own home, their planned vacation soon becomes their worst nightmare when their tormentors decide to play a series of humiliating and torturous games, including betting whether they will live past 9am the following morning.

*Funny Games* differs from most American remakes of European films. While the setting has been transposed from a Central European lakeside location to Long Island/the Hamptons, *Funny Games U.S.* as it is sometimes referred to,[2] is a shot-for-shot, line-by-line remake of the European version to the extent where even the American cast bear an uncanny resemblance in appearance and performance to the original cast. As will be explored later, the operations of translation and transposition are nonetheless noteworthy in terms of cultural dissemination and critical reception, but not in terms of the viewing experience itself, which is for the most part identical.

Amidst the slight yet critical differences of people and place, the most remarkable feature remains the ways in which *Funny Games* addresses issues related to the ubiquity of violence in the media and the ethics of consuming such violence. More specifically, the film plays with the conventions of the horror and thriller genres as well as the audience's expectations as it performs a type of Brechtian, self-reflexive critique of

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[2] For the immediate discussion, I will collapse the two versions by referring to them jointly as *Funny Games*. I will then redraw a distinction between the two when I address issues related to cinematic remakes across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

spectatorship by questioning the viewer's motives and desires to watch.  This is not only

performed through the form of a direct address to the audience—on two occasions, Peter

(Devon Gearhart), one of the tormentors, turns to the camera, mocks us, and asks us why

we are watching—but also through a strategy of temptation and denial, as the aesthetics

of the film subverts the classical psychological framework of viewing pleasure.

In an extended sense, *Funny Games* situates itself within proximity of Bataille's

*Story of the Eye* (to which it implicitly refers through the play of eggs) by subverting the

emphasis placed on visibility and the "I/Eye" of the beholder.  Much like his other works

such as *Benny's Video* (1992) and *Caché* (2005), this film provides a critical reflection on

the structures of seeing and the role of media violence in contemporary consumer culture,

which places it in direct vicinity of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, the subject work

of Chapter 5.  From another perspective, in bridging cultural differences while at the

same time highlighting the role of spectatorship, Haneke's remake aligns itself critically

and formally to the work of Tsai Ming-Liang examined in the previous chapter.  The

notable difference is that while the latter questioned the viewer's desire introspectively,

the former provides a more visceral, immanent critique of spectatorship, and in so doing,

it does not spare its audiences.

Contrary to contemporary horror movies, dubbed "torture-porn" by movie

reviewer David Edelstein, wherein the experience hinges on spectacular displays of blood

and gore,[3] watching *Funny Games* is a gut-wrenching experience *not* because the film

dwells extensively on such spectacles, but rather, because it makes a point of *not showing*

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[3] See "Torture Porn: The Sadistic Movie Trend."

any of the bloodshed on-screen.  Calling it "the most terrifying movie of the year," King

explains that

> Although the blood here is measured in drops rather than in *Saw*'s gallons,
> the film is relentless, and all but unbearable.  It works as savage parody of
> the snuff-porn genre even as it transcends it.

*Funny Games* achieves what many graphically explicit horror movies aim for in terms of

sensation and emotional tension without the slaughter and splatter.  But as it takes the

audience in a roller coaster of fear and trepidation, it is unrelenting because it does *not*

provide any visual pleasure or satisfying catharsis.  Reflecting the sadistic playfulness of

the two young unassuming psychopaths, it toys with our emotions by subverting our

expectations.

The film performs a critically didactic gesture by raising a mirror directly in front

of us and making us stare with fascination and revulsion into the frame.  In the

introductory note of his column for *Entertainment Weekly*, King acknowledges that he

usually receives a lot of angry letters from readers who vehemently disagree with his

choices.  Consequently, it should not be surprising that *New York Magazine* for example,

considers *Funny Games* the *worst* movie of the year, calling it "a senseless remake."  In

fact, similar to the critical reception of *American Psycho* and its cinematic adaptation

(which will be addressed in the corresponding chapter), critical opinion and popular

reception of Haneke's remake diverge considerably.

Before focusing on the reasons for such divergent views as they pertains more

particularly to the critical responses of cinematic remakes and issues of cultural

translation and transposition, and because *Funny Games* questions the fascination of

audiences for spectacular displays of blood and violence, it would seem appropriate first to review what draws audiences to horror films, a genre that relies on a set of established yet evolving conventions to pander to the viewers' growing expectations. It is to these wandering desires, as fueled by the "frenzy of the visible" characteristic of visual media, to which *Funny Games* responds by playfully and mockingly subverting them, and making us the victims of our own wanton pleasures.

## The Pleasures of Horror

"We all know a genre when we see one," observes Rich Altman (680). Yet Altman also notes that behind this truism lies the fact that providing clear, tautological definitions to specific genres nonetheless remains difficult (681). The reason being that film genres are both *static* and *dynamic* systems: on the one hand, like the perennial archetype of Greek tragedy, they rely on proven conventions and formulas to reexamine and resolve cultural or interpersonal conflicts; on the other, genres are also shaped by shifts in audiences interests and new genre films that reinvigorate the genre.[4] Although each genre film relies on certain "rules," conventions, or formulas characteristic of the genre (e.g. in a horror movie, the cast of characters will typically include a monster or psychopath), as a differentiated instantiation, each film contributes to the reshaping of the genre by uniquely combining the fundamental structural components of characters, plot, and setting. Using the analogy of language, Thomas Schatz explains "individual genre films seem to have the capacity to affect the genre—an utterance has the potential to change the grammar that governs it" (693).

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[4] See Thomas Schatz (691).

In surveying various approaches to defining the horror genre, Peter Hutchings points to Andrew Tudor and Rick Altman's argument regarding the ways in which a genre is shaped by the discursive claims of various constituents (critics, audiences, and film-makers), and concludes that defining a film as horror "is dependent upon the context within you see the film" (8). In this sense, there is a continuous, evolving relationship between the ways in which the genre film reinforces audiences' expectations and how, in turn, the experience of the audience helps cement or reshape the formulaic and narrative components of the genre.

Altman explains that with regard to the role of the audience, there have traditionally been two distinct approaches to theorizing genres: the ritual approach, which stresses the audiences' ritualistic relationship to film, wherein spectators actively contribute to shaping the genre through the validation of their expectations and desires; and the ideological approach, reminiscent of the Frankfurt school and influenced by publications such as *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Screen*, and *Jump Cut*, which considers "how audiences are manipulated by the business and political interests of Hollywood" (682-3). Altman concludes that there is a particular way in which film genres perform both ritualistic and ideological functions:

> [t]he structures of Hollywood cinema, like those of American popular
> mythology as a whole, serve to mask the very distinction between ritual
> and ideological functions. Hollywood does not simply lend its voice to
> the public's desires, nor does it simply manipulate the audience. On the
> contrary, most genres go through a period of accommodation during
> which the public's desires are fitted to Hollywood priorities (and vice-
> versa). (688).

Similarly, Hutchings observes that audiences and the film industry are mostly invested in "what is relevant to them in the context within which their engagement with horror is situated" (7). Defining horror as a distinct combination of formal elements is difficult because as with any genre, horror cinema is continually shifting and prone to variations in tastes and audiences. Nonetheless, as its name suggests, one binding and persistent element is that it aims to stir the emotions in inspiring fear and dread, even disgust, and in an extended sense, horror movies have continuously sought to fulfill the premise of what Tom Gunning has dubbed "The Cinema of Attractions" in his study of early cinema, wherein emphasis was placed on "the direct stimulation of shock or surprise" (59). While Gunning explains that early filmmakers "planned to exaggerate the impact on the spectators," he also points out that "every change in film history implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way," (61). Given the evolution of the horror genre, from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* to the latest *Saw* sequel, one would expect that the contemporary spectator of horror would be fabricated according to recent shifts in cinematic history. Nonetheless, spectators of contemporary horror shares with that of early cinema (and early horror) the fact that filmmakers place particular focus on the spectacular to stir the emotions. It is specifically because of horror's emphasis on sensational excess that Linda Williams categorizes it as a "body genre," and joins Denis White in observing that a film's success is usually measured by the extent to which it can stir the spectator's emotions (Williams 4, White 2).

However, this does not imply that directors can simply, easily manipulate their audiences, although to some extent, as will be detailed later, the spectator willfully

submits herself to the cinematic experience.  In her discussion of feminist approaches to horror films, Cynthia Freeland objects to strict Marxist readings that stress how audiences are being manipulated by a film's ideological message because "the nature of agency in question in filmic representation is actually very diffuse, and also because it makes viewers into powerless Pavlovian dogs" (761-762).  Freeland argues that this view is particularly inaccurate when it pertains to the audiences of the horror genre because "Horror movie viewers are in fact often highly sophisticated and critical; horror movie screenings, in my experience, may be much more participatory than other films" (762).  In highlighting the active and critical role of the audience in shaping and responding to systems of cultural and symbolic signification, Freeland draws attention to the dialogic relationship between the audience and the genre.  In other words, more than any other genre, the horror film aims to fulfill/meet/pander to the desires and expectations of its audiences, while at the same time providing the structures of meaning characteristic of cinema as a myth-making enterprise.  As I will investigate below, *Funny Games* suggests that the growing emphasis on spectacle has somewhat effaced the possibility for critical reflection and speculation.  Therefore, the film scrutinizes the ever-growing expectations of the audience and its seemingly uncritical consumption of sensational images of gore and violence.

But before investigating the particular ways in which Haneke's films address the politics of the viewer's desire as it pertains to the media industry and spectatorship, it seems appropriate to understand why audiences are attracted to the specific type of ritualistic experience that horror provides.  A simple answer would be that rituals

reinforce our sense of time and place, a sense of who we are and where we belong.   The

ritualistic context in which Greek Tragedies were performed played a significant role in

shaping the ways in which audiences responded to them.[5]   In *the Birth of Tragedy*,

Nietzsche argues that rooted in ritual, Greek tragedy provided the Hellenic mind the

sensual means to accept the terrors of existence.  And later, in *Twilight of the Idols,* he

claims that the Dionysus taught him that even living through painful experiences was an

affirmation of life over death, because it celebrates  "the eternal joy of becoming, beyond

all terror and pity — that tragic joy included even joy in destruction" (121).  Nietzsche's

intervention points to the similarities that horror shares with tragedy[6]: like the tragic

experience, which brings audiences to tears and agony before providing elation in

catharsis, the experience of horror can also be pleasurable—as paradoxical as it may

seem.  While Noël Carroll's centers his examination of the aesthetics of horror on this

paradox in *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Human Heart*, Michael Levine

points out "Emotions such as fear, horror disgust, etc. are not intrinsically unpleasant …

in certain circumstances … they obviously *can* be enjoyed" (46).  If indeed, these

sensations are capable of producing pleasure, what exactly are the pleasures of Horror?

Since the late 1970s, psychoanalytic movie critics (operating predominantly from

Freudian and Lacanian paradigms) have persistently attempted to answer this question

with varying degrees of success.  Even though some of the claims made by these writers

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[5] See Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's "Greek Tragedy and Ritual."
[6] The comparison between the two is not unique to Nietzsche, see for example, Denis L. White "The Poetics of Horror: More Than Meets the Eye."

have recently come under intense scrutiny,[7] as metatexts of the genre they have played an influential role in shaping the particular dynamics of desire—between film production and audience expectations—that *Funny Games* criticizes.

In "Why We Crave Horror Movies," King summarizes—and sorts out—in a few concise and succinct paragraphs the various claims made by psychoanalytic movie critics in their dissection of the genre. King argues that we are drawn to horror movies for three gradual, yet interrelated, reasons: we watch them because they dare us to overcome our fears; they are appealing because they reinforce our sense of normalcy; and most importantly, we like horror movies because they sublimate those sadistic and aggressive tendencies that are socially repressed.

Horror movies typically expose elements of our deepest fears. Consequently, by watching horror films we force ourselves to face and defeat them. Robin Wood argues that horror movies "are our collective nightmares" and, likening the experience to a thrill-seeking ride, King explains, "we are daring the nightmare … [t]o show that we can, that we are not afraid, that we can ride this roller-coaster." King explains that fears are intrinsic human emotions: "they inform our own body, and we recognize that it demands its own exercise to maintain proper muscle tone." Fear forms an essential part of our bodily experience of the world and, in an extended sense, as Nietzsche pointed out even frightful experiences are an affirmation of our will to live. While there may be some masochistic dimension in submitting ourselves to the experience, it can also be therapeutic because our fears are related to some deep-seated anxieties we confront in our

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[7] For an informed survey of the debate, I refer the reader to *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*.

daily lives.  Dennis White argues that horror dramatizes our fear of the unknown, the unforeseeable, even our own death, and by so doing, "it asks the same questions as do the greatest works of art" (9).  At the same time, the cinematic apparatus allows the spectator to safely undergo the experience because it usually provides some kind of narrative resolution to our anxieties as they transfigured on screen.  Consequently, horror movies provide a safe channel through which we can overcome the anxieties manifested in our most dreadful nightmares by allowing us to confront them at a distance (White 16, Tudor 58).

Next, King claims that in its depiction of a Manichean world "the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary."  By being able to distance ourselves from the horrible deeds and monsters on the screen, we are telling ourselves that we are normal. This claim echoes the argument of psychoanalytic movie critics such as Barbara Creed and Robin Wood who argue that the monstrous Other typically represents a threat to perceived normalcy.[8]  Looking at the structures of repression stemming from Freud's notion of the uncanny and Kristeva's Lacanian-inspired concept of the abject, they contend that the "monster" coalesces with "the return of the repressed" and the "abject body," things that threaten our perception of "normality."  Their theorizations emphasize the psychosexual dimension of repression as it applies to the heterosexual male viewer, wherein the monstrous Other as well as the female victims who are to some extent associated with it, represent and/or embody the threat of castration.  In this configuration, which will be further elaborated below, conflict resolution (e.g. the death of the

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[8] See Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," and Robin Wood's "Return of the Repressed"

"monster" and the female victim) in horror movies typically aims at restoring the normalcy associated with the patriarchal order of bourgeois society.

But it is predominantly through King's last and over-arching argument that the pleasures of horror come to fully interact with structures of repression as they relate to social norms of behavior. "We're all mentally ill," King announces at the onset of his essay; we might like horror movies because they are conservative and allow us to confront our fears, but ultimately we watch them "to have fun," claims King, which "comes from seeing others menaced—sometimes killed." We learn from a very early age what consistutes acceptable behavior and how, in turn, aggressive or antisocial comportment is admonished, but this does not mean that these drives do not exist or are completely eliminated. Social codes of conduct repress those desires and by sublimating them, by providing a sanctioned venue in which we can witness and experience them, horror movies provide some "psychic relief." Furthermore, alluding to these voyeuristic and sadistic desires, King explains, "the horror film has become the modern version of the public lynching." In this sense, the horror film also provides us with the satisfaction of witnessing evildoers being punished for their deeds.

In psychoanalytic film theory, Laura Mulvey provides a thorough analysis of the sadistic, voyeuristic gaze in her canonical essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Alluding to Freud's scopophilic drive (pleasure in looking) and the identification processes stemming from Lacan's mirror stage, Mulvey argues that mainstream Hollywood cinema typically objectifies women by subjecting them to the dominant gaze of the—predominantly male—spectator. The narrative allows the spectator to identify

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with the male protagonist who will eventually behold the woman for his own pleasure, and as Mulvey notes "through participation in [the male character's] power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too" (204). But because of her differentiated sexuality the eroticized woman also represents the threat of castration, and to deflect the threat, the male viewer can either resort to a sadistic form of voyeurism or fetishistic scopophilia. The first option blends well with the conventions of classical narrative resolution as it involves a process wherein the female is examined, undermined, and then punished or saved within the film's diegesis. In the other alternative, which is independent of linear time, the threat is disavowed by either substituting or transforming the female figure into a fetish object (205). While Mulvey's argument has been widely debated by feminist movie critics because it oversimplifies the complex interface between the camera and the spectator and does not account for the alternative pleasures of female and homosexual viewers, it nonetheless provides a useful point of departure to understand the viewer's desire to keep watching horror films. Freeland explains that the threat of castration is particularly acute in horror because the woman's sexual difference is visually explicit: "The women's flesh, the reality behind the surface appearance, *is* made visible, and horror shows the "wound" that we are revolted to look upon" (743). From this perspective, one can easily comprehend how the difference embodied by the monster or the psychopath, i.e. its "abnormality" or "otherness," represents an equal or bigger threat to the viewer.

The association between monsters and women underlies Williams' critical response to Mulvey's direct assimilation of the gaze to male viewers. According to

Williams, both women and monsters represent a threat to the patriarchal order because of their sexual difference *per se* (and not through the indirect fear of castration). When the woman looks at the monster, not only does she partake in "the male's fear of the monster's freakishness, but also recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference" (87-88). Consequently, females that dare the "gaze" and monsters are ritualistically punished in horror films (or "lynched" to refer back to King's succinct account of the pleasure derived form someone being killed) because they represent a threat to the patriarchal order. Concurring with Mary Ann Doane's suggestion that the woman's gaze is complicit with its own victimization, Williams explains, "The woman's gaze is punished … by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (85). Consequently, drawing from the work of Carol J. Clover, Williams notes that horror can be configured as a sadomasochistic fantasy because the viewer typically alternates between the polarized positions of victim and tormentor. Freeland notes that although Williams attempts to overcome the shortcomings of Mulvey's analysis of the gaze, she "seem to accept the basic idea that horror films reinforce conceptions of the active (sadistic) male viewer and the passive (suffering) female object" (744). In this sense, and therein lies part of the critique directed towards psychoanalytic film theory, these explanations seem to overwhelmingly focus on structures of seeing based upon an overtly conventional paradigm of Oedipal heterosexuality.

Nevertheless, psychoanalytic theory provides a link between King' s brief expose and sociological studies on horror film preference, wherein viewers responded they watch

films of the genre because they want to heighten or arouse their senses, wish to see gore and destruction (and sometimes experience a sadistic pleasure in so doing), and enjoy experiencing the comforting plot resolutions these films often provide.[9] Psychoanalysis not only helps us to understand the ways in which these reasons are closely interrelated, but also how they hinge upon the interplay of desire inherent in processes of subject formation, especially as it is geared towards resolving our deep-seated anxieties. While the horror film might transfigure our nightmares on screen and play with our fear of death, it always returns us to our seats, providing us the impression that we have overcome our fears. Accordingly, W. H. Rockett, director of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, explains that fictional horror "exorcises fears and doubts that are going on in a person's subconscious. It brings them out in an entertaining manner and resolves the fears in a way that seems to wrap them all up" (3). The horror film is conservative, and in many ways, amidst all the purported transgressions it performs in exploring the repressed desires stored in our unconscious, it is perhaps the most reactionary of genres. By vividly dramatizing our fears, it exacerbates the tension between revulsion and fascination and toys with our desire to look by ultimately making us yearn for a narrative resolution that we will ultimately find comforting. In most cases, the pleasures of horror ultimately derive from reaffirming our sense of order and being; although the horror film threatens our subject positions (through the fear of castration or sexual difference), it eventually reinforces processes of identity formation within the dominant, patriarchal structures of

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[9] See "A Uses and Gratifications Analysis of Horror Film Preference," where Patricia A. Lawrence and Philip C. Palmgreen review studies that have used a self-report methodology to identify the motivations behind horror movie consumption.

the institutional family.  In other cases, such as in the *Omen* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* wherein the villains remain unpunished, horror does not provide a return to order, but capitalizes on our more sadistic tendencies and the necessity to feed what Joseph Grixti has dubbed the "beast within."  As King indicates, "the mythic horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest fantasies realized . . . and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the dark."  But we are not alone in the dark and accordingly, our participatory role in processes of cultural consumption cannot be easily dismissed.  As the family painfully endures their tormentors' twisted games, Paul mockingly tells them, "you shouldn't overlook the value of entertainment"; *Funny Games* addresses the very basis of horror's entertainment value and, through a play of self-reflexive frames and mirrors, it casts a critical light on the spectator to question the desire to watch horror and the pleasures we may derive from it.

**Between Terror and Horror**

While psychoanalytic approaches have historically dominated feminist film studies and studies of the horror genre, they have recently come under fire by critics such as Cynthia Freeland and Malcolm Turvey.  For example, Freeland claims that the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalytical theories are constraining in part because they rely on certain given assumptions about gender and sexual difference.  But I am not sure that her own ideological approach, inspired by Noël Carroll and Luce Irigaray, is any more comprehensive than that of Mulvey and Williams.  Similarly, Turvey argues that the problem of psychoanalysis is its reductionism (69), but his analytical attempt to

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demystify the various claims made by psychoanalytic approaches to the pleasures of horror by using "dialectical theorizing" also falls short of providing some clarity in the matter. These recent, inconclusive attempts suggest that although psychoanalysis may fall short on numerous accounts, it should not be entirely dismissed. As previously discussed, psychoanalysis has historically influenced the various constituents of the genre and thereby provides an instrumental segue in understanding the discursive formation of horror. But before addressing the ways in which *Funny Games* challenges the pleasures of horror by toying with the structures of voyeuristic desire, I will consider how the film subvert the principles of horror fiction as they were historically theorized in eighteenth century literary discourse.

*Funny Games* makes a point of not displaying any violence on-screen, which not only betrays convention (and the expectations of the audience), but also seems to subvert the very definition of horror as it took shape during the historical developments of the genre. Consequently, an examination of cultural history would allow us to consider aesthetic strategies of the genre that do not rely on some of what have been identified as the restrictive and reductive assumptions of psychoanalytic approaches. This departure is particularly appropriate because, as will be demonstrated below, *Funny Games* seems to undermine the bedrock of psychoanalytic theories based on Freudian-Lacanian-Kristevan paradigms of the uncanny, repression, the mirror stage, and the abject.

Historians of horror fiction situate the origins of the genre in the eighteenth century gothic literature. In another context, I provided a comprehensive survey of the

British gothic novel in retracing two distinct stages in the development of the genre. [10] The first one, dubbed "terror-Gothic," was initiated by Ann Radcliffe and inspired by French sensationalism and Elizabethan Dramatists; the second, "horror-Gothic" was established by Matthew Lewis and was largely influenced by German *Shauer-Roman*. The most remarkable distinction is situated in their respective use of the supernatural and the graphic depiction of sex and violence. While Radcliffe systematically provided cognitive structures that denied the supernatural any real agency and was careful not to include any scenes that would be morally objectionable, Lewis did not. His strategy was that of unadulterated shock and horror: *The Monk* (1796) contains gruesome episodes of incest, rape and murder, all of which caused major controversy at the time of publication. In other words, whereas Radcliffe carefully aims to gently entertain her reader by providing a moral framework, rationalizing the supernatural, and merely suggesting an idea of terror, Lewis literally "attacks" his audience's senses and sensitivity.

Although the horror film seems to be the genetic heir of Lewis' strand of the gothic, from an ideological standpoint, Radcliffe's gothic corresponds more closely to the ways in which the modern genre is deemed conservative and/or reactionary. Not only do her novels always stage a return to normality by providing a certain moral framework, she also wrote *The Italian* as a reaction to *The Monk* by excising the objectionable material. In fact, there is a certain asymmetry at work between Lewis and Radcliffe's divergent aesthetics and the ways in which *Funny Games* enacts stylistic strategies that diverge from, and criticize, convention. We can approach this asymmetry by considering

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[10] See "The Conservative, the Transgressive, and the Reactionnary: Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* as a response to Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*."

the specific deployment of the terms "terror" and "horror" as they pertain to the phenomenology of on-screen and off-screen violence.

In her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry," Radcliffe argues in favor of terror as a literary device by outlining its didactic purposes. For her, the "obscurity" and "uncertainty" of terror allow the reader to explore the elevating possibilities offered by Burke's theory of the "sublime." In contrast, she discards horror for its "annihilating" capacities; according to her, the reaction it provokes does not propel the reader into a shock of imaginative contemplation. Her distinction between terror and horror echoes the Aristotelian belief regarding off-stage and on-stage representations of violence, an argument succinctly articulated by Percy Shelley in his Preface to *The Cenci*, in which he claimed that on-stage violence deformed the moral purpose of "the human heart" (239-40). However, I have argued contra Radcliffe that in confronting the audience, horror does not "annihilate" the possibilities of experience. Quite to the contrary, it subverts the traditionally passive position of the audience by awakening the senses and thus extending the physical dimension of readership.[11]

*Funny Games* deconstructs these historical concepts of terror and horror by first performing a reversal of the distinct phenomenologies outlined by Radcliffe and Shelley and then undermining their characteristic differences altogether. The film is in part horrific because of the particular ways in which it chooses *not* to display any spectacular

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[11] While the work of Tsai-Ming Liang makes a point in highlighting the same passivity in film audiences, the earlier discussion on *Adaptation* pointed out that although film and literature might share certain interactive structures with their respective audiences, their particular evolutions couldn't be mapped directly onto one another. As I will later explore in the chapter on *American Psycho* there is perhaps an added dissymmetry in the ways in which each medium affects its audience with regards to graphic depictions of sex and violence.

violence.  The dialectics of representational violence are evinced by a stark realism that prioritizes affect and sensation through prolonged observation.  Consequently, the film also prolongs the agony and turns the potential terror of the imagination into a visceral experience akin to the horrific.

*Funny Games* critically addresses the conventions of the horror genre, but as pointed out earlier, it seemingly responds to the "snuff-porn" or "torture-porn" genre as King and Edelstein have respectively labeled them.  However, the film exploits the conventions of the genre as a means to simultaneously subvert them.  In an extended sense, it reverts the historical playfulness of a film genre in order to produce a self-reflexive, thought-provoking experience.  As the subversion enacted through the self-referential gestures may be heavy-handedly didactic, the effects on the audience are even more forceful and potentially infuriating.  *Funny Games* is neither funny nor pleasurable in the traditional sense attributed to a game, but the film nonetheless provides for an experience that warrants discussion in part because it is as enlightening as it is horrific and terrifying.

On a most basic level, *Funny Games* puts into play our fear of death.  More specifically, however, it stages a direct assault on the paradigmatic bourgeois family as the majority of the action takes place in the Farber's very own living room.  In so doing, it addresses our fear of being violated in the comfort of our own home.  As Michael Atkinson and Robin Wood have pointed out the "family in peril" narrative device emerged out of post-WWII anxieties that coincided with the rise of a prominent middle-class, wherein the family unit labors to fend off vicious attacks by nightmarish creatures

to preserve its sanctity (Atkinson 23, Wood 28). But in this case, the threat does not come from an irrational and inhuman monster feeding some frenzied appetite, nor from an overtly psychotic individual *à la* Norman Bates or Ed Gein. In fact, Peter and Paul present themselves as innocent "boys next door," who are well mannered, calm, and *overtly* polite. By thus mixing cruelty with good manners, they unsettle the dichotomy between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. What is deranging is precisely that there is nothing in Paul and Peter's presentation (apart from the white gloves, which Paul claims he is wearing because he has eczema) that should inspire fear or mistrust. In the scene wherein the two perpetrators try to explain the situation to George, who is puzzled by his wife's antagonism towards the two young men over a couple of broken eggs, their composure is so seemingly calm and reasonable—"we just want the eggs"—that the Farbers' response appears unwarranted.

The young men pretend that the rationale or explanation for their actions is rooted in their attempt to uphold good manners, for "politeness' sake" as Paul announces. In fact, the young men's comportment is so debonair and unassuming, so *normative*, that the politeness and good manners are unbearable. In taking the logic of civility to an extreme, the perpetrators turn them into a tool of oppression, punishing the Farbers for failing to behave themselves in accordance to the standards of their class. In fact, Paul uses George's reaction as a justification for things going awry: "But you have to admit, George, the slap in the face? It really wasn't the most appropriate reaction." How do you respond to someone who just attacks you, but then extends his hand as an apology? This dynamic tension between the doing and the saying, between the effects of violence and

the normalcy from which it originates, forms an intrinsic part of the "game": it is "funny" not because it is comical, but because it is strange or unexpected—although, as the film makes a point in demonstrating, it is not at all unconventional,

As soon as Paul and Peter's intentions become apparent, George asks them why they are doing this, to which Paul answers "Why not?" The logic seems simple: because we can. But like George, we are not satisfied with the answer, so the second time he asks them, Peter answers "I don't know" before Paul responds ironically by listing all the classical, well-wrought explanations of psychotic behavior: an unhappy, deprived childhood, indifferent parents, unresolved sexual disorders, drug addiction, jadedness, etc. Of course, like George, we don't believe any of it. Paul confirms our doubts by asking, "what would you like to hear? What would make you happy?" and as Paul mockingly continues to supply explanations for their actions, George exclaims, "I get it. Isn't that enough?" We get it indeed: the fact that it *is* happening and *can* happen without a rational explanation (in terms of individual or group psychosis and the structures of alienation with which it is traditionally associated) is what makes the Farber's predicament (and by extension, ours) all the more terrifying. The situation might be familiar (we have witnessed it through countless re-enactment of the same scenario), but it does not correspond to any of the classical explanations that inform our collective understanding of the causes for violent behavior. In this particular sequence, our response is reflected visually in a precisely crafted shot of the family as they sit, speechless and powerless, in painful contemplation of their plight. Audiences approach a genre film with the expectation that it is going to abide by an evolving set of conventions

shaped by the dialogic exchange between filmmakers and moviegoers. As examined in the previous section, for the horror genre, these conventions usually pertain to the ways in which the film transfigures our anxieties in the form of a supernatural monster or psychopath representing a repressed surplus or excess, i.e. an "abnormality," which needs to be appropriately addressed or terminated before order can be restored. As a self-reflexive work of art, *Funny Games* investigates the classical paradox that allows us to relate to and engage with the fictional world (rooted in theories of "disbelief" or "make-believe")[12], by situating horror in the everyday and presenting it as a banality that is deceitfully "normal."

*Funny Games* plays with the all-too classic formula of presenting a "normal" situation disrupted by the appearance of a supernatural monster or deranged killer, which stands for the repression of sexual energy caused by an overbearing bourgeois normativity. But the film situates this excess not only in the victimized family as dictated by convention but in the perpetrators as well: the shyness and politeness that characterizes the seemingly innocuous visitors is on par with the Farbers' performances of idyllic domesticity (the musical guessing games, the wife laboring in the kitchen while the husband and dutiful named-after-his-father-son rig the sailboat). In lieu of presenting a threat in the form of otherness or abjection embodying a transgression of natural norms and/or accepted behaviors—which we can easily dispel through distance and differentiation—*Funny Games* suggests that the danger does not stem from a "return of the repressed," but from what is exceedingly normative. In this sense, the threat, and the

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[12] For a comprehensive critique, see Carroll, "Metaphysics of Horror, or Relating to Fictions", Chapter 2 of *The Philosophy of Horror*.

structures that enable it, are not *foreign,*[13] but native or immanent to sanctioned codes of societal behavior. To that effect, Atkinson points out that *Funny Games* suggests "a family is as endangered from within as from without" (23). "The horror, the horror," as Conrad's Kurtz cries out, is co-opted by the workings of an increasingly "enlightened" or "civilized" society through capitalist exploitation. Similarly, the film blatantly makes clear that, as moviegoers, we are complicit with the perverse ways in which contemporary Western culture sanctions certain forms of violence; more specifically, it criticizes the ideology that warrants the media industry to produce the images of torture and suffering we consume uncritically as entertainment and as a means to potentially sublimate our sadistic impulses.

We know the scenario all too well: hidden behind the façade, lurks a sadistic drive that needs to be satisfied; the film posits that this impulse is not only shared by the members of the audience, it is also the basic constitutive premise of the film. Even before any of the self-reflexive devices are enacted, the film already asks us what we want: do we want Paul and Peter to leave quietly and peacefully, or do we want them to refuse and the tension to escalate into the inevitable? The answer is obvious: without our desire to watch, there wouldn't be a film; without our desire to see *what* happens when they refuse to leave the film would not exist. But our voyeuristic impulses, our pleasures in seeing, are co-dependent on narrative resolution or closure and our capacity to immerse ourselves through the fantasy structures the narrative enables. *Funny Games*

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[13] Some critics, such as Wood, have argued that certain historical cycles of horror films not only positioned the threat as external to the family unit, but as being *literally* foreign: "horror exists, but is un-American" (29).

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denies us both, and therein lies the viciousness, and effectiveness, of its critique. On the one hand, it brutally denies us any type of catharsis even after it teases us on numerous occasions through a series of carefully orchestrated shots and sequences. On the other, it perturbs the sanctity of our position as spectators by reminding us that we are the instruments of our own demise. The cinematic frame that traditionally serves as the vehicle through which we can project our introjected wishes and desires from a relatively safe distance acts as a mirror, wherein our wish to witness destruction and suffering on screen is directly reflected on us. We are not merely *witnesses* but *participants* as well, yet, similar to the "Deconstructionist" of *Adaptation*, we are both victims and executioners. Our desires as viewers remain unfulfilled: not only are we denied the pleasure of seeing violence (why else would do we willfully go to watch a movie whose plot and premise have been widely publicized through its various metatexts and paratexts—trailers, interviews, reviews, etc.?) because all of the actual violence happens off-screen, but we are also denied the satisfaction and release of a cathartic resolution. The film makes us suffer and once the pain sets in, we keep on looking in order to find some form of relief, in vain.

In eliding the distinction between "normalcy" (conventionally represented by the heterosexual couple and the bourgeois family) and "abnormality" (traditionally embodied by the monster or psychopath) as part of its premise, *Funny Games* pre-empts the possibility of a return to order from the onset. In a first instance, our desire for narrative closure is put in doubt when Paul lays down the conditions of the bet regarding the Farber's survival, turns to the camera and asks us: "What do you think? You think they

stand a chance?  You're on their side aren't you? Who are you betting on, hm?" We might be betting on the Farbers, but at this point, through the sudden alienation produced by Paul's Brechtian address, our hope for a satisfying resolution are put in jeopardy.  As theorized by Brecht, the *Verfremdungseffekt* of "alienation effect" aims to remind the spectator she is watching a play and draw her into disinterested contemplation.  We are suddenly taken out of the passive, phantasmagoric space of spectatorship as our desires, voiced through Paul, speak back to us.  And while the situation conforms to our expectations of horror, we suddenly realize that its denouement may not conform to our wishes.  As an audience, we are made aware that, as Chris Justice aptly point out, "the narrative is ultimately controlled and driven by the two thugs (after all, they orchestrate and direct the funny games)."  The *Verfremdungseffekt* produced by Paul's intervention acts as an *interpellation* of some sorts, wherein we realize the narrative is not going to unfold according to our desire.  Nonetheless, we are not kept at an emotional distance for long as our affective involvement with the Farbers' predicament only increases throughout the narrative.  In fact, the film alternates between distancing and rapprochement techniques alongside a strategy of temptation and denial, wherein it raises our hopes for resolution and/or a return to order only to mercilessly shut them down.

*Funny Games* proceeds by using techniques of suggestion inscribed within diegetic principles as well as by performing outright violations of narrative conventions. Arguing that "we're not up to feature film length yet," Paul asks Ann to play "The Loving Wife," a cruel game wherein she has to choose how her husband will die: "by the knife or by the gun." George urges her not to play along, that "it's enough", to which

Paul responds by asking Ann whether she wants to keep playing. Once again, Paul turns to the camera and asks us our opinion: "Do you think it's enough? I mean, you want a real ending, right? With plausible plot development don't you?" As she fails to answer, Paul tells Peter to "show her how the game is played" and begins to use the knife on George (off-screen). Ann's despair, frustration, and anger mark her facial expression. Paul tells her that she can spare him the pain if she plays along, and she eventually complies. Paul makes her kneel and recite a prayer. The placement of the characters in this scene position Paul as "God" to whom Ann is praying, visibly situating him as the prevailing authority with regards to processes of subjectification and narrativization. He has not only made Ann his subject, by subjectifying her and her family to humiliating acts of physical and psychological torture, but us, the audience, as well. However, the narrative temporarily evades his control when Ann, asked to recite the prayer backwards, suddenly grabs the gun and shoots Peter, whose splattering body is propelled against one of the walls in the only on-screen act of violence of the entire movie. His face slightly sprayed with Peter's blood, Paul stares and laughs in disbelief. He soon regains his wits, grabs the rifle from Ann, hits her with it, and frantically searches the room for the remote control. He finds it underneath the loveseat's pillows (expectedly) and, as the shot cuts to a close-up shot of the device, he presses the rewind button. And there, asserting his transcendental authority, Paul causes the entire sequence to play backwards, thus unequivocally violating narrative conventions inscribed within a framework of linear time. This not only gives him the opportunity to "replay" the scene according to *his*

desire and to the detriment of our hopeful expectations—and at the same time eliminating the possibility of any "plausible plot development."

This scene intensifies the tension between fantasy and reality; although the obvious artificial continuity of the narrative is disrupted, it nonetheless has "real" consequences in terms of how we process the scene affectively. It also foreshadows, albeit heavy-handedly, the manipulative nature of narrative construction. And while this particular instance aggressively transgresses the rules, the film is also exploitative when it seemingly complies with diegetic conventions. In the first part of the film, there are pointed references to a knife Georgie borrows from his mother to rig the boat. A particular shot focuses on the knife falling from the deck onto the hull when George goes to check on the reason why their dog suddenly stopped barking. In thus drawing our attention to the knife's existence, we are lead to believe it is going to play a critical role in the narrative. Therefore, in one of the concluding scenes where Ann, the last survivor of the family, is led to the boat her hands tied and her mouth gagged, we imagine—or rather wish against all possible hope—that she is going to find the knife, free herself, and avenge her family as the paradigmatic "Final Girl"[14]. Lying on the hull, she indeed finds it and starts to cut through her ropes while Paul and Peter seem at first oblivious, thus setting the stage for a climactic finale. But in the next shot, Paul notices her using the knife and Peter confiscates it; and shortly thereafter, she is pushed overboard in a gesture that is so anodyne, it not only falls short of providing a satisfying resolution, but it is also

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[14] See Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, wherein she defines the Final Girl as a strong female character who succeeds in staying alive throughout the slasher's murderous rampage and will "stop screaming, face the killer, reach for a weapon, and address the monster in his own terms" (48).

frustratingly anti-climactic.  Even as the knife acted as a tease; by the time we reached this point in the film, it would have been extremely foolish to believe that the Final Girl sequence will unfold according to convention.  And while this scene marks the end of the Farbers' tragedy, the narrative lead by the two tormentors progresses, unconcerned and imperturbable.

The cumulative effect of the film's critical self-referentiality suggests that the dismissive attitude of the characters mimics our own, as it potentially expresses how we have apparently grown desensitized to representations of violence. This idea is further marked in the film's final sequence, where Paul and Peter dock the boat at the Thompsons', another family introduced earlier in the narrative.  When Paul enters their house and asks Mrs. Thompson for some eggs on behalf of Ann, the narrative comes full circle as he throws one final smirking glance at us.  This last scene further suggests that the violence enacted by Paul and Peter, as proxy of the consuming public's thirst for such spectacles, is marked by a sense of cyclical infinity.  The ending effectively bookmarks the portion of the cycle we have witnessed and participated in—from the Berlingers to the Farbers, and eventually towards the Thompsons—suggesting that the recurring violence is a direct effect of our own desire to continually seek it out as popular form of entertainment.

## The Realities of Horror

*Funny Games* does not provide an explanation, nor does it offer any closure or resolution to the violence via catharsis.  In other words, the film does not provide the structures that aim to rationalize the conflict it stages, nor does it dispel the associated

tensions. Although it rides on feeding our sadistic impulse to *witness* violence exerted on others, we are also denied the sadistic pleasure of voyeurism. Instead, through a series of carefully sequenced close-ups, off-screen tactics, and enduring long shots, the Farber's suffering becomes our own.

One of the first games Paul and Peter play after they "bet" with the family is to wager on whether Ann's body is as Paul believes, "flawless," or if it contains any "Jelly Rolls"; in order to determine the outcome, they politely ask George to request of his wife to take her clothes off. As we've seen in Mulvey's critical examination of the pleasures of narrative cinema, the objectified female body is a site for the male's fetishistic consumption through the gaze. However, in lieu of objectifying Ann by framing the unveiling of her body and producing an occasion for scopophilic enjoyment, the camera emphasizes the humiliation and agony of the family by providing close-ups of their faces. Following the work of Clover, Williams explains that horror films are capable of perturbing traditional viewer-gender associations by making spectators oscillate between sadistic (traditionally male) and masochistic (female) positions. By undermining the structures of seeing that provide sadistic pleasure (sexual *and* violent), *Funny Games* prompts the viewer to identify with the powerlessness of the (feminized) victims: Anne, Georgie, and George, the castrated father.

Prefacing the scene, Paul plays "Cat in the Bag" with Georgie, which consists of placing the boy's head in a pillow case for two purposes: to torture him until his parents comply and to blind him as not to see his mother's naked body—in a seemingly sympathetic gesture. This game metaphorically foreshadows the ways in which the scene

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undermines the Oedipal underpinnings of the male gaze. In thus subverting the mechanics of the gaze as delineated by Mulvey and critiquing the classical Oedipal structures of subject identification (already implied by the figure of the castrated George), the film unsettles the paradigmatic fantasy of cinematic enjoyment.

As some critics have noted,[15] *Funny Games* is a sadistic movie, but what is perhaps even more disheartening, even frustrating, is that as an audience, we are denied any masochistic pleasure as well because the film disrupts the fetishistic fantasy in which such pleasure can occur. Williams argues that in the horror film, audiences alternate between sadistic and masochistic positions according to classical gender associations of male perpetrator and female victim. But Williams' argument relies on a Freudian-Lacanian paradigm of castration anxiety, sexual difference, and the gaze, a psychoanalytic framework that *Funny Games* expressly rejects. In "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of Cinema," Gaylyn Studlar addresses the shortcomings of Freudian-Lacanian approaches by referring to Deleuze's study of Masochism in *Coldness and Cruelty*, arguing that a masochistic approach considers the pre-Oedipal stage of psychosexual development, which has often been overlooked in feminist-psychoanalytic approaches emphasizing sadistic models of spectatorship. Taking this as a starting point, my approach focuses more particularly on the concept of the "contract" between the masochist and his/her tormentor as that which allows for phantasmatic enjoyment. Using this as segue towards investigating the relationship between the audience and the film

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[15] Reviewing the remake for *The New York Times* for example, A.O. Scott argues that Haneke's "cinematic sadism … seeks to stop us from taking pleasure in our won masochism."

genre, I will then explain how the aesthetics of *Funny Games* effectively violates the terms of the masochistic fantasy, thus eliding the possibility for pleasure.

The horror film subscribes to the masochistic fantasy delineated by Deleuze in enacting an aesthetic of "waiting and suspense." The object of the fantasy is not pain proper but the pleasure-pain complexity that is experienced in pure waiting; as Deleuze explains, "For at the same time pain fulfills what is expected, it becomes possible for pleasure to fulfill what is awaited" (71). Thus, according to Deleuze, the masochist aesthetic is based on disavowal, suspense, waiting, fetishism and fantasy (72), wherein the masochist needs to uphold the fetish, the phantasmagoric space, the transfiguration of the real and the ideal in the fantasy. To that effect, Studlar explains, "the formal structures of the masochistic aesthetic—fantasy, disavowal, fetishism, and suspense— overlap the primary structures that enable classic narrative cinema to produce visual pleasure" (775).

The first section above examined how the genre film is a ritualistic experience that is equally shaped by the interests of filmmakers and spectators alike; as Schatz points out, "whereas the genre exists as a sort of tacit 'contract' between filmmakers and audience, the genre film is an actual event that honors such a contract" (691). The ritualistic configuration of the genre experience is in many ways analogous to the masochistic fantasy insofar as it implies a contractual agreement between two parties: "The masochistic contract generates a type of law which leads straight into ritual. The masochist is obsessed; ritualistic activity is essential to him, since it epitomizes the world of fantasy" (Deleuze 94). Moreover, in the masochistic fantasy, it is the masochist that

draws the clauses of the contract, and the tormentor is not necessarily a sadist living out her sadistic fantasy, but rather, through contractual agreement, she forms an integral part of the phantasmagoric realm of the masochist. Freeland argues that in horror, the role of the audience is much more participatory in shaping the genre than any other forms of popular entertainment. In this sense, like the masochist, the viewers draw the ways in which they desire to live out the fantasy provided by the ritual experience of horror. Earlier, we've reviewed the ways in which genre conventions are reinforced and evolve according to every instantiation. The experience, like the fantasy, is only effective if it relies on these precise sets of conventions. The horror film, like any genre film, is considered "successful" (measured by the box office and reviews from audiences and critics alike) if it delivers what the audience expects, if it plays according to the "rules" as Schatz explains using the analogy of a game. However, *Funny Games* does not play by the rules: it does not uphold the contract because its aesthetic violates the formal structures of disavowal, fantasy, and suspense. Paul's Brechtian's interventions remind us that we are watching a movie; we are not only repeatedly taken out of the phantasmagoric space, but we are also expressly aware of the inevitable outcome, ever since the first instance wherein Paul asks us "you're on their side aren't you?"

The scene of Ann's undressing enacts and metaphorizes a strategy of veiling and unveiling that "lays bare" the filmmaking apparatus and the conventions of the genre. On a first level, the photography is quite bare, if not stark—free of ornamentation. The majority of still shots consist of deep focus long shots and close-ups, and the film proceeds in a succession of long takes; there is no fast-editing or montage as usually

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practiced in most instantiations of the horror genre, and apart from the two pieces from Handel and Naked City played within the narrative sequence, there is absolutely no music. Interestingly, the film's austerity and the ways in which it continually draws attention to the artifice of its own creation intensify the actuality of the emotions it conveys, even as it exacerbates the tension between reality and fiction.

The aesthetic of *Funny Games* is brutally realistic to the point where representation becomes "realer than the real"; in the words of one critic, "one of the more provocative statements of Haneke's films is that representation is as real as reality itself—perhaps even more so, since representation is deliberate, pre-selected, *chosen*, while reality is ephemeral and subject to chance." The film minutely orchestrates every possible detail to enhance the experience, wherein the fiction of others becomes the audience's reality. As we've seen, not only do we *feel* the (fictitious) suffering of the Farbers', we also *live* it through time as duration.

One of the binding characteristics of the horror genre is that films aim to produce vivid emotions and sensations, and that to some extent, their efficacy and appeal are measured in the affective responses they are capable of drawing from their audiences. According to Williams, "the success of these [Body] genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (4). Yet, Carroll has argued that theories of character-identification relying on the ways in which audiences duplicate the emotions of the characters on screen are problematic. Although we might share similar emotive responses with the characters (e.g. fear), Carroll argues "there is an asymmetry between the emotional state of characters and that of audiences"

(91).   Rather, he suggests that we respond emotively to the situations on screen by *assimilating* and *assessing* the situation from both an internal (that of the character) and external (i.e. spectatorial) point of view.  In other words, our emotional response might not only reflect the anguish or fear of the character but also express the anguish we feel towards witnessing someone under attack.  This implies that the terror or anguish we feel as an audience is particularly acute because we are compelled to respond emotionally on two supplemental layers of affective involvement.  In *Funny Games*, our potential to respond affectively to the situation of the characters on screen is further acerbated in two distinct, yet interrelated aesthetics: in the ways in which the camera focuses on the Farber's facial expressions in a repeated series of close-ups, and in the ways in which the film plays with time and duration.

In his Bergsonian approach to cinema, Deleuze calls the "affection-image" the face as emphasized in the close-up shot: "*the affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face…*" (*Cinema 1* 87, his emphasis).  The affection-image expresses thought, desire, and affect; expressions that are sometimes buried elsewhere in the body (87-88).  Referring to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Deleuze also posits that multiple faces, or a succession of various close-ups, provide a more expressive intensity of affect (89). Taking Deleuze's ideas as a point of departure, the face expressively condenses the various sensations of the body.  Consequently, the close-up, in providing an exclusive shot of the face, reveals an affective intensity unparalleled by any other shot in the cinema.  *Funny Games* utilizes the close-up, multiple and serial, to intensify the expressions of pain and suffering of the Farbers.  In turn, our affective response to the

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Farbers' plight is particularly intense as a result of the two layers—internal and external—through which we respond to the situation, an emotive force which Deleuze accurately synthesizes in the following terms: "[t]he affection-image … has its limit the simple affect of fear … But as its substance it has the compound affect of desire and astonishment—which gives it life—and the turning aside of faces in the open, in the flesh" (101). In a number of instances, such as when Paul mockingly responds to George's request for an explanation and in the stripping scene mentioned above, *Funny Games* provides successive and/or simultaneous shots focusing on the family and their facial expressions at the extreme limit of fear and suffering, "giving it life," as Deleuze would say, which we internalize (by perceiving the situation through the point of view) and conceptualize cognitively (and empathetically) through an external knowledge of the situation.

The extreme long take of the Farbers' living room following the death of Georgie is particularly distressing and emphasizes the affective, sensational potential of the bare and stark cinematics of the film. Deleuze provides us with the means to understand how this scene plays with our perception of time and makes it exceptionally terrifying. As explored in Chapter 2, Deleuze associates modern cinema (Italian Neo-Realism, French New Wave, etc.) with the concept of the "time-image," wherein time reveals itself in a pure form, as *durée* or duration. The time-image produces a crisis in our very understanding of time, replacing the sensory-motor schema of the movement-image and creating a cinema of sensation with an importance placed on seeing. Although Deleuze does not address the implications of the long take as a particular time-image, it can be

seen as deterritorializing our normal conceptions of chronological time by providing a more direct sense of duration.

The long take begins when Paul returns with Georgie after the boy's unsuccessful escapade. Handing the gun Georgie found to Peter, Paul asks with whom he wants to begin. As he lets Peter decide, he announces he is going to get something to eat and the shot cuts to Paul entering the hallway and pans as he enters the kitchen. The camera is stationary as he is looking for food while the TV, which has been playing the entire time, blares the sounds of a car race. When a gunshot followed by screams of agony are heard, the camera remains on Paul as he selects items from the refrigerator, looks for a knife, and prepares a sandwich. The scene then jumps to frame the TV screen for almost a minute, which is sprayed with blood, displaying images of racing cars with audio commentary and engine sounds to match. The next shot is a wide-angle shot of the Farber's living room. In the center of the frame, behind the sofa, Ann, bound, is kneeling on the floor, her head slightly bobbing. On the bottom left, George's inert legs edge out of the sofa, suggesting that he is lying face-up on the floor. The blood-splattered TV set occupies the right margin of the frame. Georgie's motionless body is lying on the floor next to the TV console, his head hidden behind it, making the source of blood physically obvious. As an audience, we are forced to contemplate this lifeless tableau of the decimated Faber family for almost two minutes, as the shot remains stationary and the TV flickers images from the car race while it spews commentary and the revving sounds of motors. There is no movement in the frame apart from Ann's slight bobbing of the head for half a minute. During the next minute, Ann slowly lifts her head up, and then,

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painfully stands up.  She starts hobbling around the sofa towards the TV set, her feet still bound.  The camera slightly pans as Ann circles the sofa and hobbles in front of her dead son's body, revealing an extensive spray of blood above and behind the TV set.  She makes her way to the TV, gyrates, kneels, and reaches out with her bound hands to turn the television off.  The commentary and the engine sounds end; the screen goes silent while Ann is still, breathing heavily, her head down, kneeling for another 40 seconds until she hears the sound of a car and gate outside.  She turns her head as if listening attentively and whispers: "They've gone."  The next minute elapses as she tries to rip the tape that binds her wrists with the corner of the TV console, in vain.  She whispers "I'll get a knife," and for the following minute, we watch as she painfully tries to get up.  She then hobbles her way out of the living room to the left of the frame, the camera panning to follow her skipping across the living room, and we can see George's hand rise behind the couch, gripping the loveseat to his right.  He uses it to raise his upper body against the loveseat.  And for the next minute and a half, we are again forced to watch as he sits, motionless, his face shadowed.  He starts sobbing and Ann re-enters the living room to console him, which lasts another minute and a half, when Ann announces: "Gotta get out of here," and for the next two minutes, she helps him to get up and supports him as they make their way out of the living room.  The scene lasts approximately ten minutes.

This extremely long take is a time-image in the sense that it does not operate along the sensory-motor schema of the movement-image (time is not subordinate to the action, to Ann's moving about the living room).  And while it definitely emphasizes the act of seeing (contemplating Georgie's decapitated body, noticing George's body, gazing

at Ann's restricted movements), the long take can be further associated with what Deleuze calls a "chronosign" wherein the past (the injury sustained by George, Ann's undressing, and the death of Georgie), and the future (the foreshadowing of George's death as his body's position is symmetrical to that of his son and the aborted escape implied in Ann's failure to untie herself), virtual and actual are all present.  But it is also as a "noonsign," a world of thought-images made possible by duration, and a "lectosign," where sound and image operate along separate visual continuums in the disjunction between what we hear (the sounds of the race, the gunshot) and what happens on-screen (Paul in the Kitchen).  But in the sequence, the only continuous image is the sound of the monotonous car race; there is no indication as to how much time has elapsed between the gunshot and the subsequent shot of the blood-splattered television set.  There seems to be a further disconnect between Paul and Peter announcing that they are leaving and Ann reportedly *hearing* them leave.  In thus combining elements of the time-image, the long take extends both cinematic time and chronological time into duration.  As an audience, we are not only forced to come to grips the direct effects of what happens off-screen (Georgie's death) without catharsis, but we are also drawn to directly experience and *relive* the plight of the Farbers as the long take simultaneously and visually incorporates their past, present, and future.

### *Difference and Repetition*, or, The Politics of Reproduction

In denying the possibility for pleasure, whether sadistic or masochistic, *Funny Games* undermines the promise of the popular horror genre.  It enacts a visceral critique of the scopohilic structures of visual pleasure by subverting the mechanics of the gaze

and reversing the dynamics of horror and terror. The aesthetics of the film also aim at redirecting the suffering of victimization onto the viewer through techniques that blend self-referentiality, affect, and duration. Consequently, the film is neither funny nor is it entertaining. The blatant self-awareness with which it indicts the audience and criticizes entertainment value may account for the wide pendulum of opinions between those who revere the film and those who vilify it[16].

Schatz explains that "A genre … represents a *range of expressions* for filmmakers and a *range of expectations* for viewers" (695), but the aesthetic expression of *Funny Games* does not meet the expectations of the viewers. Rather, it *exploits* the expectations of the audience, by expressively subverting them. Yet *Funny Games* is not only exploitative of our desires, it also points the finger at us as it attempts to teach us a lesson. As we've seen in the above exegesis, the film questions the tendencies towards gratifying the expectations of the audience, an audience who is complicit in making violence and torture a spectacle for consumption, an outlet in which the excesses of a culture are safely sublimated and digested uncritically.

By laying bare the structures of what passes as entertainment, the film echoes Adorno's and Horkheimer's famous critique of the culture industries. Paul's observation that "you shouldn't overlook the value of entertainment," is a satirical jab at the exploitative tendencies of the modern cinematic industry, which present forms of pain and torture *as* entertainment. While Edlestein queries why "America has gone nuts for bloods, guts, and sadism," the film proposes that because we have increasingly become

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[16] On popular movie review sites such as *rottentomatoes.com*, the original gets a 6.3 rating (out of a possible 10), while the remake a 5.6.

numb and desensitized, the subversive potential of visual horror has exhausted itself.[17]

However, paradoxically, *Funny Games* succeeds in expressively and purposely tormenting us to make us *feel* how implicated and complicit we are in sanctioning the dubious ethics of producing and consuming images of tortures and violence without showing any bloodshed on screen.  In this sense, the film "returns" to the very idea of horror *as* a terrifying experience, and shows that the spectacular emphasis of on-screen violence, i.e. violence in representation, is a distraction from the very realities of violence.

From a different perspective, when the *New York Magazine* reviewer calls Haneke's film a "senseless remake," he brings in another fundamentally critical aspect of *Funny Games U.S.*, and by extension of the horror genre and the cinematic industry, to our attention.  The subject of the film's critique and its self-referentiality may not be novel as some critics have pointed out—most obviously, the U.S. version is the faithful remake of an Austrian movie released a decade prior—but in a perversely righteous way, *Funny Games* succeeds in exploiting the exploitative. White explains that remakes are a common feature in the horror film genre (3), a genre, which according to Hutchings, evolves in sequels and cycles building on the originals' successes.  One could easily argue that there is no other genre in which remakes are more popular than in horror; the very recent (re)productions of the infamous and incredibly popular *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween* are not exceptions to this rule.  In many ways, remakes are the referential work *par excellence*, and like other type of cinematic references, the

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[17] Ron Tamborini and James B. Weaver III argue that in the evolution of the genre, "the most apparent development since the 1960s is the drive toward more graphic horror" (11).

motivations are manifold: from the producers/studios trying to capitalize on new audiences to the filmmaker wanting to pay homage to a noteworthy influence or mentor.

With films such as *The Eye* (mentioned in the chapter on the work of Tsai Ming-Liang) and *The Ring* (also starring Naomi Watts), American remakes of foreign horror movies are a notable recent trend, which speaks more particularly to the present case because they are usually produced under the assumption that, due to the language and cultural barrier—and related issues of national marketing and distribution—U.S. mainstream audiences may not be directly exposed to the original films. Nonetheless, producers and filmmakers interested in global expansion (of markets or audiences, depending on one's perspective) believe that the originals have the potential to interest the particular tastes of mass American moviegoers. Remakes in general almost always involve some type of transformation or transfiguration of the original, and in the case of foreign movies, they also require some work of translation and transposition. Expectedly, these changes might not be successful, and like movie adaptations, they run the risk of having fans of the original scream of betrayal.

Mike D'Angelo undoubtedly echoes many horror fans disgruntled judgment in suggesting that many Hollywood remakes of foreign thrillers, such as *The Vanishing*, "are usually watered down until they're safely innocuous." More particularly, in his review of recent remakes of horror and suspense thrillers such as *Psycho* and *Halloween*, Nathan Lee of *Film Comment* argues that one of the most shocking feature of Gus Van Sant's 1999 almost shot-by-shot remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is the green monochrome background during the opening credits (25). On one level, the specificity of

Lee's remark further validates Freeland's earlier observation regarding the sophistication (or obsession) of horror audiences and the dynamics of the relationship they hold with genre films. On a more pertinent level with regards to intertextuality and adaptation, far from decrying the new films' divergences from the originals, Lee's consideration acknowledges (and to some extent, celebrates) the regenerative, creative potential inherent to the process of adaptation, thereby providing an opportunity directors can create visions of horror that will fulfill audiences' expectations for renewed thrills.

With the remake of *Funny Games*, discussion moves away from concerns of betrayal or authorial intention since both films are not only made by the same director,[18] but are faithful shot-by-shot, line-by-line, narrative and formal copies of each other. A comparative screening reveals that amidst slight variations in rhythm, the timing of each shot and line delivery is grossly identical. As Lee points out, "Michael Haneke's remake of his own *Funny Games* (97) adheres to its model with such frame-by-frame fidelity that Van Sant's *Psycho* seems flamboyantly freestyle in comparison" (28). And while Lee believes Van Sant's slight divergences raise a new set of interesting queries, he argues, after admitting that he was not a fan of the original, that Haneke's exercise in repetition is utterly superfluous. In fact, Haneke's gesture raises another, radically different set of questions relating to texts and contexts because it succedes in producing identical effects while effectuating minute, yet precise, variations. In so doing, *Funny Games* addresses questions of global consumption as it intersects with cultural, national, and linguistic divides.

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[18] However, in the case of *The Vanishing* pointed out by D'Angelo, the Hollywood remake was effectuated by the same Dutch director.

Robert Koehler claims, "Haneke all along imagined and intended *Funny Games* as an American-produced film set in America involving American characters" (56). But regardless of whether *Funny Games* was *intended* as a drama set in the U.S., the critical gesture performed by the remake merits further examination. While there is clear difference in the operations of linguistic translation, transposition of setting, and transfiguration of actors at the level of *production*, the *action*, the diegetic operations of the film, is a pure *reproduction*, or repetition. In this case, the difference seeks to accommodate the linguistic specificity of the target audience, whereas the reproduction aims to annul the notion of cultural difference. The films underline the constructedness of cultural identity while simultaneously eliding cultural difference through the experience of cinematographic fidelity. In other words, it utilizes difference to render the similarities of affect and sensation more profound.

Taken as a pair, the films propose that not only are both contexts mirror images of one another, but also that the subject of the self-reflexive critique is symmetrical. In reproducing *à la lettre* the characters and the settings, the remake suggests that the Northeastern upper-middle class milieu is in many ways identical to its Western European counterpart. Consequently, the similarities also suggest that the dubious ethics of spectatorship and consumption the film criticizes are not particular to one cultural context or another. Together, the films suggest that unlike the vast majority of U.S. remakes, the aesthetics do not need to be drastically reconfigured or transformed to *accommodate* or *respond* to the specific tastes and values of audiences purportedly predicated on notions of national or cultural consciousness. In this sense, both films take

into consideration the global expansion of consumer culture predicated on a capitalist ideology that identifies and organizes target audiences in homogeneous wholes.

In their famous analyses of spectacular consumer culture, Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard have argued that global capitalism has conflated the modes of cultural production and consumption in a visual code of a signifying order[19]. In the global cinematic industry, this strategy has been most efficiently carried out through Hollywood's advertising and marketing power. By supplying a generic cultural product of mass appeal within multicultural communities, Hollywood's spectacular marketing factory aims to homogenize consumer preference and unilaterally shape demand to suit their agendas of cultural production[20]. But *Funny Games* not only criticizes the film industry, it also questions the role of audiences in their patterns of consumption.

We can read *Funny Games* as a thorough critique of U.S. cultural imperialism[21] and decry, as some critics have,[22] Haneke's stance as a European intellectual distancing himself from the ideologies he criticizes while at the same time exploiting them. But amidst speculations about authorial intentions, the films bridge cultural and national

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[19] While Debord observes that socio-political and economic realities are mediated through images of a spectacular nature (7), Baudrillard posits that "[t]he ideological function of the system of consumption in the current socio-political order can be deduced from the definition of consumption as the establishment of a generalized code of differential values and form the function of a system of exchange and communication" (94).

[20] For example, in his study of the video industries in Mexico City, Gabriel García Canclini reports on the ways in which the U.S. film industry's marketing strategies have successfully homogenized sites of cultural consumption. In particular, he notes that the predominantly young demographic of the video audience demonstrate a clear preference for the most recent releases in the Hollwyood thriller/action movie genre (*Consumers and Citizens* 116).

[21] For an internal critique of U.S. cultural imperialism see *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism* (Eds Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller. Duke University Press, 2007).

[22] In his review, A.O. Scott claims "that the new new version takes place in America is part of the point, since Americans—to a European intellectual this almost goes without saying—are especially deserving of the kind of moral correction Haneke takes it upon himself to mete out"

differences in juxtaposing both the respective contexts (Europe vs. the U.S.) and the institutions towards which the critique is directed (the European film industry vs. Hollywood). While Adorno, Debord, and Baudrillard were expressly critical of the capitalist ideologies of U.S. cultural imperialism, they also recognized that in "The Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the industries and institutions of their native Europe were widely complicit in building cultural empires in pursuit of nationalistic ideologies.

As *mirrored* works, both films intervene by leveling the playing field, suggesting that through their active participation in patterns of cinematic consumption, audiences on both sides of the Atlantic have by and large co-opted ideologies of media violence. As noted above, it could even be argued that Haneke himself is an active participant in this capitalist enterprise by exploiting the very structures he aims to criticize. Conversely, considering the original and the remake as *serial* works, the operations of translation, transfiguration, and transposition outline slight cultural variations that emphasizes difference in repetition (rather than repetition of the same) even if the aesthetic experiences produced by each film are in very close proximity—or identical—to each other. As Koehler suggests, in addition to the affect of one's native language, choosing particular actors for certain roles may reinforce the audience's feelings of empathy because of their engagement with the actor's work; not only are English-speaking audiences more perceptive of or sensitive to the language, but they have also developed a "closer" relationship to Tim Roth and Naomi Watts than they have to the work of

Susanne Lothar and Ulrich Mühe.[23]  The same could be said of the setting, wherein the barely noticeable distinctions—in landscape and architecture—account for geo-cultural variety to reduce the possibility of estrangement.  In this sense, *Funny Games* and *Funny Games U.S.* capitalize on affect and sensation by utilizing representational techniques of *rapprochement* even as they use narrative strategies of *distancing*, wherein one folds into the other to produce a unique sense of disorientation in the dynamics involving spectator, narrative, and character.  While the self-reflexive devices are supposed to jostle the spectator out of the phantasmic space of the filmic narrative by reminding her that she is watching a movie, the affection-image and the time-image further draw her into the Farbers' plight. "*L'effet de réel*," is not only reinforced through representational details but is also compounded with the sensation of "real" suffering actualized through time and affect.  These multiple folds, between fact and fiction, form and narrative, duration and sensation, play into the aesthetic experience of the films as individual, mirroring, and serial works.  Each film addresses, albeit somewhat minutely, the specificity of the context of their reproduction by generating individuated experiences of subjectivity; while the operations of translation, transposition, and transfiguration between the two versions bring these aesthetic experiences into proximity by bridging cultural, national, and linguistic differences.

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[23] In fact, the film seems attuned to the affective effect of the more infinitesimal details, such as the effect of substituting the Farbers' German Shepard in the original by a Golden Retriever.

# CHAPTER 4

## The Eschatology of Desire in Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires*

> "You like doing this? I don't mean simply me; I mean the thing in itself?"
>
> "I adore it"
>
> That was above all what he wanted to hear.  Not merely the love of one person, but the animal instinct, the simple undifferentiated desire: that was the force that would tear the party to pieces.
>
> -George Orwell, *1984*

As one of the most famous nightmarish projections of a negative utopia, the totalitarian regime depicted in George Orwell's novel embodies the epitome of a disciplinary society as articulated by Michel Foucault, which, through the relationship of power to its subjects, classifies, surveys, and disciplines all levels of existence.[1]  In Orwell's vision, "Big Brother" is the panoptic mechanism that ensures all citizens observe the strict rules of conduct.  In order to eradicate any form of individualized freedom, which could eventually lead to non-conformist and revolutionary impulses, a series of disciplinary mechanisms ensure that the population conforms to specific behavioral patterns.  In his later work, Foucault coined the term "Biopolitic" to delineate the ways in which technologies of power in disciplinary societies are centered on sexuality and the body.[2]  The totalitarian regime depicted in *1984* provides an instantiation of the biopolitics of power; sexual reproduction as well as the production and fulfillment of libidinal desires

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[1] See Foucault, Michel.  *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*.  Paris : Gallimard, 1975.

[2] In *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault explains that one of biopolitics' domain is "control over relationships between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live" (244-45).

are regulated, for they are perceived to be both potentially disruptive and possibly subversive to the good functioning of society. Encapsulated in the above epigraph, Winston's belief that the affirmation of instinctual expression and the fulfillment of libidinal desire is a means for political action is an idea that has been well circulated in the history of Western thought, perhaps most pervasively by the Marquis de Sade. Two centuries prior to the setting of Orwell's novel, in the aftermath of the French revolution, Sade wrote *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, in which he inserted the brief political pamphlet entitled "Français, encore un Effort si vous voulez être Republicains," an ironical response to Robespierre's post-revolutionary discourses. Popular interpretations of the work of the Marquis have attempted to show that his philosophy of sexual freedom can be read as a manifesto against the constraints and hypocrisies of the ruling class as well as the legal and moral constraints of institutionalized dogma.[3]

The view that the liberalization of sexual politics will eventually pave the way for equilibrating the balance of power in democratic societies is congruent with that of the various social movements of the 1960s that helped trigger the so-called "sexual revolution." Yet, it is precisely the socio-political legacy of this generation that is duly criticized in Michel Houellebecq's 1998 award-winning novel *Les Particules élémentaires*. Set in France between 1998 and 2009, the novel recounts, in a series of fragmentary encounters, the rather sordid existence of Bruno Clément and Michel Djerzinski, two half brothers. The former is an insatiable sex addict and consumer, while

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[3] This reading was perhaps first propagated by the surrealists in the 1920s, and re-appropriated by the various cultural movements of the 1960s on both sides of the Atlantic. It would be important to note, however, that recent scholarship has produced more complex and mitigated understandings of the Marquis and his work; for a comprehensive overview, see James Steintrager's "Liberating Sade" (*The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18.2 (2005): 351-379)

the latter is an introverted molecular biologist, and they both struggle—and fail—to find meaning in love and desire. Whereas Michel indulges his sexual urges compulsively, Michel rejects categorically his emotions and is disinterested in sex. As their lives unravel, the text makes it clear that their failures to adjust to the psychosexual realities of their daily lives can be traced to having been abandoned at an early age by their freethinking and free-loving mother, Janine. Their story is framed by a flashback narrative that is situated some fifty years later and explains how Bruno's depreciative views on love eventually lead him to discover a scientific formula that eliminates desire and affection as variables in the equation for sexual reproduction.

Through the lives of its two main protagonists, the text's sharp critique suggests that as the by-product of a free social democratic state, a sexually liberalized society—the direct heritage of the revolutionary ideals promoted in the work of the Marquis de Sade and its various interpretations—does not permit individuals to achieve a greater state of generalized emancipation because it merely *displaces* the mechanisms of oppression. In fact, consumer society perversely conflates the public and the private sphere by substituting the power structure of the disciplinary state with the not so different structure of power relations generated by a morally "unconstrained" society as propelled by the pleasure-driven economy of desire.[4]

To formulate a critique of contemporary society's model of sexual freedom, Houellebecq's novel draws from the various disciplinary discourses that have shaped

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[4] In "The Eclipse of Desire: L'Affaire Houellebecq," Jack I. Abecassis claims that it is the inclusion of the private discourse on sexuality in the public discourse of global marketing that has propagated the forms of oppressive violence characteristic of the neo-liberal economic model (811).

Western thought (philosophy, literature, theology, history, as well as the "hard" sciences of biology, chemistry, and of course, physics) and makes a considerable number of references to prominent intellectual figures (Aldous Huxley, Auguste Comte, Friedrich Nietzsche, etc.), which it interweaves into a wide-ranging argumentative stratagem.  This comprehensive panorama of discursive heteroglossia endeavors to give the narrative an authoritative agency, which, in turn. aims to validate the veracity of the novel's critique of desire.  By laying bare the problematics of desire in contemporary consumer society through the particular dialogical pattern of this multidisciplinary discourse, the rhetoric of *Les Particules élémentaires* conscientiously outdoes an "allegorical" reading of the Jamesonian "political unconscious"[5]. The Determinism that guides the multiple discursive fronts of the narrative is overt about its ideological function and the socio-historical context it addresses.  Yet, my contention is that it is specifically in this hermeneutic logic of determinism that one finds the weakness of the narrative's ideological critique of the politics of sexual liberty.  Likewise, I would further argue that the novel's implied criticism of the philosophical movements of the 1960s—the school of post-structuralist thought that specifically sought to undermine the absolutism of the Age of Reason and 19th century positivism—also falls short due to a reactionary and argumentative deployment misguided by a traditional form of historicism.  Ironically so, I will also demonstrate that it is inevitably through a deconstructive reading that *Les Particules élémentaires* provides a noteworthy illustration of the ways in which the problematics of sexual desire, far from being the inherited condition of the post-war

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[5] See *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.  Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981.

generation's advocacy for self-expression and free will, is actually the perverse product of a society of control operating under the economic model of spectacular consumption.

## Les particules élémentaires Reactionary Historicism:

## A Contested *History of Sexuality*

Ironically, the hermeneutic logic of *Les Particules élémentaires*'s naturalism points towards the demise of the determinist project. Similar to Zola's investment in the experimental novel's potentialities for the determination of the human psyche, Houellebecq's text gets entangled in the tropes of characterization drawn by the dialectics and poetics of the specific genre. Yet, in a self-conscious effort to go beyond Zola's mere characterization of social conditions the narrator expresses the need to draw specific genealogies as well as detailed narrative reconstitutions of the psychological portraits of the main characters. This is further problematized by the structure of the novel which, in lieu of merely attempting to draw what could be considered a striking cartography of male heteronormative dysfunction, the ambition displayed by the narrative is to clearly prognosticate, through historical reconstruction[6], the eschatology of all desire.

Varsava aptly argues by way of Karl Popper and Hayden White that the historical perspective projected in *Les Particules élémentaires* and in Houellebecq's other novels is guided by a very traditional historicism, where "history is governed by knowable laws and, collaterally, that the discernment of them enables the design and implementation of utopian initiatives." Varsava refers to Popper in arguing that contrary to the beliefs of Auguste Comte which Houellebecq endorses, "there are no hard and fast laws which

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[6] Jack I. Abecassis calls it a "hagiography" (804).

govern history because, simply enough, the conduct of people—the "human factor"—is contingent and unpredictable over time (163). In fact, it could be argued that historicism—as opposed to new historicism insofar as it lays claim to objective truth of the past—is animated with the same prevalent naturalism that informs much of the novel's determinism. Like Zola's own predispositions, *Les Particules élémentaires* similarly promotes a rather naïve view regarding the irrefutability of scientific discourse; a prevalent viewpoint in the 19th century, inherited from the Enlightenment which considered the concepts of truth and knowledge to be absolutes. In the second half of the 20th century, many post-structuralist thinkers have demonstrated that all knowledge, like truth, was situated—a view with which many "hard" scientists would agree—and this is especially applicable to history from a historiographical perspective. This view, of course, stands in sharp contrast to *Les Particules élémentaires*'s determinism, and consequently, it appears that the text draws an ideological critique of post-structuralist philosophy. In one notable instance, the narrator claims, "*Le ridicule global dans lequel avaient subitement sombré, après des décennies de surestimation insensée, les travaux de Foucault, de Lacan, de Derrida et de Deleuze ne devait sur le moment laisser le champ libre à aucune pensée philosophique neuve, mais au contraire jeter le discrédit sur l'ensemble des intellectuels se réclamant des « sciences humaines"* (314). In this sense, the novel's ideological affiliation is concurrent with the reactionary stance of the "*Nouveau Philosophes*" who have succeeded the generation of Foucault and Deleuze in France.[7]

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[7] For a critical outlook on the new generation's reconsideration of their forbearers' legacy, see François

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In particular, the novel addresses two strands of the genealogy of post-structuralist andcounter-enlightenment thought: the Marquis de Sade's philosophy of sexual freedom and the legacy of Nietzsche's posthumanist ideas in 20th century French intellectual history. On the one hand, Nietzsche's philosophy is disparaged through Michel's rejection of perspectivism (35) and Bruno's categorization of his worldview as "*nietzschéenne bas de game*" (214). . On the other hand, Sade's legacy is criticized through the figure of David di Meola, the son of one of Janine's lovers, a sadistic rapist and murderer, leader of a Satanist cult. Di Meola's acts of hyperviolence are portrayed to be directly inspired by the libertine lifestyle of Sade.  I would contend that if indeed the David's acts of murder and mutilation are to be considered from this perspective, then the narrative performs a rather biased and conservative reading—if not a gross decontextualized misreading—of Sade's oeuvre in an attempt to deride its philosophical pertinence.  Whereas Georges Bataille's reading of Sade emphasized the epistemological possibilities revealed by the Marquis' sexual poetics—a position later picked up by Foucault and the Tel Quel group—other writers such as Pierre Klossowski, whose influential reading runs similarly deep amongst the ranks of continental philosophers, considers Sade's philosophy of free will as a reaction to the materialism of the Enlightenment.  It appears then that the novel's reactionary reading of Sade specifically aims to further criticize the humanistic ideals of freedom and individual agency adopted by many French intellectuals of the 20th century.  Consequently, it could be argued that in

Cusset's *French Theory*, and especially the last chapter entitled "Meanwhile, Back in France…". Houellebecq's own allegiances are clearly situated along these lines; in "Houellebecq and the Novel as Site of Epistemic Rebellion," Delphine Grass points that "[c]ommenting on contemporary philosophy, [Houellebecq] declares: 'Matter, on its side, seemed to be flying away from success to success. Demagogical and simplistic thinking … is still imposed on us today" (qtd in Grass 6-7).

allegorizing the ways in which Sade's politics of sexual freedom quickly degenerates into mass murder, the novel vouches for a symbolic return to the more conservative values of a school of empiricist thought. Abecassis suggests that "[i]n reading Houellebecq, you know that you are, at heart, in the presence of a *Moraliste* of the French Augustinian variety (Arnault, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld)" (822). This *Moraliste*, I would claim, is a conservative reactionary; he abhors the ideals of individual freedom promoted by the post-war generation because he specifically—yet mistakenly—situates the root of the current state of moral decline in their egotistical endeavors for libidinal wish-fulfillment.

The reactionary ideology of the novel is narrativized by the reverence for the figure of Michel's conservative paternal grandmother, who embodies the archetypical model of self-denial and stoicism of a generation that lived through the hardships of war (48), and whose values have seemingly been lost by the ensuing generation. Manifested in part by the contempt she expresses towards her daughter-in-law (62), the critique is situated in the belief that this following generation, embodied by the couple Janine/Serge, was more preoccupied by the unrestrained pursuit of individual freedoms than by securing the well-being and caring of its offspring, "*Les soins fastidieux que réclame l'élevage d'un enfant jeune parurent vite au couple peu compatibles avec leur ideal de liberté personelle ...*" (28), an egotistical attitude with indelible consequences for the contemporary generation. Following Varsava's earlier observation, it could be argued the narrative is quick to point to the faults of a generation that it deems responsible for contemporary's society generalized state of despair without considering the larger socio-political context. Such judgments appear impulsive and are not the fruit of thoughtful

critical contextualization, for they entirely disregard the parallel political achievements of social others within that historical period. While women have actually acquired more social and political rights *vis-à-vis* the dominant patriarchy, the narrative reduces the social role of the female population to the traditional gender roles of submissive domesticity. To that effect, Varsava aptly observes "[t]he epilogue of the novel proclaims loudly that "THE FUTURE IS FEMININE," with the "feminine" defined by the naively gender-stereotyped qualities of general benevolence and self-abnegation. As Frédérick Hubeczjak, Michel's follower tells us, cloned humanity takes solace in a utopian realm that is 'as round, smooth, and warm as a woman's breast' (259)" (162-3). Thus, my mediated reading between text and context would contend that contrary to *Les Particules élémentaires*'s argument, the realization of greater individual freedom is not incompatible with social progress.

The philosophical allegiances of Michel are directly positioned in the positivism of Auguste Comte, as revealed in the later pages of the novel by a member of the future race of engineered humanoids (298), as well as indirectly, in the moral imperative expressed by Zola as part of the naturalist endeavor (25). Zola believed that in its existential mapping of the human psyche, the experimental novel could help determine the ways in which abhorrent behavior patterns could be corrected and/or reduced and that consequently it could serve political means in its pragmatic attempt to establish the guidelines for a healthy society (25-26). Michel, like Zola, believes in the potentiality of the experimental model to produce irrefutable knowledge, in his guiding principle for the achievement of his (anti)ontological project (298-299). Concurrently, Michel's own

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philosophical ideology strongly rejects Nietzche's relativism in favor of Kant's absolutism of reason and morality, which he considers to be the pillars of a healthy, happy, and long-living society (35). For Michel, the belief in science as an epistemological site for ontological experiences is unequivocal, and the novel's own narrative *raison d'être* bears witness to the triumph of Michel's scientific project as the result of his philosophical vision, a vision that categorically rejects a genealogy of western relativism which finds its primeval expression in Nietzche's writing.

Nietzsche particularly despised the religious and cultural imperatives of the Enlightenment which perceived that truth and knowledge could be attainable solely in a state of highest morality—which he called "*la niaiserie religieuse par excellence*" ["the utmost religious foolishness" (translation mine)] (36)—claiming that "morality in Europe at present is a herding-animal morality" (68). Nietzsche shows contempt for the boundaries on intellectual freedom by morality and argues that "truth" is not merely to be contained within the narrow limits of righteousness. Quite on the contrary, he contends that elevation of spirit can also be found in a "radical other": "severity, violence, slavery, danger in the street and in the heart, secrecy, stoicism, tempter's art and devilry of every kind,—that everything wicked, terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and serpentine in man, serves as well for the elevation of the human species as its opposite" (31). In parallel, Nietzsche's call for the Dionysian in man implies to some degree the expression and affirmation of instinctual drives and desires that transgress the morally permissible at that limit which separates human from animal, forces that can be both revolutionary and

cataclysmic—or, as Bataille has emphasized in his subsequent readings, both elevating and liberating.

Orwell's epigraph from *1984* encapsulates both Sade's philosophy of sexual transgression as revolutionary and Nietzsche's argument regarding the liberating potential of desire in the Dionysian. Yet, this return to the animal state of primeval desire is also sharply criticized in *Les Particules élémentaires*; while the character of Winston yearns for a return to animality as the pathway to social and political emancipation, Houellebecq's novel identifies therein the problematic root of the economy of desire in contemporary consumer society for which the spread of both Nietzsche and Sade's ideas are ostensibly complicit. Following dualist and transcendental perspectives, Michel finds particularly despicable the inherent violence of the animal kingdom, which he perceives as a rationale for accomplishing its total destruction: "*un holocauste universel*" (36). With specific regards to the libidinal economy of desire, the natural order replicates a socio-political hierarchy of class dominance by a much more violent and despotic hierarchy of dominance established through strength in combat (45-46).

In a praising review of *Les Particules élémentaires* Jack I. Abecassis argues that, following a view that was already advanced in *Extension du domaine de la lutte,* the perspective offered by the novel  equates unrestrained sexual liberty with  economic liberalism in the term "sexual liberalism," to advance the idea that the production of sexual desires and their fulfillment replicates quite faithfully the economic model of advanced capitalism. Quoting from *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Abecassis notes that, "the extension of liberty to sexuality is poisonous, for the more you extend liberty,

the more you risk and eventually lose" (810), which he then uses as a lens to consider *Les Particules élémentaires* as a discursive extension of the same sociohistorical critique of sexuality:

> In economies as in sex, free competition ("libéralisme") must thus necessarily bring about the pauperization and alienation of the majority. Consequently, "libéralisme sexuel" returns in late twentieth century to the baboon state: it is the winner-take-all world of the alpha male, which in Houellebecq's world is the Dionysian male rock and roll star. (811)

My main contention, however, is that the equation that underlines much of Houellebecq's critique of post-structuralist philosophy as well as the so-called "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and the supposed sexual liberalization—i.e. *"libéralisme sexuel"*—that ensued is based on a faulty conjecture derived from a subjective—both subjectified and subjectifying—reading of social history and contemporary philosophy. While it is undeniable that contemporary sexual mores are considerably less restrictive than they were at the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century, there is very little evidence to point out that the ideals of freedom advocated by the sexual revolution were realized and that libidinal desires have been "liberalized" to the extent that Houellebecq presupposes. Rather, I would argue that in this particular context sexual "freedom" is a mere illusion; the fabrication of a disciplinary society whose mechanisms of power have been clearly mapped out by Foucault.

In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault traces back to the 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ century the explosion of a discourse on sexuality, where sex talk penetrated all levels of and all classes of society: "[t]here was installed rather an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very

economy" (23). He is careful to link the proliferation of sexualities to discourse, a system of language, because it provided the necessary means for the disciplinary society to further classify all aspects of human existence, and hence, to further regiment it. Modern society creates the desires it supposedly abhors by naming them and classifying them only to exert better control over its members; this is why Foucault contends that by creating perversions—i.e. by naming them—such as homosexuality, fetishism, etc., beyond the category of the taboo, society "is in actual fact, and directly, perverse" (47). The supposed "liberalization" of sexual mores, the multiplication of sexual practices linked to their *recenssement*, had the quite perverse effect to implement an even more pervasive and wide-ranging structure of power and control. In other words, for Foucault the exponential growth of identifiable sexual practices in the last two centuries does not equal greater freedom. Quite the contrary, this discursive cartography allows for a more efficient exercise of surveillance. To go back to *Les Particules élémentaires*'s contextualization of modern society, it is not that a model of sexual liberalism—or economic liberalism for that matter—replicates the law of the jungle,[8] but rather, that it juxtaposes a multitude of sites "where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere" (49). In other words, far from having returned to the "baboon state" as Abecassis claims by way of Houellebecq, we have further sublimated our natural drives and instincts by mediating them through discourse

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[8] In a "Preface to Transgression," an essay originally published in 1963 for the "Hommage à Georges Bataille" edition of the journal *Critique* (reprinted in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed., Trans. and Intro Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977), Foucault is quite explicit in situating modern sexuality from Sade to Freud not in its "natural" manifestation, but rather in the "denatured" realm of language and literature: "it is not through sexuality that we communicate with the orderly and pleasingly profane world of animals; rather, sexuality is a fissure" (30).

and by providing the existing power structures the opportunity to map them out more accurately. With regards to the sexual liberties of the individual subject, the so-called "libidinal economy," it is not that contemporary sexual mores replicate the liberal economic model of advanced capitalism, but that contemporary social conditions preempt the existence of such "liberties." The emergence of new and diverse sexual practices may tend to the illusion that there is a greater sense of sexual liberty, but in fact, as Foucault puts it, it merely implies that they are being categorized and classified and thus, disciplined and regimented. Sexual liberalism, then, shifts from one perspective to another, from that of the "real" to that of the simulacrum, a sign that marks the very absence of what it signifies, and it is specifically in their property as simulacra that they are to be regarded as coercive.

### The Disciplinary Society and *La Société de Consommation*:
### Effectuating the Transition towards a "Society of Control"

While the discursive strategy that lays the ground for the novel's critique of post-structuralist thought is flawed and misdirected, the equation the text draws between an economy of sexual desire and a market economy merits our attention. , In particular, this parallel exposes quite appropriately the ways in which the mode of spectacular production that characterizes modern consumer society has hijacked the ideals of the "sexual revolution" to both perpetuate class hierarchies and impose an impressive regimen of control at both ends of the market cycle, from the production to the consumption of objects of desire both material and immaterial. Surprisingly so, *Les Particules élémentaires* introduces the reader to the *système des objets* as it relates to the

consumer objects of desire in a rather subtle way which undermines to some extent the overwhelming determinism of the oedipal narrative structure. While the title of chapter ten of the novel's first part announces "*Tout est la faute de Caroline Yessayan*" the text actually reads: "*tout était de la faute de la* minijupe *de Caroline Yessayan* (emphasis mine)" (53). By investigating the ways in which the displacement of the blame from human subject to consumer object acts upon the structure of the narrative, it could be argued that the critique of the novel appears to be directed *not* towards human agency— i.e. the "free will" and "liberalized sexuality" of the 1960s generation—but rather, following Foucault, towards a political economy that is able to control its subjects through its mode of production and distribution.

Following Foucault's work, in "Postcript on the Societies of Control," Gilles Deleuze has observed that in the late twentieth century era of advanced capitalism, the continuous (in)corporation of human existence—"the different determinant spaces of enclosure through which the individual passes"—marks the transition from a disciplinary society to a "society of control." Deleuze argues that in an age where the corporation has replaced the factory "enclosures are *molds*"; they are dynamic entities that exert control as *modulation* (3-4). In situating the crisis of desire in society in the petit-bourgeois corporate technocratic and bureaucratic lifestyle, it could be argued that both *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires* are noteworthy illustrations for such socio-political theorization, especially with regards to the ways in which various corporations *modulate* desire as a means to control it. The novel clearly indicates the ways in which the media exert a very early influence on the human understanding of

sexual desire (54-56), and consequently, the ways in which human beings both internalize the canons of beauty—e.g. Bruno's fetishization of youthful female bodies (104-105)—and simulate the sexual practices—e.g. hardcore pornography (240-244)—projected by the entertainment industry.

In *La Société du Spectacle*, Guy Debord considers that society has become a "spectacle" to the degree that "[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into a representation," thus affecting the ways in which society functions as a whole: "[t]he spectacle is not a collection of Images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (7). This hegemony of representation over reality, or in Saussurian terms of the sign over the referent, goes beyond the mere affluence of images in the media, rather it pertains to a world-vision that is objectifying, explains Debord (7), extending itself in such a way that "the spectacle is an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances" (9). In congruence with Debord's views, Jean Baudrillard argues in *The Consumer Society* that under the spectacular mode of production and consumption, goods and services are assigned *sign-value*—as opposed to *value* or *exchange-value*—which can be read as either signifying processes of communication or differentiation. From the latter perspective, the homogeneously heterogeneous patterns of consumption across the various social classes can be read as signs of *distinction*, whereas individuals covet and acquire objects (of desire) that correspond—and are made accessible—to their respective economic status. I would argue that, *in lieu* of submitting ourselves to the deterministic logic promoted by *Les Particules élémentaires*'s scientific discourse on natural selection, the access to

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objects of sexual desire—and the very fulfillment of that desire—is likewise regimented by specific signs of distinction, which is determined by a set of sign-values attributed to their appearance, attributes, and material possessions. As long as individuals belong to the privileged sexual class—e.g. those who embody the canons of beauty, wealth, and power propagated by the images of the media industry—they will be given the opportunity to fully realize their libidinal wishes. The vast majority—the old, unhealthy, and inadequately-equipped underclass—will continue to feel alienated by a system which continuously produces objects of desire that will simultaneously be kept under their reach.

Deleuze carries over the idea of Foucault's biopolitic by reminding us that in the disciplinary society power exerts control over the body *as* a body, "at the same time power individualizes and masses together," but that in the society of control society is outdoing the politics of inscribing individual bodies: "we no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair ... Individuals have become "*dividuals*," masses, samples, data, markets, or "*banks*" (5). Under this light, Michel's assessment of Bruno (178) cited in the early pages of this study can be read more allegorically. Taken out of the perspective projected by the determinist discourse that immediately follows it—rather than being considered as the human equivalent of a frustrated animal—Bruno can be perceived as a representative of that individual mass embodying a specific "target market" on whom society exerts control by producing homogenized forms of desires.

What is clear from this perspective is that far from a "natural" model of competition—i.e. Abecassis "Baboon state"—where, following Lacan, sexual desire is

experienced as need-fulfillment, the spectacular consumer society has "mediated" desire by sublimating our instinctual drives and imposing a signified system of distinction. Read literally as a work of naturalism, Houllebecqu's *Les Particules élémentaires* fails as a global, determinist critique of the liberalization of sexuality because the problematic of desire is embodied by characters—Bruno and, to a lesser extent, Michel—whose pathologies/anxieties are clearly situated in the very individuality of the psychological portraits drawn by their respective biographies. The novel also makes an erroneous historical assumption regarding the very viability of "sexual liberty" in a modern consumer society mediated by the sign-value of images. Yet, while the novel falls short of responding to the challenge posed by Winston in Orwell's epigraph, it does provide for an insightful, if not telling illustration of the political economy of late capitalism as a Deleuzian "society of control".

**The Determinist Experiment: Oedipal Desire and the Male Prototype**

While exploring the intertextual map drawn by the novel, it is impossible to miss some of the direct and indirect references made to Emile Zola. What is most interesting—as perhaps a form of indirect referentiality—are the particular ways in which the novel re-enacts some of the methods articulated in the "Experimental Novel," Zola's foundational piece on the theory of the naturalist novel. As an avid—if not somewhat naïve—admirer of the scientific method of experimentation, Zola argues that a similar methodology could be applied to novels in order to trace the intellectual and emotional reactions of living beings to specific social phenomena as a means to unearth the "scientific truths" underlying human behavior. Zola bases his theory on the belief that there are both

genetic and environmental causes to explain human behavior, and that given specific information, one can determine the outcome of particular phenomena.[9]  And so, in providing ample detail with regards to both genealogy and socio-cultural context, *Les Particules élémentaires* apparently makes similar claims with regards to the ways in which the behavior patterns of its main protagonists can be determined by these pre-conditions.  Yet, Houellebecq also provides an extension to Zola's theory by providing direct scientific "commentary" to the narrative structure as a means to reinforce this deterministic viability.  Regardless of whether this scientific discourse is accurate, it procures a reliable alibi in producing what Roland Barthes has dubbed "*l'effet du reel*;" thereby substituting the signified with a referent, "at the very moment when these details are supposed to denote reality directly."  Hence, the scientific discourse that informs the natural determinism of the novel aims to bestow an aura of empirical irrefutability on the ways in which it situates the crisis of contemporary existence in the liberalized economies of sexual desire, whose anxieties are most remarkably personified in the character of Bruno.

The novel's narrative attempts to consider the figure of Bruno as an archetype of the modern male subject, arguing that even though his state of biological Being was particular to him and distinguished him from others, his values and desires are not different from that of the general population: "*Ses motivations, ses valeurs, ses désirs: rien de tout cela ne le distinguait, si peu que ce soit, de ses contemporains*" (178).

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[9] "And this is what constitutes the experimental novel: to possess a knowledge of the mechanism of the phenomena inherent in man, to show the manchinery of his intellectual and sensory manifestations, under the influences of heredity and environment … and then finally exhibit man living in social conditions produced by himself …" (20-21).

Although there is some definite value in Michel's observation, I would argue that because of the determinist subtext that informs the novel, the reader is compelled to resist this generalization as it is articulated by his brother Michel through free indirect discourse. Michel is as psychologically-scarred as Bruno and thus, a highly subjective and partly unreliable narrator. By paralleling Bruno's sexual frustration to that of a frustrated animal incapable of fulfilling a basic need, Michel wrongly compares animal need to human desire.[10] and mistakenly conflates the complexities of human *mediated* sexual desires—the production of which is the result of a complex psychosexual development, rooted at birth but nurtured socially—with an animal's basic and *unmediated* instinctual drives.

As noted above, determinism takes into account both genealogy—the biological build up of the subject, its sex and its genetic relation to his parents—and the material conditions that constitute his environment as the forces that shape the individual's emotional and intellectual response to a wide range of social phenomena. While it could be argued that the character of Bruno can represent a prototype of heteronormative masculinity as shaped by his environment, he remains nonetheless a strongly individuated male figure whose genetic buildup is more particular than it is general and whose psychological pathos is largely determined by his relation—or lack thereof—to his parents. In other words, Bruno cannot be considered an archetypical subject of contemporary liberal society because in retracing his specific genealogical inheritance and by recounting the formative years of his childhood, the narrative individualizes,

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[10] Jacques Lacan reminds us the fundamental difference between animals and humans, is that while the former experiences biological *need* while the latter experiences psychological *desire*.

rather than generalizes, his subjectivity. The rationale for his uncontrollable and insatiable sexual desire and his castrated (in)ability to fulfill his libidinal wishes lies with his parents' characters and with his individuated failure to resolve the pre-oedipal and oedipal stages of sexual maturity. Consequently, the pervasiveness of Houellebecq's critique is greatly diminished. Even within the very narrow confines of the heteronormative perspective it presents, *Les Particules élémentaires* falters as a generalized critique of the liberalized economy of sexual desire because the psychological portrait[11] of Bruno as an individual subject—i.e. his heterosexual pathology established through his genetic buildup and the oedipal stages of his development an as infant—cannot be considered as representative of contemporary society as a whole.

The narrative draws particular attention to the genealogies of the two main characters by emphasizing the *necessity* to recount the particular fate—"*le singulier destin*" (24)—of Martin Ceccaldiand his daughter, Janine, whose characteristics, the narrator reveals, is *not* symptomatic of her socio-historical context. The narrative dubs her a "*précurseur*," "*un accélérateur de décomposition historique*", an intelligent and independent free-thinker with a clear inclination for sexual promiscuity (26). As half-brothers Bruno and Michel share rather unequally their mother's characteristic traits insofar as it appears that Michel inherited none of her libidinal drive (21). The narrative presupposes Michel was "rescued" from the perceived negative influence of his mother

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[11] Abecassis dismisses the determinacy of the main character's precise psychological portraits as "the weakest part of the novel" (805) without providing an explanation. This unwarranted dismissal is rather surprising in my view, especially as the narrative is itself quite transparent about the deterministic logic that motivates such precise descriptions.

by his father—described as a brilliant, yet solitary and introverted character with whom Michel shares most of his intellectual and physical characteristics. Michel was placed in the rather safe and healthy environment inhabited by his conservative and stoic grandmother until his adolescence (29-31), the "perfect" model of self-sacrifice, devotion, and love for Michel (91). In contrast, the son of an unwanted pregnancy,[12] Bruno was immediately sent to his grandparents and witnessed at a very early age their death and subsequently the various humiliations endured by a physically disadvantaged boy—"*l'animal omega*"—in boarding school (43-47). Unlike Michel's secure upbringing, where the paternal grandmother provided both solace and security in an edenic setting, Bruno suffered tremendously in the early stages of his psychological development from the irreparable consequences of the absence of any notable mother or father figure, as well as from the lack of a stable and safe environment.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the Oedipal stage is regarded as a critical phase of psychosexual development wherein children of both sexes[13] supposedly regard their father as a rival for the exclusive love of their mother, whereas the child simultaneously experiences sexual desire for the mother and the desire to kill the father. Freud considered the triangular structure to be fundamental to the development of adult desire. The successful resolution of this conflict was the key to successful sexual maturity, with boys and girls resolving the conflicts differently. As a consequence of the rivalry with

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[12] While Michel's birth is narrated from the perspective of his father, Bruno's is considered from the onset as a mistake. His presence is subsequently perceived to be a nuisance to both his parents, who considered that rearing a child was not compatible with their ideals of persona liberty (28).

[13] Although he originally considered the oedipal complex to male children exclusively, Freud later revisited his theory to include female children, arguing that the love experienced by daughters for their mothers was homosexual in nature. The weakness of this argument is what partly gave root to subsequent critiques of Freud's original paradigm.

the father, the male child experiences castration anxiety, which is resolved when the child is capable of accepting the presence of the father ("internalizing" his "law"), subsequently identifying with him and deflecting his libidinal attention to other objects of desire, most notably during puberty.

In the absence of both his parents, Bruno was not able to undergo the various stages of psychosexual development as determined by Freud. The classical oedipal triangle of son-mother-father never took shape, for on the first level, his mother as sexualized other only makes her appearance later in his formative years. Subsequently, the presence of his father was substituted for by Jane/Janine's various lovers; a multiplicity of other male figures, a multitude of rivals each competing for access to the mother. In other words, Bruno was unable to resolve the oedipal complex—and thus, reach sexual maturity—because not only did he not experience the awakening of sexual desire through the figure of his own mother, in the presence of an ever-morphing and continuously changing substitute male figure, he was also unable to identify with the father figure. This particular scenario is at the origin of Bruno's castration complex. Bruno's anxiety and fear of intimate contact is manifest in the depreciation of his own genitalia—i.e. its perceived inadequacy to provide sexual pleasure because of its diminutive size—and in his fear of vaginal intercourse. The latter can be traced in his preference for fellatio as well as other types of non-vaginal intercourse due to his abjection for female genitalia, which he repeatedly visualizes as his aging mother's. .

Certain critics of Freud thought that the Oedipus complex was not the sole determining factor in the child's development. Rather, the pre-oedipal period focused on

mother-child relationships that develops prior to the age at which the child is able to identify the sexual difference between his two parents. This phase is crucial in allowing the child to identify various objects of desire, whether they are parts of the body, their mother's or other "transitional objects" such as toys, which are neither. In this case, however, as accounts of this stage of childhood are not disclosed, it would be difficult accurately to trace the ways in which the lack of a maternal presence in his early existence has affected Bruno's psychosexual development. Yet there is the particular instance of Bruno's joy in riding his tricycle through the long dark corridor of his grandparents' house in Algiers that could provide some insight into the ways in which Bruno's childhood anxieties shape his failed encounters with the sexuality of both his mother and female others and are transferred, to some extent, to castration and his generalized fear of penetration:

> *Un corridor de vingt mètres traversait l'appartement, conduisait à un salon par le balcon duquel on dominait la ville blanche. Bien des années plus tard, lorsqu'il serait devenu un quadragénaire désabusé et aigri, il reverrait cette image : lui même agé de quatre ans, pédalant de toutes ses forces sur son tricycle à travers le corridor obscur, jusqu'à l'ouverture lumineuse du balcon. C'est probablement à ces moments qu'il avait connu son maximum de bonheur terrestre.* (38-39)

It is quite evident that this entire passage can be read as a metaphor for Bruno's own birth: the long dark corridor, "the effort," the eruption into the "light" of the day. As such, as he later reconstitutes this image in his head, the moment which, as an infant, he felt closest to his mother was the moment of his birth, which in consideration of the subsequent anxieties he suffered due to her devastating absence was perhaps the happiest moment of his life on earth.

On a slightly different but equally compelling level, Bruno's case also offers an exemplary literal model of Jacques Lacan's concept of desire experienced as a "lack." Heavily influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, Lacan first configures the subject as a linguistic sign (S/s), whose wholeness is split along that "bar" of repression between the conscious and the unconscious, or within the perspective of heterosexual pathos, the "dehiscence" which establishes sexual difference. Concurrently, Lacan argues that the subject is constituted by something missing, a "lack" which creates desire and which the subject will try to recover. The split can be configured as that infant who is separated form his mother and thus, that who seeks to reconstitute itself through the desire to recover its "whole," or as Judith Butler asserts from a historiographical definition of desire, to "return to an impossible origin" (370). Bruno is a subject whose anxiety is derived not only from the separation from his mother's body but, by her body's very absence, and the impossibility of recovering its wholeness. Under this perspective, Bruno's anxieties is carefully situated in the reconstruction of the birth metaphor above as an ontological beginning, at the very the moment at which he is separated—i.e. projected—from his mother's "(w)hole." All wordplay aside, Lacan's structural topography also configures the dynamics of Desire as a series of linguistic signs. Desire is that signifier "S" that never changes but that remains unfulfilled because it can never cross the bar (repression) that marks its separation from the desired object, the signified "s". Set within a chain of signifiers, Desire will continuously be displaced to (an)other signified(s). From this specific angle, the "lack"—absence—of a foundational object of desire—the mother—causes Bruno's desire to be constantly deferred in the guise of

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desirable "others."  As we have seen, however, the possibility for Bruno's desire (Signifier) to reach other objects of desire (signifieds) is also problematic due to the existence of a castration anxiety attributed to the inadequate size of his penis.  In sum, Bruno's oedipal stage is unresolved because the "lack" he experiences as a subject is further problematized by the fact that he lacks a signifying "phallus"—quite literally— and is thus unable to substitute successfully the desire for his mother with other objects in the signifying chain.  It is only when Christiane enters his life, as both mother figure and lover, that he is capable of overcoming his oedipal fixation—literally, by doing away with the image of his mother's vagina (141)—and consequently fulfill his libidinal wishes, if only for a brief interval.

The particularity of Bruno's psychosexual development as determined by both his relationship to his parents and specific socio-historical conditions, presents him not as a failed prototype of male heteronormative sexuality.  And so, within the naturalistic discourse of the novel, insofar as Bruno is considered as a normativized subject of scientific study by Michel, the logic behind his endeavor to conceive a human model in which pleasure is dissociated from sexual desire makes perfect sense.  Yet, as noted above, Michel's (and in a way, Houellebecqu's) mistake was to regard Bruno's heavily pathologized and strongly heteronormative (male) predisposition as a comprehensive topography of human desire.  Not only is he mistaking Bruno's psychosexual disorder for that of an entire society, but he also seemingly ignores the vast pluralities of forms and traces under which sexual desire is manifested and experienced across a much wider and

more comprehensive array of subjective individualities.[14]  Although the novel presents

itself as a naturalistic portrait of society, my contention is that any attempt to represent

the problematics of sexual desire from this vantage point yields particular and

individuated results that can only be applied selectively and not to the general population

as a whole.[15]  Taking into consideration a narrative voice that clearly *insists* on tracing

the destinies of its main protagonists as the result of their distinct genealogies, *Les

Particules élémentaires* fails as a global critique of the modern model of personal

liberties, specifically because the text masks the location and the particularity of these

discursive agents even as it draws highly subjectivized and precisely individuated

portraits of the characters.  The anxieties experienced by Bruno can be considered with

difficulty to represent a predominant, if not archetypical, situation of sexual anxiety for

all of contemporary society because these anxieties are situated in a male

heteronormative subject whose psychosexual pathologies are clearly a result of both

parental abandonment and genetic predisposition.  Similarly, Jerry Andrews Varsava

compares what he judges to be Houellebecq's narrow and one-sided representation of

contemporary Western society to its referent, the larger picture of Western European

society.  Considering the various improvements achieved by that very model of "social

democracy" the novel criticizes and the presence of a blatant oedipal plot, he concurs,

"The *Elementary Particles* says very much more about insecure, sexually-obsessed

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[14] On the one hand, as Jerry Andrew Varsava intuits, Bruno and Michel are "[l]ittle enough a victim of social circumstance, each is the principal author of his own misery … Even Spengler had better reasons for announcing the end of Western Civilization" (161).   On the other, all forms of queerness, alternative fetishes and sexualities are only briefly mentioned in passing.

[15] A case in point would be the episode where the narrative contrasts the sexual failures of Bruno with the success rate of Patrick, one of his peers, pointing out that the difference could not be accounted for by their respective social conditions (64).

European men in early middle age than it does about European society at large" (162). It is precisely this type of grand narrative of social determinism provided by the Oedipal model of subjectivity that Deleuze and Guattari vehemently criticize in *The Anti-Oedipus*. Consequently, by providing a gripping portrayal of the pitfalls of (male) desire in the consumerist mode of capitalistic production, *Les Particules élémentaires* highlights the logocentric and sterile, reterritorializing *pathos* of the traditional Western (Lacanian) configurations of desire as "lack," which stands in striking contrast to the more emancipating, regenerative potential offered by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "desiring-production."

# CHAPTER 5

## Extreme Desires in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*

> It is known that civilized man is
> characterized by an often inexplicable
> acuity of horror.
> —Georges Bataille, "Eye"

In recent U.S. publishing history, few books have been received with the level of outrage that characterized the release of Brest Easton Ellis' *American Psycho,* a 1991 novel about a Wall Street serial killer. Reviews deplored its extremely graphic content that dispassionately offered up scenes of sex, mutilation, and murder to punctuate the toneless blather of the Yuppie lifestyle. Various groups and individuals campaigned for a national boycott of the novel because of the acts of misogynistic and pornographic violence it portrays, while in other countries authorities attempted to ban the novel.[1]

The protest against *American Psycho* closely resembles that regarding the potentially harmful effects of displays of sex and violence in the media. The general public appears unperturbed by such concerns and has seemingly embraced the various representations of sex and violence as they appear in movies, magazines, videogames, and television, regarding them as valid—and highly stylized—forms of entertainment. As pointed out in Chapter 3, the recent trend of "Torture-Porn" bears witness to the fact that audiences are indeed fascinated by the images of graphic violence offered by the

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[1] *American Psycho* figures at the 60th posiiton on the American Library Association's "Top 100 most frequently challenged books of 1990-2000 (see http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/banned/ frequentlychallenged/challengedbydecade/1990_2000.cfm). In Queensland, Australia, it was outright banned, and in the rest of the country it was sealed in plastic and restricted to those 18 and over (see "X-Rated? Outdated" at http:// www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/09/19/1063625202157.html?oneclick=true).

entertainment industry. Given the turn towards an increasingly pornographic aesthetic[2] wherein representations of violence are pushed to their extreme—wherein violence parades as sex and/or sex is another form of violence—it would seem surprising that a work of contemporary written fiction could have generated such outrage.

Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* is a fictional novel set in New York City in the late 1980s. Patrick Bateman, its protagonist and narrator, is a Wall Street Golden Boy who is also apparently a brutal psychopath and gruesome murderer. The novel doesn't offer any continuous, linear plot; the various chapters of the book—whose titles are often repeated—are a collage of scenes or episodes wherein the totally uninflected first-person narrative unfolds in a precise, detailed, and seemingly objective fashion. All traces of affect and any references to feeling are stripped away from his voice, a voice that reproduces the language of consumer product advertisements, music, restaurant, and fashion reviews, pornographic and horror fiction. What is particularly remarkable, and perhaps even shocking or disturbing, is that Bateman displays the same matter-of-fact affective filter to describe in detail music albums, waking up and exercise routines, clothing, and restaurant scenes, as well as his barbarous acts of mutilation and murder. The disjointed and unsettling quality of the text is amplified by the ambivalent relationship between reality and fiction that characterizes novel, an ambiguity which becomes particularly prominent—and rather mystifying—at various moments throughout the novel.

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[2] A number of cultural theorists have made this claim; for example, Frederic Jameson argues that "the visual is *essentially* pornographic … it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination" (*Signatures of the Visible* 1).

In *American Psycho,* Ellis draws a metaphor for the passive, almost vegetative state that characterizes white-collar life in the twentieth century and its lack of "physicality," where the need to fulfill one's instinctual drives has been supplanted by a gregarious appetite for a variety of consumer products: clothes, cars, home electronics, music, and Hollywood blockbusters. This superficial, consumerist lifestyle is plagued with ennui and dissatisfaction, and the texts suggests that the only relief from an existence defined by "surface, surface, surface … all that anyone found meaning in" (375), is found by indulging in violence—whether fictional or not, real or simulated.

This chapter begins by providing a brief overview of Ellis' text and the controversy surrounding its publication before discussing the ways in which the novel's visual poetics[3] function as a visceral critique by transfiguring the aesthetics of sexual violence into a symptom of contemporary consumer culture[4]. In part, I will demonstrate that contrary to Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires'* more distanced, third person critique of sexual politics and consumer culture, in *American Psycho* the critique is viscerally actualized through a narrative process of subjectivization. The next section will address the hyperrealist aesthetic of the novel and contemporary discourses on

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[3] My use of the term "poetics" is partly derived from Tzvetan Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* (Richard Howard Trans. New York: Cornell UP, 1971) and alludes to the ways in which texts combine signifying and structural configurations to produce literary meaning through the reader's interaction. The terms "visual poetics" and "visceral poetics" expand on this notion to refer to the ways in which the combination of linguistic and structural elements produces visual representations to which the reader responds affectively.

[4] There are a number of excellent articles that investigate the complexities of Ellis' novel, including Frances Fortier's "L'esthétique hyperréaliste de Bret Easton Ellis," Carla Freccero's "Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case for American Psycho," Alan Murphet's *Reader Guide*, and Elizabeth Young's, "The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet." My article "Violence, Pornography, and Voyeurism as Transgression in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*" (*Atenea* 23.2 (June 2004): 73-94) and the fourth chapter of my Master's Thesis (available online at http://grad.uprm.edu/tesis/messiervartan.pdf), titled "Pornography and Violence: the Dialectics of Transgression in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho" provide a more direct context for the present study.

capitalism and desire. Positioning *American Psycho* in relation to concepts of the simulacra and schizophrenia articulated by Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, I will point to the possible ways in which the text reterritorializes male heterosexual desire within the consumerist pathos of the society of the spectacle. From there, I will transition to a comparison between Ellis' text and Mary Harron's 2000 film adaptation. The film is quite faithful to the critique of consumer capitalism provided by the text's representational qualities even though it chooses not to address the dynamics of the visceral poetics at work in the novel. Whereas the novel aims to shock its audience in order to provoke ontological reflection, by "neutering" the text and turning it into a satirical comedy—and hence, a more straightforward parody—Mary Harron's film produces a distanced and detached critical social commentary. Consequently, this difference in poetic strategy prompts a number of questions regarding the politics—and economies—of visual translation, language, and the gaze as well as the ways in which we address the violence of consumer capitalism as a collective cultural phenomenon or as an individual pathological disorder. The chapter will end with a discussion that focuses on the novel's contextual implications by reconfiguring the most salient themes in relation to cultural discourses of national consciousness and ideology.

### Shock and Scandal: *American Psycho* as Postmodern Pastiche

Because of its matter-of-fact descriptions of graphic violence, *American Psycho* was surrounded by a public outrage even *before* its release in 1991 by Vintage Contemporaries. Upon receiving the manuscript Simon & Schuster, the publisher of Ellis' previous books, withdrew from its engagement (and forfeited a $300,000 advance)

to publish and distribute *American Psycho,* fearing a national uproar over the novel's overtly explicit scenes of sexual violence. The novel's meticulous and uninflected prose was construed by a considerable contingent of readers and reviewers as reflecting a total lack of decency and morality. Some of the most controversial excerpts of the book had been leaked from the publishing company and reached the mainstream media, and it was quickly labeled as "sadistic," "pornographic," misogynistic" and "loathsome" (Murphet 65-9, Young 86), creating a stir equivalent to the release of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* almost half a century earlier (Murphet 15). Contingents of readers and reviewers were appalled by their content—the rather explicit depictions of sex and violence and the apparent lack of moral framework—and concerned that these texts would affect their respective audiences. Roger Rosenblatt of *The New York Times* called for his audience to "Snuff this book!", while Tammy Bruce of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) urged the public to boycott the novel based on her perception that Ellis' book acted as a misogynistic manual of sexual torture and mutilation. In what appears to be a misconception of the properties of art and authorship—an apparent failure to distinguish between narrator and author, fiction and reality—Tara Baxter, amongst others, assumed that the acts of sexual violence perpetrated by Patrick Bateman, the narrator and main protagonist of the novel, are a projection of the author's own vicious desires.[5] Interestingly, as in any contemporary case of public outcry and censorship, the protests and scandal only contributed to the novel's notoriety as a *succès de scandale*; *American Psycho* quickly became a bestseller

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[5] See Tara Baxter and Nikki Craft, "There Are Better Ways of Taking Care of Bret Easton Ellis Than Just Censoring Him …"

(even as *The New York Times* decided not to include it on his bestseller list because of its content), a fact that speaks eloquently of the twisted ethics of consumption of the public at large discussed in Chapter 3. However, what is quite disconcerting in the public outcry is that the outraged contingency grossly misread and misinterpreted *American Psycho* and consequently, disregarded the novel's satirical character, missing the fact that Ellis' book actually condemns the very same acts they believed it glorifies. Since publication, the book's validity as a literary satire has been reassessed; while some may consider Ellis' novel to be a satirical, postmodern *tour de force*, others perceive it as indisputably gross and contemptible, a worthless piece of sub-literary junk.[6]

For instance, Alberto Manguel contemptuously argues that *American Psycho* is not a novel of literary claims. He bases his view on the idea that even if the text had been meant to be read as a social satire, Ellis' minimalist style and the novel's grotesqueness pre-empt the possibility of its being seriously considered as such: "Ellis's prose does nothing except copy the model it is supposed to denounce" (101). He also argues that the novel's "pornographic horror" (102) literally made him feel sick (99). In other words, according to Manguel, *American Psycho* does not offer any form of distancing from its subject, a distance that would allow for a type of intellectual reflection; contrary to other shocking or controversial works of the previous epochs, he suggests the novel eludes theoretical implications because it lacks a discernible framework to do so. While Manguel is correct in pointing out that Ellis' novel does not allow the reader to distance

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[6] While popular reception for *American Psycho* was mostly characterized by outrage and indignation, critical and academic circles have been more welcoming, perceiving that the novel contained material that ought to be examined in more depth. Almost two decades after its date of publication, Ellis' novel has already been the subject of various scholarly articles and has also figured in various class discussions and curricula.

him/herself from the text and that it contains passages of "pornographic horror" capable of producing a strong visceral response, many of his conclusions are either misconstructions or misunderstandings. It seems bewildering that Manguel claims *American Psycho* cannot be read as a social satire, for it rather faithfully corresponds to various definitions of satire, starting with Mikhail Bakhtin's description of Menippean satire (*The Dialogic Imagination* 26). Ellis' text is gruesomely crude and at times extremely shocking—a point with which Manguel does not disagree—but not only because it is graphically explicit. The "zone of crude contact" of which Bakhtin speaks, is most notably produced by the various literary strategies deployed in the book as they aim to reduce the distance between reader and narrator. In addition, *American Psycho* shares the same purpose of the Menippean satire, which is, as Bakhtin points out, "to put to the test and to expose ideas and ideologues." It is the perverse and violent ideologies and ideologues of consumer capitalism that are put to the test in Ellis' novel.

Moreover, David Price aptly argues that in the nature of Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia, the "grotesque bodym" and the "carnivalesque,"[7] *American Psycho* is a parody of mass consumerism and liberal capitalism—two trends that were not only prevalent during the historicized period of the novel's setting but have asserted themselves as the tenets of U.S. society. In *American Psycho*, heteroglossia manifest themselves in the interweaving of multiple discourses; from the inner projections of the main character to the extensive descriptions of consumer goods as quotations from instruction manuals and magazines. The concept of the "grotesque body" figures

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[7] See Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel* (see *Rabelais and his World*. Hélène Iswolsky Trans. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

predominantly in the explicit depictions of sex and violence spread throughout the novel and, at another level, Bateman's body is also grotesque in an especially modern way; so fetishized ("transformed" or "modeled" by body-building, grooming, and label-wearing) as to become grotesque (24-30).

A satire in both the classical and the medieval senses as defined by Bakhtin, *American Psycho* can also be read, following Frederic Jameson, as a postmodern pastiche of spectacular consumer society. The focus of Ellis' satire corresponds to the conceptualization of the postmodern as that which criticizes the underlying strictures of late capitalism. The heteroglossia of voices that characterize the novel—and in particular the seamless integration of popular discourse and imagery—illustrate the feature of postmodernism as that which erodes the boundaries between the high and the low, art, literature, film, and popular culture[8]. The text criticizes consumer society and liberal capitalism at large and in doing so, it addresses several aspects in particular. For one, it denounces the fetishization of material goods, as well as the overwhelming importance conferred upon monetary wealth and physical appearance as measures of success, where identity becomes the sum of product labels with which the body is adorned. Secondly, *American Psycho* addresses the overpowering presence and influence of media images in contemporary existence, thereby exemplifying the salient characteristic of the postmodern as defined by Baudrillard in "The Precession of Simulacra" wherein the real has been replaced by simulated forms of consciousness. Moreover, Ellis' novel

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[8] See Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991), where the author notes that works of postmodernism display a clear tendency to blur traditional cultural boundaries (3) and in doing so, they privilege pastiche—i.e. "blank parody," or parody without the laughter—over parody, but that like parody they aim to criticize the idiosyncrasies of its era through mimicry (16-18).

condemns the de facto violence of the dominant socio-economic class for carrying out acts of violence—both directly and indirectly.  And most flagrantly, similar to *Funny Games*, the novel deplores Western society's objectification of human existence and the twisted ethics of consumption as individuals shamelessly indulge in a wide array of voyeuristic goods that are linked to a perverse fascination with gore and pornography.

**Pornography and Horror: The Politics of Sexual Violence**

*American Psycho* mimics pornographic language to exemplify how consumer culture objectifies human sexuality and how the public at large embraces this practice by indulging in its various representations, from suggestive displays of sexual behavior to hardcore porn.  Underlining the absence of emotional content in *American Psycho*, Murphet observes that the women are paid and suggests that sex is merely another consumer good in the novel, another product of capitalist society for which Bateman is the perfect poster-boy.  It is to this particular equation that the entire billion-dollar porn industry owes its success, an industry whose print media typically enclose accounts of sexual acts that Ellis' novel reproduces.  While pornography is typically marketed to a predominantly male public, it does not exclude female viewers, who might also be capable of deriving pleasure from representations of suggestive or explicit sexuality. And while the point of view of the novel is undeniably male, it is irrefutable that both males and females are active participants in the materialist society of which Bateman constitutes the poster boy: an image of flawless beauty and financial success to which males aspire and females are supposed to desire (53, 90).

In the novel, heterosexual intercourse is primarily depicted through a pornographic lens, suggesting that both sexes are only capable of *using* each other by relating on a superficial, non-intimate level that is both selfish and impersonal. In addition, the fact that pornography is a product, a marketable consumer good, implies that it is only through a marketable "transaction" that humans are able to communicate. Julian Murphet points out that tangible, "real," sexual relations between female and male characters in *American Psycho* are non-existent or doomed to fail, for "men and women in this textual world exist on parallel, untouching planes of reality; each sex satisfies for the other only preconceived and fixed expectations … (31)." By consenting to have sex with Bateman—and in some cases accepting money in exchange—the female characters of the novel enter the process of objectification imposed by prostitution and pornography in accepting the terms of the "transaction." In other words, there exists no possibility of actual intimate—whether physical or emotional—contact between male and female characters, which is illustrated on numerous occasions, such as in the romantic-turned-parody vacation he spends with Evelyn in East Hampton (278-282), or his inability to have a relationship with Jean, his secretary, the only female that seems to somewhat elude the surface materiality of the other characters in the novel. In one instance, Jean casually asks him if he wants to go up to her apartment; he eventually declines, telling himself, "pornography is so much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this lack of complication, so much more pleasurable" (264). To "actual sex," Bateman prefers the unrealistic, seemingly flawless ("virtual") sex portrayed in pornography where (emotions are nonexistent and) women simply exist to satisfy men.

The source of pornographic pleasure is *scopophilic,* and thus an act of voyeurism, of enjoyment at a "distance," but the absence of emotions prevalent in pornography initiates a process of transfiguration and fetishization, wherein the absence of a discernible subjectivity from the participants allows the ego to project itself into the action, on page or on screen, and take possession of the sexualized object. There is a way in which the aesthetics of pornographic pleasure folds into the ideology of consumption as driven by media advertising, for they both aim (and succeed) in continuously arousing desire by promising its fulfillment, even as the elation is only ephemeral at best. Bateman fully submits to this mode of operation; not only does he avidly consume various products and services (including prostitutes), but he also proceeds to accumulate them endlessly in the pursuit of an ever-evasive possibility of consumer bliss.

The pornographic aesthetic that informs the sexual relationships of the text illustrates the commodification of existence in post-industrialized society. The pornographic gaze not only commodifies and fetishizes women (and men) as sexual objects but also sees the body as fragmented, as separate and detachable pieces of anatomy—a breast, a leg, a foot, a mouth, a penis, a vagina—as if each could easily be severed from the unified entity of the body in its entirety, as a "whole," a three-dimensional subject. Moreover, one of the direct effects of such processes of objectification—as it is imposed by the prevailing condition of consumer capitalism present throughout the entire novel—is to erase individual subjectivity. When subjects have turned into objects, they have stopped existing and hence, murder appears to be the next logical step. Once humans have become mere objects, their subjectivity has already

been effaced; they have stopped existing as subjects and consequently, their existence is considered to hold little or no value. This concept is perfectly exemplified in *American Psycho* where, as Murphet notes, "the most disturbing thing about Bateman's sexuality … is that it segues into the most excruciating violence of the book's most notorious passages (39)."

As the novel unfolds, the protagonist is increasingly portrayed as a cold-blooded and brutal murderer who kills indiscriminately and on impulse. In the span of the text, his list of victims include a vagrant or "bum" (129-132), a dog and its "queer" owner (167), a stockbroker (217), a number of different female "pick-ups" and prostitutes (245, 289-90, 304-5, 328); a child (298), and a street musician (347). However, it is important to note that apart from the stockbroker (and perhaps the child), all of these victims constitute social "others": what liberal capitalism and patriarchal society consider "inferior" beings leading pointless existences. At one point, Bateman goes so far as to call a vagrant "a member of the genetic underclass" (266), but this contempt is perhaps best exemplified in the scene where Bateman coldly gauges the vagrant's eyes after teasing him by waving a five dollar bill to his face, insulting him because he is unemployed, and telling him "I don't have anything in common with you" (131).

The acts of violence towards social others prompt David Price to observe, "in Patrick Bateman's world, there is no contradiction between being a Wall Street hotshot and a serial killer because the ideology of the culture obscures such a contradiction (327)." This parallel between the individual violence of the main protagonist and the collective violence of capitalistic culture is displayed when someone asks Bateman what

is his line of work. Bateman answers, "murders and executions," but his answer is assumed to be "mergers and acquisitions" (206). Interestingly enough, as women accept becoming consumer products, as explained earlier, so do the homeless. After Bateman brutally mutilates the bum, the latter realizes he can exploit the situation by claiming he lost his sight through war injuries (385)—a satire of conditioned victimization.

While some critics in the vein of Manguel may have contended that the book's violence overshadows the satire, I would argue that in fact the violence only adds to the critical discourse of the novel by "laying bare" the excesses of the system it criticizes. Although most killings are markedly graphic, the most telling passages are the ones that combine sex and violence, particularly where, as the novel progresses, one inevitably leads to the other. In Ellis' novel, the relationship between sex and death—the concept of Eros and Thanatos—is taken to its literal extreme, thus establishing a direct link between pornography and violence as it metaphorically signifies the mass media objectification of sexuality and the economic cruelty of liberal capitalism. This next excerpt is taken from one of the two chapters titled "Girls" where Bateman hires two escorts and takes them to Paul Owen's apartment, a colleague he recently murdered, which he decides to use as the venue for his sexual adventures and gruesome murders. While the sexual encounter is depicted in precise pornographic fashion (303)—as the majority of other sex scenes in the novel—Bateman eventually fails to be aroused, and thus, decides to find an alternate way to reach an orgasm:

> … finally I saw the entire head off—torrents of blood splash against the walls, even the ceilings—and holding the head up, like a prize, I take my cock, purple with stiffness, and lowering Torri's

head to my lap I push it into her bloodied mouth and start fucking
it, until I come, exploding into it. (304)

Bateman's capacity to reach arousal is closely correlated with the acts of mutilation and torture he carries out on his victims, and thus, in noticing that there is a gradual increase of these acts both in incidence and intensity, the reader sees that violence becomes progressively the only way in which Bateman is able to fulfill his sexual drive. This brings us to the conclusion that the sadistic traits of both the main protagonist and the narrative are increasingly reinforced not only through the repetition of acts of viciousness and murder, but through their increasing intensity as well. Violence in *American Psycho* serves not only to illustrate the violence and savageness of capitalism—which is also epitomized by Bateman's being both a relentless and successful Wall Street stockbroker and an equally successful and relentless murderer, but the misogynistic aggression of the male pornographic gaze as well. And for Bateman, sex and violence as sources of physical pleasure are closely intertwined through the same processes of increasing explicitness and repetition.

Even though this and other similar passages occur late in the novel, they have prompted critics such as James Gardner to deem them "excessive" and in more senses than one, they are. While these scenes are responsible for provoking the most vehement responses to *American Psycho*, they are not the perverse projections of a deranged author, nor are they designed solely to fuel the misogynistic fantasies of a small contingent of male readers as some critics hastily decried. They are the result of careful crafting and serve a precise and specific aim: by remaining in step with the overall first-person narrative style of the novel, these scenes project the reader to the forefront of the action

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and intend to provoke a sensation of unadulterated horror while simultaneously laying bare the violent ideologies at work in contemporary consumer society.

In Chapter 4, I retraced my argument regarding the ways in which the power of horror lies specifically in its propensity to trigger a strong affective response in the reader and how, in doing so, it assaults the reader's sensibility. By narrowing the distance between the text and the reader, horror creates a *rapprochement* between reading as an intellectual activity and reading as a physical experience. As Georges Bataille argues in his theories of Eroticism (*Erotisme*) and Transgression, it is the visceral response created by this *rapprochement* that allows the author to fully unleash the ontological possibilities of language.[9] In the case of *American Psycho*, the power of horror lies specifically at the point where reading the text becomes a visceral experience, where the aesthetics of horror causes a "revulsion of the gut" as Manguel describes it.

Within the same line of thought, one could also relate the experience of horror to that of pornography. While sexual content aims merely to titillate the reader, pornographic displays aim not only to arouse, but to trigger a sensation of physical pleasure. Although the reactions elicited by horror and pornography contrast in the sense that the response to horror is one of revulsion, and the reaction to pornography is pleasurable, as language and experience conflate, both are corporeal responses. Ellis utilizes this uncanny alternation between revulsion and fascination to put the reader's sensibilities to the test.

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[9] For a brief overview of Bataille's theories, see my article: "*Erotisme* as Transgression in the Writings of Georges Bataille: from *Savoir* to *Jouissance*" in Messier, Vartan P. and Nandita Batra eds. *Transgression and Taboo: Critical Essays*. Mayagüez, Puerto Rico: College English Association-Caribbean Chapter (CEA-CC), 2005: 125-137. I also invite the reader to explore Bataille's own explanation in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991.

In the absence of real plot, these elements—and in particular the accounts of sexual violence—gradually become the focal point of *American Psycho*. Even as the text suggests that these acts are the product of the main character's imagination (375), the violence does happen *textually*. Paradoxically, while these accounts may be particularly appalling for the reader, they also become inescapably appealing. The stylistic devices employed by Ellis compel the reader to long for the scenes of sexual violence as they become the sole plausible point of interest. *American Psycho* not only plays with the reader's feelings of revulsion and fascination to exert control over the reader's affective response, it also further conditions these responses by condensing the narrative point of view and using boredom as a political and aesthetic strategy.

Bateman is the sole narrative voice of *American Psycho*; as such, it does not allow the reader to distance herself from the events on the page and coerces her to assume the role of participant, both as victim or executioner. However, adopting the victim's point of view is not only unpleasant, it is unbearable, and consequently, the reader quickly assumes Bateman's perspective, as deranged as it might be. Bateman's voice is uncontainable: it becomes overwhelming as it assumes total control over the text— similar to those ways that Paul exerts narrative control in Haneke's *Funny Games*. To that effect, Elizabeth Young aptly argues:

> From the first line, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here", to the last, "This is not an exit", we are *signed*, we are entered in to what is really a *circle* of hell. Once we have given ourselves up to the text, made the choice to "abandon hope", we have no way out. It is a closed system. These imprisoning, claustrophobic qualities are deftly manipulated in order, not only to force us to live as close to Patrick as possible in a fictional sense, but to imprint the reader with such force that we cannot ever get out. This is an act of great

aggression and confidence on the part of the author revealing a controlling ego which asserts its rights over both characters and readers. (3)

This control is further implemented through what critics define as Ellis' "aesthetics of boredom,"[10] in referencing the 'boring' passages of *American Psycho*: the endless name-dropping, label-listing, descriptions of household items, cataloguing of grooming and exercise routines (24-9, 69), dining guide blurbs, the typical *Rolling Stone* or *Billboard* pop music reviews (252-6), and the empty, senseless dialogues (108-9) between characters that are so superficial and so seemingly alike that their identities are constantly being mistaken. Yet, these "boring" passages, which represent the majority of the text, work as "a carefully considered foil to the violence," Murphet argues (24). While Manguel identifies them as a sign of Ellis' lack of "style" confirming the book's sub-literary status, he ignores the fact that, quite to the contrary, Ellis has structured *American Psycho* meticulously, and that the purposes of the novel are in part executed by his stylistic choices. To that effect, Murphet explains that the violent incidents are "so confronting and disturbing partly because they have been so long in coming … and partly because what had remained latent behind the surface banality is here given such swift and explicit expression that we are simply unprepared for it (40)."

What is most disconcerting is that both the boring and the violent passages are syntactically very similar, which increases the potential shocking effect when the *content* shifts from one to the other. Thus, the two are interdependent in a way that they each accentuate the other, and this dialogism works to maximize the effect on the reader.

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[10] See Young, Abel, and Murphet.

Following Jauss' reader-response theory the reader's "horizon of expectations" is constantly shifting, and in the face of the extensive boring passages, the reader starts longing for "something to happen": and in the text, what happens—in fact, the only thing that happens, even as its actuality is diegetically contested—is the sex and the violence. As both the premise and promise of the text (how can there be a psycho without bloody murder?), the violence raises the reader's expectations, but also hijacks the reader's desire to read the novel, exposing and exploiting her scopophilic tendencies. This was mostly put in evidence during the scandal surrounding the novel's release, which also contributed to creating its main appeal. The knowledge that the novel contained gruesome depictions of sexual aggression did not intimidate readers. Quite on the contrary, readers—and possibly some who would have never bought the book if they had been unaware of its content—were eager to acquire the novel and fulfill their expectations by experiencing the blatant depiction of pornographic horror that the media reviews publicized. Ironically, the mechanics of controversy works rather well with the overall premise of *American Psycho*, for it is partly this type of twisted fascination for gore and pornography that the novel denounces, further implicating the reader within the cycle of voyeuristic consumption. As discussed in Chapter 3, it is this particularly perverted desire to fulfill the expectation of consuming violence that *Funny Games* criticizes.

By actualizing the affective dimension of the text through the visceral aesthetics of pornography and horror and by implicating the reader in the violent ideologies of consumer culture through a carefully orchestrated textual strategy, *American Psycho*

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unleashes its potential as a text of social criticism. While it could be argued that if the objective of the text was to illustrate metaphorically the misogynistic violence of the male gaze in particular and patriarchal society in general on the one hand, as well as the perverted *collective* violence—direct or indirect—of neo-liberal capitalism on the other, the point would have been made more succinctly, by avoiding the accumulation and repetition of scenes of gore and pornographic violence. This argument is flawed, however, for it again fails to take into account the overall premise of *American Psycho's* being a meticulously-crafted satire. As Linda Williams argued in "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," far from being merely gratuitous displays of excessive sex, violence, and emotions, the pornographic and horror genres serve specific cultural functions related to the problematics of sexuality, gender, and identity. And so, this "excess" in the text is by no means gratuitous; as the subject of the novel's attacks are consumerism and the neo-liberal tenets of American Society, the excess in violence illustrates the excesses of commodity fetishism that form an integral part of consumer culture and liberal capitalism.

## Postmodern Spectacle: Simulacra and Schizophrenia

As postmodern pastiche, *American Psycho* is cluttered with direct references to popular media (*The Wall Street Journal* and *CNN*, *GQ* and *Rolling Stone*, horror and pornographic movies such as *Body Double* and *She-Male Reformatory*, or the "Patty Winters Show" as a stand-in for daytime celebrity television shows, etc) and Bateman's narration faithfully reproduces the language of these various outlets: whether it pertains to grooming and style advice (29, 277-278), music reviews (133-136, 252-255, 352-358),

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or image-conscious political speeches (15, 199). Bateman's demeanor is an indication of his desire to "fit in" (297) prescribed by what one should wear, think, act, or buy as dictated by advice columns and product reviews. Popular opinion shapes Bateman's perceptions even on the smallest of subjects. He decides that he likes the pizza at Pastels because McDermott shows him a *New York Times* review that indicates that Donald Trump thinks they serve the best pizza in New York (109-110). His possessions are a collage of pictures taken from upscale product publications. The description of his upscale Manhattan apartment is a feature article in *Elle Décor* or *Architectural Digest*: "A polished white oak floor runs throughout the apartment. On the other side of the room, next to a desk and a magazine rack by Gio Ponti, is a complete stereo system (CD player, tape deck, tuner, amplifier) by Sansui with six-foot Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood" (25). In the image-obsessed world of the status-conscious Wall Street executive, existence is valued by how well one can duplicate life depicted in the glossy pages of magazines and other visual channels of mass communication.

This logic of replication is exacerbated in the seamless integration of these discourses in the narrative voice, thereby suggesting that Bateman's consciousness, his desires, thoughts, and perceptions, are a bricolage of the various linguistic and visual signs encountered in the media. This is particularly prevalent in the discursive construction of masculinity that informs the narrative point of view. Mark Storey observes that Bateman, "as an exemplar of traditionally male language systems (violence, pornography, the media, fashion, commerce) taken to their extremes," creates an

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"artificial identity that is formed entirely by the culture that surrounds him" (59). Following the phallogocentric discursivity of patriarchal culture, Bateman and his colleagues systematically evaluate women according to their physical attributes; their taste consists of the paradigmatic male fantasy of a playboy centerfold behaving like an inhibited porn star on a movie set. Synthesizing the female ideal of this misogynistic mindset, George Reeves details, ""A good personality … consists of a chick who has a little hardbody and who will satisfy all sexual demands without being too slutty about things and who will essentially keep her dumb fucking mouth *shut*" (91). Interestingly, these "business lunches" are occasions for Bateman and his cronies to engage in senseless conversations about the latest male fashion trends and gawk at the "hardbodies" in the room: no actual business is ever conducted.

In fact, Bateman never seems to be doing any *work*. Rather, his days at the office are spent planning his busy social schedule (64), and if he is not securing a reservation at an exclusive restaurant, he listens to music and reads magazines (65-66, 266). He also uses "work" as an excuse to conveniently slip away from situations he finds uncomfortable. In one instance, when Evelyn wants to make dinner plans with him, he responds that he cannot because he is working, to which she responds, seemingly vocalizing the thoughts of the reader, "What work? What work do you do? I don't understand." (221). For Bateman, "work" is another accessory to his wardrobe; he "plays the part" because it fits the image.

Appearances supersede everything in this society of the spectacle, where, as Guy Debord famously argued, an objectifying world-view is so prevalent that "the spectacle is

an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances" (9). Accordingly, Bateman is consumed by his appearance; he takes extremely good care of himself through an obsessive regime of beauty products and regular visits to the spa and the gym. His sense of *being* is based on how others perceive him. Bateman constantly checks his reflection and blatantly admits, "All it comes down to is this: I feel like shit but look great" (106). When the boardroom is in fact a catwalk (108-111), the spectacle becomes the site and the means through which individuals and relatives, citizens and public institutions, consumers and corporations inform and interact with one another.

In "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard takes Debord's concept of the spectacle to its paroxysm by arguing that in modern consumer society, which promotes the gradual eradication of nature by culture, the sign (i.e. images and representations) has replaced reality (1). Typically, individuals privilege the sign over things signified and substitute "signs of the real for the real itself" (2). The purpose of the sign has become what Baudrillard calls "simulacrum," which he differentiates from representation in the sense that a simulacrum marks the absence, not the existence, of the objects it is supposed to signify (3). Consequently, the world as we experience it is "hyperreal": we emulate—or rather, simulate—models of who and what we are supposed to be, following social constructs and conventions propagated through various forms of mass media. In the hyperreal world of *American Psycho*, subjectivity is reduced to the designer labels and brand names of the material goods one possesses.

In Ellis' novel, the logic of simulacra is pushed to the point of circular referentiality. Not only do people become the sum of the labels they wear and the goods and services they consume, but they also become carbon copies of each other. At the onset of the narrative, Bateman notes that both his girlfriend (Evelyn) and his mistress (Courtney) are wearing exactly the same outfit, "a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and silk-satin d'Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik" (8, 9), begging the question whether Bateman's simultaneous involvement with both of them is rooted in their identical fashion sense. Under this predicament, individuals are constantly mistaken for someone else. In the boardroom for example, Paul Owen mistakes Bateman for Marcus Halberstam, which, interestingly, does not seem to upset Bateman because Halberstam shares the same taste in clothes and they go to the same barber (89). In another instance, Bateman is able to leave an announcement on Paul Owen's answering machine because his "voice sounds similar to Owen's and to someone hearing it over the phone probably identical" (218). The obsession with surface materiality begets uniformity and conformity to the extent that no one can be distinguished from anyone else. After Evelyn's dinner party, Bateman asks Evelyn if she is interested in Price: "'He's rich,' I say. '*Everybody's* rich,' she says…'He's good-looking,' I tell her. '*Everybody's* good-looking, Patrick,' she says remotely. 'He has a great body,' I say. '*Everybody* has a great body now,' she says" (Ellis 23). Characters are interchangeable because they are all manufactured by the mass media, and like consumer products from the same assembly line, they are all alike and replaceable.

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In the world of copies and simulacra that Patrick Bateman inhabits, looks are reproducible because in an existence defined by material possessions, human subjects become objects, and all authentic sense of personal identity and self-consciousness vanishes as people do not recognize or care for one another. Bateman is well aware of this fact as he realizes, "If I were to disappear into that crack … the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No … one … would … care" (226) and later confesses,

> … there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I am simply not there*. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, and aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and uninformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist. (emphasis of the text, 376-377)

There is no real Bateman because this hyperreal society is dominated by simulacra, wherein everyone simulates models of who and what they are supposed to be following societal ideas of prefabricated identities.

Bateman's expressions of conformity allow him to exist in the "reality" of the consumerist pathos. As long as he is dressed according to accepted standards of style, maintains a healthy physique, and has flawless skin—in other words, as long as he fits in and is *"GQ"* (90)—the people around him do not care about (or pay attention to) the fact that he is (or believes he is) a " fucking evil psychopath" (20). In one instance, Bateman tells Helga, his skin technician, "Did I ever tell you I want to wear a big yellow face mask and then put on the CD version of Bobby McFerrin's 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' and then take a girl and a dog-a collie, a chow, a sharpie, it doesn't really matter-and then hook us

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this transfusion pump, this IV set, and switch their blood, you know, pump the dog's blood into the hardbody and vice versa, did I ever tell you this?" (116). But Bateman's confession does not faze Helga, as she and her assistant continue providing him with a facial and a pedicure and compliment him on his complexion. Similarly, people around him are so engrossed in their own superficial and egotistical lifestyles that they don't "hear" when he tells them "I'm into murders and executions," (206) or "I'm utterly insane … I like to dissect girls" (216). Paradoxically, it could be argued that Genesis' "The Man on the Corner" is Batemans' favorite song because even though it is apparently about "a bum …a poor homeless person" (134), he relates perfectly.[11] In this sense, his killing spree is perhaps a means to be recognized for the individuality of his actions, and that his telephone confession to Harold Carnes, his lawyer, is a desperate call for attention (352). However, when Bateman brings the matter to Carnes when he sees him, Carnes confuses him with a man named Davis and then proceeds to deride his confession as a practical joke (388). Truth is, "Inside … *doesn't matter*" (397), because appearances are *all* that matter, and as far as his entourage is concerned, Bateman is "The boy next door" (9, 16, 18, 35).

Whether it pertains to dressing like a model in a *GQ* spread, obtaining a reservation at a restaurant recommended in the *Zagat* guide, having pornographic sex with various "hardbodies" as detailed in *Hustler*, or mutilating and killing others according to the ways in which people are brutally murdered in horror movies, Bateman's existence is a media-induced "reality." Accordingly, by drawing extensively from

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[11] The lyrics are: "Looking everywhere at no one / He sees everything and nothing at all / When he shouts, nobody listens / where he leads, no one will go…Nobody knows him, and nobody cares."

cinematic techniques, Bateman narrates his life as if it were a movie (1, 59, 164, 243, 286, 292, 343, 348). In this spectacularized, hyperreal existence, the distinction between fiction and fantasy is extremely amorphous, and although Bateman's voice and his thoughts are real, the actuality of his actions remains uncertain.

The most graphic scenes of the text are the faithful reproduction of scenes scripted in countless pornographic videos and horror movies. For example, Batemans' desire to viciously mutilate women with a power drill (303, 326) is without a doubt inspired by the movie *Body Double* (113), which he has rented and reportedly seen over a dozen times. David Price emphasizes that the "cartoon-ish" quality or the grotesqueness of the violence depicted in *American Psycho* renders it entirely or partly *invraisemblable*, which makes it unclear whether the murders actually take place, or whether they are merely the verbal expression—a *projection* rather than an *actualization*—of the protagonist's repressed desires. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have famously argued that "the culture industry does not sublimate; it represses" (*Norton* 1230) and the blurred lines between Bateman's conscious reality and his (unconscious? Imaginary?) projections of sexual violence are indicative of a continuous internal discourse between the expressed and the repressed. As a reader, we are left to ponder whether Bateman's murderous rampage actually ever took place. Not only is Owen reportedly still alive (388), but there is no validation for any of his crimes: when he returns to Owen's apartment to see what has happened to the body of the two prostitutes he maimed there, the building and the guard look different, his key doesn't fit, and there is absolutely no trace of what transpired (366-370). This continuous ambiguity between narrative and

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textual reality persists throughout the novel and constantly sends the reader questioning not only the authenticity of the events described but also the nature and extent of the protagonist's psychotic disorder.

In a world where the spectacle has hijacked all aspects of human existence, Bateman is as much a representation of a mediated reality as he is a victim of it. In the absence of individuality and authenticity, whereby reality is shaped by the external perceptions communicated through media culture, all layers of subjectivity are gradually stripped away:

> There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being - flesh, blood, skin, hair - but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. (282).

Bateman imitates the reality configured by the omnipotence of media images flooding the political, social, and cultural landscapes. The precession of simulacra has turned him into "a rough resemblance of a human being." But it would be incorrect to assume that Bateman is alone in this predicament: his "depersonalization" is an intrinsic characteristic of postmodern subjectivity.

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson periodizes postmodernism in relation to consumer capitalism and argues that the existential condition created by the omnipotence of media culture in the late twentieth century is akin to the schizophrenic experience. Drawing from Lacan's theorizations, Jameson explains that the

schizophrenic has no sense of personal identity because he is unable to understand his relationship with the outside world in terms of the continuity of time as experienced through language (118-119). Jameson explains, "the schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (118), and he qualifies it as being particularly unpleasant (119). In a number of instances, Bateman's narration follows the disembodied, fragmented, and disjointed flow of the schizophrenic experience. The linearity of events is randomly disrupted within (85-86, 177-179) and between chapters (148-153), and his voice often breaks off incoherently, thereby reflecting the flickering screen of channel surfing or MTV-style rapid fire editing (80-81, 342-343). Moreover, the uncertainty, discontinuity, and magnitude of detail that informs the text's most sensational scenes confirm Jameson's idea that "as temporal continuities break down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and "material": the world comes before the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy" (120). In *American Psycho*, the repetitive and increasing occurrence of delusional episodes and hallucinations reinforce the text's schizophrenic character. For instance, the chapter entitled "Chase, Manhattan" (347-352) totally morphs into an action movie in which "Patrick Bateman" stars as the main protagonist. Bateman's narrative "I" becomes completely disembodied as he suddenly breaks out of the first person and jumps into the third person mid-paragraph:

> […] *I lose control entirely*, the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I've been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, *Patrick* tries to put the cab

in reverse but nothing happens, *he* staggers out of the cab, leaning against
it, a nerve-racking silence follows, "nice going, Bateman," *he* mutters […]
(*emphases mine* 349)

Bateman's schizophrenia is by and large induced by his media-informed consciousness;
subjectivity never comes into being because the self fails to "accede fully into the realm
of speech and language" as Jameson would phrase it (118). However, it would be
inaccurate to conclude that Bateman has completely lost touch with "reality," quite to the
contrary, Bateman is deeply connected with the world around him; as he indicates, he is
"in touch … with humanity"—but it is a humanity consumed with appearances, one that
is completely immersed in the hyperreal spectacle of simulacra.

The schizophrenic experience as theorized by Jameson and exemplified in
Bateman's hyperreal existence is distinct from Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization
of the schizophrenic as that figure which resists the inscription of capitalist
reterritorialization. Even though Bateman is not defined by any latent Oedipality—the
text carefully undermines this possibility in the chapter entitled "Sandstone"—his (male)
desire remains constructed as "lack" according to the need-based imperatives of the
consumerist pathos. In other words, rather than actualizing the desiring-production of the
multiple, nomadic subjectivities of the Deleuzian schizo, Bateman's subjectivity (or lack
thereof) is deeply entrenched in the repressive regimes of a phallogocentric order.

### From Pastiche to Parody, or, an "I" for an "Eye"

Mary Harron's 2000 film adaptation of *American Psycho*[12] provides an insightful
intertext to Ellis' novel, especially if we query the critical and ideological discourses that

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[12] released in a DVD "uncut" edition in 2005.

have surrounded the reception and interpretation of both novel and film. Whereas the release of the book was characterized by the public outrage about the overtly explicit accounts of sexual violence, Harron's film was largely praised in part because it excised the explicitness of the original. Presumably, the excessive violence of the text was drastically reduced to highlight its satirical qualities, even as in light of the above exegesis, it is difficult to understand how the detractors of the novel were unable to read *American Psycho* as a satire. This directorial decision appears to have pleased the reviewers who had originally found Ellis' novel despicable. In *The New York Times* for example, while Roger Rosenblatt expressly condemned the excesses of violence of Ellis' text, Stephen Holden praised Harron's directorial decision to "remove its excess fat in a kind of cinematic liposuction," claiming that she thereby "salvage[d] a novel widely loathed for its putative misogyny and gruesome torture scenes."

One might ask whether it was necessary for Mary Harron to adapt the text in order for its satirical thrust to be recovered. Perhaps it was the film-makers' female/lesbian status that gave her a degree of immunity from the attacks that Ellis received, as Guinevere Turner, the script's co-author, points out.[13] This is possibly one part of the explanation, but I would contend that the trajectories of both texts are equally implicated in broader aesthetic and ideological concerns that inform the politics of

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[13] See the interview of the 2005 Uncut DVD edition, where Turner indicates that having a female director would absorb a lot of the feminist backlash that characterized the release of the book and this perhaps what informs Richard Porton's review of the film, where he points out that the movie was partly conceived as a "feminist project" (44). Nevertheless, as various academic critics including myself have clearly demonstrated, Ellis' novel lends itself rather well to a variety of critical approaches (feminist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, etc.) and so I believe that it would be interesting to investigate what processes are at work in the general public's perception of authorial ideology with regards to their gender and why it was necessary to instill a female/feminist returning gaze for the public at large to consider reading the text from a feminist perspective.

language and the gaze as they displace the locus of responsibility from the individual to the collective and vice-versa.

In "Judgment is not an Exit: Toward an Affective Criticism of Violence with *American Psycho*," Marco Abel appropriately points out that in emphasizing the satirical edge of the novel (the point missed by the likes of Manguel, Rosenblatt, and Baxter), Harron unveils the book's vein of social criticism by juxtaposing it with a strong sense of irony and comedy. Yet Abel also argues that with this shift in emphasis, the director transforms the text into a "traditional" satire by pre-empting the possibility of the audience's responding affectively to the violence (138). Keeping in mind Jameson's distinction between pastiche and parody, it could be argued that by reinstating laughter in Ellis' text, Harron transforms it into a more straightforward parody. Partly because of the chosen medium and partly because of Harron's directorial choices, the film does not require the same involvement—i.e. the same degree of active participation in the reading/viewing process—from its audience that the novel demands from its readers. Whereas the narrative strategies deployed by the novel makes a point of implicating the reader both physically and emotionally, the film seems consciously to impose a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*—a "distancing effect"[14]—between the actions depicted on screen and the spectator in order to promote critical reflection over emotional involvement. While in *Funny Games* the distancing effect does not eviscerate the viewer's emotional involvement—quite the contrary, it exascerbates it by exerting control through a narrative strategy of temptation and denial—in Harron's *American Psycho* it reduces the possiblity

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[14] See Bertolt Brecht's "A Little Organum for the Theater."

of responding affectively by focusing the viewer's critical attention on the representational qualities of the film.

The distancing effect also marks a departure from the ways in which Ellis' narrative strategy functions as an ideological critique. In her examination of the novel's voice as that of a serial killer, Carla Freccero notes:

> *American Psycho* is narrated for the most part in the first-person voice of a serial killer. The serial killer is a popular American figure of dementia, universally regarded as unthreatening precisely because of his singularity, the nonrationality of his pathology, and the individualized and eccentric nature of his violence. A serial killer is not the oppressed masses, and although his murders are usually lurid, his reach is limited. In this sense, the serial killer serves the function of a fetish in public culture: he is the means of the disavowal of institutionalized violence, while the "seriality" of his acts of violence marks the place of recognition in this disavowal. Through the serial killer, then, we recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction. We are thus able to locate the violence in his disorder rather than in ourselves or in the social order. (48)

Observing that that in American popular culture the fictive individual image of the serial killer is a "consoling fantasy" which acts as a "condensation of the violence of American historicity into a singular subject who performs discrete, singular injurious acts (49)." she concludes that Ellis' novel "does not offer its readers the serial killer as consoling fantasy (51)." As a result of the author's minimalist style as well as the absence of an expository or explicative pathological profile, Bateman escapes the singular categorization of a "serial killer" in the vein of other well-established and distinguishable psychopaths such as Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter or Norman Bates of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (51). Abel argues that Harron's film clearly portrays Bateman as a "monster" and that

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consequently "the audience can feel superior and thus is likely to remain uninterested in identifying with him" (142). This distancing is very similar to the ways in which the reader of *Les particules élémentaires* can easily dissociate herself from the precisely drawn psychopathology of its protagonists. Rather than illustrating the pathology of a singular subject, the book illustrates the pathology of a given culture: the all-encompassing, collective violence that characterizes contemporary consumer culture. Quite to the opposite, Harron's version offers the spectator an "exit," an "escape route"; by depicting Bateman as a classic "serial killer", a "consoling fantasy," the audience feels detached from the excesses of violence, pornography, and consumerism the text portrays. In Ellis' text, the distance between reader and narrator is narrowed through a forced process of identification: there is no distance between the "I" in the text and the personal "I." The position of the reader is that of an active participant; as Laura Tanner observes, the reader "imaginatively becomes the violator" as she is bound to project herself into the action (qtd. in Walker).

It is predominantly because of Ellis' unassuming prose that the reader is coerced to adopt Bateman's point of view. Far from receiving any escape route, the reader consequently gets absorbed into the narrative. The irony of Ellis' minimalist style and Bateman's unaffected voice is that they relegate the responsibility for feelings and emotions to the reader. And so, the reader is able to experience what apparently Bateman does not—feelings of revulsion and abhorrence for the acts of sexual violence he perpetrates—even while the style suggests no such revulsion is necessary. It is the absence of affect in Bateman that produces the close, intimate space between the reader

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and the narrator. Without a primary filter of characterization and personality, the reader subconsciously becomes Bateman. It is also Bateman's lack of personality—which is partly highlighted by the fact that he is constantly being mistaken for someone else—that not only compels the reader into filling the affective void by becoming the protagonist but also makes her long for the violence as the sole answer to the boredom which plagues the endless descriptive passages of the text. Due to the author's detailed and uninflected prose and the sudden, uncanny, difference in content between the boredom that characterizes the majority of the narrative's cataloguing of consumer goods and the unexpected explicitness of its most violent scenes, the reader's sensibilities are heightened and he/she is unable to distance himself from the text. It is both through the poetics of forced participation and the structure of the text that *American Psycho* literalizes the ways in which the perverted system of consumer capitalism comes full circle: faced by the boredom that plagues our lives as consumers we seek elation through some of the highly aesthetical, glamorously violent, and perversely obscene productions of the visual entertainment industry.

In Harron's film, the distance between the spectator and the character is restored. The lens of the camera acts as a physical filter—thus preventing the audience from being entirely absorbed by the text. The main narrative function is enacted through the cinematic lens as a series of shots, camera angles, and montage from a predominantly third-person point of view, and while the protagonist's voice remains present through the monologues that inform certain scenes, most of them are accompanied by a shot of the protagonist's face. By contrast to the novel's blank narrative voice, Bateman's voice is

embodied by a discernable character on screen, thus allowing the spectator an opportunity physically to distance herself from both the voice she hears and the person she sees. Contrary to the particular ways in which the structural and linguistic elements of the novel interact dialogically to create a distinctive writerly experience, the film's visual poetics produce a clearly discernible third-person perspective. The replacement of the first-person subjectifying perspective by a third-person "critical" one—the substitution of an "I" with an "eye"—allows the spectator to distance herself from the main character, thus allowing her to easily dissociate her own implication in the perverse, totalizing ideologies of consumer capitalism that Bateman personifies and the text literalizes. In other words, whereas in the novel, the reader finds itself in the position of the killer, and incidentally, the guilty, in the movie, the audience assumes the position of a witness, and incidentally, in a situation capable of judging the actions perpetrated on screen as that of a discernable other.

This shift of emphasis is metaphorized visually in the film in the scene where Bateman's gauges the bum's eyes (131). In the novel, the description of the act is not only reminiscent of *Le Chien Andalou* ("… with my thumb and forefinger [I] hold the other eye open and bring the knife open and bring the knife up and push the tip of it into the socket … then slitting the eyeball open sideways…"), it also speaks eloquently of Bataille's epigraph wherein he positions civilization in close proximity to horror; a horror that is epitomized in the fear of the eye, both as an organ and as an instrument of vision. As a great source of anxiety, Bataille claims, "The eye is ranked even higher in horror, since it is, among other things, the *eye of conscience*" (17). The eye to be the locus and

the prism of horror; not only do we *witness* violence visually—as the conduit towards visceral, bodily responses—but the violence exerted on the eye is also the most horrific. The scene from the novel is guaranteed to make us cringe, as many of us have squirmed when we watched Buñuel's film for the first time, but it also acts symbolically as an act that provokes blindness, of the bum, but also of us turning a blind eye to the horrors and vicissitudes of the perpetrator. In the film, the act is shot entirely from above, we do not witness the violence up-close; in other words, the particular positioning of the shot is blinding, pre-empting the possibility for catharsis even as the violence unfolds in front of us.

Whereas the stylistic strategies imbedded in the violent passages of Ellis' novel specifically aim to jostle the reader out of his/her passive complacency through a series of sudden and unexpected visceral shocks, the frigid aesthetics of Harron's film positions the spectator in a state of rational self-reflection as he/she remains emotionally unscathed by the events that unfold on the screen; a strategy which seems to align itself with Bertolt Brecht's paradigm of critical distance and Laura Mulvey's politics of deconstructing the gaze through passionate detachment.

In sharp contrast to Ellis' aesthetical choices of laying bare the violent ideologies of scopophilic consumer culture, Harron not only decided to trim the "excess fat" by removing and sanitizing the scenes of sexual violence, she also made the directorial decision to return the male pornographic gaze onto its subject. The camera makes a point of focusing on Bateman's fetishized body in the illustration of his exercise routines, his bathing and grooming rituals, and more compellingly, in the representation of the sex

scenes. More tellingly, in the depiction of a sexual encounter between Bateman and two prostitutes, which he names "Christie" and "Sabrina," in *lieu* of focusing on the fragmented sexual organs of the two girls as in the pornography description contained in the novel (173-176), the camera—alternatively representing both Bateman's gaze and Christie's—focuses predominantly on Bateman. It appears that this particular scene underlines the feminist politics of the film. On the one hand, the play of mirrors emphasizes the narcissist component of mainstream pornography whose codes of scopophilic pleasure have been embraced by the visual media industry, and on the other, the strategy of returning the gaze specifically aims to denounce and subvert the male gaze which has dominated the visual codes of traditional narrative cinema. While the film certainly does provide for a telling critique of these two components of contemporary consumer culture, I would contend that in this particular instance it works against the more compelling stylistic strategies at work in the novel for it merely confers on the spectator another opportunity to "exit" the text. What is particularly telling in the poetics of this scene are the ways in which the visual narrative creates an even greater distance by using a wide shot of the prostitutes and Bateman through the perspective of a second camera, the camera that Bateman uses to tape this threesome. The audience now finds itself behind two screens, two filters, two frames of reference or discernment looking at the blurry, colorless, and considerably smaller figures of the three characters. Following the point made previously, the critical "eye(s)" of the camera permits the spectator simultaneously to dissociate herself from the perverse vicissitudes of scopophilic consumption. In contrast, the novel's subjectifying "I" does not allow the reader to

remove herself from the objectifying scopophilic discourses that characterize consumer culture. Whereas the film privileges the sanctity and dignity of the audience, the novel violates the reader's privileged intimate space to the same extent that the text violates its various subjects. The film diffuses the potentially disorientating/shocking effect of the text's sexual violence, while in the novel, echoing Bataille's theories on language, *Erotisme*, and transgression it is deployed as a major stylistic strategy. With regards to this, Ellis explains in an interview for *MetroWeekly* why he thinks the movie adaptation may have misinterpreted the novel:

> … it's a movie I admire -- I am by no means embarrassed by it and I liked it a lot. I just thought it didn't really capture the sensibility of the novel. It was too chilly, too elegant. I thought the novel itself was a lot wilder and crazier. Director Mary Harron placed the movie within a feminist context and put quotation marks around it and I don't think the movie needed that.[15]

By stripping the excessive displays of gore and pornography and abiding by Mulvey's feminist strategy of returning the gaze, Harron does not investigate the ways in which, as Williams points out, these "excesses" might function as ideological critique.

### The Politics of Adaptation: Poetics, Intertextuality, and Ideology

Marco Abel contends that by privileging satire over violence, the film stresses the "representational" qualities of *American Psycho*, and in doing so it reflects a "tendency to judge a work of art in terms of its truth value" (138) but diminishes the text's potential in exploring the possibilities of writing at the "frontier" experienced through representations

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[15] Interestingly, in this interview Ellis also mentions that he is dubious about the possibility that his novels would make good movies for he contends that even thought "[t]hey have cinematic scenes, they have a lot of dialogue, but often they don't have that narrative momentum a movie needs […] So I'm always shocked when people want to make movies out of my books."

of violence (147). By excising the visual poetics of sexual violence and transforming the gaze, Harron transforms the potential impact that *American Psycho*'s transgressive style of criticism produces because the film's spectator does not respond on the same visceral level as the reader of the book. The shocking effects of pornographic horror are clearly absent from the film, because on the one hand, the poetics of the camera allow the spectator to remain at a safe distance from the events depicted on screen and on the other, the few violent scenes are predictable and undisturbing[16] and they do not replicate the series of uncanny shocks produced by Ellis's aesthetical choices.

The narrative style of the novel, its first-person disembodied "blankness," coerces the reader to assume the position of the protagonist: the voice that the reader hears in its head when it reads the book is its own. Due to the absence of any feelings and emotions in the narrative voice, the reader is compelled to respond affectively to the gruesome acts of violence it depicts. At the same time, the spectacle of sexual violence is what drives and links the various parts of the narrative. There is, at least affectively, no way out of this vicious circle: the narrative is plagued by the boredom that informs the long-descriptive passages of the novel, only to be interrupted—or "perversely relieved," one could argue—by the episodes of violence that punctuate the narrative. The visual poetics fold into the immediacy of the novel, we are active participants in the economies of spectacular consumption the novel decries, and hence the thoughts and desires of the protagonist are actually our own. In the movie there is an actor who the audience sees and recognizes as a discernable person, a distinct other, and the thoughts and desires of

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[16] Abel goes so far as calling them "comical" (146).

the killer are heard in the voice of that actor. As an audience, we dissociate ourselves from the events on screen, both temporarily[17] and spatially, and thus, we are clearly repositioned in our seats[18]. As a result we can easily draw the line between the character/actor and ourselves, between the psychopathology of a serial killer and that of an entire culture.

In psychoanalytic terms, it could be argued that at the same time the novel's narrative blurs the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious modes of expression, it subverts the reader's unconscious desire for both a secure subjective position and a subject of self-recognition by delivering an ego-ideal which acts as a symbolic symptom of the perverse ideologies guiding spectacular consumer culture. In contrast, there is no such symbolic dimension in Mary Harron's adaptation, for the critique of consumer culture is to be read on a more literal level. The narrative structure of the film represents a more or less stable subject—i.e. a "serial killer"—that is easily recognizable as a discernable other, a subject the audience can distance itself from because of its otherness: a "secure" subject in the sense that the security of the subject-position of the audience vis-à-vis the character is preserved, thanks in part to the third-person perspective of the camera's "eye".

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[17] Interestingly enough, a special feature of the DVD, as well as various of its interviewees, clearly considers *American Psycho* to be a "time-piece," representative of the late 1980s Reaganomics, without ever hinting that Ellis' satire is even more relevant today in the digital age of late capitalism.

[18] Nick Browne has noted in "The Spectator-in-the-text: the Rhetoric of *Stagecoach*," there is usually an ambivalence with regards to narrative positioning of the spectator either outside or inside the text –"the literal place and the imaginary place of the filmic stage"—in concordance with the structural organization of the narrative and the narrator's own moral disposition towards the story and its characters. The position of the spectator is further complicated by what Browne dubs, "the prohibition against the meeting" between the actor and the spectator, insofar as "it places [the spectator] irretrievably outside the action" (116).

Yet, from a slightly different perspective, it could be argued that in reproducing textually the visual aesthetics of pornography and horror films, Ellis embraces the postmodern rhetoric of undermining the high/low dichotomization of critical discourses surrounding literary culture and popular culture. Conversely, it could also be suggested that by emphasizing the dialectic—i.e. "textual"—properties of *American Psycho* and excising its visual aesthetics, Mary Harron focuses on the more detached critical properties of cinematic language and simultaneously subverts or undermines the spectacular ideology of visual pleasure associated with traditional narrative cinema. In some skewed way, it could be argued that Harron is reflecting Ellis' subversive tactics by reversing the dynamics of transgression. Whereas Ellis chooses to include pornographic violence in a genre of cultural production (i.e. "serious" literature) where it is both unexpected and condemned, informed by the sulfurous reputation and scandalous reception of the novel, she is being similarly atypical by expurgating graphic violence in a film genre[19] where it is expected and celebrated. From the perspective that Harron's text is a critique of the traditional voyeuristic conventions that have dominated the film medium, it appears that the director responds to Mulvey's political call to destroy the mechanics of scopophilic satisfaction.[20]

Holden's comment regarding the ways in which Harron's film "salvages" the novel adequately echoes the ways in which criticism may affect a novel's perception and

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[19] Interestingly, the film has been categorized—and marketed—as a horror film.

[20] Mulvey explains, "the first blow against monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure, and privilege of the "invisible guest," and highlights how film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms" (209).

reputation and how critical responses can "defend" a work. Yet, Abel considers that, by making certain judgments, critical responses, such as Harron's film actually "attack" a work by emphasizing certain aspects while undermining others (139). Hence, it could also be argued that by focusing on its representational qualities and dismissing the visceral poetics of the text, Harron's decision to emphasize the satirical aspect "neuters" the text by stripping it from its potential to violate the complacency of the society it addresses. While the novel specifically aims to attack the senses of the reader through a series of visceral shocks in order to trigger an ontological *remise en question* of the system in which he/she is a participant, the film positions the spectator at a detached distance from the materiality of sexual violence. The novel's narrative—the "I"—is a symptom of capitalism's collective violence, whereas the critical detachment—the "eye"—of the film allows the spectator to view Bateman as a "consoling fantasy," a product of the material conditions of a historicized epoch. In arguing for a reconsideration of the relation between genre, gender, fantasy, and structures of perversion, Williams reminds us that although horror and pornography may seem to superficially reenact traditional patterns of violence directed towards women, "[t]o dismiss them as bad excess … is not to address their function as cultural problem-solving" (12). By excising the scenes of sexual violence from *American Psycho*, Harron seemingly overlooks the discursive function of pornographic horror and so, one could wonder where Harron's satire positions itself with regards to the political economies of the culture industry it supposedly subverts.[21]

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[21] Hollywood actually branded *American Psycho* by producing a sequel. Nevertheless, it is worth

**The American Nightmare**

Bateman personifies the excesses of consumer capitalism and commodity fetishism, where self-worth is defined by the accumulation of material wealth and interpersonal relationships are commoditized transactions. Bateman is not the only one preoccupied by these obsessions, and consequently his compulsive behavior cannot be simply dismissed as an individuated neurotic disorder. His consumerist leanings make him an integral part of an American culture defined by appearances and possessions. The perceptions that form his *being*—or lack thereof—are entirely shaped by the signs and images of the popular media as a configuration of the collective imaginary. This suggests that the objectification of human existence and the endless pursuit of wealth and status that Bateman embodies also conform to the ideals that have shaped national consciousness.

It is impossible to dismiss the precise contextual setting of *American Psycho*. In the 1980s, the U.S. was coming out of a global energy crisis, a bitter recession, and the social and political breakdown caused by the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon's resignation. The political and economic recovery that seemingly occurred when Ronald Regan took office greatly influenced how America presented itself as a world superpower at the height of the Cold War. From the outset, the text resonates with the free market and consumerist ideologies that have fomented the American financial empire, making Wall Street the capital of the Western hemisphere. In *American Psycho*, the delusional, supercharged, testosterone-filled narrative makes the sublime aura of this exclusive location shine with a rather sordid magnificence.

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mentioning, that the special features of the 2005 "Uncut" DVD edition pays considerable tribute to Ellis' original text.

Competition is a defining characteristic of free market ideologies that have defined the Reagan era. Bateman and his associates are in competition with each other, an idea best exemplified in the scene where they compare their business cards (which was executed with compelling flair in Harron's movie adaptation) (44-45). *American Psycho* shows how the self-consuming ethos of narcissistic individualism and the Reaganomics of corporate greed, market de-regularization, and political irresponsibility have distorted the "American Dream." When consumer capitalism becomes a form of social Darwinism, the dream turns into a nightmare, not only for Bateman's victims, the social others that do not fit into the conformist fantasy of an image-driven society, but for the executioner as well. The Society of the Spectacle is all encompassing, and the egotistical thrust of self-promotion has paradoxically exacerbated individualism to the point of destroying individuality.

Bateman's surface beauty is the outward projection of a picture perfect society, which, under the cover of flawless appearances, struggles to hide the vices and vicissitudes of a deeply fragmented and deranged psyche. From a purely materialistic point of view Batmen has everything he could ever desire, and all with such ease. But he has no sense of human value, only monetary value. To him everything is an object with a price tag. For example, Bateman dates and has sex with women not because he is intelligent, witty, or charming (he is not), but because he pays them. Similarly, women are also obsessed by material wealth, for according to Price, "When I tell [girls] what my annual income is, believe me, my behavior couldn't matter less" (53). Moreover, as Reeves exclaims, "Girls dig Bateman" because "He's *GQ*" (90), but he is also "the boy

next door," the archetypical all-American Male, and thus interchangeable and undistinguishable from the rest of his crew. Consequently, the hypersexual logos of the male faction signals a crisis in the construction of heterosexual masculinity. The episode with Luis Carruthers and Bateman's taste in transsexual pornography (evidenced in the reference to *She-Male Reformatory*), as well as his obsession with his body-image and the implied categorization of "the boy next door" as a gay archetype, all point to the possibility that Bateman is a closet or repressed homosexual who is in fact overcompensating by enacting—or projecting—very misogynistic sexual fantasies as a means to conform to a hypersexual ideal of heterosexual masculinity.

Whereas Bateman may very well embody the post-industrial American Dream of financial wealth and class affluence, he also represents the inherent horror of a culture predicated on the logic of competition and accumulation. Bateman's existence is characterized by luxury and excess—but it is also a life plagued by boredom and ennui, where feelings and emotions are null and void. The pointless and endless accumulation of material goods has created an emotional vacuum that translates into vacuous feelings. To escape from the numbness of a life defined by the surface materiality of things, Bateman fantasizes heavily about violence as a means to reawaken his senses. He needs to *feel*, and he can only do so by feeding off the adrenaline rush procured by sensationalized violence. As desire gives way to need in the form of addiction, a vicious circle of increasing sensationalism and subsequent desensitization gradually imposes itself.

Consumer capitalism is perhaps the latest stage of development of Western civilization, *American Psycho* suggests that as Bataille's epigraph points out, "civilized" man is indeed no stranger to horror. In her essay on Ellis' hyperrealist aesthetics Frances Fortier asks the reader "*Où est l'insupportable? Dans la violence même ou dans le récit qui le banalise?*" ["Wherein lies the unacceptable? Within the violence itself or within the narrative that banalizes it?" (translation mine)] (98). Given the recent trends in visual consumer products wherein ultra-violence is the norm, the public at large has grown largely desensitized; the thresholds of tolerance for depictions of obscenity and gore have consistently been pushed further. Ellis claims in an interview for the *New York Times* that he was attempting to convey, "how desensitized our culture has become toward violence." Interestingly, this was also the argument made by Michael Haneke in (re)producing *Funny Games*. But in contrast to Ellis, Haneke decided to excise all display of on-screen violence, a strategy similar to Mary Harron's, which may further support my point that strategies work differently across the two mediums. As I've demonstrated, the critical paradox lies in the fact that through the operation of subjective transfiguration—i.e. through the twofold process of affective projection and response—the text's gratuitous violence works as a *critique* of gratuitous violence.

Part of the critique rests on the idea that the promulgation of various consumer products of a visual nature has promoted a scopophilic type of voyeurism; turning subjects into objects and undermining the ethical implications of consuming representations of violence and human suffering by classifying them as "entertainment."

Charles Baudelaire, the eponymous writer of commodity capitalism,[22] addressed the preface of *Les Fleurs du Mal* to an *hypocrite lecteur*, a hypocritical reader, someone who would not want to accept the self-image the poems depict. For Ellis, we are all hypocrites, we all indulge in a dubious lifestyle of voyeuristic consumption. As a satire, *American Psycho* does not escape—in fact it perfectly abides by—the limitations of its genre. Bakhtin observes that the role of the Menippean satire is to be symptomatic, to reveal the defects of the subject it addresses without attempting to correct them (*The Dialogic Imagination* 26), a point that Jameson similarly emphasizes when he compares postmodern pastiche to the oppositional art of modernism (123-124). "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT," the novel concludes, because, quite simply, there is no way out. The ideology of consumerism is so deeply engrained in everyday life that it seems impossible for the public at large, regardless of class and gender, to renounce to it. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, consumer capitalism represents such a totalizing ideology that the *American Psycho* will carry on.

Bateman is narcissistic, greedy, cruel, proud, and envious. And yet, other than the fact that he *may* be a brutal murderer, he is in many ways not so different from the average U.S. consumer and citizen. The magnitude of American consumerism is rivaled by no other nation in the world and the omnipotence of the media and the spectacle has grown exponentially[23]. Modern-day Americans are obsessed by reality shows, action

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[22] See Walter Benjamin's *The Painter of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[23] The uneasy collusion of spectacle and politics in American life is perhaps best exemplified by Sarah Palin, who, after being nominated as vice-president in the 2008 election, now runs a multi-million dollar media empire is celebrated by Ann Coulter as "a real American" in Time Magazine's annual "World's most influential People" of 2008. See *Time* (May 11, 2009), p. 120.

movies, designer clothing, physical beauty, dieting, money, social networking, and material possessions. The multiplication of social networks and online personas has accelerated our "depersonalization," as Bateman would say (282). Capitalist ideology thrives by imposing a system of false needs, and through the omnipotence of media advertising, we are constantly being sold on the belief that consuming certain products will bring us happiness, and that our self-worth is determined by the size of our houses, cars, and egos. Reading *American Psycho* twenty years after it was originally published is a striking reminder that the social Darwinist ethos of 1980s consumerism remains deeply engrained in the American psyche.

In a June 2010 column of *Esquire*, writer Stephen March asks "Why in Hell are We Back in the 80s?" as he traces the current decades' "eighties retrocraze" and tries to understand the nostalgia for what he calls "the shittiest of decades" (87-88). For many critics and viewers, Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) remains a cultural reference for its accurate portrayal of the 1980s neo-liberal ideologies of greed and excess. In perhaps one of the most memorable speeches of the film, Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas), a corporate raider, tells an audience of shareholders:

> The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA. [24]

[24] The speech was reportedly inspired by the 1986 commencement address at the Berkeley's school of Business Administration, in which Ivan Boesky (who was later convicted on insider-trading charges) opined: ""Greed is all right, by the way. I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself".

Greed was indeed alive and well in the decade that spawned a million Gordon Gekkos and Patrick Batemans, but if the cultural recycling of 80s popular culture (including a most anticipated sequel to *Wall Street*) may indeed be a sign that "we are back in the 80s," the rampant unaccountability of those in positions of political and economic power with regards to the financial scandals and crises of the last two decades suggests that its *spirit* has never left us.

# CHAPTER 6

## The Self, the Other, its Doubles, and its Shadows:

## The Dialectics of Desire in Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho*.

> I ask that I be taken into consideration
> on the basis of my desire.  I am not only
> here-now, locked in thinghood.  I desire
> somewhere else and something else.
>
> —Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Set in an undisclosed nation-state in sub-Saharan Africa, *African Psycho* (2007) was released in 2007 in the U.S. and marks the American debut of Alain Mabanckou, a francophone author from Congo-Brazzaville whose previous novels have reaped a number of awards in France.[1]  The paratextual reference to Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* is striking and unavoidable.  The title—and by extension, its cover—evokes and invokes the Other and Otherness.  Not only does the title call in Ellis' infamous novel, but for a book originally published in French, it also presents itself as an Anglicism. *African Psycho* is a francophone text with an English title, and its translation is destined for an American audience who will inevitably recall the experience—cognitive and sensory—of reading Ellis' book.  But *African Psycho* is not only a response to *American Psycho*: it is also its shadow and its double.

In *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, James Ferguson addresses the seemingly paradoxical idea that "Africa" is as much a real cultural and historical locale as it is a construct of Western thought.  Decrying the fact that Africa has

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[1] Mabanckou was awarded a number of literary prizes; most notably, *Mémoires de porc-épic* was awarded the Prix Renaudot in 2006. He now partly resides in the U.S. where he is professor of Francophone Literature at UCLA.

consistently been configured as the "dark other" or "an absent object" (2), Ferguson claims the continent has almost exclusively been described in negation (what it is *not*) (10). Following Achille Mbembe's observation that "speaking rationally about African is not something that has ever come naturally," Ferguson takes into account the role of the imaginary in producing Africa both as a historical and social construct as well as a "real place-in-the-world"—i.e. a place that is both real and socially meaningful, and where fantasies about a fictional and constructed Africa collude and collide with actual political and economic processes (5-7).

Ferguson notes that the promises of neoliberalism—i.e. that free markets will create the conditions for economic opportunities through global interconnectedness—have failed and have had dire consequences on African states as social and political insecurities have only deepened (9-10). Echoing the early Western construction of Africa as the "dark continent," these effects have driven political and economic analysts to address Africa in terms of both "shadow economies" and "shadow states," as economic transactions and political power are negotiated covertly through unofficial means (15). For Ferguson the idea of a "shadow" also brings in the idea of a *doubling* (16), wherein Africa's relationship to the West not only points to a negative *other*, a "bad image" of failed modernization for example, but also implies a bond and a relationship:

> A shadow, after all, is not a copy but an attached twin—a shadow is what sticks with you. Likeness here implies not only resemblance but also a connection, a proximity, an equivalence, even an identity. A shadow, in this sense, is not simply a negative space, a space of absence; it is a likeness, an inseparable other-who-is-also-oneself to whom one is bound.

In *African Psycho*, the paratextual reference to *American Psycho* not only confirms the figurative parameters of a relationship between "America" and "Africa," but also emphasizes the model—i.e. the "psycho"—on which the relationship is bound. The novel brings into focus the ways in which Ferguson's notions of a doubling and a shadowing can be applied to the discursive formation of African cultural identity and subjectivity, which, I would add, is entangled in a dialectic relationship predicated on configurations of cultural or individual psychosis. Fanon has already explicated the psychopathology of colonization in depth; and so, one way of approaching *African Psycho* is to inquire what the text can tell us about the psychopathology of the *postcolonial* subject.

Although the title might temporarily annul the cultural *differences* between the "American" and "African" by positioning them in paratextual proximity, the opposition is quickly reinforced in the text itself. Accordingly, Yves Chemla indicates that the world drawn by Grégoire, the protagonist of Mabanckou's novel stands in opposition to the logic of excess and spectacular consumption that characterizes Bateman's world. Admitting he thoroughly enjoyed Ellis' novel, Mabanckou explains the connection in the following terms:

> My book, *African Psycho*, is deeply rooted in Africa, and I needed to focus on an awkward character who is unable to commit a real murder -- Gregoire Nakobomayo. *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman is a product of America; he is rich -- the image of the successful Manhattan executive. Gregoire is the opposite. He is an orphan. He is poor. He lives on the street. He was adopted by a rich family, but it is not his world. He wants to resemble Angoualima, a mythical serial killer from the other Congo [the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly known as Zaïre]. Patrick Bateman is the perfect serial killer. Gregoire is just eternally awkward. (qtd in Zuarino)

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The dyadic relationships the text draws are not limited to the protagonists. In similar ways to which Grégoire is related to Bateman as a shadow or a double, the "Africa" depicted in the novel is also related to "America"—and to some extend, the West—even as the precise locale remains undetermined. While there are definite references to the region of the Congo, such as the *Bembé* language (66), the distinct setting of the novel is never named, thereby eluding precise geographical location. The series of playful toponomastic twists—such as "He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot, the name of the protagonist's neighborhood—further remove the setting from any "real" or existing locale, even as they more accurately describe the place. In a sense, whereas the context of *American Psycho* was precisely situated both historically and geographically in the epicenter of American culture and civilization, the setting of *African Psycho* is *relative*: in accordance with Ferguson's observations, it is defined either as a *double* or *in negation*. The river that cuts the city in two is dubbed "the Seine" as a mirror image of the river that cuts Paris in half (71) and the numerous references to "the country over there" (possibly pointing to the Democratic Republic of the Congo) aim to emphasize the differences between the two African nation-states. Furthermore, the apparent dissymmetry enclosed therein—i.e. approximating the Western capital while maintaining the African neighbor at a distance—calls in Ferguson's idea regarding the ways in which Africans aspire to "copy" Western forms as a means to attain Western norms,[2] even if it means undermining notions of cultural difference and specificity (19).

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[2] This tendency has already been observed by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, see the chapter entitled "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness."

The tension between the novel's approximate localization and its clear continental context emphasizes the notion that "Africa" is not defined *in-itself* but rather through the bonds and relationships it holds with other locales and nation states.  Consequently, the novel addresses Ferguson's idea that "Africa" is as much a product of the imagination as it is a real place in the world.  Dialogically, the title emphasizes the constructedness of the "African" as a shadow and a double of the "American."  But it also heightens the expectations of the audience: as readers of Ellis' novel, we expect to meet an African version of Bateman, a symptomatic figure revealing the psychosis of the culture he represents.  As a result, the following questions arise: How does the novel actualize the audience expectations and perceptions of "African" culture?  What/who is an African Psycho? What are his/her vices and vicissitudes? How does the protagonist correspond to a Western Audience's perceptions of the "African" and "Africa"?  If these perceptions are by and large informed and reinforced by media images and representations, how does it address the historical construction of Africa as the "dark continent," which finds its roots in Hegel, and is further echoed in Chinua Achebe's postcolonial reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*?  Or is this "African Psycho," a more contemporary figure, the figure of a monster, such as the brutal, ruthless Idi Amin[3] or the narcissistic, delusional dictator, "The Ruler" of Ngugi's *The Wizard of the Crow*?  With these questions in tow, in this chapter I will examine how *African Psycho* critically addresses the audience expectations and perceptions about "Africa" and the "African" as markers of

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[3] I might add it would not be a far cry to assume that most contemporary Western audiences are most familiar with Idi Amin through Kevin Macdonald's award-winning film adaptation of Giles Folden's *The Last King of Scotland*.

cultural identity and products of the collective imaginary. In so doing, I will argue that *African Psycho* examines the psychopathology of postcolonial subjectivity by deconstructing dialectical models of self-consciousness that arise within and across literary texts and contexts.

Following Ferguson, we are prompted to consider that by calling on Ellis' novel, *African Psycho* acts as both its "double" and its "shadow," but it also *mirrors American Psycho*. Consequently, we can ask, what does the African psycho tell us about his American counterpart and about the notion of cultural difference imbedded in the play of mirrors. Furthermore, if we are that *hypocrite lecteur* whose self-image is reflected in Bateman as a figure embodying American national consciousness, what does its double and its shadow tell us about the *other* and, eventually, about ourselves? But before we can try to examine these relationships more in depth, we need to meet first the psycho referred to in the title: who is the *African Psycho*?

The novel's narrator and protagonist, Grégoire Nakobomayo, is a would-be murderer who lives in the curiously yet appropriately named *He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot* neighborhood of an unnamed city in sub-Saharan Africa. Grégoire is a "picked up" child, un "*enfant ramassé*," an orphan who spent his childhood in different foster homes. Although he lives in the relative comfort of his own home and is self-employed as a metal-sheet worker, he is consumed by anger and self-loathing. He systematically rants about the dejected state of his neighborhood, the arrogance of the prostitutes from the "country over there," the travesty of the judicial system and the vanity of its public prosecutors, and the gaudy sensationalism of the irrelevant media outlets. Determined to

compensate for his apparent ugliness (his head is shaped like a rectangular brick, which lands him the nickname "rectangular head") and overcome his inconsequential life as a manual laborer and petty criminal, he aspires to follow in the footsteps of his deceased idol, "The Great Master Angoualima," the country's most infamous and accomplished serial killer. A figure of mythical proportions, Angoualima becomes Grégoire's imaginary mentor, a "spiritual father" whom Grégoire wants to please by enacting his own murderous deeds. Despite a series of botched criminal attempts, Grégoire believes that murdering Germaine, his live-in girlfriend and a professional streetwalker, will grant him the validation and recognition—from Angoualima, the media, and ultimately, the reader—he so desperately seeks. But Grégoire fails to kill Germaine, as he failed to kill Master Fernandes-Quinoa or "The Girl in White," and ultimately, also fails as a character and as a fully realized subject.

### Rants, Raves, and Lies: The Pathological Language of Non-Being

The narrative unravels in a series of rants and digressions; the thoughts, observations, and events that serve as the context and rationale of the speech act that constitutes the opening sentence and premise to the text: "I have decided to kill Germaine on December 29" (1). Signaling subjectivity, sovereignty, and premeditation, the commissive underlines the agency of the subject in committing the act, but *in-itself* it lacks in factuality[4] and, eventually, curtails its realization. Grégoire's decision allegedly foreshadows the act as the cathartic resolution of the narrative; however, the next

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[4] According to John Searle's taxonomy of speech acts (see for example, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.), commissives differ from assertives in the sense that they are not based on facts.

sentence highlights the deferral rather than the commitment as the *thinking* shadows the *doing*: "I have been thinking about this for weeks—whatever one may say about it, killing someone requires both psychological and logistical preparedness" (1). The impact of the initial proposition's apparent decisiveness is immediately overturned by the disclosure of excessive premeditation. In *African Psycho*, premeditation equals procrastination. While the commitment allegedly foreshadows the act, it actually foreshadows Grégoire's failure to commit the act.

From the start, the narrative is imbued by the absence of assertiveness, and in this sense, the novel reveals the performative paradox inherent in the commissive. Like all speech acts, the commissive is performative, but it also defers the performance of the act to which one is committed. The contradiction actualized in *the performative deferment of the performance* highlights the distance and remoteness of the commissive to the factual. From this perspective, it is the *deferment and not the act* that is put forth. In fact, entire sections of the narrative are devoted to preparing and imagining how the scene will unfold (93-98, 110-112, 125). The opening sentence characterizes to a great extent the narrative progression of the novel, wherein the crime is perpetually deferred as Grégoire errs and wanders in a series of rants, digressions, and projections, repeating his mantra (77) without ever passing to the act. He is either ill-prepared or never achieves the desired and necessary level of "psychological and logistical preparedness" for his criminal endeavors even though he seems aware of the perils of deferment, "If I had kept on trying one scenario after another … I would never have made up my mind and would

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still be postponing my gesture indefinitely" (110).   The lack of assertiveness that marks the deferral is a sign of both Grégoire's past and future failures.

Far from actualizing an individuated agency rooted in decisiveness or assertiveness, Grégoire's narrative is mostly constituted by a series of expressive speech acts that position the psychological front and forward. He claims having "reached the necessary state of mind" (1) and the willpower (77) to carry out his murderous deed, whereas in fact, Grégoire is not only an irreverent procrastinator but is also incoherent, erratic, and irrational, if not completely neurotic.  His voice recalls that of Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and in many ways Grégoire shares their bitterness, isolation, and anonymity.

Yves Chemla points out, "African Psycho *est un discours par lequel un 'Je' accède à la souveraineté de sa propre parole, mais en même temps cette parole est minée, et se déconstruit au fur et à mesure de sa prolifération*" ["*African Psycho* is a discourse through which an "I" attains the sovereignty of its own *parole*, but at the same time, this *parole* is doomed, and it deconstructs itself as it proliferates"] (Translation mine). From the onset, the title qualifies the discourse as pathological, which highlights its nonsense and incongruence.  His speech is a grotesque collage of fantasies, lies, and phantasmatic projections, and his delusions of grandeur and inner contradictions not only mark him as unreliable but also cast a shadow on his capacity to act as a free self-determining subject.  In fact, his failures are foreshadowed in the patterns of his speech. Not only is the discourse characterized by an incessant oscillation between past digressions and future projections—a wandering that eludes action in the present—but

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every thought also appears *suspended*, as indicated by the ellipses that mark the end of every section of the text.

Wavering in and out of the past and the future without actualizing the present, the discourse constantly seeks to reassert itself. Through his incessant blabber, Grégoire anxiously seeks our approval at the same time he seeks recognition from Angoualima, providing motive and rationale to justify his actions and desires. Not only does Grégoire profess he is predestined to follow in the footsteps of Angoualima due to their shared history as orphans (7-8), but he also claims he is on a "cleaning" mission to restore dignity and honor to the neighborhood of He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot (18, 78), a place which has nurtured him as parents would (32-33, 79-80). But although Grégoire is well aware of the ways in which persuasion can win over an audience (31-32), he lacks the necessary skills to win us over. His apparently noble endeavor—he calls it a "public health campaign" (64)—to preserve the honor of his territory is quickly shadowed by the fact that his rationale is deeply rooted in structures of misogyny and xenophobia: "I was going to clean [the neighborhood] real good, give it back some dignity, rid it of its refuse, or its detritus, of its filth, of its germs, of its amoebas, of its bacilli, yes of its bitches who came from the country over there" (78). While this train of thought echoes the pitfalls of African nationalism Frantz Fanon had already identified in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grégoire's distinct pathology accentuates its incongruities as the discourse wanders off ineffectually into a senseless rant (77-85).

Grégoire's psychosis is embedded in the ways in which he is incapable of linking thought to action, and in an extended sense, *African Psycho* investigates the relationship

between language and being through the protagonist's ambivalence. Ferdinand de Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jacques Lacan situate language as a fundamental, pre-existing reality that precedes existence. Humans are born *into* language insofar as they come into being through language. Language informs and shapes subjectivity, from the first violent act of naming,[5] through interpellation, to our own appropriation of its system of signification. Likewise, language allows us to understand our world, but also gives us access to its symbolic order, to the values and meanings of a given cultural milieu. Accordingly, language plays a significant role in constructing Grégoire's subjectivity and his perceptions of the world. In fact, the protagonist seems acutely cognizant of the implications of language; in one particular instance, he explains: "*To kill*—a verb I have worshipped since coming of age. Fundamentally, all the small jobs I carried out were done in the hope of later being able to conjugate this verb in its most immediate and fully realized form" (35). However, for Grégoire realization often gets lost in a sea of endless chatter and nonsense. Ranting about his failure to kill the "Girl in White," Grégoire exclaims:

> on that night, I was convinced that I was going to kill at last, crush, wipe out, I don't give a fuck about words, that I was going to exist at last, that's it, exist, that I was going to be somebody, that I was going to follow in Angoualima's footsteps, come out of the banality of my life as a poor sheet-iron man, a poor auto-body man with large hands, as a good-for-nothing, as a man who does the rounds of He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot's watering holes, that I was finally going to hear the national press and the press of the country over there to wonder who this new Angoualima was, who is this murderer (78).

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[5] See Jacques Derrida's "*The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau*" in *Of Grammotology*: 101-140.

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After first dismissing language, he immediately plunges into irrational blather, fluctuating between pathetic self-pity and exaggerated projections of fame and glory. Grégoire's failure as a subject is in part rooted in a fraught relation with discourse and language. His endless chatter belongs to what Heidegger categorizes as "idle-talk" in his discussion of discourse and language in *Being and Time*. In contrast to authentic discourse, which intelligibly and genuinely shapes our understanding of the ways in which we relate to others, idle-talk "cut[s] off the primary and primordially genuine relations of being toward the world, toward *Mitda-sein*, toward being-in itself" (159). The incessant noise of Grégoire's pathological discourse is overwhelming and overbearing, and its delusions, lies, and incongruities, do not allow for an authentic disclosure of Being. To that effect, Angoualima, in his final phantasmatic appearance towards the end of the narrative, tells Grégoire: "you're just a liar… you have no personality, that's your problem, Rectangular Head!" (143-44).

Not only is Grégoire a liar, he is also an impostor whose lack of self-worth further distances him from a genuine sense of self. For example, when he meets Germaine, he introduces himself as Angoualima to impress her (115), and in another more notable episode, he pretends to be Angoualima and threatens by phone the host and guest of *Listeners Speak Out*, a popular radio show (52). While he experiences tremendous joy at having successfully impersonated his idol, what is most striking is that Grégoire's sense of self-assertion is derived vicariously by shadowing Angoualima. Existing in a world made of lies, where the "Master" from whom he seeks recognition is not only a murderous psychopath but also an abusive—and imaginary—father figure, Grégoire is

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incapable of asserting himself as a being-in itself or a truly independent self-consciousness.

### Black Skins, Black Masks

In addition to the obvious paratextual reference to *American Psycho*, Mabanckou's novel also draws an implied and rather subtle hypertextual reference to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon's canonical text on the psychological effects of colonialism. I am prompted to highlight this connection because there are surprising and insightful correspondences between Fanon's chapter outlining the relationship between "The Man of Color and the White Woman" and *African Psycho*. My argument is that Fanon's analysis of colonial psychosis is transposed to the postcolonial setting through the skewed transfigurations of Jean Veneuse, the "White Woman," and even Germaine Guex, the psychoanalyst whose work Fanon utilizes, in the characters of Grégoire, "The Girl in White," and Germaine, the girlfriend Grégoire plans to murder. Consequently, *African Psycho* dramatizes—and somewhat parodies—Guex's theories on the neurosis of abandonment.

Grégoire's psyche is deeply scarred by his personal history as a "picked up" child—a baby abandoned by his parents and whom the state literally "picked up" and placed in various foster homes:

> We were called "picked-up children" because at the time, following an unwanted pregnancy, a great number of mothers would wait until they had delivered to skip out of the maternity ward and leave the task of caring for their progeny to the state. (8)

In slight contrast to Veneuse, Grégoire is a "real" orphan.[6]  However, in similar ways to the subject of Fanon's case study, Grégoire struggles with the pre-Oedipal causes and Oedipal effects of abandonment.  But in the present case, the subject is not desperately trying to live up to standards of Whiteness, as was the case with Veneuse, but to imagined and imaginary standards of "Blackness," embodied by the African psychotic archetype of Angoualima.

According to Guex, parental abandonment causes deep psychological effects: "The symptomatology of this form of neurosis is based upon the tripod of the *anxiety* aroused by abandonment, the *aggressivity* to which it gives rise, and the resultant *devaluation* of self" (13, qtd in Fanon 54).  Grégoire's erratic narrative voice is an expression of his apparent anxiety, which in turn, shapes his murderous tendencies. Finally, his inability to successfully carry them out to gain the recognition of the media and the approval Angoualima, his "idol and Great Master," triggers feelings of self-devaluation and self-loathing that manifest themselves in his imaginary conversation with his mentor (7).

Interpreting Veneuse's feeling of abandonment, Fanon explains he rejects the love of others as a result of having been abandoned; in turn, he will make others suffer in order to express his need for revenge (56).  As a foundling, Grégoire deeply resents his mother and fantasizes about eating her heart out: "I would pull out her heart of stone, cook it in my shop's furnace and eat it with sweet potatoes, licking my fingers, the rest of her body rotting away in front of me …" (8).  His mother's abandonment might also

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[6] I am using the term "real" to contrast Grégoire with Jean Veneuse, whom Fanon considers an "orphan," figuratively speaking, because he was "abandoned" by his parents to attend a *lycée* in France.

explain his more general misogyny, as he projects treating the body of his female victim in the same way he would his mother's: "I'm going to cut [Germaine] up, then boil her in a big pot thanks to my furnace, and go eat certain parts of her body" (122). Although these cannibal tendencies might recall some of Bateman's most gruesome acts, from a psychosexual standpoint Grégoire is much closer to Houellebecqu's Bruno than he is to Ellis' Bateman.

Grégoire describes his life in foster families and, in a satirical nod, the "civilizing mission" of educated civil servants who sent him to catechism, where he would learn the word of God under the crack of the whip (9-10). Most notably, however, Grégoire relates how he defended himself against his foster brother's attempt to abuse him sexually by requesting they play "Mommy and Daddy" (11-13). This event has had a determining effect in establishing Grégoire's proclivity for violence as he not only considers it his first "dangerous deed" (8), but also indicates that his career as a petty criminal began soon thereafter (13).

In addition to setting the stage for Grégoire's inclination towards interpersonal violence, the episode also contains important psychosexual implications. The multilayered juxtaposition of child homosexuality, incestual rape, and role reversal may explain Grégoire's incompetence as well as his relative impotence. In this reconfiguration of domestic rape, Grégoire is asked to play the role of the mother, whom the father/brother wants to abuse sexually: "Take off your pants. We're going to do like daddies and mommies! You're mommy and I'm daddy" (12). But through a clever subterfuge, he turns things to his advantage. Grégoire tricks his foster brother into

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turning off the lights claiming, "Usually when daddies and mommies do this, the daddies must always close their eyes when the mommies take off their clothes. And you have to turn off the light because it's not good to see when you do that…" (12). To convince his foe that he knows what he is talking about, he lies by telling him that he *saw* his parents having sex. The brother complies and Grégoire acts rapidly, using the element of surprise to completely reverse the dynamics of the encounter:

> He turned off the light. I could still make out his silhouette in the doorway. As soon as his back was turned, I grabbed the stick he used as a whip by surprise. The other end was pointy. He turned around, felt for the switch in the dark. The light came back on, more intense than before. I had only a few seconds to act.
> Thinking of the *Zorro* comics I stole from the bookstore-on-the-pavement outside the duo movie theater, I attacked, holding the stick like a spear. Bull's-eye. Immediately I heard the bad boy scream. "Baldy! Baldy!" He cried for help and groped for a cloth to wipe the abundant gooey liquid that oozed from the eye I had just pierced (13).

By piercing the "eye" of the father, Grégoire not only "castrates" him, but he also symbolically subverts the violence inherent to the patriarchal gaze. This "first dangerous deed" is a successful self-determining act, yet it is achieved by playing the role of the "mother," the sexual other he so vehemently despises. The psychosexual impact of this episode has some exponential consequences for Grégoire's existence, potentially explaining his repeated failures to act a sexualized and embodied self. As his early exposure to heterosexual conduct is predicated on castration and role reversal, he is incapable of exerting the phallic violence of the "Father," contrary to the hypersexualized Angoualima. On the one hand, Grégoire will suffer the impotence of the castrated father in the instance where he wants to rape the "Girl in White" (74-75). On the other, his failure to kill Germaine is both foreshadowed as well as reinforced in domestic role

reversal: in projecting the murder scene, he imagines her sitting down after work waiting for him to bring her a beer (97).

From a different perspective, the piercing of the eye brings into focus notable intertextual and narrative ramifications of concepts related to vision and blindness, and more specifically to what we *see* and experience as a reader. On a first level, the piercing of the eye resonates with the infamous scene from Bunuel's *Le Chien Andalou* and Bataille's idea that the eye is the privileged locus of violence. In so doing, the text draws attention to the aesthetic quality of violence, as is the case in *Funny Games* and *American Psycho*. More particularly, the description of the foster brother's wound mirrors quite faithfully the episode in *American Psycho* wherein Bateman blinds a bum: "… both sockets [are] hollowed out and filled with gore, what's left of his eyes literally oozing over his screaming lips in thick, webby strands" (132). This mirroring effect between the two works is further reinforced by the fact that these episodes mark the first explicit act of violence. But while both texts pick up on the ubiquity and pervasiveness of real and fictionalized violence, this point of convergence only reinforces the divergence between the personal narratives of the protagonists amidst the fact that they share a number of distinguishable characteristic traits. In a broader sense, Bateman is more schizoid than neurotic as he does not display any of the peculiarities of Grégoire's psychosexual pathologies. In *American Psycho*, the textual violence becomes more explicit as it increases in frequency, even as the empirical evidence of Bateman's murders remains uncertain, whereas in *African Psycho*, it vanishes nearly completely as Grégoire is incapable of murdering anyone. When he imagines killing Germaine for example, the

scene does not go further than the description of his cutting into her skin with a knife (98, 99). While it is undeniable that both protagonists entertain brutal misogynistic thoughts towards women in general and prostitutes in particular, the vivid and extended descriptions of murder and mutilation by Bateman contrast greatly with Grégoire's simulations:

> I thought I would blindfold and gag her. The moment she started suspecting something, and therefore started jerking around to try and free herself, it would be too late: I would already have fastened her arms behind her back with cables taken from a moped. Beforehand, even before she came back from work, I would have made the broad-bladed knife red-hot, more than a thousand degrees, in my shop's furnace. It would then be easier to slash her from the place that separates her anus from her *thing* up to her abdomen while holding her legs wide open with cords… (98)

Even as Bateman's descriptions might be a projection of his unconscious desire, they are actualized, both in the protagonist's mind and in that of the reader's, through the lack of distancing, the immediacy of the present tense, and the hypersexualized violence of the male pornographic gaze. In contrast, there is a distinctive dose of restraint in Grégoire's voice—the *thing* is never named and he does not appear to be in "control" when he has sex with Germaine (97)—which accentuates his indeterminacy and insecurity as the title character. In addition, as with many of his narrative speech acts, the description remains *suspended*, a temporal distance and deferral further emphasized linguistically by the signal phrase "I thought" and the conditional tense. Grégoire's psychosis, which is deeply rooted in the psychosexual anxieties of abandonment neurosis, differs significantly from that of a brutal murderer and sexual predator in the vein of Bateman or Angoualima.

Not only are the narrative projections of the protagonists' misogynistic desires considerably dissimilar, it is also apparent from the onset that the respective self-images of Bateman and Grégoire contrast greatly. There is a way in which the mirroring processes at work between the texts are literally actualized, which operate to further differentiate the characters' consciousnesses, and to reinforce Grégoire's insecurity and inherent failure as a realized subject. Bateman, the all-American golden boy, is reportedly handsome and takes extreme care of his Adonis-like features; narcissistic to the extreme, he is obsessed with his appearance, constantly checking his reflection whenever he can (e.g. 11, 68, 230). On the contrary, Grégoire is markedly unattractive; overtly conscious of his ugliness, he violently reviles his own appearance: "… I looked at myself in the shower … I saw the face of an incompetent, of a clumsy individual, and hit my fist hard against the mirror" (37). Both texts reveal, in a dissymmetrical way, that obsessions related to one's body image are not confined to the cultural specificity of their respective milieus. Although Bateman and Grégoire each exhibit some psychological anxiety with regards to their body image, their respective comportments disclose divergent psychopathologies.

Bateman's self-image is, in a way, akin to Dorian Gray's, where the surface beauty works to dissimulate the ugliness of the *fragmented* schizophrenic psyche, a syndrome of the culture he inhabits. Grégoire's vehement rejection of his reflection is a symptom of a dysmorphic disorder, a syndrome of a deeply *fractured* psyche. Entangled in a dialectic relationship with an imaginary other, he has not resolved the mirror phase of psychosexual development. For Grégoire, his desired self-image is that of an ego-ideal

who *remains* a distinct other: "I kept on staring at my features, without flinching. Angoualima's face appeared instead of mine" (127). Grégoire's identity as a fully sexualized subject remains in jeopardy because he cannot reconcile the image in the mirror with his own. As an aspiring "psycho," Grégoire desires his criminal exploits to reflect those of his Great Master, but he is so consumed by emulating his imaginary idol that he only succeeds in further alienating himself from his own self-image. This dialectical process of self-alienation and self-devaluation is greatly exacerbated because, on the one hand, Grégoire identifies with an imaginary figure of mythical proportions, and on the other, he also relies on gaining validation from a "Master" who will never recognize him as an equal and whom *he* sees as superior.

### The Monstrous Other as Ego-Ideal

In the absence of parental figures with whom he could possibly identify, Grégoire chooses the "Great Master Angoualima," the country's most notorious (and deceased) serial killer, as his model: "in everything he undertakes, man needs a model, a solid reference" (19). Grégoire's choice is undoubtedly linked to the pervasive influence of the media, and the role it has played in shaping the myth of Angoulima who "was more famous than [the] President and […] musicians combined," to the extent that he "stole the headlines from them" (40-41). The irony is that even as Grégoire repeatedly rants and raves about the seemingly worthless media (3, 53, 62), his perception and knowledge of both his *being*, the world he inhabits and his place in it, and his *becoming*, his aspirations and desires, are entirely shaped by it. His actions, whether they pertain to robbing Master Quiroga's office (26) or defending himself from the attack of his foster brother (13) for

example, are influenced by what he has read or seen through various media outlets, such as comic books, TV shows, and movies, including *Blek le Roc*, *Les tontons flingueurs*, and the notorious *Scarface*. Most notably, the media exclusively informs his knowledge of murder, the very act that will lead to his consecration. In a first instance, he confides, "reading news items in our town's dailies, I find that no gesture is as simple as that of bringing someone's life to an end. All you need to is procure a weapon, whatever it may be, set a trap for the future victim, and finally, proceed"(1) and later, he confirms that comic strips permitted him "to find out the manner in which criminals accomplish their deeds" (15). His perceptions are skewed to the point that even though he is well aware that the adventures of his heroes are "figment of the imagination" (15) and that "committing murder is not like acting in a movie," he still considers what happens in the world of fiction to be the norm: "in a normal situation, there would have been a detective like in the movies or in crime novels" (140). In other words, similar to Bateman, Grégoire's perception and understanding of the world he lives in is by and large influenced by the media. The notable difference, however, is that whereas Bateman's consciousness was a cipher, a simulacra of postmodern consumer culture, Grégoire's subjectivity is deeply entangled in a dialectical movement towards recognition that finds its root in colonial subjugation and still resonates presently in the formation of postcolonial subjectivity.

Grégoire seeks the recognition of the media for his deeds as a form of validation, explaining, "Ideally, I would enjoy as much media coverage as my idol, Angoualima" (2). Consequently, what is most dramatic for Grégoire is that his crime might go

unnoticed ("a humiliating possibility") (2) or misrepresented in the media (but surprisingly he does not mind if his misdeeds, even his failed murder attempts, are attributed to Angoualima (27)). For example, he complains about the fact that his failure to kill "The Girl in White," was not only grossly overlooked by the media (5-6) but it was also misinterpreted as the act of a "sex maniac" (63). By the same token, Grégoire would like "to be considered [Angoualima's] spiritual heir" (4), and he thereby also seeks the recognition from his "Idol and Great Master," arguing that killing Germaine would not only lead to his "coronation" (4) but would also be "a more coherent gesture … that would delight Angoualima" (35). But Grégoire is forever relegated to the ranks of wanna-bes: a *being* incapable of *becoming*. He is incapable of it because the recognition he so desperately seeks is foreclosed by evolving in the shadows of his idol, who is both a figment of his own imagination and of the collective imaginary.[7]

Born with six fingers on each hand, Angoualima, Grégoire notes, is no "ordinary human being … which we find comforting" (2). Grégoire's observation echoes the discussion of the horror genre and *Funny Games* regarding the figure of the psycho wherein the "normality" of the social is reinforced by confirming the "abnormality" of the monster. But as a product of the collective imaginary propagated and perpetuated by the media, Angoualima was also "every man" (42) and "everywhere" (43) to the extent that every single criminal deed was attributed to him (52). In many ways, Angoualima embodies the "consoling fantasy" Frecerro describes in her analysis of American

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[7] Achille Mbembé explains that the African has always believed in a continuity between the reality and the imaginary, "to the extent that there was no representation of the real world without a relation to the word of the invisible," and that even after colonization, "in spite of the transformations and discontinuities, an imaginary world has remained" (146).

historicity (46), but in this case, the fantasy condenses particular perceptions of African culture and mythology.

Angoualima's magical powers and shape-shifting capability is a satirical nod to Anansi, the Ashanti trickster, who figures in many African (and Caribbean) folktales. Angoualima also corresponds to the Western projection of the African as a "primitive" or "savage." Voiced by the likes of Hegel in the nineteenth century, this stereotypical projection was famously denounced by Chinua Achebe in his reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Nicknamed the "Judge of Darkness," Angoualima reportedly possesses a penis, a "*thing*" as Grégoire calls it on numerous occasions, of gigantic proportions (40). In *La légende du sexe surdimensionné des Noirs*, Serge Bilé argues that the phantasmagorical construction of the comparatively larger sexual organ of the Black male aims to dehumanize him and present him as a savage.[8] In other words, like Hegel's idea that "The Negro … exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state" (209), the popular myth related to the Black male's oversized penis serves to perpetuate the stereotype that Africans are only gifted in areas that relate to primary instincts and physical capabilities, thus denying them the intellectual capacity to think. What is particularly perverse, Bilé explains, is that many Blacks have internalized the stereotype through the insidious ways in which the cliché has been reinforced by forms of popular media. Additionally, the widely held perception of the Black male's gigantic sex has lead lesser-endowed individuals (Blacks and Whites alike) to an inferiority complex characterized by sexual anxieties and feelings of inadequacy.

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[8] Interestingly, Bilé's book is a topic of discussion on Mabanckou's old blog (See
http://www.congopage.com/ Quand-Pierre-Assouline-parle-de-La)

While *African Psycho* parodies the ways in which the media exaggerates and perpetuates the stereotype—i.e. calling it "the fifth limb" (40)—the text also feeds off our own expectations by revealing how the stereotype affects our cultural biases and anxieties. As we have seen in our discussion of the horror genre, the figure of the monster and/or the serial killer has been considered in psychoanalytic approaches to represent a surplus or excess of sexual energy that has been repressed by societal norms. At the same time, in embodying a form of sexual difference, it also represents the threat of castration. On a first level, *African Psycho* plays into the sexual anxiety (or fantasy) of witnessing the Black monstrous male raping and murdering the white woman (39-40). But on another, more important level, the text criticizes the particularly perverse effects of racist stereotypes on the African male. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon argues that the racist attitudes of colonialism have had some particular pernicious effects on the psyche of colonized people, creating a deep complex of inferiority. While Angoualima might elude the complex by embodying the collective fantasy of the African psycho serial killer—i.e. he is not an ordinary man, but a monstrous sexual predator (43-47)—Grégoire, on the other hand, is not immune to the anxieties associated with the complex. One telling way this is manifested is in his sexual inadequacy and impotence at the moment he is about to rape and kill "The Girl in White" (74-5). Most notably, he blames his failure on the errancies of desire, on the ways in which his sexual desire made him veer off his plan and err as a consequence: "Instead of going straight to the point, instead of killing her nice and neat, suddenly there was this idiotic desire to ride her frontally, to understand what the Great Master Angoualima felt when he raped his victims

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with his size XXXL *thing …*" (81).  In fact, his failure is in many ways connected to his inferiority complex towards the legend of Angoualima.  Living in the shadow of the myth, of the man with the "fifth limb," he is incapable of rising to the task because he is inhibited by his feelings of inadequacy to the standard of "Blackness" set forth by Angoualima.

Grégoire's phantom relationship with his imaginary mentor presents a complex psychological ramification pertaining to the role(s) of the imaginary other in the construction of subjectivity.  Grégoire's account of Angoualima's appearance during visits to his grave (2, 85, 141) corresponds to the extraordinary qualities attributed to him by the media (39-43).  Partly because he shares the same history as a "picked-up child" (8), Grégoire believes he is predestined to follow on the same path of greatness:

> I recognized myself in each of his gestures, which the whole country decried.  I felt admiration for him.  In a certain way he preceded me in the type of existence I dreamed of for myself.  To fend off despair, I persuaded myself that I resembled him, that his destiny and mine had the same arc, and that little by little I would eventually climb each step until my head […] deserved a crown of laurels. (3)

Grégoire not only considers Angoualima his mentor, identifies with him as he represents an ego-ideal, he also relates to Angoualima as a son to his father.  But Angoualima is not just an imaginary father for Grégoire, he is God almighty:

> […] lo and behold the Great Master appeared before me, Imperial, Divine, Colossal, Powerful, Sublime, equal to himself … but I immediately lowered my gaze, this mythical character, this charismatic character is none other than my own God and consequently you don't return God's gaze, you are content with believing Him to be alive, eternal, unchangeable, omniscient […]. (85)

Angoualima is not a beneficent God, his reign is a negative theocracy; he willfully abuses his subjects, insulting Grégoire for his incompetence (87-90). This interaction between Grégoire and Angoualima speaks eloquently of the self-devaluating dimension of Grégoire's neurosis. On another level, it also clearly sets the stage for a dialectical encounter between self and other.

From the onset, the text presents the ways in which the subject, the "I," is entangled in various intersubjective relationships predicated on recognition. On the one hand, Grégoire explains that his deepest fear is that his deeds will remain unnoticed (2), and on the other, he desperately seeks the validation of his existence in his conversations with Angoualima. Grégoire is under the impression that he will gain recognition by mimicking the acts of the "Great Master." As Fanon tells us, the drama of Veneuse is that he desperately seeks the recognition and approval of white society, but he erroneously believes he can do so by becoming "white" and rejecting his own racial identity. Grégoire is also in desperate need of recognition, but the validation he seeks is that of a phantasmagoric projection of "African-ness," thus the errancy of his desire partly lies in the belief he has to live up to the myth of African monstrosity. His desire for recognition is further complicated by the fact that that the imaginary other is an abusive father whom he also considers his "Master," even as he admits that it is not in his best interest to constantly seek his approval (7).

The relationship between Angoualima and Grégoire seems to perpetuate the dialectical structure of colonial subjectivity by implying that the postcolonial subject must similarly compare himself to an "Other" in order to attain self-realization. In "Black

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Man and Recognition," Fanon argues that the black man's self-assertion is dependent upon being recognized by "the Other" (187). Adapting Hegel's concept of self-consciousness, Fanon further explains:

> Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, it is this other who remain the focus of his actions. His human worth and reality depend on this other and on his recognition by the other. It is in this other that the meaning of life is condensed. (191)

The problem, continues Fanon, is that the black man was "set free by his master [and] did not have to fight for his freedom," and consequently, he is unsure of whether the white man considers him is equal (194). For his part, Grégoire exemplifies the consequences of configuring this other as a phantasmagoric projection, an ego-ideal from whom recognition is perpetually deferred for an Ego like his, who confines himself within a structure of self-alienation. In Hegel's account of self-consciousness, the "bondsman" or "slave" does not come into being by seeking the validation of the "lord" or "master." Rather he transcends his condition by comprehending the nature of agency through his own labor.[9] This is precisely what Grégoire fails to do because in lieu of affirming his own being through his own becoming, he errs into desiring the recognition of others by mimicking them. Even as Angoualima tells him "it is not by aping what I accomplished that you will get people talking about you" (87), he remains under the spell of the powerful image of his imaginary mentor. Grégoire's errancy is even more surprising

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[9] See §196: "Through this discovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own" (*Phenomenology* 118-119).

since he indicates quite early in the narrative the pitfalls of such an approach to self-determination:

> Now only if I could convince myself that it is not in my interest to compare myself to [Angoualima] or desperately seek his approval as a master of crime, I might be able to start working with a free spirit. To each his own manner and personality. (7)

The permanent shadow of Angoualima keeps Grégoire in the dark, blind to the potential of attaining subjectivity through his own agency. Consequently, Angoualima's hold over Grégoire speaks of the pervasive influence of media images on the construction of subjectivity.

Prefacing his analysis of contemporary Cameroonian cartoons, Mbembé points out that "in spite of its claim to represent presence, immediacy, and facticity, what is special about an image is its "likeness"—that is, its ability to annex and mime what it represents, while, in the very act of representation, masking the power of its own arbitrariness, its own potential for opacity, simulacrum, and distortion" (142). In *African Psycho,* the media's construction of Angoualima as a figure of mythical proportion not only emphasizes the media's propensity towards exaggeration,[10] but also the ways in which it creates "cartoon-ish," larger-than-life, even hyperreal, public personalities. At the same time, the overwhelming emphasis given to the greatly exaggerated exploits of the "African Psycho," highlights the media's tendency to glorify and sensationalize violence to draw in the public's attention. More specifically, however, the novel allegorizes the ways in which these imaginary models promote structures of alienation,

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[10] In an interview, Mabanckou explains, "Congolese journalists like to exaggerate. I wanted, in my novel, to joke on this aspect. I also believe that, in this world, information is often amplified."

simulacra that individuals simulate at the cost of their own differentiated subjectivities, especially when these models are psychotic murderers.

## Spectacle and Subjectivity: A Metanarrative Play of Mirrors

*African Psycho* makes a particular point in stressing the spectacular dimension of societal life in contemporary Africa. Although the African context is clearly situated, it is neither the pre-colonial Africa of *Things Fall apart*, the colonial setting of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or the neo-colonial post-independence nation-state of Sembène's *Xala*. Rather, it is a *postcolonial* Africa, which not only remains entangled in historical structures of subjugation and alienation, but that has also actualized internal processes of self-alienation by incorporating the neo-liberal signifying order of spectacle and simulacra. These aspects are continuously emphasized through the multiple references to the popular media and the role it plays in shaping the collective imaginary, the consciousness of individuals, and institutions of the state. The importance of media theatrics and the gaze is considerably emphasized throughout the text. For example, the "What Then? Trust Me!" television interview parodies the bogus, nonsensical content of television shows as well as the ways in which live television plays with camera angles and montage to add a dramatic—if not dizzying—effect (41-48). In another instance, Grégoire describes at length the ways in which, the courthouse is a stage for public prosecutors to practice their oratory skills to the greatest enjoyment of the audience (30). Moreover, Mabanckou's novel also stresses the fascination for, and popularity of, violence in the media by mocking the ways in which it hijacks all aspects of the news from local politics to music and entertainment. In thus representing the society of the

spectacle, its structures, and its practices, *African Psycho* maintains its close proximity with *American Psycho*, as well as with *The Elementary Particles* and *Funny Games*.

The titular substitution of "American" by "African" calls our attention to the African, evoking perceived differences between the two locales and their related cultures while at the same time heightening our expectations. But amidst the expected binary construction between American and African, between first and developing world, and the paradigmatic consumerist excesses of one culture related to the relative poverty of the other, what stands out is that the ideologies of the culture industry are similarly emphasized and criticized in both texts, marking this critique as a point of convergence between two narratives that diverge considerably. Both Bateman and Grégoire's murderous desires seem to be ignited and fueled by the pervasive and hyperreal quality of images of violence as well as a similar cultural obsession with brutal psychopaths. While both struggle to find their own voice amidst the constant bombardment of visual noise, the texts addresses these issues from different angles, retracing the struggle for self-determination and processes of subjectivization from different points of departure.

*African Psycho* undermines the preliminary effect caused in the titular substitution of African for American by glossing over potential cultural differences and focusing instead on the anxieties and neuroses of the main character. In *American Psycho*, Bateman's voice was produced by the collective imaginary as a pastiche and conglomerate of media images: a flickering stream of thought that characterizes the schizophrenic hallucinations of the fragmented postmodern psyche. Ellis' narrator was

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an emotional blank slate, a character that provoked the reader to *project* her affect to fill Bateman's psychological void.

In contrast, Grégoire's consciousness presents a very individuated form of psychosis; a psychosexual disorder rooted in abandonment neurosis, which is further exacerbated as a result of his relationship with Angoualima's ghost. The "I" of Grégoire is an Other that is as alienating as it is self-alienating. In this sense, he is perhaps much closer to Houellebecq's Bruno. Accordingly, by resisting the narrative process of identification, the reader is prompted to *react* affectively against Grégoire 's overbearing psychological discourse, even as she might at first sympathize with his predicament.

Informed by Hegelian and Freudian-Lacanian models of subjectivity, Grégoire errs into choosing Angoualima as both a father figure and an ego-ideal. As an orphan with no parental guidance or opportunity for identification through a familial process of simultaneous recognition and misrecognition in the mirror phase, he finds himself in a double-bind: his psychotic neurosis linked to his feeling of abandonment makes him idolize an idealized larger-than-life psychopath. Grégoire's voice is that of the tortured psychopathological character whose fractured self-image is trapped in the shadows of an idealized Other. It also expresses the tragic predicament of the unrealized self who paradoxically desires to be recognized by a figurative Other; an image which is not only a figment of his imagination, but also a castrating father, a tyrannical figure of God-like proportions whose law is as debilitating as it is unavoidable.

In many ways, his desire to emulate and please his idol is emblematic of the errancy of the desire for recognition in the dialectic encounter between self and this Other

who is "realer than the real." His attempts to mimic and seek validation from this "Master" only lead to a series of failures, highlighting both his impotence and immaturity as a subject. Consequently, Grégoire's misguided desire leads to his overall failure as a differentiated self-consciousness. In a sense, the novel proposes that Grégoire's failed endeavor to transcend his condition points to the shortcomings of a dialectical model of desire and subjectivity, especially when this desire is ignited and fueled by the simulacra manufactured by the society of the spectacle.

Although both *American Psycho* and *African Psycho* satirize the vicissitudes of media culture, their strategies differ significantly because they each put into play a very distinct "I/Eye." There is a way in which the psychopathology of each character—or the apparent lack thereof—can be mapped on the effects it produces on the reader. In contrast to the poetics of forced revulsion and fascination that characterize *American Pyscho,* Mabanckou's novel lures the reader in through the *promise* of violence—both by the paratextual reference to its predecessor and the commissive that marks the beginning of the text—but without ever providing it, potentially disappointing the reader at a level similar to Grégoire's own frustration. In this sense, the strategy utilized by Mabanckou is not dissimilar to Haneke's in *Funny Games.* Consequently, although the narrative elements of each text differ considerably, both novels address the reader's desire for textual violence by involving them affectively. But whereas Ellis' novel suggests that there is "NO EXIT" from the violent processes of psychological dislocation and objectification at work in contemporary consumer culture, *African Psycho* shows us that

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there is potentially a way out—it pertains to eluding the self-defeating dialectics of desire.

Simultaneously, there is a broader, metatextual commentary to be found in Grégoire's failures and errancies and in the multiple intertextual references contained in *African Psycho*. Angoualima is a transcendental signifier who is not only cast as an Other, but is also a series of doubles: he is a Master and a God, it is both real and imaginary, and it is the both the double and the shadow of Bateman, the American Psycho. Following Fanon—and to some extent Fergusson and Mbembé—we can address Grégoire's predicament as a telling illustration of the "pitfalls of national consciousness" when national or continental identity are constructed according to an imaginary fabrication of self and other. There is a way in which Grégoire's failure to reconcile his own image with that of the idealized other speaks of the disjunction between the postcolonial subject and the discursive construction of the African male as a Monstrous Other. Accordingly, not only does Grégoire fail to live up to the expectations of his mentor, he also fails to live up to the expectations of its (presupposed) Western audience. John Walsh argues that through the 2007 translation of the novel, "Mabanckou now reaches a much wider audience, and one that may soon come to question its own complacency with regard to generally accepted ideas about Africa" (152). However, the novel also points out that the structures of alienation that plague the character, and by extension, the African subject, are also self-imposed; it is undeniable that there is a body

of African literature that feeds off the stereotypical projection of this Monstrous Other by transfiguring him as a ruthless dictator[11].

From a different angle, by making specific references to infamous—French—literary figures (Proust, Genet, Céline, Rousseau, Camus) *African Psycho* provides a self-reflexive commentary on the *question of literature*, not only in terms of its relation to the performativity of language or in issues pertaining to the ethics of representational violence, but also regarding the validity or recognition of a "newer" work or literary tradition in terms of canonical potential. As Walsh points out, "Much like its protagonist, the 'African Psycho,' Mabanckou looks to lure in the reader with apparent pulp only to surprise later with the realization that some greater form of literature is at issue" (152). There is a transfigurative way in which the narrative voice makes a claim for the status of contemporary francophone literature vis-à-vis the French Canon in a way parallel to how the postcolonial subject yearns for recognition by an authoritative figure. This idea is clearly inferred when Grégoire reacts to the reader's implicit assumption that he is somewhat dim-witted because he only read comic books:

> But Wait! Don't Get the Wrong Idea, I also threw myself into reading what people call great literature, I did. To each his own. What I was looking for, personally, was action, fear, which I found above all in pulp literature. People said, however, that in order to be an educated man, you had to immerse yourself in the likes of Proust, Genet, Céline, Rousseau and a great many others of that ilk. (15-16)

Evident in Grégoire's intervention is the traditional concept that "great" literature "educates" its readers, an oft touted—yet strongly contested—criteria for canonicity.

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[11] See for example Nurrudin Farrah's *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*.

To draw an interesting parallel, it could be argued that Grégoire's anxious discourse and subsequent impotency parodies the sterility of a work that operates under Harold Bloom's concept of the "Anxiety of Influence." Consequently, Grégoire erroneous belief that mimicking his "Father/Master" will bring him widespread recognition similarly marks the failure of an Oedipal model for literary greatness.

Situating the novel in the broader context of discursive formations about Africa, Walsh claims, "Mabanckou's approach as a writer is to inscribe violence in his text with the aim of provoking the reader into a dialogue about the causes of violence and about the responsibilities that Africa and the West carry, in order to facilitate a less stereotypical representation of Africa" (162). The paratextual reference to Ellis' novel returns us to some of the political implications alluded to by Ferguson in the introductory section of this chapter. Addressing the complex relationship between Africa and the West, especially as it relates to ideas about modernity and standards of living, Ferguson observes that "Claims of likeness, in this context, constitute not a copying, but a shadowing, even a haunting—a declaration of compatibility, an aspiration to membership and inclusion in the world, and sometimes also an assertion of responsibility" (17). The triangulation between Grégoire, Angoualima, and Bateman as well as the titular substitution of the American by the African provides us with a critical prism through which we may consider the multifaceted nature of these interrelationships. Grégoire's desire to be recognized by Angoualima mirrors the African's desire to "exist" according to American or Western forms and norms, and his failure to mimic Angoualima speaks of the ways in which this predicament has had negative consequences on the self-

determining process of African nation-states in the neo-liberal world order. Consequently, what is at stake, as Ferguson intimates, is to rethink the very definitions and standards for modernity and globalization, concepts that remain fundamentally Western—and colonial—in essence.

**CONCLUSION**

Barthes' "Death of the Author" mirrors in many ways the "Death of the Subject" or the "Death of Man": the poststructuralist and/or posthumanist decentralization of the rational Subject of enlightenment thought and the diminuation of modern ideals of scientific reason and progress with which it was associated. Inspired by Nietzche's proclamations that "God is dead" and that "Man is something that must be overcome," various strands of poststructuralist thought have led a wide-ranging assault on the concept of the Western European, phallocratic Subject as an embodiment of the humanistic ideas of free-will and self-determination, as well as the narratives of human emancipation and progress he stimulated.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault scrutinizes the historical conditions of knowledge that gave birth to this Subject and its subsequent placement at the top of a hierarchy of living beings, i.e. "*à la place du roi*." He argues that "Man" is a product of various structures of institutional and discursive subjugation and oppression, and in the concluding pages, he envisions his disappearance:

> If those arrangements [of knowledge that invented man] were to disappear as they appeared, if some event which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (387)

But, as in Barthes' eradication of a central locus of knowledge and signification, the death of "Man" also implies a rebirth, or a new birth. In *the Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon concludes by articulating an edifying critique of European humanism and calls for a "new

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history of Man" that steers away from "the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe" (313-315)[1].

The narrative progression of this work—as an obviously artificial yet necessary construct—presents itself, as well, as a *regression*.  This aporia reveals the deconstructive logic of narrative construction and at the same time interrogates the central role that processes of narrativization play in organizing human experiences.  More importantly, however, if my objective were to progressively work towards presenting a cohesive picture of transnational postmodern subjectivities operating outside or in the margins of structures of oppression and colonization, then I have failed. In other words, if the emancipation of the human subject is the sought-after ideal of progress, what I have proposed in the preceding pages is in an extended way, a story of regression.

The masculine subjects examined in the final three chapters—Bruno and Michel, Bateman, and Grégoire—are Oedipal and/or re-territorialized subjectivities, whose errancies of desire work to reinforce existing dogmatic, Western European or North American consumer capitalistic norms. Bruno and Michel exhibit characteristic traits of unresolved Oedipality, wherein heteronormative male desire operates according to the Lacanian "lack."  A similar paradigm haunts Grégoire, whose subject position is additionally coerced by the specters of dialectical desire proper to colonial and post-colonial subject relationships.  And while Bateman's subjectivity is a psychological void, a schizophrenic pastiche of postmodern American media culture, his desire is re-

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[1] Foucault's and Fanon's revisualizations for posthuman subjectivities are further echoed in Derrida's concept of *différance*, Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus*, Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects*, Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Postfuman*, and Donna Haraways' cyborgs, to cite only a few examples.

territorialized according to the pathos of consumer capitalism and cultural imperialism. Accordingly, following the didactic strategy of Haneke's Funny Games, the narratives function affectively to produce an aesthetic experience highlighting processes of phallogocentric subjectivation and the violence contained therein, even as the immanent critique of the texts operate self-reflexively to denounce these mechanisms.

Thus, the portraits provided in the second section on transatlantic masculinities on contemporary literature are a far cry from the more undetermined and differentiated subjectivities that appear in the opening two chapters on *Adaptation* and the cinematic works of Tsai Ming-Liang. The analyses performed here demonstrate how the errancies of desire dislocate authorial, hierarchical, hegemonic, and colonial concepts of subjectivity and identity inscribed within geo-political time and space. The formal and figurative strategies in these texts outline the ways in which the twofold process of affective projection and response presents itself as a disruptive and itinerant productivity. On the one hand, the cinematic references of *What Time is it There?* and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* examine the feelings of longing, trauma, nostalgia and memory to deconstruct the direction of the cinematic gaze as well as conventional configurations of cultural difference, a formal and contextual critique which is further reinforced in Haneke's remake. On the other hand, the fragmented and schizophrenic narrative structure of *Adaptation* actualizes visually the vagrancies of the Barthesian Lover, a reader whose intertextual proximity to the text produces her as much as she produces the text. In contrast to the narrative, ideological, and philosophical determinisms that frame the masculine subjectivities presented in the texts of the latter section, the films of the
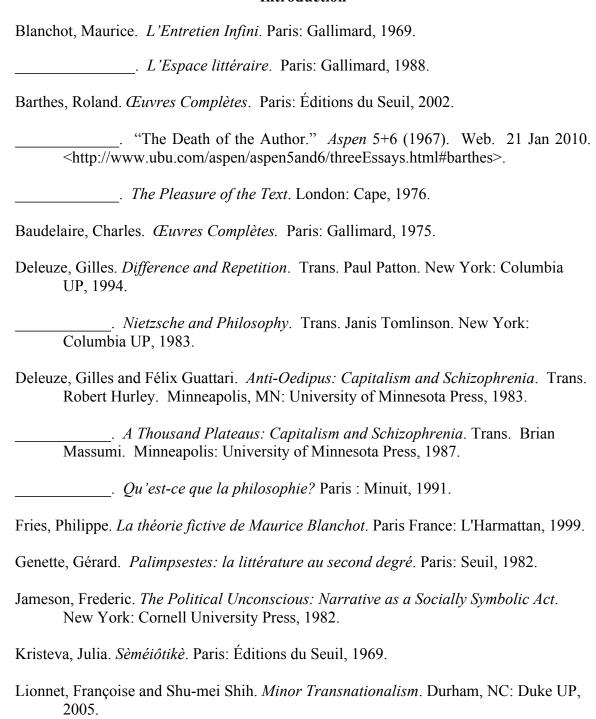
first section portray subjective processes that emphasize the fluid and regenerative potential of desire, even when the forces of desire are seemingly misguided.

But in truth, my failure also marks my intent, for my objective has never been to perform a narrative of progress, a retelling or mimicry of a (dialectical) struggle towards emancipation. To the contrary, the formal arrangement of the chapters suggests that cultural and literary imaginings of masculinity are eventually re-territorialized by the unrelenting forces exerted by naturalistic scientism, the cultural logic of consumer capitalism, and Hegelianism, even as processes and formations of subjectivity cross cultural and national boundaries. In other words, rather than producing a narrative of emancipation, the formal progression of this study regresses into investigating more classical—and therefore, problematic—images of masculine desire and male subjectivity. The seemingly arbitrary repartition of the chapters according to the principal mediums of their subject texts is effective in this way. The critical work performed here provides a transnational, even transatlantic perspective on issues surrounding masculinity that are both enduring and relevant. The novels of Ellis, Houellebecq, and Mabanckou remind us that conventional gender configurations and processes of identity formation that hinge on the expression of sexual violence and oppression are as unbecoming as they are persistent. Consequently, the absence of a narrative of emancipation points both to the illusionary quality of narratives of progress, and the treacherous maze that differentiated transnational subjectivities must navigate under virtual, past, and present conditions of globalization. While there may be much to be celebrated in the dissolution of national boundaries and the nation-state in the wake of transnational movements, there remain a

number of concerns with what Shu-Mei Shi and Françoise Lionnet have identified as "globalization from above." Characterized by the instability of global markets and the dubious ideologies of the financial (and political) institutions that support them, the homogenizing forces of global media cultures, and the increasingly oppressive apparatuses of state surveillance and control, the material realities that inform the cultural predicament of a nascent transnational citizenry remain in proximity to problematic constructs of hegemonic masculinity and social dominance.

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