

Articles (Theme)

“ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE”: THE CRITIQUE OF CONSUMER SOCIETY IN *AMERICAN PSYCHO* AND *FIGHT CLUB*

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Abstract

This article explores the politics of two films, namely *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), both of which portray a privileged, white collar protagonist suffering from a personality disorder that leads him to commit violent acts. Set in the late 20th century America characterized by rampant consumerism, stark materialism and fierce competition, both films suggest that it is the debilitating impact of the commodified, commodity-driven consumer society that leads the protagonists to resort to violence as a way of transcending their depthless, shallow, one-dimensional existence. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* present a critique of American society through the portrayal of protagonists whose pathologically violent behaviour stems from the dehumanizing effects of consumer culture on the individual psyche.

Key Terms

consumer society, commodification, depthlessness, one-dimensional man, violence.

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“İÇERİ GİRECEKLER BÜTÜN UMUDUNU KAPIDA BIRAKSIN”: AMERİKAN SAPIĞI VE DÖVÜŞ KULÜBÜ’NDE TÜKETİM TOPLUMUNUN ELEŞTİRİSİ

Öz

Bu makale, şiddete eğilimli, kişilik bozukluğundan muzdarip, üst tabakadan beyaz yakalı karakterlere odaklanan Mary Harron’ın *American Psycho* (*Amerikan Sapıği*, 2000) ve David Fincher’ın *Fight Club* (*Dövüş Kulübü*, 1999) filmlerinin altında yatan politik dinamikleri incelemektedir. Tüketim çılgınlığının, materyalizmin ve bireyler arası sert rekabetin hâkim olduğu 21. yüzyılın eşiğindeki Amerika’da geçen her iki film de ana karakterlerin şiddete yönelmesinin sığ, yüzeysel, tek boyutlu varoluşlarını aşma çabasından kaynaklandığını göstererek karakterlerin patolojik şiddet eğilimlerinin ardında tüketim toplumunun insan üzerindeki yıkıcı etkisinin yattığını ima etmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, *Amerikan Sapıği* ve *Dövüş Kulübü* filmlerinin merkezine aldığı şiddete eğilimli karakterler vasıtasıyla Amerikan toplumuna sağlam bir eleştiri yönelttiğini göstermektir.

Anahtar Terimler

tüketim toplumu, metalaşma, derinlik yoksunluğu, tek boyutlu insan, şiddet.

The Unbearable Shallowness of Consumerism

We live in a world increasingly dominated by commodities so much so that we are surrounded on all sides by “a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 25). The growing colonization of human life by commodities goes hand in hand with the inexorable expansion of commodification into all realms of life so that practically anything, “every desire, plan, need, every passion and relation is abstracted or materialized as sign and as object to be purchased and consumed” (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 26). Commodification is one of the predominant

features of multinational, or late capitalism,¹ which involves “a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” (Jameson, 2009, p. 36), thereby signifying the ultimate triumph of capital over human life. As Jameson (2009) points out, even the unconscious has been subject to colonization by capitalism, which means that the innermost thoughts, fears and desires of human beings are now dominated by the ubiquitous consumer messages disseminated by the mass media and the advertising industry.

As a general rule, in the consumer society, which holds the individual completely in its thrall, objects are not consumed because they serve some utilitarian purpose or satisfy certain needs, but primarily because they function as signifiers of prestige, rank and social standing. Hence, the concept of “conspicuous consumption,” a term originally coined by Veblen (2007) in the late 19th century to explain how members of the leisure class engage in the consumption and display of expensive commodities to flaunt their privileged social status, is more relevant than ever. In recent years, the social logic of consumption has come under scrutiny by such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu (1996) and Jean Baudrillard (1998), who offer comprehensive analyses of the ways in which people manipulate consumer goods to gain prestige and identity and thus distinguish themselves from others. What is more, in a society where the consumption of objects has come to play a fundamental role in the construction of identity, the human being has virtually become a commodity built from commodities, which is another way of saying that “consumer goods are part of the way in which people construct a sense of who they are” (Bocock, 1993, p. 52).

It is far from surprising, therefore, that the commodified, consumerist, hence dehumanizing nature of life in advanced consumer societies has inevitably had a tremendously debilitating impact on human beings’ experience of reality and mode of being. In fact, the past few decades have witnessed “a peculiar tendency” among cultural theorists “to employ the language of mental disorder to describe [the] effects” of living in a world which is increasingly immersed in consumerism and dominated by the mass media, the advertising and marketing industries (Nicol, 2009, p. 9). One of the most effective diagnoses of the pathologies symptomatic of late capitalist society comes from Fredric Jameson (2009), who claims that current sociocultural conditions have given rise to such pathologies as schizophrenia, fragmentation of the self, depthlessness

¹ Late capitalism, a term originally coined by Ernest Mandel (1993), refers to the third stage in the evolution of capital after “market capitalism” and “the monopoly stage, or the stage of imperialism.”

and the waning of affect.² Jameson's "diagnosis [which] is backed up with an extensive analysis of the impact of the conditions of late capitalism on individual perceptive and cognitive faculties" (Nicol, 2009, p. 9), establishes a direct, causal relationship between pathological cultural conditions and psychic pathology. On the whole, those cultural critics who employ a psychopathological terminology to describe the harmful psychological effects of living in the technologically advanced, media-saturated consumer society agree on the fact that the main "consequence for the individual is that the self is experienced as being emptied of substance, lacking coherence and consistency" (Nicol, 2009, p. 184). It is, therefore, not so difficult to imagine that in their attempt to transcend their sterile, commodified, depthless existence characterized by the feelings of inner emptiness, insubstantiality and inauthenticity, contemporary subjects may embark on a desperate search for an authentic, genuine experience, which might lead them to violent paths.

American Psycho (Mary Harron, 2000) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), both of which are film adaptations of novels by contemporary American authors, are centered upon a protagonist who resorts to violence as a means of lashing out against the commodity-driven, commodified American society that is depicted as completely immersed in consumerism and dominated by the omnipresence of consumer goods. As a matter of fact, both films can be said to present a scathing critique of contemporary American society through the portrayal of protagonists whose violent behaviour stems from the dehumanizing effects of consumer culture on the individual psyche. Set in the United States in the late twentieth century, both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* demonstrate how contemporary consumer culture, which is based on unbridled capitalism, fierce competition, stark materialism and rampant consumerism, gives rise to psychopathologies in individuals. Both Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* and the unnamed narrator in *Fight Club* are well-to-do, white-collar workers who suffer from personality disorders³ that lead them to commit violent acts. What follows is an attempt

² "'Affect' is a term used by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts to refer to emotion, as in 'being affected by' something" (Nicol, 2009, p. 184).

³ It should be noted that the present article employs the term "personality disorder" in much the same way as cultural critics like Jameson employ psychopathological terminology to describe the psychological effects of the late capitalist society. Thus, this article does not aim to undertake a discussion of personality disorders as such, endorsing neither the psychiatric approach, which claims that mental disorders have biological causes, nor the psychoanalytic approach, which seeks the causes of mental disorders in unconscious intrapsychic dynamics. Any reference to the American Psychiatric Association's current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) or the psychoanalytic theory of Otto Kernberg is intended for informative purposes only and should not be taken as an endorsement of either approach.

to analyse the politics of these two films with a view to elucidating the ways in which the protagonists' individual psychopathologies are depicted as the natural consequence of the cultural pathologies in contemporary American society.

A Psycho of Our Time

American Psycho (Mary Harron, 2000) is the film adaptation of American author Bret Easton Ellis's notorious 1991 novel of the same title, which has been dubbed as "one of the most shockingly violent novels ever published" (quoted in Mandel, 2006, p. 9) due to its detailed graphic descriptions of murder, torture and sexual violence, most of which have been omitted in the film. Set in New York in the late 1980s, at the height of the Reagan era, *American Psycho* focuses on a 27-year-old investment banker called Patrick Bateman, who is a typical Wall Street yuppie except that he has an uncontrollable urge for murder and bloodshed that he tries to conceal behind his charming outer appearance. The original novel opens with the words "Abandon all hope ye who enter here," i.e. the inscription on the gate of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*, scrawled in blood-red letters on the wall – a fitting beginning for a novel that "presents us with a vision of contemporary Hell" (Nicol, 2009, p. 204). The quote from Dante's *Inferno*, however, is omitted in the film adaptation, where the opening credits depict red drops of what looks like blood falling against a white background, which turn out to be drops of red sauce used for decorating a dish in an elite restaurant where Patrick is dining with his colleagues. The association between blood and red sauce created in the opening sequence gives us the first inkling of the nightmarish reality that is concealed behind the glittering mask of prosperity, success and glamour that characterize the lives of Wall Street yuppies like Patrick Bateman and his circle of acquaintances who lead hedonistic, commodity-driven lives. The dark underside of consumerist American culture is shockingly embodied in the figure of Patrick Bateman, a psychopathic serial killer who tortures and mutilates his (mostly female) victims to death in the most sadistic ways imaginable. Patrick is an irrevocably split subject who leads a double life, his attractive, successful, educated banker persona concealing the ruthless murderer within. As the film progresses, the list of Patrick's victims extend to include several escort girls, a homeless man and a colleague of his who evokes his envy. The fact that towards the end of the film we are left in doubt as to whether the murders Patrick committed are real or just hallucinations produced by his disturbed mind makes Patrick a no less monstrous figure since his urge to kill is nevertheless real.

Apparently, Patrick seems to be suffering from a psychopathology that can be said to fall within the category of antisocial and narcissistic personality disorder⁴, or what the modern psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg terms as “malignant narcissism syndrome,” which is defined as the combination of the following elements: “(1) narcissistic personality disorder, (2) antisocial behaviour, (3) aggression or sadism [...] (4) a strong paranoid tendency” (Kernberg, 2000, p. 89), all of which are symptoms displayed by Patrick. What makes *American Psycho* a powerful social critique is that Patrick’s psychopathology is not presented as a mental disorder that stems from childhood experiences or any such personal causes. Unlike Norman Bates in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) whose psychotic behaviour is the direct consequence of his pathological relationship with his domineering mother, Patrick’s murders “are the reactions to, perhaps even the ultimate expressions of, the consumerist lifestyle which dictates Bateman’s and his associates’ existence” (Nicol, 2009, p. 199). Thus, in contrast to Norman, Patrick is presented as a psycho of our time whose psychotic behaviour stems from the dehumanizing effects of consumerist American society where fierce competition, egoism and the desire to get ahead leaves no room for any human values, thereby fueling the tendency toward narcissism in individuals. As Baudrillard puts it, “the narcissism of the individual in consumer society is not an enjoyment of singularity; it is a refraction of collective features,” for in a society where “the individual is everywhere invited, primarily, to enjoy himself, to indulge himself,” people are actively encouraged to become narcissists (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 95). Indeed, preceding Baudrillard by more than half a century, Veblen was one of the first theorists to claim that the consumerist lifestyle has given rise to “a strange new culture of narcissism characterized by widespread use of the psychological mechanism that psychologists call ‘splitting’ or dissociation [...] a culture in which emotions are cut off from the intellect,” thus providing breeding ground for a certain pathological character type, i.e. “the narcissistic type [who] is split psychologically and socially [...] and displays lack of empathy, envy, and self-absorption” (Mestrovic, 2003, p. 3).

In Patrick Bateman, we encounter egoism, narcissism and emotional detachment in the highest degree; he views people merely as objects he can use to satisfy his own sexual and destructive impulses. He is utterly devoid of all human feeling, empathy, remorse or pity, all of which are emotions that have no room in the late capitalist

⁴ Antisocial personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder are listed as two separate categories in the DSM-5, but Otto Kernberg emphasizes the close link between the two and stresses that the antisocial personality is fundamentally narcissistic.

American society where fierce competition is the natural mode of being. At one point in the film, Patrick complains that “I have all the characteristics of a human being: blood, flesh, skin, hair; but not a single, clear, identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust.” Greed is, no doubt, the natural byproduct of the capitalist consumer society, which is characterized by an insatiable desire for the acquisition of commodities, a rugged individualism and fierce competition based on the principle of the survival of the fittest. Patrick’s desire to get ahead of the others and excel at everything is so strong that in the business card scene where Patrick and his colleagues flaunt their business cards to see which one is the best, Patrick almost has a fit when he sees that his colleague Paul Allen’s business card looks more classy than his own. The business card scene can be interpreted as a satirical rendering of the cutthroat competition that lies at the root of American society, where it is taken for granted that human existence has no other purpose but to live in the best apartments, dine at the most stylish restaurants, wear the most trendy clothes by the best designers and buy the newest consumer products. When Patrick feels that he has been surpassed in some way, he immediately falls prey to envy, for “[n]arcissism is the domain of envy” (Mestrovic, 2003, p. 13). After the incident with the business cards, Patrick resolves to murder Paul Allen out of pure envy, which is even more intensified when he realises that Paul Allen’s apartment which overlooks the park is obviously more expensive than his own. Since he is devoid of any emotion other than envy and greed, Patrick’s daily dealings with people are nothing but fake, empty interactions that consist of meaningless chatter, more often than not, on trivial subjects that pertain to their immediate experience, like the food that they are eating, or the drinks that they are having. Similarly, Patrick’s relationship with his fiancée Evelyn is also characterized by shallowness, emotional distance and lack of meaningful interaction. However, it is worth noting that such affectless relationships are indeed the norm rather than the exception in the world depicted in *American Psycho*, and thus indicative of the wider cultural pathology that Jameson (2009) terms as the waning of affect (or emotion). It is only natural that affect, which is “a fundamental part of existing as a normal social being” that enables us to empathize with the experiences of others (Nicol, 2009, p. 184), has been disappearing in the increasingly commodified consumer society where human beings are surrounded by objects as never before in history and “their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men but rather [...] with the reception and manipulation of” objects (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 25).

American Psycho highlights the fact that Patrick and his circle of acquaintances, who live in luxurious apartments, dine at expensive restaurants and go to exclusive health clubs to maintain a perfect physical appearance, lead lives utterly steeped in consumerism and dominated by consumer goods. The sheer monotony and sterility of this material-obsessed, consumerist lifestyle is evident from Patrick's description of his meticulous daily grooming and exercise routine which involves the regular use of a variety of beauty products, including many different kinds of facial lotions and moisturizers, ranging from "anti-aging eye balms" to "herb-mint facial masks." The fashion-fluent, ever stylish Patrick wears nothing short of the most expensive designer clothing, such as Armani and Valentino. Compared to the film, the novel is even more outspoken in its depiction of the obsession with clothing in that considerable parts of the novel are devoted to the detailed cataloguing of designer labels and brand names, since each appearance of every single character is followed by an extensive description of what he or she is wearing down to the smallest detail. Thus, both the film and the novel demonstrate that not only Patrick but also his acquaintances, all of whom are members of the privileged class, engage in conspicuous consumption, consuming specialized commodities merely for the display of prestige, rather than for some utilitarian purpose. So, *American Psycho* presents illuminating insights into the social logic of consumption as theorized by Veblen, who claims that the member of the privileged class

not only consumes of the staff of life beyond the minimum required for subsistence and physical efficiency, but his consumption also undergoes a specialisation as regards the quality of the goods consumed. He consumes freely and of the best, in food, drink, narcotics, shelter, services, ornaments, apparel, weapons and accoutrements, amusements, amulets, and idols or divinities. [...] Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit (Veblen, 2007, pp. 52-53).

In *American Psycho*, the elite restaurant called Dorsia, where it is virtually impossible to secure a reservation, functions as the ultimate sign of prestige coveted by Patrick and his acquaintances. In particular, *American Psycho* demonstrates that clothing items function as signifiers of the social status of their owners who no longer have an existence independent of the clothes they wear; in other words, what really matters are

the clothes and the social prestige they signify rather than the people themselves, who are virtually interchangeable. That is why Patrick's colleague, Paul Allen, keeps mistaking Patrick for someone else who also has a penchant for Valentino suits, wears the same kind of glasses and goes to the same barber. In *American Psycho*, the predominance of appearances is further emphasized by recurrent references to fitness programs, facial care, tanning beds, etc, which show the great lengths Patrick and his associates go to maintain a perfect physical appearance, which however can provide little, if any, relief to Patrick. Indeed, as Patrick puts it, "all it comes down to is this: I feel like shit but look great." Thus, the elaborate beauty routine and expensive clothes only serve to intensify Patrick's feelings of inauthenticity: "there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, I simply am not there." Hence, the film demonstrates that in advanced consumer societies people are reduced to a mere visual image, an outer appearance devoid of inner content, which is in perfect accord with Baudrillard's assertion that we live in an age dominated by images, or simulacra,⁵ which do not correspond to any reality whatsoever, so that "we are [ourselves] simulacra [...] we live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting strangeness of the desert and of the simulacrum, with all the veracity of living phantoms" (Baudrillard, 2010, pp. 152-153). The reduction of human beings to "living phantoms," such utter obliteration of one's personal identity, creates a psychological void which gives rise to feelings of inauthenticity, inner emptiness, anguish and pain. It is exactly these feelings that Patrick gives voice to when he says "my pain is constant and sharp, and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact, I want my pain to be inflicted on others." Patrick's words reveal that it is these feelings of pain and inner emptiness, which are the psychological effects of consumerist lifestyle, that lie at the root of his homicidal impulse. Hence, Patrick's homicidal behaviour can be regarded as a violent reaction against his dehumanization by society, thus demonstrating the most radical effect of consumer culture on the individual psyche. In short, as implied by the epigraph to the novel taken from Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, "such persons as" Patrick Bateman "not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist considering the circumstances under which our society has been formed" (Ellis, 2000, p. 1). Hence, "Ellis's choice of epigraph signals clearly the

⁵ Simulacra (the plural of simulacrum) is associated with the fake, the counterfeit, the inauthentic. In Baudrillardian terminology, simulacra refers to a copy without an original. According to Baudrillard (2010), our age, which is marked by the predominance of the mass media and advertising networks is characterized by simulation, whereby signs or representations of reality become indistinguishable from reality itself.

sociological intention behind the book: to suggest that a character like Patrick Bateman is the ultimate product of a superficial, uncaring age, in which the logic of consumerism runs rampant" (Nicol, 2009, p. 203).

In the end, although Patrick confesses his gruesome crimes to his lawyer, his confession falls upon deaf ears in such a way as to cast doubt on the reality of the murders committed by Patrick. The film concludes with Patrick's voice over: "even after admitting this, there is no catharsis; my punishment continues to elude me, and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself. No new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant nothing." Thus, with Patrick having failed to achieve catharsis through confession, the film ends on a pessimistic note precluding any hope of escape from the shallow existence dictated by the consumer society, where individuals are trapped in an empty consumerism.

In Search of an Authentic Experience

David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), which is adapted from American author Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel of the same title, also focuses on a troubled upper-class white-collar worker, a recall specialist in a prominent car company, who resorts to violence in a desperate attempt to transcend his shallow existence and reach an authentic experience. Suffering from chronic insomnia, the unnamed narrator initially seeks solace in various support groups for people afflicted with terminal illnesses in order to relieve his psychological anguish and feel authentic emotion which otherwise eludes him. Before long, a man the narrator meets during a plane flight, Tyler Durden, who surprisingly turns out to be none other than his own alter-ego, manages to channel the narrator's pent-up energy and frustration into a more violent path by establishing a secret fight club where people gather to beat each other up. The fight club gradually becomes a whole ring of fight clubs, which later evolve into a secret organization called Project Mayhem geared towards unleashing destruction in the city. Like *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* offers a scathing critique of contemporary American society through the depiction of a protagonist who reacts to the dehumanizing effects of consumer culture by resorting to violent behaviour. The unnamed narrator in *Fight Club*, who is more or less from the same social class as *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman, suffers from split personality disorder⁶ in which his separate personality, Tyler Durden, draws

⁶ Split personality disorder (also referred to as multiple personality disorder) is categorized as "dissociative identity disorder" in American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5).

him deeper and deeper into an abyss of violence which gradually takes on an explicitly political aspect. Unlike the psychopathic Patrick who turns to violence for the sake of inflicting pain on others, the narrator in *Fight Club* turns to violence as a means of rebelling against the system as he seeks an existence outside of consumer culture.

Initially, the narrator appears to be no different from other white-collar workers who follow the same boring routine day after day imprisoned in their offices, resembling “slaves with white collars” as Tyler once aptly puts it. Entrapped in a totally programmed and administered life organized by the dictates of the late capitalist society, the narrator and other fellow workers are faced with the risk of being reduced to mass-produced automatons whose only function is to perform a certain appointed task, i.e. of becoming anonymous cogs in the multinational capitalistic system. The narrator’s psychopathology, that is his creation of a separate personality who is strong enough to rebel against his shallow, commodified existence and wage a war against the system, can be interpreted as an unconscious reaction to the society’s attempt to reduce him to a “one-dimensional man,” which is the term Herbert Marcuse (2010) uses to describe the masses who have no feelings, ideas, needs or desires other than the ones imposed on them by the consumer society. In Marcuse’s words, “one-dimensional man is the mutilated and abstract individual who experiences and expresses only that which is given to him [...] whose behaviour is one-dimensional and manipulated” (2010, p. 187). According to Marcuse, the one-dimensional masses are not even alive since “their inner lives are totally administered, programmed to produce exactly those desires that the social system can satisfy and no more” (Berman, 1983, p. 29). The narrator in *Fight Club* resists being reduced to the state of a mere automaton trapped in a one-dimensional life by adopting a two-dimensional mode of existence that allows him to lead a double life as two separate personalities. In fact, the splitting of the narrator’s personality, the fragmentation of his self, is in line with the dominant trend in the age of late capitalism toward the breakdown, or decentering, of the human subject as opposed to the formerly centered subject in the age of classical capitalism where the dominant psychopathology used to be alienation. As Fredric Jameson (2009) puts it, “the shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation” (p. 14). So, the fragmentation of the narrator’s self into two demonstrates how the prevailing social conditions in late capitalist societies render it impossible for the subject to preserve a unified sense of self.

The narrator's alternate personality, Tyler Durden, is everything that the narrator is not: He is virile, strong, violent, rebellious and equipped with extensive knowledge about all kinds of explosives and firearms, which makes him capable of waging an all-out war against the consumer society. The first thing Tyler does as soon as he comes into being is to blow up the narrator's – or since they are one and the same person – his own apartment along with all the luxurious furniture and expensive consumer products in it, for as Tyler declares, "it is only after you have lost everything that you are free to do anything." Tyler's words imply that as long as one leads a life grounded in commodities, he or she can never be free since, as Tyler puts it at one point in the film, "the things you own end up owning you." Tyler's words are in accordance with Baudrillard's (1998) view that consumer society is characterized by total organization of daily life, total homogenization, where the only freedom people are entitled to is the illusory freedom of consumer choice – i. e. the freedom to prefer one consumer product to another. Tyler's destroying the narrator's personal belongings can be interpreted as an open declaration of war against the consumer society where consumerism is the unrivalled ruling ideology and consumer products are regarded as an essential part of one's personality. Initially, the narrator is deeply troubled by the destruction of his apartment which used to be full of fashionable and expensive consumer goods that the narrator feels were inextricably linked to his own sense of self and identity: "That condo was my life, okay? I loved every stick of furniture in that place. That was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed, it was me!" It falls upon Tyler to convince the narrator that it is not his material possessions, the amount of money in his bank account, or his job that define him as a person: "You're not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet." In a society where "all individuals are described in terms of their objects" (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 23), Tyler insists that there is more to a human being than the commodities that he owns, a fact that the narrator can only acknowledge after his apartment has gone up in smoke.

The destruction of the narrator's apartment, which is the first step in the war against the commodity-driven consumer society and the search for an authentic experience, is followed by the establishment of the fight club, where men from all rungs of the social ladder gather to beat each other up. In an age characterized by the predominance of images, or simulacra, which results in the reduction of human beings to "living phantoms," as Baudrillard (2010) puts it, fighting provides people with a

feeling of embodiment, that is a means of becoming conscious of their physical existence. Thus, the fight club is presented as a site of resistance to dehumanization, which, compared to the support groups that the narrator used to attend, is much more effective since fighting enables him to feel that he is actually made of flesh and blood in a way that even the support groups could not, that is why the narrator says, "you aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club." Tyler, who keeps saying that he does not want to die without a scar, evidently regards the scar as a mark created by a genuine, authentic experience. According to Tyler, the fight club is the last refuge for men whose physical, creative and intellectual potential is drastically wasted in the late capitalist consumer society where people are forced into slavish work routines and blinded with the false promise of the American Dream, brainwashed into believing that they will all be millionaires:

Man, I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived. I see all this potential, and I see squandering. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables; slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.

The last step in Tyler's war against the late capitalist consumer society is organizing Project Mayhem whose goal is to unleash destruction in America with the aim of undermining and eventually overthrowing the system. One of the tasks that Tyler assigns his disciples is to provoke the people in the street to fight with them in order to trigger the great potential for power inside the common man and make them realize that each man, or woman, however insignificant he or she may seem, has the power to change history. This view is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's ideas about power according to which "power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels" (Tyson, 1999, p. 281), that is not only from the top of the socioeconomic structure to the bottom, but also from the lowest rung of society to the top so that even those belonging to the lowest social class are not entirely powerless since they can find ways to oppose authority. Tyler wants to mobilize the power inside the common people with the aim of destroying the whole civilization so that a better, more humane one can be built in its

place, or as Tyler puts it: "Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world." Hence, in *Fight Club*, violence is presented as the sole means not only of resisting dehumanization, but also of combatting and destroying the consumer society altogether, which is a prerequisite for the construction of a new and more meaningful existence.

Conclusion

On the whole, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, which are set in America in the late 1980s and the 1990s respectively, portray a world dominated by the proliferation of consumer goods, the inexorable spread of commodification, fierce competition and rampant consumerism, where people lead increasingly depthless, affectless lives. Both films present illuminating insights into the psychological effects of late capitalist consumer society through the portrayal of psychopathological characters who turn to violence in their attempt to transcend their sterile, commodified, shallow existence. Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* is a psychopathic murderer caught in the grip of narcissism and envy, who feels like an illusory entity behind his elaborately maintained physical appearance and strives to escape from the feeling of inner emptiness by inflicting pain on others. The unnamed narrator in *Fight Club*, on the other hand, is a run-of-the-mill white-collar worker who creates a strong, rebellious alter ego to fight against the system that is dehumanizing him and thus to achieve an authentic experience that eludes him in the commodified, depthless consumer society. It is worth noting that both characters are fragmented subjects who lead double lives, which points to the impossibility of preserving a unified, stable identity in the age of late capitalism, which as Jameson (2009) asserts, is characterized by the decentering of the human subject. In conclusion, both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* present a powerful critique of consumer society by reflecting its damaging effects on the individual psyche, and by demonstrating, in their separate ways, how violent behaviour is the natural consequence of an inhumane and dehumanizing society, thus shedding light on the darkness concealed behind the glittering mask of prosperity, success and glamour that characterize the lives of privileged Americans.

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