

# HYPER-MASCULINITY:

## The Construction of Gender in the Postmodern Novel

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# ABSTRACT

## Hyper-Masculinity: The Construction of Gender in the Postmodern Novel

This thesis takes as its subject the superficial nature of the normative masculine gender role. To investigate the creation of this role I have attempted to bring some understanding of recent theorisation of the postmodern, and of gendered identity, to readings of selected contemporary fiction.

I have chosen to focus on several contemporary American texts. In a bid to avoid essentialising masculinity ever further I attempt to embrace the self-reflexive way in which these novels are written in conjunction with the various postmodernisms posited by Fredric Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, John Frow and Jean Baudrillard. Despite differing in significant ways, these critics all explore the idea of multiple identities. The lack of fixity this multiplicity fosters ensures that masculinity as an intrinsic given becomes disputed. The dialogues this creates reveal a category that is insecure, mobile and fluctuating, regardless of attempts to present it as otherwise.

The first novel looked at is Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*. This narrative encourages the questioning of the 'standard' masculinity adopted in patriarchal society by displaying men vulnerable to Post Traumatic Stress disorder, hysteria and madness, due to the war in Vietnam and governmental law enforcement. Masculinity is portrayed as tentative, provisional and impossible to maintain to society's exacting requirements. Psychotherapy is shown to confusingly both offer a fixed and stable 'self', whilst *also* promoting the encouragement of potential multiple other 'selves'.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* continues the search for these 'selves'. Jack Gladney's debilitating fear of death compromises his mental and physical health. His strivings to deal with this, whilst also fulfilling various strands of the desired male stereotype, are explored through life-threatening disasters, usually pre-empted by rapidly developing technology. Jack's career in academia raises questions about the circulation of knowledge and information. Like *Vineland*, *White Noise* also examines the role of the family unit as an inherent part of the enforcement of standardised identities. 'The Family', both in its domestic format and via its more violent reincarnation as The Mafia, plays a vital role in all of these texts. Within DeLillo's *Underworld* (Section Three), the protagonist's therapy brings him away from the influence of The Mob, transforming him from murderer to upstanding citizen. His career in Waste Management provides a metaphor for the text's exploration of the manner in which abject matter is expelled as part of a bid to conform to societal requirements. I draw upon Julia Kristeva's work on abjection in this section.

The ritualistic nature of what is discarded and what revered is further explored in the fourth novel, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. This text offers an extreme picture of the potential results of stereotypical containment, with a protagonist who is determined to hyper-conform. Patrick Bateman not only espouses the thorough commodification of society, he also strives to exceed every stipulation pertaining to consummate masculinity. Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*, provides the material for the final chapter, it offers a chilling portrayal of surface-obsessed society. Mediated images of celebrities provide role models for the characters' identity formation. Postmodernity's purported lack of depth is explored in the light of Baudrillard's theories. The potentialities of the cybernetic post-human are raised and discussed via the theorisation of Lyotard and Donna Haraway.

The texts were selected for their usefulness in demonstrating a developing notion that rather than forming a new or extended sense of masculinity, men are acknowledging a growing awareness of the self-conscious, performative, indeed 'hyper', nature of any masculine identity. Contemporary films and television programmes are examined alongside the novels.

# INTRODUCTION

**‘The more I learn about the world, the more I feel we are fed a bunch of crud about who we are supposed to be.’<sup>1</sup>**

I intend to investigate the normative masculine gender role by reading contemporary fiction through an understanding of recent theoretical debate about gendered identity and the postmodern. Rather than accepting what had largely passed as a ‘naturalised’ masculinity, much recent fiction suggests it is an insecure construction in need of investigation. Alert to the dangers of further enforcing boundaries whilst discussing, even contesting, them I will explore texts selected for their self-reflexive properties and ability to question the limits, boundaries, targets and ideals that identify men. My sources include novels by Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and Bret Easton Ellis.

These texts, which intersect but also challenge each other, provide a series of localised narratives, offering insight into the ways in which masculine identities are formed, reproduced and undercut and the ways that the illusion of an enduring gendered self is created.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen narratives which celebrate the refusal of borderlines, yet present hyper-masculine characters torn between upsetting the status quo and conforming to it. The men in these novels display the inadequacy of stereotypes whilst also admitting that the concept of individuality is flawed and not sustainable.

Fiction potentially provides a site where restrictive societal ‘norms’ such as a standardised masculinity may be enforced. Tania Modleski discusses the complicity of some writing in the creation of an approved way of living. She points out the

difficulties involved in entering into *any* narrative, a place she deems a fictional 'world':

A world...in which the very notion of a stable "identity" functions as part of an oppressive ideology, the regressive, falsely reassuring qualities of narrative were condemned precisely because they lulled us into complacency, suturing us into a spurious sense of identity and wholeness.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than aiding social conditioning, however, literature can also provide an arena in which to scrutinise it. Instead of replacing one defunct narrative with an equally invalid alternative, the novels discussed below all display the insecurity of masculinity without offering a replacement. Instead they display an emergent male self-consciousness, formed by men's growing awareness of the performative nature of their role. The male body is depicted in these narratives as one that is in crisis; disintegrating, abject, traumatised and hystericised. These are novels with the potential to be more interesting than the theories applied to them, as their characters act out what the theorists struggle to describe, and facilitate a focusing on gender relations which said theorists avoid. Postmodern theory generally fails to confront its own impact on normative gender constructions, as commented on by E Ann Kaplan in the introduction to *Postmodernism & its Discontents*. Kaplan, in her useful summary, points out that Arthur Kroker, David Cook, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Andreas Huyssen and others all fail to address 'the important implications of postmodernism for gender issues'.<sup>4</sup> The characters within these novels offer vignettes of contemporary life which in many ways translate the chaos of existing within the postmodern present in a more lucid manner than the majority of postmodern theorists.

The fluid and manifold nature of postmodernisms erodes the underpinning of established rules by pointing out the constructed constitution of such rules, whilst adhering to them in a mocking, self-aware way. This has profound implications for

the construction of a masculine stereotype as no alternative way of functioning is suggested.

Understandings of what postmodernism represents or explains vary considerably. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to look at seminal essays by Fredric Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, John Frow and Jean Baudrillard, writers who offer differing explanations, even identities, for the postmodern condition. The Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson, describes postmodernism as a post-industrial period of intense technological consumption resulting in the end of individualism. There are several problems with this. Such a position infers an originary position for 'authentic' individuals, and also neglects to discuss these individuals, whose autonomy is claimed to be under threat, in terms of gendered identity. The postmodern person becomes 'average white male' by default. However, despite these anomalies the fragmentation of postmodernism could be logically linked to the oppressive nature of capitalism and its mass commodification, not as an inherent part of capitalism, as Jameson suggests, but rather as a resistance to it. This definition of postmodernism, as an ongoing reaction to oppression, is closer to some of Lyotard's work. However, Lyotard, who associates postmodernism with literature and art, goes on to further claim that postmodernism, far from being the latest concept or 'era', existed as a dynamic before, during and after modernism, a phenomenon - surrounding, encompassing and encroaching on other theories and territories - which is gradually receiving fuller attention and analysis:

What, then, is the postmodern? What place does it or does it not occupy in the vertiginous work of the questions hurled at the rules of image and narration? It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday...must be suspected...In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end, but in the nascent state, and this state is constant <sup>5</sup>.

Lyotard's claim that postmodernism will continue in an ongoing state of self-perpetuation differentiates him from Jameson as it undermines Jameson's claim for an historical linearity, in which the foremost concern is socio-political issues.

The linking of postmodernism with the cultural and aesthetic has come to be viewed as characteristic of European critics, such as Lyotard and Baudrillard. However, Baudrillard is also aligned to other critics such as Arthur Kroker due to his interest in commercialism. He describes postmodern society as surface-focused, 'hyper-real', an oxymoron which reflects the subject's created nature; it supersedes the real, in that it dares to suggest that there is nothing below the surface. Similarly the constructed male stereotype could be usefully described as hyper-masculine, an effort to reflect a certain aspirational 'perfection' beyond what can exist.<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard focuses on the false and created nature of much of contemporary life, where, amongst the abundance of copies and representations, singular and fixed narratives of instruction become an anathema.

Postmodernism is often claimed, perhaps most famously by Lyotard, to signal the inadequacy of, and the subsequent moving away from, grand narratives, the form of representation systematically aligned with notions of fixity, authenticity and origins. Postmodernism challenges such universal reasoning. Lyotard uses the term 'modern' to describe the manner in which sciences still look to grand narratives for validation. However, it appears that science and technology are developing faster than they can *be* explained; outgrowing and over-reaching themselves, whilst pinning-down, labelling and categorisation falters. They crave the endorsement of grand narratives (as does patriarchy) despite being an intrinsic part of the postmodern culture proclaiming such narratives invalid. What can technology and science then use for justification in a rapidly evolving culture? As Lyotard terms it, 'where after the

metanarratives can legitimacy reside?'<sup>7</sup> Justification is instead sought via constant, voracious development, which need offer no specific improvement. The speed of this development negates any possible benefit by quickly outmoding it. Accustomed to being in control the enfeebled operator is bemused, but helpless, as technology races out of this control, focused on new growth and an unspecified but alluring trajectory.

The modernisation of society is aligned with the development of machine-technology and the subsequent centrality of scientific knowledge. To be postmodern is to demonstrate disbelief in the grand narratives supporting this technology and so-called progress, regardless of the impact this has upon self-identity or the ability to prove anything. Rather than the false, and ultimately empty, 'comfort' of finding 'oneself', the postmodern persona faces constant effacement. This is further underlined by Lyotard's comments about the 'unpresentable'. He discusses postmodern writing as that which acknowledges the impossibility of describing and categorising all things, allowing itself to be content with simple allusions to characters and events, without demanding that they be made present.<sup>8</sup>

This lack of precise definition, together with increasing levels of self-awareness, is reflected in the withdrawal of the discernible 'hero' in much contemporary fiction. Instead the reader finds a protagonist entrenched in the confusion around him, a more believable figure who acknowledges the impossibility of being spontaneously handsome, brilliant, athletic, kind, rich, sexy, devoted, skilled, tough, sensitive, rebellious, obedient, muscular, adventurous, brave, bold, *and* successful. The struggle to fulfil such a multiplicity of roles is played out in these texts in psychotherapy by first person narrators who consistently speak as 'I'. Despite therapy's reputation as a tool for finding oneself, the potential to find any such authentic and original 'self' is constantly undercut by the opportunities to create

endless other versions.<sup>9</sup> In a similar paradox Jameson discusses attempts to bury and repress grand narratives, whilst still remaining under their influence and the difficulties this presents to any interpretative attempts. He describes this double-bind as a 'political unconscious,' a phrase recalling not only Marx's work on the alienated self, but also Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>10</sup> Jameson claims that the difficulties associated with feeling comfortable with the 'self' have not gone away, but rather been re-named, reiterating Lyotard's claim that postmodernism is not a fresh concept but a multi-stranded re-visiting, as much a candidate for therapy as its confused and precarious human contemporaries.

To be masculine is *not* to be confused or vulnerable. The image of masculinity has, since the time of the enlightenment, represented sane rationality. This has ensured that it is difficult for men to share the emotions surfacing in therapy, and guaranteed a complex relationship with the inner self. Within a therapy situation revelations are made to a professional, who is initially a stranger. Before the therapy even commences such formality ensures a degree of identity-construction by patients unwilling to appear too distant from the expected norm. Encouraging the patient to speak, to repeat, to re-identify, to reach for a point where dissolving and forming collide seems the epitome of Lyotard's description of the postmodern. However, as stated above, therapy simultaneously also offers the finding of the 'real self', authenticated by an authoritarian figure. These differing positions undermine and negate one another. Patients aware of this negation may attempt to avoid it by usefully monopolising upon the self-conscious fragmentation inherent in re-visiting and repeating past experiences and former versions of self. John Frow writes about the way in which such therapeutic re-visiting, via memories and mediated experiences can be used to manipulate stereotypical, pre-fashioned identities. He discusses this in

terms of ideal 'types'.<sup>11</sup>

### History & Hysteria in Thomas Pynchon's - *Vineland*

Relating all eventualities to prescriptive stereotypes and denying the possibility of other selves, is one way of attempting to control multiplicity. In Section One, I examine the struggle to adhere to such stereotypes in an American society largely accepting Freudian therapy as normative. *Vineland* provides a narrative in which men struggle to hone a persona that is heterosexual, rational, disciplined and dispassionate; influenced by the expectations of parents, partners, employers and teachers.<sup>12</sup> Masculinity's reputation as invulnerable sits uneasily in this text amidst the purported fluidity of postmodern circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Whilst adherence to society's rules affords a certain legitimisation the resulting containment is shown to cause eruptions of irrational, even violent behaviour. Judged by accepted norms this behaviour is categorised as madness, a condition historically associated with women, rather than men due to a habitual close alignment to feminine sexuality and reproductive capacities. Men are alternatively granted status as healthy, well-balanced and reasonable. Madness must be externalised, its chaos deflected onto some other.<sup>14</sup>

The extremes of medical and legal control are exerted upon masculine bodies via the comical figure of Zoyd who must act 'mad' to be left alone.<sup>15</sup> Zoyd's instability grows from a constant 'looking-back' to previous lives, other relationships and the war in Vietnam. Like the women categorised by Freud as 'hysterical' whose symptoms included recalling memories, Zoyd constantly re-calls and re-frames past events. This retrospective 'revisiting' is associated with regressive behaviour, causing Freud to remark that: 'The hysteric *suffers* from reminiscence'.<sup>16</sup> Despite the tendency

of narrative to enforce teleology, postmodern narratives opt for a *lack* of strict linearity, which reveals *everyone* to be a product of multiple and interconnecting pasts, futures and presents. The acceptance of this free-flowing identificatory process includes accepting looking back as necessary and 'normal', rather than hysterical. The normalising of the word cancels the perceived need to align the word with femininity. The naming of conditions is of vital importance due to the signals this gives. Veterans of the First World War, shell-shocked and suffering from extreme stress were said to have War Neurosis (later re-named Post Traumatic Shock Disorder) rather than hysteria, despite the similarity in their symptoms. Instead of penetrating the male-domain, by giving hysterical conditions a cross-gender identity War Neurosis served to further fuel its feminisation. This was partly because of the enforced captive passivity of trench warfare and partly because, as Eric Leed discusses, there was no middle-ground between the strict demarcations of 'hero' and 'malingerer'.<sup>17</sup> It was inferred that men could only display hysterical symptoms if they were intrinsically 'feminine' initially. These men already felt impotent, due to being 'buried alive' in trenches, and the diagnoses made of their illness only served to fuel their feelings of inadequacy. As is repeatedly suggested to Zoyd, a 'real man' would be immune to such things. The label 'hysterical' remains a derogatory one when used to describe men who are suffering from the effects of stress, it retains its feminised overtones and latent power to threaten the boundaries of gender definition. Such threats emphasise the flimsiness of adopted identities, categories which would be inviolable if inherent. Tania Modleski describes the hysterical condition as both cause and symptom of boundary de-stabilisation:

The hystericized male body, oscillating between masculine and feminine identifications in such a way as to destabilise the fixity of gender categories (demonstrating) the postmodern rejection of the specifically sexed body.<sup>18</sup>

Modleski links male hysteria through repulsion to postmodernism. The subject is categorised as hysterical for rejecting the containment of stereotypes. Hysteria is therefore seen, like postmodernism, to evade boundaries and precise definition by combining memories with current and imagined experience.

Hysterical fluctuations between defining borders offer increased opportunities for fluidity and boundary-breaching. In order to avoid the potential contamination of these gaps and aporias and show themselves rather to be firmly masculine, men must obey laws. These laws promise to ensure that abjection is, as Julia Kristeva posits, 'hemmed in and thrust aside'.<sup>19</sup> Whilst it seems obvious that some method of legitimisation is necessary and desirable it is also obvious that laws are not chosen universally, despite the requirement for universal obedience. Postmodern theories do not repudiate laws. However, they do point out that the creation and enforcement of universally fair laws is problematic amongst societies who admit that difference exists, and that therefore narrowly structured identities are inadequate, and strictly enforced behavioural codes inappropriate. The current law supports the societal construction of masculinity and dictates the way in which families should operate. *Vineland* illustrates the law being used for domination, personal promotion and the enforcement of national service.<sup>20</sup> Unshakeable rules are tied to a linear history which is segmented into periods, and the intolerant nature of grand narratives. Most realities, in contrast, seem uneven and blurred. Boundaries are drawn around the present and the past in the belief that the future has redemptive qualities. However, lamenting the lost past and investing all hope in the future effectively defuses any possibility of potent political action in the present.<sup>21</sup> Period categories encourage the creation of a binary system around modernity and postmodernity, preventing the two from working usefully together. Lyotard connects a historical periodisation with a tendency to look

for origins and a controllable unity. He terms this as 'nostalgia of the whole and the one'<sup>22</sup> and claims that hankering after narrow and impossible ideals, in preference to fostering the expression of looser, perhaps overlapping, definitions is directly responsible for acts of genocide, such as the Holocaust.<sup>23</sup> Violence is unleashed by a desperate, reductive adherence to a formulaic identity, where there are no allowances for changes or difference amongst the intensity of a created perfection of sameness. Lyotard suggests that difference be celebrated and embraced rather than pilloried and points out that social codes of control will always function unfairly until difference is adequately taken into account. Kristeva agrees with Lyotard, that postmodern society needs to 'acknowledge ...the impossibility of Religion, Morality, Law'.<sup>24</sup> Allowances must be made for the elusive, questioning, formative state that is traversed in order to *be* modern, the state that Lyotard terms 'nascent'. Constantly evolving personae can only be encumbered by grand legitimising theses. Kristeva discusses ways in which usefully to refer to the evolution of the subject:

To take account of this de-stabilization of meaning and of the subject I thought the term 'subject in process' would be appropriate. 'Process' in the sense of process but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled.<sup>25</sup>

The challenges to identity Kristeva points out require a self-conscious questioning rather than a mute acceptance. This self-awareness encourages a search for opportunities within restriction, if not quite a 'breaking-out'. The reflexive nature of postmodern theories suggest postmodernism as a chance to question and recharge. As Jameson's work favours the discussion of theory within periods it becomes aligned with history and science, and a tendency to use references rather than representation. A periodisation of theory would lead to re-assessing modernity. Postmodernism's insistence that periods borrow from each other, to the point where distinction between

them becomes irrelevant, suggests that any re-assessment of modernity need not be a negative one.<sup>26</sup> Postmodernism includes modernism in much the same way that texts include parts of other works, either as literary allusions or on a more unconscious level. This cross-text mutation also includes disciplines and genres and has implications for their analysis. Modernism, postmodernism and the dialogues between them then are crucial in the examination of masculinities.

The overlapping and borrowing between categories illustrates the lack of inviolable boundaries. Parody, frequently cited as a postmodern trope, further blurs any dividing lines. Jameson defines parody as mocking an original with an imitation, but perhaps, in the light of the constructed nature of masculinity, it could be more aptly claimed as a recognition that there *can be no original*. Therefore, men cannot live up to a nostalgic ideal, as such an ideal never existed. Postmodernism is said to incorporate rather than imitate. This 'incorporation' results in 'acting' and 'natural' (or rather not-acting) becoming indistinguishable and ties postmodernism firmly to capitalist consumer society, where all that is cultural is destined for consumption. The increasing integration of the aesthetic with the commercial results in marketing strategies which absorb art in a totalising amalgamation. Companies like MacDonalds present an all-encompassing experience, rather than merely a café. The ethos is to combine the product with a 'look', indeed a lifestyle. This postmodern appropriation involves a mimicking and re-visiting which renders the drawing of hard borderlines impossible. As a potential backlash against capitalism, rather than an inherent part of it, postmodernism could be termed as a crisis-induced virus, mimicking and reduplicating aspects of capitalism in a self-absorbing hyper-commodified state. Such parodic behaviour is in keeping with the growing self-awareness, already cited, of the constructed nature of masculinity.

Postmodernism consumes and absorbs the past by re-visiting and re-casting it, whilst grand narratives attempt to perpetuate it with the memorialization of a singular revered version. Opinions and norms evolve and change over time so that there can never be one version of the past, true for all people in all places, as Frow terms it there are rather, 'continuous shifts...partial continuities running through multiple strands of time'.<sup>27</sup> However, there is comfort and a certain justification to be gleaned from looking back to discernible versions, rather than admitting that all scenarios are fabricated. Academia itself is one of the major culprits in this 'normalising' procedure. That which is worth knowing does not remain static, although that which is taught often does. The establishment within an accepted canon is a major part of this normalising procedure. Modernist texts have been tamed and had their subversive tendencies neutralised by such inclusion.

### **Academia & Autonomy in Don DeLillo's - *White Noise***

In the second section I use Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, a novel set in and around a university campus, to facilitate the examination of the changing status of science and knowledge. The narrative presents academic information as vacuous, yet seductive, its surface appeal rivalled only by the glow of the vast array of other consumer products on offer. What is supplied to the students as 'learning' is firmly within the control of the, predominantly male, professors. Jack Gladney, the protagonist, becomes the reader's representative 'academic'. The different ways in which postmodernism has been adopted by scholars may eventually lead to a more multi-dimensional approach to learning, however, Jack's classes offer no escape and no position from which to be self-critical. His inextricable connection to what he would describe unravels throughout the narrative leading to extreme anxiety about his

masculine identity. Although Jack seems a postmodern subject within a postmodern narrative he longs to ground his identity within what Patricia Waugh describes as, the 'ideal autonomous self as presented in Enlightenment thought'.<sup>28</sup> He seeks affirmation of his masculine self via his career, his many marriages, his appearance and his diet, but mostly through what he 'knows'.

Lyotard discusses the evolving nature of the position accorded to knowledge. He suggests that perhaps one use for postmodernism would be as an analytical device with which assumptions about knowledge could be questioned. Due to rapidly developing technology, knowledge is increasingly viewed as being separate from the human brain, a useful and valuable commodity to be exchanged in a system where learning circulates as currency. Frow comments on the centrality of this increasing commodification, 'at the heart of most theories of postmodernism is an account ... of the extension of commodification to many areas of life'.<sup>29</sup> Commodity production and the generation of profit are inseparable from human identity processes. Using knowledge as an article of commerce attaches it to technology, whose aims are all bound up in best performance, and ultimately profits. Such commodification leaves no room for individual thought or feeling. As a result of this, emotional responses become solely associated with images and narrative. Jack needs to read 'erotic' literature in order to be roused into automated sexual activity. *White Noise* suggests that in keeping with other social acts sex is performative, not individual; it is a repeated parody or imitation of some previously learned script and therefore part of an ongoing act to fit a scripted identity.

Sex consequently becomes merely another discourse requiring systematic translation; there is nothing 'natural' or instinctual about it, despite its habitually

mediated representation as such. As a commodity, sex is an activity to be learned and carried out in terms of correct and incorrect. As Victor Seidler claims:

Since there is no “reality” or “nature” that can exist independently of the discourse in which we can articulate them, we are bereft of terms of criticism. We are also left powerless to illuminate the inhibition, oppression, and sexual misery in a culture which would treat sex as a commodity.<sup>30</sup>

Postmodern theory seems to suggest that the inhibition and oppression *can* be highlighted. However, it offers scant guidance with regards as to how they can be overcome. Facts are deemed necessary for survival and they can be learned by rote, downloaded from the internet, or, before very much longer, implanted in the brain using microchip technology. Until this happens the characters of *White Noise* are led around the hypermarkets and malls by the powerful force-field of excess energy, the white noise of the title. They chant slogans and TV jingles, underpinning a suitable identity by purchasing as they are instructed, believing that they have located an important message in the white noise. The material goods purchased fail to satisfy; indeed they find their way into the waste disposal where they continue to assert their resilience. The consumers live in fear of death, rendered obsolete by the technology they initially developed, which now seems more than capable of further developing itself.

The disasters of *White Noise* are inflicted on the environment by accelerated technological ‘progress’. Technologies that can mechanically produce raw materials and alter and amend foodstuffs to exacting requirements question the inherent naturalness of anything. Everything, including people, becomes technological product, both physically and mentally.<sup>31</sup> Frow suggests that what is natural becomes what humans *decide* is to be natural, part of a sentimental process.<sup>32</sup> So actions that seem transparent, naïve - even immediate - are in fact mediated. Jack’s wife teaches people how to self-consciously breathe and walk. Characters are simultaneously afraid

of and allured by ostensibly 'natural' disasters, seemingly fascinated by the savage breaching of environmental boundaries that events such as the toxic spill engender. They are ironically soothed by the aesthetic, though poisonous, beauty of the sublime sunsets. Postmodernity highlights the impossibility of locating any difference between what is 'real' and what is produced specifically for cosmetic purposes. The achingly beautiful sunsets tease the characters with further fragmentary ocular stimuli rather than offering any solution to their identificatory nightmare.

*White Noise* illustrates that media saturation, via the television, magazines and other printed and visual sources, plays a central role in the creation of identity and firmly connects masculinity to commercial cultural institutions and practice.<sup>33</sup> The prioritisation of the superficial effectively neutralises and devalues any purported depth and content, despite therapy's insistence that there is a meaning to be reached for. In Baudrillard's discussions of the intense valorisation of surface, he suggests that it renders contemporary society a depthless place.<sup>34</sup> Counter-arguments are offered suggesting that depth must exist in order for it to be conceived of and theoretically debated. However, Baudrillard claims that the extremity of attention and focus aimed at what is transparently surface negates any *use* for depth; it is not a matter of there being no depth, but rather that it does not *matter* whether there is. Obviously, there are palpable happenings below the surface gloss - within the world real people physically die. Frow summarises this when he says that despite the commodification of modern life and the attack on 'reality' by various discourses and theories, actions and events are not *only* ideas, images or pictures to look over and either imitate or ignore, they still have, 'direct consequences on human lives'.<sup>35</sup> Baudrillard's ironic refutations of such events as the Gulf War have enraged their victims and those related to them. What his descriptions of postmodern life suggest is that the phenomenon of

representation has now reached a level, both in terms of technological specification and saturation of potential possible viewers, on which it is capable of emptying out formerly accepted meanings. He sees this mass-representation as a confirmation that originals and stable referents are impossible ideals, rather than proof that nobody ever experiences anything. He knows that experiences are being had, but insists that they are variously mediated through multiple versions of other experience, in other words never fresh or unique and therefore impossible to analyse in a neutral way. Societies lack authenticity because of the huge information transfers rendered possible by the media. This infers that the inhabitants of modern societies are brainwashed into conforming. It is hardly surprising then that this dazed culture chooses psychotherapy as an aid to narrative construction. Designed specifically for wish-fulfilment, the elaborated content therapy offers is an answer to the nostalgia for imagined depth. Therapy offers a chance to 'be' as others are perceived. A 'new' story is created, yet it is a story that inevitably draws on what allegedly went before and what may come, requiring *their* creation also. There is a tendency to alter and amend events to fit conveniently with that which is already known; as Waugh terms it, 'nostalgia writes history in terms of desire'.<sup>36</sup> This lack of depth confines existence to a perpetual present with no 'real' past to engage with and no feasible future. Baudrillard claims that America epitomises this perpetual present:

America...lives in a **perpetual present**. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of a principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs.<sup>37</sup>

He connects nostalgia for authentic identity with the founding of a new country, suggesting that this reveals the lack of foundation behind the endless signs, in that every fresh influx claim themselves as originary. Obviously, alternative histories

centring upon America's native inhabitants can be offered, yet this does not resolve the problem of constantly reaching back for some elusive total primacy.

In order futilely to strive to fulfil the stereotypes this searching for authentic identity encourages, children are instilled with gender-appropriate behaviour and the notion of paternal masculinity from an early age. *White Noise* shows children growing up with an image of themselves, reflected back through dominant cultural institutions.<sup>38</sup> As they mature children realise that they are obliged to adopt one identity to the exclusion of all others, despite the overlapping nature of roles. Georges Bataille, whose work is referred to throughout this study, discusses such overlaps in *Visions of Excess*.<sup>39</sup> The adoption of a single, unitary identity places unassailable boundaries around the growing child. Emphasis is given to the messages coming from 'others'. From the moment a young baby sees its perfect, unified image in a mirror it thinks of identity as 'reflected back'.<sup>40</sup> Jacques Lacan claims that the purported unity of the reflection encourages a desire for a self that is perfectly complete, despite such completeness never being attainable. Young babies will typically look behind the mirror to search out the other they think they see, unable to accept that the reflection is a representation of *them*, the person reflected back from doting parents and others. This is the beginning of the struggle in perception between being 'Me' and 'I', a struggle often played out in later life in therapy. An 'image' is adopted as a sign which, hopefully, signifies in an appropriate manner within their encoded interrelationships with other signifiers.

Andrew Tolson attempts to summarise the crucial codes of masculinity, used in this signifying practice. He lists them as, 'an aura of competence, a way of talking and behaving ... immediately recognised... enshrined in social rituals and customs'.<sup>41</sup> Long-established, hegemonic master discourses dictate the appropriate way to behave.

This results in masculine sexuality being granted a socially accepted meaning. To fulfil this meaning diverse physical and mental acts are combined into a mythical wholeness. Heterosexuality, preferably white, male and middle-class is prioritised. The definitions of gendered identities differ between cultures but in Western culture they include suppressing homosocial bonds, and fostering, via a family unit, the reproduction of heirs. The same social conditioning promoting heterosexual marriage also instils the necessity for emotional attachment to the object of sexual desire. This is a founding principle of the socio-historic discourse of sexual normality and deviance and also one of the major factors causing behaviour to become 'over-socialised'.<sup>42</sup> Relationships, like identities, must be clear and precise because blurred edges suggest a danger of contamination.

### **Dirt & Disorder in Don DeLillo's - *Underworld***

Section Three offers an investigation into this threat of contamination, using *Underworld* to examine the plight of masculinity within the context of Julia Kristeva's work on abjection. Nick Shay's occupation as a Waste Manager is portrayed as compromising the boundaries of his identity and negating any ability he has to claim a complete and clean body. This has obvious implications for any psychoanalytic attempt to clearly define a separate subject and object. Nick is torn between adhering to the prototype of white, bourgeois male - sanitised by cultural influences - or alternatively giving in to the wild disorder of the streets. His therapy sessions bring him away from the influence of the Mafia, in an attempt to transform him from a violent murderer to an upstanding citizen. Kristeva uses the term 'abjection' to describe the process by which, in a bid for substance, the subject rejects innate parts of itself, like a trapped animal biting off its own limb. The abject occupies

the borderlands of entities, where separate identities become blurred and indivisible. The major abject groups are food, waste, and signs of sexual difference, all complex and ambiguous categories, capable of instilling desire for that which is also feared and rejected.<sup>43</sup>

The areas of play caused by this ambiguity represent vague and ill-defined territories. The existence of such areas necessitates customary purification and exclusion rites which enforce conformity amongst members of a community.<sup>44</sup> The segregation or destruction of those perceived to have faults enables their lack to be used within the creation of 'acceptable' identities. In *Underworld* the landfill industry operates as a metaphor for these rites. Within the narrative people strive to dispose of what is considered dirt as part of the consolidation of the neat compartments of modern life. Ironically, behaving fearfully in this way, rather than removing danger, exacerbates it by releasing pollution, radiation and gender-bending chemicals into the environment. Although Nick has a religious fervour for his landfills this is not enough to prevent them leaking. This bleeding through boundaries negates attempts strictly to classify gender parameters and is further illustrated by the de-masculinising potential of the environmental oestrogens which can be found in the water supply.<sup>45</sup> This is reiterated by the characters in *American Psycho* (Section Four), who portray an intense fear of tap water and what may have seeped into it, as a consequence of this they will only drink that which has been analysed and bottled.

*Underworld* explores the vulnerable corporeality of the body as flesh, producing intimate waste products. The actions of this flesh are shown to be recorded, monitored and disciplined by the discourses of science, psychology and law, 'logically' unravelled and categorised. The conflict between mind and matter, what is knowable and what is not, is represented by the second generation Italian immigrant

brothers Nick and Matty. They are respectively material and discursive, physical and cerebral, aggressively sexual and passively intellectual, yet for much of the time present two sides of the same person. To upset the neat balance further cerebral Matty develops weapons, whilst his wild, street-wise brother leaves reform school philosophical and conforming.

All of the selected texts provide a place to examine the roles of family members in identity-formation. They offer examples of the way in which attempts to identify with impossible ideals of autonomy cause relationships to fail. Fathers are repeatedly shown acting outside of their expected roles. Nick and Matty's father is missing, yet he maintains a strong presence within the narrative. DeLillo's *White Noise* offers a central family where no two children share the same set of parents. The centrality of 'The Family' is paralleled in *Underworld* by the repeated exploration of the Mafia, a grotesque parody of 'The Family', with its stereotyped kinship networks and gender roles, including supremely masculine 'soldiers'. The brutal acts carried out by the Mafia seem to suggest that, contrary to Baudrillard, something *does* lurk 'under the surface of ordinary things' (U. p.761); there are violent deaths, destruction and exploitation - not merely portrayals of such. The Mafia initiation ceremony in which the chosen few are elevated in rank to show their allegiance to the 'Boss' identifies them as hand-picked hoodlums. They become 'Made-Men', the killing of others is *their* making. *Underworld's* Nick is so impressed by the authentic Italian feel of these ancient rites he terms the men 'hand-made'. However, the commodified, machine-made nature of goods, prolific within western culture and rife within the texts, compromises the nostalgic 'hand-crafted' nature of The Mob's Made-Men by proposing that perhaps they are merely functioning according to pre-decided formulae.

Masculinity, supposedly a symbol of empowerment, is presented as a burden to be lived up to, permanently in danger of being betrayed or undermined. Nick resents the pressure to be husband, father and provider, his connection with the shooting of the pool-hall hood named 'Lack' an ironic link to his personal struggle with insufficiency. Postmodernism challenges the boundaries of his various identifying duties, but stops short of providing an arena in which to reach alternative agreements. Indeed with its encouragement of difference it validates the existence of potentially endless threatening 'underworlds'. It seems understandable then that there are conflicting arguments about whether postmodernism is the *cause* of, or *part* of a complex strategy to survive, the instabilities of living *without* a pre-ordained identity whilst under the influence of intense technological-consumerism. Self-awareness of being all 'made-up' does not remove the determination to survive regardless. Like Nick, Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, the focus of the next section, feels a lack of affinity with his allocated roles. Both men suffer from what Kristeva terms '*too much strictness on the part of the other*',<sup>46</sup> as they attempt to meet the unreasonable expectations of contemporary patriarchal society, albeit in differing ways. Whilst Nick tries his utmost to conform placidly, Patrick unleashes his fear and rage by hyper-conforming, determined to *exceed* everything society seems to require of him.

### Self-analysis and Self-indulgence in Bret Easton Ellis's – *American Psycho*

Patrick demonstrates the conscious effort required to simply *be* oneself, supposing that this self can ever be located.<sup>47</sup> As a dominant male he glories in the first person narration, keeping a self-reflexive journal of his activities. He has evolved through his vast wealth and privileged lifestyle to the point where he feels able to analyse his own actions, without the input of a therapist. As therapists traditionally

listen in an almost-silence the reader takes over in this role. Through his frenzied, sexual, slaughter of women and intensely homophobic treatment of men Patrick projects his fears, desires and loathings about his own physicality onto his environment in a way symptomatic of hysteria. He demonstrates Kristeva's definition of abjection, 'the abject (as) the violence of mourning for an "object" that has Always already been lost', and the "object" is the elusive, and impossibly perfect, 'I' he attempts to resurrect.<sup>48</sup> Male characters from the other texts looked at so far have attempted to fulfil their stereotypical role by observing customs deemed 'manly' and controlling their personal passions and desires. Patrick illustrates what might happen if the violence suggested by proclaimed masculine power is *not* contained. He chooses instead to give in to the struggle that Victor Seidler calls: 'the historical antagonism between reason and desire'.<sup>49</sup>

Patrick fails to conform to the condoned version of masculinity by pushing beyond it. He is *too* handsome, *too* strong, *too* rich and *too* sexual. His hyper-conformity results in the disruption of accepted rituals.<sup>50</sup> As part of the ongoing rules about bodies food is cooked, within 'civilised' cultures, in preference to being eaten raw. This is based on knowledge; generally cooked food tastes better and is safer. To flagrantly forgo the pre-ordained wisdom and morality of the past is considered to be a sign of madness. When Patrick has sex with corpses and attempts to incorporate the raw flesh of others through cannibalism he neglects the ritual of firmly separating life and death. Patrick places himself in danger of contamination, torn between doing what he wants to do, which seems to be have sex with other men, and doing what he has been conditioned to do, marrying a girl of his own social standing and having sex and children with her. Instead he dismisses all restraint, his idea of sexual activity encompassing any level of bodily mutilation and destruction. Sex is the point where

the individual body makes contact with the other bodies making up its society, hence inviting authoritarian interference. Harding comments on this regulative aspect, claiming that 'the individual is integrated into the social order through regulation and control of sexuality'.<sup>51</sup> Patrick refuses this integration, illustrating the potential havoc unleashed when the 'correct' version is refuted or surpassed. There remains nothing against which to measure and identify 'lack'. Prohibitions need to be carried out for protection, however this text shows the difficulties in enforcing prohibitions in a culture where fragmentation can potentially protect enclaves of the like-minded, and what is considered 'acceptable' is constantly evolving. Patrick takes this individualism to the extreme by offering the reader his own personal reality. This is the ultimate hyper-real where he can perform the absolute in hyper-masculine acts, as he interprets them. As Waugh terms it he is attempting to 'empty out the self into an abstract form'.<sup>52</sup> He exemplifies this self-reflexive ability to 'look at' himself as a created persona when he is almost caught in a filmic police-chase. Briefly he abandons his confessional first person narration to refer to himself in the third person. The intense proximity of danger transposes him from film-star to film viewer.

### Sex & Surface in Bret Easton Ellis's - *Glamorama*

In Section Five the filming continues.<sup>53</sup> *Glamorama*, the final text examined, explores the nature of hyper-masculinity on an ornate film-set where 'actors' physically have sex, and actually die. The boundaries between reality and fiction are exposed as no more than the fluid reflections of a two-way mirror, once again Lacan's work on mirrored reflections has an obvious relevance. The young child initially perceives itself as fragmented limbs, ensuring that the mirror image looks more perfect and capable. There is simultaneous recognition *and* mis-recognition, the

outside ego appears to be superior to the internalised one, causing alienation. During the first eighteen months of life an image is *assumed*, and as soon as possible the transformations that accompany this image are undergone; because of this aspects of mis-recognition remain for life. Throughout *Glamorama* Victor recalls this theory, as he reacts to the desires and preferences of others, and attempts to build the most pleasing version of himself. The image reflected back to him, from surfaces and the eyes of others, and the confirmation of worth this brings, becomes of primary importance. Victor demonstrates how the quest for masculine perfection brings paradoxical feelings of vanity *and* inadequacy. The intense valorisation of surface accumulated in the chosen texts culminates here in an obsession with celebrity; models, movie stars and the super-rich. All characters are outmoded by technology, any claim to originality negated by eugenic doubling. The ease of cloning characters illustrates technology's ability to re-duplicate and spawn copies, and further copies of those copies, in a self-perpetuating high-tech viral outpouring.

*Glamorama*'s robotic bodies are meticulous imitations, evolved to the point of superseding that which they set out to emulate, becoming what Baudrillard terms simulacra, copies without originals.<sup>54</sup> The beautiful people of *Glamorama* search for evidence of libido to validate their existence. They further enforce what has been suggested by the other novels, that desire is a fantasy, played out on a stylised set, recalling Lacan's point that 'setting' can be achieved, and the satisfaction of needs can be fulfilled, but desire is never attained.<sup>55</sup> Despite the endless choices offered by contemporary consumer society only certain outcomes can ever be gained. This results in the compromise of desire, together with contrived behaviour. Therefore a *fulfilling* of needs becomes instead a *creation* of needs to accommodate the available solutions. This echoes the creation of a market for consumer goods, fuelled by 'needs'

which are artificially induced, rather than the creation of goods for an existing market. This need-inducement is illustrated in these texts, as is the circularity of the postmodern tendency forever to examine and assess what will have been done, re-visiting and re-casting what is known, including what has not yet happened.

*Glamorama* offers a climax to what has been hinted at in all of these novels - that sexual activity, regardless of gender, yokes sexuality with subjectivity; in other words sexuality, beyond language, becomes the method which shows what its participants are and what they know. This emphasis on self-definition and self-knowledge means that being active sexually qualifies one as a living person, capable of sustaining an appropriate gendered identity - at least within the society that defined that gender. This offering of impossible ideals to aspire to places sexed-beings in competition with themselves.<sup>56</sup> *Glamorama* provides explicitly detailed sex-scenes which (like Jack Gladney's erotic literature) suggest that spontaneity and self-expression are only fantasies, and remind the reader that sexual players perform to pre-decided standards. The emphasis on action is typical of contemporary mediated society. Victor's interminable commentary alienates those 'watching' the sex. The strained relationship between language and experience echoes Freud's opinion that psychoanalysis is a 'talking cure'. Patients are encouraged to use language to express themselves. Putting into words relies on a common language but due to the inherent ambiguity of all language this is never straightforward. Lacan attempts to describe the difficulty in ever precisely expressing what is intended with the phrase 'sliding signifier', emphasising that meaning is fluid and impossible to pin down.<sup>57</sup>

Just as the constantly expanding technologies retrospectively shrink grand narratives to the point where it is apparent that they have little value, concepts which are not acknowledged until after the establishment of language defeat language's

capacity to sum them up. Kristeva discusses the semiotics of attempting to express ‘impurities’ which fall outside of ordered, isolated subjectivity. The psychoanalytic scenario, where a patient is free to speak and therefore free potentially to invent, offers the opportunity to use talking as a way of connecting with, or alternatively deferring, emotions. Paradoxically, patriarchy gives man a voice, whilst encouraging him *not* to talk, as this may reveal too much of his worries and weaknesses, construed as feminine. He must instead struggle against institutionalised power to find a register and an appropriate discourse to reflect the strength and authority he is said to embody if he is a man. Putting something into words inserts that thing into the symbolic order, capable of being interpreted. Kristeva suggests this as the point at which the object becomes abject, reasoned with (always on the subject’s terms) and cast aside.<sup>58</sup> If you desist from defining yourself, then it cannot be suggested that you are, by definition, inadequate.<sup>59</sup> This obvious honing of the subject simultaneously declares its inauthentic constitution.

All of these narratives illustrate the inadequacy of one constraining masculine identity. They also display a palpable fear of going too far, of experiencing uncharted territories, linking to fears of death, the unknown, the fall into the abyss. Characters are afraid to fly or cross bridges, struggling with the urge to maintain control, recoiling from the seemingly unbounded capacity of contemporary technology for linear growth. The character’s horror of boundary removal highlights the irony of being torn between the supposed choices of postmodern commodity culture, and the ‘safety’ of limiting grand narratives. Fluid and fluctuating multiplicity with its implications of vastness via re-visiting brings an ironic desire for the derided, but relative security of containment. Such containment is in turn revealed as unstable due to the inherent characteristic of technology to push ever-onwards. The subject of

the first section, *Vineland*, shows characters instilled with feelings of fear and vulnerability, attempting to cope with an existence somewhere in between false containment and frightening liberty.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> M Harris, *Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p.9, quoting a respondent.
- <sup>2</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986) and *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998). Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) and *Glamorama* (London: Picador, 1999).
- Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1991). Further references to these novels will be made by title's initials & page numbers in parentheses, in the body of the work. These American texts highlight the extreme technological advancement of capitalist society together with its inadequacy in identifying its diverse inhabitants. I also draw upon contemporary American film and TV.
- <sup>3</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture & Criticism in a Postfeminist Age* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), p.108.
- <sup>4</sup> E Ann Kaplan ed., *Postmodernism & its Discontents* (London, New York: Verso, 1989). Kaplan discusses the attempts to break with oppressive binary definitions by feminist literature which displays, what she terms, a utopian postmodernism, as compared to the more commercial postmodernism focusing on, 'Technologies, marketing and consumption' (p.4).
- <sup>5</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.79.
- <sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Trans. P. Foss & P. Patton (New York: Semiotext(e) 1983), pp.1- 4.
- <sup>7</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxv.
- <sup>8</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.80-81.
- <sup>9</sup> The TV series *Ally McBeal* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox & Channel Four) illustrates this expectation that therapy will accommodate the voicing of differing realities and validate various illusions, subsequently sanctioning their passage into public life.
- <sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism & Consumer Society' *Postmodern Culture* Ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1985) & *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1986).
- <sup>11</sup> John Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory & Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.67.
- <sup>12</sup> Victor J Seidler, 'Reason, Desire, and Male Sexuality' *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed., Pat Caplan (London: Routledge, 1987).
- <sup>13</sup> Patricia Waugh comments on the overturning of such myths whilst comparing feminism and postmodernism through their shared goals, 'The commitment of feminism and postmodernism to the project of deconstructing both the subject and the 'master narratives' of history'. *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p.16 (original italics).
- <sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1993).
- <sup>15</sup> Elaine Showalter discusses the 'acceptable' behaviour for men that Zoyd is deemed to be falling short of, in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics & Modern Culture* (London: Picador, 1997), p.77.
- <sup>16</sup> Freud quoted by Kristeva in 'Oscillation between power and denial', *New French Feminisms* eds. Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), p.166. Italics added.
- <sup>17</sup> Eric J Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p.176.
- <sup>18</sup> Modleski, *Feminism Without Women*, p.100-101.
- <sup>19</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.16.
- <sup>20</sup> See Richard Collier, *Masculinity, Law & the Family* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995) and *Masculinities, Crime & Criminology* (London, Thousand Oaks, Delhi: Sage, 1998).
- <sup>21</sup> Frow, p.2.
- <sup>22</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.81.
- <sup>23</sup> This is not to say that Lyotard could not see the value of a certain political unity. Populations can, after all, have *political* similarities whilst remaining vastly different in other ways.

<sup>24</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview', *Women's Review*, no 12 (1986), p.19-21.

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the end of grand narratives is not entirely celebratory, there is much fear of the unknown from those who feel comfortable with patriarchal rules. The irony of such linearity being the familiarity, hence safety, rules seem to offer. What passes for 'natural' is actually habit and custom.

<sup>27</sup> Frow., p.3.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Waugh, 'Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism', *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Ed. P.Waugh (London: Edward Arnold,1992), p.194.

<sup>29</sup> Frow, p.3.

<sup>30</sup> Seidler, 'Reason, Desire & Male Sexuality', p.106.

<sup>31</sup> Frow, p.4. explores this further with regard to DNA and human organ transplants.

<sup>32</sup> Frow, p.2.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Singer, in her book *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory & Politics in the Age of Epidemic* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), discusses the major influence of the media's portrayal of ideal manhood, by presenting a wide variety of masculine images; positive characteristics to aspire to, and negative ones to avoid, in the form of newsreaders, various TV programmes, presenters, advertisements. Television makes its message clear, men who do not follow conventional patterns may become alienated and castigated.

<sup>34</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp.1- 4.

<sup>35</sup> Frow, p.4.

<sup>36</sup> Waugh, 'Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism' p.194.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1999), p.76.

<sup>38</sup> Peter. M. Nardi, *Men's Friendships: Research on Men & Masculinities* (London: Sage, 1992), p.197.

<sup>39</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927 – 1939* ed. & intro Allan Stoekl, Trans. Allan Stoekl, C R Lovitt & D M Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.174.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). Chapter, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', p.1.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Tolson, *The Limits of Masculinity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1987), p.7.

<sup>42</sup> William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.114.

<sup>43</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity & Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution & Taboo* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), provides a useful survey of these rites.

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Harding, *Sex Acts: Practices of Femininity & Masculinity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1998), p.75. Discussion of the potential for environmental circumstances to question gender categorisation.

<sup>46</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.15, italics in original.

<sup>47</sup> Penelope Deutscher discusses the effort required to be 'oneself' in *Yielding Gender* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.15.

<sup>49</sup> Seidler, 'Reason, Desire & Male Sexuality', p.105.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas, discusses the Nyakusa tribe (recalling *Vineland's* Zoyd) :

On all other occasions they avoid faeces and filth and reckon it is a sign of madness not to do ; so. But in the face of death itself...they even claim to have eaten filth as madmen do, in order to keep their reason. Madness will come if they neglect the ritual...sanity is assured if they perform the ritual.

Striving for identity in the circular movement between dirt, madness and death it becomes acceptable to 'behave' like a mad person. *Purity & Danger*, p.177.

<sup>51</sup> Harding, *Sex Acts*, p.2.

<sup>52</sup> Waugh, 'Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism', p.191.

<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991), and *The History of Sexuality* Vol. I (London: Penguin, 1990), recalls the work of Jeremy Bentham on panoptic penitentiaries. Such all-encompassing surveillance now operates in most towns in the form of CCTV cameras, which are generally welcomed by the public. The constant filming of *Glamorama* echoes this watchful vigilance.

<sup>54</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

<sup>55</sup> Lacan, *Ecrits*, particularly Chapter Seven, 'The direction of the treatment and the principles of its power' Section, 'Desire must be taken literally,' p.256.

<sup>56</sup> Seidler, discusses the manner in which men are set against themselves in 'Reason, Desire, and Male Sexuality', p.105.

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<sup>57</sup> Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.154.

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.15.

<sup>59</sup> The extraordinary length of time taken to 'label' Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is evidence of this reticence.

## SECTION ONE

### THOMAS PYNCHON'S *VINELAND*: Making Deals With the Boys.

#### Introduction

*Vineland* uses the repetitions and variations of postmodern life to satirically illustrate the 'fall-out' resulting from multi-layered beings forcing themselves into conventional gender categories. Nothing is single, simple or linear. Zen and materialism meet head-on as FBI agents *and* 'peace loving' hippies struggle against severe governmental restrictions. Readers must be alert not only to multiplicity, but also to their own implication. Citizens are coerced into conformity, aware that their decreased freedom of choice is enforcing the renouncing of valued activities. Scope for any kind of achievement is limited, and only permissible via calculated bargains made within patriarchal constraints; deals between a hierarchy of men.

#### The Body as Vessel: 'Forcing things into each other's bodies'.<sup>1</sup>

Characters follow their idols, dreams and beliefs with a religious fervour. Hector Zuniga, 'a homicidal narc having a mid-life breakdown' (V. p.345), worships the television, Zoyd worships the luminously beautiful Frenesi Gates, and hopeless ideals of peace, love and minimal effort, Weed worships the *idea* of worship, lured into involvement because of his external appearance, and Brock Vond, the cold and calculating federal agent, worships power and control with an undisguised manic abandon, berating a lack of either in others: 'Everywhere Brock looked he saw defects of control' (V. p.279). However, even power-hungry Brock cannot resist Frenesi, and when she has a baby, playing, as this does, upon his horror of procreation (he believes that the production of new beings represents a diminution of his personal power) he begins to slip over the precipice into madness, where every birth represents an

inroad into his death:

Though he enjoyed...even got obsessed about sex, he was also...scared to death of it. In nightmares he was forced to procreate with women Who approached never from floor or ground level but from steep overhead angles, as if from someplace not on the surface of Earth, feeling nothing erotic but only...a terrible sadness, violation...each child he thus produced, each birth, would only be another death for him (V. p.276-7).

Brock is haunted by precision, the exact angle from which a lover approaches is of paramount importance. He links sexual activity with mortality; angels will approach from above to take him away at the end of his life. Ironically his end is nothing like this, yet he continues to link angles with angels, controllability with the fantastic, the cerebral with the spiritual. Georges Bataille discusses this correlation between birth and death in *Literature and Evil*, claiming that humans cannot reproduce without yielding to the destructive instinct ultimately expressed by death.<sup>2</sup> After Prairie's birth Brock's obsession with Frenesi pushes his personal urge for control into ascendance over his quest for professional power. He tracks her wherever the protection scheme hides her, his behaviour a clear indicator to observers that he is close to the edge:

Son of a bitch was fairly irate...he totally lost it there for about a week... clearly needed some R and R over at Loco Lodge, a Justice Department mental resort in the high desert...“wild-eyed,” “terminally depressed”, ... they'd expected him to take off his clothes and do something unspeakable ...what a wacko! (V. p. 69).

Like the other male characters Brock is hysterically attempting to compromise his fanatical fixations with his struggle to retain some manner of socially, and politically, acceptable identification as a man. The struggle is gargantuan and never-ending, eventually becoming a seamless part of the identity. The constant negotiations between the men of *Vineland*, who on the surface seem very different, serve to underline governmental patriarchy in an all-male continuum, where relationships between men, even those on different sides, are given precedence to any relationship with a woman. Eve Sedgwick discusses such homosocial exchanges in an illuminating

way in *Between Men*.<sup>3</sup> She terms male social activities as homosocial, but not homosexual, suggesting that both homosocial *and* homosexual activities are interwoven in a continuum. In other words, men who love other men, have sex with other men, and promote the interests of other men, all have more in common than they do not, and even more than they have with women. A male dominated hierarchical society places men in competition with each other. As a consequence of this competition all-male contact is prevalent and provides an arena for all-male interest, stimulation and attraction. Men's roles within the continuum adapt and change as they grow from boyhood to manhood, and women may find themselves being used by men to validate a male relationship: 'Frenesi saw that if Weed had been fooling her, then so had Brock, by keeping it from her. The Boys' (V. p.240). There is more to this 'boys' arrangement than the merely social or governmental, it suits Brock and Weed to use women as mediators, as it gives a veneer of 'normality' to their dealings with each other, legitimating masculine contact. The contact may not be as physically direct as they would like, but it is irresistibly enhanced by Frenesi's unwitting assistance. She is the vital third side of their triangle, emphasising masculinity's and femininity's impact on each other, as Sedgwick describes it in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 'male-male desire ...widely intelligible...through triangular relations involving a woman'.<sup>4</sup> Men's chromosomal gender is enforced to the point of complete geometrical containment by cultural gender roles.

Zoyd and Hector also have an ongoing and caring, relationship that spans many years: 'It was a romance over the years...Hector still, for no reason he could name, liked to keep on popping in every now and then' (V. p.22). They know the details of each other's lives and relationships, and, although not physically, they similarly use Frenesi; she is their excuse to get together, their point of contact and

common denominator. Brock and Weed have Frenesi as a blatant go-between. They enjoy their little secret, both working for the same 'side', governmentally and gender specifically, whilst knowingly indulging in sex with the same woman. As Frenesi patrols the boundaries of their illicit homo-erotic alliance she also paradoxically provides sustenance for their relationship by camouflaging their homosocial negotiations:

Something...between men, it's about whoever's runnin' Brock thinking, What can I get him to do for me, what are his limits, and Brock thinking, I did this deed for him, it wasn't so bad, but what'll he ask me to do next?... (Frenesi is) only in there to make it look *normal and human* so the boys can go on discreetly porkin' each other (V. p. 265-6. italics added).<sup>5</sup>

Despite enjoying the reciprocal protection that hiding within societal norms brings him, Brock cannot resist callously pointing out to Frenesi that she is merely a vessel for sperm, messages, and 'the boys' male on male desire:

Remember last time when I told you not to bathe...Because I knew you'd be seeing him that night, knew he'd go down on you...Ate your pussy...I know, because he told me. You were coming in his face, and he was tasting me all the time...You're the medium Weed and I use to communicate, that's all, this set of holes, pleasantly framed, this little femme scampering back and forth with scented messages tucked in her little secret places (V. p.214).

Brock and Weed fear the extreme consequences of being hard up against each other without some sort of protection. Frenesi is their human condom, she validates contact and absorbs risk. She is the 'edge' who saves them from being personally contaminated; she carries alien bodily fluids, so closely linked with abjection, on their behalf. This transporting, passing on, and ingesting of sperm raises questions about the precise ownership of bodily fluids. Brock courts disaster by entering her as frequently as he does, and would blame this for his mental unhinging. Weed has oral sex with her to take Brock's sperm into his mouth and is therefore equally close to the black hole. The self is identified as both constant and fluid, always part of an exchange system.

By using Frenesi to transport his sperm to Weed, Brock is confirming women as reservoirs. Frenesi giving birth to a child (whose parentage is never made clear, although her alleged promiscuity and deviance *are*) further enforces the carrying capacities of her 'secret places'. Brock is ignorant about wombs, yet simply knowing such hollows exist, but are out of sight, makes him actively covet them, and burn to appropriate them for his own use, hence preserving the sanctity of *his* body. Whilst protecting the men from the dirt and disorder inherent in abjection, the insemination of Frenesi, be it by Brock, Weed, or Zoyd (the public blaimée) is also enforcing the position of women as an 'object' to be used by men for gratification, identification and the carrying of burdens. Frenesi's daughter Prairie complains to Zoyd and Isaiah, echoing the archetypal treatment of women already illustrated by her mother's various roles. She is about to embark on unearthing the 'truth' about Frenesi, underlining the all-encompassing effect patriarchy has: 'Typical males you're handing me back and forth like a side of beef' (V. p. 53). Although Frenesi's unusual name echoes the words 'freedom is necessary', the men in her life do their best to tie her down into their system of exchange value. It is hardly surprising that Prairie's parentage is uncertain, considering this system of 'passing around'. The law, made and enforced by patriarchy, deals with this by stating that a child's father is accountable to both his partner and their offspring; if the child is born in wedlock then the woman's husband is legally considered the father. Social constructs override biology by designating a child's father, and whilst biological paternity may be provable by scientific methods, the social difference this makes can be minimal.<sup>6</sup>

Although Frenesi has many sexual partners she does not sit easily in the role of passive, mute, object of reproduction. In fact she hungers for sexual release, relentlessly giving strangers the 'come-on' and indulging her uniform fixation by

masturbating to re-runs of *Chips* on the television, although it is difficult to gauge how far she is influenced by ideological constructs in these fantasies (V. p.84). However, the way in which the men who have sex with her subsequently behave suggests that their patriarchal system of identificatory practices is not working. They are not maintaining a superior aloofness, but rather becoming emotionally involved with the inferior, lesser being. Such emotional investment is archetypal *feminine* behaviour and the male character's awareness of their inability to resist acting that way pushes them further into madness<sup>7</sup>. Frenesi's resonant name also suggests, frantic, frenetic, frenzy, reminding the men that they are vulnerable whilst indulging in an act that reduces them to the level of epileptic seizure.<sup>8</sup> This connection of uncontrollable physical malfunction with sexual activity is a reminder that to surrender to the intoxication of passionate sexual release is to teeter uncomfortably close to death. However, whilst death must be faced alone, sex may be attempted as a mutually experienced participation. Frenesi, on the other hand, becomes increasingly determined to estrange herself from her body's activities: 'even sex was mediated for her now - she did not enter in' (V. p.237).

Initially it seems surprising that Brock arranges Weed's death, connected as they are by sex. However, when death's release is viewed as the only option offering true freedom for the 'self', the connections between the desire to transcend the existing state of being, via sex, and the desire for death becomes apparent, linking the sexual act with ritual sacrifice. Bataille's statement that 'Sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates' is correct.<sup>9</sup> Brock sacrifices Weed decisively, to be the acting body, rather than the body being acted upon, the 'liver', rather than the 'dier'. Allowing explicit definition by action raises the potential to be categorised as 'nothing' if passive in any situation. Brock's profound fear of release ensures that he practises

dying by getting as close to death as he can without actually passing away. As Bataille terms it, 'assenting to life up to the point of death'. Brock does this by having sex and sacrificing others.<sup>10</sup> He has sustained his relationship with Weed, using Frenesi as intermediary, for as long as possible. He appreciates the inherent ability of the touch to spoil and soil. The physical consummation of a relationship with an object intensely desired is doomed to fail because of the hand's capacity to kill, in this case kill the idolatry. The other person is no longer worshiped, to again refer to Bataille: 'The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim'.<sup>11</sup> As soon as Brock has sex with Frenesi his obsessive longing for her abates. He is still driven by his urge to control her, but his sexual desire for her no longer overpowers him. The first time they meet he cannot wait to remove the protection her camera offers and this urge to break down her defences culminates in him locking her in a secure Government detention camp.<sup>12</sup>

Weed's sacrifice to 'the cause' could similarly be tied to Brock's diminished desire. He claims that the removal of Weed is for the greater good as it will cause the collapse of 24fps (frames per second), allowing its members better to fit Governmental plans. As he explains to Frenesi:

"You're right there literally in bed with him—perfect placement...the key log, pull him and you break up the structure", and the logs would disengage... continue on their way down the river to the sawmill, to get sawed into lumber, to be built into more America (V. p.216).

Anybody exerting a noticeable influence must be removed; they inevitably encourage others to question societal classifications. Brock is convinced that the members of the group can be simply removed from one influence, and subsequently re-influenced: 'They'd only been listening to the wrong music, breathing the wrong smoke, admiring the wrong personalities. They needed some reconditioning' (V. p.269). The 'rebels' are incapable of having their own beliefs, they are endlessly re-formable blank slates,

in need of guiding towards better citizenship. Although Brock projects his Governmental concern in eliminating those resistant to change, he is also disposing of a rival in an embarrassingly personal and petty act, revealing the unmanly attributes of unreasonableness and insecurity. Frenesi summarises his confused feelings perceptively when she challenges him with her gun theory. Despite the threat of infection men keep penetrating barriers and breaking membranes. She terms Brock's gun as an extension of his penis:

Men had it so simple. When it wasn't about Sticking It In, it was about Having The Gun, a variation that allowed them to Stick It In from a distance. The details of how and when, day by working day, made up their real world...she would have hated to admit how much of this came down to Brock's penis, straightforwardly erect (V. p.241).

Brock's penis is cited as *permanently* erect, a weapon steeled for the war against the terrifying void - feminine sexuality. His desperate plunge into sexual activity is insufficient to mask the bleak cosmic truth that everybody dies. His ever-increasing madness is irrelevant by comparison. The other male characters feel the same, and despite their adoption of differing beliefs and singular, strangely sexless names, any attempts to secure an individual identity are pitifully inadequate against the might of accepted norms. Hector hysterically, and rather heartlessly, reminds the idealistic Zoyd: 'Hey, all right Fuckhead, try this – *you are goin to have to die?* Yeah-heh-heh, remember that? Death! After all them years of nonconformist shit, you're gonna end up just like everybody else anyway!' (V. p.32).

Struggling to come to terms with this inevitability are the Thanatnoids, the walking dead, those with unresolved issues on Earth which hinge on resentment and the urge for revenge.<sup>13</sup> This rancour is inscribed on their bodies as discourse: 'What was done to them – they carry it...on their bodies – written down for – all to see!' (V. p.174). This controlled construction of identity via the 'body' reflects the abhorrence

of the body in Christian culture. The 'built' nature of bodies is depicted in their sexualised, traumatised, and ultimately sacrificed, state.<sup>14</sup> Such images become sacred in their 'otherness', reflected in Judaism's rites of defilement. 'The Jew', as abject, is a concept rooted in religious history charting the subject's struggle for identity. The search for spiritual substance and identification has led to the classification of the Jew alongside 'soulless' bodies, such as 'The Zombie' and 'The Vampire', who, like the Thanatnoids, threaten pollution from the other side of a border, their difference suggesting dirt, darkness, and the inherent risk of contagion.

That almost everyone becomes a Thanatnoid is hardly surprising, when considering our own lack of readiness to die. Memories and déjà vu prevent full-blown death taking effect, by operating as the forerunner to computer records: 'What was a Thanatnoid, at the end of the long dread day, but memory?' (V. p.325). Weed, shot dead due to Brock and Frenesi's betrayal, reappears towards the narrative's end, ghostlike and yearning:

Still a cell of memory...refusal to forgive, sailing like a conscious virus through the population, seeking her out... 'As a Thanatnoid one's reduced to hanging around monitoring the situation, trying to nudge if you don't think it's moving along fast enough but basically helpless and, if you give in to it, depressed, too' (V. p.365).

Just before Weed is shot he realises that he has been duped and begins to slip away to the 'place of the betrayed', inhabited by those whose acute self-awareness makes them feel that they may as well be dead: 'some silvery effluent, vacating his image, the real moment of his passing' (V. p.246). Thanatnoids eat little, resonant of the ancient Greek myth that after death humans pass into another state (illustrated by moths and cocoons), and wait to be reincarnated, soul intact. Logically, Thanatnoids do not have material possessions, due to their propensity to weigh down their owner with both responsibility, and reminders of tangible mortality.<sup>15</sup> They watch copious

amounts of television, due to its capacity to reincarnate. The screen idols, technically dead yet animated, and subsequently immortalised, confirm for them that there is the potential to live forever. As television appears to be 'live', death is less daunting: merely an alternative existence. Television programmes exist only in reproduction, as simulacrum - copies without originals, therefore *déjà vu*, *memories* without origin, becomes the ultimate format. Mediated television images outdo lived experience, illustrating life as a copy, and subsequently validating the existence of those officially 'dead'. Many Thanatnoids are veterans of armed conflict: 'Since the end of the war in Vietnam, the Thanatnoid population had been growing steeply' (V. p.320). They carry the wounds of battle, physical and otherwise. Men are trained to be killers and expected to perform destructive acts, the patriarchal world must be maintained at all costs. The failure of wars, like the collapse of the great enlightenment projects creates ghosts. Those bearing scars are 'living' after the event, this after-life becomes part of what is 'post'.

War heroes are those who paradoxically defend their own whilst killing the wives and children of those perceived as enemies. Vato and Blood, male buddies from Vietnam days, 'an outstandingly dark and death-laden time' are now modern-day Grim Reapers collecting accident victims in their pick-up truck (V. p.181). After his accident Brock Vond is taken directly underground, to be buried alive in what is presumed to be Hell, but is not qualified with that location's usual seriousness. The trip sounds like a macabre border-crossing, but the final destination into what should be abjection, is deflated somewhat by the heavily ironic style in which the serious message about difference is couched :

All this time had been rising a wall of earth each side of the narrowing road, in which tree roots twisted overhead now, and mud, once glistening, had grown darker, till only its smell was present...They'll take out your bones...the bones have to stay on this side. The rest of you goes over. You look a lot different,

and you move funny for a while, but they say you'll adjust. Give these third-worlders a chance...they can be a lot of fun (V. p.379-80).

Prior to his helicopter crash, Brock, in his trademark megalomaniac style, had descended from the clouds like a God, in an ill-judged attempt to kidnap Prairie, potentially his daughter. Brock feels, (with discernible overtones of John Donne), that a true (masculine) God ravishes his worthy subjects with a sublime, holy rapture, transporting them to some other place:

Batter my heart, three-personed God...  
take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.<sup>16</sup>

He intends to transport Prairie, both physically and metaphorically, into his own sphere. He is confident that, if the operation runs smoothly, and he makes his descent at the perfectly plotted angle, Prairie will swoon into his clutches. By, raptor-like, swooping her away from the earth, he looks to escape its infuriating, defining boundaries: 'Come down vertical, grab her, and winch back up and out - "The key is rapture. Into the sky, and the world knows her no more" '(V. p.376). Brock is projecting his memories of Frenesi onto the body of Prairie. Kristeva describes this ironic combination of remembering and forgetting: 'Carry me away and sweep me beyond the things I see, hear, or think. The "sublime" object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory'<sup>17</sup>. Rapture, gushing and unstoppable, is completely at odds with precise angles, however Brock, paranoid and predatory, self-conscious of the containing nature of society, is looking for controllable, formulaic rapture. His behaviour exemplifies the Lacanian claim that desires are destined never to be fulfilled. As a result of this fantasies focus instead on the mise en scene; the setting and environment, 'the intrapsychic landscapes that evoke sexual excitement'<sup>18</sup>. Rapture is carefully planned, and the formulaic construction of ideal events (that

never were) tries to hide what is, and always will be, lacking in sexual relationships - any true primacy. As William Simon explains: 'Virtually all the cues that initiate sexual behaviour are embedded in the social routines of the external environment'.<sup>19</sup>

Brock takes his cues from various sources; he wants to act like God, or at least an angel, whilst looking like Rambo.<sup>20</sup> He emerges from his hijacked helicopter 'in flak jacket and Vietnam boots, posing in the gun door with a flame-thrower on his hip' (V. p.375). To have the 'world know her (and him) no more', leaves him in the omnipotent position of depending on nobody for definition. By official standards he may well be completely insane, but by his own he is in fact the only lucid one, finally becoming aware of the crushingly restrictive nature of societal roles. His side-kick, Roscoe, is portrayed as drooling and animal-like, salivating over Prairie's breasts. He, in fact, conforms more closely to the accepted social construction of masculinity by at least registering as heterosexual, even if vulgar, as opposed to Brock who remains remote and inscrutable.

In the film *Blue Steel*, Megan, the Policewoman, (Jamie Lee Curtis), dreams that Eugene, a psychotic serial killer, (Ron Silver), takes her above the city on a vertiginous helicopter ride.<sup>21</sup> He shows her spectacular glittering images, like the devil tempting Jesus with 'the kingdoms of the world in all their glory'.<sup>22</sup> Eugene encourages her to share the powerful male gaze that she (supposedly) covets, leading to her urge to masquerade in a police uniform, toting a gun. However, in return for sharing his domain she must 'pay homage' to him. The nightmare ends with him pushing her out of the helicopter, *forcing* her into the difference that she thinks she wants. Although it shimmers seductively, it is a dangerous difference, abyss-like, threatening to swallow her into nothingness. In the dream she is forced from the helicopter, but within the film's action she resists the dark side by shooting him and

continuing with her life, presumably on patriarchal terms. Her 'unnatural' masculine side is quashed by the annihilation of Eugene and his perceived psychosis.

However, like Frenesi, Megan is irresistibly attracted to her antagonist, even loving him, in a self-destructive way. They both want to feel the danger of teetering on the brink of the unknown, wondering whether they will return. Sex and death are both surpassing, in that they take their participants beyond, outside of themselves. There is always the possibility that one day letting go to sex's exquisite extremes of pleasure, will pass into death. To be simultaneously thrilled and terrified places eroticism and death on the same level, linking desire with terror, sexual arousal with imminent extermination, and sexual orgasm with violent death. Humans are frail, singular, mortal - sex promises at least temporary oblivion, by dissolving the fraught and confused 'I' into a brief 'we'. The overwhelming bliss of orgasm encourages the feeling that life *can* go on forever, as teetering at the brink has resulted in survival. The absolution from responsibility this grants, however brief, is comparable to the religious exoneration offered for the confession of sins.

### Portrayal and Betrayal: 'Attending a Movie of it all'.<sup>23</sup>

Abstinence prevents the need for absolution, and Rex feels that it is the only way ahead for the members of the radical film collective 24 fps. He believes that giving up what they enjoy will fit them for action by making them less indulged and complacent, and hence less vulnerable:

Rex himself saw the revolution as...progressive abstinence...you began by giving up acid and pot, then tobacco, alcohol, sweets...cutting down on sleep, doing with less, you broke up with lovers...you even gave up masturbating—as the enemy's attention grew more concentrated, you gave up your privacy, your freedom of movement, access to money (V. p. 229-30).

He makes the ultimate sacrifice by giving over his beloved Porsche 911 to be a communal possession. Rex is intimately attached to the car as an intrinsic, even

cyborgian, part of his masculine identity:

In scented petroleum dimness...his throbbing manhood down inside one flared chrome carburettor barrel as the engine idled and with sensitive care he adjusted the pulsing vacuum to meet his own quickening rhythm, as man and machine together rose to peaks of hitherto unimaginable ecstasy (V. p.230).

The conscious self-denial involved in parting with the car is exemplary. By representing what you *do not* do, self-denial is a crucial part of identity. Forgoing pleasure pares Rex's construction to the absolute minimum. Like the Thanatnoids, he has less to tie him to the earth. Partaking of less, and owning less, creates a more ephemeral persona, more difficult to pin down. The removal of enjoyment is not always a free choice as the State bans certain substances and activities, making abstention a part of patriarchy's desirable construction.<sup>24</sup> Man should be healthy to fulfil the masculine role. However, deprivation of all gratification renders man a machine:

They're gonna be coming after everything, not just drugs, but beer, cigarettes, sugar, salt, fat...anything that could remotely please any of your senses, because they need to control all that. And they will (V. p.313).

Zoyd suggests that drugs have been made illegal as they offer an alternative vision of what is desirable to the one being offered by the Government, and an alternative view of life and death:

No wonder the state panicked. How are they supposed to control a population that knows it'll never die? ... when they thought *they* had the power of life and death. But acid gave us the X-ray vision to see through that one, so of course they had to take it away from us (V. p.313, italics added).

The characters reflect the basic human urge to preserve life and avoid death. Typically they increase life's intensity to achieve this, yet this ironically brings danger. They are searching for a place between intensity and survival. This becomes maddeningly elusive when combined with the constraints of socially constructed gender roles. Jean Baudrillard sums up their struggle precisely by reminding us that: 'Immanence and

transcendence are...two sides of the same dream'. They long for immediacy, which paradoxically lasts forever - a permanent enjoyment rush.<sup>25</sup>

Because they have been conditioned to believe that indulging this yearning for permanent enjoyment will lead to an insane chaos, the characters struggle with self-discipline. Some, like DL, obtain strength from an inner energy and power, trying to transcend their society's limitations with a balanced Karma. DL's separation of mind and body represents the separation of the rational from the disordered. The corporeal is relentlessly postmodern, whilst the potential rationality of the cognitive resists such fragmentation. DL is aware of the manner in which patriarchal society would like her to depict herself, however; she prefers to represent her body in *her* terms, reflecting her personal philosophy:

Returning to herself, reclaiming her body. "Which they always like to brainwash you about, like they know it better, trying to keep you as spaced away from it as they can. Maybe they think people are easier to control that way" (V. p.128).

Throughout the narrative she strives for control of her own body, and is portrayed as 'masculine' as a consequence of this. Her urge to retain mastery leads her to study Ninjitsu. She trains her mind to be calm and centred, admitting that this takes application, yet craving the control and clarity of thought it offers. She is repeatedly described in terminology associated with the male gender category, emphasising that to be in control within a patriarchal society is to be identified as masculine.

Paradoxically, Brock is shown to be losing *his* control and therefore panicking about impending feminisation:

Brock get a grip on yourself! But some other adviser lay coiled in ancient shadow, whispering *Kick loose*. Brock knew how much he wanted to, feared what would happen if he couldn't contain the impulse (V. p.278).

He demonstrates the human dilemma between control and indulgence by acknowledging his urges whilst trying to conquer them. He believes that disaster will

be unleashed by the following of instinctual feelings rather than orders.

DL opposes Brock's values, trusting her own instincts, and allowing her deep thinking and meditation to lead her to question the contradictory and ambivalent reality she is being offered.<sup>26</sup>

(Had she) gone on to make up the whole thing? And was now not in any Japanese whorehouse waiting to kill Brock Vond at all, but safely within a mental institution Stateside, humoured, kindly allowed to dress up as the figure of her unhappy fantasies? (V. p.141).

Takeshi accidentally becomes involved in the same manipulation that DL is feeling due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and supposedly bearing a resemblance to Brock. Because Takeshi is Japanese, and Brock is blond, the way in which this resemblance manifests itself is quite disturbing:

Takeshi...saw Brock Vond for the first time, moving forwards into the light, and thought for just a second or two it was himself and something radical, like death, had just happened. It was a stressed and malevolent cartoon of his face, of what he shaved and had long looks at (V. p.148).<sup>27</sup>

The insinuation that a Caucasian and Asian male are roughly interchangeable further jeopardises the possibility of rigid constructs. In an atmosphere of primary fragmentation Takeshi is sucked into danger because of his appearance and the basic allure of body parts. Unable to resist a free trip to a 'gentleman tits ass club' he poses as Brock and confirms that there is no such thing as a free ride (V. p.149). After having sex with DL, who is disguised as Frenesi, his main worry in life becomes whether the, supposedly fatal, 'Vibrating Ninja death palm' can be reversed. DL, who to the untrained eye appears to have mounted him for sex, straightforward to the point of automation, has actually set in motion a 'body transaction... complex, referential, calling in not only chi flow and the time of day but also memory, conscience, passion, inhibition – all converging to one lethal instant'(V. p.154). She is able to transform the sex act into much more than an exchange of bodily fluids; it becomes a violent

exchange of energy. The turbulence liberated ensures that *both* of them cannot survive. As Bataille terms it, their ‘burning passion (transfigures them to) nothingness...blood and bones’.<sup>28</sup> Takeshi knows that the recipient of such attention should not live longer than a year after the event. He feels he has volunteered himself for certain death, self-blame that swiftly escalates into paranoia under the influence of drugs:

My own sleaziness has done me in!...a foolish, emotionally diseased life...under the combined influence of speed, Scotch, and some new tranquilliser...in the realm of the chemical (V. p.158).<sup>29</sup>

The only known treatment for the Ninja death palm is the Puncutron machine (V. p.164). Takeshi is required to complete the machine’s electric circuit by being hooked up to electrodes, a further melding of man and machine. The harnessing of science to hone a construct in this way is not only reminiscent of the electric shock ‘therapy’ used in the treatment of those diagnosed as mentally ill, but also of the more recent cosmetic use in CACI non-surgical facelifts.<sup>30</sup>

When DL poses as Frenesi she adapts cosmetically to blond hair and vivid blue eyes by simply wearing them on top of her own red hair and pale green eyes. Identities can adopt, or peel away, layers. As she is given second-hand contact lenses, made to somebody else’s prescription, she spends her time as ‘Frenesi’ unable to see clearly. The world is a blurred and unfriendly place, where appearances are deceptive through someone else’s eyes. It is fitting that she does not either look, or see, as herself, whilst killing Brock (who is actually Takeshi), on Ralph Wayvone’s behalf. Ralph is the local Don for that, ‘Wholly owned subsidiary’, the Mafia, offered in the narrative as the postmodern alternative to the governmental grand narratives (V. p.93). Convinced that the contacts came from a dead prostitute DL feels understandably creepy: ‘Lenses taken from the eyes of a dead person...witness her

own act of murder through the correction to *just this person's eyesight*' (V. p.152). DL's enforced vision reflects the manner in which all humans see through other's eyes when they conform to strictly enforced gender categories and subsequently inherit the point of view of others. Ralph watches her through yet another inserted lens, that of the video camera patching the action back live to his hotel suite. DL has to get her hands dirty whilst Ralph merely watches. Although she is active in the bedroom scenario, his omnipotent gaze ensures that she remains the objectified female and he the manipulating male. She is only temporarily in charge because he has placed her there as his puppet. However, he desires her beyond control or reason, and goes to extreme lengths to have sex with her himself, as well as looking on voyeuristically as she performs the mechanics of sex on top of a passive Takeshi. DL is too focused to notice that Takeshi is *not* Brock and performs in a conditioned manner, their sexual encounter a prime example of the way humans 'do' sex:

She straddled the naked man...found his penis and slipped it in, breathing with precision, conscious only of the human alarm points spread below...dark meridians. No longer needing anyone's eyes, she went in by other sensors... opposing his chi-flow, spiralling her own in with correct handedness (V. p.153).

Just as Ralph looks through the video lens, and DL through the lenses of an unknown other, all 'reality' is mediated through some channel. In search of her mother, and ultimately herself, Prairie treats the past as a huge archive, scrutinising copious film footage. The scenes she retrieves consequently reveal celluloid facets of other characters' lives, captured on film to be repeatedly consumed. Frenesi attempts to handle life by viewing, and consequently objectifying, everything through her camera's eye; this obsessive behaviour ensures that there is a good deal of film for Prairie to share. The narrative relays several strands of past, future and present, simultaneously, providing a postmodern bricolage of possibilities, rather than a single

recommended version. Jean-Francois Lyotard aptly describes such a bricolage as, a 'multiple quotation of elements taken from earlier styles or periods, classical and modern'.<sup>31</sup>

Frenesi kept the camera between her and the world at all times, to create safety, via space and distance.<sup>32</sup> The resulting film footage becomes her version of life, and an opportunity for her daughter to recover her story, played out amidst the struggle to resist the narrow societal norms of someone else's script. Frenesi realises that life would have been easier had she only learned how to 'shoot inoffensive little home movies...speak the right lines, stay within budget, wrap each day, one by one, before she lost the light' (V. p.292). However, unable to view filming in this mundane way, she instead extols it as a way of existing, not merely recording the FBI's version. She is not alone in experiencing life as metaphoric movie-land; all of the characters are profoundly influenced by pictures, films, media and television, indeed the narrative frequently feels like a film being made, long before Hector begins filming.

Frenesi first encounters Brock through her protective lens. The minute the camera is lowered he inveigles his way into her life, by stepping over to her side of the shield and removing her control. By letting down her defences she loses her border and discovers, too late, that as that was all that was defining her she cannot survive without it. Brock begins his insidious absorption, dragging her down into the female gender norm, a place she has been assiduously avoiding. She ties conformity to getting old and dying, and her fear is tangible: 'lost...control...time was rushing...rapids...far ahead...Brock's stretch of the river...sex, children, surgery...adulthood perilous and real...life...includes death' (V. p.217). Fear is bodily, located at the 'base of the spine', and experienced on a visceral level. Western Culture demands that part of masculinity is the ability to ignore, or at least refuse to

acknowledge, fear. This dread panic leads to men forgetting what fear actually is, the effort to conform to the accepted norms of masculinity is so great that fear is suppressed or called another name. Brock unloads his fear of death onto Frenesi in a masculine attempt to deal with madness and mortality; it may appease him temporarily but he still has to die. Intent on validating *his* version, he destroys the archived evidence of the 24fps Gang (V. p. 333). However, the commune's records are only *one*, selective and edited rendition. As Stacey Olster posits: 'Filmmakers and equipment alter the shapes of scenes and the actions of participants'.<sup>33</sup> The different possible interpretations of Frenesi's actions enforce the invalid nature of a universally accepted version that allows no place for local narratives, the story of events as experienced by small minority groups. Her parents worked in Hollywood, reinforcing the multiple discourses of life: 'the town had been a toxic dump for everything those handsome pictures had left out' (V. p. 326). Rather than being embraced as an alternative, not fitting the accepted norm is to be abject, outcast, 'not normal'. Similarly, there is much that Frenesi and her camera choose *not* to record, eventually taking pictures through Brock's eyes, favouring *his* point of view and helping to underline *his* version, which represented 'another script to learn' (V. p.72). Photographs inevitably present someone's viewpoint; even holiday snaps make a point, no matter how small, the subjects are sun-tanned – slim – happy - alive. Brock's subtle influence over Frenesi's choice of subject emphasises the violence lurking below the surface of pointing a camera, gun-like, at someone: 'When you said cuttin' and shootin' I didn't know you were talking about film' (V. p.52). The intricate connections do not occur to the group until they disband:

We were running round like little kids with toy weapons, like the camera really was some kind of gun, gave us that kind of power. Shit. How could we lose track like that, about *what was real?* ... the minute the guns came out all that art-of-the-cinema handjob was over (V. p.259, italics added).

The camera is posited as a shallow imitation of a gun, emphasised graphically by the allusion to a 'hand-job' (masturbation) as opposed to full intercourse.

Frenesi believes for many years that her camera *is* reality. Although she becomes cynical about its power, she can see her old self in Hector, female and irrational, naively using the camera as a defence, gathering evidence in a bid to refurbish the past: 'That Hector. He's like me when I was twenty, maybe even more of an ingenue than that, he really believes he's immune. That Panaflex is his shield' (V. p.355). When Weed is shot by Rex, Frenesi is shielded behind a huge spotlight and two cameras:

A 1,000-watt Mickey-Mole spot on the dead body of a man who had loved her, and the man who had just killed him, and the gun she'd brought him to do it with. Stood there like the Statue of Liberty, bringer of light...part of some contract to illuminate, instead of conceal, the deed (V. p.261).

Rex is immediately repentant and Frenesi the mediator once more: "It should have been you, Frenesi, fuckin' whore, where are you?" (V. p.247). He cannot see her, unable to focus beyond the intensity of the spotlight. When Brock gave Frenesi the gun he used similar distraction techniques, pointing out the parity between guns and cameras, making it clear that guns represent reality, and therefore progression and enhancement for her. He places a question mark over which world, if *either* is real:

Two separate worlds – one always includes a camera, and the other always includes a gun, one is make-believe, one is real? What if there is some branch point in your life, where you'll have to choose between worlds? (V. p.241).

Frenesi's commune place their trust in the filmic world, believing that if Weed and Rex's confrontation is filmed then they will retain control of the situation: 'Once we have it on film, whether he lies or whether he confesses, he's done for, it doesn't matter'(V. p.240). The camera's gaze alters behaviour and the other's perception. Weed is an easy fall guy as, a 'character in a movie'(V. p.237). Film validates, even

outdoes, 'reality', by producing evidence and offering endless re-runs. However, it is only 'Movie sincerity' (V. p.245), open to alteration and destruction to comply with the favoured constructs of the powerful, with 'factual' documentaries being filtered through dominant ideologies. Frenesi categorises her sex-centred relationship with Brock as a screen-bound one, a computer game she cannot win:

His erect penis had become the joystick with which, hurtling into the future, she would keep trying to steer among the hazards and obstacles, the swooping monsters and alien projectiles of each game she would come, year by year, to stand before, once again out long after curfew, calls home forgotten, supply of coins dwindling, leaning over the bright display among the back aisles of a forbidden arcade...no longer (a part of) the time the world observed but game time, underground time, time that could take her nowhere outside its own tight and falsely deathless perimeter (V. p.292-3).

The parallel world of addictive computer game action is filmically framed; *she* has no control, there are no records, the screen can only emulate *her* image, which she passes back through her eyes in an endless, reciprocal reflection. Brock's version of the future, his 'stretch of the river', frightens her. Sex, like the computer game, takes her 'beyond' this fear for a limited time on a journey into cyberspace and obliteration, but it is somewhere to hide on a temporary basis rather than a permanent escape from all responsibilities. As Tania Modleski terms it she can fleetingly wallow in 'performance rather than existence'.<sup>34</sup> The mysteries of this computer space are reiterated by Frenesi's failure to cash a government cheque. How can the shopkeeper know her cheque is cancelled when banking hours having finished? He wearily tries to explain that the computer never sleeps but rather continuously monitors, out of sight and control, yet endlessly vigilant and unforgiving. Users of the automated banking network must become complicit with the system oppressing them, its hierarchical method of channelling information strengthening Frenesi's fear of computer technology. She considers the computer an instrument of violence, to be respected, even feared, as it has axed her payments; worse than that, it has deleted her,

leaving her with the frightening task of existing alone and unacknowledged, outside of the accepted boundaries of 'civilised' society. She has taken the 'long painful fall into ineffectuality and government co-operation', discussed by N Katherine Hayles, and is disillusioned in such a fallen world to find that nobody is redeemed, quizzing DL, 'Who'd we save?' (V. p.259).<sup>35</sup> It is this identity as 'digits in God's computer' (V. p.90-91) that causes 24fps to feel that the 'comfort' of sinister control is far outweighed by the attraction of pristine, primitive behaviour. They routinely search their homes for surveillance bugs, convinced that their non-conformity and bid for 'freedom' is threatening enough to justify electronic regulation. Brock uses sexual innuendo, and socially programmed responses, to threaten Frenesi with this regulation: 'A man in a uniform with a big pistol, would have to make you come' (V. p.201). One way or another she will obey. Tellingly Frenesi, like her mother before her, *wants* to offer herself to men in uniform, she tries to seduce the police officer who delivers her cheque. Like a pagan sacrifice she bares herself to authority and hopes to be taken, ravished, forced to reveal her most intimate secrets. As Takeshi has already posited, our own sleaziness 'does us in' (V. p.158). The computer records intimate details of lived lives, then turns its subjects against themselves, by using their own records to betray them.<sup>36</sup> The screen's display is an indisputable replica of the subject's own face, trusting and vulnerable, reflected back from the glass.

### **When Men Behave Like Women, & Women Who Behave Like Men, Dress up as**

#### **Women: 'Some of these girls...were boys'.<sup>37</sup>**

It is impossible to shatter the binding restrictions of that reflection, yet the characters try. As a way of denying biological gender, with its accompanying societal expectations, gender specific males act as women, historically viewed as far less

stable. The escape and pleasure to be obtained from letting the pretence drop encourages this crazy behaviour. Zoyd has to justify the incapacity benefit he receives from the agreement he made with Brock to stick to 'the law, *his* law' (V. p.268). He is being paid to stay away from Frenesi, whilst retaining responsibility for their daughter. The masculine law, made by men allegedly to suit men, contains Zoyd as much as it contains his ex-wife. Frenesi is kept as well secreted from her former life as she would be on any witness protection programme: 'All that fascist prick wants is to keep Frenesi from seeing her child again. Usual thing, men making arrangements with men about the fates of women' (V. p.304-5), and ultimately, other men, including themselves. To embody his supposed mental incapacity, hence guarantee the 'label', and the cheques, Zoyd must 'act up' to his insane certification. His madness is more than approved; it is demanded, with the media's appetite reinforcing these demands. He undertakes a yearly stunt, displaying his self-conscious, arranged and handled madness, in which he challenges the sign above *The Cucumber Lounge*, (an enormous, phallic, flashing cucumber), by throwing himself through their window, whilst wearing a dress, make-up and a wig. What could be more insane than a red-blooded man, in logger country, wanting to take on the appearance of an unbalanced, inferior creature? He is surrounded by hulking men who chop down trees, drink beer, repair cars and discuss Vietnam, guns, and federal dealings. His intrusion, mid-lunchtime swig, toting a handbag-sized chainsaw, is enough to mesmerise every last one of them.<sup>38</sup> When he attempts a change of scenery he is firmly moved back to his usual venue, for containment purposes (V. p.6/7).

By bursting through glass Zoyd breaches the boundary between what is reasonable and masculine, and what is madly feminine, and should be denied. Though glass is thin and transparent it is relatively strong and holds Zoyd in his ordained

place, whilst still permitting his gaze to take in the other.<sup>39</sup> However, when he *wilfully* breaks through the designated confines of identity he must take the consequences of being outcast to Vineland, a demented man who must forgo all contact with Frenesi. Zoyd feels compelled to carry out Brock's bidding in order to keep Prairie and get on with life. He ensures that his stunts are extreme, hoping to appear *too* mad to be considered authentically mad, in fact hyper-mad. This works and he becomes a local celebrity, appearing on television each year. Whilst Prairie is still a baby, sitting on the glass topped pinball machine, he shares with her his insight: 'Enjoy it while you can...while you're light enough for that glass to hold you' (V. p.314). The suggestion of the glass breaking and letting her fall through to the other side, combines with the associated meaning of 'looking glass', and summarises the difficulty in accepting a reflection as being the image that the rest of the world sees. The difference between versions of self is defined by seeing different selves through the gaze of others. Zoyd's best friend Van Meter, looks so much like him that when Zoyd spots him driving his (Zoyd's) car he is shaken, thinking he is looking at himself. Van Meter cheerfully points out that all the men in Vineland look the same, making it the ideal place for Zoyd to lie low: "'every guy up here looks just like we do. You're darn near invisible already. Hey! Where'd you go?'" Groping around in the vicinity of Zoyd's head' (V. p.318). They are both hippies, ironically trying to be 'different', but instead illustrating that even an alternative appearance can never be truly individual, involving as it does a conscious effort to be identified in a certain way.

Long-haired and unemployed, it is difficult to view Zoyd in terms of the societal preferred, 'Father as masculine achiever' figure. He is far more heavily reliant on the likes of Sasha, his Mother-in-Law, than a female single parent would be. They form an uneasy, but necessary alliance; an ageing communist and a drop-out junkie,

united in their determination to keep Prairie out of 'State Care'. A woman, even a lone one, would be viewed by society as more appropriate for the role, and subsequently more able to cope. Mothers customarily have custody of their children as, according to the Law, they are the parent most likely to offer continuation of care. Frenesi defies such gender stereotyping by refusing to look after Prairie. She is selfish, and primarily led by her sex drive; in her own words she follows her pussy, and plays upon her physical frailty. The Law states that a 'good' father should provide; authority, economic responsibility and heterosexuality. Zoyd struggles to provide whatever he can, hardly the model disciplinarian. Notwithstanding his shortcomings Prairie is remarkably well adjusted, by anyone's standards. Her thriving, despite an unorthodox upbringing, questions the validity of rigid constructions of parenting, and patriarchy's insistence that a traditional family arrangement is the accepted norm. Richard Collier discusses the way that such conventional family units are promoted as favourable, as a 'source of social and individual stability'.<sup>40</sup> The ambivalent feelings Prairie has when she finally catches up with her mother underline that shared experiences and commitments come to count for more than shared genes. Media culture assists in the promotion of the sanctioned family, consequently aiding patriarchal control.

Parenting can be viewed as the very essence of the way humans handle being 'human'. Parents play the initial, crucial, role in identity formation. To fit the construction of 'Mother' or 'Father', is to be identified by the societal norms associated with that role. Missing parents also enjoy the benefit (or curse) of classification. A missing father tends to be awarded an elevated status.<sup>41</sup> It is unusual for the mother to be the missing parent, as mothers tend to stick close by their children, due to personal feelings, or societal pressure. However, the narrative questions the wisdom of inflicting the role of 'social parent' upon someone, simply

because they are a 'biological parent'. Frenesi feels that she is trying to 'act out' a false, and compromising, role, 'pretending to be Prairie's Mom the worst lie, the basest betrayal' (V. p.292).

Although the men in the book make deals to keep Frenesi and Prairie apart, Frenesi has no maternal feelings for her child from the outset, incapable of being 'another mom in a nation of moms... safe... inside that particular fate' (V. p.292). As a female she is identified by her lack of a penis, and indeed her general 'lack', she lacks conviction - smoothly changing allegiance, she lacks guilt, maternal love, familial loyalty, decisive sexuality - fluidly shifting between male and female partners. Her ultimate lack is that she is missing from the scene, hidden by subterfuge. The deals 'her men' have made draw on their fear and paranoia. Zoyd is as petrified of losing Prairie as Brock is neurotic about losing control of her mother. Although Frenesi *does* desire Brock, she is able to walk away; it is just a 'penis thing'. Brock's identity is seamlessly aligned with the physicality of his erect penis, despite the cerebral and balanced natures men are reputed to have, in direct comparison with the weak, bodily ones of women. Frenesi insists that he has never 'owned' her or had a serious hold over her: 'When had Brock ever possessed her? There might have been about a minute and a half' (V. p.268). It is this very failure to crush and tame her, despite their physical relationship, which fuels Brock's ongoing fascination.

Frenesi's absence causes the increasing feminisation of Zoyd. For the sake of correlation he must balance out the gender equation; if the mother is missing, he must step in. When he cries over Frenesi's departure, believing it to be good to get in touch with your feelings, his Mother-in-law berates him like a ridiculous, emotional female: 'No wonder she left you...blow your nose and act like a man...cut your hair while you're at it' (V. p.297). Brock is equally derisory when he has Zoyd in custody,

examining him as a lesser species, looking at his teeth, and commenting on his long hair, repeatedly linked to the feminisation of the male. Brock feels that once a man lapses towards the female side the only way to treat him is as a specimen, a case study: 'Would you mind turning your head...Give me a profile...if you could look up at that corner of the ceiling? Thanks, and maybe pull back your upper lip?' (V. p.298). He approves of Cesare Lombroso's work, studies of deviance and transgression manifested upon the physical body. Brock's belief in the existence of 'lesser beings' admits his aspirations to a 'Master Race' (V. p.272/3). He is blond, tanned and healthy, Frenesi's blond-haired, blue-eyed perfection is continually pointed out. However, it is impossible for Brock to further the actuality of a 'Master Race', given his deeply ingrained aversion to breeding. As he feels Zoyd's feminisation to be reciprocal, so he too feels sure that any depletion of physical potency threatens him with personal death. The vibrancy and power of new life feeds off, and subsequently reduces, *his* vibrancy and power, pushing him closer to the abyss. He believes that energy is finite, therefore, sharing it further emphasises his earth-bound mortality. New life reinforces his own expiry-date, the deathly perimeter of his containing frame. He also fears, but is fascinated by, the potential to feel an irresistible incestuous attraction towards his offspring. This is fuelled by his arrogant feelings of indisputable superiority, and is confirmed by his attempt to abduct Prairie.

Frenesi too fears reproduction's demands on autonomy, yearning instead to live outside of bodily restrictions. The federal incarceration unit where she is held is a concentration camp where those who do not measure up to the Government's precise standards are herded together like animals and locked away:

The long-haired bodies, men...grown feminine, women...become small children, flurries of long naked limbs...boys with hair over their shoulders ...kept getting in their eyes...the sort of mild herd creatures who belonged, who'd feel, let's face it, much more comfortable behind fences (V. p.269).

Brock treats the captives with disdain because of their perceived failure to epitomise their biological sexuality. However, his own appearance and attitude reveal that he too is struggling with contradictory urges:

The careful product of older men, Brock, of medium height, slender and fair-haired, carried with him a watchful, never quite trustworthy companion personality, feminine, underdeveloped, against whom his male version, supposedly running the unit, had to be equally vigilant (V. p. 274).

He has an all-encompassing fear of penetration, manifested as frequent nightmares, in which he futilely attempts to keep every aperture and orifice in a large house closed: 'it was his job to make sure that all doors and windows, dozens of them everywhere, were secure, and that no one, nothing had penetrated' (V. p.275). The places where precise boundaries meet with abjection are too numerous to guard simultaneously and to Brock's horror abjection refuses, as Kristeva points out, to respect the borders 'peculiar to the given symbolic system'.<sup>42</sup> To add to this ambivalence, the edges between physical surfaces are always both inside and outside of the body, and therefore not definable as subject or object, nor easily patrolled. Brock is all too aware of his own permeability, and the potential of violation from within to reduce attempts to defend all apertures to impotency.

Zoyd manages to maintain integrity, despite Brock's repeated attempts to institutionalise him, and points out that Brock himself teeters further from his own prescribed attributes, due to his failure to retain rationality. He is aligned with madness through his recklessness, reminding Zoyd of the manic behaviour of others close to the edge:

Self-destructive maniacs...who feared nothing...Mister Professional, good grip on the world, but underneath all the time there'd been the onrushing night road...the terrible about-to-burst latency just ahead, the hard-on...(Brock) looked like a big-city edition of that same dream fatality (V. p.299).

Brock pays in spirituality for his aggressive adherence to the normative masculine

stance. His authoritative grip on the world is an attempt to cover, yet ironically inflames, his mental instability and yearning to offer himself up to an uncontrollable fate. Another government employee, Hector Zuniga, a federal drug agent, displays equally visible signs of hysteria. 'This clearly insane Mexican guy' (V. p.334) is as vehemently opposed to Brock as the others, who he should be variously apprehending, but instead 'tips-off'. Television is his magnificent obsession, his reliance on it emphasising a desperate search for divine transcendence via something other than religion. However, like religion, it is invasive, addictive and glamorous with its chanting, brain-draining mantras, catch phrases and theme tunes. The viewer's propensity to believe what is portrayed on television endows it with God-like qualities. In his loneliness Hector warms to the intimacy of its close-up faces, and penchant for revealing details of others' lives. To justify his social categorisation as 'mad' he displays a particular weakness for the typically female realm of daytime television, especially repeats of old soaps.<sup>43</sup> He knows his favourites by rote, the scripts, the character's catch-phrases and inter-relations, with a marked fondness for the theme songs.<sup>44</sup> One of his favourites is *The Brady Bunch*, which he is particularly nostalgic about, causing the 'experts' in the field to name him 'The Brady Buncher'.<sup>45</sup> Due to soap operas frequent denigration other programmes are eager to validate their contents as *not* soap, as fervently as men feel the need to assert that they are *not* feminine.

The prescribed viewing for properly defined 'males' centres on the fragmentation and subsequent fetishisation of the female body. Antithetically soap operas pledge continuity - they defer gratification by never ending: 'Soap operas offer the promise of immortality and eternal return'.<sup>46</sup> They do this by valiantly continuing to place obstacles between desire and fulfilment. Hector further enforces this

permanent state of expectation by recording re-runs and watching them out of sequential order. Although he is a 'Fed', he refuses to be 'fed' the 'correct' version in the designated way, preferring to acknowledge the chaotic realities of life. This mixing of fragments from the past, present and future, (his favourites have been shown, are being shown, and will be shown again), indeed, the very act of inserting the old programmes into the 'here and now', turns chronology and reason on its head. The narrative is saturated with awareness of what has gone before, which manifests itself through allusions, re-workings, and inter-textuality. Hector is not only revealing his 'feminine side' by succumbing to hysteria, he is also revealing it in his preference for chaotic postmodern style. He accepts the future as something already experienced, one long re-run, due to the cyclical quality of living in a world of copies and simulacra, where you become what you always already were. He would dispute that anybody has the right to claim to be experiencing the most real and valid version of now, especially the doctors at the clinic where he is receiving treatment. He agrees instead with Masson's opinion that 'It is the nature of therapy to distort another person's reality'.<sup>47</sup> This boldness further undermines notions of origins, ultimate projects, and an identifiable future, reiterating postmodern theory:

The artist and the writer are working without rules to formulate what *will have been done*... Work and text have the character of an event... they always come too late for their author... their being put into work, their realisation (*mise en oeuvre*) always begin too soon.<sup>48</sup>

As Lyotard suggests, the future as 'always already experienced' is best illustrated by writers and artists as their work is continuously formed before, after, and during their creative process. Promises of a desirable and attainable future have been overturned, leaving writers (and readers) increasingly reflective.

Hector's doctors, operating under the belief that correct 'maleness' is within the confines of medical knowledge and can be grasped in some brute way, cite the TV

as sapping both his brain and his masculinity. This supports his ex-wife's decision to name the television as corespondent in their divorce, an act underlining both Victor's intimacy with the set, and the tube's manifestation as a 'being' (V. p.348). The Doctor's prognosis of Hector demonstrates Victor Siedler's opinion that: 'Doctors conceive themselves within a masculine language of battle and conflict as if they are standing alone to defeat the hold that illness has gained over our bodies. It is a matter of winning control'.<sup>49</sup> Hector is forced to remain at Tubaldetox: 'a dryin'- out place for tubefreeks', and submit to this fight for control (V. p.33). He escapes repeatedly, using feminine wiles and cunning.<sup>50</sup> When he tracks Zoyd down and asks him for help in finding Frenesi he reveals his proximity to the edge by leaping upon the table and behaving convincingly like an irrational, hysterical woman. He shrieks and refuses to come down, 'eyes inflamed, haircut askew (proclaiming) "Tell these people how much I don' need this shit!"' (V. p.49). He is weak and embarrassing, becoming sly and devious when the men in overalls come to take him back. Increasingly proficient at eluding capture, he ensures that he can catch up with his beloved television programmes whilst 'on the run': In the back seat, on loud and bright, was a portable tube...angled the rear-view mirror at so he could see, for the highway was a lonely place' (V. p.335). Soap operas are designed to accommodate such distracted viewing, busy housewives are prone to interruptions, and the programme's endlessly deferred climax means that some repetition is inevitable<sup>51</sup>. Hector also watches the re-runs to intensify this affirmation. Whilst driving he only sees fragments of the programme, and listens to the rest. Having a television in his car emphasises how 'normal' it is becoming to him to be 'on the run', a state that would usually be considered as out of the ordinary. The price he pays for not conforming is any neutrality in his life, he is forever either, 'on the run', or restrained, against his will. When beset by such

extremes there is little wonder that Hector loves the television, at least he can switch it off when he chooses to. He would be in full agreement with the child who compares his parents to a TV programme: 'Pretend there's a frame around 'em like the Tube, pretend they're a show you're watching. You can go into it if you want, or you can just watch, and *not* go into it' (V. p.351).

In order to comply with the accepted parameters of masculinity, men generally at least act as if they are unconcerned about the way they look, and would almost certainly keep any cosmetic surgery a secret. Hector, however, is completely obsessed with his appearance and must always have immaculately shining shoes and a consummately groomed moustache: 'He knew his moustache was perfect, he could feel where every hair was' (V. p.341/2). Other men may be equally eager to have spotless shoes, but the secret is to conceal the obsession. Because Hector starts to talk about his feelings and make them manifest he is classed as insane, due to his dangerous proximity to feminine priorities. His appearance is described in pieces, giving the effect of a volatile and fractured man, an image of groomed bits and pieces, montage-like and disorientating. This fragmentation echoes cosmetic surgery, with its isolated perfecting of individual parts, as opposed to the whole, its juxtaposing of surface with interior, and its connections with attempts to satisfy accepted ideals. He demonstrates the manner in which humans rely on others to validate their appearance, having little faith in their own reflection. He and Frenesi discuss who should play them in the movies of their lives. Taking it for granted that they can never actually represent themselves, they rely on the blatant credibility of media figures (V. p.348). Hector has made a lifelong habit of impersonating Ricardo Montalban, who he believes represents the side he wishes to present to the world. He feels such an affinity with the mediated image of the actor that he cannot contemplate anybody but

Montalban taking his part in the film.<sup>52</sup> The narrative consistently presents such character pairings; DL and Frenesi, Prairie and Che, Vato and Blood, Rex and Weed, Zoyd and Van Meter, Brock and Takeshi - reiterating the hunger for doubles which allow distance from 'self'. Reality is never singular, but rather bifurcated and multiple, creating the need for comparisons, inversions and variations.

Weed too is eager for some outside force to influence his image. His perceived inadequacy leads to his involvement with 24fps. His first contact with them comes from his appearance: he is unusually tall, and too femininely indecisive and irrational, to say 'no'. His lack of judgement not only seriously dents his masculine identification, it ultimately gets him killed, penetrated by Rex after taking the passive role in his long-distance relationship with Brock. Like Frenesi he does not connect with the objectives of 'the cause', but merely allows himself to be swept along, acted on rather than acting. He is flighty and susceptible to flattery, enjoying the adulation his attractive, androgynous appearance brings. His admirers are keen to replicate this image and in their haste to reconstruct their shallow idol they 'had actually cut off pieces of hair from their heads and, too impatient to grow beards, glued it onto their faces' (V. p.208). Their devotion is blind, but like the followers of Jesus they are destined to betray him. Weed's long hair and fluid sexuality are presented as masking a far greater threat than his political beliefs: 'Weed looked exactly like the kind of college professor parents...were afraid would seduce their daughters, not to mention their sons' (V. p.210).

Weak and feminine, it is no surprise when Brock easily infiltrates Weed and recruits him to work for the Government. Messages are passed and FBI instructions received, under the pretence of dental appointments. Dr Elasmó, the 'dentist', has unsanitary, crumbling offices, on the far side of a defining membrane. Weed's

regression into chaos and confusion is encouraged: 'Weed...would go back down the chipped and crumbling steps, back across a borderline, invisible but felt at its crossing, between two worlds' (V. p.228). He is breaching the boundaries of his supposed beliefs, *and* his gender-designated sexuality, by becoming more deeply involved with Brock. The images of dentistry invoke the necessity to use his mouth, in the same way that the graphic descriptions Brock gives of oral sex to taunt Frenesi do. Weed's social position as a man is negated by his body being used as a depository for the bodily fluids of others. He is willingly taking on the abject role patriarchy assigns to the female, and embracing the violation characteristic of this role.

Whilst Weed is presented as stereotypically feminine, DL is presented as an honorary man. Both have names which are not gender-specific. She dispenses with her fancy, double-barrelled name, preferring no-frills initials, and is supremely masculine when compared to Frenesi, the supposed benchmark for irresistibly fragile femininity. DL repeatedly demonstrates that biological gender does not limit the way she behaves, instead choosing to be a 'live solid woman' (V. p.99), athletic and warrior-like, refusing to conform to the societal norms for a 'female', and centring her power in her physical self, not mechanical parts or assistance.<sup>53</sup> She is tougher, more capable and level headed than the so-called 'real men' and undertakes all of the narrative's key rescues and missions. When she and Frenesi first meet, on DL's motorbike, Frenesi is convinced that her saviour is a man:

With her bare thighs Frenesi gripped the leather hips of her benefactor...she'd also pressed her face against the fragrant leather back – she never thought it might be a woman she hugged this way. Bike rapture for sure (V. p.117).

Because desire is legitimised as desire for 'other', Frenesi is surprised that she could have felt so drawn towards a woman. She is socially programmed to believe that 'difference' is needed for sexual arousal and ensuing pleasure. The relationship she

has with DL is her most fulfilling, both physically and spiritually: 'you saw me do stuff he'll *never* see' (V. p.260). They make a mockery of the societal assumption that sex must involve a penis to be acceptable.

When Frenesi is kidnapped by Brock, DL is the obvious choice to go after her, despite the irony that Frenesi does not want to be rescued. Oozing glamour and sexuality, 'DL slipped into a black jumpsuit and ski mask. A cold wind blew down off a ridge someplace' (V. p.252), and sped after her beloved. DL can undoubtedly translate Frenesi's guile more skilfully than the biological men, yet she is no more able to resist her. The 'rescue' is cloaked in mystery - with DL dressed in black, her face covered, and stealth - she slips past numerous guards thanks to her Ninjitsu skills, and shows that no genitally identified man, involved on either side, is as calm and effective: 'By wriggling her fingers precisely in his face, she selectively blinded him to her presence - he could go on with his life, but without DL in it' (V. p.253). The gaze is powerfully restricting. To be unseen is to be free to do as you wish; restriction comes when the vision of another is enforced. There is something undeniably erotic about both her journey to, and meeting with, Frenesi. DL is in charge, she is strong, she is bold and incisive, although some may think her 'mad' to attempt such a coup, she is clearly not insane, but cool and rational, every inch the 'hero' in fact.

DL's rescue of Frenesi involves a camaraderie and exhilaration (echoed in the film *Thelma & Louise* <sup>54</sup>), that sees them high-tailing away from the FBI detention centre: 'they'd switched to a Camaro of uncertain age and colour, mainstreaming their ID's, scarves over their heads, driving a little under the limit, a holiday plunge into old Mexico' (V. p.257). However, the high spirits do not last, as it becomes obvious that Frenesi has been duplicitous, choosing the 'government-defined history without consequences' (V. p.354), and they suffer a prolonged and messy break-up:

They stayed up the rest of the night, crying separately and together, demanding, pleading, exchanging insults, repeating formulas, getting things wrong on purpose...as it went on falling to pieces (V. p. 260).

No heterosexual relationship reveals this level of emotional involvement, suffering and anguish, the men and women involved are ready to move on to another partner, re-negotiate another deal. Sex is action - not intimacy, as part of the societal construction of accepted norms heterosexual relationships are discernibly contractual, business like, with rules and agendas to adhere to.

Mafiosa Ralph Wayvone is obsessed by the austere, but athletically attractive phenomenon, that is DL. He has charted her entire martial arts career, trailing her progress through the competition circuit. Like beauty pageants, the competitions are a voyeur's paradise, designed to please men. Whilst DL fights for mental focus, Wayvone refuses to release her from her allocated social construct of erotic, physical body. When he decides that she is the only one who can eliminate Brock he sets up an elaborate kidnap, allowing him to buy her from an auction of sex-slaves and geisha girls, ostensibly to persuade her to be an assassin but he also ensures that they have sex<sup>55</sup>. The men at the auction display their power and wealth to each other, whilst emphasising a woman's role in society. To be a 'real' woman DL should adhere more rigidly to the stultifying classifications society uses. However, the falseness of these constructions is reiterated by the convincing alteration in her identity; a great achievement in view of the resolutely 'masculine' way in which she is presented. She is transformed into a 'Barbie Doll' to be 'sold' to Wayvone, who 'has' her already; it is an elaborate scam to force her to dress like a 'woman' and wear make-up. However, rather than a well-groomed woman she seems like a transvestite in particularly elaborate drag. This impersonation of a female is demonstrated again when she

becomes Frenesi to ensnare Brock. Appearance is not inherent but created; everybody is in drag.

DL's sexuality and appearance are presented ambiguously, but gender-stereotyping ensures she is classed as 'butch', simply because she prefers to be referred to by her initials and possesses admirable fighting prowess. Anybody displaying such rugged individualism, especially when compared to the naked vulnerability of Frenesi, is a 'real man'. DL, like the biological men, uses Frenesi's frequently bare, endless coltish legs, micro mini-skirt and so often supine position to be, by comparison, big, strong and powerful. DL is scarred by the memory of a wife-beating father, however, her determination to be tough is not a decision to be a 'man'. She wants to live out her life as herself, sometimes attracted to women and sometimes to men, but guided by the particular person and situation, rather than what society dictates she should do with her feelings and drives. In a narrative crammed with males shying away from gender stereotyping she is the character most admirably fulfilling what society *thinks* it wants a man to be, which negates the feasibility of presenting gender roles as inherent and natural.

**Conclusion: 'Everybody pretending the surface was all there was'.<sup>56</sup>**

DL, more than any of the other characters, epitomises a postmodern blurring of boundaries. It is a blurring that questions the possibility of confining humans to strictly demarcated compartments. DL's relationships with mother, father, friends, lovers are all seen to be experienced 'against the grain', her relationship with Frenesi demonstrates the inadequacy of pre-decided gender sexuality, whilst her strength and precision, both as a thinker and fighter, underline the absurdity of enforcing stereotypical gender-appropriate behaviour. She proves her capability to hone her

flesh to an almost robotic obedience, rendering her the character closest to a cyborg state. Furthermore she spiritually embraces this physical state, her trance-like meditations an example of the steely control more often associated with masculinity, but ultimately with machinery. DL's frequent transcendent withdrawal into the space her own mind can provide is vital to her survival within a dirt-filled, deeply materialistic consumer society. Similarly in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the subject of the next chapter, Jack Gladney struggles to place himself in a commodified society where identity, relationships, even emotions, are reduced to 'product'.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1991), p.214.
- <sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature & Evil* (London: M. Boyars, 1985), p.17.
- <sup>3</sup> Eve K Sedgwick, *Between Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- <sup>4</sup> Eve K Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.15.  
Such triangular relationships are often illustrated in fictional narratives, eg Henry James, *The Aspern Papers* (London: Penguin, 1994), where an obsessive editor is forced to negotiate with two elderly spinsters in order to obtain some memorabilia pertaining to his real love, a long dead, male poet.
- <sup>5</sup> In a gang-rape scenario it is often posited that the male perpetrators are more thrilled at their proximity to each other's penis and sperm than the fact that they actually have sex with a female, she is just the facilitator.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Collier, *Masculinity, Law & the Family* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995).
- <sup>7</sup> Women's tendency to involve their emotions in their sex life dates back to prehistoric times when a strong, healthy, caveman was the ideal provider and hunter. The best way to obtain security and survival, would be to involve such a man in a 'relationship', rather than just a sexual encounter.
- <sup>8</sup> Frenesi's daughter's name, Prairie, conjures up opposite images, rather than frenzy and potential panic she represents the calm, wide-open spaces of the 'natural' world. Another of the echoes of Frenesi's name is that of Sandor Ferenczi, psychologist and close associate of Freud. His most well known writings, appropriately enough, centre on sexual behaviour, homosexuality, the genital organs and impotence. He achieved notoriety for believing patient's accounts of child abuse, dismissed by Freud as fantasies, and came to view Freud as hypocritical and complacent.
- <sup>9</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (London: Zone Books, 1988), p.58.
- <sup>10</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (London: M.Boyars, 1987), p.11.
- <sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, *Death & Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism & Taboo* (New York: Walker & Co. 1962), p.17. The intense idolatry Bataille refers to links to commodity fetishism via the irresistible urge to consume.
- <sup>12</sup> Frenesi's great beauty, like that of Lisa (Grace Kelly) in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (U.S 1954), is seen as arrestingly unmaning.
- <sup>13</sup> Thanatos (Greek death) meets android, (robots resembling human beings).
- <sup>14</sup> Illustrated by *The Corpse of Christ in the Tomb* (Holbein, 1521).
- <sup>15</sup> Jack in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986) makes similar claims.
- <sup>16</sup> John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A J Smith (London: Penguin, 1971), *Divine Meditations*, 14, p.314/5.
- <sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 12.
- <sup>18</sup> William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.21.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.
- <sup>20</sup> *First Blood* (USA, 1982) Director, Ted Kotcheff.
- <sup>21</sup> *Blue Steel* (USA, 1990) Director, Kathryn Bigelow.
- <sup>22</sup> *The New English Bible: New Testament*, Matthew 4 (Oxford University Press, 1961).
- <sup>23</sup> Pynchon, *Vineland*, p.237.
- <sup>24</sup> DeLillo's *White Noise* similarly discusses the limitations imposed on consumables.
- <sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), p.205.
- <sup>26</sup> In the 1998 film, *The Truman Show*, this possibility is illustrated by a person's 'real' life being filmed 24 hours a day as a television 'soap' for the rest of the country. When Truman begins to have suspicions the rest of the 'cast' go to extreme lengths to try and keep him ignorant and appeased.
- <sup>27</sup> As DL's mother likens Takeshi to Robert Redford, Brock must also look like him.
- <sup>28</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.239.
- <sup>29</sup> Although taking drugs has the potential to offer a similar release to sex, the possibility of it resulting in actual death, rather than just the obliterating rehearsal of sex, is much greater.
- <sup>30</sup> It was discovered, when treating the faces of stroke patients, that because the electric current made their muscles plumper their wrinkles were consequently stretched into less significance.
- <sup>31</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (London: Turnaround, 1992), p 90.
- <sup>32</sup> Brita, the photographer, in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), uses her camera in exactly the same way, as a protective shield, pointing, aiming and shooting, as if it were a gun.

- <sup>33</sup> Stacey Olster, 'When You're a (Nin)jette, You're a (Nin)jette All the Way – or Are You?: Female Filmmaking in *Vineland*', in *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel* Eds. Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner & Larry McCaffery, (Normal, USA: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), p.123.
- <sup>34</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture & Criticism in a Postfeminist Age* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), p.101.
- <sup>35</sup> N Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models & Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1984), p.24.
- <sup>36</sup> The frightening extent of this betrayal is illustrated in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* (London: Picador, 1999), by alteration of computer records, cloning of characters and enhancement of computer generated photographs to create false 'evidence'. This text is further discussed in Section Five.
- <sup>37</sup> Pynchon, *Vineland*, p.135.
- <sup>38</sup> A similar miniature chainsaw is favoured by Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), Section Four.
- <sup>39</sup> Fredric Jameson discusses the fragile, yet strong nature of glass. He claims that it repels those outside of it and if reflective gives off a certain aggressivity. 'the great reflective glass skin of the Bonaventure' 'Postmodernism & Consumer Society' *Postmodern Culture* Ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1985), p22-3.
- <sup>40</sup> Collier, *Masculinity, Law & the Family*, p 203.
- <sup>41</sup> Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998) offers Nick's absentee father as an example of this. See Section Three.
- <sup>42</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.92.
- <sup>43</sup> Tania Modleski, in her book, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), states that up to twelve soap operas are shown every day in the USA, 90% of their viewers are female, and typical themes include, 'The winning back of an estranged spouse', 'Deceptions regarding paternity of a child' and 'Divided loyalties', all of which are explored in *Vineland*. The 'loss of a child' is an 'unbearable ending', hence the need to re-unite Prairie and Frenesi.
- <sup>44</sup> The narrative speaks with songs, from Rock to Glen Miller, including numerous parodies. Slade cites music as the embodiment of human longing. Joseph W Slade, 'Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*', *The Vineland Papers*, p.74.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Brady Bunch* is discussed with similar affection in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) a postmodern bricolage of popular culture, refusing to be defined by chronology.
- <sup>46</sup> Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance*, p.89.
- <sup>47</sup> J Masson, *Against Therapy* (London: Fontana, 1989), p 247.
- <sup>48</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.81.
- <sup>49</sup> Victor J Seidler, *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity & Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.143.
- <sup>50</sup> Hector's incarceration may be voluntary, in which case it is wilfully ironic to attempt to break out of something you initially chose for yourself. However, as he is only trying to find a cure to please his ex-wife by 'fitting in', the frequent escapes illustrate his inability to do this.
- <sup>51</sup> Margaret Morse discusses such distracted viewing as a way of legitimating differing realities, 'An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, the Television' in Patricia Mellencamp (ed), *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
- <sup>52</sup> As in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), the narrative abounds with movie references.
- <sup>53</sup> *The Bionic Woman* is repeatedly offered by way of comparison. (E.g. V. p.165/66 & p.327/28).
- <sup>54</sup> *Thelma & Louise* (USA, 1991) Director, Ridley Scott.
- <sup>55</sup> This individually specific training is echoed in Luc Besson's film *Nikita* (1990).
- <sup>56</sup> Pynchon, *Vineland*, p.125.

## SECTION TWO

### DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE* - 'The American mystery deepens'.<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

*White Noise* demonstrates that modern men, despite their society's vast technological capacity, are inept about the most ordinary things. Busy and focused, yet confused and overreaching, Jack Gladney the sardonic protagonist is driven to a state of dementia by his inability to fulfil an 'authentic' masculine identity. Jack's conventional principles struggle within his chaotic postmodern setting, prompting him to insist that 'people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way' (W.N. p.172). When his perceived inadequacy is combined with his all-pervasive fear of death, Jack's feelings of inferiority create a debilitating paranoid atmosphere in which he must function. The other male characters are equally compromised, Willie Mink, alias Mr Gray, spends his life floating in a technological haze induced by chemicals and television. Murray Jay Siskind, the New York émigré, and the entire staff of the School of American Environments are obsessed by the most banal things, including: bodily functions; toilet and hygiene habits; consumables and their packaging; celebrity and nostalgia. The Department strives to make connections that may validate some viable masculine framework. Their chair, Alfonse Stompanato, gives them the blueprint for the manly academic, he is 'large, sardonic, dark-staring, with scarred brows and a furious beard fringed in grey' (W.N. p.65). Jack's German teacher, his father-in-law, his neighbours, are all portrayed as having slipped over some borderline, leaving the societal 'norm' far behind them.

As in DeLillo's *Underworld* (Section Three) much attention is given to consuming and disposing of products, collecting or parting with possessions - indeed to what defines 'waste'. Jack sums up this phenomenon as 'an immensity of things, an overburdening weight, a connection, a mortality' (W.N. p.262), and claims that sifting through his possessions for items he can part with, physically getting them out of the house, will cause 'a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around (him)' (W.N. p.262). Material goods become intolerable burdens, yet he is powerless to resist buying further items to replace what he throws away (W.N. p.292). The alternative to disposal is recycling, a recycling which is not limited to material goods and the packaging of consumables, but extends to styles, events and beliefs in the form of parody, pastiche and déjà vu, even a recycling of desire. Jacques Lacan connects this recycling to the manner in which humans learn how to 'read' images, as part of a developing sense of the various constructed versions of 'Me' and 'I'. These images of 'self' become thoroughly assimilated into life as empty reflections, which can be appropriated. This means that they are used in the formation and re-duplication of relationships between humans, both with others and with the objects around them, part of the creation of varying forms of 'reality'.<sup>2</sup> The inherent falseness and reconstituted nature of images, ensures that they negate any aspired-to 'authenticity'. This lack of authenticity cancels any claim for feeling genuine desire, at the same time ensuring that human subjects are uncomfortably aware of the restricted dimensions of that which deserves to be the *object* of this contrived desire.

**Deflecting Death by Consuming: "We had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less".<sup>3</sup>**

Jack and his wife Babette illustrate the conscious search for affirmation of legitimate

desire by fondling each other in the supermarket queue, the kitchen, the car, anywhere they remember. They recreate each other, and through their 'desire' for this recreated 'other', recreate themselves. This is achieved via the fulfilment of stereotypes.

Jack, himself constructed as 'important scholar', mutters 'dirty blond' into the back of Babette's hair, fantasises about her wearing only legwarmers, and requests that she read erotic literature to him. Some outside stimulation is always required, either from props or memories; there is no spontaneity. Jack is told 'you go shave and brush your teeth. Meet you in the bedroom in ten minutes'(W.N. p186). They cling to the traditional social conditioning that dictates sex acts should be confined to bed, with a member of the opposite sex and nobody else around. Whilst bearing these rules in mind they try their best to force desire upon themselves, to create it, re-ignite it from some other place and time. In their essay 'From *Casablanca* to *Pretty Woman*: the Politics of Romance', Lapsley and Westlake demonstrate the Lacanian revisiting of the Freudian thinking that there is no sexual relation.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with Jack's behaviour, they suggest that there is nothing 'natural' about falling in love, or being infatuated by someone, and no spontaneous desire; restrictions are self-inflicted in line with society's enforced 'norm'.<sup>5</sup> Incorporated into Jack's attempts to identify himself as an acceptable male are the images deflected back from his sexual partner, these prompt him to trying to be what *they* want him to be. In keeping with this procedure he proclaims, 'As the male partner I think it's my responsibility to please' (W.N. p.28). The discovery that there is 'no sexual relation' comes in stages; it begins with a basic mis-recognition at the mirror stage, when the person being reflected is always 'in love' with what they *want* to see. Mis-recognition results in aphanisis, the disappearance of the subject. Within the signifying chain the subject can never be clear due to this mis-recognition. It is because of this ambiguity that psychoanalytic

theorists emphasise the absolute centrality of language to identity; when language is entered into something essential is lost. Jack comments on the transformation his German teacher undergoes when he reverts to his native tongue, aligning it with some primitive regression to a former, more vital and valid means of communication:

When he switched from English to German, it was as though a cord had been twisted in his larynx. An abrupt emotion entered his voice, a scrape and gargle that sounded like the stirring of some beast's ambition. He gaped at me and gestured, he croaked, he verged on strangulation. Sounds came spewing from the base of his tongue, harsh noises damp with passion. He was only demonstrating certain basic pronunciation patterns but the transformation in his face and voice made me think he was making a passage between levels of being (W.N. p.32).

This centrality (and ambiguity) of language is underpinned by Jack's addiction to erotic literature, and Babette's objection to some of the phrases used, translating them, as she does, in ways far beyond Jack's thought patterns:

"I don't want you to choose anything that has men inside women, quote-quote, or men entering women. 'I entered her.' 'He entered me.' We're not lobbies or elevators. 'I wanted him inside me,' as if he could crawl completely in, sign the register, sleep, eat, so forth. Can we agree on that? I don't care what these people do as long as they don't enter or get entered" (W.N. p.29).

The final stage of discovery that there is no sexual relation is on a symbolic level; the difference between what is real and what is imaginary. Jack's paranoia is fired by his pursuit of a unity and completeness that never was. Like being 'in love', a fantastical concept and part of Western ideology that many cultures do not comprehend, the fantasy of sexual rapport masks the lack in both the 'other' and the self. The result of this is that Jack can create a romantic narrative structure around his unsatisfactory life. His major horror in this search for wholeness is that death will pre-empt satisfaction. Indeed it is this fear of the onrush of death that prompts sexual activity. The compulsion of sex is inextricably linked to a fascination with death, born of the similar feelings both embody: extreme release and lack of control. Leslie Fiedler sums up this connection in his discussion about desire and age, where he

claims to have, 'wished for ultimate impotence quite as deeply as I feared it; even as I must have yearned for the final obliteration of consciousness as fervently as I dreaded it'.<sup>6</sup> Jack says of sex and death that he would 'hate to think they were inextricably linked'; yet his irrational behaviour suggests that he has already acknowledged their sinister alliance, even if only unconsciously (W.N. p.217). Georges Bataille, whose writings centre on the life-shaping power of the fear of death, would see Jack's behaviour as demonstrating a certain typicality, as a man 'constantly in fear of himself',<sup>7</sup> attempting definition by being, 'the mirror of death'.<sup>8</sup>

Jack defines life in terms of impending death, unavoidable, yet profoundly unknown and unknowable, he summarises, 'we are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die' (W.N. p.99). The impossibility of knowing the full intimacy of death, or indeed sex, requires that man must put himself at stake, take risks with his physical being if he is to obtain satisfaction, fulfilment, even knowledge. The possession of knowledge is tied to control and, therefore, masculinity, but as the doctor tells Jack, who is eager for facts, 'knowledge changes every day' (W.N. p.280). These changes are reflected in the endless lists of fashionable commodities his children compulsively recite, and the frequent mis-translations arising from the changing and overlapping meanings of words. The result is conversations doomed to remain forever misunderstood. Such changes make men uneasy, as their image must be constantly re-assessed and their claims to dominance justified. It is impossible to conceive masculinity as unitary and coherent amongst such fluidity. The vastness of what seems 'unknowable' is overwhelming and aligns pleasure with uncertainty and chance. Man must gamble if he wants to find out more than he already knows, or experience more than he is

already experiencing. Bataille links this risk-taking with constructed identities and posits that these should be cast aside:

‘Communication’ cannot take place from one full and intact being to another: it requires beings who have put the being within themselves *at stake*, have placed it at the limit of death, of nothingness.<sup>9</sup>

So the fear of death, and the subsequent fear of sex’s potential to similarly overwhelm completely, are irrevocably tied to a fear of literally ‘letting go’ of identity and a subsequent reliance on the comfort of constructs. Letting go of such planned and scripted manners of behaving ties dying irrevocably to the fragmentation and re-visiting of postmodernity. The circularity of re-visiting offers a certain feeling of security, as although choices are presented as purportedly endless they actually consist of sifting through, selecting and blending what has always already been done. Circularity also carries inferences of continuation rather than ending. The potential to constantly create fresh alternatives from differing combinations of that which is known reflects postmodernism’s ability to evolve. Murray describes death in terms of an ongoing evolution, ‘(death) continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new passages and means. The more we learn the more it grows’ (W.N. p.150). Like postmodernity death is capable of change and adaptation. Jack’s colleague Winnie, a scientist, wonders whether life would be pointless and futile without the knowledge of death, impending and inevitable, changing to fit circumstances, ironically re-creating and re-birthing its role, and over-hanging life:

I think it’s a mistake to lose one’s sense of death, even one’s fear of death. Isn’t death the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit (W.N. p.228-9).

Jack queries this, resenting the constant anxiety he is feeling, ‘Does knowledge of impending death make life precious? What good is a preciousness based on fear and

anxiety? It's an anxious quivering thing' (W.N. p.284). But Winnie thinks awareness of death should be compared to confrontations with raw nature, such as a grizzly bear in the wild, a situation she feels makes the victim intensely and vividly aware of identity, as she puts it: 'lit up for our own imminent dismemberment' (W.N. p.229). This very Bataillian statement causes Jack to question whether fear is another word for self-awareness and subsequently, risk-taking a pastime designed to make the risk-takers feel more alive, more tangible and clearly aware of themselves. He wonders if this is why Orrest wants to sit in a cage full of deadly snakes, in order to make his emotions comply with his own construction of life. As Victor Siedler suggests, perhaps intrinsic fears have been denied for so long, due to a grim determination to appear in control, that it is now almost impossible to recognise fear. Fear is still felt but not called fear anymore, because 'we have lived so long without acknowledging it that we do not recognise it when it makes its presence felt'.<sup>10</sup>

One of the ways to become less afraid of death is to get intimate with it. Proximity can be obtained by committing murder. Murray plants the idea in Jack's head to kill Willie Mink, (the man Babette has been having sex with) in a prehistoric and sacrificial crime of passion, regressive, ancient and primitive, telling him: 'He dies, you live' (W.N. p.291). As a motive, fear of death far outweighs any jealousy Jack feels about Mink having sex with Babette. When he challenges her he discovers that she not only fears death too, but is prepared to trample on his cultivated male pride by doing something about it. This concerns him far more than the fact that she has been having sex with a stranger: 'Baba, I am the one who is obsessed by death. I always have been the one' (W.N. p.197). His emphasis on *his* right to be more frightened, to prioritise *his* fear, makes Babette respond: 'What do you want me to say? Your fear is older and wiser than mine?' (W.N. p.198). Jack *would* like

confirmation that his fear is more valid, more primal and originary; after all he is a man. He resolutely expects his wife to behave according to her woman's place; she should be warm, supportive, amusing, open. When she is not he complains that she is sarcastic and mocking, unlike 'herself' (W.N. p.225).

Murray's theory that you are either a 'killer' or a 'dier', and therefore cannot be both, means that to kill someone guarantees that you live. If you are not an acting body then by default you become a body being acted upon. He echoes Bataille's thoughts on the potential for wars to divert destructive energy:

I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions (W.N. p.290).

As Jack lives by his intellect he wants to resist this barbaric idea and the urge to reduce life to the level of a computer game. He feels he should be capable of dealing with his wife's infidelity in a calm, rational manner. However, Murray's justifications are just too hard to resist:

We're two academics in an intellectual environment. It's our duty to examine currents of thought, investigate the meaning of human behaviour. But think how exciting, to come out a winner in a deathly struggle, to watch the bastard bleed (W.N. p.291).

Jack succumbs to shooting Willie Mink in a meticulously plotted revenge attack involving stealing a car, running red lights, and refusing to pay road tolls. He is ironically aware of his self-conscious creation of self: 'how literary, I thought peevishly. Streets thick with the details of impulsive life as the hero ponders the latest phase in his dying' (W.N. p.281). He narrates the approach to the potential crime scene with a Raymond Chandler-style voiceover, revealing his awareness of self and social construction by describing his 'out of character' misdemeanours as: 'how

people escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying. Simply stop obeying' (W.N. p.303). His ostensibly unsound actions bring a lucidity again resonating with Bataille. Impressed by the level of clarity the intensity of death and destruction provides, his proclamations repeat those of *Literature and Evil*: 'Being loses its solitude...intensity increases, to the point where destruction, the death of the being, becomes apparent'.<sup>11</sup> In Mink's seedy motel room there is no precision, only the overlying buzz of television static and Mink's bizarre mumblings in 'T.V. speak', the information from his media-saturated life becoming *actual* as the Dylar's side effects kick in. The anti-fear-of-death drug renders words and suggestions literal, rather than symbolic. When Jack says 'hail of bullets' Mink crouches down in an attempt to hide and crawl away. This implosion of words and meanings recalling Jean Baudrillard's assertions that only surface remains in contemporary life due to the proliferation of representations.<sup>12</sup> However, when Jack shoots Mink twice in the stomach, overlapping the multiple versions of 'reality' in his search for an intense connection with physicality, 'the visceral jolt' (W.N. p.308), Mink returns his fire, agonisingly shattering Jack's wrist. The intensity of the pain and luminous, red blood forces the would-be murderer to divert from his carefully scripted and contained actions, in an attempt to avoid this 'death of the being'. The fact that this 'being' is now himself, and not only Mink, is given suicidal overtones by Jack placing the gun in Mink's hand, in an act of potential self-destruction. If he is to retain his life, and his rapidly returning rational hold over his existence, then he must at least try also to save Mink. Saving Mink becomes inseparable from saving himself, as, although the subject cannot exist without separation, Jack has been trying his utmost to view himself as abstract 'other'. The alternative to preserving life is a rapid plunge into the abyss, a prospect which Jack finds horribly alarming, despite Mink's prior

reassurance that although drugs like Dylar cannot prevent death they can manipulate consciousness to the point where 'it won't matter' (W.N. p.310).

The dark unprecedented fear evoked by plunging into the unknown has been hinted at by both Babette and Murray in individual articulations of man's capacity to perpetrate violent acts. Their inference is that this ability is an inherent one, away from social conditioning, which instead attempts to mask this darkness. Murray refers to it as an unlit pool:

Let's examine the nature of the beast, so to speak. The male animal. Isn't there a fund, a pool, a reservoir of potential violence in the male psyche?...male rage as a dark lake ... a sludgy region you'd rather not know about? A remnant of some prehistoric period when dinosaurs roamed the earth and men fought with flint tools? When to kill was to live? (W.N. p.292).

Babette has already suggested to Jack that he has inherited, or perhaps taken insufficient steps to control, this 'traditional male darkness' when she is attempting to pacify him about her meetings with Mink:

You're a man, Jack. We all know about men and their insane rage. This is something men are very good at. Insane and violent jealousy. Homicidal rage. When people are good at something, it's only natural that they look for a chance to do this thing. If I were good at it, I would do it. It happens I'm not. So instead of going into homicidal rages, I read to the blind. In other words I know my limits. I am willing to settle for less (W.N. p.225).

The act of acknowledging this 'claimed' male capacity, albeit in an amusing mock-serious tone, serves to further distance it from the 'female' nature and endorses it, in a paradoxical way. Therefore, if this irrational violence is accepted as part of the male psyche, rather than challenged, it will continue to be part of the accepted construction and perhaps lived out, whether present as a characteristic or not. Babette's comments about performing within certain boundaries confirm that men are acting as society expects. Jack *should* shoot the man who has slept with his wife, Murray *should* be pleased when his major rival at work drowns, and so on.

Jack is aware of the build up of anger within him and, whilst he does not question its authenticity, he does sense an impending implosion. His way of projecting the free play of this surplus energy, of what Bataille terms 'an unbroken animal that cannot be trained',<sup>13</sup> into an outward explosion is by shooting Mink, in a radical release of energy that confronts destructive potential. In *The Accursed Share* Bataille discusses such energy as being 'always in excess'.<sup>14</sup> This excess circulates, waiting to be squandered:

Life suffocates within limits that are too close; it aspires in manifold ways to an impossible growth; it releases a steady flow of excess resources, possibly involving large squanderings of energy. The limit of growth being reached, life, without being in a closed container, at least enters into ebullition: Without exploding, its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion.<sup>15</sup>

Traditionally, ancient societies harnessed excess energy in festivals, carnivals and ritualistic ceremonies. Within the technological world, reverberating violence is reabsorbed into the background turmoil and illustrated by the ever-present periphery noise of Jack's tentative life. This is DeLillo's 'white noise', modern and technological, 'the sublittoral drone of maintenance systems...layers of oceanic sound,' (W.N. p.168). Bataille enlarges on white noise as a background void, on the boundaries of human consciousness, and the 'natural' store for the destructive force of released energy. It is a whirling, chaotic place where discharged power lurks and elemental rhythms pulse, an intrinsically powerful, yet uncontrollable demonic excess. Living organisms receive more energy from its free-play on the earth's surface than they require to survive. It is the left-over energy, the floating excess, which forms the buzzing 'white noise'. DeLillo sees this phenomena as being particularly concentrated in supermarkets and shopping malls where the huge machines and air conditioning units absorb power, humming forcefully as a backdrop to the manic consuming. Due to the sharp rise in technological knowledge, and subsequent reliance

on technology, this area of pressure is growing and building all the time. Fredric Jameson sees postmodern hyper-spaces like these malls and, for example, Gateshead's Metro Centre, as too vast to comprehend. According to Jameson: 'We do not possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyper space',<sup>16</sup> a statement which confirms technology's ease in out-running its creators. Jack wonders if some of the floating excess energy produced is combining with the powerful omnipotence of the dead:

The power of the dead is that we think they see us all the time. The dead have a presence. Is there a level of energy composed solely of the dead? They are also in the ground, of course, asleep and crumbling. Perhaps we are what they dream (W.N. p.98).

Rather than the living being granted a prescience it is the dead who are superior. Those who remain alive rely on them for identity, support and a further layer of energy to add to the 'sublittoral drone'.

Another major contributor to the amalgamation of 'white noise', and also the irresistible culture of consumption, is the television. This modern phenomenon is portrayed as the central mediating agency in the construction of self:

The flow is constant ... Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes ... For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set (W.N. p.66).

Television not only influences the conception of 'self', it also places individuals within a group identity. Viewers are situated within constantly evolving marketing groups in order to be targetable consumers. Jack's family are saturated by brand names, slogans and jingles. They locate important messages within the white noise which they chant in their sleep like religious fanatics, 'Coke is it' 'Toyota Celica', hence maximising production and profits and assuring the continuation of capitalism. Jack is a voracious consumer feeling that the more he buys the more valid his created male persona as provider, intellectual, father, teacher, husband, lover, and most

vitality, living entity, will be:

The sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment ...the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought (W.N. p.20).

He also desperately clings to the belief that Murray is correct when he says, 'Here we don't die, we shop' (W.N. p.38) and that his acquisitiveness, his eagerness to enter into the exchange system, will ensure he remains alive. Baudrillard's comments on America's commodified culture likewise associate it with death:

The unspeakable houseplants, lurking everywhere like the obsessive fear of death, the picture windows looking like Snow White's glass coffin, the clumps of pale, dwarf flowers stretched out in patches like sclerosis, the proliferation of technical gadgetry inside the house, beneath it, around it, like drips in an intensive care ward, the TV, stereo, and video which provide communication with the beyond, the car (or cars) that connect one up to that great shopper's funeral parlour, the supermarket, and lastly, the wife and children, as glowing symptoms of success...everything here testifies to death having found its ideal home.<sup>17</sup>

Jack also relies on his surface appearance to deflect death. When one of his colleagues sees him away from the campus and comments that: 'You look so harmless Jack. A big, harmless, ageing, indistinct sort of guy' (W.N. p.83), he is horrified and afraid at the suggestion of a lack of substance. He takes his family on a mall spending-spree to get over the upset which, as well as providing him with goods to help him construct an identity, also offers him therapy and affirmation. He claims that what he spends comes back to him in the form of 'existential credit' (W.N. p.84). He is able, albeit only temporarily, to shelve his cynicism about the way in which contemporary life is packaged and presented to him. The shopping mall is no better than the chemical testing centre, 'Autumn Harvest Farms', about which he passes the comment, 'Would a quaint name fool us into thinking we were living in pre-cancerous times?' (W.N. p.275). However, his awareness does not prevent expansive treatment of his family,

including fulfilment of Christmas wishes many months in advance. Jack himself feels rewarded, underlining the affirmative aspects of purchasing and consuming; the business of exchange: 'I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed' (W.N. p.84). Jack's behaviour recalls 'Potlatch', an ancient tribal ritual of gift-giving, which Bataille suggests more acutely answers something in the giver.<sup>18</sup> 'The Mid-Village mall', where Jack's rejuvenation takes place, is a huge modern creation. The fact that the mall offers the oxymoronic 'live Musak'(W.N. p.273) is a hint at its paradoxical identity. It represents a combination of nerve centre and temple for the inhabitants of Blacksmith, a small mid-western town, whose very name, like the 'Autumn Harvest Farms', *seems* to advertise old-fashioned values and country goodness. The people of Blacksmith can find everything they want to buy at the mall, there is enormous choice from every kind of store. All cultures and tastes are catered for in the format of 'a ten storey building arranged around a center court of waterfalls, promenades and gardens'(W.N. p.83). This modern erection has been created not merely to satisfy, but rather to create and dictate its customer's needs.<sup>19</sup> The food sold is not quaint and wholesome, despite the name; but sterile, processed and pre-packed. The fruit and vegetables are heavily sprayed with wax to make them shine, pumped full of chemicals to look large and perfect, dressed up with the appearance of healthy food, giving the image and representation of 'goodness' that the public wants to believe in. In fact the bright, burnished, over-large format is much further from any 'reality' than inferior looking specimens might be:

Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished bright. People tore the filmy bags off racks...I realised the place was awash with noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension (W.N. p.36).

Visitors to the mall are provoked into becoming customers. This buying of a life, an existence, connects death with consumerism. Babette criticises the marketing of sun-creams, underlining this connection of death and consumerism, and illustrating Baudrillard's insinuation that intense fear of death reduces life to a living death. Babette is convinced that the fear of skin cancer is a corporate tie-in and furthermore that when 'the public' is convinced that sunlight, air, food, water and sex are all carcinogenic they will seal themselves from the world in sterile containers and life and death will be barely distinguishable. Human fear of death fosters submission to any 'authority' promising to prolong life.<sup>20</sup>

The crowds shown in supermarkets and malls trying their utmost to sustain an identity, hence a life, are the same crowds which either watch or flock away from disasters, and who attend Jack's lectures. Jack's son Heinrich comments on how becoming part of a crowd can be likened to becoming part of a machine, impersonal and technological, doing as you are told to make the larger machine run efficiently. Baudrillard also confirms the way in which modern life is increasingly experienced as part of a mechanical crowd. He terms them as 'the masses', huge ungainly and inert. However, when confronted by multiplicity and choice they ironically still huddle together to carry out the same acts and buy the same products and services, totally in the thrall of what he calls: 'The networks of influence',<sup>21</sup> powerfully mass-mediated images. Like Jack, his students use their studies as part of this consuming lifestyle. Jack craves the purported safety his lofty academic position offers. His students long to ape his confidence and knowledge, eager to create clones. They ironically perpetuate the fascism they are articulating, rather than condemning it, in much the same way that their unquestioning approach to Jack's knowledge perpetuates, rather than breaks down, grand narratives. Reality is not homogenous, and the same for

everybody in every place, it is instead disorderly, fragmented, heterogeneous. The fact that the human sciences are known as 'disciplines' speaks of Academia's efforts to tame this unruly mess. Jack believes that his students are attracted to the concept of the crowd for its potential to offer a safety in numbers. As a personal and obsessive fear of death dominates *his* life he presumes that his students share this terror, claiming that they come together to form 'a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual'(W.N. p.73).

This reliance on crowds is further emphasised by introducing male academics with the potential to be interesting, diverse and innovative but who, rather than asserting themselves in any individual way, become united by their idiosyncrasies. Murray J Siskind and his colleagues talk for hours about whether or not they spit in their sandwiches, and spend their spare time prowling supermarket aisles, eager to sniff other people's shopping. Jack describes these colleagues as 'from New York, smart, thuggish, movie-mad & trivia-crazed'(W.N. p.9). They are linked to the violent gangs of *Underworld*, with their loutish behaviour, obsessive loyalties and propensity to demarcate their own property, including a similar spoilage of food. Perhaps the overt madness of spoiling your own food is only outdone by the greater madness of being repulsed by our own spit, or other bodily fluids, something traced back to social conditioning rather than any natural repugnance.

### Science v Nature: 'The suicide wish of technology'.<sup>22</sup>

Man's approach to his surroundings takes a similarly demarcated approach, as humans attempt to conform to what is expected within their environment. The supposedly natural elements within *White Noise*, such as the weather and the fantastic

sunsets, are fatally linked to the destructive tendencies of modern technology. The realisation, that rather than save us technology is likely to destroy us, regardless of class privileges, is an irony not lost on DeLillo. Within a technocracy all are under threat. Jack futilely tries to categorise qualifying status for disasters:

I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county (W.N. p.117).

The technological 'cure' for the toxic spill creates clouds of potentially fatal chemicals, which in turn cause the glowingly beautiful sunsets: 'Broad towering ruddled visionary skylscapes, tinged with dread' (W.N. p.170). Such transformations represent technology's ability to appear hyper-attractive, whilst remaining an insidious threat to health and well-being. The people of Blacksmith gather to gaze at the apocalyptic sunsets, Jack calls them postmodern, feeling that the term sums up their sublime combination of aesthetic beauty and radioactive pain. They are so beautiful they hurt, literally. The sublime nature of that which threatens life is also raised by the crowds fleeing the toxic spill:

Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and wilful rhythms. This was death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable (W.N. p.127).

The characters typically attempt to affirm life, despite such threats, with physical exercise. Babette runs relentlessly, pushing herself ever harder despite the fact that there is no enjoyment in the act. The obsession with health is underlined by Jack's comments on the physical production of children:

Heinrich's hairline is beginning to recede. I wonder about this. Did his mother consume some kind of gene-piercing substance when she was pregnant? Am I at fault somehow? Have I raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degeneration, glorious sunsets? (People say the sunsets around here were not nearly so stunning thirty or forty years ago.) Man's guilt

in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death (W.N. p.22).

Heinrich diligently performs chin-ups alone in his cupboard, yet his physical prowess cannot stop his premature hair loss. Jack asks him, ““Why do you want to chin? What does chinning accomplish?”” to which Heinrich replies: ““What does anything accomplish? Maybe I just want to build up my body to compensate for other things”” (W.N. p.181). Despite his cynical take on happiness which insinuates that all humans are merely machines consisting of bundles of stimuli (W.N. p.182), Heinrich cannot prevent himself from undertaking the physical efforts to conform to the societal approved physical appearance of a ‘man’. Part of masculine maturation is accepted as: ‘learning how to determine his worth from the reactions of others’ (W.N. p.131). This necessitates treating his body as separate from his mind, accepting it as something to be trained, honed and altered and not allowing it to reveal any weakness that would compromise his masculinity. He plays chess by mail with a convicted murderer of six, who, despite the way in which it dilutes the horror of his crimes, Jack cannot resist stereotyping:

Did he care for his weapons obsessively? Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park? ... Did he fire from a highway overpass, a rented room? Did he walk into a bar, a washette, his former place of employment and start firing indiscriminately? People scattering, taking cover under tables. People out on the street thinking they heard firecrackers. “I was just waiting for the bus when I heard this little popping noise like firecrackers going off”(W.N. p.44).

Jack uses ideas he has gleaned from the media about serial killers, even down to such details as the manner in which witnesses attempt to represent what they have seen and/or heard. The categorisation of people and events, combined with the inability to accept things without some comparison to their ‘other’ is discussed by Baudrillard who cites intense exercise as a diversion for such destructive energies. He illustrates the focused obsession that overtakes dedicated exercisers, particularly runners:

Decidedly, joggers are the true Latter Day Saints and the protagonists of an easy-does-it Apocalypse. Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his walkman, cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy, indifferent even to catastrophes since he expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts, from exhausting the energy of a body that has in his own eyes become useless. Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger contemplates suicide by running up and down the beach. His eyes are wild, saliva drips from his mouth. Do not stop him. He will either hit you or simply carry on dancing around in front of you like a man possessed.<sup>23</sup>

For Baudrillard running and the demands of extreme physical exertion are linked to controlling death. If man can control, even modify, his body then he can control his destiny and distance himself from the chaos around him, by harnessing raw energy rather than allowing it to inflict itself upon him. Baudrillard's thoughts on running are epitomised by Jack:

It felt strange to be running. I hadn't run in many years and didn't recognize my body in this new format, didn't recognize the world beneath my feet, hard-surfaced and abrupt. I turned a corner and picked up speed, aware of floating bulk. Up, down, life, death. My robe flew behind me (W.N. p.186).

Whilst running Jack feels the same paradoxical mixing of fear and elation that Baudrillard draws attention to; the jarring, limited earth contrasting with the boundless floating of air. He senses his death as intimately linked to the ground and its boundaries: 'a heaviness in my legs that seemed the very pull of the earth, its most intimate and telling judgement, the law of falling bodies' (W.N. p.227). John Frow in his discussions of space and place questions these same boundaries and limits and the stretching of a body that formerly appeared as a fixed unit<sup>24</sup>. He suggests that man accepts constructed representations as lived reality and as a result individuals are linked to their surroundings, the earth, by the constant mediation of words and texts. Within *White Noise* this is demonstrated by the characters' adherence to the instructions on maps and billboards; the textual commentary on what are purported to be sites of interest along the autoroute. Jack and Murray visit one such site, 'The Most

Photographed Barn in America' and discuss the collective perception of the famous tourist site: 'No one sees the barn ... We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one' (W.N. p.12), giving an insight into the way that myths are perpetuated. Frow describes this reification as a process of acknowledging a definitive 'type', 'suffused with ideality, giving on to the type of the beautiful, or the extraordinary, or the culturally authentic'.<sup>25</sup> Reality is therefore not palpable, but rather revealed emblematically, with signs and markers. Murray and Jack follow posters advertising the barn, and imitate the other tourists, who do what those who came before *them* did. They are driven by a hunger both to belong, and to place other people and events within this belonging: what Frow describes as 'nostalgia for a lost authenticity'.<sup>26</sup> The authenticity is not 'misplaced' but lost because it never existed and so can never be reclaimed. Such mythologising of 'types' results in an attraction to typicality, and consequently to societal constructions, like normative masculinity, being lived as reality. Adhering to the particulars of type fosters a culture of sameness, inevitably leading to feelings of non-validity for non-conformers. The obsession with typicality found in *White Noise*, a hunger for some kind of 'realism', is paradoxical within a postmodern narrative, encouraging the reader to ask questions about the very nature of postmodernity. Perhaps it is only a different name for the hopeless strivings to fabricate some reality, this time however a self-conscious striving via endless reproduction, parody and pastiche. Postmodern chaos suggests variety and multiplicity; the empowerment of thinking and feeling for yourself. However, Jack rather than welcoming this liberty is afraid and suspicious of it.

Frow discusses perpetual imitation in the light of the Platonic simulacrum; a copy of a copy. However, it may be argued that the act of copying endows the copied with a certain validity, even reality, much in the manner that man can be seen to be

endlessly copying himself within therapy; his talking about, and creation of, his many potential personae giving them 'life'. This is what Baudrillard means by hyper-reality, more real than real. It is a world consisting of closed, self-referring systems where 'ideas' of what constitutes reality are indefinitely reproducible and the consumption of these reproduced images dominates to the point of replacing experience, with future definitions made against that which is already a reproduction within a thoroughly commodified society.<sup>27</sup> Supposed originals are copies, 'tradition', 'heritage', 'the past', are all part, like the famous barn, of the nostalgia for a lost authenticity that never was. Mike Gane points out the manner in which what was already reproduction continues to be reproduced: 'The *hyperreal* is the simulation form which dominates, and as such defines itself in relation to that which is always already reproduced.'<sup>28</sup>

Rather than adhering to reality, reality is used to suit a purpose, to create an improved version. In *White Noise* this is demonstrated by the use of 'the real event in order to rehearse the simulation' (W.N. p.139). A 'real' situation, the toxic spill, is used to practise for potential future evacuations, causing the boundaries between the two to be increasingly ill-defined: 'You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about' (W.N. p.139). The projected version of the disaster is prioritised over the actual event as it unfolds, man is manipulated to promulgate the 'progress' of society. As Heinrich points out: 'Industry would collapse if the true results of any of these investigations were released' (W.N. p.174). Where, normally, serious and important incidents are identified by their very rarity, Heinrich suggests that the increasing number of toxic spills is causing complacency. What he finds even more sinister is the way in which televisions and labour-saving equipment are unquestioningly welcomed into the home, despite the radiation they expose the

occupants to. As he sums it up: 'It's the things right around you in your own house that will get you sooner or later. It's the electrical and magnetic fields' (W.N. p.175).

Heinrich reiterates Baudrillard's findings in *America*, agreeing that carefully created and contained status symbols are false, technological or chemical and furthermore, must be aligned with death and disease. The endless electricity feeding into households is part of an elaborate life support system. When Jack's daughter is sent home from school due to toxic fumes the long list of potential offenders emphasises the hazards of modern life:

The ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by micro-computers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes from the chlorinated pool, or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things (W.N. p.35).

After his own exposure to the toxic spill Jack is given a highly technological health check. He finds it an unnerving experience, seeing his existence reduced to a series of 'pulsing stars' and 'flashing numbers' on a computer screen and being told he is no more than 'the sum total of (his) data' (W.N. p.141). This claim is not entirely accurate as Jack is not affected by the data readings, but rather the way in which the operators manipulates the information to use it against him. The technology he is drawn to, for its purported power to save, or at least extend, life, paradoxically offers the opportunity for others to alienate him from his own body and subsequently his impending death. His summary of the situation underlines this phenomenon, as he says himself, 'It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying' (W.N. p.142). His reaction is to long for the supposed security of the invented identity he has settled for: 'I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses'(W.N. p.142) and he is able to be clinical, even patronising about the deaths of others:

An emergency ward...where people come in gun-shot, slashed, sleepy-eyed with opium compounds, broken needles in their arms. These things have

nothing to do with my own eventual death, nonviolent, small-town, thoughtful (W.N. p.76).

His nonchalant stereotyping of deathly circumstances with his own death 'booked in' to be peaceful and thoughtful, merely because he is an academic, is now being rudely questioned by the probing, and apparently sinister, technology. Like the Mylex suits worn by the rescue workers, whose composition compromises the precision of the vital computer readouts and the cloud of micro-organisms designed to 'eat' the toxic spill, the cure is worse than the disease. The most basic forms of protection are falling under scrutiny. Murray has already proclaimed that the condoms widely available are insufficient shield against 'the intelligence and adaptability of the modern virus' (W.N. p.150). Jack feels afraid and distant from his own flesh and concludes that a healthy person would be *made* ill by the tests, with their insinuations that the body is rendered superfluous in cyberspace.<sup>29</sup> The creation of an ailment for every symptom recalls the need-creating consumer goods. Modern man is conditioned not to question the Doctor/scientist's knowledge, even to the extent of feigning ignorance of our own bodies, discussions of which are hastily dismissed as subjective and emotional. Medical knowledge overrules anything a person thinks he knows, even to the extent that instilled attitudes are accepted as gut reactions, in an illustration of Marx's 'false consciousness' or, as Victor Seidler terms it:

We can be so used to constructing our experience according to how we think that things ought to be, that it can be difficult to acknowledge any emotions and feelings that go against these images.<sup>30</sup>

The construction of masculinity is aided by the rejection of aspects of themselves that modern males are conditioned not to 'recognise'. Jack struggles to do just this, torn between his fear of the corporeal limits of his flesh because of their inevitable connection with death, and his mistrust of technology's offer to take this responsibility away. As Murray summarises, technology, 'creates an appetite for

immortality on the one hand (and) threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is just removed from nature' (W.N. p.285). It is the confusingly paradoxical nature of technology that causes Jack to begin to echo Heinrich's thoughts, thoughts he previously found hostile as they involve the body being accepted as machine-like and potentially a stranger to its occupant. When Heinrich discusses why the serial killer he writes to committed murders, he aligns humans with cyborgs, a combination of flesh and machine:

It's all this activity in the brain and you don't know what's you as a person and what's some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire (W.N. p.46).

The inference is that bodily actions are not controllable. When this ambivalence is combined with misplaced trust in the media, it is easy to imagine Blacksmith's inhabitants psychosomatically producing the physical symptoms their radios warn them about: sweaty palms; vomiting; déjà vu (memories without origin). Jack has already testified to the power of official suggestion with his comment that the tests run on him could easily convince a healthy person of illness. With the acceptance of the disaster's official title, 'The Airborne Toxic Event' the people of Blacksmith distance themselves further from any reality by focussing on its seductive, mediated representation. Jack's family are expert in this distancing procedure, having honed it through their ritualistic television viewing. The television offers them a panoramic view, more comprehensive than actually being present could provide, and the more disaster footage they see, the more complacent they become, with catastrophic scenes struggling to be dramatic and gruesome enough:

Watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping (W.N. p.64).

They watch events happening rapidly, even simultaneously, addicted to the constantly

circulating global news their televisions offer, particularly its public traumas.<sup>31</sup> The disaster simulation company, Simuvac, claims that: 'The more we rehearse disaster, the safer we'll be from the real thing' (W.N. p.205), yet the Gladney's avid consumption of disaster footage suggests a creation of disaster rather than any averting of it. The bombardment of differing versions from all over the world, furthermore, negates the possibility of ever locating any truthful origins. There is no breathing or thinking space, no before or after; everything is available and 'in your face'. Events are reported as they happen, or even before they happen. The novel's simulated disasters pre-empt death by practising it in much the same way that the 'Millennium Bug', was monitored on one side of the world, so that distant countries could act upon the happenings of the new Millennium before it technically took place within their 'reality'. Accepted time-scales are redundant when the future, as Jean-Francois Lyotard predicted, increasingly appears in the present because of the human tendency towards self-precipitation.<sup>32</sup> The suggestion is that humans over-reach and over-extend themselves, determined to prove, to label and tie down. Lyotard claims that this is impossible due to the evolving and circular status of life. There is always room to question, to discuss and explore further. He also predicts that if knowledge is accepted as finite and unquestionable it will come to be accrued instantly with the implantation of microchips in the brain, without any studying or analysis. Recalling Jack's description of the experimental drug Dylar this, literally, presents 'technology with a human face' (W.N. p.211). At the time of publication Lyotard's ideas seemed extremely far-fetched, to be aligned with science-fiction novels. However, more recently society's collusion with similar developments has become apparent. The film *The Matrix*, reflects a world where knowledge and skills, such as martial arts, are gained, by implantation, not only incredibly quickly, but to very high levels of

accuracy and performance.<sup>33</sup> If knowledge, as suggested above, is intrinsically bonded to the creation of masculinity through the control it offers, then technology, via such developments as microchips in the brain, can be viewed as a direct threat to masculinity, as presently perceived.

Lyotard's ideas *appeared* fantastic but computer technology has progressed rapidly, with part of this rapid development encompassing the enormous resources of the Internet, which in some ways has had similar effects to a micro-chip in the brain. The Internet, it could be claimed, creates an environment where nobody needs actually to learn, or know, anything anymore; that someone, or rather something, will do our knowing on our behalf, but as Heinrich comments:

What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything (W.N. p.149).

Part of this floating knowledge controls whether or not individuals will be deemed sufficiently valid to be allowed money from their bank accounts. Jack comments on the comfort he gleans from the automated bank teller's decision that his own calculations to reach a balance are correct: 'Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval (W.N. p.46). The 'system' operates in 'waves', using its unseen radiation to stimulate Jack's emotions and ensure his encoding into the system, both literally and metaphorically. When his new bankcard arrives through the post the instructions are explicit and precisely defined. To be allowed to operate within the societal system Jack must obey these rules: 'Only your card allows you to enter the system'(W.N. p.295).<sup>34</sup> The thorough systemisation of humans renders them cyborgian without the need for any metal or plastic bodily additions.<sup>35</sup>

The expert manner in which the college parents have entered this system is commented on by Jack, and connected to societal parenting within strictly obeyed parameters, the achievement of which causes much smugness:

Husbands...accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage...collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation...they've grown comfortable with their money...they genuinely believe they're entitled to it. This conviction gives them a kind of rude health. They glow a little (W.N. p.3-4 & 6).

Babette reminds Jack that no matter how much constructs achieve, death still lingers. It is just, perhaps, harder to envisage at this comfortable level. Jack, a materialistic achiever himself, responds: 'Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands'(W.N. p.6).

As part of his ongoing attempts to identify himself as a correctly functioning male Jack gathers around him the offspring of his various marriages. He hopes that this will demonstrate his ability to be a socially commendable father, and that by showing a selfless love for his family, shifting the emphasis from himself to others, he may become less afraid of death. The sights, sounds and wonders of the world are unremittingly linked to death and decay. Keith Tester cites this awareness as the reason why people secure themselves in 'safe little houses', looking to formulated 'love' for consolation.<sup>36</sup> Jack comments on the elements he feels contribute to 'family life', and the way in which it can be adopted as a conduit for emotion:

Heat, noise, lights, looks, words, gestures, personalities, appliances. A colloquial density that makes family life the one medium of sense knowledge in which astonishment of heart is routinely contained (W.N. p.117).

None of the children who live with Jack share the same set of parents due to multiple divorces<sup>37</sup>. In an attempt to overcome this postmodern fragmentation Jack takes Heinrich, his eldest son to such events as the asylum burning down, believing that

there is something primal about such raging destruction which cannot help but unite a father and son:

There were other men at the scene with their adolescent boys. Evidently fathers and sons seek fellowship at such events. Fires help draw them closer, provide a conversational wedge. There is equipment to appraise, the technique of firemen to discuss and criticize. The manliness of firefighting – the virility of fires, one might say, suits the kind of laconic dialogue that fathers and sons can undertake without awkwardness or embarrassment (W.N. p.239).

Jack makes similar comments about the ability, or otherwise, of men to fix things. He feels uneasy about his own lack of skill with his hands, and believes that this somehow makes him less of a 'man'. He comments, 'What could be more useless than a man who couldn't fix a dripping faucet – fundamentally useless, dead to history, to the messages in his genes?' (W.N. p.245). Whilst watching the asylum burn down Jack and Heinrich are assaulted by a caustic odour which Jack feels reminds him far too graphically that death is always lingering, continuous and ever present, over-hanging and threatening the comfortable identity being created:

The crowd broke up. It was as though we'd been forced to recognize the existence of a second kind of death. One was real, the other synthetic. The odor drove us away but beneath it and far worse was the sense that death came two ways, sometimes at once, and how death entered your mouth and nose, how death smelled, could make a difference to your soul (W.N. p.240).

The omnipresence of death is reiterated by Murray and linked, via the supposed side effects of the toxic cloud, into the *déjà vu* he feels is experienced every day:

Most of us have probably seen our own death but haven't known how to make the material surface. Maybe when we die, the first thing we'll say is, "I know this feeling. I was here before" (W.N. p.151).

Murray's insistence that 'death is in the air' leads him to proposition the local prostitutes. He is not interested in sexual intercourse but rather in performing the Heimlich manoeuvre on one of them as a way to demonstrate his masculine strength and prowess, a certain invincibility in uncertain times:

As long as she makes gagging and choking sounds. As long as she sighs deeply when I jolt the pelvis. As long as she collapses helplessly backward into my life-saving embrace (W.N. p.153).

The prostitutes are knowing and self-contained, supportive within their own tight-knit group. Contemporary women are portrayed as having a growing sexual awareness and knowledge, and consequently a willingness which men find threatening. Jack's father-in-law worries that:

Wives will do things. They want to do things ... It used to be the only thing available in the American home was the basic natural act. Now you have the options too. The action is thick ... wives wear edible panties. They know the words, the usages (W.N. p.246).

This breaching of boundaries between what is 'seemly' and what is not is not limited to female sexuality and its refusal to remain passive. Jack is taken aback when his German teacher puts his fingers into his mouth: 'Once he reached in with his right hand to adjust my tongue. It was a strange and terrible moment, an act of haunting intimacy. No one had ever handled my tongue before' (W.N. p.173). There are certain things that humans are conditioned not to do and if one of them occurs there is no frame of reference, no coping strategy by which to deal with the act. Jack begins his relationship with this man by doubting his masculinity due to the softness of his skin, an opinion which is shallow, but is relatively harmless: 'Soft hands in a man give me pause. Soft skin in general. Baby skin. I don't think he shaves' (W.N. p.32). However, after the tongue-handling incident Jack and Murray decide between them that he looks like a man who would find dead bodies erotic, then: 'A grim lasciviousness escaped his body and seemed to circulate through the barricaded room' (W.N. p.238). Fear of difference is all-encompassing and men who do not conform to societal standards of behaviour and appearance are judged harshly. Jack perfectly demonstrates how this judging of others is inherently linked to the formation of our own persona.

What gradually dawns about this formation - that it is created from sections of what is seen, heard and read about - is vividly reflected in Jack's discussion of Willie Mink. He claims to be trying not to think about 'that staticky figure in the Grayview Motel putting his unfinished hands on (his) wife' (W.N. p.230), but is dwelling on him enough to berate her:

How do you offer your body to a composite of three or more people? This is a compound person. He is like a police sketch of one person's eyebrows, another person's nose. Let's concentrate on the genitals. How many sets are we talking about? (W.N. p.194).

Mink is a hazy figure now, but when he describes his former life as project manager, along with the success he enjoyed in this role, he claims to have been in the position to look at 'himself' as a separate entity. Although created he was whole, and capable of a sharper focus: 'I envied myself' (W.N. p.308). This represents perhaps the ultimate use of stereotypes as a delusion to 'self' rather than any 'other'. When the accepted version is overturned by the chemical disaster Jack comments on the atmosphere in the hall filled with evacuees:

Remarks existed in a state of permanent flotation. No one thing was either more or less plausible than any other thing. As people jolted out of reality, we were released from the need to distinguish (W.N. p.129).

The creation of a personal 'reality' is echoed by Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* as justification for his blood-letting.<sup>38</sup> When the Governor visits the disaster area he uses the event as part of *his* reality; within his public relations campaign it represents a photo opportunity. Arriving by helicopter, he utilises the very technology that has caused the spill, and ensures that he remains far enough away from the area designated as 'dangerous', whilst still able to claim to having been there. However, he is not indestructible and is killed when the helicopter crashes, thus reinforcing the ever-present danger and life-threatening capacities of modern technology.

Jack appreciates the threats posed by rapidly developing technologies, yet is

unable to resist them, citing the German-made gun he is given by his father in law as powerful enough to alter his world: 'The gun created a second reality for me to inhabit' (W.N. p.297). This statement reinforces his belief in technological machinery and activity, but also his fascination with what he sees as the might of the German nation, and particularly Hitler.

**Learning & language as defence from death: 'I am cured of my own lonely dying'.<sup>39</sup>**

Jack tries to appropriate Hitler's larger than life image as his own in a postmodern recycling aimed at absorbing his fear of death. Murray compliments him:

You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can as much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction, literally or metaphorically. This is the center, the unquestioned source. He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler (W.N. p.11).

Murray is eager to imitate Hitler Studies by substituting Elvis, convinced that one icon's representation will do just as well as another, because it is the act of myth creation that takes precedence, not the reality. A defining characteristic of postmodernism, the acceptance of diverse subject matters, is restricted by the insistence that origins are validated. However, the fact that Jack has *created* these origins and lives in constant fear of being exposed as a fraud, suggests that they deserve rigorous and cynical scrutiny. Jack comments himself on Murray's conscious creation of 'an academic':

There was something touching about the fact that Murray was dressed almost totally in corduroy. I had the feeling that since the age of eleven in his crowded plot of concrete he'd associated this sturdy fabric with higher learning in some impossibly distant and tree shaded place (W.N. p.11).

Not only does Murray construct this image for himself, he constructs courses he feels will court success, based upon Jack's experience. Jack makes a guest appearance at

Murray's initial Elvis lecture to give it his official seal of approval (W.N. p.71-2) and comments afterwards that: 'I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal' (W.N. p.73). It is not clear whose madness this is, his own, Hitler's, or some combination. He comments further on the fragility of the created image: 'We all had an aura to maintain and by sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very things that made me untouchable' (W.N. p.74). Jack's identity is completely bound up in ideas of academic self-aggrandisement.

It is inherently ironic to be attempting to 'teach' in a society deemed postmodern. Rather than dismissing grand narratives teaching potentially perpetuates them. By choosing to create and teach a module about Hitler, Jack illustrates this clearly. He does not take the opportunity to re-visit and re-assess the myths surrounding Hitler but rather validates fascist beliefs by adhering to an 'approved version'. Insider knowledge, like self-knowledge, illustrates a certain level of self-consciousness. The traditional college novel represents the professors as objects of ridicule; either they are intellectuals who cannot cope with life, or alternatively, they are control freaks who put all their energies into dominating others. Both of these unflattering descriptions fit Jack to a certain extent. The students do not simply study a narrative history; they are encouraged to respond adoringly to Professor Gladney, endowing him with the same hypnotic ability as his subject matter, Hitler. Jack claims to be teaching 'Advanced Nazism' due to Hitler's perceived similarities with television. He feels they both have the same dictatorial power over the enthralled masses, absorbing and destroying any conflicting opinions. Like the Nazi faithful, Jack's students give up their minds to him and the education system; they give up their individual powers of determination to become part of a crowd, a mass

consciousness.<sup>40</sup> They are the modern hyper-crowd, self-aware of their own ‘crowd-ness’.

What Bataille terms, the, ‘isolation of individual separateness’ undoubtedly makes crowds more attractive. However, as well as offering a certain homogenous comfort they are also, paradoxically, frightening and threatening, with their potential to crush and obliterate.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, Jack’s charade with Hitler Studies only serves to make him more vulnerable as he creates a myth of invincible power impossible to live up to: ‘Hitler...I spoke the name often, hoping it would overpower my insecure sentence structure’ (W.N. p.274). He lives in fear of his fellow professors and the ‘actual Germans’ at his conference discovering that his grasp of the German language is inadequate, or that the innocuous name ‘Jack’ is loitering behind the grandiose initials J.A.K. He describes his situation as, ‘living... on the edge of a landscape of vast shame’(W.N. p.31). Rather than embracing and exposing a postmodern valorisation of surface, he desperately searches for origins, hiding his ageing eyes and body behind dark glasses and academic robes.<sup>42</sup> He has begun to nervously admit that ‘Hitler Studies’ puts him further away from his potential to have a ‘real’ self, if such a thing can be achieved:

The chancellor had advised me, back in 1968, to do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator. Jack Gladney would not do, he said, and asked me what other names I might have at my disposal. We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J.A.K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit. The chancellor warned against what he called my tendency to make a feeble presentation of self. He strongly suggested I gain weight. He wanted me to “grow out” into Hitler. He himself was tall, paunchy, ruddy, jowly, big-footed and dull. A formidable combination. I had the advantages of substantial height, big hands, big feet, but badly needed bulk, or so he believed – an air of unhealthy excess, of padding and exaggeration, hulking massiveness. If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career enormously. So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward... The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea...Babette said (the disguise) intimated dignity and prestige. I am the false character that follows the name around (W.N. p.16 -17).

He demonstrates Baudrillard's allegation that representation has replaced reality. New and different personae can be invented, and gradually authenticated. The Chancellor does not admit to re-inventing Jack; he insinuates that he is filling out his 'true self'. The term 're-invent' suggests that what is being replaced was already an invention, a circularity of creation illustrated by his fellow university lecturers who include former journalists, sportsmen and celebrity body guards, merely reinvented into 'teachers'. The J.A.K. Gladney that develops is just another in life's series of disguises, no nearer to any tangible reality. Instead of security, gleaned from the comfort of the elusive 'authentic', Jack is caught up in his own hype, cocooned in self-myth, like his hero and academic inspiration, Hitler. Both men are masquerading behind a show of power, which is merely a façade waiting to be discovered. Their fetishistic desires are not grounded in any genuine reality; they are similarly tied into layers of fantasy and illusion. The overlapping possibilities of time and place, built upon representations, ensure that they can never be re-created; there is no substance or origins to return to or imitate.

Hitler anticipated the ephemeral nature of his power by asking Albert Speer to design classical buildings representing the Nazi party, buildings which would decay magnificently, and astonish posterity (W.N. p.257-8). These architectural decisions encouraged Hitler to believe that he could control the future, by ensuring that there would be definite and predictable happenings, which he could isolate in the style of a grand narrative. Ironically, by trying to predict the future and dictate nostalgia, he suspends chronology and emphasises the difficulty in ever assessing modernity and postmodernity as separate entities. Traditionally the present is lived in, whilst looking to the future, with the past firmly behind. However, Lyotard suggests that viewing the future as experienced before the past is a way of coming to terms with postmodern

times: '*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)'.<sup>43</sup> Jack, like his hero, tries to control his future, but his impersonation of power cannot save him from dying anymore than Hitler could keep himself from ruin. Jack would justify his associations with Hitler by claiming to identify with his representation rather than his insidious reality. However, by parodying him he ensures that the Nazi leader becomes familiar enough to be sanitised, even deemed harmless. Indeed when one of his ex-wives asks Jack how his job is going the conversation breathes life into the long-dead aggressor. The question: "How is Hitler?", brings the reply: "Fine, solid, dependable" (W.N. p. 89), referring to what Hitler's image is doing for his career.

The complex relationship between grand narratives and postmodernity is further illustrated within the University, where popular culture is seen to be vying with the more 'traditional subjects'. The courses do not exist chronologically, or historically, but instead compete with each other for validity, indeed superiority, within an uncomfortably incestuous, yet at the same time competitive, environment. The traditional English degree could be viewed as an archetypal grand narrative with its veneration of the 'Canon', an approved version, with supposedly provable origins. What is taught centres upon 'authentic' literature; that which has already been given official recognition. The contemporary courses offering the study of films and television adverts (in Jack's university there are 'full professors ...who read nothing but cereal boxes' W.N. p.10), present alternatives. However, if these alternatives are simply destined to become the grand narratives of the future, with accepted readings reproduced in multiple text books, then individual interpretation will merely become part of the new normative, rather than part of a multiplicity capable of overturning *one* official version.

Lyotard claims postmodernism marks the end of credibility in such official versions, and their attempts to legitimate constructs. He asks how enlightenment discourses which supposedly relate to human progress and liberation can ever be taken seriously in the wake of such atrocities as Auschwitz, and points out that any possibility of cultural, political or ethical certainty is negated by human beings' harsh treatment of each other.<sup>44</sup> Due to the inadequacy of grand narratives he promotes instead the 'countless other stories (minor and not so minor ... which) ... weave the fabric of everyday life'.<sup>45</sup> This creates difficulties for writers and filmmakers as, whilst it may be more realistic to view society as consisting of multiple 'little' narratives, it is not always easy to represent it as such. Lyotard describes such 'little narratives' as equally valid, disproportionate parts that do not conform to controlling cultural forms because they cannot be easily described or cannot speak for themselves, due to insufficient knowledge of the dominant language. Books themselves could be claimed to be conforming to, or assisting the creation of, a grand narrative. Lyotard put *The Postmodern Explained to Children* together from sections of letters, with no ends or beginnings, and no linear thread. The isolated snippets are read as little voices, welcoming difference, and resisting fixity.

Amongst the multiple strands forming society there are inevitably sections that, for whatever reason, cannot adequately represent themselves. Lyotard names these unrepresentable sections the 'differend', claiming them to be incommensurable with the dominant societal 'norms', yet no less valid.<sup>46</sup> The danger is that these small sections will be ignored or abused. Lyotard suggests that this can be avoided by celebrating the 'differend': 'Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name'.<sup>47</sup> He acknowledges that it is easier to accept the majority opinion but wants to at least make

the effort to question and analyse, to *refuse* the ‘consolation of correct forms... consensus of taste and common...nostalgia’.<sup>48</sup> Such common accord can be seen directly illustrated by ‘The Most Photographed Barn’, especially when scrutinised in the light of John Frow’s writing on tourism, discussed earlier. As Frow states, our nostalgia makes no allowance for ‘difference’.

Babette’s son, Wilder, is an example of such difference with his protracted crying bout which lasts over seven hours (W.N. p 79), and his inability (or refusal) to speak. He is portrayed as ‘wilder’ than the rest of the family. His reactions are more instinctive, he looks for Babette in and around the television after her brief appearance and cries when she disappears, unable to accept the power of the radiated image in the same unquestioning way as his siblings. He further demonstrates his lack of cohesion with the modern world by pedalling his tricycle across the motorway (W.N. p.322). Murray claims that Wilder is different because ‘He doesn’t know he’s going to die. He doesn’t know death at all. You cherish this simpleton blessing of his’ (W.N. p.289). However, rather than his lack of ‘normality’ leading to a categorisation as ‘retarded’ the family treat him as special and revered.<sup>49</sup> Jack describes him:

His great round head, set as it was on a small–limbed and squattish body, gave him the look of a primitive clay figurine, some household idol of obscure and cultic derivation. I had the feeling he wanted to show me something (W.N. p.242).

In *Madness & Civilisation* Foucault discusses asylums as an intrinsic part of modernity, claiming that before their advent those confined there as ‘mad’ due to their vagrancy or mental/physical differences would have been accepted into the community, even valued for their difference.<sup>50</sup> They would be viewed as having something special to offer, a certain insight or wisdom setting them apart from ordinary mortals, and certainly not to be dismissed. Within Wilder Jack sees ‘the spirit of genius at work’ (W.N. p.209). When the insane asylum burns down (W.N. p.239),

watched by Jack and Heinrich, it is a postmodern symbol for the overturning of such categories, or at least some re-assessment of who decides what constitutes 'normal'. The tendency is to cite personal inadequacy and dismiss those who do not fit societal categories easily as deviant or pathological, they are targeted on an individual level when it is more feasible that the institutionalisation of society is to blame.

The historic support for 'reason' as, in Victor Seidler's words, the 'legislator of reality'<sup>51</sup> leads, via the close association of masculinity with reason, to an implied authority for men to form a world according to their notion. It is a construction giving priority to 'reason' and rationality, encouraging man to live an emotionless, dutiful life, functioning apart from anything that may be classed as 'natural'. Emotional behaviour and acts that could be blamed on some inherent 'nature' are classified as messy, dirty and uncivilised; to remain in control, instincts must be ignored. This encourages modern man's intense valorisation of technology and the denigration of nature with its chaotic, female associations. The protracted suppression of emotional needs leads to the impossibility of expression, and the encouragement of a societal 'norm' that includes wives and mothers dealing with emotional needs on the behalf of husbands and sons. The selfless meeting of uncommunicated needs, rather than being 'loving' is merely another strand of societal relationships of domination and power, part of a network of control.

**Conclusion: 'All plots tend to move deathward'.<sup>52</sup>**

A determination to control and depict all eventualities is defeated by the unrepresentability of death. Man tries desperately to familiarise the process, yet cannot survive to describe his experience. Jack illustrates the abiding tensions of balancing a consumer lifestyle and fragmented identity. He is anxious and insecure,

unfulfilled and questioning, forever wandering around the supermarket. He believes that death and plotting are infrangibly linked, and therefore wants to foster a certain oxymoronic contrived aimlessness: 'May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan' (W.N. p.98). Once more his controlling instincts are confused and undercut by his postmodern experience. The urge to plot, despite its aiding of the onrush of death, is emphasised by the never-ending lists of writers who continuously produce narratives. As Lyotard claims, attributing, 'The Writer' with a certain psychic or pre-emptive power: '(The writer formulates) *what will have been done*... characters, events...they always come too late for their author'.<sup>53</sup> The future has always already happened, in as much as it is always predicted and pre-formed, to make the present bearable. Despite the palliative effect of working towards a perfectly constructed golden future, which is perceived as 'waiting', whatever actually happens will always have been experienced already. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons discusses Bataille's work in terms of, 'the potential force of poetic violence'<sup>54</sup>. This violence is released by writing and contributes a further level of energy to the swirling white noise. In DeLillo's *Mao II* the writer Bill Gray deliberately allows himself to die in a sacrificial act, which he knows will have various outcomes. He is dying, literally, to make his new book 'good'. He wants to grant it a certain validity and instant cult status. He is also attempting to grasp a unique and original experience, in a world with which he has become increasingly disillusioned. He hides his face in order that the image it presents cannot be corrupted by this world.<sup>55</sup>

As a reclusive author, very much in the mould of J.D.Salinger, Bill shows the American dream gone wrong, following Bataille's logic: 'When we curse death we only fear ourselves'<sup>56</sup> and illustrating that death must be faced. Bill simply does not

fight it. Injured in a traffic accident, he does not kill himself, but nor does he attempt to keep himself alive. Instead he accepts that life and death are inseparable, and hopes that through this acceptance he will find peace. Again this echoes the resignation of Bataille when he proclaims: 'I imagine myself covered with blood, broken but transfigured and in agreement with the world, both as prey and as jaw of TIME, which ceaselessly kills as it is ceaselessly killed'.<sup>57</sup> He further posits that whilst life and death are part of the same experience, there is a distinct moment when life slips into death, a hiatus when man is neither alive nor dead, but simply 'travelling'. This brief moment between life and death, when 'being (passes into) nothingness',<sup>58</sup> is demonstrated by Bill as *his* being flows through stages, both literally and metaphorically, whilst he travels by boat. Bill sacrifices himself in 'the human action more significant than any other',<sup>59</sup> going one step further than Jack and his bungled attempts to sacrifice Mink. Bataille explains the sacred nature of sacrifice as coming from its paradoxical ties with continuity. He sees 'the sacred (as) the revelation of the continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite'.<sup>60</sup> Considering death as not an end, but rather as a continuation connects death firmly with the postmodern condition claimed by Lyotard to be 'nascent',<sup>61</sup> constantly being re-born. There is no end, only multiple overlapping and repetitious beginnings, events, as within the novel, both precede and copy, are followed and following.

These multi-stranded, multi-directional versions are further illustrated by DeLillo in *Underworld*, a novel whose narrative uses a baseball passed through generations as a memento to symbolise differing and multitudinous realities, and a thread to connect these differing versions. Loose connections, chosen in preference to

any precise and linear plot, are once again an avoidance of death. *Underworld*

provides the major focus of the next section.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986), p.60.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the 'I' as revealed in psychoanalytic experience' *Ecrits: A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) (London: Penguin, 1991), discusses the way in which the sexual drive is prioritised above the object of this drive hence acting as a prohibitive factor within relationship formation.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Lapsley & Michael Westlake, 'From *Casablanca* to *Pretty Woman*: the Politics of Romance' *Contemporary Film Theory*. Ed. Anthony Easthope, London: Longman, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie A Fiedler, 'More Images of Eros and Old Age', in K Woodward & MM Schwarz, *Memory, Desire & Ageing: Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p.50. The binding of ageing, impotence and death is further illustrated by DeLillo, using Bill Gray the reclusive author in *Mao II* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991). When interviewed DeLillo himself admitted his own urges to adopt the name 'Bill Gray' and simply disappear.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, Trans. Mary Dalwood (London: M. Boyars, 1987), p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927 – 1939* Ed. & intro Allan Stoekl, Trans. Allan Stoekl, C R Lovitt & D M Leslie Jnr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.239.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Bataille writing about Nietzsche, quoted by Derrida in *Writing & Difference*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.263. Italics in original.

<sup>10</sup> Victor J Seidler, *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity & Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.18.

<sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature & Evil* (London: M. Boyars, 1985), p.17.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Trans. P. Foss & P. Patton (New York: Semiotext(e) 1983). Michel Foucault suggests in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.352 that, (Man) 'constitutes representations by means of which he lives'. Baudrillard feels that these representations are man's only 'reality'.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Trans. By Robert Hurley (London: Zone Books, 1988), p.24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>16</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism & Consumer Society' *Postmodern Culture* Ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1985), p.21.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1999), p.30.

<sup>18</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p.68-9. Marcel Mauss discusses 'potlatch' in *The Gift: The Form & Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. WD Halls, (London: Routledge, 1990). For further discussion within thesis see Section Four - *American Psycho*.

<sup>19</sup> Murray welcomes the 'small-town setting', 'I can't help being happy in a town called Blacksmith' (W.N. p.11). He describes cities as being full of heat, sex and too many people, ironic in view of the unfolding action: Babette's affair, drug abuse, attempted murder, the chemical spill etc. The Treadwells, an elderly couple, get lost (one of them later dying) in the 'Mid-village mall', negating its purported wholesomeness.

<sup>20</sup> This suggestion is repeated by Zoyd in *Vineland*, p. 313.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication' *Postmodern Culture* Ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1985), p.133. The 'masses' are also discussed in, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

<sup>22</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p.217.

<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, p.38.

<sup>24</sup> John Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory & Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.67.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

<sup>28</sup> Mike Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary: Baudrillard & Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> In *Neuromancer* William Gibson describes the cyberspace Jack's data makes up a tiny part of as: 'A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation... a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding' (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p.51.

<sup>30</sup> Seidler, *Unreasonable Men*, p.138.

<sup>31</sup> Stjepan G Mestrovic discusses the re-packaging of news into entertainment in *Postemotional Society* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.79.

<sup>33</sup> *The Matrix* – Joel Silver (Warner Bros. 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Characters within both Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* and Pynchon's *Vineland* find the same resistance from official bank computers to validate them with cash until they agree to conform more stringently.

<sup>35</sup> Donna J Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology & Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', *Simians, Cyborgs & Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Keith Tester, *The Inhuman Condition* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> The Sky One series *Once & Again* demonstrates such intertwined families by letting each individual 'speak' to the camera alone, giving their version, as though in therapy.

<sup>38</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991). See Section Four.

<sup>39</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p.273.

<sup>40</sup> Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), also illustrates this crowd mentality with the combination of photographic image and narrative. The pictures include swarming masses in Tianamen square, a multiple Moonies wedding in the Yankee stadium, Ayatollah Khomeini's funeral and the Hillsborough football stadium disaster. Terrorists within the narrative entirely give over any claim to a separate identity by wearing hoods emblazoned with pictures of their fundamentalist leader.

<sup>41</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.20.

<sup>42</sup> Jack has compromised himself by taking the academic gown and all that goes with it; the relative security of a salary, pension etc. , in exchange for the unfettered vibrancy of new and disturbing ideas. His methods of 'teaching' Hitler are dogmatically predetermined.

<sup>43</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.81.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (London: Turnaround, 1992). Lyotard cites the Christian narrative with its promise of redemption, the Marxist narrative with predicted emancipation from exploitation, the capitalist narrative proclaiming emancipation from poverty etc.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. , p.31.

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Differend is an apt word to represent something with no exact translation, as *it* has no exact English translation.

<sup>47</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.82.

<sup>48</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, p.24.

<sup>49</sup> Wilder's mother's insistence on helping the 'disabled', and even coaching people to breathe correctly argues against her acceptance of difference. She proclaims that, 'The handicapped were morally bound to higher types of entertainment. If we couldn't look to them for victories of the human spirit, who could we look to?' (W.N. p.57), confirming that she feels there are definite standards to be upheld, rather than any embracing of multiplicity. Yet, she dotes on her own son, who is far from 'normal' and cites that one of the most important things to her is that he stays, 'The way he is for ever'(W.N.p.236).

<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> Seidler, *Unreasonable Men*, p.65.

<sup>52</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p.26.

<sup>53</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.81.

<sup>54</sup> 'Sacrifice & Violence in Bataille's Fiction', Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons, *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p.94.

<sup>55</sup> DeLillo, *Mao II*, p.36.

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Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. By Leon. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Kristeva claims this will only be relieved by death, 'It is only after his death, eventually, that the writer of abjection will escape his condition of waste, reject, abject. Then he will either sink into oblivion or attain the rank of incommensurate ideal' (p. 1).

<sup>56</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p.34.

<sup>57</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.239.

<sup>58</sup> Bataille, *Literature & Evil*, p.163.

<sup>59</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.73.

<sup>60</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.82.

<sup>61</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.79.

## SECTION THREE

### DON DELILLO'S *UNDERWORLD* - 'Refuse heaped many stories high'.<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

*Underworld* continues the investigation the other texts have started into the boundaries of contemporary society. History, memory and theory are linked in a postmodern bricolage, offered to the reader in a fragmented, overlapping and disorientating way. The result is that ideas of a historical past are questioned along with formerly accepted cultural stereotypes. The narrative's lack of chronology and tendency to blend and overlap events subtly undermines the validity of any teleological, future-focused linearity. Celebrated figures are displayed as disturbed and unstable, their lack of heroic appeal casting doubts over their 'right' to be revered. The narrow divisions between dirty and clean, good and evil, even life and death, cause the reader to doubt any possibility of heroic integrity. 'The masculine, 'the hero' and 'the self', are all confirmed as fabricated identities, constructed by the collective myth systems of religion, science, the arts and 'history'.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally the American narrative hero is the exemplum of the 'male body', consisting of both form and morality, with a certain 'wholeness', or perfection, clearly differentiating him from the world at large. For the text to be both believable and entertaining its protagonist should masquerade as 'hero' within certain parameters, some given and others presumed. Adhering to these rules ensures his rapid and insidious creation within the reader's mind, in response to the socially conditioned urge to find someone to believe in and aspire to. Just as culture encourages, indeed expects, adherence to legitimate gender identities, in turn similar expectations are made of fictional heroes. They must offer a solution, albeit a temporary one, to

appease the 'need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls'.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with their readers they must conform to approved stereotypes by displaying the correct symptoms. Failure to do so results in being categorised as 'unacceptable within our present construction'.<sup>4</sup> This lack of acceptability confers the labels undeserving and inauthentic.

Because the blueprint for what is deemed an acceptable gender identity is produced by the social and institutional practices operating within a patriarchal hierarchy the physical body becomes central to political concerns of power and resistance. As Nick in *Underworld* says, 'They control...you have to improvise and dissemble. They establish the limits of your existence' (U. p.444). The Western definition of masculinity is embedded in the work ethic; consequently, money is equated to value and self-worth. Men are portrayed as 'providers', with bad behaviour over-looked in exchange for cash. Because Nick hands over his wages, his mother ignores his sexually indiscreet and criminally violent behaviour. In a way that is reminiscent of films such as *Good Will Hunting* (1998) and *Sleepers* (1996), Nick is an integral member of a gang of violent juvenile delinquents and petty criminals, he is eventually sent to reform school. Throughout his life his connections with the Mafia continue to have an impact on his identity. His mother's acceptance of the conventional belief that men behave in a certain way is juxtaposed with the postmodern chaos that a lack of boundaries brings.

Disorder springs from the confession that social forms, adopted in a widespread manner, are in fact false and constructed. This dichotomy is reflected throughout the narrative by constant comparisons of faith in logical cognition, the 'never to be satisfied search for authenticity',<sup>5</sup> with the postmodern lack of cognitive

justification, chronology, and causality, and instead a respect for the 'actual pulsing thing'(U. p.805).

**Brothers, Fathers – separate but joined: 'The fraternity of missing men'.<sup>6</sup>**

*Underworld's* characters perpetuate this divide by behaving either rationally or physically. Nick Shay, the central protagonist and older brother, is resolutely, and aggressively sexual. His brute physicality reminds the reader of the larger than life Hollywood action films of the 1980s: 'films that take the male hero to historically unparalleled levels of omnipotence'.<sup>7</sup> For instance, portrayals such as Stallone's *Rambo*, or Schwarzenegger's *Terminator*. These films present 'heroes' as men who are darkly attractive, yet muscle-bound and monosyllabic, physically developed yet emotionally inept, dealing with situations where the priority is always, 'which body crushes the other' (U. p. 797).<sup>8</sup> This swaggering masculinity leads the seventeen year old Nick to the fatal shooting of an acquaintance, graphically illustrating that 'Killing is...machismo taken to extreme'.<sup>9</sup> Although the religious and academic guidance he receives whilst incarcerated for this crime ensures that he is learned and secures a good job, he is still haunted by the past and emotionally and spiritually lacking. He uses the status of his employment to identify and protect himself: 'I...felt assured and well defended, safe in my office box and my crisp white shirt connected to things that made me stronger' (U. p.119). Heroes are expected to take death-defying risks and Nick *does* deal with toxic waste, however, his exposure is minimised by his cosseted 'bronze tower' existence (U. p.119).

Matty, a cerebral chess genius who does not mix well, is consistently identified as 'Nick's (younger) brother'. This position grows in prestige after Nick's arrest, when Matty becomes 'a little bit of a hero with his brother upstate, doing what he'd done ... boys from blocks around wanted to know him' (U. p.745 & 606). As a

result of this Matty grows up with a strong desire to find a different identity, other than the one being a sibling brings him. He thinks he can pin this down by taking a remote job in systems:

He'd wanted to do weapons...wanted the edge, the identity...the honing (of) silhouette, knowing himself...better - a secret installation in the desert ...a sterner life...the fixing of wilful limits (U. p.402 & 413).

However, his decision does not present him with the satisfactory identity he hoped for; indeed Matty deliberates endlessly about the moral implications of designing weapons. He feels his true calling is to give himself over to learning, read for a Doctorate, write papers and contribute to 'think-tanks'. The 'job' is cited as defining the man, and both brothers are deeply entwined in their job descriptions. Matty allows Nick's definitions to dominate, worrying about his opinion to the extent of holding fantasy conversations:

He might say 'this is the way you define yourself as a serious man, working through the hard questions and harrowing choices, and if you stick with it you'll be stronger in the end.' Or he might say, 'Fool, what kind of mark will this make on your soul when you become a father like me? Think of the guilt of raising your children in the world you've made - your talent put to such desolate use.' Speaking softly now. 'And who knows the ticklish business of weapons better than I do, Brother?' (U. p.416).

Matty is torn between the desire to mimic Nick, and the need to be his opposite. They function like two halves of the same person, giving conflicting opinions to avoid making a decision. They are fatherless and keenly feel the profound urge for secrecy of parent-less children. This manifests itself as an urge to keep something their own, special and revered. Their father's unexplained desertion into a 'lower world' recalls the disposal of waste and like the waste he must be dealt with. Rather than accept a silent and unseen decomposition, the surveillance impulse is adopted. Nick will not accept that his father may have left willingly and imagines him kidnapped or 'wasted' (U. p.210). Matty is convinced that, having disappeared 'through a crack in the

pavement' (U. p.808) he is leading a parallel life in some other place, 'unknown to us in the crawlspaces of the infrastructure, down the tunnels and under the bridge approaches'(U. p.323). Whichever excuse is closest to the truth their father is managing to avoid the restricting socialisation of accepting the moral and economic responsibility for his family.<sup>10</sup> The brother's negative identities - they are portrayed as what the other is not - enforce the idea that the 'other' is only ever a breath away, at the opposite side of an eminently breachable boundary. The paradox they display of extreme closeness *and* difference, similarity *and* distance, illustrates how easily each may represent the other's abject, what they are not, or cannot face.

Julia Kristeva likens this closeness to an ability to re-duplicate, like the multiple personas encouraged by therapy. She connects existence to finding a voice: 'the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat'.<sup>11</sup> Identification may be likened to cells endlessly splitting, repeating what has been done, imitating the past, imitating parents, pre-empting the future. The narrative confirms human identity as a fragile construct; a stable self can only be achieved with the disavowal of what had previously been labelled as valid parts. Kristeva defines this incorporation and evacuation as abjection, a process by which the subject repulses inherent parts of itself in an attempt to formulate a palpable identity and avoid the threat of disintegration. Ritual cleansing, via sacrifice and expulsion, comes into play when the impossibility of being perfectly clean, pure and proper is finally acknowledged. Children experience a liberating oceanic feeling of being unbounded, prior to the realisation that there are outer and inner limits to 'self'. These limits denote what is socially acceptable and represent the boundaries by which definition is established in order to avoid being ostracised. The safety of naming and labelling is resorted to in the hope that knowing, and being knowable, will keep

abjection at bay. If the world is not to be understood in terms of a linear history, how instead can it usefully be viewed? The difficulty of precise categories is illustrated by the narrative's scrambled sequence, sections are labelled with titles and years, but they are not in any chronological order. Nick's wife Marion illustrates the conscious, physical effort that classification can represent: 'She was determined to get back to the grind, to the work of hygiened perfection, shaping herself, willing herself into tighter being' (U. p.604).

Pinpointing the precise divide between what remains, and what is expelled, is not straightforward, as the object does not respect the borders, positions and rules 'peculiar to the given symbolic system'.<sup>12</sup> Categories frequently aligned with abjection, the underside, include the gambler, the religious fanatic, the artist, the criminal and the killer, all dealing in excess and risk and all represented within the narrative by characters struggling to cope with what society expects of them. Interfaces exist between physical surfaces, forming rims, areas that are always both inside and outside of the body and therefore not definable as subject or object. As Kristeva says, the subject/object divide is threatened:

The object is above all the ambiguous, the in-between, what defies boundaries, a composite resistant to unity. Hence, if the subject's identity derives from the unity of its objects, the object is the threat of unassimilable non-unity.<sup>13</sup>

Examples of this closeness are orifices which allow the passage of object substances from the body into the world at large. Food, faeces, urine, vomit, saliva and tears are all emitted from the body via a hole, a gap or lack, which seeks an object to both satisfy and identify it, to justify its existence. Retching is choking on the very physical limits which have been so keenly claimed. Such apertures as the mouth, eyes, vagina and anus are reminiscent of the abyss, 'the edge of everything' (U. p.77) which both attracts and repulses. Nick has a fetishistic interest in mouths, commenting in minute

detail on those of his sexual partners. Abjection is ever present, disturbing identity, system and order, luring to the place where definition disintegrates.<sup>14</sup>

The inherent risk of the edge is illustrated by the dangerous, vertiginous manner in which the homeless paint sprayers choose to commemorate their dead. Whilst suspended by a rough piece of rope from a, 'six-story flank of a squatters' tenement...graffiti writers spray-paint an angel every time a local child dies of illness or mistreatment'(U. p.811). The angels and inscriptions commemorating the dead children emphasise the memorial facet of artistic works, works that ensure that the artist always also leaves something of himself, even when he is not the subject matter. 'The Wall' is an area of the South Bronx inner ghetto, named 'partly for the graffiti facade and partly the general sense of exclusion - it was a tuck of land adrift from the social order'(U. p.239).<sup>15</sup> Sister Edgar, one of the nuns working in this desperate area, where life and death touch, where the trees and vines grow over and around garbage which includes limbs and hospital waste, aptly summarises this cavalier attitude to risk when pondering the homeless drug addicts' propensity for sharing needles: 'the lure of critical risk, the little love bite of that dragonfly dagger. If you know you're worth nothing, only a gamble with death can gratify your vanity' (U. p.242). In the struggle between subject and object, 'abjection is the underside of the symbolic. What the subject must reject, cover over and contain'.<sup>16</sup> *Underworld* attempts to reveal this 'underside' and in the process confirms the abject as whatever disturbs socially imposed limits. The subject excludes the abject, but must also acknowledge its existence, because, as Barbara Creed points out, 'that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life'.<sup>17</sup> The abject is vital in the subject's quest for identity, as it represents that which the subject professes it is not.

Abjection emphasises the fragility of the law by living on the opposite side of

the border supposedly separating the subject from that which endangers its existence.<sup>18</sup> Nick, as a criminal and murderer, serves as a reminder that the subject can so easily 'slide back into impure chaos out of which it was formed'.<sup>19</sup> Although social roles, with responses imbued with symbolic content, are hard to live up to, conditioning leads to the belief that non-conformity will result in crisis. Potential crises are illustrated by the disintegrating body of the bomber pilot who is reduced to bones before his own eyes; the abject bodies of the wall-dwellers, outcast by society and abandoned to attempt survival in the polluted margins; the bodies in revolt in the film *Unterwelt*, through the illness and deformation that radiation causes; and the disembodied bodies, of characters like stand up comic Lenny Bruce - reduced to a sharp suit and a drugs habit. Traumatized, hysterical bodies are incapable of fulfilling the demanding role of an admirable, standardised 'male'. There is often no indication as to who is speaking, or when the action is taking place: 'I was driving a Lexus through the desert' (U. p.63). The reader, conditioned to expect a reliable narrator, longs for the security and feelings of control this containment seems to offer. Instead the caustically witty Nick is reluctantly accepted as speaker, main protagonist and by default 'hero'. As his brother comments: 'Nick had the enduring stuff of narrative, the thing that doesn't have to be filled with speculation and hearsay' (U. p. 454). Conversely, Matty is too insubstantial to hold the attention, admitting begrudgingly himself that 'Nick was always the subject, ultimately' (U. p.220).

As contemporary consumer readers 'look' at Nick to indulge their fascination with the stereotypical 'perfect body', a body image perpetuated by the punishing of perceived inadequacies with disciplined exercise and diet. However, rather than reveal the consummate hero's body, Nick remains elusive and shadowy, reinforcing the constructed and insubstantial nature of masculinity. His appearance and motivation

are inferred by cryptic hints, details mediated through third parties: 'dark as my father was'(U. p.64); 'there's a certain distance in my makeup, a measured separation like my old man's'(U. p.275). Due to his prior departure from the narrative, Jimmy Costanza's appearance and motivations are even more enigmatic than his son's. However, the importance of 'The Father' whether absent or present in the subsequent construction of the son, together with the constant effort involved in striving to 'form yourself' in the image of absence, are both emphasised.

Freud comments that 'the absence of a strong father figure in childhood not infrequently favours the occurrence of inversion'.<sup>20</sup> Nick goes to extreme lengths to disprove this suggestion, using macho behaviour and promiscuity with the opposite sex. What he reveals about himself is self-denigrating and disappointing; he admits to exercising to 'look good for his age'. The reader hungers for the familiarity of the stereotypical images to which they are accustomed. The narrative is almost over before it is stated that 'he' 'was pretty big...darkish and well-built' (U. p.732). It is left to presumption that the 'he' is Nick. By this stage the hints have been employed to construct a picture of him and the 'official' version is superfluous and ironic, merely drawing attention to the automatic way in which 'readers' devise identities.

Like DeLillo, Nick's ancestors are poor Italian immigrants, encouraging the stereotypical presumption that he has dark skin and hair, to match his dark brooding temperament.<sup>21</sup> Raised on mean streets in the tough New York suburb of the Bronx, it is all too easy to picture him strutting around at the head of his gang, or cruising in his stolen car. Much like Tony (John Travolta) in *Saturday Night Fever*<sup>22</sup> he exudes sexuality and street-credibility, but also a certain vulnerability and craving for acceptance. Like Nick, Tony is visibly influenced by both his family life and the street hoodlums he spends his spare time with. As I. M. Harris summarises: 'Male

behaviour is strongly influenced by gender role messages men receive from their social environments'.<sup>23</sup> Tony's appearance is almost obscenely visible, thrust at the audience in swaggering *Technicolor*, every detail of his fashion-conscious dressing and preening revealed. However, this has the effect of creating a simulacrum; Tony is all surface, a copy of the fashion crazes going on around him, which are already copies.

Nick is less visible, but the attempts to render his appearance irrelevant with a lack of detail instead of underplaying appearance have the opposite effect, pushing the imagination (fed with socially constructed stereotypes) into over-drive. A weedy Nick - five foot and bald - is feasible given the information provided. This is never contemplated, indeed, thanks to heaving *7-Up* crates and receiving the sexual favours of an intelligent woman seventeen years his senior, Nick is always tall and broad with a lean stature and a well-developed musculature. Together with his presumed olive skin, smouldering, dark Italian eyes and black slightly unruly hair, he is every inch the *Mills & Boon* heart-throb, a filmic montage of a man, created from the perfect 'bits'. By leaving his description vague the reader is actively encouraged to build him from separate pieces into the end result, a synthesis, the ideal hero, until he kills George. However, George is a drug addict with no friends, a worthless outsider, dispensable because he differs from the norm. The circumstances of the murder are ambiguous enough to call it accidental. It is presented as an act to be envied; facing death, causing it, watching it, getting as close to abjection as you can without dying. Having the chance to understand death, even rationalise and justify it, Nick sees himself as two separate personae: 'shooter and witness both and you can separate these roles' (U. p.510). Nick separates the roles by alluding to himself as 'he', a different person when he discusses the shooting (U. p. 781).

The lack of chronology juxtaposes '7-Up man' with 'Waste Disposal Manager', an ironic position in the light of his 'wasting' of George. As Nick himself translates it: 'Waste is an interesting word that you can trace...back to the Latin, finding such derivatives as empty, void, vanish and devastate (U. p.120). His proximity with that which is considered waste enforces his close associations with the abject roles of outsider, criminal and foreigner. Tony Soprano, the mob leader of Channel Four's *The Sopranos* is also involved in 'Waste Management'. His job title provides a useful euphemism for his violent occupation in view of the shady dealings and secret activities he is involved in as a career criminal.<sup>24</sup> He kills and sanctions killings, further enforcing his connections with 'wasting'. Ironically, his legitimate operations include an over-priced waste disposal service, adding further to the layers of waste, and emphasising the shift in definitions, decided by the society you occupy. Traditionally men who executed others were outcast from society, due to the amount of blood upon them both figuratively and literally. The grounding of this remains in the likes of Tony Soprano, and others in waste disposal, who deal with the difficult-to-face aspects of life, whilst the majority of the population look the other way.

Nick is thrust from society because of what he has done. Incarceration makes him grow to appreciate boundaries and fear open spaces, with their lack of definition; by comparison prison is safe, with its capacity to remove choices:

I needed a private life. How could you have a private life in a place where all your isolated feelings are out in the open, where the tension in your heart, the thing you've been able to restrict to small closed rooms is everywhere exposed to the whitish light and grown so large and firmly fixed that you can't separate it from the landscape and sky? (U. p. 341).

His ambiguous desire for autonomy *and* restriction echoes the victims of the toxic spill in *White Noise*: 'What people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own

chaos' (W.N. p.120). So although the postmodern person masquerades as an individual s/he actually craves the safety of crowds and rules, if this will keep the terrifying chaos at bay. Ironically the society emphasising the purported safety of rules may expose its inhabitants instead to further danger due to its incessant onward progression. Although postmodernism seems to instigate a chaotic lack of fixity, its circular, recuperative nature potentially holds greater succour. During his time spent with the ritualistic Jesuits, Nick makes a concentrated effort to re-form himself into a socially acceptable man, using the traditional guidelines. Although he is attracted by the rambling, discursive nature of a postmodern existence, he is also aware of, and confused by, the results his former unbounded behaviour unleashed. Instead he opts to adhere to grand narratives and be penitently honed by religious indoctrination:

All the winter I shovelled snow and read books. The lines of print, the alphabetic characters, the strokes of the shovel when I cleared a walk, the linear arrangements of the words on the page, the shovel strokes, the rote exercises in school texts, the novels I read, the dictionaries I found in the tiny library, the nature and shape of books, the routine of shovel strokes in deep snow-this was how I began to build an individual (U. p.503).

There is no middle ground, or grey area; Nick is completely wild or totally tamed. Before shooting George, he was 'angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a mystery to myself', categorically stating that he would not allow routine to identify him, and subsequently grind him down (U. p.810). He disobeys rules and refuses to conform, showing his dissatisfaction by vandalising trains and cars, making unprovoked attacks on other youths and sleeping around. His rebellious behaviour is all part of his bid to avoid:

The regular hours...the same time every day. Clocking in, taking the train...going in together, coming home together (U. p.685) Nick didn't think it was necessary to have one job for life and start a family and live in a house with dinner on the table at six every night (U. p.724).

As a working adult and family man he makes a conscious effort to adhere to routine,

but it is very apparent from his frequent comments and self-scrutiny that he is far from satisfied with his 'normal' life. When he discovers that Marian and Brian are lovers he is pleased as it alleviates his feelings of oppression:

Relieved of my phoney role as husband and father...feel free just for a moment, myself again...giving it all up...the children...the grandchild, they could keep the two houses, all the cars, he could have both wives...None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms (U. p.796).

However, his social conditioning ensures that he must respond to the slight on his 'honour' by assaulting Brian. Similar retributions are carried out in *The Sopranos* under the guise of being seen to respond in the expected 'manly' way. There are rules to be obeyed and the pre-decided punishments must be meted out, visibly administered, revenge is compulsory if you are to be identified as a real man and Mafia 'soldier'. Nick increasingly finds that living his life to a pre-formatted pattern is not as satisfying as he was led to believe it would be. He feels dislocated from the decorum and yearns for spontaneity, preferably a solitary spontaneity. As the narrative draws to a close he is still emphasising this:

I long for, the days of disarray, when I didn't give a damn or a fuck or a farthing...the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real (U. p.806-10).

Matty adhered to strictly indoctrinated rituals from an early age, using their support when his extraordinary chess skills began to fade. He came to appreciate the narrow familiarity of black/white, right/wrong, good/bad and Heaven/Hell. The routines the nuns made his class practise, in case of nuclear attack, made him feel safe, part of 'an odd belonging...a community of look-alikes and do-alikes'(U. p.728).  
Matty's comments on the reductive effect of the Jesuit order on Nick are telling. When Nick becomes resigned to changing into a disciplined animal, Matty feels *he* must ensure they retain their identities by behaving differently. Once again he acts as Nick's abject, that to which he is 'other':

When Nick came back from Minnesota, Matty called him the Jesuit. His catechism<sup>25</sup> days were well behind him now, (Matty's)...days of blind belief, he liked to gibe at his brother's self-conscious correctness, attempts at analytical insight. Whatever Nick's experience in correction and however deftly the jebbies worked him over in their northern fastness, minting intellect and shiny soul, it was still a brother's right to heckle and jeer (U. p.450).

Despite Nick's expert and determined creation of a recognisable identity for himself, Marion remains convinced that there is more below the surface than he chooses to reveal. The potential to omit detail and alter personal history is underlined by changes of name. Klara's original surname was Sachs. Her father changed it to Sax, in a conscious attempt to disassociate his family from high order Jewish specificity and appear more generically American, hoping to find a safe anonymity amongst low order uniformity. Nick does not use Costanza, his father's name, which reflects some of the glamour and charisma surrounding a missing parent. Instead he is called Shay, his Irish mother perhaps changed *her* name from 'O'Shea'. Marian insinuates that his disciplined ritualisation of life has taken him into the realms of the posthuman:

She had a demon husband if demon means a force of some kind, an attendant spirit of discipline and self-command, the little flick of distance he'd perfected, like turning off a radio. She knew about his father's disappearance but there was something else, hard and apart (U. p.256).<sup>26</sup>

Nick is profoundly disturbed by his father's disappearance. He has been raised in the traditional belief that a father forms a son's idea of self, via his work achievements and status at home. As an anonymous speaker in one of the narrative's small vignettes reminds the reader: 'Who are you...if you're not them?' (U. p.706). The standardised family roles represent institutional order and show a society perpetually grooming the next generation of adults for the upholding of this order, sons conditioned to accept their inheritance, almost existentially, as becoming, 'What you already are' your father's son.<sup>27</sup> Kristeva agrees that there is a ritualistic order of things, set down retrospectively:

Not an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession *previous* to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody.<sup>28</sup>

Whether Kristeva feels that this is the Father is left open to judgement, but tradition implies that it is. Matty faces his loss by refusing to imitate what would be the archetypal role model and instead determining to be the antithesis of his runaway father. He does this by volunteering to fight in the Vietnam war:

He could not evade the sense of responsibility. It was there to be confronted. He did not want to slip away, sneak through, get off cheap, dodge, desert, resist, chicken out, turn tail, flee...as his old man had done (U. p.463).

Ironically, by eagerly thrusting himself into scenarios he feels his father would retreat from he is allowing his father to continue forming his identity. When Nick receives therapy in the remand school it confirms what he already believes; that his father, absent or not, has an influence which is far-reaching:

She told me that my father was the third person in the room the day I shot George Manza ... She told me that one way or another the two events were connected, meaning that six years after Jimmy disappeared I shot a guy who didn't know my father ... and this was the link she wanted to probe (U. p.512).

He is cynical about the uses of therapy, yet agrees with its ultimate conclusion, the centrality of his missing father to his problems. Tony Soprano suffers from similar anxieties about whether or not to emulate his dead father, or indeed whether there is ever truly any choice in this emulation. His increasingly frequent panic attacks echo those suffered by his father, also one of the leaders of the crime family. Tony, like Nick, is sceptical about the therapy he receives, especially because his therapist is a woman. However, despite Tony's frequent, often violent, denials, Doctor Jennifer Malfi is inevitably vindicated in the various diagnoses she makes. Tony becomes extremely defensive when she suggests a link between his father's behaviour and health and his own, at one point even attacking her physically. To enforce their

physical connection, when Tony is under threat she too has to go 'into hiding'.

Despite being a hoodlum Tony is a typical therapy patient, affluent, upper-middle class and involved in a high-stress occupation.

In *Underworld* and *The Sopranos* the relationship the community have with baseball, the country's national game, is directly compared to that between fathers and sons, being similarly steeped in tradition: 'You do what they did before you' (U. p.31). Tony is determined that his son will physically excel, despite his unwieldy body shape and 'laid-back' attitude. *Underworld* highlights that those who may have very little socially can briefly have, and *be*, something; their team. The crowd demonstrates an intense emotional involvement with the game; feeling, revealing and sharing such emotions as hatred, love, loyalty and despair. These feelings are contained by the sports arena; they are acted-out, theatricalised and controlled. The stadium is portrayed as a place where men can conduct sanctioned relationships with other men, such homosocial bonds forming the backbone of patriarchy. The game, and other male-dominated sports, come to represent individual freedom within society, a place where men can construct their own world of physical prowess, free from marriage, domesticity, heterosexuality and children. J. Edgar Hoover and his aptly named cohort, 'Junior', spend their lives in this rarefied atmosphere. Cotter, a young black truant who has managed to get into the ground without paying meets Bill, a businessman, at the big game. The relationship appears to be homely and comforting but when Bill offers to buy a soda for the penniless boy the action is immediately diverted to the men's toilet, casting doubts over his kindness:

*Men* passing in and out of the toilets, *men* zipping their flies as they turn from the trough and other *men* approaching the long receptacle, thinking where they want to stand...the old ballpark's reek and mold are consolidated here, generational tides of beer...shit...cigarettes...peanut shells...disinfectants... pisses in the untold millions (U. p.21, italics added).

The arena's toilets display the actuality of masculine waste, what Josh Cohen describes as: 'Textured and odorous materiality'. Cohen uses Coover's *The Public Burning* to further illustrate such human detritus:

Human garbage...sticky condoms in the balcony, sprung hairpins, stools clogged with sanitary napkins...excrement in the bridal fountain or hair grease on the plush upholstery. He feels like (a) visitor...to an alien planet stumbling through endless wastelands in the vain search for life's telltale scum.<sup>29</sup>

A construction of self is carried out by the rejection of excess, at the ball game this excess is 'beer...shit ...cigarettes'. The tentative handling of male on male relationships is inextricably linked to this, as is the more overt construction of masculinity, that which is layered in dogma and tradition. When Matty is cut he desperately wants to prolong Nick's touching of him (U. p.746) yet he knows that society encourages circumspection, even within a socially accepted familial relationship. He cherishes the opportunity to study Nick's own hands whilst Nick looks at his. Matty comments that, 'Nick's own hands were dirty and bruised and so much bigger, five, six years bigger – a man's hand's, almost, blistered on the palms and broken by glass'(U. p.744). Matty acknowledges the rites of passage to becoming a real man, a certain amount of time has to pass and many injuries be borne. He must expect to do more than simply venturing onto the edges of forbidden territory, 'the lots', and as Nick terms it, punching 'a little girl in the mouth' (U. p.744)

Nick and his best friend JuJu demonstrate one of the *sanctioned* relationships between men of 'Hero and Sidekick', they are very close, yet draw the line at full physical contact (U. p.737 & 758). As a violent and invincible gang leader, Nick is in a better position than most to avoid any kind of physical violation. JuJu is seen to survive things that nobody else would even dare try, for example taking the sandwich that Nick is eating out of his hand, an action which suggests an even deeper level of intimacy when it recalls the way in which members of the gang spat on their food to

prevent others from sampling it.<sup>30</sup>

The narrative does not reveal any physical contact between Cotter and Bill other than the tussle they have for the ball. This original ball from the famous game of 1951 is passed from hand to hand, son to father, then father to son, throughout the narrative. It starts with Cotter, whose father Manx Martin takes it when he is sleeping and sells it to Charles Wainwright, who passes it to his son, who heartlessly parts with it: 'The baseball his dad had given him as a trust, a gift, a peace offering, a form of desperate love and a spiritual hand-me-down' (U. p.611).<sup>31</sup> Eventually the ball comes to Nick who pays \$34,500.00 for it, despite the fact that back in '51 he listened on the radio as his team, The Dodgers, lost (U. p.809).

The act of obtaining this ball, and the function of the ball as 'memento', according to John Frow, says a good deal more about Nick himself than it does about the ball game: 'like the fetish, the souvenir is a part object, and ... an allusion rather than a model'.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, to exist, the ball needs some kind of narrative past; part reality and part created myth. Loosely defined origins will allow Nick to attach whatever value best suits him to the (eventually) re-claimed ball. The importance that he attaches to the ball validates its existence: 'it will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins'.<sup>33</sup> The narrative Nick creates - his version of why the ball is valuable - becomes imperceptibly entwined with the narrative of origins. He creates a personal narrative which is capable of laying claims to authenticity: 'A story not of the object but of the subject who possesses it, and via the souvenir possesses the lost and recovered moment of the past'.<sup>34</sup> Who decides what will be revered or discarded? The baseball is reverently passed from 'hand to hand', when it could so easily have been thrown away or lost; indeed the ball that survives may not

even be the original ball. Any number of claims to the originality of the baseball from the great game could be made across the world, the narratives attached to these balls far outweigh deliberations over their authenticity.<sup>35</sup> The narration created around everyday objects animates them above their actuality and injects them with the ability to mediate between experiences crossing time and space. The ball has no intrinsic worth, raising questions about why certain objects are placed in museums and others in waste bins.<sup>36</sup>

The inflated price Nick pays for the ball, which may or may not be 'original', illustrates the way in which commodities which are consumed by the masses, such as the baseball game, have become opportunities to stimulate the circulation of capital, rather than their more overt purpose of supposedly satisfying cultural, in some way 'natural', needs. Within a capitalistic society every occasion, every gesture, is reduced to a commodity. It is the juxtaposition of its commercial value and its inherent value as talisman (to some) that ensures its movement from hand to hand.

The ball begins and ends with poor, tough kids from The Bronx, products of shiftless fathers and honest, hard-working, God-fearing mothers. Mothers are confirmed as crucially important to self-identification; their potential simultaneously to threaten and reinforce boundaries contained by rituals of separation. Young children have a strong libidinal investment in the image of their parents. However, as Lacan posits, the formation of a cohesive and stable identity on this basis can only ever be a fantasy. Klara comments in the theatre that she is seeing the place through her own viewpoint for the first time, having always looked through 'her mother's eyes' (U. p.432). When Nick's mother dies he feels whole, for the first time: 'She is part of me now, total and consoling' (U. p.804). He can overcome the threat she previously made to his boundaries by incorporating her into himself. Similarly Tony

Soprano does not feel completely whole, or indeed safe, whilst his mother is still alive, due to her demands on his time and attention, and her suspected involvement in an attempt on his life.

The 'Texas Highway Killer' is a forty two year old man still living at home with his ageing parents, incapable of aspiring to the cultural and sexual expectations of masculinity (U. p.262). The only relationship he successfully sustains is with the glamorous television news presenter, Sue Ann, conducted solely over the telephone. He talks about the manner in which she is 'forming his being'. Like a supreme mother figure she 'gives birth' to him, physically enabling him to grow and develop in a way that he could not have done without her:

She made him feel real...gave him the feeling he was taking shape as himself, coming into the shape he'd always been intended to take...like filling out - did you ever feel things pouring out from the centre of who you are and taking the shape of the intended person? ...that's what Sue Ann did...he was never really who he was until he talked to her (U. p.269).

Matty similarly describes struggling with an emerging sense of self. When his father left home he looked for the glamour and mystery he felt a missing parent embodied in the awesome beauty and otherness of the plush foyer at the local theatre. Only gazing at the golden stars emblazoned on the enormous dark blue ceiling could come close to instilling in him the feeling of reverence the occasion demanded: 'He thought this was a thousand times more holy than church'(U. p. 407). The narrative is crammed with constitutions of 'holiness', and all the definitions of the sacred have a common link with the strivings humans must make to construct themselves to an approved format. As DeLillo comments in *The Names*, 'What ambiguity there is in exalted things. We despise them a little'.<sup>37</sup> These contradictory emotions stem from the feelings of inadequacy revered objects saturate onlookers with, mere mortals are lacking by comparison, yet acknowledge that they must strive to be 'something'. Identification of

self, *and* other, is inextricably bound up with the myth system of Christianity. Like Science, Christianity functions on the dualistic principles of grand narratives. The Christian faith in the separation of human and divine, spirit and flesh, God and humanity parallels the scientific separation of subject and object. Furthermore, Christian teleology - from creation to apocalypse - repeats scientific linear causality and is therefore equally undermined by postmodern circularity. Albert Bronzini, normally sceptical about anything spiritual, preferring to place his trust in the scientific paradigm, finds transcendence in his dying mother:

The drama of an ailing body. The way impending death made her seem saintly with an icon's fixedness, a stern and staring and enamelled beauty. Albert, who shunned any form of organised worship and thought God was a mass delusion, sat and watched her for hours...and felt that the flat was suffused with a reverence...an otherworldliness, now that she was here (U. p. 683).

Albert's feelings reiterate that traditional religious worship is *not* the only way to identify that which is revered for its close proximity to the border with 'otherness'. There is potential to re-examine and question such borders and perhaps to select perimeters more fitting to individual feelings or beliefs.

**Religion: 'Mystical contemplation...seems totally appropriate to the subject of waste'.<sup>38</sup>**

Religion, as sacred otherness, gives the *appearance* of guiding the subject away from the abyss, and in this displacement of the abject offering a stable identity. Religious teachings typically draw upon defilement, taboo and sin to illustrate the path to an acceptable formation. Nick claims his firm to be 'the Church Fathers of waste in all its transmutations' (U. p.102), and makes their waste his ritual offering:

My firm...waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste...It was a religious conviction...that these deposits...would not leak radiation. Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard (U. p.88).

This connection of waste and church is also explored in *The Sopranos*, where Tony's extended 'family' have strong connections with the Catholic Church. His wife entertains and feeds their local priest, whilst his street-wise colleagues conduct similar economic relationships with various clergy. The amount of cash or material goods donated to the Church is given with expectations of repayment with interest.

Similarly, the trips to the confessional are relied upon to produce tangible results. Nothing is wasted, Carmela's cooking, and Paulie's donations to the church roof are investments to be re-cycled, sacrificial offerings buying the sacrificers life credit. Many religions exclude the abject by using sacrifice, however Judaism particularly broke away from sacrificial rituals by establishing corporeal prohibitions and dietary exclusions in their place. As Albert demonstrates they will eat only like their own kind - animals properly matched to their environment – so as not to confuse the 'order of things'. This can be traced back to the logic of separation from the maternal. There is a fear of an incestuous bond between the mother and child due to breast-feeding, such fears requiring the early weaning of babies. This tying of the sexual and the culinary leads to a need to define precise differences between meat and body parts.

Kristeva classes food as a polluting abject, a border between two separate entities, for example edible/inedible, cooked/uncooked and clean/unclean.<sup>39</sup> The manner in which food can be seen to penetrate the self's 'clean and proper' body is at the heart of religious taboos regarding defilement. Klara and Albert are Jewish. Albert is almost obsessive about the oral object and Klara enjoys watching him eat:

He did it so deeply, handling and savouring things...chewing food thoroughly...a sense of earth and our connection to it...the way he looked at food in the plate, breathing it all in before he even touched a fork (U. p.748).

Albert seeks refuge in food. In a rapidly changing world he wants food that remains the same, praising it for being traditional or European (U. p.672). Matty, his chess partner of old, shares his values, longing for grapes without the pips bred out of them and peaches with the leaves left on. He echoes Jack's suspicion (*White Noise*) of the heavily sprayed and 'perfect looking' supermarket fruit. Matty manages to find the fruit he craves when he visits his mother, still living in the Bronx. Rosemary herself notices the traditions of eating going on around her:

The pleasure of familiar food...the family was an art to these people and the dinner table was the place it found expression...This food, this family meal... this was their loyalty and bond and well being, and the aroma was in the halls for Rosemary to smell...the savor had an irony that was painful (U. p.698-9).

As an intrinsic part of identity, food is almost too vividly poignant, with its intense images and smells creating an acute awareness of inadequacies.<sup>40</sup> Bataille emphasises the intimate nature of the act of eating by reiterating the breaching of boundaries, and reminding that 'swallowing presents itself as a partial rupture of physical equilibrium'.<sup>41</sup>

Characteristically cynical about intimacy, Nick treats food with caution. He exists on salads and soy milk, contenting himself with a voyeuristic enjoyment of other people's unchecked consumption of burgers and fries - which he describes in lurid detail. He remains aloof from such indulgence, the measured man, proud of his discipline and determined to retain control within the austere limits he sets himself, based upon those set by society. When he does relax and let his guard down whilst out with Sims, they end up drinking too much and fighting in a demeaning roadside brawl. The description of their violence is enlarged upon in narratives like Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, where the alleged strength and hardness of the masculine form is challenged by men who *embrace* being hurt<sup>42</sup>. The body, in whatever

condition, is not disowned, undermining the normative concept of perfect manhood. Nick's usual controlled construction of identity and form, reflect the more conventional *abhorrence* of body in Christian culture. Nick and Matty are raised on the dogma of Catholicism, attending a school staffed by Nuns, one of whom, the notorious Sister Edgar, is described as 'a detail lifted from a painting by some sixteenth-century master', due to her traditional black and white starched habit (U. p.232).<sup>43</sup> The description aligns her with Breugel's painting, *The Triumph of Death*, already compared by J. Edgar Hoover to the crowds of fans at the baseball ground (U. p. 49). Hoover, who like an incestuous brother shares the nun's name and fear of germs, confesses that the disturbing picture feeds his fascination with the abject, as he describes it, 'cankers, lesions and rotting bodies'(U. p. 50). Sister Edgar's facial appearance further underlines her own connection with death:

Known throughout the school as Sister Skelly Bone for the acute contours of her face, the whiteness of her complexion and the way her lean hands seemed ever ready to administer some grave touch, a cold and bony tag that makes you *it* forever (U. p.717).<sup>44</sup>

Sister Edgar's effect on the children she teaches is far-reaching. Nick and Matty revisit her harsh enforcement of the rules they should adhere to for the rest of their lives. After leaving their school she works on the streets amongst the poorest inhabitants of the city, people whom she appears to feel little empathy with. Indeed her calling is selfishly motivated. She steels herself to 'face the real terror of the streets to cure the linger of destruction inside her'(U. p.248). By surrounding herself with abject filth she believes that she will be rendered immune to it and identify her as being as clean as is humanly possible. She is determined to 'protect (herself) from the abject...by dint of being immersed in it.'<sup>45</sup> However, total cleanliness is never attainable due to the threat from the borderlands of abjection; areas both inside and outside of the impurity division. This unavoidable 'filth' existing upon the boundaries of identity threatens

the unity of the ego, just as society is threatened by what is outside its parameters, and life is threatened by death.<sup>46</sup> Sister Edgar's horror of dirt and disease ensures compulsive scrubbing:

If you clean the soap with bleach, what do you clean the bleach with?... you could never clean a thing so infinitesimally that it didn't need to be cleaned again the instant you were done (U. p.238 & 775).

The abject cannot be removed, but purging, like religious chanting, is part of the constant vigil to keep it at bay. This fear of contagion prompts her to wear rubber gloves when she goes out. She only feels safe when 'masculinized...condomed ten times over' (U. p.241) believing that masculinity is bound up in protection and isolation. She obsessively watches for Ismael, the leader of the street-dwellers, to produce the first symptoms of AIDS:

Edgar expects him to look wan and drawn, visibly fragile. She thinks he has AIDS...stands at a distance...tries to understand the disappointment she feels, seeing Ismael in good spirits and evidently healthy. Does sister want him to be deathly ill? Does she think he ought to be punished for being homosexual? (U. p.812-3).

Firmly believing in a normative masculinity, she is disgusted by his homosexual activities and drug habit. No account is made for his living circumstances or past misfortunes. She also fails to acknowledge his creative vibrancy and the inspirational effect he has on the other inhabitants of 'The Wall'. Her phobias and loathings, fundamental forms of abjection, overpower any positive characteristics he may possess. Sister Edgar's fear of dirt is all-encompassing and the connection of the erotic with waste products is traditionally an uneasy one. Freud, in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, ties recoiling from the thought of anal sex to a horror of waste and excretion.<sup>47</sup> Food, paradoxically, is enjoyed, even loved, when eaten, but hated when it leaves the body as faeces. The 'natural' urges to absorb into the body and expulse are actually carefully controlled and monitored, ungoverned appetite cannot be

allowed. Babies are initially fascinated by their bodily waste, but are socially conditioned to be 'disgusted' by it and to firmly reject it as part of their identity. Eliminating such 'dirt' is enforced as part of reorganising the environment to make it conform to clearly structured ideas. Sister Edgar rises at dawn to pray, relying on discipline and austerity to identify her, especially during the school vacations when she cannot identify herself by treating the children harshly:

'The Raven'...She wanted to recite the poem to her class when school reopened. Her namesake poet...the dark croaking poem...made her feel Edgarish again, contoured, shaped, bevoiced, in the absence of her boys and girls...she wanted to teach them fear...shake in their back to school shoes, They would know who she was and so would she (U. p.775-6).

However, when Esmerelda, a twelve year old ghetto child, is raped and thrown to her death from a rooftop Sister Edgar begins to lose her icy grip on the identity she has carved out from contemptuously 'saving' the despised 'other'. She feels herself 'falling into a crisis...The serenity of immense design...missing from her life' (U. p.817). The dead girl begins to appear as a vision on a poster advertising orange juice.<sup>48</sup> Identity, even existence, is validated by such mystical media images. The wall-painting ghetto dwellers are delighted when they appear on television, appreciating as they do that events are justified and validated by media coverage. What remains unseen is insignificant enough to be classed as not happening. They have the chance to view themselves as others see them, through a transcendental haze: 'the things they know so well seen inside out...smeared with other people's seeing' (U. p.817). Esmerelda is unable to control the limits of *her* being; as Jean Baudrillard terms it, she becomes 'a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence'.<sup>49</sup> Like Nick after borstal, she is open to everything, in spite of herself, with no distance, separation or intimacy, just proximity and over-exposure:

The first detailed drops splashing at the bottom of the goblet with a scatter of spindrift, each fleck embellished with the finicky rigour of some precisionist painting. What a lavishment of effort and technique, no refinement spared - the equivalent, Edgar thinks, of medieval church architecture (U. p.820).

The image, visible in the headlights of passing trains, could be a trick of the light, however, it is enough to send the hope-starved public, ever eager for a new icon, something beyond the ordinary, into raptures of religious ecstasy. They demonstrate the identifying urge John Duvall discusses with reference to baseball:

People's collective urge to be part of something larger than themselves...to surrender to a power that would explain the felt alienation of their lives and protect them from a recognition of their own mortality.<sup>50</sup>

An, 'Unnameable painful elation' is rekindled in Sister Edgar, the heady tug of pleasure combined with anguish (U. p.821). Desire and terror are closely linked in a cathartic eroticism, offering her the hiatus she needs to feel before she dies: 'the abject edged with the sublime'<sup>51</sup>. As Kristeva suggests, divine intoxication places religion on a par with evil *and* sex, due to the heady rush of murder and the obliteration of orgasm. Sister Edgar wants to meet death head-on, grasp it: 'Open herself to the mystery,' (U. p.245) like an exalted sexual act. She longs for an intermediary, a saviour or prophet and Esmerelda fills that vacancy. The younger nun, Gracie, claims 'The *poor* need visions' (U. p. 819), but Sister Edgar's beliefs remind the reader that *everybody* searches for, that 'burst of beauty that overwhelms us - and cancels our existence',<sup>52</sup> removing the exhausting need to constantly act in an approved manner to 'earn' a sanctioned identity.

Radiation is more than capable of rivalling religion in terms of capacity to overwhelm. Louis, the bomber pilot, who has been exposed to dangerously high doses, with nothing more than a nylon cushion to protect him, still recounts the experience with awe:

The world lights up. A glow enters the body that's like the touch of God...Louis can see the bones in his hands through his closed eyes....Lord God Jesus. I swear to Jesus I thought this was heaven...I thought I was flying right through judgement day (U. p.613).

Sister Edgar's whole appearance is starkly white and bony, as if the inevitability of radiation or God has passed through her already - there is no attempt made to differentiate between the two. After her death the connection of the power of *believing* in God and the might of radiation is enforced:

The jewels roll out of her eyes and she sees God. No, wait, sorry. It is a Soviet bomb she sees, the largest yield in history, a device exploded above the Arctic Ocean in 1961, preserved in the computer that helped to build it (U. p. 826).

Sister Edgar's death suggests that the after-life takes place in cyber-space, located between computers; a technological venue in time, rather than a geographic area, despite the male characters' reliance on various spatial locations throughout the narrative for strands of their identity:

Here in cyber-space she has shed all that steam-ironed fabric. She is not naked exactly but she is open - exposed to every connection you can make on the worldwide web (U. p.824).

Albert has discussed the benefits of burials in outer space and Sister Edgar takes this one step further, passing into the technological phenomenon which offers endless possibilities, the 'body' transcended into infinity with corporeal boundaries and cultural identity shrugged off. As Mark Poster has commented 'the world of "hyper-reality" bypasses the distinction between death and life'.<sup>53</sup> Albert's attraction to both space burials and the encrypting of corpses springs from his yearning for a different locality, a place, or space, between perception and consciousness, tied down as he is to the pain and nostalgia of the old neighbourhood. As 'the subject' is always defined by its boundaries, infinite space is a confusing concept; simultaneously frightening and attractive. Nick is both obsessed by, and apprehensive of, the desert, 'the

otherness of the West' (U. p.449). Matty's wife describes it well, as 'too big, too empty, (with) the audacity to be real'(U. p.449).<sup>54</sup> As part of his attempt to secure a stable identity Nick now lives in a town where history does not 'run loose', an area that remains starkly geographical to him, acknowledge in spatial terms (U. p.86). Ironically this increases, rather than controls, his sense of randomness. His memories of, 'the way the world used to be' (U. p.333) are deeply entrenched in 'place', characteristic of postmodern re-visiting where accepted time-scales are defunct or at least confused. Kristeva discusses the way in which '*Where* am I ?' becomes a substitute for '*Who* am I?', commenting that:

The space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogenous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject - constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray* (original italics).<sup>55</sup>

Nick cannot perceive 'Back East' as merely a physical place, to him it is a metaphor representing strands of existence, a collage of his development as a man, rather than anything specific on a map or in an almanac.<sup>56</sup> The materiality of the built environment, with its hard lines and unequivocal borders serves to emphasise the constant re-building Nick undergoes in his personal quest for satisfactory male identity. The power of his physicality is at odds with his determination to be a measured man; modern and in charge, capable of reinvention and hypothetically much more at ease with lines, words and figures on a cartographer's piece of paper. He exemplifies the way that, as a consequence of the power of the landscape of memory, and the conflicting messages it gives in relation to societal norms, humans can easily become 'strays', setting themselves apart, and at risk. Taken to extremes those like Nick, wild and unconvinced by the dominant ideology, or irreversibly disadvantaged, become 'The Wall' dwellers. Kristeva maintains that such strays are 'saved', having

dared to face the risk of walking away from societal constructs, they will instead come to 'a land of oblivion'. This facing up to dirt, shame and otherness, even allowing them to combine with the false constrictions of 'the clean and proper', results in a final location of 'jouissance', a ravaging bliss, beyond any kind of planning, like Sister Edgar's afterlife in cyberspace, an unfettered area capable of being the glorious land she seeks. Kristeva maintains that: 'The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment revelation bursts forth'.<sup>57</sup> Lyotard similarly terms postmodernity as revelatory and redemptive. Sister Edgar longs to combine the extremes of sensation *and* peacefulness. This double-ness is described by Kristeva as 'chora', a term enlarged upon by Elizabeth Grosz:

Chora, ...is the space in which place is made possible, the chasm for the passage of spaceless forms into a spatialized reality, a dimensionless tunnel opening itself to spatialization, obliterating itself to make others possible and actual. It is the space that engenders without possessing that nurtures without requirements of its own, that receives without giving, and that gives without receiving, a space that evades all characterisation including the disconcerting logic of identity, of hierarchy, of being, the regulation of order.<sup>58</sup>

Sister Edgar finds this ideal area, an area capable of simultaneously both giving and taking, in cyberspace.

Nick's memories of the spatial 'Back East' echo the hysteric's reminiscences, in that they come back to him as fragmentary bits and pieces. This fragmentation compromises his reliability as a narrator. He admits that he does not actually 'recall the weather or the card players. There's always a radio and someone playing cards' (U. p.119).<sup>59</sup> Vagueness of description combined with nostalgia and generalisation ensures that memory becomes notoriously capricious, distancing, rather than familiarising, what actually happened and underlining the impossibility of ever retrieving this elusive actuality. Crucial in identity-formation, the memory is closely linked to abjection. Kristeva emphasises the link: 'A deep well of memory that is

unapproachable and intimate: the abject'.<sup>60</sup> This connection is revealed in the way that only selected, honed memories are shared, whilst others are concertedly eradicated. Despite therapy's attempts to make its subjects face their demons there are always unapproachable aspects of the past. Nick's memories of killing George are vital in his self-construction: 'I hefted the weapon and pointed it and saw an interested smile fall across his face, the slyest kind of shit-eating grin' (U. p.132). George smiles knowingly as he hands over a loaded sawn-off shotgun, it is difficult to believe that he did not want Nick to kill him. As a drug addict he daily exposes himself to the risks Sister Edgar discusses. If you feel worthless, then putting yourself at stake may be the only thing that can identify you. Nick can feel he did not thrust death upon George; a murder shared presents itself as safe, permitted and recommended, like the temptation of the abject; irresistible although forbidden. George dies so that Nick can live, as Kristeva points out: 'The abject kills in the name of life'.<sup>61</sup> The immense destructive potential from a gun's radical release of energy, (like the striking of the baseball, and the detonation of the nuclear bomb) results in one figure gaining from another's loss (U. p.621). The killing of George is the making of Nick:

Once you're a made man, you don't need the constant living influence of sources outside yourself. You're all there. You're made. You're handmade. You're a sturdy Roman wall (U. p.275).

Nick is heavily influenced by his Mafia connections and Italian roots; he feels the necessity to establish solidity, in preference to the randomness he is beset by. The Mafia's highest accolade, becoming a 'Made Man', is clearly connected to the construction of masculinity by its resonant title. The promotion is further enhanced by Nick until it becomes 'handmade', with all of that term's connotations of tradition and authenticity; handmade items are often expertly crafted and intended as heirlooms - priceless or prohibitively expensive. This is echoed in *The Sopranos* when Tony puts

his nephew, Christopher, forward for his 'button'. The inference is that Christopher has been created specifically for his role as senior mobster, and until that point has been nothing substantial. To be considered for this secret initiation ceremony, in which you pledge your allegiance to the boss, you must be of indisputable Italian descent, raising further questions about 'origins'. The viewer has followed Christopher's evolution as vicious thug to this point. He uses script-writing classes in the same way that Tony uses therapy, to try and overrule his insecurity. Through the 'acting' undertaken in these classes Christopher faces up to, and unleashes, his feelings and fears, rather than confronting them in a medical environment. His new status as 'made man' provides an answer to his identity crisis, in that coherence is thrust upon him, and violence legitimated.

There are suggestions that Nick shot Lack, a pool hall hood, using the same legitimised violence. Executed by the local 'mob', Lack's precise murderer is never identified. Given Lack's symbolic name Nick's connection with the event seems appropriate, in view of his acute awareness of his own perceived inadequacies. The other noticeable 'lack' is the narrative's postmodern lack of linear plot development. Section headings reiterate the invented nature of 'time'; dates and titles are given in a random, non-sequential order, an attempt at liberation, echoing Jeanette Turner Hospital's summing up of human efforts: 'to salvage the future and predict the changeable past'.<sup>62</sup> The lack of chronology is reinforced by the repetition of sentences, and paragraphs, like action replays inviting observation and interpretation from differing angles.<sup>63</sup> The eerie feeling of déjà vu this gives is paradoxically disorientating *and* familiar. The subject matter undergoes a fragmentary splintering, but the repetition enforces the potentiality of return, even redemption. Questioning the origins of recollections subsequently raises doubts about the validity of teleology.

When Marian's affair is revealed out of sequence, the reader begins to make judgements before anything is known of Nick's various misdemeanours. It is further suggested that Mario Badalato, 'The Godfather', visits the snooker club to recruit Nick into the organisation that lurks 'Under the surface of ordinary things', the Mafia (U.p.761). However, it is later implied that Badalato is actually there to give Nick his opinion of Jimmy's disappearance. Such ambiguity is characteristic of the jumbled sequence of events and of the Mafia's parodic display of 'family', with familial roles being taken to extremes. Like all parody this slightly mocking imitation serves to highlight the fragile construction of that which is being copied.

Through exaggeration the Mafia draws attention to the extremities at the heart of constructed masculinity. *The Sopranos* is equally ambiguous, as both long-suffering Carmela and Tony's Russian girlfriend, the goomar, are seen to have their price. Carmela (like Nick's mother) turns a blind eye to Tony's murderous habits and sexual philandering on the understanding that he keeps her in a large well-appointed house, dressed in Versace and sable; loyalty between rival, but connected, factions is endlessly challenged; ruthlessly controlling Mafiosa are actually mentally ill. The biggest ambiguity of all is the strange allure of James Gondolfino's 'Tony', who, despite being vicious, overweight and unstable is undeniably appealing. Nick tries to skirt such ambiguity by pigeonholing himself, and his crime, in a stereotypical way. He encourages this by threatening his staff in the idiom of an Italian mobster, relying on a standardised image to *pretend* to be what he actually *is*, in a perceived escape from his roots. His staff perpetuate the simulacrum, by mimicking *him*. Nick's bicultural incorporation is shown ironically. He is a second-generation Italian immigrant, who speaks English, teaches Latin and performs Mob impressions. He insists that, 'There's a word in Italian', even to the extent of holding ordinary objects

aloft for naming (U. p. 280). This isolation of meaning echoes Nick's anxieties about the coherence of his own existence, anxieties which cause him to rely on imitation. The production of such copies implicates the producer in both subject and object, reaffirming that there is no position outside of ideology. Those who attempt to present or outline events and identities are always already implicated in what they are discussing, as N Katherine Hayles summarises it: 'We are involved in what we would describe'.<sup>64</sup>

**Art: 'Methods of transforming and absorbing junk' (U. p.102).**

Subjectivity is similarly formed through art, rather than the subject being an unassailable given, and art being *about* it. Art becomes rather meta-art – art about the nature of art itself. The Artist cannot fulfil the role of stereotypical hero, separation from his/her work, like the definition between reality and representation, is not clearly enough defined.<sup>65</sup> The audience/performance dichotomy becomes dissolved as boundaries between perceiver and perceived are shown to be dangerously thin. There is ample opportunity for collusion. As Baudrillard terms it:

(Contemporary art is) analogous to the effect of distantiation internal to the dream, that makes us say we are only dreaming, but this is only a game of censure and of perpetuation of the dream, hyperrealism is made an integral part of a coded reality which it perpetuates.<sup>66</sup>

The alleged authenticity of any piece of art is debatable due to its deconstruction by reproductions, copying and appropriation of random mediums. The ease of postmodern reproduction ensures a decline of the veneration afforded to 'original' works of art and the fetishisation of so-called high culture. Klara flaunts this reproduction by using waste products in an allegorical pastiche, mixing the aesthetic and the social, the cultural and the real. The traditional insinuation that art is different to life is refuted by the impact of Klara's stunning re-cycled pieces and the 'in-your-

face' challenge to coherence of the wall-dweller's graffiti. Such outpourings of volatile material are difficult to meet head-on and are more likely to be dealt with via distractions. Like the abject emissions made in religious confession and deflected through the priest, what is expelled by the artist – writer, painter, film-maker - is deflected through the viewer. Kristeva examines this connection:

Catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion (results in) the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject (appearing) as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions.<sup>67</sup>

Writers and artists can vicariously void sin on behalf of their audience, daring to look narcissistically inwards and hailing this as self-contemplative rather than regressive. Whilst art may be viewed as expulsions it is more likely to be a combination of what has been expelled along with that which is clung to, due to conflicting drives and the malleable nature of the abject. This inability to obey rules firmly connects the abject with Art. As Kristeva terms it, both categories, 'mislead', 'take advantage of', 'corrupt' - rather than conforming to established standards.<sup>68</sup> The true artist imitates the perverse logic of the abject, amending language, style and content, seeking to confront rather than pacify and raising questions about identifying processes. Writing as 'verbal play' is designed to deal with the abject by thrusting it away, even 'Purifying' it.<sup>69</sup> Amendment of language, and the inferences of this for future meaning, suggests the potential to purify the abject by simply changing boundaries. Striving to be 'something' is a process beset by extremes. There is no safe place between the poles of opting out, or obeying societal stereotyping. Artists fall foul of these limits, portrayed as people who cannot live with others, and uphold responsibility. Nick insinuates that Jimmy, his errant father, could have become an artist producing 'a rambling art that has no category' (U. p. 276) His alternative life being that of 'a man who doesn't wash or change his clothes, bummy looking, talks to

himself on the street' (U. p.276). Klara uses art to experience such physical and textual extremes, her longing for corporeality leading her into a sexual affair with the juvenile Nick, and eventual divorce from the cerebral Albert. Albert, as science teacher, acknowledges his need to make sense of things, to, 'count, measure and test' and trusts in the fundamental scientific doctrine that it is possible to separate the subject from the object, observer from the observed, scientist from the experiment (U. p.734).<sup>70</sup> Klara feels crushed and suffocated by such a compartmentalised version of life, craving instead difference and diversity, the combined nature of pigments and minutely different shades of colour, 'strata blue...geranium red...cobalt and chartreuse' (U. p.79), categories crossing and blurring.

Ismael Munoz uses the same bold colours in his own mix to spray-paint underground trains, he signs his designs with his codename and street number, 'Moonman 157'. Baudrillard terms such names, 'empty signifiers' if we do not, and can never, know the person named, however, the same thing could be said about anybody's name or title.<sup>71</sup> Ismael is typical of the outbreak of graffiti artists prolific in New York in the early 1970s, urban artists reacting to the riots of the late 1960's.<sup>72</sup> They epitomised the 'graffiti instinct – to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are'(U. p.77), painting for self-identity, not fame or public acclaim; to the contrary, Ismael is always difficult to track down. Such identitarian methods commit these struggling artists forever to the margins; however, it is enough for Ismael to observe, unseen, in *his* underworld, the subway, as the commuters take in his multi-coloured outpourings. He summarises the function of his designs as: 'the art that can't stand still...I'm your movie, motherfucker'(U. p.441) and utilises the truism of the advertising executives: 'Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world'(U. p.530). Left-wing art movements such as the Situationists, have always favoured graffiti to

display slogans proclaiming their objections to totalising regimes, and their rights to exist outside of the dictation of others. However, such movements often attempt to inflict their own elite version, which is too narrow in definition to be usefully adopted by any other than a tiny minority. One of the slogans of the Situationists proclaimed that every person should be allowed to live in their own cathedral. The painted-angel wall has something of this vast holiness, its elevation by the television cameras into mass-mediated spectacle underlining its connections with such movements even further. The fragile nature of personally carved-out 'freedoms' is brutally pointed out by the shadowy figure who throws Esmerelda to her death, her name reiterating the cathedral connections. The narrative shows attempts to dilute rigid constructions, fixed and nameable by colour-washing over them with fluidity. Spray paint is seen as part of the abject, expelled then intrinsically linked into the signs left behind. Like animal tracks and excreta the paint becomes part of the urban re-cycling project of those who are outside of society, 'specimens of urban spoor – spray paint, piss, saliva, dapples of dark stuff...probably blood' (U. p.211).

Emotions, closely aligned to abjection by being neither inside nor outside the body, are also expelled. Humans actively expel anger and sexual feelings, they look for a release via orgasm or violent outburst, which fundamentally rids them of the way they are feeling, a closure rather than a cultivation of permanence. Energy is a potent force that must be expended, it cannot merely 'exist'. The toxic landfills, intrinsic to Nick's life, demonstrate that energy cannot be simply buried and forgotten about, it continues in another place, radiating. As sex is expelled, like a waste product, sexual identity can never be straightforward. If humans retain an open mind as to who they are, then sexual identity could change from one experience to the next (U. p.319). Sexual identity is not the inherent part of the corporeal body that societal norms

suggest, but rather tentative and provisional.

Nick's feelings about sex and waste are comparable; he feels that neither should be taken into the open, but rather should be carefully secreted and handled.

Donna (who goes to desert hotels seeking sex with strangers), protests to him that the secret of sex is already out:

Sex is what you can get. For some people, most people, it's the most important thing they can get without been born rich or smart or stealing. This is what life can give you that's equal to others or better, even, that you don't have to go to college for six years to get. And it's not religion and it's not science but you can explore it and learn things about yourself (U. p.297).

Donna enforces the message running throughout the narrative that it is impossible to identify yourself using only the grand narratives of science and religion. The complexity and diversity of lived-lives means that this 'ideal' can never work. It is an 'ideal' whose false constriction leads to suffering, anguish and misery. Donna opts for pleasure above formality, impetuosity above conformity, and whilst Nick may *act* as if he disagrees he has given up the rigours of being a 'fan' for very similar reasons. His gradual disenchantment with 'The Dodgers', and subsequent prioritisation of 'the moment' instead, demonstrates the impossibly exhausting intensity of being a fan, like falling in love and desiring unreachable celebrities. What he is rejecting - and by default he aligns his beliefs with Donna's - is the fantasy of a perfect future, waiting to be discovered. He knows, whether he admits it or not, that it is better to settle for fragmented reality, have 'real' sex with a 'real' person. Donna confirms the parodic nature of sex and its redemptive capacity; its ability to save and briefly obliterate the constrictions of life and death. She sees sexual activity as something that humans can aspire to take control of, or *willingly* relinquish control of. This is why she has sex with strangers: *she* chooses the place and singles them out, simply because she wants to, and knows from previous experience the comfort she will take from the act.

Rather than 'choice', sexual maturity was forced on the local teenage boys by neighbourhood tradesmen like the inquisitive, innuendo-ridden, butchers: 'The butcher asked him if he was old enough to get it up' (U. p.605). This fascination with virility, and presumption that any red-blooded male of a certain age will commence sexual relations with females, is associated with eating red meat. Academics and cerebral types are judged to need some help with their physical prowess, something to 'make him ballsy ... puts some lead in his pencil' (U. p. 667). Nick is sexually active with many local girls, for despite dating Loretta regularly he still feels the need constantly to assert his potency: 'She knew he'd had sex with other girls, handjobs, blowjobs, whatever else, putting it in, taking it out, putting it in keeping it in, bareback, rubber' (U. p.704). Like Tony Soprano, who tries to sexually dominate every woman he meets, Nick is fulfilling Bataille's assertion that 'Men act in order to be'.<sup>73</sup> The sexual satisfaction of their various partners is never broached; indeed within Tony's Mob performing oral sex on a woman is totally demeaning, a stigmatised, homosexual act, and sure sign of weakness.<sup>74</sup> However, sex cannot be removed from the female domain, as Carmela Soprano tries to seduce the decorator, whilst happy to have sex with her husband in return for expensive gifts, and Nick's wife embarks on an affair with his work-mate, where the sex is neither spontaneous nor meaningful, but rather, 'a matter of close concentration' (U. p.258).

The affair is an attempt to attract Nick's attention, and provoke an emotional response. Brian, the work mate, is instantly, and clearly described as 'a loose-jointed guy with a freckled forehead and nappy hair' (U. p.256), in a way that Nick *never* is, yet Brian is a much paler and less significant figure because of this clear classification. Marian is determined from the outset that Nick *will* find out about her and Brian, and when he fails to do so she bluntly tells him. She labels time with her

lover as 'her' time, a period when she can be herself and feel, 'less enveloped in someone else's figuration, (Nick's) self-conscious shaping of a life' (U. p.257).

However, the meetings and sex with Brian are contrived and theatrical, both of them masquerading within customised identities. Marian begins to take drugs, admire her naked reflection, and play the role of 'lover', visualising herself in 'the movie version'(U. p.260). Klara's thoughts followed a similar pattern many years previously whilst caught up in her brief, wordless affair with the teenage Nick:

Smiling to herself like it was three days later, after the fact and she was ...thinking what they'd done, but it wasn't three days after the fact, it was still the fact, and she had his balls in her hand (U. p.750).

The two major events of Nick's life are presented as killing George and having an affair with Klara Sachs, (his father's abandonment overhanging all scenarios). The priority given to these events reinforces the closeness of sex and death; both offer the subject a plunge into non-existence, one temporary the other permanent. There is a joy before death, a letting go, and loss of self. George smiles when he knows Nick is about to end his life. The annihilation death offers collapses the boundaries between one's body and the world, finally allowing a release of false constricting borderlines which are, ruptured, flooded over with the liquidity of bodily insides - blood, sperm and excrement.

Sexual activity challenges the edges of existence, 'real' time is frozen whilst a parallel world is inhabited. Brian feels a similar 'breathless abyss' every time he crosses a bridge. His day to day existence slipping into non-significance when compared with the sensations of hanging, loose and unsafe in an un-categorised space, as he terms it: 'losing all purchase on name and place and food taste and weekends with the in-laws...hanging sort of unborn in generic space' (U. p.167). He plans elaborate routes to avoid bridges, and the way they make him feel. Bridges expose his

need to erect boundaries and limits, some kind of protection from death. To him bridges represent risk, taking a wild ride down the rapids, never quite knowing if he will survive. He instead chooses to avoid the adrenaline rush and carefully makes plans, in the hope that plans can ensure an existence. This careful, approved planning ensures the narrator's ability to offer a clear picture of him in all of his insipid average-ness. His fear extends to air travel, with its similar capacity to produce feelings of being nowhere, ceasing to exist for a time, but always with a heightened awareness of mortality.

This awareness of mortality encourages sacrifice. Waste is presented to the ground like an offering to a god, a recompense, hence endowing waste with a certain transcendence and, as Bataille suggests, the capacity to be transformative: 'Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane'.<sup>75</sup> Sacrifices are made to give destruction its due and save the rest from contagion. 'The Accursed Share' are doomed to be consumed and destroyed, like the seriously malformed people Nick visits, whose exposure to radiation has resulted in differences from the accepted norm which ensure their alignment with the abject and their expulsion from contrived society (U. p.799-800).<sup>76</sup> Such deformities are highlighted in the film *Unterwelt*, and question the categorisation of the 'impure' and the 'divine':

Hump-lurched...hands dragging...cripples and mutants...deformed faces, people who existed outside of nationality and strict historical context ... people persecuted and altered...a guilty secret of the society around them (U. p. 430-43).

*Unterwelt* echoes *Underworld*, the 1927 gangster movie, and offers a synthesis between two films, the novel's title, and their mutual subjects; radiation damage and gangsters.<sup>77</sup> Nick is the catalyst, an Italian hoodlum, working in waste-management who fears for his own boundaries.

These fears are sharpened by his awareness of the cyclical nature of waste and the inherent uselessness of categorising what is waste and what is not. Bataille also questions this enforced separation and connects it to society's ever-increasing consumption:

But man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption.<sup>78</sup>

Nick's awareness of the futility of attempting to separate what is waste and what is not fuels his determination to try. However, his exerted efforts have the effect of, rather than redeeming anything, reducing all things to waste, due to their capacity to be re-cycled. Even new products become instant garbage to him. His obsession with re-cycling transforms his grocery shopping into buying and eating waste, resigned as he is to being part of a society that feeds on its own garbage, a body that feeds on itself:

Marian and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. We didn't say, What kind of casserole will that make? We said 'What kind of garbage will that make?' (U. p.121).

The meticulous categorising of waste to obtain 'clean safe healthy garbage' (U. p.119), for potential re-use, eases their guilt a little (U. p.89). They long for what was once 'product' to become 'product' again, a recognisable package, tamed, rather than wild and threatening, harnessed to human re-use, part of the civilising system of commodified socialisation. Nick takes his granddaughter to visit the waste plant, determined to show her what he feels the plant highlights: 'the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave ageing' (U. p.809). In this endless circularity: 'All waste defers to shit' (U. p.302). Excrement is an inherent part of its producer who cannot simply expel it and

walk away; it remains bound up in their identification; there is nowhere that it can conveniently disappear to. This unshakeable fact is symbolised by the ship that Marvin tracks down, full of excrement and unable to dock in any port, already at sea for over two years. During this trip Marvin is unable to suppress the details of his own bowel movements - sinister and foul-smelling - his association of them with chemicals and radiation strangely fitting (U. p.309-13).

Intimate bodily waste, like blood, nail clippings and hair, render the body indistinct and ambiguous, encouraging ritual acts to ward off defilement. Human implication in personal waste and debris ensures that it can never be completely expelled. As Nick says: 'What we excrete comes back to consume us' (U. p.791). Tony Soprano's garbage includes various prescription medication bottles, endless wasted food and magazines, including *Playboy* and *Waste News*, the later of which covers subjects from, 'used oil' to 'Miss Recycled Plastic'.<sup>79</sup> Hoover goes to neurotic lengths to ensure that nobody can get hold of his garbage, confirming that what is thrown away says as much about identity as what is kept, and underlining the inadequacy of binary oppositions.<sup>80</sup> This obsession with waste disposal is deeply ironic in view of Hoover's notoriety for leaving the Mafia to its own devices, whilst vigorously pursuing the perceived threat of communism. By burying huge heaps of waste and living amongst the toxic fumes, like Hoover, all members of modern society are reduced to the sum of their own waste, in a deconstruction presenting waste producer and waste to each other as one and the same. These alleged opposites collide, Kristeva describes it in detail: "subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again - inseparable, contaminated, condemned'.<sup>81</sup> There is no separation and no precise, convenient, borderlines.

## CONCLUSION: 'Everything is connected in the end'.<sup>82</sup>

The narrative closes with 'the author' still (and always) writing, feeling consciously self-reflective he describes the physicality of his desk, his lunch, the things he is hearing and thinking (U. p.827). He describes the voices of the children playing outside of his window as his *own* voice, everything is known in relation to self, or things already known, nothing is new, heroic or sharply differentiated; there is too much of the abject clinging to everybody.<sup>83</sup> There is no escape from involvement and the implications of a deluge of 'oneness' are frightening. The amount of waste created by our highly commodified society means that further underworlds, comprising of what is discarded, are created daily. The postmodern lack of boundaries fragments identity. The fixed and knowing alternative, whilst offering the succour of being 'something', is delusory as it encourages futile attempts to push ever onwards, determined to 'find meaning in a world that is ultimately unknowable'.<sup>84</sup> The narrative offers no solutions to this identificatory nightmare, only a growing self-awareness of the false and constraining nature of societal norms and a suggestion that although postmodern chaos can be unnerving, it is perhaps preferable to resolutely adhering to a false and constricting trajectory.

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, the subject of the following chapter, shows an individual equally disillusioned by modern life's inadequate classifications but choosing to inflict his feelings of dissatisfaction and confusion on those around him. Patrick Bateman, the 'psycho' of the title, shows his reluctance to conform by hyper-conforming. He pushes his society's boundaries to breaking point to graphically prove that sometimes the best way to illustrate that what people want is not going to work is by giving it to them.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998), p.104.
- <sup>2</sup> I.M Harris, *Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p.19.
- <sup>3</sup> Don DeLillo, *The Names* (London: Harvester, 1983), p.81.
- <sup>4</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics & Modern Culture* (London: Picador, 1997), p.77.
- <sup>5</sup> N.H Reeve & R. Kerridge, 'Toxic Events: Postmodernism & DeLillo's *White Noise*,' *The Cambridge Quarterly* (23:4, 1994), p.318.
- <sup>6</sup> DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 182.
- <sup>7</sup> Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London: Virago 1990), p.173.
- <sup>8</sup> *First Blood*, 1982, Director, Ted Kotcheff & *The Terminator*, 1984, Director, James Cameron. These films are from the 1980's but DeLillo reminds us in *White Noise* that humans have been modelling themselves on characters from films for much longer, 'I copied Richard Widmark's laugh (in *Kiss of Death*) and used it for ten years. It got me through some tough emotional periods...It clarified a number of things in my life. Helped me become a person' (London: Picador, 1986), p.214/5.
- <sup>9</sup> Harris quoting Staples, *About Men* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1987). Case studies re: macho behaviour of street gangs in poor, multi-cultural areas, p.153.
- <sup>10</sup> Nick and Matty react in opposite ways to their Father's absence; Nick becomes a criminal, whilst Matty does not, questioning the existence of a 'typical' response to the situation.
- <sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.12.
- Jean Paul Sartre also describes 'rejection' of self, calling it 'bad faith' and using as an example the disowning of your own hand, if it is being held by an unwanted suitor. *Being & Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Methuen, 1972).
- <sup>12</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.92.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.4.
- <sup>14</sup> This fear of 'otherness' is broached by Frantz Fanon in his writing on race and colonialism. He discusses the white man's fear of blackness as a fear of having such definitions challenged, even overturned. Recognition of 'self' within the objectified 'other' is a daunting prospect, potentially challenging comfortable stereotypes and effectively 'calling the bluff'. See, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. C. Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).
- <sup>15</sup> Echoing the homeless 'wall' dwellers of J.T. Hospital's *The Last Magician* (London: Virago, 1992).
- <sup>16</sup> E. Gross, 'The Body of Signification' *Abjection, Melancholia & Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. J Fletcher & A Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990), p.90.
- <sup>17</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.9.
- <sup>18</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4. The law is used to construct masculine heterosexuality, see Richard Collier, *Masculinity, Law & the Family* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995).
- <sup>19</sup> Gross, 'The Body of Signification', p.89.
- <sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) (London: Penguin, 1991), p.57.
- <sup>21</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Casablanca: Cult Movies & Intertextual Collage' *Modern Criticism & Theory* ed: David Lodge (Harlow: Longman, 1988) provides an interesting discussion of stereotypes.
- <sup>22</sup> John Badham, *Saturday Night Fever* (U.S: 1977).
- <sup>23</sup> Harris, p.1.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Sopranos* – series creator David Chase (Brillstein-Grey Entertainment. Inc.1999).
- <sup>25</sup> Matty's class repeating the catechism for Sister Edgar (U. p.717).
- <sup>26</sup> Marian's description of Nick recalls Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Khubla Khan* (1797/8) - 'Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!, A savage place! as holy and enchanted, As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted, By woman wailing for her demon-lover!'
- <sup>27</sup> Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness*, that beings become what they already are. A man is not created by an omnipotent God, for some divine purpose, but rather, he 'simply is'.
- <sup>28</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 10, italics added.
- <sup>29</sup> Josh Cohen, *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing & the Politics of Seeing* (London & Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1998), p.100/1, Robert Coover (New York: Lane Fine

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Fiction, 1978), p.15.

<sup>30</sup> In DeLillo's *White Noise* Murray and his colleagues discuss their youthful attempts to personalise their food in this same way, illustrating that ideas of repulsion can be individual.

<sup>31</sup> The 'peace offering' is emphasised by Brian when he traces the ball for Nick, part of his apology for having sex with his wife.

<sup>32</sup> John Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory & Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.94.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Marvin Lundy collects baseball memorabilia and meticulously establishes lineage. He sells the ball to Nick, via Brian. Sports items are now being impregnated with DNA in order to maintain precedent.

<sup>36</sup> This aspect of material culture very much part of the New Historicists debate.

<sup>37</sup> DeLillo, *The Names*, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> DeLillo, *Underworld*, p.282.

<sup>39</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.75.

<sup>40</sup> DeLillo has already touched on the power of aromas within the identity process in *Endzone*, 'I leave behind the old words and aromas and guilts' (New York: Penguin, 1972), p.142.

<sup>41</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.95.

<sup>42</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> The nun's habit is a metaphor for her state of mind, when unyielding, she is, 'A wall of cloth' (U.p.720), when mellowed by the 'vision' (U. p.823) she 'enfolds' Ismael, previously shunned.

<sup>44</sup> Being 'It' in childrens' games is compared to being 'outside', abject (U. p. 675-8).

<sup>45</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.28. Also see Mary Douglas, *Purity & Danger*.

<sup>46</sup> Excrement and its equivalents, decay, infection, disease, corpses, etc. represent the danger to identity that comes from without. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.71.

<sup>47</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, p.64.

<sup>48</sup> Charlie, the Ad. Exec, gives a prolonged selling pitch for orange juice (U.p.532-3).

<sup>49</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication', *Postmodern Culture*, Ed. Hal Foster, (London: Pluto, 1985), p.133.

<sup>50</sup> John N Duvall, "Baseball as Aesthetic Ideology: Cold War History, Race & DeLillo's 'Pafko at the Wall'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 41(1995), p.285.

<sup>51</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.11.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.210 (Quoting Celine).

<sup>53</sup> *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, Ed. & Intro. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p.6.

<sup>54</sup> The postmodern connection of self with place, rather than time, is graphically illustrated in Tim Burton's 1988 film *Beetlejuice*, where those displaced between life and death are confronted with a frightening, swirling vortex, a graphic representation of that which unnerves Nick; a desert without boundaries.

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.8.

<sup>56</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Pimlico, 1998). Davis discusses the way in which location strongly identifies, hence the ambivalent feelings caused by such disruptions as the re-naming of places.

<sup>57</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 8-9.

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time & Perversion: Essays in the Politics of Bodies* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), p.116.

<sup>59</sup> Showalter, quoting Freud, p. 91, 'The hysteric suffers from reminiscence'.

<sup>60</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.15.

<sup>62</sup> Hospital, p.69.

<sup>63</sup> *Underworld*, p.86, p.102, p.118 etc.

<sup>64</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models & Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.20.

<sup>65</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Trans. P. Foss & P. Patton (New York: Semiotext(e) 1983).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.147.

<sup>67</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.17.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp 16-17.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Civello, *American Literary Naturalism & its Twentieth-Century Transformations* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), p.159.

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<sup>71</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange & Death* (London: Sage, 1993), p. 79.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., provides a useful overview of the urban art of this period, p.76 – 84.

<sup>73</sup> George Bataille, *Eroticism* (London: Boyars, 1987), p.171.

<sup>74</sup> The shame the characters associate with the act echoes its illegality in some American states.

<sup>75</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume One*, Trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p.55.

<sup>76</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.102, quotes Leviticus to give the biblical connotation of that which should be rejected, and aligned with the abject due to its physical defects and consequent conformity.

<sup>77</sup> Cited as a film by Eisenstein, *Unterwelt* is a product of DeLillo's imagination.

<sup>78</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 23.

<sup>79</sup> Allen Rucker, *The Sopranos: A Family History* (London: Macmillan, 2000), chapter six.

<sup>80</sup> Hoover adds to the idea that, 'Well known figures are media shadows, public relations figments, inventions of the culture, never seen in the flesh, without a life of their own, virtually without a verifiable existence', Philip Stevick, *Alternative Pleasures: Postrealist Fiction & the Tradition* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1981). Stevick recalls how political satirist J Buchwald suggested that J Edgar Hoover did not exist, but was instead an image made from photographs, his name invented by the FBI and his policies devised by some committee. The anomalies of private/public personas encourage the invention of 'self' and construction of a 'type'. Celebrity spotting (See *Glamorama*, Section Five) is part of the urge to verify that there is something/one discernible below the surface hype.

<sup>81</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.18.

<sup>82</sup> DeLillo *Underworld*, p. 826. Thomas Pynchon, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, also draws this conclusion (London: Vintage, 1995), p.703.

<sup>83</sup> This tendency of all fiction to be metafictional is explored in Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory & Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>84</sup> Civello, p.4.

## SECTION FOUR

### BRET EASTON ELLIS'S *AMERICAN PSYCHO*: 'Man vs conformity'.<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

Despite its extreme violence *American Psycho* remains a widely read text, now also adapted as a film.<sup>2</sup> This suggests a fascination with that which strains against the boundaries of 'desirable' behaviour. Patrick Bateman's pathological sexual appetite is viewed as a perversion. However, Karen Horney observes that: 'There is no such thing as a normal psychology which holds for all (of humanity)'.<sup>3</sup> If this is accepted as true then it emphasises the impossibility of judgement of any kind from the audience. Witnessing the slaughter - simultaneously thrilled and afraid – condemning murder, yet ghoulishly enjoy the dangerous propinquity with death. The victim becomes sacrificial; s/he dies whilst the perpetrator and observer need not. As Georges Bataille suggests:

Sacrifice keeps violence out of general society by deflecting it onto a surrogate victim...the purpose of sacrifice is to give destruction its due, to save the rest from a mortal danger of contagion.<sup>4</sup>

Killing is viewed as outside of civilised culture, a violent intrusion into it, to be kept out of society at all costs. Violent death must be deflected onto a substituted other, a victim who differs from yourself.<sup>5</sup> Despite 'sacrificing' dozens of others Patrick fails to remove himself from the role of 'victim', suffering as he does from complex disorders, including rampant anomie. He is unable to function within the 'acceptable' boundaries of contemporary society so instead formulates his own inflated version of 'normality'. Within Patrick's 'reality' normative masculine traits are carried out in the extreme and he therefore need not desist from harming others; killing merely becomes a demonstration of his male prowess. He does not acknowledge the mental and

physical boundaries commonly adopted; or rather, he acknowledges them by constantly pushing beyond them.<sup>6</sup> He simultaneously embodies the extremes of conformity and resistance, refusing to be restrained by a moral code, yet grimly determined to be wealthy, fit and attractive. Whilst striving for the approval of 'others', ironically he undermines, undervalues, and eventually destroys, them.

Hegemonic discourses are produced, within society, around a heterosexual norm. In questioning the validity of these discourses care must be taken not to erase the option to classify Patrick as deviant, he can only be abnormal when viewed against some satisfactory 'other'. Despite his harrowing behaviour he is alarmingly entertaining: funny, intolerant, sharp, clever and quick-witted. He addresses the reader in lyrical, easy to read prose which frequently amuses - occasionally even endears - inviting an intimate, subjective relationship with him, despite his penchant for torture, murder and gory detail. It is hypocritical to flinch from the gruesome description, yet demand explanations and chronology. The narrative's lack of either mirrors the unaccounted for, irrelevant, sequences of life. Patrick's fragmented thoughts and actions explode the myths surrounding neatly constructed gender roles.

**The Power of Money: 'If you had an American Express card she'd give you a blow-job'.<sup>7</sup>**

Patrick's affluence facilitates the easy capture of his prey, and the covering of his tracks. His vast wealth both protects and identifies him. Masculinity is inextricably connected to occupation and income; men must have a calculable value, as Bataille states: 'Money serves to measure all work and makes man a function of measurable products...each man is worth what he produces...a function ...within measurable limits'.<sup>8</sup> So, it is supremely 'masculine' to be rich, to earn *and* to inherit - traditionally through the male line. Respect and deference is given to those with money; it buys

status. Patrick's parents own 'half of Wall Street', his associates wonder why he goes to work, an anomaly he explains when he stutters, 'because... I...want...to... fit...in' (A.P. p. 237). This 'fitting in' is a double-edged 'benefit', which helps him to hide his grisly hobby, but frustrates him sufficiently to accelerate the frenzied dismemberment of others. In a society where your 'masculinity is only as secure as your last competitive achievement', he must visibly achieve.<sup>9</sup> As Victor Siedler enlarges, masculine identity hinges on competitiveness and comparison; doing well becomes doing better than others.<sup>10</sup>

In actuality Patrick's 'achievements' revolve around playing with miniature electrical goods and drinking designer drinks in his luxurious office. He is merely occupying time between cosmetic appointments and gym work-outs. These 'treatments' identify both his shallow, fastidious existence and his level of fragmentation; he becomes 'a hand attached to an impeccable manicure' (A.P. p. 6). The body in pieces is identified only by what is acted out upon it. Patrick uses this method of definition to pick his way through the constantly confused identities: "No that wasn't Conrad", I say, surprised at Price's inability to recognise his co-workers. "That guy had a better haircut" (A.P. p. 10). He is fascinated by the alterable nature of hair, obsessive about new products and only attending the 'trendiest' salon, able to admire himself in sections in the most detached manner: 'How good the haircut I got at Gio's last Wednesday looks' (A.P. p.12). He gazes at himself in segments whilst visiting his hospitalised Mother: 'I've spent the last hour studying my hair in the mirror I've insisted the hospital keep in my Mother's room' (A.P. p. 365). This isolation of body parts, in a bid to hone individual perfection, does not stop with his own body. Exploiting postmodern intertextuality, he appropriates the limbs and organs of others, to entertain, occupy and fleetingly fulfil him. It is insufficient merely

to touch or look, he must physically dissipate, supporting Bataille's belief that death is consumption: 'Death...exploding consumption of all that was, the joy of existence of all that comes into the world; even my own life demands that everything that exists, everywhere, ceaselessly give itself and be annihilated'.<sup>11</sup> He obtains a profound aesthetic pleasure from looking at his victim's body in pieces, whilst continuing to strengthen his own physicality:

My arm muscles burn, my stomach is as taut as possible, my chest steel, pectorals granite hard, my eyes white as ice.<sup>12</sup> In my locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I've attacked in the last week. Two are washed off, one isn't. There's a barrette clipped to one of them, a blue ribbon from Hermes tied around my favourite (A.P. p. 370).

The quest for the consummate construction reduces body parts to consumer goods, with favourite shop associations, and the potential to satisfy the demand for gratification. This separation of isolated body parts recalls fetishes, stated by Freud to be lying dormant in everyone, simply waiting to be resuscitated. Patrick's praising of each part validates their separation, as does the accessibility of various prostheses. He demonstrates the ease in separating the body from the person in a cold, emotionless alienation, a separation encouraged by the endorsement of body parts as commodities. He lists women whose '*bodies*' he would have sex with.

Patrick exercises excessively, 'two thousand abdominal crunches and thirty minutes of rope-jumping' (A.P. p. 160), are still not enough. He rigorously strives for the modern societal ideal and uses working-out to demonstrate his will-power and self control. However, the ironic truth is that excessive exercise is itself a form of control, one which which plays on the human fear of failing to meet the societal standards of a fit, tanned, muscular body at its optimum weight. Patrick's physical exertion is directly linked to his mental state, as his murderous urges manifest and grow, so the workouts intensify:

I worked out heavily at the gym after leaving the office today but the tension has returned, so I do ninety abdominal crunches, a hundred and fifty push-ups, and then I run in place for twenty minutes (A.P. p. 76).

Freud, in *Three Essays on Sexuality* discusses striving for satisfaction as, 'a peculiar feeling of tension of an extremely compelling character', and insists that tension involves unpleasure; hence the urgency to be free of it.<sup>13</sup> Yet tension paradoxically becomes associated with pleasure, as its precursor. Patrick feels that the burning 'excess' in him must be used up. He is conditioned to train relentlessly. Training causes adrenaline to course through the body, like killing and cocaine: 'I feel heady, ravenous, pumped up' (A.P. p.132). If he does not exercise something equally intoxicating is substituted:

I didn't work out this morning because I'd made a necklace from the bones of some girl's vertebrae and wanted to stay home and wear it around my neck while I masturbated in the white marble tub in my bathroom, groaning and moaning like some kind of animal (A.P. p. 395).

To supplement the exercise Patrick eats 'healthy' food, taking every trend to extremes; oat bran muffins, exotic fruit, obscure teas. His following of the prescription for prime young maleness is ludicrous when contrasted with his profound cruelty and intolerance, suggesting that the guidelines for masculine perfection are too demanding. Similarly, his zealous work-outs, lavish cosmetic treatments (A.P. p. 26) and trendy health-food breakfasts, lead to evening binges of rich food, hard drugs and copious amounts of alcohol. After trying restriction he indulges his appetites including, what Bataille terms, 'the luxury of death'.<sup>14</sup> He displays the extremes of his Jekyll and Hyde style doubling, by sending a shrivelled heart to the mother of one of his victims on Valentine's Day, whilst his secretary Jean receives exaggeratedly exquisite gifts (A.P. p. 382-3). His lack of middle ground is constantly affirmed. It is impossible for him to decide whether: 'The scene seems too pitiful ...or not pitiful

enough' (A.P. p. 316). He is simply rising to the challenge of a strictly containing culture, that does not embrace overlap and middle-ground.

Ironically, the valorisation of surface appearance enables the very thing such societies veer away from, inhabitants who look like something they are not. Patrick settles for *looking* healthy, with facial scrubs and a permanent tan. When a colleague returns from the Bahamas, Patrick claims his poolside tan is no better than his own sun-bed version, *his* reality. He feels capable of validating the colour of his body, even to the point of surpassing that which was obtained from the actual sun (A.P. p.137). As a result of drinking copious amounts of water and obsessively using eye-drops and facial ice-packs he proclaims: 'I feel like shit but look great' (A.P. p.106). part of this 'feeling shit' are the panic attacks and migraines he suffers from, classically symptomised by the irrational sadness he periodically feels (A.P. p. 139-148). When circumstances escalate, for example his confrontation with the dry cleaners, he hides his inner turmoil and feelings of ill-health behind his characteristically sharp appearance. An overdose of patriarchal mores facilitates the cultivation of this honed demeanour. However, keeping his body under control presents an ever-increasing struggle. He gloriously depicts what Tania Modleski describes as, the male desire to escape the human limits of the body'.<sup>15</sup> He describes food in minute detail - like an anorexic - desiring, but in the same instant, denying that desire. His relationship with food is intrinsically linked to a loathing of the body, and the futility of trying to remain eternally adolescent, torn between the wish to be invisible and the wish to be seen.

As an assertion of power he controls what enters and leaves his body: 'I would vomit - just to do it - into the rustic terra-cotta jars' (A.P. p. 281). His cosmetic treatments appease his terror of ageing, as masculinity is firmly entwined

with physical vigour and youthful prowess (A.P. p.26). The superficial ailments he tries to avoid, 'dull skin' and 'flat hair', have the potential to make him look older, to combat this he buys every product which promises eternal youth. His vitriolic ageism ensures his abhorrence of any woman approaching thirty. The thought of having sex with anyone older than him disgusts him (A.P. p.26). His partners are 'hardbodies' (A.P. p. 213), tanned, muscular with perfect hair and no body fat.<sup>16</sup> Mary Douglas comments on this attempt to locate discernible boundaries:

It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive...turns out to be hard and dead as stone when we get it ...Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise...the yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for *hard lines and clear concepts*. When we have them we have either to face the fact that some realities elude them or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts. The search for purity...it is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable, and those who make the attempt find themselves led to contradiction.<sup>17</sup>

Such purity is unattainable, border lines are ambiguous and breachable. With Daisy the model - a perfect example of Patrick's flawless ideal - he makes the comment: 'We have sex and lying beneath me she is only a shape' (A.P. p. 213). Her defining lines become of no consequence, she merely provides a conveniently disposable orifice in which to deposit bodily fluids; any limits she has only serve to invite violation. Women can never be 'pure', and deserve contempt and distaste as dangerous carriers of diseases:

Diseases!...there's this theory out now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having *sex* with someone who *is* infected then you can also catch *anything*...Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, haemophilia, leukaemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes - you can get dyslexia from *pussy* - (A.P. p. 5).

The male traders use the female body as, to quote Gallagher, & Laqueur, an 'arena in which society's anxieties about decay, about corruption, ...about the nature of economic life itself are expressed'.<sup>18</sup> 'Women' become the fall-guy, Patrick projects

the anxieties he feels about himself and chaotic modern life onto them, typically portrayed as having no substance of their own, an empty vessel waiting for such a responsibility. Overcoming his anxieties becomes a matter of over-coming 'her', and defining himself as what 'she' is not; strong, dominating, independent. However, he *cannot* overcome his dependency; without women to define him he becomes nothing himself. By slaughtering his sexual partners he destroys the evidence of his need, and denies this dependence.

He comments scathingly that the girl working in the video rental is, 'five pounds overweight' (A.P. p.112), because of his conditioning she would have to weigh five pounds less for him to look at her. This does not make her overweight, she may like to weigh more, and it should be her personal business. However, Patrick echoes his society's strict demarcations around what is to be deemed normal. Social stereotyping drastically reduces the options for personal appearance, enforcing adaptation. As Patrick himself sums up: 'your body has somehow become tuned to the insanity and you reach a point where it all makes sense...it clicks' (A.P. p. 6). His resistance to growth and maturity is part of his revolt against societal norms, increased, in a bizarre paradox, by his trying too hard to fit these same norms. The parameters are temporary, created and requiring constant amendment. He feels the exhaustion of this constant evolution: 'My sanity is in danger of fading...unable to maintain a credible public persona' (A.P. pp. 295 & 7). He feels nothing but shuddering contempt for figures of fleshly excess, which he sees as dripping food and excrement. Food is a foreign substance, like drugs, and equally open to abuse. During 'the pathologising of food consumption',<sup>19</sup> it becomes impossible to know where to draw boundaries between food that is ingested and the bodily organs. Foreign substances are endlessly capable of sinister inter-penetration.

Patrick surrenders to this inter-penetration by indulging in cannibalism, greedily devouring parts of his victims: 'I'm kneeling on the floor beside the corpse, eating the girl's brain, gobbling it down, spreading Grey Poupon over hunks of the pink, fleshy meat' (A.P. p. 328). Freud comments on such cannibalistic urges, maintaining that: 'The history of human civilisation shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct...(perhaps) a relic of cannibalistic desires,'<sup>20</sup> he goes on to cite other aspects of Patrick's behaviour, such as, 'intercourse with dead bodies' as pathological, in its sharp deviation from the 'norm'. He does however fail to suggest who is in the position to decree these 'norms'.<sup>21</sup> Patrick breaches the traditional taboos surrounding corpses, determined to absorb the 'other', as he gorges he forces another, half-dead girl to watch him, from her position nailed to the floor of his luxury penthouse.<sup>22</sup> He uses her to witness his appropriation of the organs of 'another' into his own body, in a manic attempt to break down the boundaries restraining him. He wants her to acknowledge the lack of constraints around him, along with the horrific potential and unbounded nature of what could happen to *her*. In a macabre re-enactment of Holy Communion he mimics the way the 'Flesh of Christ' is participated in as part of an incorporation, assimilation, and ultimately, identification process.

When the private detective investigating Paul Owen's disappearance visits Patrick he reveals his proximity to 'the edge' by immediately wondering how to hide the detective's body. Anyone in his way is eliminated as he acts out an exaggerated version of the societal role men are encouraged to play; the best, toughest, most resourceful, richest, survivor. The narrative's portrayal of madness exposes the infliction of such societal roles as one of its most likely causes. Patrick conforms to social standards by being handsome (he is endlessly asked if he is a model or a movie

star), well-educated, successful, wealthy and having a good body. Because he complies so admirably with these surface parameters he has ample opportunities to indulge his deviance: 'Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in...this was civilisation as I saw it, colossal and jagged' (A.P. p.375). In true Baudrillardian fashion he is 'simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being' (A.P. p.282). If, as Baudrillard suggests, there *is* no authentic reality to imitate then it must be faced that he is imitating a creation, a contrived reality held up as exemplary. Conditioned to scrutinise no further than surface appearance his numerous women companions are impressed by the way he looks, ignoring what a designer outfit can hide: 'I have a knife with a serrated blade in the pocket of my Valentino jacket' (A.P. p.52). As there is no correlation between appearance and behaviour, then conforming to the societal rules for masculinity is not enough to actually make you into the 'masculine' being society craves. Indeed, as Patrick has discovered, the gender role offers the perfect hiding place, a façade behind which the darkest of fantasies can be given free rein. He manages to smile charmingly and apologise to Bethany, although in reality he is, as he describes it, 'furious, full of rage...my rages at Harvard were less violent than the ones now and its useless to hope that my disgust will vanish – there is just *no way*' (A.P. p.241). Whilst smiling externally he is acknowledging in his head how much he wants to slice open her genitals.

Patrick, and his 'friends' have difficulty differentiating between each other. They look alike and dress alike, blending into one narrow-minded, overpaid, intolerant, vain, homogenous mass. Patrick acknowledges their similarity, but feels confident that he has the edge, providing his peers with the ideal construct to aspire to, due to his 'over riding intelligence' (A.P. p. 237). His supreme self-assurance makes him question the stunning beauty of natural phenomena: 'A curtain of stars, miles of

them, are scattered, glowing, across the sky and their multitude humbles me, which I have a hard time tolerating' (A.P. p. 264). He buys luxury items made from rare species, illustrating the ambiguity between trying to 'fit in' whilst still wanting to be 'different' by having the most unusual and expensive possessions. However, what he buys remains within the accepted parameters; making him the best at being the same. His enviable possessions are so easily acquired he feels justified in possessing the bodies of others.

His surface 'perfection' covers his retarded personality. He and his 'friends' are anti-British, anti-Jewish, anti-women, anti-ageing, afraid of anything differing from them (A.P. p. 36). They feel women, children and home-making threaten their homosocial, adolescent behaviour, therefore they prioritise the sex drive, never the sex object, opting for the transience of temporary partners, who they use to publicly confirm their masculinity, and establish their ranking within the hierarchy.

Responding to each other's names, they treat anyone failing to look like them as a freak:

Stash 'is probably uncomfortable...since he looks nothing like the other men in the room - his hair isn't slicked back, no suspenders, no horn-rimmed glasses, the clothes black...ill-fitting, no urge to light...a cigar, probably unable to secure a table at Camols, his net worth a pittance (A.P. p. 13).

They deal in excess; money, designer clothes, and luxury goods. Patrick's thoughts are a jumble of his recent and impending acquisitions: 'J&B I am thinking...Shirt from Charivari. Fusili I am thinking...Porsche 911...A Sharpei...I would like a Valium, no two Valium I am thinking. Cellular phone I am thinking (A.P. p. 81).

Such tangled nonsense is sharply reminiscent of the hysterical dialogue of T S Eliot's

*Waste Land:*

Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think.<sup>23</sup>

Hysteria is firmly tied to language; the sufferer is rendered mute, or speaks with a disorderly speech pattern. Traditionally categorised as a female affliction, hysteria became something which men wrote about, rather than suffered from. This writing was often broached within a collaboration of men, for example Eliot and Pound, Freud and Breuer. Hysteria is, reputedly, caused in men by scenarios too horrible to be faced; sex with women, fighting in wars and so on. The demands of a real sexual situation bring Patrick's antagonism with women into direct collision with his instinctual drives. Freud cites hysteria as a way in which to escape the fall-out of this type of collision, in work that also firmly links hysteria in men with homosexuality.<sup>24</sup> Sprawling chaos is introduced where there should only be hard power and precision. Freud posited 'talking' as a cure for hysteria, or a writing-out of events, Patrick echoes this therapeutic approach with his first person narrative. He opts for murder to further express himself. The ever-increasing waste blowing around the streets fills him with foreboding. Wayne Koestenbaum comments on the relevance of waste to the unbalanced mind: 'The hysteric is terrified by waste's ability to breed: the site of excrement (the anus) makes the speaker remember and desire, and even generates new life'.<sup>25</sup> As in DeLillo's *Underworld* waste recalls the proximity of abjection and the potential threat to identity of that which is considered 'other'.

Patrick's crowd believe that cultural scenarios such as where they dine, legitimate their identity. They want to be seen in the most exclusive, *Zagats*-listed, restaurants and complain if the bill is reasonable (A.P. p. 154). The narrative's diary format names sections after restaurants; life revolves around eating out.<sup>26</sup> Patrick panics if he cannot book the restaurant of his choice, even if he is not hungry (A.P. p. 396), and frequently orders food he has no intention of eating, plus unnecessary garnishes, 'with crushed ice on the side in a glass, that I asked for but don't want'

(A.P. p. 114). He is torn between conforming to type and personalising what he consumes. The food is ornately presented, food in disguise, and eating is a luxurious leisure pastime. Plain food is associated with a tedious level of goodness and restraint, avoidance of richness and the subsequent bloating and nauseating debauchery.<sup>27</sup> Food is over-modified, geometrically perfect pieces of liver, and star shaped rabbit (A.P. p. 141), and excessively ornamented, ‘the cheesecake, what flavour? Was it heated?...Ricotta cheesecake? Goat cheese? Were there flowers or cilantro in it?’ (A.P. p. 107). The rat from the toilet is offered brie with ‘a sun-dried tomato and a sprinkling of dill’ (A.P. p.309). Patrick’s secretary researches restaurants for him and obtains sample menus. He threatens to murder his dinner partners if they make him order something not previously contemplated, his fear of the unknown is pitiful and complete (A.P. p.95). He also adheres to the book of etiquette and dress codes: ‘What are the rules for a sweater vest?’ (A.P. p.152), and lists his major priorities as, the air conditioning operating at maximum efficiency, avoiding boring lunch dates, having his dry cleaning dealt with pristinely, returning video rentals on time, and never having to queue for the ‘Stairmaster’. The people he socialises with have the same attitude, they are impossible to satisfy and never find a restaurant that they like enough to use regularly. This obsessive searching and lack of fidelity, ensures that restaurants are ephemeral and fleeting, constantly closing down to make room for new ones; identified by who launches them. Patrick describes an associate as going to ‘all the places’ (A.P. p. 374). His ‘places’ form the whole universe, there is nothing else. This is Patrick’s reality, freed from restrictions and recriminations by his decision to exceed everything required of him, as he insists: ‘The past isn’t real. It’s just a dream...Don’t mention the past’ (A.P. p. 340). However, it takes strength to forget the past and despite his urge to ‘fit in’ he recoils from the pressure to acknowledge, and

aspire to, the same reality as 'everyone else'. His identity *is* formed in conjunction with what is revered and found admirable by society, yet paradoxically the grand narratives of this society, supposedly assisting social control and averting chaos, are unable to control the very conspicuous consumption that they themselves have encouraged.

Patrick changes women as often as he changes restaurant. He muses about Jean, his devoted secretary:

How useless, boring, physically beautiful she really is...why not end up with her?...she has a better body than most of the other girls I know... everyone is interchangeable anyway...it doesn't really matter (A.P. p. 379).

He parts with his long-time girlfriend Evelyn in a characteristically cold manner, 'she has been eyeing me for the last two years not with adoration but with something closer to greed' (A.P. p. 338). Evelyn shows her willingness to compromise, as she sees his money slipping out of her avaricious grasp: 'What do you want me to do? What is it you want?' (A.P. p. 341). She turns Freud's famous question of 'what is it that women want' to Patrick, as he, hysterically feminine, proclaims: 'King...I want you to call me King' (A.P. p. 339). His graphic depiction of their relationship offers an insight into his brain's turmoil, a fragmented and disturbing filmic montage, where multiple shards, sharp and splintered, are seen simultaneously:

Our relationship...it's a grey place, most of it blacked out, bombed, footage ...endless shots of stone and any language heard is utterly foreign, the sound flickering away over new images: blood pouring from automated tellers, women giving birth through their arseholes (A.P. p. 343).

He sees life with Evelyn as the reflections of multiple TV screens, snippets of film, magazines and newspapers. It is a relationship with no tangible 'reality', and no border lines between categories and images which freely interpenetrate each other.

Every aspect of their relationship is mediated. The exaggeration of this mediation suggests that all human relationships are similarly based on mediation.

Patrick's comments about Evelyn's greed are repeated by his cronies discussing *their* dinner-dates: 'She expects to be paid. They *all* do' (A.P. p. 52). In their social strata, the price of sex is dinner at the restaurant of the woman's choice. Patricia is holding out for 'Dorsia', a venue proving maddeningly elusive to Patrick, who terms her 'Restaurant whore' (A.P. p. 74). Even Bethany, whom he has not seen for many years, but can remember beating up, does not escape. As Patrick ominously predicts: 'She has made a promise by asking me to lunch' (A.P. p. 237). Left with a black eye, and her arm in a sling last time she encountered Patrick, Bethany seals her fate by telling him that she is dating somebody rich and influential enough to irritate him, the chef and co-owner of the mighty Dorsia.

The yuppy brokers are prepared to put up with paying the bill every time, if it guarantees them sex with good-looking, slim, young women:

The only girls with good personalities who are smart or maybe funny or halfway intelligent or even talented...are *ugly* chicks...the only reason chicks exist is to get us turned on...survival of the species (A.P. p. 91).

Although they think nothing of spending \$475 on a meal to get a woman into bed, they will not give money to the numerous homeless beggars. They waste ludicrously expensive champagne and conspicuously flaunt their various platinum credit cards whilst jeering at those less fortunate. They share Bataille's view that 'the poor (are) closer to death', and think that by comparison *their* obscene consumption will make them live forever, effectively buying themselves life-credit.<sup>28</sup> They fear that giving a dollar to the street dwellers will be the beginning of narrowing the dividing gap between them and open the possibility of any assimilation taking place. Patrick's elevation is at the beggar's expense. En-route to the obscene consumption of Evelyn's

Christmas party he throws a Fortune Cookie to one of them, only to insult him for eating it, despite the lavish buffet awaiting *him*:

Roasted hazlenuts and lobster and oyster bisques and celery root soup with apples and beluga caviar on toast points and creamed onions and roast goose with chestnut stuffing and caviar in puff pastry and vegetable tarts with tapenade, roast duck and roast rack of veal with shallots and gnocchi gratin and vegetable strudel and Waldorf salad and scallops and bruschetta with mascarpone and white truffles and green chilli souffle and roast partridge with sage, potatoes and onion and cranberry sauce, mincemeat pies and chocolate truffles and lemon souffle tarts and pecan tarte Tatin.(A.P. p. 181-2).

The extravagant listing of sumptuous food is typical of the narrative. Patrick repeatedly, almost compulsively lists the food that is ordered or appears on menus. The consumption is conspicuous and nauseating, with evidence of huge wastage. The chasm between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' is colossal and reflected in Patrick's favourite musical *Les Miserables*, which demonstrates the wealthy using the poor as entertainment, in much the same way as Patrick gets his kicks from taunting the homeless. The play ironically shows poverty and social injustice in a lavish theatre production, with excellent actors, singers and musicians, and an audience who can afford a ticket. The classes are separated by their diet and clothing, and more literally by the club's barricades: 'All of the men outside Tunnel tonight are...wearing tuxedos, except for a middle aged homeless bum who sits by a Dumpster...begging for change.' (A.P. p.52). *He* facilitates their identification as well-dressed, successful, supremely masculine. Patrick spends vast sums on clothes, insulating himself from the banality of the world by only frequenting shops with a rarefied atmosphere and ultimately preferring to purchase from glossy brochures. He obsessively lists the high-spec contents of his flat, in a rush of material abundance that echoes the blurbs from these brochures. Christmas shopping allows him to fulfil his stereotypical role as 'wealthy, tasteful, innovative man'. He has nothing but contempt for the recipients of the gifts, but conforms to the accepted pattern of a generous, rich, male; benevolent

and bestowing. Gift-giving, and receiving, is seen as a game, an opportunity to prove your lofty status with ostentatious squander. This is reminiscent of the Potlatch rituals practised amongst primitive tribes, where opulent gifts are chosen as a way to humiliate the recipient (from a rival tribe), and subsequently create an obligation for the gift to be reciprocated, indeed bettered. Rather than an equal response a luxurious excess is encouraged, a rash expenditure, encouraging disequilibrium.<sup>29</sup> This lack of restriction encourages and facilitates the destruction of wealth as a method of defying rivals. Potlatch can lead to massive depletion of personal assets, linking its rituals with sacrifice, through notions of the sacred and of loss. Such ostentatious loss is viewed, in psychoanalytical terms, as an attempt to flee abjection, hence also linking Potlatch to excretion and death. Patrick is correct in his assertion that money separates him from the abject. When he ruins an expensive handkerchief from Hermes with 'thick rosy strings of blood and snot' (A.P. p. 106) he is only perturbed that it was not a gift; ruining something is of little consequence, who pays is what matters. This paramount importance attached to the ability to pay is further emphasised by his constant use of the automated teller machines. As in *Vineland*, *Glamorama* and *White Noise* the bank machine is acknowledged as part of a huge surveillance network, assisting in the validation of existence, by giving money, or not.<sup>30</sup>

Patrick is passed off by others as innocuous, a 'nice' guy, 'the boy next-door', soft, spoilt, and protected by Daddy's money. His proclamations: 'I'm a fucking evil psychopath,' are ignored (A.P. p. 20). His career responsibilities, 'mergers and acquisitions' are transformed into 'murders and executions' without anybody noticing (A.P. p. 206). It is impossible to tell whether he is being ignored, or making the comments in his head, but either way the inference that inhabitants in the same society fail to pay each other sufficient attention is clear (A.P. p. 141).<sup>31</sup> When he finally

decides to: 'make public what has been, until now, my private dementia' (A.P. p. 352) he leaves a long garbled confession on his attorney's answer phone machine, giving dates and corroborating evidence, and signing off 'I'm a pretty sick guy' (A.P. p. 352). As Joel Black discusses in his book *The Aesthetics of Murder*, it is always easier to dismiss a murderer as 'insane':

The medical establishment have been reluctant to admit the possibility of motiveless murders committed by disinterested, sane assailants... Traditionally, the legal medical discourses have sought to rationalize violent crimes in the form of a confession elicited from the perpetrator. The police interrogation, the courtroom cross-examination, and the psychoanalytic session are modern institutionalized modes of the much older religious confession of the Catholic church or the literary, autobiographical confessions of writers.<sup>32</sup>

Because Patrick appears to be 'normal' Carnes, his attorney, thinks it is a huge joke and insists that there is no way *Bateman* could do all those things, further refuting the possibility by claiming to have dined with Owen since Patrick states he has killed him. Patrick's victims are frequently not missed, or are identified as dining out, or working in other cities, further denying any possibility of a straightforward identity or definitive version of events (A.P. p. 367- 8).<sup>33</sup> Within his short conversation with Carnes, Patrick is identified as no less than three different people. He is prone to this mis-recognition, by both colleagues and staff, and is repeatedly called 'Marcus', making it simple for him to use that name as an alibi. He responds to being called the wrong name by misnaming the person who is speaking to him, and only occasionally demurs a comparison: 'even though I'm more handsome than Craig, we both look pretty much the same' (A.P. p. 250). It is difficult to pin guilt on an individual man when viewed as simply an amorphous construction of 'maleness'. In *Vineland* characters *look* alike; in *American Psycho* they substitute each other in a way that goes beyond appearance.

## Pleasure Beyond Endurance: Sex, Violence and the Breaching of Boundaries.

The feelings of vulnerability caused by boundary transgressions ensure that those not directly involved conveniently avert their eyes. Complicity in deviant courses of action abounds within the narrative. When Patrick attacks the Sharpei and its owner the scene is bloody (A.P. p. 164-5). He runs, long black leather coat flying behind him like a cape, laughing hysterically, a mechanical puppet, outlandish dress hiding the mechanisms.<sup>34</sup> However, nobody in the street looks twice and when he enters a supermarket, sprayed with blood, the other shoppers and staff seem to see nothing out of the ordinary. He drags Paul Owen's corpse, in a sleeping bag, through his apartment building and into a cab, stopping on the way to socialise, yet nobody asks what he is doing (A.P. p. 219). The anonymity of society would be humorous, were it not so sinister. After his 'shoot-out' with the police a wanted poster is displayed at the taxi depot. However, when a taxi driver recognises him from this poster he does not take him to the police, but instead demands his Rolex, his cash, and his Rayban sunglasses (A.P. p. 391), confirming everybody's willingness to 'look the other way', for a price. The estate agents trying to lease Paul Owen's apartment have covered up the murders of the call girls, to keep the property desirable. When Patrick visits the apartment the rental clerk feels suspicious of him, but is more interested in her commission. Her failure to challenge him, even after she has tricked him into claiming to have seen an imaginary press advert, fills him with dread:

All frontiers, if there had ever been any, seem suddenly detachable and have been removed, a feeling that others are creating my fate will not leave me for the rest of the day. This...is...not...a...game, I want to shout, but I can't catch my breath (A.P. p. 370).

Until now he *has* thought it a 'game', but when others begin to play their own preferred version, with their rules, he feels his dominance and supremacy slipping away. A crucial part of fulfilling a construct is the erection of inviolate walls, offering a protected place in which to 'mind one's own business'. Patrick finds himself, 'Horny and desperate, lusting for contact' (A.P. p. 198), far too frequently to be able to stay within his societal boundaries. The rich, over-presented food, alcohol and drugs he indulges in are the beginning of an orgy of consumption. As part of this consumption sexual activity becomes commodified, leading to multiple sexual partners, and endless variations of the sexual act. Affluence and sexuality become connected, with a voracious sexual appetite and a long list of conquests a sign of success, proof that life is lived to the full, with both the capacity for enjoyment and an indisputable identity. Patrick's sex life is graphically described as at saturation point when he begins to torture, maim, and kill small animals, then people. He is looking for acute sensations of pleasure from his sexual encounters to prove his ability to be 'manly', and soon progresses to pain. To maintain the intensity he juxtaposes two aspects of sexuality, pleasure and danger. Bataille summarises the conflicting emotions incited by sexual arousal: 'Just as virility is tied to the allure of a nude body, full existence is tied to any image that arouses hope and terror'.<sup>35</sup> Even when Patrick wallows in excessive, endless sexual variations with multiple partners he is not satisfied, conditioned as he is to strive ever onwards to be the best, translated by him as the most extreme. He resorts to torture, with nail guns and sharpened coat hangers. He literally pours salt into wounds, unable to resist combining pleasure and pain. His sexual partners must suffer for their multiple orgasms and leave his apartment with a limp or a black eye. He claims to pay them well, having been convinced by the

ideology of his class that money is all that counts (A.P. p.176). Freud discusses the potential for such aggression in an alarmingly matter-of-fact way:

The sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of *aggressiveness* – a desire to subjugate: the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing.<sup>36</sup>

With the prostitutes Patrick does not have this excuse, they do not require wooing, but are simply doing their job. It is *his* requirements of them that exceed reason. He is a rampaging, dominant, male beast, in charge to the point of fastening them down. He fulfils Don Milligan's assertion: 'You must fuck as if your life depended on it. Apparently it does'.<sup>37</sup> However, although sex identifies, societal norms dictate that it must not be allowed to dominate. Ideally sex should be autonomous, only occupying its own terrain. Patrick presents murderous sex as what you do when you have done everything else; the logical conclusion to a concentrated search for fulfilment, recognition, pleasure, enjoyment and status. His failure to keep his sexual activities private and institutionalised results in him inflicting his deviant desires on others.<sup>38</sup> To ensure that the public face of sex reflects the heterosexual 'norm' the family is used as the ultimate social definer and containing tool. Patrick's mother is in a secure private hospital, having suffered a breakdown. She continuously wears dark glasses, symbolically blind to her son's activities.<sup>39</sup> His father is presumed dead. In keeping with Patrick's priorities his father's clothing is described in great detail. He too has something wrong with his eyes:

The photograph of my father when he was a much younger man...he's wearing a six-button double-breasted black sport coat, a white spread collar cotton shirt, a tie, pocket square, shoes, all by Brooks Brothers. He's standing next to one of the topiary animals a long time ago at his father's estate in Connecticut and there's something the matter with his eyes (A.P. p. 366).

Just as his parents are visually impaired, Patrick has grave doubts about everybody's ability to 'see': 'Does anyone really *see* anyone? Does anyone really *see* anyone else?

Did *you* ever see *me*? *See*? What does that mean? Ha! *See*? Ha! I just don't get it' (A.P. p. 238). People look without seeing, or see what they choose, or have been conditioned to look for. Patrick likes to remove eyes; they threaten with their shading of light and darkness and offer a potential door to abjection, at the outskirts of the body proper, a semi-closed orifice. The closeness of 'eye' and 'I' is intolerable to him, with its suggestions of individuality.

Patrick is consumed by envy for the comparative youth and hip-ness of his brother Sean (A.P. p. 266). Family members, rather than providing a source of support and strength are illustrated as those most likely to undermine the careful construction of self, due to their proximity to it. Patrick's uncontrollable feelings of jealousy and fear towards his brother enable him to focus sufficiently to control his urge to tell him that he has noticed his plucked eyebrows:

The overwhelming urge I have to mention this is quelled only by squeezing my hand into a fist so tightly that I break the skin on the palm of my hand and the biceps of my left arm bulges then rips through the cloth of the linen Armani shirt I have on (A.P. p. 226).

He does not make *this* much effort not to kill people, revealing his very personal, and totally self-absorbed priorities. He is hyper-aware of his brother's self-conscious construction of a social persona and therefore hyper-sensitive about his own. He has no fond memories of family life, indeed he reinforces the danger of depending on the revered 'family' construct for inspiration, as in reality the world abounds with hopelessly dysfunctional families, not the balanced and supportive structures projected by ideology. Focusing on sexual activity to the intense degree that Patrick maintains invariably indicates problems that stem from circumstances other than the sexual. This is enforced by William Simon: 'The complexity of motivations to engage in sexual behaviour reminds us that the desire for sex is rarely, if ever, in the

exclusive control of 'sexual desire'.<sup>40</sup> Patrick's sexual activities are part of his determination to appear supremely masculine.

The gender role society inflicts on him makes him feel as trapped and constricted as blood contained within the complicated vascular system of veins and arteries. Like sexuality, blood, when liberated from its allotted place, creates feelings of unease. It should be on the other side of its boundaries, skin and tissue. Patrick symbolically releases blood, just as he lets his sexual urges rampage, encouraging it to spurt, spray, jet, shoot around - ejaculatory. His breaching of boundaries stems from an original bid to fulfil them and consequently proves them to be false, unsustainable and self-created. They are part of a plan to retain control and cultivate feelings of safety which ironically instead proves the impossibility of such aims. When a rat travels from the sewers via the toilet into his luxury penthouse, he blames his lack of dismay on the amount of drugs he is taking, but the rat's breaching of boundaries cannot worry him whilst he is in the midst of annihilating his own. The re-writing of what is acceptable is an admirable idea in principle, however, Patrick illustrates the difficulty of deciding who can ever be qualified for this task, and where will lines be drawn to prevent damage to others. The rat appears at a human's most vulnerable point, directly below their exposed genitals; a base creature placing under threat the very base of the body.

Patrick only postpones damaging others when it suits his own purposes:

My mind races, becomes flooded with impurities - her head is within my reach, is mine to crush; at this very moment my urge to strike out, to insult and punish her, rises then subsides, and afterwards I'm able to point out, "That's a very fine Chardonnay you're drinking" (A.P. p. 170).

His struggle with savagery causes him to be labelled as psychopathic. The social preferred is that the indulgence of impulses, classified as uncivilised and anti-social, is not tolerated. The underlying question is whether these drives are more natural and

intrinsic than a sophisticated contemporary population dares to admit. Patrick insists that he must obey his urges to strive to be the best, the ultimately powerful man:

I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage. This was my bone season and I needed a vacation (A.P. p. 279).

If masculinity is accepted as a 'social construction', rather than a natural quality, then the nature of Patrick's urges are complicated. They may be intrinsic, a result of conforming, or a way of *not* conforming. He argues in favour of an inescapable fatality dictating life, claiming that there is therefore no point trying to alter things, or civilise himself. Indeed the attempts made to stereotype him are seen to push him further into extremities of behaviour. The girl who dies with the rat inside her is said to have had no choice, she could not escape him, or her fate: 'This all would have happened anyway. *I would have found her*. This is the way the earth works' (A.P. p. 328).

Man as a beast, following uncontrollable blood lusts, is an historically documented image. Women have been traditionally relied upon to tame and civilise him with their gentle wiles: '(Jean) is searching for a rational analysis of who I am, which is...an impossibility: there...is...no...key' (A.P. p. 264). The anomaly, of course, is that man also claims to be superior to his female counterpart, far more rational and sane than she, who cannot help but be prone to madness and hysteria due to her reproductive capacities, and lack of penis. By using compulsory social constructs, man can validate himself in any way he chooses, therefore a combination of opposites resulting in a paradoxical, 'rational beast', may be sanctioned, subsequently legitimating what may have formerly been viewed as 'mad' behaviour. It is perfectly acceptable to go on the rampage, because it is *his* society, his rules. Rigid adherence to the rules of patriarchal society formats humans as they are.

Despite over-reaching social constraints, Patrick does not want to breach *every* boundary. He obeys the messages of fashion and social entertainment and has a heightened perception of the effect of his appearance on others and the necessity for secure financial backup to *sustain* this appearance and hence his position of superiority within society. The thought of slipping over the border into poverty horrifies him. He is passionate about his amassed wealth, and resolutely treats beggars as ‘the enemy’. He is terrified of living like they do, but fascinated by them, taunting them at every opportunity: ‘I wave to a beggar on the corner of Forty-ninth and Eighth, then give him the finger’ (A.P. p. 94). Visible representations of the frightening other side of the border, he berates them for not working, although he does nothing at his office, cosseted due to his family’s money (A.P. p. 130). He viciously blinds a beggar and breaks his dog’s legs, calmly cutting out the man’s eyes, and slitting his body. He is intrigued by the boundaries of ‘the other’, and determined to investigate their impact upon his quest to reign supreme. The ritual carving up of the victim is offered by Patrick as something aesthetically interesting, as discussed by De Quincey in ‘Murder as One of the Fine Arts’,<sup>41</sup> he behaves as a creative artist, with other people’s body parts as his artistic medium. De Quincey’s descriptions come from a terrified, surviving witness; Patrick offers the murderer’s viewpoint, squirmingly closer to the action, and ultimately the reader/audiences’ own implication. His motivations lie beyond the infliction of pain, entangled instead with the manipulation of flesh; he wants to alter, amend and control the many permutations of how the human body can look, push the boundaries of what is acceptable to the point where *his* is acknowledged as the preferred version. His descriptions of ornate restaurant food invariably echo the organs and blood of his mutilations - ritualistic platters – which both justify his actions, *and* give him new ideas:

The meat loaf dark red triangles topped by chevre which has been tinted pink by pomegranate juice, squiggles of thick tan quail stock circling the beef, and mango slices dotting the rim of the wide black plate (A.P. p. 78).

The artistic and unusual arrangement of foodstuffs validates the alteration of formerly pristine forms, in a striving for the ultimate presentation. The likeness and difference between disparate items: 'taking a bite out of his brioche, which looks like a sponge drenched in blood' (A.P. p.140) makes him believe that it is permissible for him to play with, and alter patterns, break things up and put them back together differently, for the sake of pleasing his eye with new things and potentially creating a perfect blueprint. He describes his eviscerated victim's entrails in tones of wonder, marvelling at the colours and textures he reveals. Signs of sexual difference are removed, he frequently amputates breasts, and slices open vaginas, eager to remove females' extra viscera.<sup>42</sup> Difference unnerves him, he can only deal with varying levels of sameness. De Quincey claimed murder leads to a drugged and trance-like state, in modern terms gives a 'fix'. Patrick undoubtedly gains a high he cannot resist from carnage and is so intent on following his script and indulging in copious amounts of sexual activity that he fails to spot the irony of becoming hysterical, mid thrust, over spermicidal lubricant (hyped up by manufacturers) when with Courtney (A.P. p. 102), yet happily meshing body parts with prostitutes, multiple participants, and strangers, using all orifices, and condoms only occasionally. At this point he is grimly retaining some kind of bizarre double standard, thinking that a woman of his own class and financial standing, even though he feels nothing for her, has to be treated in a certain way. Similarly, Courtney makes a scene about whether the condom he is wearing to penetrate her has a receptacle tip, before taking his penis in her mouth without *any* protection. The constructed and constricting nature of the sex he has with women like Courtney and Evelyn encourages ever more hideous atrocities with the

likes of the juvenile prostitute, Christie, whose nipples are attached to a car battery until she explodes (A.P. p. 290). The attacks increase in severity, as Patrick becomes a connoisseur of carnage, constantly fantasising about what he would like to do next. In a bid to keep his sexual activity away from the tedious servility of day to day life he meticulously plans his forthcoming events, buying equipment and weapons. His attacks are an extreme embodiment of hierarchical power as rather than dissolving the boundaries he resents he reinforces them, by subjugating his victims to his will from his elevated position in society. He is not conforming to a pattern, as many serial killers do, his only identifying characteristic is that all of his victims (the majority female) suffer horrible mutilations, and their death is never quick or clean. Patrick suppresses their inhibitions with drugs, leading to a plethora of sexual pleasure before death; the ultimate destination and the only place left to go after multiple orgasm. Bataille also ties orgasmic moments and death: 'Life and void are confused and mingled like lovers, in the convulsive moments of the end'.<sup>43</sup> Patrick exploits his victim's dying moments to enhance his sexual excitement:

After I've stabbed her five or six times - the blood's spurting out in jets; I'm leaning over to inhale its perfume - her muscles stiffen, become rigid, and she goes into her death throes; her throat becomes flooded with dark-red blood and she thrashes around as if tied up, but she isn't and I have to hold her down. Her mouth fills with blood that cascades over the sides of her cheeks, over her chin. Her body shaking spasmodically, resembles what I imagine an epileptic goes through in a fit and I hold her head, rubbing my dick, stiff and covered in blood, across her choking face, until she's motionless (A.P. p. 290).

He usually uses more than one woman and forces them to pleasure each other, sometimes involving him, sometimes not. He constantly pushes them to further acts, watching closely and controlling:

I make Elizabeth lie on her back and hold both legs up, open, spreading them as wide as possible, and then I push Christie's head down and make her lap at her cunt - not suck on it but lap at it, like a thirsty dog - while fingering her clit, then, with her other hand, she sticks two fingers into the open, wet cunt, while her tongue replaces the fingers and then she takes the fingers she's

fucked Elizabeth's cunt with and forces them into Elizabeth's mouth, making her suck on them (A.P. p. 288).

He presumes all women are weak and degenerate, describing their drug induced lack of inhibition in a cold, rational tone. He feels that their Dionysian abandon and capacity to enjoy sex justifies his vicious treatment of them and that the prioritisation of men by society endorses his wilful breaching of their boundaries. He becomes frustrated by the finite nature of atrocity, feeling the restriction of constructs closing in on him: 'Later, predictably, she's tied to the floor, naked...I can tell its going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I'm used to the horror' (A.P. p. 327-9). In a desperate bid to make it different he saws her body in half whilst she's still alive with a rat inside of her, then pulls her legs away from her torso quickly in the hope that she is aware of this, albeit briefly, before she dies. Although, Elizabeth's death sounds like orgasm and ejaculation combined, her whole body in spasm, she cannot return to reflect on the experience, only Patrick benefits from it. His experience with Tiffany and Torri is similarly mediated. Killing the girls in Owen's apartment he continues with his ever-spiralling atrocities. After the usual energetic, multiple participant sex:

I start by skinning Torri a little, making incisions with a steak knife and ripping bits of flesh from her legs and stomach...then I try to cut off her fingers with nail scissors and finally I pour acid on her belly and genitals, but none of this comes close to killing her so I resort to stabbing her in the throat and eventually the blade of the knife breaks off in what's left of her neck stuck on the bone, and I stop. While Tiffany watches, finally I saw the entire head off-torrents of blood splash against the walls, even the ceiling – 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. Afterwards I'm so hard I can even walk around the blood-soaked room carrying the head, which feels warm and weightless, on my dick (A.P. pp. 304 & 5 & 6).

There are multiple ways of dying and Patrick wants to experiment with as many of them as he can, his perverse cruelty an extreme way of pointing out the multiplicities

of life (and death) and the subsequent inadequacy of attempts to enforce demarcated gender identities, supposedly suitable for all people.

Successful white male is the approved societal format, Patrick and his cronies believe that conforming to this social type can even protect them from AIDS. Patrick wants desperately to exceed the benchmarks for being fit, slim, healthy, rich, clever and acquisitive, all surface qualities, and his treatment of women, from dismissive to murderous, confirms his preference for the 'superior' gender model. The illusion of male supremacy he and his fraternity are so eager to retain provides the ideal zone to cultivate homoerotic relations, yet Patrick is petrified of homosexual contact, firing his personal trainer when he thinks he is, 'coming on' to him, and attempting to strangle Luis Carruthers. Obsessed by image Patrick knows that to be homosexual is to risk, as Tim Edwards summarises, 'religious castigation, state criminalisation and medical categorisation'.<sup>44</sup> He therefore suppresses his perceived perversion to the point of neurosis. In the toilet cubicle the horror slides towards comedy as Luis takes the hands around his neck as a seductive profession of love, and therefore reciprocates (A.P. p. 158-60). Patrick, paralysed and appalled, withdraws from the washroom, but the connection has been clearly made between sex and death, repulsion and attraction. Luis replaces Patrick's hands every time he tries to move them, and gently kisses his would be murderer on the wrist, an act that alarms Patrick far more than any struggle or entreaty would. To try and deflect his encounter with Louis, forcing him, as it does to face up to his potential homosexuality, he returns to the dining table and launches, mechanically, into his stock dress code advice:

While a tie holder is by no means required business wear, it adds to a clean, neat overall appearance. But the accessory shouldn't dominate the tie. Choose a simple gold bar or a small clip and place it at the lower end of the tie at a downward forty-five degree angle (A.P. p. 160).

Patrick and Luis are connected via Courtney, with whom they both have sex. Patrick sleeps with most of his friend's girlfriends, as well as many prostitutes, who in turn have been with hundreds of different men. Through this promiscuity he liaises sexually with other men, without compromising his heterosexual image. This constant transfer of sperm between the male characters is symbolically illustrated by the chapter 'Another Night' (A.P. p. 320) when they all connect with each other via the telephone system's 'Call Waiting' facility. When a woman interrupts she immediately weakens their multiple relationship by removing her boyfriend from the arrangements. 'Call Waiting' grants a certain anonymity, it is difficult to be sure of who speaks, and what their background actions are, yet the all-encompassing interconnectedness of the call gives the multi-masculine intimacy they crave. The telephone makes an ideal facilitator, acting also as a protective shield.

This idea of 'protection' is progressed by Patrick buying a separate apartment in Hell's Kitchen, where he takes the bodies of male victims: 'I want to keep the men's bodies separate from the women's' (A.P. pp. 249 & 214).<sup>45</sup> Whilst he dismembers women, plays with their body parts, has sex with their corpses, even eats them, he merely wants to dispose of the male bodies, using a bath of lime to eradicate them completely. The women's body parts are used to create a different order; the men are allowed to maintain their wholeness, uncontaminated by abject pieces of the feminine body, with its dubious boundaries and sinister connections with menstruation and childbirth. His victims are a different species to him, demonstrating what Sergei Lobonov-Rostovsky calls, the 'refusal to see the self mirrored in the dissected corpse'.<sup>46</sup> Although he has killed many more people than the details given (he tells Carnes answer phone, '30- 40 -100') the male victims are usually unintentional, insignificant or necessary, unlike the multiple attacks on women which

he fantasises about, and plans meticulously, determined to alleviate them of any power.

The fear Patrick feels towards women, and the subsequent need to control and restrict them is likewise aimed at homosexuals. The Gay Pride march makes him physically ill. He likens the marchers to Halloween characters, yet watches with a 'certain traumatised fascination, my mind reeling that a human being, a *man* could feel pride over sodomising another man' (A.P. p. 139). He literally runs away, sprinting to get a cab, and decides to be late for the office so that he can go back home, change his clothes (again) and torture a small dog to death. His extreme homophobia is telling, suggesting a physical interest in his own sex that he refuses to contemplate. His constant drug taking could be one of his methods of avoiding how he feels, it is incredible that he survives the combination and quantity of chemicals. Gross mistreatment of his body compensates and punishes him at the same time, for having, but not indulging, same-sex desire. Through him erotic tension and substance abuse are connected.

As part of Patrick's attempts to be acceptable, as he terms it himself, to 'fit in', he conforms *too* rigidly to stereotypes until he reaches the point of exceeding every requirement. He struggles to replace, what he has been conditioned to perceive as, one horrendous deviancy, homosexuality, with another. In his 'reality' it is better to mutilate people than to have sex with a man. When he meets a man walking his dog he instantly categorises him as an old 'queer', commenting on his pink, 'feminine features' and his 'tacky' clothes. He mimics his speech, exaggerating his lisp and carves his dog up in front of him, fascinated by the poor animal 'sniffing the pile of its own intestines' (A.P. p. 166). He likes his victims to be aware of their fast approaching demise, his attack on the man clearly sexual:

Push him back, hard, with a bloodied glove and start randomly stabbing him in the face and head, finally slashing his throat open in two brief chopping motions; an arc of red-brown blood splatters the white BMW 320i parked at the curb, setting off its car alarm, four fountainlike bursts coming from below his chin. The spraylike sound of the blood. He falls to the sidewalk, shaking like mad, blood still pumping...to make sure the old queer is really dead...I shoot him with a silencer twice in the face (A.P. p. 166).

He has now started to use guns, in addition to his macabre collection of scissors, knives, chain-saws and modified kitchen utensils. His indiscriminate shooting of a street saxophonist (A.P. p. 348), instigates a police chase. Society legitimates men as killers, resulting in the entwining of the images of gun and penis: 'something ...manly about an Uzi, something dramatic...that gets me excited' (A.P. p. 346). The bigger and more powerful the better, the Uzi is like an extension of his body, and he finally confesses the thrill manliness gives him. He wants a large gun to reflect the physical dimensions of his penis, the size of which is common knowledge amongst his 'friends'. When he makes one of his typically blunt confessions during a conference call, they choose to ignore the gruesome truth: 'You know guys it's not beyond my capacities to drive a lead pipe repeatedly into a girl's vagina', instead they admire his endowment: 'We all know about your lead pipe Bateman...stop bragging' (A.P. p. 325).

This capacity to disguise or ignore deviance means that Patrick need not acknowledge any boundaries of decency, but merely indulge his every whim, allowing his body to overcome itself in bursts of dissipation, where rapture meets rapture:

The walls are breathing, the stench of decay smothers everything...I spend the next fifteen minutes...pulling out a bluish rope of intestine...still connected to the body, and shoving it in my mouth, choking on it...it feels moist in my mouth...filled with some kind of paste which smells bad. After an hour of digging, I detach her spinal cord and decide to Federal Express the thing without cleaning it...I want to drink this girl's blood as if it were champagne...I plunge my face into what's left of her stomach, scratching my chomping jaw on a broken rib. The huge new television set is on...*this is my*

*reality*. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw (A.P. p. 344-5 italics added).

His unbridled delving into the corpse mirrors his boundless attitude to sex and his curiosity about any potential for depth in his surface-focussed society. Vampire-like he longs to drink her blood, she dies so that he can live and escape obscurity. He ignores his body's borders, which try to resist by gagging, instead forcing the intestines into his mouth. Eating is a complex phenomena with conventional food preparation demanding certain guidelines. Patrick tries to make sausages, legitimating the girl as meat, to be cooked and devoured by the archetypal carnivorous, red-blooded male:

It does sporadically penetrate how unacceptable some of what I'm doing actually is, I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit and along with Xanax (which I am now taking half-hourly) this thought momentarily calms me...the smell of meat and blood clouds up the condo until I don't notice it anymore (A.P. p. 345).<sup>47</sup>

Bataille comments on man's tendency to appropriate in this way, and echoes Patrick's insatiable consumption:

Man does not only appropriate his food, but also the different products of his activity: clothes, furniture, dwellings and instruments of production. Finally, he appropriates land divided into parcels...(identity) established between the possessor and the object possessed...(therefore) production can be seen as the excretory phase of a process of appropriation.<sup>48</sup>

So, like a production line, objects are incorporated into a system, transformed and regurgitated as something else. Patrick tries to remain with this method by turning the girl into sausages, a sanctioned food item. This struggle for some acceptable sameness, as a continuation of control, echoes the philosophical appropriation of totalitarian systems. The 'swallowing up' processes of such systems attempt to unify the homogeneity of the world, render all the same, forced to follow the same rules. In his struggle to establish a reality (that suits him) he finds death's palpability endearing. He can touch, smell and feel its presence, in an impersonal world. The

smell of blood soon becomes 'normal' to him, confirming that notions of acceptability are alterable. There is no attempt made to locate a middle-ground between stifling restriction and rampaging bloodlust, with its damage of others.

Patrick's constant drug taking does not appease his feelings of neurosis and confusion. He tries to compare what he has been taught in his life with the experiences that have then flowed from this teaching and can find no concurrence between the two:

And later my macabre joy sours and I'm weeping for myself, unable to find solace in any of this, crying out, sobbing "I just want to be loved," cursing the earth and everything I've been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer - all of it was wrong, without any final purpose. All it came down to was: die or adapt. I imagine my own vacant face, the disembodied voice coming from its mouth: *These are terrible times*. Maggots already writhe across the human sausage, the drool pouring from my lips dribbles over them...I can't tell if I'm cooking...correctly, because I'm crying too hard and I have never really cooked anything before (A.P. p. 345-6).

The cry to 'die or adapt' is telling. He has tried to adapt to acceptable parameters, but his efforts have been too extreme due to the constant pressure to be better than others. His over-adapting has resulted in a widespread slaughter that he is aware cannot continue indefinitely, without his apprehension by others. There is unavoidable contact with abjection at the borderlands of identity, areas where no cut and dried division between the self and other can be made, rim-like contiguous areas identified as being both 'in' and 'out' side. By subjecting people, without the ability to escape him, to his revolting way of living Patrick implicates them in his activities:

The maid ...wipes blood smears off the walls, throws away gore-soaked newspapers without a word. Faintly it hits me that she too is lost in a world of shit, completely drowning in it (A.P. p. 382).

When he toys with the idea of marrying Jean, he states, 'she too will be locked in the rhythm of my insanity' (A.P. p. 378), the pulsing, tangible thing, which inhabits his life, what he frequently posits as 'his reality'. He sees surface appearance as false, a

façade, and reality as what is underneath the surface, or ‘behind closed doors’:

‘Sometimes, Jean...the lines separating appearance - what you see - and reality – what you don’t - become, well, blurred’ (A.P. p. 378). Identifying roles inveigle all into an elaborate game, a format which can be followed. He complains that he ‘just want(s) to...keep the game going’ (A.P. p. 394), but he has stopped obeying the rules, he has overstepped them to create a hybrid, his own game. The accepted ‘game’ is pretending to fit in, going outside of the boundaries is ‘cheating’. Like all cheating, minor indiscretions are acceptable, whilst undetected. However, major diversions from the ‘straight and narrow’ are ostracised. Humans play individual versions of the same game, within varied strands of life, separate and overlapping, trying to appease the pressure to be ‘normal’, but Patrick is determined that his version, his reality, will dominate. Due to the multiple strands involved it is impossible to proclaim one reality the definitive version; this is, as Lyotard terms it, ‘(the) fantasm of taking possession of reality’.<sup>49</sup>

### Different Versions: ‘This is my Reality’.<sup>50</sup>

Patrick is alienated, media-devouring and urban. He patterns his identity on what he sees on film, television and reads in newspapers and the confessions of serial-killers who are paradoxically revered and feared. Slicing open his victims is part of his desperate search for something he can proclaim as ‘reality’, happening ‘here and now’, fragmentary, but tangible. He cynically terms his actions: ‘another broken scene in what passes for my life’ (A.P. p.389) seeing his murders, not as atrocities but rather as what the stultifying, but largely accepted, social norms have inflicted upon him. The media encourages him to think of his life as scenes from a film; images are appropriated, simulated, exchanged, in the name of fashioning a social identity. When

he has sex irrelevant scenes from his media-saturated existence become involved mentally in what he is doing physically. Violent scenes from television, fragments of phone calls, thoughts of his mother, or other men, all become tied up in sexual experience. Barely civil to daily contacts, he venerates media celebrities and rich strangers. He is besotted and dazzled by Donald Trump's entrepreneurial success and inviolability, hailing him as a God-like figure. An elevated level of status, and therefore the potential to render oneself untouchable, is all that instils respect in him. Thomas De Quincey, in 'Murder considered as One of the Fine Arts' discusses the rarity of murdering such public figures, claiming that it is because they are, 'a mere abstract idea', and as such rarely seen.<sup>51</sup> Patrick thinks if he can lay hands on a body, then it is fair game. However, Tom Cruise lives in his apartment block and his appearance in the elevator completely disorients Patrick, who acts uncharacteristically gauche, seemingly unable to accept that perhaps film stars' public personas are merely created marketing tools. He would rather take it as confirmation that life is no more than a film. To the reader a celebrity's appearance in the elevator reiterates that nobody is truly 'untouchable'; a little less vulnerable, but still within the murky margins of Patrick's bloody 'reality'. His favourite television programme is *The Patty Winters Show*, which he watches, tapes and discusses with fervour. Despite striving to be elite and visibly demonstrating his superiority whenever he has the opportunity, he clamours for a programme designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator. The media offers him the opportunity to see what other people truly want and expect of him. When one episode features both 'Donald Trump' and 'Torture' Patrick is ecstatic, wallowing in the postmodern mix of two diverse but equally dear topics (A.P. p.256). This juxtapositioning is echoed by the narrative's format, where chapters may approximately follow months and seasons, their prosaic

titles lulling into a false sense of security, yet lurch freely from the horrendous to the banal. Horrific mutilations are swiftly followed by in-depth discussions of 'middle of the road' pop music (A.P. p.132-6), or different brands of mineral water, a reminder of the turmoil lurking below the surface of so called 'normality'. Whilst admiring Trump's status as a hugely successful businessman, Patrick finds that his attempts to emulate him result in a violent objection to being typecast.

Although videos, TV and the theatre are *unreal*, Patrick's obsessive consumption of film, (he watches, and re-watches videos, having rented *Body Double*<sup>52</sup> 37 times), reveals the potential complexity of its hidden levels, suggesting them to be more than surface. Film has an enviable ability to defy ageing, due to its capacity to be endlessly re-run. The actress in *Body Double* never ages, she remains youthful, screaming at the same point, eternally spurting just the right amount of blood and making Patrick feel he is controlling the situation. For similar reasons he begins to videotape his murders, re-running them at his leisure, playing them as he commits further atrocities - a film within the 'film of his life', providing multiple layered images of 'his reality'. His media dominated lifestyle typifies contemporary viewing influences. Although the majority of the population stop short of carnage they do gaze with equal intent at advertisements, soap operas and chat shows. Beset by numerous channels, the remote control facilitates a hacked-up diversity of images, causing confusion in a culture of stereotypical constructs. Programmes are interrupted by adverts, usually irrelevant, both to one another, and the programme being dissected. Shows are video-taped, allowing time to be re-run - nothing is ever missed. Spectacular media displays depict violence, satisfying most urges to look at fantastic things without actually carrying them out.

Looking voyeuristically like this, brings the high without the crash, and connects scopophilia to mind-altering pastimes such as drug-taking. In Bataille's words, humans 'suspend a taboo without suppressing it', by indulging in looking it is possible to get the best of both worlds.<sup>53</sup> Patrick illustrates this theory, endorsing 'looking' rather than partaking: 'Pornography is so much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this lack of complication, so much more pleasurable' (AP. p.264). He appreciates the distance, and the accompanying illusion of the control he craves, the illusion of people put in their 'place'. Although the action is scripted, and facilitated by people being encouraged to live up to stereotypical images, he feels that *he* is selecting the script with his choice of channel. When Jean kisses him, the only way he can categorise the moment is as a filmic one:

I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualising things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost hear the swelling of an orchestra...hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting...overhead, the seventy-millimetre image of her lips parting and the subsequent murmur of "I want you" (A.P. p.265).

Jean is starring in a romantic movie, whereas Bethany is lured to his apartment to feature in a slasher film: 'I've started growling to myself and my hands are shaking...in slow motion, like in a movie, she turns around' (A.P. p. 244-5). Because Patrick embraces this dramatic mediation of society, further possibilities open up to him, beyond the boundaries and borderlines he has been taught. Life becomes a montage of scenes: 'like in a movie...my automated teller has started *speaking* to me...the park bench that followed me...it spoke to me too. Disintegration - I'm taking it in my stride. (A.P. p.395). However, after shooting someone on the street, the ensuing police chase frightens him so much the narrative, for once, jars into the third person (A.P. p.349). Although the action is more like a movie than ever, Patrick reports on the 'perpetrator' as a separate person, and he merely an observer. Usually

an expert at rising above the devastation he causes, under such intense surveillance he begins to feel the clinical gap closing. 'Patrick feels infected' (A.P. p.349) and tries desperately to distance himself from the possibility of arrest:

They just start shooting and *he* returns their gunfire from his belly, getting a glimpse of both cops behind the open doors of the squad car, guns flashing like in a movie and this makes *Patrick* realise he's in an actual gunfight of sorts, that *he's* trying to dodge bullets, that the dream threatens to break, is gone, that *he's* not aiming carefully, just obliviously returning gunfire, lying there (A.P. p.350 italics added).

Paradoxically, whilst this sequence is one of the most fantastic and dreamlike to the reader, it is during this shoot-out that Patrick begins to have suspicions that 'The dream threatens to break'. His everyday life is the dream, and this confrontation is threatening to spoil it. He has transformed conforming into a dream or game, a consciously false scenario where he can indulge in unfettered behaviour. As he feels like an actor he is able to distance himself from the action, and hence shirk responsibility. The police chase offers a palpable threat of some other world breaking in to his created, and up to now, protected, 'reality'.

In keeping with the narrative's film-like action there is a continuous soundtrack of music: 'one long, unending song that overlaps with other, separate songs connected only by a dull thumping beat it obliterates all conversation' (A.P. p.60). From Madonna to *Les Miserables*, the television drones, the beautician hums, theme tunes spark memories.<sup>54</sup> Patrick uses a Walkman to keep the music constant, but if the combination of this, and the background noise, are insufficient to insulate him from irritations he simply obliterates them in his own inimitable way. He graphically demonstrates with Paul Owen:

The axe hits him mid-sentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up...(his) mouth is a twisted red-pink jumble of teeth and meat and jawbone, his tongue hangs out of an open gash on the side of his cheek, connected only by what looks like a thick purple string (A.P. p. 217-8).

Bataille likens cutting up the human body in this way to cutting life into manageable pieces, eliminating the unwanted sections, maintaining that 'an axe blow destroys everything'.<sup>55</sup> When Patrick is not in a position to physically quieten someone he simply stops reporting their speech, mid-sentence; they no longer exist in 'his reality', because they are either boring him, or foolishly expressing a differing opinion. His victims are dealt with more severely; knocked out with blows to the head from nail-guns, maced in the face, gagged and even having their tongues cut out. When one half-dead prostitute has a tube from a rat's cage, and indeed the rat itself, forced into her vagina he coldly comments that, 'The noises the girl makes are for the most part incomprehensible' (A.P. p.329).<sup>56</sup> This is the way he likes it, no interruptions that he has not given prior consent to are tolerated, nobody screams, they are kept quiet by force. Due to this striving for control, and his attempts to attain perfection, he dislikes live music concerts, feeling as uncomfortable with their un-scripted nature as he does when he cannot study a restaurant menu in advance. Live music, like postmodernism, is to be experienced, even flinched at, without an official version or hidden agenda to conform to. The mediocre music, described by Patrick in such tedious detail, is safe, bland enough to be collected, studied and de-coded as part of a regimentally identified society. Because *he* finds spontaneity unnerving, he uses it to take advantage of others, actively trying to surprise and overpower. He plies his victims with alcohol and drugs, approaches them from behind to gain the advantage, plans attacks beforehand, believing that his organising skills will give him the edge. When he kills Owen he has placed newspaper on the floor, an axe in the shower, and bought a 'cheap' raincoat and towels. The only victim to struggle against the futility of resistance is the pale and delicate Christie. Fragile and juvenile, although a prostitute she refuses to fit the stereotype and is presented as unspoilt and lovely. When she

bites Patrick and tries to escape, the poignancy is sharp. She is the sole victim to be wary of him, but she lets what seems a generous offer of money overcome her survival instincts, and accepts a cheque she will not live to cash (A.P. p.290). In a macabre re-enactment of the Pygmalion fantasy Patrick bathes her, dresses her in designer-wear and gives her fine food and wine. Freud misogynistically cites 'uncultivated' women and children as easy to lead into perverted sexual activities, claiming prostitutes will exploit this disposition to offer clients limitless opportunities to use them.<sup>57</sup> This is a game Patrick soon tires of and her clean body is raped, tortured and killed. His fascination with her young, pristine appearance and irresistible urge to scrutinise her from the inside out is an echo of Nabokov's Humbert:

My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys.<sup>58</sup>

Patrick is mistaken for both movie star and model, but is sufficiently self-satisfied about his appearance to feel the flattery justifiable. He has an inflated opinion of the 'famous', but is not impressed with fashion models, portraying them as shallow and dim. When he has sex with Daisy, but tells her to leave the apartment before he hurts her, it is unclear whether she realises that he means physically, just as it is unclear whether he does not attack her because she is physically perfect, or because too many people know she is with him. When they leave the club lightening flashes overhead, but Daisy's world has been confined by the camera lens for too long and she cannot tell the difference between lightening (natural phenomena) and flash bulbs (cultural inconvenience)(A.P. p.210).<sup>59</sup>

Patrick believes that capturing by camera can restrict the past. He conceives history in traditional terms, as a limited palpable thing that can be grasped and observed in a cinematic way, a broad spectrum of activities and past events, that can

sustain life, and justify actions. He is disappointed by the lack of satisfaction he gets from killing a five year old child, and blames it on the fact that the child 'has no real history, no worthwhile past (and therefore) nothing is really lost' (A.P. p.299).<sup>60</sup> It is of no significance to him that he has stolen the child's potential future, as to him the future is his version. However, by the end of the narrative he sees the network of support he thought history was capable of providing, crumbling to nothingness:

Walking down Fifth Avenue around four o'clock in the afternoon, everyone on the street looks sad, the air is full of decay, bodies lie on the cold pavement, miles of it, some are moving, most are not. History is sinking and only a very few seem dimly aware that things are getting bad (A.P. p.384).

History as a definitive version of reality is no longer tenable, the task of keeping records, laying down any 'correct', unitary version, is impossible leaving humanity lurching towards chaos, with, according to Patrick, no sustainable middle-ground between being phenomenally successful, or on the streets waiting to die. Like the aftermath of a war, when destruction, death and disaster, enforce that grand narratives cannot save lives, there is no redemption. Again, Patrick's observations of the streets echo Eliot's sentiments in *The Waste Land*:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.<sup>61</sup>

The city is cited as a place of dirt and death, a place where life is cheap due to the plentiful supply of bodies. It is a place of extremes where the inadequacy of gender stereotypes and the effects of attempting to fulfil the false criteria of masculinity can be seen only too clearly.

**Conclusion: 'This is no time for the innocent'.<sup>62</sup>**

Humans are physically and mentally fragile. Patrick demonstrates this vulnerability, and the ease with which they can be crushed – he is convinced there is

no worth in anything so easy to break into pieces and snuff out. The disorder of body parts and mental states negates any calm and rational acceptance of person-hood. Physical constructs are useless; brawn, brains and bone quite literally fragment - he smashes Bethany's skull with her own sawn-off arm (A.P. p.252). Control is not acquired by obeying the rules of patriarchal society. Patrick demonstrates this by rather than obeying or disobeying, exceeding them. Names and identities are fluidly interchangeable, Patrick calls himself Marcus, and encourages mis-recognition to distance himself from the slaughter. He is misnamed often enough to query the very existence of 'Patrick Bateman', which, along with his ease in obtaining an alibi, implicates all men in his guilt. He reiterates the reader's collusion in his creation, and hence his acts:

There is an idea of 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 sense our lifestyles are probably comparable. *I simply am not there.* Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, 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. There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed. I still, though, hold onto one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless. Each model of human behaviour must be assumed to have some validity. Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do? 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. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this - and I have, countless times, in just about every act I've committed - and coming face to face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me telling you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing* (A.P. p.376-7).

Behaviour is pre-ordained by acquiescence to the rules of society and as a consequence lives have the potential to be reduced to their constituent parts, like a puzzle, a hollow lifestyle, or as Patrick keeps calling it 'a game'. Bethany tries to

fulfil modern demands - she is beautiful, educated and rich - yet Patrick manages to show her the futility of her efforts. Within moments of entering his apartment she finds 'her life reduced to nightmare' (A.P. p.247). As he breaks up his victim's physical bodies, so he dismantles the façade of their everyday lives, showing the impossibility of a comforting wholeness, due to the multiplicity of human existence. To quote Patrick, slavishly following societal constructs, offering an exaggerated version of what society thinks it wants, is, 'not an exit' (A.P. p.399), there *is* no way out. Rather than escape Patrick simply pushes towards death.

Easton Ellis continues his investigation of the path to death in his next novel *Glamorama*, discussed in the following section. The fascination with wealth, celebrity and their complex relationship with surface appearance continues, as does the ongoing debate between a linear history or alternatively a postmodern circularity of existence.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p.395.
- <sup>2</sup> Mary Harron, *American Psycho* (U.S: Lions Gate Films, 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Times* (New York: Norton, 1964), p.19.
- <sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (London: Zone Books, 1988), p.59.
- <sup>5</sup> Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.137, quoting Zizek.
- <sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 61. Freud claims that man emphasises appearing 'civilised', hence denigrating instinctual behaviour.
- <sup>7</sup> Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 285.
- <sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927 – 1939*, Ed. & Intro. Allan Stoekl, Trans. Allan Stoekl, C R Lovitt & D M Leslie Jnr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.138.
- <sup>9</sup> Victor Siedler, *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity and Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.18.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.135.
- <sup>11</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 239.
- <sup>12</sup> Cosmetic surgical procedures can remove the red veins, even bleach the eyes, to obtain the ice whiteness Patrick refers to (*Vogue*, Editorial, February 2001, Conde Nast Publications).
- <sup>13</sup> Freud, *Three Essays*, p.129.
- <sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (London: M.Boyars, 1987), p.34.
- <sup>15</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture & Criticism in a Postfeminist Age* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), p.109.
- <sup>16</sup> Such 'hardbodies' were typically portrayed in 1980s films like the *Terminator* and *Alien* series.
- <sup>17</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity & Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution & Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p.161-2, italics added.
- <sup>18</sup> Catherine Gallagher, & Thomas Laqueur, *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality & Society in The Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press,1987), p.x.
- <sup>19</sup> Eve K Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.131.
- <sup>20</sup> Freud, *Three Essays*, p.72.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74.
- Freud completes this piece by concluding that insufficient is known about biological sexuality to facilitate adequate theorisation. How then can 'normal' be established? p.169.
- <sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem & Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). Along with the discussion re: the danger of corpses Freud also suggests that sacrifice of others is a substitute for killing the Father and absorbing him back into oneself.
- <sup>23</sup> T S Eliot, *The Waste Land & Other Poems* (London: Faber & Faber,1991), p.27.
- <sup>24</sup> Freud, *Three Essays*, p.79-80.
- <sup>25</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum discussing *The Waste Land* but eerily relevant to Patrick's situation. *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989), p.129.
- <sup>26</sup> Freud ties eating and sex via kissing, *Three Essays*, p.62.
- <sup>27</sup> These same connections are clearly made in DeLillo's *Underworld* by Nick's obsessive diet of plain food, salads and soy milk.
- <sup>28</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature & Evil* (London:Marion Boyars, 1985), p.67.
- <sup>29</sup> Potlatch is introduced in the *White Noise* chapter, p.85.
- <sup>30</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1991).  
Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (London, Picador, 1999).  
Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador,1986).  
Frenesi in *Vineland* and Victor in *Glamorama* repeatedly struggle to obtain any money from these machines, both characters with their identities in dispute. Jack in *White Noise* is desperate to remember his 'code'.
- <sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is perfectly possible that the entire narrative is the workings of his fevered imagination.
- <sup>32</sup> Joel Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), p.136.
- <sup>33</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Select Essays* including 'Murder As One of The Fine Arts'(Edinburgh: A&C Black, 1938). De Quincey also cites the anomaly of drinking coffee with the supposed victim. v1, p. 9.

- <sup>34</sup> Patrick's 'puppet-like' appearance is mirrored in his physical perfection, and his societal manipulation. He is doing the audiences' bidding, murdering to impress those who look on.
- <sup>35</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.228.
- <sup>36</sup> Freud, *Three Essays*, p.71.
- <sup>37</sup> Don Milligan, *Sex-life: A Critical Commentary on the History of Sexuality* (London: Pluto Press, 1993), p.1.
- <sup>38</sup> In DeLillo's *Underworld* Nick protests that sex, like waste should be secreted, however Donna, a casual sexual partner, totally disagrees with him, proclaiming that the secret of sex is already unleashed, p.297. This threatens a society under the rule of any grand narrative discourse.
- <sup>39</sup> Freud ties a mother's handling of her children inextricably to their future sex life, *Three Essays*, p.146.
- <sup>40</sup> William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.72.
- <sup>41</sup> De Quincey, *Select Essays*. vi.
- <sup>42</sup> His evisceration of female bodies is reminiscent of Jack the Ripper, believed by some to be too rich and influential to be caught. In a society where protection can be bought, Patrick is the Manhattan Killer in much the same way as the Ripper was the London Killer.
- <sup>43</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.133.
- <sup>44</sup> Tim Edwards, *Erotics & Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity & Feminism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p.3.
- <sup>45</sup> Like the narrator in Henry James, *The Aspern Papers* (London: Penguin, 1994) Patrick associates the male body with a certain tangible wholeness, whilst the female body has blurred boundaries and mysterious orifices prone to rotting and decay.
- <sup>46</sup> Sergei-Lobanov-Rostovsky, 'Taming the Basilisk' in *The Body in Parts* Eds. D Hillman & C Mazzio (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p.200.
- <sup>47</sup> Patrick takes copious quantities of Xanax, a drug prescribed for panic attacks.
- <sup>48</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.95.
- <sup>49</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, (London: Turnaround, 1992), p.25.
- <sup>50</sup> Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, p.345.
- <sup>51</sup> De Quincey, p.59. The nature of celebrity is further explored in *Underworld*, with regard to J. Edgar Hoover, and *Glamorama* where numerous examples are given from the world of fashion and media.
- <sup>52</sup> Brian DePalma's 1984 film *Body Double* offers Patrick a self-referential model for creating 'reality', centring as it does on voyeurism (particularly from an elevated viewpoint), doubling, dressing-up, disguised and mis-recognised identity, uninhibited sex, brutal murder, isolation of body parts, pornography, fetishism, acting and actors. Everyone is seen as ultimately replaceable and non-authentic, deception and anticipation are shown to be inherent parts of life. Films within the film are offered with the suggestion that none of it is 'real'.
- <sup>53</sup> Georges Bataille, *Death & Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism & Taboo* (New York: Walker & Company, 1968), p.36.
- <sup>54</sup> *Glamorama* also has an ongoing 'soundtrack', and *Vineland* includes numerous musical numbers.
- <sup>55</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.227.
- <sup>56</sup> Vagina and throat are connected by Jaques Lacan, *The Second Seminar: The Ego in Freud's Theory & in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-55* Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1991), p164.
- <sup>57</sup> Freud, *Three Essays*, p.109.
- <sup>58</sup> Vladimir Nabakov, *Lolita*, (London: Penguin, 1991), p.165.
- <sup>59</sup> The world of models is explored further by Easton Ellis in *Glamorama*.
- <sup>60</sup> De Quincey similarly states that there is little satisfaction to be gained from murdering an elderly person, as they are too close to death.
- <sup>61</sup> TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p.61-4.
- <sup>62</sup> Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 382.

## SECTION FIVE

### BRET EASTON ELLIS'S *GLAMORAMA* - 'The better you look the more you see'.<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In *Glamorama* Victor, the protagonist, despite trying desperately to conform to society's approved format shows little evidence of satisfactory progression. The novel's chapters reflect his life's lack of teleology. Rather than being numbered chronologically they follow a descending order, suggesting that the narrative's 'beginning' may be its 'end'. The constant present of the dialogue holds beginning, middle and end in free-floating, continuous abeyance and undermines the technological efforts to push ever onwards towards a discernible future.<sup>2</sup> *American Psycho*'s obsessions with wealth, fame and beauty intensify. Victor speaks for the entire cast when he says, 'I like to pretend' (G. p.37).

#### Appearance: 'I wonder how cool I look in other people's eyes'.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary society is portrayed as a place obsessed by appearance. Victor self-consciously constructs a 'cool' masculine persona:

At first I was confused by what passed for love in this world: people were discarded because they were too old or too fat or too poor or they had too much hair or not enough, they were wrinkled, they had no muscles, no definition, no tone, they weren't hip, they weren't remotely famous. This was how you chose lovers. This was what decided your friends. And I had to accept this if I wanted to get anywhere...we lived in a world where beauty was considered an accomplishment – I...made a promise to myself to be harder, to not care, to be cool. The future started mapping itself out and I focused on it. In that moment I felt as if I was disappearing from poolside...I was floating above the palm trees, growing smaller in the wide blue sky until I no longer existed and relief swept over me with such force I sighed (G. p.481).

He tries to leave his physical body, with all its connotations, burdens and dimensions, behind him on the sun-lounger. By divorcing himself from his fleshly appearance he can also step away from responsibility for its actions. In an out-of-body experience he wants to float above the empty mannequin that represents 'Victor', observe its actions, but stop short of involvement or intervention. His definition of 'love' is intrinsically bound to what is fashionable and sought after, his theorising echoing comments made by Jean-Francois Lyotard about the constructed nature of human relationships:

Supposed 'partners' (in a pleasure arrangement) draw up a contract for purposes of common 'enjoyment' of sexual difference itself. The contract provides that neither party suffer from this association and that at the first sign of lack (whether through failure to perform or not), of defocalization, of lack of control and transcendence, the parties break the contract – though that's still too strong a phrase, they'll just let it lapse. And even if from time to time fashion gives 'love' its place back among the inventory of objects that circulate, it's as a 'top of the line' sexual relationship, reserved for superstars and advertised as an enviable exception.<sup>4</sup>

Love is a 'top of the range' product, created and marketed. In a facile world where, 'beauty (is) considered an accomplishment' (G. p.481) those who meet the current parameters set by society have an unfair advantage. However, they are also looked to for exemplary behaviour and the creation and sustaining of 'love'. Friends and lovers must be chosen from the same superior gene pool, something facilitated by attending functions to which, 'only good-looking people have been invited' (G. p.293). Ageing and changing tastes affect the popularity of those who are identified by their looks. The threat of their 'best before' date looms large. Despite changing tastes there are certain recognisable benchmarks - such as Bobby Hughes:

He's here in the flesh-four years older than me ... since I'm not really used to being around guys who are so much better-looking than Victor Ward, it's all kind of nerve-racking and I'm listening more intently to him than to any man I've ever met because the unavoidable fact is: he's too good-looking to resist.(G. p.267).

Victor lists the features to be avoided and they include paleness, being under or over weight and lacking muscle tone. Despite having just 'discovered' Tammy dead in a bath of blood Bobby finds it an appropriate moment to tell Victor he is looking too thin and white, and must motivate himself to work-out regularly (G. p.382).

After Victor makes his decision to adhere to the value system which favours the 'cult of appearance' and is led by Bobby Hughes, he is afforded a certain relief. Released from decision-making and responsibility, he welcomes oblivion. He longs for the body-less, spiritual 'letting go' (floating into the sky is repeated throughout the narrative), although, ironically, it is his stark physicality that makes him popular, successful and hip. He has got 'the look' - handsomely hybrid, with a toned body draped in the trendiest clothes. His speech is the epitome of hip-ness, to the point of cliché, everybody is 'baby' and everything is 'cool'. These words are overused until they become devoid of any meaning. Their commonly accepted meanings are negated by the ludicrous repetition. But whilst language is shown as inadequate, due to its propensity to abuse, its capability of evolving and introducing new meaning is also enforced. This is illustrated by the reader's automatic alteration of the accepted meanings of words, as they develop an overwhelming distaste for this 'cool' world. 'Cool' soon represents, bad, cruel and bitterly cold – generally a world to be avoided. Victor's 'coolness' accelerates into an inability to be warm and comfortable, he feels unbearably cold and is described as constantly shivering. Language is limiting as it binds humans to words with mutually agreed meanings. Part of Victor's perceived coolness comes from his taste in music and night-clubs. Being in the right places, being hip, acting cool, is tied to 'not caring', being hard and focused. Although it is physical appearance that is noticed, there needs to be ruthless, 'behind the scenes', manipulation going on. It is not enough to look good, the sanctioned appearance must

be cynically used to maintain, a certain edge, a marked superiority - even a licence to legitimated sex and violence. Through the opening of a new club the narrative emphasises that 'hip-ness', and popularity, are clinically designed and orchestrated. Trendiness is an anachronism, in keeping with other societal constructs. What is *proclaimed* to be 'trendy', becomes 'trendy', however there are no inherent values to recommend a certain look or appearance. The priorities Chloe accuses Victor of holding are those of the fashion cognoscenti, 'a smart suit ...Being buff. A cool haircut ... whether people think you're famous enough or cool enough or in good enough shape'(G. p.410).

When humans are judged on their appearance social interaction becomes self-advertisement and models and film stars become the ultimately revered (G. p.273). Bobby Hughes occupies the position at the pinnacle of this system of beauty power: 'Felix and the director don't say anything. It's almost as if they're obeying a silent vibe Bobby's sending out: I'm beautiful, I have a purpose, go back to your dream'(G. p.334). Victor calls Bobby a major influence. The urge to dismiss him as 'only a model', is undercut by the word's other meanings. Over and above a fashion mannequin who displays clothes to prospective buyers a model can also be one to imitate or to follow. 'To model' is a way to mould to a particular design or type and to plan or create. Moulding to a specific design describes the doubling of characters that Victor eventually notices: 'I think they double people...I don't know how, but I think they have...doubles. That's not Sam Ho...that's someone else...they have doubles' (G. p.373). When Sam Ho is tortured to death he is described as a dummy, 'the camera aimed solely at the mannequin'(G. p.283). Indeed Victor is certain that Sam Ho *is* a wax dummy, until Bobby makes his body leap and contort.<sup>5</sup>

The prioritisation of a certain look is ruthlessly Fascistic, encouraging any potential individuality to be swept away in a sea of designer clothing and accessories: ‘A montage: Brooks Brothers, Ann Taylor, Tommy Hilfiger’ (G. p.474). Those who do not fit into the currently favoured societal mould risk disposal.<sup>6</sup> Instead of the Nazi predilection for Aryan blond-haired, blue-eyed ‘perfection’, contemporary society idolises those who are rich and successful, but above all, slim, tanned, toned, and beautifully dressed. The narrative reinforces these Nazi similarities with painted swastikas on the night-club’s walls (G. p.16), and an opening quotation from Hitler: ‘You make a mistake if you see what we do as merely political’. The so-called ‘political’ encompasses more than the merely governmental. If society continues to valorise surface appearance, with people valued because of how they look and their material possessions, then it is only a small step to sanctioning a terrorism, violence and cruelty, which only the very rich will survive. Victor hires a magician he describes as typically German, and as the narrative closes the Jewish star is highly visible, reiterating the danger of legitimating eugenics, by failing to challenge the glamorisation of surface.

Victor’s much-repeated catch phrase: ‘*We’ll slide down the surface of things...*’ underlines this (G. p.145, original italics). The prioritisation of surface recalls Jean Baudrillard’s suggestion that there is nothing else.<sup>7</sup> When Victor is trapped on the boat he complains that the surface appearance of his surroundings are dull, grey and bland - again emphasising the priority given to surface stimulation: ‘Surrounded by so much boring space, five days is a long time to stay unimpressed’ (G. p.189). Towards the narrative’s end, he rebukes Damien with: “You’re just looking at the surface of things”, to which Damien retorts: “There’s something else?” (G. p.453). The MTV journalists who interview him before the club

opens focus upon surface by wearing clip-on nose rings and detachable ponytails. The ephemeral nature of their accessories emphasises that surface appearance must be capable of seamless alteration if it is to receive societal approval (G. p.138).

Furthermore, the crew are responsible for the surface view of Victor which will reach millions. Whilst they are filming they are in turn filmed as part of the never-ending circuit of watching. As those who do not measure up to the criteria for perfection are killed or bred out of the system those remaining will have more pressure on them to be increasingly exemplary. This will lead to changes in what is accepted and the impossibility of ever reaching a safe place. The future-focussed technology harnessed by the characters is more than capable of creating a blueprint of 'perfection', which humans will struggle to measure up to. Alongside a simulation of a human 'real' humans are found wanting as reality is always deemed inferior to the hyper-reality of sophisticated modern technology. Ageing and changing tastes render even favoured ones destined for disposal, and the still-beautiful are disposable if they prove to be inflexible.

Chloe is ostensibly removed to appease Bobby, yet her death also satisfies the fascist terror, wiping out those who fail to conform. Suggestions are made that she is becoming too old to retain her super-model status: 'I'm twenty-six. That's a hundred and five in model years' (G. p.40) As the narrative progresses her anxieties soar.<sup>8</sup> She is neurotic about her breast implants, her cravings for drugs and ensuing re-hab sessions, and her inability to function as a 'normal' human being. She spends hours performing such mind-numbing feats as practising how to wink, emphasising Mike Gane's assertion that: 'The distinction between the real and its representation (is being) effaced.'<sup>9</sup> (G. p.40-41). Her death is gruesome, insides flooding out of her in a tide of blood, bodily tissue and chemicals, 'massive haemorrhaging due to the

ingestion of fatal quantities of Mifepristone' (G. p.456). Rather than an ambulance, whose paramedics may have tried to help her from the inside, she is sent a film crew, only interested in capturing the surface (G. p.429). Her graphic physical loss of depth symbolically represents the manner in which she has been reduced to a brittle shell by her facile life. She is empty and used up, with only surface left; apparent, and profoundly reproducible. Her fate is reminiscent of Baudrillard's description of the postmodern world - transparent, yet unstable.<sup>10</sup>

The easy reproducibility is enforced by numerous cases of mistaken identity. Meticulous mediated construction has created subjects honed to such an intense state of 'perfection', they have become deeply iconic. Even the person believed to be the 'original' cannot sustain the required level of finery. The image takes shape, rises up and begins a life of its own. Victor's new self arose from the sun lounger on Ocean Drive, whilst the superfluous parts, those that were actually worrying about 'life', gently floated away, like paths not taken. Celebrated individuals are constantly told that they look *like* themselves, though never enough to actually *be* themselves, nobody can fulfil that revered role. Chloe is resigned to hearing: 'You look *just like* Chloe Byrnes' (G. p.37 italics added).<sup>11</sup> Her acceptance of these comments illustrates her realisation that it is impossible to live up to her own image. She mimics countless celebrities before her by adopting strange idiosyncrasies in a bid to be recognised as more than simply surface. She keeps her hair permanently wet with coconut oil until Victor asks her: 'Baby why isn't your hair ever dry?' (G. p.35).<sup>12</sup> She and Victor should make the perfect celebrity couple, capable of matching each others' allure, and indeed their personal interactions appear occasionally to be spontaneously genuine, only to be undercut by a director asking them to repeat them:

I start relaxing but ... a camera starts panning around us and we're asked to "do that" once more. Someone yells "Action". Someone yells "Cut". I stop crying and we do it again (G. p.409).

Victor expresses the need for the celebrities attending his opening to similarly rise to the occasion, act-out 'being themselves' and palpably fulfil their sketchy outlines: 'People just really need to learn how to embrace their celebrity status'(G. p.70).

Certain requisite possessions will help them do this:

A Gucci snake-skin wallet, a miniature Mont Blanc fountain pen, an Asprey address book, Calvin Klein sunglasses, a Nokia 9000 cell phone, a Nars lip gloss, a Calvin Klein atomizer and a Sony ICD 50 (G. p.257).

No sooner are these requisites listed that they are out-of-date and replaced by newer models. Despite such 'difficulties' Victor expects his guests to feel sufficiently complete to give themselves over to scrutiny and appropriation. The disclaimer at the party's doorway spells this out: 'This Event Is Being Videotaped. By Entering You Consent to the Cablecast and Other Exhibition of Your Name, Voice and Likeness' (G. p.146).

The cameras films continuously, the invention and re-invention of self is perpetually reflected-back in a never-ending cycle of vain and insecure affirmation. This absolute emphasis on 'to be looked-at-ness' is unsettling for the reader, forcing them to acknowledge commonly accepted modern societal value-systems and priorities. Because models are worshiped for their beauty, with any brains and initiative easily discounted, it is a ridiculous suggestion that they could be terrorists.<sup>13</sup> However, the brutal and ruthless Bobby shows that beautiful people can be anything they choose. Capitalising on the era's technological capabilities is obligatory; if computers are capable of inventing images then they must be allowed to. Victor suggests that the computer game, 'Super Mario Bros...mirrors life...kill or be killed'(G. p.23), but then demonstrates that life, in return, mirrors the computer world,

in an endless cycle of reciprocal imitation.<sup>14</sup> When he fights to the death with Bobby the scripted nature of the action and presence of the film crew do indeed associate the action with computer animation; however the blood and pain are in keeping with ancient gladiatorial pursuits. The director's words of comfort to Victor, the literal 'victor' on this occasion, emphasise the scripted nature of the event: "'Don't worry nothing's broken'... 'You're just badly bruised'" (G. p.436).

Those who are not celebrities must place themselves in a position to form an identity *against* celebrities (G. p.9). The narrative suggests that patriarchal society is being slowly eroded, as power is placed with increasing firmness behind those with money and/or looks, regardless of their biological sex. The rampant adulation of the rich, famous and beautiful (the names used are real) is ironically juxtaposed against the constant mis-recognition of characters and the ease of adopting a different persona. Victor constantly denies sightings of himself: 'That's nice Abdullah but I wasn't in South Beach last week even though I'm semi-famous there'(G. p.11). As he is known there then people may see him/think they see him, and it is of little consequence which one it is. However, present or not, his priority remains the same: 'Did I look good'(G. p.80). Even those closest to him mis-spot him (Alyson, G. p.96), and 'created' photographs of him with Lauren (G. p.177-8) are justified, as although they are falsified he *has* been fooling around with Lauren.

Chloe's response to the incriminating pictures implies that there is not much difference between the thought and the deed. This is a relevant argument in a narrative centring on violence and depravity. The act of reading such a narrative could be taken as a way in which to condone it. As aptly noted by Ben Knights, readers are not 'passive consumers but active collaborators in meaning'.<sup>15</sup> Readers are complicit in a narrative's creation and add to the meanings of texts, rather than mutely accepting

them as a finite whole. Bobby underlines such universal collaboration when he says to Victor, who is eager to assert his personal lack of involvement with the terrorist activities: "Everyone's involved" (G. p.315). Like the reader Victor has no alibi and no claim to being elsewhere, and therefore has to desist from denying the bogus sightings (G. p.122). The images being portrayed are too powerful for him to compete with, and he must accept the frightening prospect of representation replacing reality, somebody appearing on the scene who is more like 'him', than he is (G. p.310).<sup>16</sup> Alison berates him about what the 'other' Victor has done and said; Lauren has had sex with the 'other' Victor and wonders why *this* one does not acknowledge it, commenting, confused and hurt, that, 'it's like you're back from ...outer space or something...and I don't know you' (G. p.127). Chloe even manages to be impregnated by Victor Mark II.<sup>17</sup> Given Victor's personal confusion (forgetting where he is whilst in Paris is only one example G.p.273), it is easy to see why others offer contradictory accounts of his movements. Furthermore, it gives credence to the various falsified photographs circulating amongst the players, and casts serious doubts about any certainty of place and time. Claims for a real and valid 'now', are insupportable. Victor's multiplicity is illustrated by his rapid changes from stupid to sharp, from friendly to spiteful, from helpful to stubborn, from supportive of Chloe to derisory: 'all you have to do is say cheese about two hundred times a day' (G. p.100). He certainly behaves like at *least* two different people.

The anxiety caused in the text by duplicate personas epitomises recognisable feelings for the contemporary person, the feelings of never being authentic enough. This is summed up by Jamie, who recalls to Victor: 'the dark patterns started appearing ... and when I told Bobby "No one's being themselves, everyone's so phoney", Bobby said "Shhhh...that *is* being themselves"' (G. p.310). In a similar

acceptance of the validity of 'phoniness', Victor begins to engage with what the other 'Victor' is doing; where he sits, what he wears. When his AmEx is cancelled, as his cash-card has been already, he senses the 'system' slowly shutting him down, and replacing him with a doppelganger, a bogus persona. The concept of a bogus 'Victor' is a complex one, when he appears already to be a transparently constructed figure (G. p.86).

Victor has changed his surname to avoid association with his senator father, whom he refers to as, 'a contrivance...A plot device' (G. p.37). His two names further facilitate the creation of multiple personas and the ongoing vagueness surrounding him. By rejecting his family name he creates an opportunity for someone else to adopt it. As in *American Psycho*, where the characters frequently call each other by the wrong names, these mistakes draw very few comments. Indeed, Victor accepts his melting into other beautiful people as inevitable:

My reflection superimposed in the glass covering of an Armani Exchange ad and it's merging with the sepia toned photo of a male model until both of us are melded together...three beautiful girls pass by...trailed by a thug with a camcorder ...someone's calling "cut!" (G. p. 94).

Images blend, as despite the contrived nature of events, there *are* connections. This is why beautiful people appeal, via identification. Gazing at them can lead to a sharing of their experiences to the point of actually 'being' them. Such fantasies are capable of lifting the spirits and causing sexual excitement.<sup>18</sup> However, whilst loving the beautiful for their chiselled jaws and perfect musculature, admirers also simultaneously hate them for causing feelings of inadequacy. If the hate overwhelms the love then the urge to destroy the image manifests itself. The perfect advertisement that Victor comments on is also a source of frustration. Usually altered and airbrushed, such images promote impossible ideals.

Victor's admiration of, and blatant blending with, such commercial images reiterates his shallowness, which is further demonstrated by his clone-like girlfriends. They are all tall and thin, with short blond hair, large breasts (usually implants), and bright blue eyes.<sup>19</sup> When he 'finds' Jamie in London he comments: 'Jamie Fields is so beautiful that she's starting to blow away whatever residual memories of Lauren Hynde I might have held on to' (G. p.246). Lauren having only recently replaced thoughts of Chloe. His ex-girlfriends are comfortingly interchangeable, which is useful as he cannot remember them all, or which order they came in (G. p.249).<sup>20</sup> Chronology is cited as invalid due to the propensity of people to return, re-packaged in differing formats. Paradoxically, the intense value placed upon appearance by Victor and his contemporaries leaves them more vulnerable to being misled. When Victor has sex with Bobby on board the ocean liner, it is obvious that it is *not* Marina (G. p.220). However, Victor is more concerned about sexual gratification than who he is actually with, and has been coached to see what he wants to see. As William Simon terms it, desire is, 'Costumed and occasioned', to the extent that the biological sex of the other person no longer matters.<sup>21</sup>

**Sexuality: 'What if one day, Victor...you became whatever you're not?'**<sup>22</sup>

Despite his female lovers, Victor's sexuality remains ambiguous. His name's close proximity to 'Victoria' reflects his confusion.<sup>23</sup> His heterosexuality is a conscious decision, as part of his image-building. He is acerbic with his assistants about their conspicuous homosexuality, unwarranted in one so determined to be hip and hinting at a latent homosexuality in himself. Former homosexual activity is suggested by more than one character, and he succumbs eagerly to Bobby's advances. Victor's insistence that he is scrupulous about his sexual partners, 'I am a strict heterosexual

...Devout, in fact' (G. p.139), echoes Patrick in *American Psycho*. Both men share similar parameters, summed up by Victor when he says that he will never have sex with anyone who, 'didn't have tits, ...wasn't "toned" enough...wasn't "hard" enough, was "too old", or not "famous" enough' (G. p.437). Both explode their own myths, Patrick by inserting his penis into almost anything, alive or dead, including the eye-sockets of skulls, and Victor, although protesting his fastidiousness and rampant heterosexuality, by indulging in same-sex intercourse, sex with multiple partners, and sex with strangers – whose biological gender is unclear. Bobby is also reported to be discriminating about female partners, his standards becoming legendary: 'you had to be a certain weight...a certain height...in order to fuck Bobby Hughes' (G. p.310/11). The narrative's action illustrates him as *less* particular.

Victor's masculinity remains vague, under threat, and never clearly enunciated. His androgynous appearance, and frequent description as 'beautiful' are not easily aligned with the typical image of a 'man' and ensure that he is thoroughly objectified (G. p.262). As the 'typical' masculine image is one of societal construction, perhaps the reader should welcome Victor's potential to explode stereotypes. Antithetically his father conforms to the approved role of 'Man'. He is socially responsible with a prestigious career as a senator, friends in high places, and a suitable female companion. Despite his duplicity, revealed through various conspiracies and multiple cosmetic surgery, he remains closer to the desired norm for masculinity than Victor. His most serious misdemeanour, a lack of genuine concern for his own son, is negated by the question marks over Victor's identity. Any worries about Victor, whichever version, centre on the repercussions on the senator's career. In an attempt to minimise such repercussions Victor is regularly tailed and

photographed in various venues. His father keeps dossiers of these photographs together with newspaper and magazine cuttings.

In exposing this constant surveillance the narrative evolves into multiple films being shot. This emphasis on looking and acting underlines the constructed nature of identities, including sexual identities which far from possessing inherent 'naturalness', are also creations. They rely on, as Simon suggests:

A complex text, the script of the erotic. The erotic is often viewed as the expression of sexual desire, when more appropriately it might be seen as the sexualised representation of desire – the costuming and posturing of desire often, but not always, in the culturally available idioms of the sexual.<sup>24</sup>

Victor describes clothes and objects in such detail that their necessity for this posturing is in no doubt. The contents of his wardrobe are frequently described: 'In my closet: white jeans, leather belts, leather bomber jacket, black cowboy boots, a couple of black wool crepe suits, a dozen white shirts, a black turtleneck, crumpled silk pajamas'(G. p.143). The hangers and shelves are filled, unwitnessed, for forthcoming scenes. As an 'actor' in intensely scripted situations Victor may distance himself from his performance and somehow manage to hold onto his own version. He may hold a picture in his head that helps him cope. As WH Auden described it:

The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I might love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me.<sup>25</sup>

This is what Palakon, the double-agent, describes as "different truths" and what ironically negates his own duplicity (G. p.406). Consequently, during sex the participants re-invent themselves for that particular partner, and through their expectations and view of that partner assist in *their* creation by utilising the correct responses:

At first I'm able to look as if I'm concentrating intensely on what she's saying and in fact some of it is registering, but really I've heard it all before; then, while talking, she moves closer and there's a quickening and I'm relieved.

Silently focusing in on her, I realise that I've been *activated*. I stare into her face for over an hour, asking the appropriate questions, guiding her to certain areas, mimic responses that I'm supposed to have, offer sympathetic nods when they're required, sometimes there's a sadness in my eyes that's half-real and half-not (G. p.209, italics added).

Victor robotically demonstrates what is expected of humans. This image of him as a machine is also suggested by the frequent references to his limbs feeling dead: 'I'm vaguely aware that my entire body has fallen asleep' (G. p.437). He 'operates' when the director says 'action' and in between takes 'shuts-down'.<sup>26</sup> To get others to respond in a way that corresponds with a 'personal' imagined sexual scenario (no matter how influenced by ideological conditioning) with actions that will be arousing, and ultimately fulfilling, players have to interact in a specific way. This may use a slightly, or completely, different script, but it is still a script, one which leads to action of an anticipated, orchestrated, hence potentially false, nature.<sup>27</sup> With Alyson in the men's washroom the sex that the script calls for is incredibly short and to the point (G. p.96). Although they call each other 'baby' numerous times their acts do not reflect this affection, as Alyson says, 'just fuck me harder...and lift up your shirt. Let's see that bod work' (G. p.97). This interaction with some 'other' takes precedence over personal thoughts and can prevent the acting out of desired scenarios, instead 'actors' are thrust into a world where there are accepted ways of behaving, a world where priority and validity are granted if these sanctioned ways of behaving are adopted. To again refer to Simon, they are:

Shaping the materials of relevant cultural scenarios into scripts for behaviour in specific contexts...*interpersonal scripts represent the mechanism through which appropriate identities are made congruent with desired expectations.*<sup>28</sup>

By staying within the framework of a pre-ordained legitimacy, the risk of surprises within sexual scenarios, for both the actor and co-stars, is reduced.

As a consequence, spontaneity becomes the biggest fantasy of all. Even the

wildest, most instant attraction, followed by immediate, physical sex, still involves bodies, which carry with them every fragment of what they have done, felt and thought about before. As the Auden quotation reflects, imagination is used to produce a desirable mental picture of the self, a picture that can interact with others, and masquerade as it would wish to be seen. So ultimately, what one person finds attractive is projected onto their present partner, and in turn reflected back onto them. The only way to feel sexual is by another *looking at you* as sexual, as part of an incestuous circle of reflection. Even lone sexual activity involves some element of some other, be it only an imaginary other or some deeply ingrained concepts of what is considered to be 'sexy', always already gleaned from elsewhere.

The human reliance on constructed identities ensures that part of arousal is always false. Simon discusses the impact of this on sexual activity: 'Not only do individuals often "fake" their sexual responsiveness, they often must simulate sexual interest in order to invoke authentic sexual excitement'.<sup>29</sup> Paradoxically, the falsified and restricting precise mapping of sexual activity makes 'reality' feel 'real'. Players are gloriously legitimated by their own fantasies, providing that these fantasies fall within sanctioned boundaries. Without carrying out the actions it is enough for some unknown other, some fictional character from a movie or book, to do the things that were thought about and planned; this offers the confirmation that is craved. Sex works in a formulaic way. Fantasies involve certain favoured scenarios which include the mannerisms and speech patterns of lovers, their expectations of perfection (which happily coincide with what can be provided) - action centres on sensation and cuts from one sustainable interlude to the next. Like a mental security blanket, designed to cushion us from the actuality of our sex lives, or as Freud described it: 'the conceptual scaffolding we have set up to help us in dealing with the psychological

manifestations of sexual life.<sup>30</sup> Victor demonstrates the way that the messy ‘joining’ sections are not focused upon but instead skipped over. Sex can be seen as the ultimate hyper-real act, the act linking humans most firmly with the fragmented and turbulent postmodern. Sex is marketed as emotionally engaging and real, yet actually contains vast quantities of that which has been acted out on an imaginary level, at some previous time.

Sex is the archetypal simulacrum, capable of sustaining (déjà vu – like) endless memories, which have no actual event to refer back to. As Lacan has suggested, sexual desires are never fulfilled because the ideal sexual scenario is always already a tissue of fantasies. Humans endlessly strive to re-enact something that never existed in the first place. This is why Lacan feels so much significance is attached to the surrounding scene and setting of sexual activity.<sup>31</sup> Victor plans and fantasises endlessly, enforcing his ability to keep on acting his part: ‘replaying imaginary conversations with her while on the Stairmaster, rehearsing the words I’d use during sex (G. p.211-2).

Simon links the ‘actor’ in everybody to their Ego. Although fantasies can be allowed to run away, what is usually depended upon is the cast of others. It is considered safer, and therefore more likely to be allowed, to try to keep to certain socially approved formulas. This can result in never achieving the wanted sex, and indeed most humans end up with something close to the advertisement Victor describes: ‘On the screen now, a commercial, grainy fuzz, a reproduction of a reproduction’ (G. p.41). In a world of reproductions, sexual excitement can only come from multiple interpretations and connections to others. Fantasy is fragmented and stilted, it does not flow and it does not use ‘real’ time, but rather brief snatches, flashes, the ‘good bits’. The un-scripted, potentially difficult and embarrassing, can

conveniently be missed out. The fantasy can focus on, 'She will touch me there', 'I will look at him like this' *without* connections, because events do not have to be logical, sustainable or justifiable to be exciting, indeed they are more likely to be exciting if they are none of those things. Fantasy does not tend to deal in consequences, results and implications, just the bits that feel great. It is merely inhibiting, social conditioning that enforces sex between partners of the opposite sex, sex within marriage, sex without violence and so on, and makes humans subsequently crave a certain sanctioned (hence plan-able) background scenario to facilitate enjoyment.

When Victor is involved in a sexual marathon with Bobby and Jamie, (Chapter 28 in its entirety, p.335) this is clearly illustrated. The action is presented as an uneasy combination of sex manual, soft-porn and *Mills and Boon* romance, and illustrates sexuality as one of contemporary culture's major defining tropes. As Victor has already told his father: 'Sex sells, dude'(G. p.81), and he should know, involved in the marketing of sexual images, such as the Calvin Klein adverts he both appears in and admires. In a consumer culture sex is a commodity, and Victor's threesome offers a bricolage of some of the elements that 'sell'; a correlation of snippets without beginnings, ends, or consequences. His insistence that he cannot help himself suggests an uncontrollable agenda, running alongside the scripted 'fantasy'(G. p.338).

Graphic details replace what a human mind might only imagine as a brief snapshot, yet the detailed description, the putting of thought into words, encourages an audience to question what level of sexual explicitness is desirable, or acceptable. Although long and exhausting, the fragmented nature of Victor's sex scene, emphasised by the frequent use of ellipsis between sections, and constant new paragraphs, reiterates the impossibility of keeping a fantasy running continuously, and

chronologically. Fantasy is supposed to present what somebody would like to be doing, the 'perfect version', what actors, and characters in books do, something previously suggested. It would be mundane and tedious to re-run the mechanics of what actually happens in 'real' life. Far from fulfilling, sex is instead frustrating, used variously to communicate, dominate and overpower. Victor recalls his early relationship with Jamie: 'I'd try and fuck her into some kind of consciousness, desperate to make her come'(G. p.182). This desperation leads to composed stories, played out in minds, making 'that which arouses' a valid part of life. The manipulation carried out with real people, to re-enact these story scenarios, makes what *is* feasible and attainable perhaps more exciting, and, hopefully, capable of equally arousing the manipulator.

Victor, Bobby and Jamie are filmed attempting to present the audience with the sex they think they want to see, influenced as it is by media-saturated society, and its obsession with beautiful people and their perfect bodies. The action keeps coming, engulfing the reader in what the characters are doing to each other and themselves. Scene setting is the briefest description of showers and suntans, however this only serves to plunge the narrative into graphic details of body parts. The attempts to follow 'real' time are exhausting, and embarrassing. The reader wants the action to end, encouraging hasty page turning, and missed sections, eager to appease the discomfort, even boredom. The many orgasms experienced by the characters in this section should offer an escape, however, whilst traditionally viewed as an ending, they are simply overridden in the push to reach *beyond* the ending. Sex as chronological and climactic is disputed, placing it alongside other contested grand narratives. Like them its historical, calculable and containable description is questioned, in view of its ongoing, ambiguous and multifarious properties.

The physical bodies involved would all rather be having sex with different people. For the moment their limbs form one physicality, representing their changeable multiplicity. Jamie is not the 'real' Jamie, who died years earlier in a car accident, her transparently easy replacement backing up that: 'Reality *is* an illusion' (G. p.9 original italics). When she is dying Victor describes her as, 'just a shell, and something huge and shapeless is flying over us in the darkness, hanging above the courtyard, and a voice says, You all are'(G. p.425). This emptiness is underlined by Chloe's horrific death and the ease with which all characters are doubled. Simon sees shallowness in identity creation as part of the societal norm: 'The modern self appears with a profoundly enlarged capacity or necessity to be insincere and to deceive others as an aspect of normal human development'.<sup>32</sup> Because of this encouraged deceit, the sex act is imagined in non-chronological fragments, with detailed focusing on the segments particularly enjoyed, or viewed as handle-able, like sections of a roll of film, framed shots from a movie. As 'self' is shaped in the shadow of the awareness of what others desire, 'self' becomes a continuous production, supporting such comparisons with film-making. Fredric Jameson describes the surface prioritised nature of postmodernism as, 'a rush of filmic images without density', a description which aptly describes the flimsy celluloid constitution of Victor's life.<sup>33</sup>

**Films and Music: 'Adding graininess...erasing people...inventing a new world seamlessly'.<sup>34</sup>**

By centring on the act of filming the narrative presents surveillance tactics as an inherent part of modern society. Identity is formed in conjunction with looking at others and being looked at. The pressure instigated by constant surveillance brings unease and feelings of inadequacy, but also a paradoxical urge to *be* looked at,

in preference to being ignored. The opportunity to re-form identity demonstrates the lack of any inherent essence to the human condition, this realisation, whilst offering the liberation of the endless choices of postmodern society, also offers the frightening prospect of potentially being nothing and nobody.

The surveillance of Victor reveals that not only is his present, a montage of 'modern moment(s)' being staged, but his past and future are amended both before and after the event, thanks to the cutting-edge technology of computer graphics.<sup>35</sup> The dividing lines between reality, film and imagination are dissolved as all boundaries are wiped away and negated. Bentley shows Victor how easy it is to alter photographic images with the assistance of the latest computer software:

Lips are digitally thickened, freckles are removed, an ax is placed in someone's outstretched hand, a BMW becomes a Jaguar which becomes a Mercedes which becomes a broom which becomes a frog which becomes a mop which becomes a poster of Jenny McCarthy, license plates are altered, more blood is splattered around a crime-scene photo, an uncircumcised penis is suddenly circumcised (G. p.357).<sup>36</sup>

The fine line between filmmaking and surveillance is demonstrated when Victor is chased by Damien's 'heavies'. Formerly portrayed as a laid-back 'cool dude', Victor is suddenly able to ride his scooter like a professional stunt man. He would easily be caught, if it were in the script to catch him (G. p.111-3 & p.137). His escape is physically demanding and skilful, at odds with his usual portrayal as beautiful, but inept.<sup>37</sup> When Bentley is blown to pieces in front of him he tries to comfort himself with the thought that it is simply more of these special effects: 'It's a special effect I'm telling myself. It's makeup. Bentley is just a prop' (G. p. 418).<sup>38</sup> It is increasingly difficult to differentiate between what is and is not a special effect. The confused haze suggests that all things are merely an effect of some kind. Modern technology, constantly developing, is capable of altering events *after* they have

happened, and indeed can easily create events that did not happen, using computerised graphics. The existence of any discernible, and verifiable, origins are questioned, as images are created from differing body parts. A head from one person joins the torso of another, with perhaps the legs of a third, facilitating replicas, such as those of Victor and Chloe, and compounding the frequent mis-recognitions.<sup>39</sup>

The permanent presence of camera operators, film editors, and make-up girls reiterates that contemporary life within this vain cinematic society requires constant 'acting'. As in Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* there are multiple film crews and it is never clear who is filming whom.<sup>40</sup> When Jamie says her nail polish is for 'the movie', Victor asks which one and she replies 'both'. (G. p.243). The borderline between reality and the movie becomes increasingly hard to define, indeed the act of filming takes on the role of validation, causing Victor to ask Palakon, 'is this for real?... I mean, is this like a movie?...Is this being filmed?'(G. p. 373). There are echoes of the film *Man Bites Dog*, in which a film crew who are tailing a serial killer become embroiled in his gore-soaked world, where murder and rape are acceptable parts of life.<sup>41</sup> The audience begins to question the difference between perpetrating the deed and merely watching without helping the victim. Does watching, even enjoying, horrendous acts assist in their validation? As in *American Psycho* where the murderer is witty and entertaining, extremely ambiguous relationships are formed, both with other characters within the narrative, and with the audience themselves. As it is the camera's version that is offered the camera can never be neutral, and by collusion it creates a receptive audience, a ready market for sex, violence and cruelty, which subsequently leads to abject helplessness and vulnerability.

Victor is constantly beset by circumstances he can do nothing about. Several characters bleed to death in front of him, and on the occasions when he tries to get help nobody listens to him, or they do not understand due to language differences, or their following of an alternative script. Language difficulties abound in a world shrunk by transatlantic travel. Victor is widely reported to be having dinner in New York, whilst living in Paris and although this is explained by the existence of an impostor, it would not be inconceivable for Victor to jet himself there. The inference is that the impressive capacities of contemporary technology can shrink the globe to the extent where it is possible to be in more than one location at any given time.

Further to enforce the filmic atmosphere there is a permanent musical background, identified as 'the soundtrack' (G. p.168). In keeping with films, where nobody is ever seen to put the record on - it simply plays - the music of *Glamorama* is always cited as being, 'somewhere' (G. p.12), out of shot. When Victor arrives at the club for the opening party the act of filming and the resultant film's need for a soundtrack are explicitly foregrounded: 'Finally we're at the curb in front of the club and I the first thing I hear is someone yelling 'Action!' and U2's 'Even Better Than the Real Thing' starts playing somewhere'(G. p.145). If there is no song playing then Victor sings, or quotes lyrics, which are eerily relevant to his life. It is unclear whether this is coincidence, or life imitating art. The lyrics assert their pertinence, and situations compromise themselves to accommodate the song playing. As the action evolves to the atmosphere of the track, it reiterates the search for something to aspire to, a role to mirror in the constant creation and re-creation of situation and identity. As Victor sums it up, the music gives, 'the footage an "emotional resonance", that I guess we are incapable of capturing ourselves' (G. p.193). Victor's huge repertoire of lyrics echo his willingness to assume a pre-given identity, experience his life via media

simulation, and act out the emotions and ideas of others. As Neil Bartlett suggests: 'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives are mimicry, their passions a quotation'.<sup>42</sup>

Many of Victor's musical choices seem deeply ironic. He makes a quotation from the theme for the movie *Flashdance*: 'Take your passion and make it happen' (G. p.18). However, *he* is not making anything *happen*, but allowing himself rather to be carried along by events. When Victor quotes from songs the songs are rarely identified, instead they assist in the formation of a privately coded language. The reader needs to know the lyrics in order to understand. Yet an admission of knowledge is a collusion with Victor, and the grim place he inhabits. He paraphrases W.B. Yeats, "'The centre cannot hold, my friend"... "...what if there's *no* centre? Huh?'" (G. p.29), using modernist poetry in a self-referential literary allusion, characteristic of such writing.<sup>43</sup> However, his suggestion that there is *no* centre, is more in keeping with postmodern thought, and a prioritisation of the blurred margins and borderlands, with the centre of origin as a non-sustainable concept. So, whilst Victor's allusions to pop songs are reminiscent of elitist literary references, designed for a limited and chosen audience, his borrowing of 'mood' and inference has a distinctly postmodern feel.

The diversity of his musical quotations supports this: Wings; David Bowie; Elton John; Simon & Garfunkel; The Eurythmics; the *Grease* soundtrack; and more. Although at the cutting edge of every trend, Victor does not limit himself to the records currently in the charts. He reflects the postmodern belief that everybody consists of multiple, non-chronological strands of different influences from their pasts, songs heard when young, on the radio, in clubs/parties/shops, at other people's houses, parent's choices, and so on. When he has flashbacks to these former times

they are blatantly 'created' and changeable, insinuating the propensity to make of the past what you will by remembering chosen fragments, in a chosen manner. When Victor indulges in this malleable *déjà vu*, music is invariably playing from 'somewhere'. For example when he re-creates the incredibly detailed scene of Jamie and himself at school (G. p.181), and the slightly differing version of the same scene (G. p.468), from which the filming begins, in the first version either Whitesnake or Glass Tiger are playing, in the second, Pink Floyd.

This fluid multiplicity is reciprocally reflected back to him by contemporary trends in re-issuing and re-mixing records, also the use of sampling, a technique which produces records containing portions of other records. Such postmodern recycling of influences, appropriation of sentences and sections of tunes, is comparable to Victor's penchant for taking song words, out of context, and re-making them into a part of his present (or future), whilst acknowledging their irretrievability from their past. He uses the words of others to finish his sentences, sign cards and gift-tags, as they encapsulate, better than he can, what he is trying to say. They create an eerie sense of *déjà vu* and ambiguity, the reader knows what the lyrics remind *them* of without knowing what they mean to Victor. This play of meaning, created by multiple implications, and similar sounds, ensures that communication can never be straightforward; definition, interpretation and understanding overlap. Victor and his minions constantly misunderstand each other, as this interchange illustrates: "' We're selling myths" "Mitts?" "No, myths. M-y-t-h-s. Like a fag was gonna introduce you to Miss America, what would he say?" "Myth...America?"' (G. p.45).

Victor's habit of quoting song-words ensures that he in turn is easily quotable, and his double is instantly plausible, sending flowers to Chloe with the message: 'Ain't no woman like the one I've got...baby I'm a want you, baby I'm a need you'

(G. p.66). Victor Mark II quotes *two* songs to get his point across, and even Victor's personal assistant comments that it certainly *sounds* like Victor. Conforming to type creates an easy reproducibility, Victor sounds like the 'himself' he has created by quoting other people's words and ideas. Victor's father takes him seriously when he flippantly quotes song-words over lunch: 'I'm a loser baby...so why don't you kill me' (G. p.78-9), and attempts to comfort him about not being a loser by stating 'You just need to, er, find yourself ...find ...a new you?'. Victor's response is more apt than he realises, when he claims he wants to do something that is all his, where he is not 'replaceable'. The narrative explores the futility of searching for this perfect placing of the individual self.

Music is used to create atmosphere and to validate actions. Characters are portrayed as sad, directionless, idiotic, teetering on the brink of madness. In *Vineland* the characters claim that an actor's portrayal is always more authentic than the person being portrayed (V. p.348). In *Glamorama* strangers can 'sing' a life so much better than the person living it, magically summing up how they feel. The suggestion is that life is amended to suit the record, as the record is perceived to be 'tuned in' to what constitutes contemporary life. Victor summarises this type of record as, 'something emblematic of where I am at this moment' (G. p.342) and confirms the ease of influencing him by then suggesting two different types of song. Bobby and his team detonate bombs. The code words they use are song titles, turning the carnage into a frivolous game. It is the same game that Victor plays with his band – re-calling album details. When these details are used to disguise times and flight numbers the playing of a particular track detonates the bomb. Victor lyrically reports, 'the dying comes in waves'(G. p.439). Like a song's refrain, this sentence is repeated, poetic, unstoppable, inevitable.

Victor's night-club existence emphasises his intense connections with music. His life is acted out upon a stage, or more precisely a film-set with no background security on which he can anchor a safe and meaningful base. This is illustrated when he moves away from the lofty echelons of his night-club opening to go downstairs into basement rooms. The areas he passes through are cold, dark, unwelcoming, and bottomless. Away from the music and action the descent into the ground is threatening and alien. He is entering uncharted, uncivilised territory, straying away from where he 'belongs', where he is allowed to be, the limited area in front of the camera lens, where his constructed façade passes for a 'person'. By wandering away from the comforting restrictions of 'lights, camera, action' he risks the wrath of the unknown, and the dangerous abjection lurking 'off-set'. As Susan Sontag states, there is a certain 'Aggression implicit in every use of the camera'.<sup>44</sup> The act of focusing is objectifying with its inferences of containment, a subtle violence furthered by the language of pointing, aiming and shooting. However, there is also some degree of comfort to be gleaned from the fact that your image is in demand. This is why subjects try to look their best for photographs, despite the old adage that the camera never lies, it is *not* looking for the truth, indeed that nebulous entity is impossible to represent.

Colin MacCabe discusses the problems of adequately representing what is purportedly 'real' and concludes that, 'no discourse can ever be equal to the multifarious nature of the real'. He claims that the 'notion' of the real is what is settled for instead.<sup>45</sup> The past, present and future are imperceptibly intermingled by filmic records, and turned into consumable object. Subjects are complicit in suffering and untruth to get a good photograph. Television and media coverage designs happenings. As Joel Black says: 'In a world of mass-media-mediated fictions, the

individual in search of an identity is free to choose whatever script he wishes to enact'.<sup>46</sup> Victor may be an incredibly handsome, model/actor with a glamorous life and famous father, or rather the spinner of continuous fantasy. The occasional mundane and sordid events which break through; his apartment being re-possessed; his scooter crushed; the bank machine's refusals to issue him with cash – may be the only *actual* happenings.<sup>47</sup> He may be nothing more than a gorgeous gigolo with a scooter and the occasional use of other people's girlfriends, the rest a product of an over-active imagination. Like Patrick in *American Psycho* he could simply be imagining his acts within the eye of potential observers. This 'suppose I was been watched' mentality, where the 'self' is constantly constructed for some unseen viewer, echoes Sartre's theory of existential identity. The classic example Sartre offers is that of the Peeping-Tom, happy in his protected 'through the keyhole' world until he hears a chance footstep behind him. An unseen viewer forces him to rapidly reflect on how he must look to that other person.<sup>48</sup> Simple enjoyment becomes voyeurism, re-named and legitimated by its audience.

First person narration usually prevents the discovery of the 'hero's physical appearance. The reader gradually builds an image from hints and inferences. However, gorgeous Victor is vain enough to describe himself, in detail, early in the narrative: 'high cheekbones, ivory skin, jet-black hair, semi-Asian eyes, a perfect nose, huge lips, defined jawline'(G. p.16). As the narrative unfolds and the reader becomes aware of the doubling of characters, this description may be reinterpreted as the disinterested comments of a stand-in. Victor, as a construction, can talk dispassionately about his own appearance. His choice of adjective favours the romantic, 'high', 'ivory', 'jet-black', 'perfect', 'huge'. The details are too visual, too immodest for self-description and, as in *American Psycho*, the reader is reminded that

if Victor (like Patrick) *is* a construction, then it is current narrow ideas of what is attractive that have made him what he is.<sup>49</sup>

In common with *Vineland*'s Frenesi Victor is repeatedly refused the validation he craves from the automatic cash dispenser, street representative of his society's systematic oppression (G. p.17). However, it is whilst ensconced in the machine's reflective steel capsule that he is able to gaze at his own beautiful face, admire it, and share its details. The magazine cover he appears on as '27 and Hip' shines from the nearby news-stands. Victor expresses his amazement that he manages to retain his spot on the cover even from one news-stand to the next, aware of the fickleness of fame. Throughout the narrative other characters are surprised that the cover shot actually *is* Victor, showing the ability of images to create a life of their own. The picture does not represent the subject that the camera was pointed at, but rather a new subject that is formed from the process of posing within the shutter's snap and subsequently being looked at and admired. Victor describes himself in the photograph as, 'smiling, expressionless' (G. p.19), the oxymoron a reminder that everything is a façade.

This theory evolves as Victor meets with one of his lovers, Alyson Poole, who dominates him in a gender role-reversal culminating in a faked orgasm, from Victor (G. p.21). She controls the situation, tattooed and aggressive, socially powerful, and physically strong. Victor visits her luxury penthouse where he does as he is told, and is treated as someone less important than her vicious chows. He remarks on the uncomfortable coldness of Alyson's apartment. His own home is also cold, to the point of having ice and frost on the windows.<sup>50</sup> Apartments do not offer a safe area in which to 'live', furthermore, they are not truly a part of 'the film', as nobody can see, hence validate the existence of their inhabitants. Victor should be displayed on his

designated stage, rather than limiting himself to Alyson's patronising admiration: "God Victor...In this light"... "you look gorgeous" (G. p. 27). Victor's response to this compliment is his play on words catch phrase: 'The better you look the more you see' (G. p.27). As the action becomes messier and more frightening the 'cold' is mentioned with increasing regularity. It is cold in the nightclub, at the gym, at the fashion shoot, and to the point of feeling 'snowed in' in Tower records (G. p.52, 54, 58 & 86). Along with the heaps of confetti, and swarms of flies, the sub-zero temperatures hint at what is existing in the margins, threatening to invade at any moment, the abject other, identifying the beautiful by default. The camera and lights transiently control the scene but the inference remains that all around, just out of sight, there is a huge 'other place', always on the verge of spilling over. The symbols of chaos and dirt appear continuously, even duplicate characters are threatened by them. Victor's double is not safe from attack, its imminence announced by confetti on his bed (G. p.458 & 463). When he professionally kills his two assailants and makes a coded phone call to summon 'the cleaners', we are reminded of the automated 'expert' way in which Patrick Bateman responds to danger in the paradoxically false, yet tense, police chase of *American Psycho*.

Alyson Poole has migrated into the narrative from *American Psycho*, where she is a rare survivor of one of Bateman's attacks. Patrick also appears in the narrative (G. p.38), demonstrating true intertextuality. The differing narratives both comment on each other and physically interweave. When Mica the DJ is found dead in Hell's Kitchen, beaten with a hammer and eviscerated (G. p.149), there are echoes of Patrick's methods of murder and mutilation, and uncomfortable re-memories of his apartment in Hell's Kitchen, kept specifically for disposing of bodies. Texts are not merely quoted, they are incorporated, the incongruous result of this being that the

action is both more *and* less real. The reader balks at the thought of these multitudinous characters having a large interconnected world where personal indulgence is fuelled by excessive wealth. The fact that Patrick has not been apprehended for his multiple murders is unsettling, as is his apparent association with the film-makers. His obsession with graphic visual images, and aptitude for using his vast resources to facilitate evil, would make him an eager backer for films where people *physically* have sex, and *actually* die. In the film of *American Psycho* the part of Patrick is played by Christian Bale, an actor frequently mentioned by Victor to describe the man who is following him (G. p.322).<sup>51</sup> Victor relies on celebrity-similarity for clarity, even asking his stalker whether they are in the same movie, to further enforce the brittle surface of every strand of the action (G. p.279).<sup>52</sup> Victor's insistence that Patrick is a 'Nice guy', who deserves an invitation to his opening party, illustrates his surface assessment (G. p.38). Intertextuality reminds the reader of the created, fictional nature of the society they are both analysing and occupying.

The relationships of the main characters are uncomfortably intermingled and incestuous. Victor is involved with at least three women consecutively, all of whom socialise with each other. He is aggressively pursued and shared. Alison is particularly predatory. Rather than the more usual categorisation of the woman by her husband's status, men are identified by their lovers (G. p.47-8). Chloe and Alyson wear the same dress for the opening, an incident which causes huge consternation. This is heavily ironic as both women slavishly copy what is designated as fashionable (G. p.152). The 'Todd Oldham original' (G. p.41) proves that any such claims for 'originality' are fraught with difficulties. The dress is described as 'Navajo inspired', further enforcing the impossibility of indisputable origins. Both women have been socially created for placement within their high-profile niches. It therefore seems fitting that they wear the

same dress, making them identifiable as, 'Victor's current women'. Chloe's initial failure to notice the duplication of her outfit is explained by her being 'blinded by the flashing cameras'(G. p.145). She is rapidly losing her ability to *see* in a world where it is her place to be looked at.

The boundaries between 'real' and 'reel' are blurred. When Victor is beaten up, the staging of the fight is orchestrated. Victor 'wonder(s) if the third slap was in the script'(G. p.170) thereby drawing attention to the ill-defined nature of the divisions between differing scripts and versions. Although the action is filmed, (the 'Steadicam operator is unable to keep up'), the blood and pain are real. Joel Black discusses the way in which mimetic behaviour – acting, posing, posturing - all blur and trivialise the boundaries between what is real and what is not. He reminds us:

Plato and his followers were suspicious of these arts precisely because they blurred the fundamental distinction between fiction and reality, thereby giving rise more readily than the non-mimetic or narrative arts to violent disorder and confusion.<sup>53</sup>

This regulative side to 'playing' places filming as 'a site of controlled chaos and ritualised violence carefully regulated within the strict boundaries of the stage'.<sup>54</sup>

Victor's narration of the fight places him in the position of spectator, watching and describing, able to include aspects he would not be aware of whilst being punched.

This distancing gives the action a surreal, glassy feel. Even Victor can look at 'Victor'.

Such staged fights are the beginning of his slide from favour. He is reduced from 'It boy' to the level of waste product, with no possessions and never far from, 'the smell of shit rising up faintly from somewhere and floating all over the room' (G. p.316).<sup>55</sup> The ominous piles of confetti increase until 'confetti (is) strewn all over' (G. p.110).<sup>56</sup> Like Victor, confetti is an attractive, but relatively useless, commodity with a short life span. Confetti notoriously looks beautiful in photographs but is a nuisance

the moment it has finished hanging in the air and needs clearing away. Its flimsy constitution is reminiscent of paper records and their disposable disadvantage, when compared to the technological superiority of computers. The harsh binaries suggested by confetti and Victor; beautiful/ugly, useful/useless and so on, are continued throughout the narrative. Victor suggests that: 'The '90s are honest, straightforward. Let's reflect that...no distinctions between exterior and interior, formal and casual, wet and dry, black and white, full and empty'(G. p.51). Although this speech embraces difference, and encourages diversity, the actuality of the narrative is rather different, with characters who are beautiful *or* ugly, healthy *or* sickly, and activities and locations which are 'in' *or* 'out'. The middle-ground remains uninhabited. As Victor later admits:

Most people were mellow and healthy, tan and buff and drifting around. Others were so hysterical – sometimes covered in lumps and bruises – that I couldn't understand what they were saying to me (G. p.88).

As he summarises his society of binaries Victor paraphrases T S Eliot: 'the city looks vaguely unreal' (G. p.16).<sup>57</sup> By inserting the word 'vaguely' he acknowledges the many differing states of 'reality'. The night-club opening is just one of the narrative's many displays of conspicuous consumption, adding the further binary opposition of obscene wealth and abject poverty.

What *is* and *is not* deemed fashionable presents ludicrous extremes:

The catwalks seemed longer, the paparazzi were both more and less frantic, girls were wearing bones, bird skulls, human teeth, bloody smocks, they held fluorescent water pistols, there was a serious buzz, there was zero buzz, it was the epitome of hype, it was wildly trivial (G. p.408).

Again there is no middle ground. Lauren draws a similar conclusion when Victor suggests that she is only having sex with Damien because he is rich: "“What's better?” ... “Unable to pay your rent and depressed and trembling in the local *Kentucky Fried Chicken?*””(G. p.111). The planned construction of relationships is further emphasised

by Jamie and Bobby, who Victor insists should not be together: 'You don't love him ...I can tell. You don't love Bobby. It's a job, right? It's part of the plan, right? You're just acting, right?' (G. p.301). What constitutes a 'job' and 'acting' remains extremely ambiguous, as does who is devising this compulsory, brainwashing 'plan'. Attempts to trace back the demarcations of authority become impossibly tangled, interconnected and contradictory. There is even confusion between real and fake corpses in the wreckage of the bombs. Victor comments that the debris of body parts and blood does not look real: 'the blood and the flesh of the art students ... it just seems too red' (G. p.239). The mixture of real and fake blood, flesh and plastic bodies, is regarded as 'decoration', the explosions are claimed by Bobby to be about: 'the will to accomplish this destruction ... not the outcome' (G. p.296). The bombs injure scores of people, yet the camera crews merely film the action, they are there before the ambulances but they do not help anyone. Through their lenses the victims look 'tiny and inconsequential and vaguely unreal' (G. p.296).<sup>58</sup> What the cameras capture is described as: 'the usual: bleeding people running out of thick black smoke, the screams of the wounded and the dying ... the shock, the sirens, a hundred wounded – it's all so familiar'(G. p.306).

The gruesome montage is primarily formed from beautiful people, designer labels and product placements. It also includes falsified fragments, pieced together by the media into some kind of 'truth'. This creation is accomplished with sufficient ease to warrant the questioning of every 'news' item that is broadcast (G. p.320). The deliberate mixing of real and fake bodies pre-empts the contemporary cyborgian embracing of technology, whilst also serving to remind of the fragility of human life. Sleep and death, movement and immobility, flesh and plastic, the difference is much slighter than at first believed. Like Bobby's impossibly 'natural' tan, the supposedly

real and false are mixed relentlessly. Being tanned by the sun has 'natural' associations, however, the appropriation of a tan as a cosmetic accessory involving the technology of tanning machines, negates this. When the *Band on the Run* bomb detonates, destroying the plane and the passengers, the gory mixture of fuselage, fleshly debris and consumer goods in a macabre evolution becomes, 'what makes up the forest now' (G. p.441). The hundreds of corpses and mangled wreckage have to exist together at the crash sight, another fusing of 'natural' and man-made or technological matter.<sup>59</sup>

### *American Beauty – Rose Petals Replace Confetti*

Many of *Glamorama*'s 'fictional' scenarios are offered in glorious, theatrical colour by Sam Mendes' 1999 film *American Beauty*.<sup>60</sup> Both narratives present misrecognition, multiple scripts and misappropriated evidence amongst the dysfunctional families, constant surveillance and valorisation of good looks and financial success which make up contemporary society. *American Beauty* commences with Lester, the central character, revealing that he is dead, and re-visiting the events of his recent life. This transposed and ambiguous ending echoes the non-linear arrangement of *Glamorama*. The camera swoops down from on high, above the complications of human existence, offering a glimpse of a viewpoint from the sky, the place where Victor's thoughts linger.

Both narratives demonstrate a distinct lack of supportive family relationships. Victor's mother is dead, his father a cardboard cut-out, and his sister an untrusting, suspicious voice at the end of a telephone line. The idea of a father as a masculine protector degenerates into Bobby feeding a hysterical Victor copious amounts of drugs (G. p.284). Equally, in *American Beauty* Lester, as father figure, is an

inadequate provider, leaving that to his dynamic wife Carolyn, who strives endlessly to sell real estate, to the detriment of everything else. Lester, (like Victor), turns to drugs, however, in a role-reversal, they are provided by his daughter's boyfriend, Ricky, the boy next door. Lester walks away from his executive job, preferring to work in a retro-style burger bar and revert to the habits of his youth, which include growing his hair, working-out in the garage and driving an 'unsuitable' car.<sup>61</sup> He naively believes that by adopting extreme behaviour he is resisting the zealously acquisitive society that is encompassing him. Ironically, his drug habit represents the ultimate capitalistic tool, supporting a network of money-makers, who gain a lucrative income from his consumer addiction.

Selling drugs funds Ricky's constant video surveillance, and huge archive of video-cassettes. In keeping with the film-making of *Glamorama*, Ricky's filming reveals multiple scripts, misrecognitions and misappropriation of evidence. For example, the tape on which Jane complains about her father and asks Ricky to kill him runs out before it records her confirming her statements as a joke. To anyone viewing the video after Lester's fatal shooting the tape appears to contain vital evidence. Ricky's father views the video collection as proof of his son's homosexual tendencies, because he has taped Lester working out in the garage, naked from the waist up. What he fails to take into account is the fact that his son tapes *absolutely everything*. When he shoots Lester it is not for having an affair with his son, but for refusing to have sex with *him*. Ricky's close bonding with the available technology is more crucial than what is eventually recorded, the tapes are of either limited or endless value, depending on viewpoint, due to their alteration by every subsequent viewer.

Ricky's video library recalls the numerous faxes sent to Victor, with the message: 'I KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU'RE DOING' (G. p.105). Massive volume, and ambivalent subject matter, subsequently negate any meaning, 'it could apply to anything...So ultimately it's meaningless'(G. p.105). The endless surveillance turns back upon itself, until all things become equally relevant or equally meaningless.<sup>62</sup> As Don DeLillo's *Running Dog* summarises:

Go into a bank, you're filmed...Go into a department store you're filmed. Increasingly we see this. Try on a dress in a changing room, someone's watching you through a one-way glass...Drive your car anywhere. Radar, computer traffic scans. What circles the earth constantly? Spy satellites, weather balloons, U-2 aircraft. What are they doing? Taking pictures. Putting the whole world on film. The camera's everywhere.<sup>63</sup>

Ricky's huge directory of film references attempts to record, even create, some version of history, however the randomness of his choice of subject, and the casual way in which episodes are cut short, edited or placed alongside differing sections, undercuts this. Lester's attempts to re-live his youth show a similar seeping of past into present and future, déjà vu-like he wants to recall 'last time', but somehow also improve upon it and incorporate it into 'now'. Societal norms validate 'development', and would view Lester's behaviour as regression, however, when viewed as re-taking missed opportunities, and expanding on uncertain choices it could be viewed as an improvement. Lester's incorporation of what has already passed him by, into the present, reiterates Lyotard's theories of the future having already been experienced in the past<sup>64</sup>. Lester is acting upon the theory that if there is no future mapped out and waiting to be worked towards, then why not simply act spontaneously within the present? His newly embraced acts - giving up his job, toning his body, masturbating at will, speaking his mind, taking drugs, and so on, become more admirable, rather than merely self-indulgent, when viewed in this light.

Lester is shot for refusing to adhere to societal norms, he breaks out of those

boundaries, only to be constrained by others. Although Carolyn thinks he is taking the easy route by 'opting out', it takes courage to face up to what you think you want, as the photographer comments to Victor in *Glamorama*, 'It's hard to be yourself' (G. p.451). Without condoning ideas of some inherent identity, Lester pursues the possibility to try and be truly 'yourself', acutely aware of your feelings and determined to prioritise friends, family and lovers, over material possessions. When Carolyn chastises Lester for almost spilling beer on the couch she ruins a tender moment and reinforces the rampant materialism of both *Glamorama* and *American Psycho*, questioning a society that offers its members gratification of every material want.

Blood-red rose petals, from the rose 'American Beauty', replace the confetti of *Glamorama*, as a much repeated motif of that which is beautiful, quickly shrivelling and fading. The notion of beauty is further queried by Ricky's insistence that Jane is the beautiful one not the more obvious Angela, whose greatest fear is being 'ordinary'. In an appearance-focused world of consumables, pretty, blonde Angela feels obliged to 'sell' herself, in a show of false-bravado, using her BMW and fashionable clothes for self-advertisement.<sup>65</sup> The ultimate paradox, a virgin-whore, she acts as a knowing and available dealer prepared to exchange commodities. Ricky insists that Angela *is* the ordinary one, despite surface appearances, as she has bought into society's grand narrative of exchange value. He finds beauty in a paper bag blowing in the wind, ephemeral, like the confetti, it will blow away and be destroyed by the next downpour, merely disposable, even rubbish. He claims the bag is dancing with him, admiring its free, unfettered movements.<sup>66</sup>

When Lester is shot, Carolyn finally loses her steely control, collapsing in his clothes to weep hysterically, in a touching, yet somehow predictable, reaction to

losing him. Despite the fact that his body is still there, she immediately reverts to material goods, touching, smelling and holding the clothes he leaves behind. At the moment of death Lester does not see images of cars and possessions, but re-memories of his daughter and wife looking younger, laughing, healthy, happy. Again, the scene is touching, and what the audience wants to see and believe. However, as nobody survives their death to confirm, or deny, the thoughts of death throes, such pictures of happy, family times could be merely further ideological propaganda, another layer of cliché to labour which are the correct memories to value and prioritise. Both narratives present characters who are unable to articulate what they *really* want or value.

### **Conclusion : 'It's what you don't know that matters most'.<sup>67</sup>**

Victor, like the recently widowed Carolyn, turns to traditional values. When forced to face up to the reality of horrific torture he pleads, 'I just want to go home' (G. p.285). However, other than his yearnings to drift off into the sky the reader never learns of where this elusive home is; rather than a geographic location it refers to a state of mind. The narrative shows time and space to be abstract entities. Characters act out their scenes in one location whilst every other scenario becomes melded into a homogenous 'elsewhere'.

The final sections of the text offer a beginning and an end, to any reader still searching for coherence. Victor commences his journey at a villa on Ocean Drive, the day he meets Chloe, and ends alone in an Italian hotel bar, staring at a mural on the wall. The picture is of mountains, and, once again, he looks to the sky for salvation, seeing its elevated position as offering an escape from the difficulties and complications of life (G. p.428). He claims the stars to be the only reality. However,

the narrative's constant filming, surveillance and use of computer technologies queries the capacity of the stars in the sky, and the professed infinity of space. The action suggests that perhaps, in keeping with their human counterparts – the movie 'stars' - the stellar constellation can only provide a further layer within the endless circular observation, merely part of the continuous cycle of watching and being watched.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*, Picador, 1999, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> The frontispiece quotation enforces the constant nature of the present, 'There was no time when you nor I nor these kings did not exist' Krishna.

The final section (Section Six, p.467) numbers the chapters in the traditional ascending order, and could be the 'real' beginning, however by placing an opening at the narrative's close, and referring to a previously recounted scene, any attempt to fix a chronology is instantly diffused.

<sup>3</sup> Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*, p.138.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> The avid recording of this torture is reminiscent of Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991). Patrick videos his victims in order to repeatedly re-visit the gore.

<sup>6</sup> The marketing of these 'in' products dupes purchasers into thinking they are the items they need to become, and remain, a certain kind of person. Allowing this self-delusion to continue reiterates Marx's theories of 'false consciousness'.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Trans. P. Foss & P. Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Women's ages are similarly discussed in *American Psycho*, where Patrick's women must not be, 'too used up' (p.171).

<sup>9</sup> Mike Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary: Baudrillard & Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p.101-2.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication,' *Postmodern Culture*, Ed. Hal Foster, p.133.

<sup>11</sup> This reflects the thousands of fans who emulate their hero's appearance. The *actual* person representing that hero also has to emulate the image if they want to sustain it.

<sup>12</sup> A result of Chloe's constant readiness to have her photograph taken, her appearance is never 'set' before she is washing it off and painting it back on again.

<sup>13</sup> Bobby claimed models the ideal candidates for recruitment, due to their familiarity with taking instructions (G. p.309-11). His techniques and philosophies echo religious cults.

<sup>14</sup> The heroine of the cult computer game *Tombraider* (Eidos Interactive), Lara Croft, is a perfect example of this blurring between reality and fiction. It is easy to forget that she is a product of computer animation because of her strikingly beautiful appearance, her magazine 'interviews', product endorsements and feature film. She represents perfection, rich, slim, fit, attractive, capable – and does not age or get tired.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth Century Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999), p.9.

<sup>16</sup> This fictional idea has now been realised by internet sites offering the potential to create a clone of yourself who, when fully developed, can communicate with the clones of others, leaving you free to do other things. The clone makes its own decisions on the basis of what it knows of your profile which obviously leaves a margin for error.

<sup>17</sup> Chloe has stated her desire for children, just as Victor's father wants Victor to return to school. Victor Mark II can be seen to be fulfilling others' desires.

<sup>18</sup> Otto Fenichel, writing in 1935, quoted by Barry Glassner, in *Bodies: Overcoming the Tyranny of Perfection* (Los Angeles: Lowell House, 1992), p.43.

<sup>19</sup> Such stereotypical appearance recalls the television series *Ally McBeal* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox & Channel Four) and the media coverage given to Calista Flockhart's similarities to the writer's wife (Michelle Pfeiffer).

<sup>20</sup> This atmosphere of cloning is continued by the male model/terrorists having names beginning with the same letter, Bruce, Bobby, Bentley and Bertrand.

<sup>21</sup> William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.137.

<sup>22</sup> Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 287.

<sup>23</sup> Victor's name is also close to 'Victim'.

<sup>24</sup> Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities*, p.29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33, quoting WH Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 1963.

<sup>26</sup> Some examples of this can be found on the following pages, 311, 316, 321, 344, 299, 303.

<sup>27</sup> Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities*, uses the terms, 'inter-personal' and 'inter-psychic' scripting, p. 33-4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41, italicised in original.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) (London: Penguin, 1991), p.138.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth, 1977), p.56. Lacanian theory states desire can never be obtained, due to the impossibility of ever knowing what is 'true' desire amongst the endless layers of social conditioning humans are exposed to, therefore the background or setting of fantasies becomes the main focus.

<sup>32</sup> Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities*, p.115.

<sup>33</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London, New York: Verso, 1991), p.34.

<sup>34</sup> Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*, p.357.

<sup>35</sup> 'Another modern moment completed' (G. p.121). This is Victor's description of a fashion shoot, with temporary tattoos, trendy refreshments, make-up and discussions of celebrities and sexuality.

<sup>36</sup> Digital cameras present a miniature picture to the photographer, who decides whether to keep the shot on the film or erase it, thus offering potentially endless opportunities to take that 'perfect shot'. This erasing and re-writing has implications for what can be called authentic. Furthermore, developed photographs can be altered, and models lit, made-up and posed in appearance altering ways (*Bodies: Overcoming the Tyranny of Perfection*, Barry Glassner, Los Angeles: Lowell House, 1992, p.41). This 'enhancement' of photographs is one of the reasons that Chloe is 'mistaken' for herself, nobody can be exactly like their own pictures.

<sup>37</sup> As in *The Last Action Hero*, Dir. John McTiernan (US, 1993) we are offered a self-conscious parody as Victor's 'real' and fantasy lives are hopelessly intermingled.

<sup>38</sup> Similarly in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, Brock attempts to mask the danger of a gun with 'It's only a prop' (p.240). Life's theatricality is used to soften the harsh reality of death.

<sup>39</sup> This ability to 'create' a person from the favoured segments is echoed in Victor's description of his own appearance (G. p.16). The intricately detailed fragments offer a composite, but not complete, man, formed from what is currently fashionable, hence desirable.

<sup>40</sup> Dir. Dziga Vertov, *Man With a Movie Camera* (USSR, 1929).

<sup>41</sup> Dir. Rene Belvaux, *Man Bites Dog* (Belgium, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), p.190.

<sup>43</sup> Victor's endless quoting and appropriation of song lyrics is reminiscent of the extensive literary and cultural allusions of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991).

<sup>44</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Allen Lane, 1977), p.7.

<sup>45</sup> Colin MacCabe, 'Realism & the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Contemporary Film Theory*, Ed. Anthony Easthope (London: Longman, 1993), p.53.

<sup>46</sup> Joel Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), p.176.

<sup>47</sup> In the film *The Matrix*, Joel Silvers (U.S: Warner Bros, 1999) humans are kept subdued with representations of life, whilst they live out their days constricted in gel filled pods, all energy and life force drained by huge machines. 'Reality' is an exhausted and non-sustainable concept, what Baudrillard refers to as the, 'Desert of the real'. *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being & Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Methuen, 1972).

<sup>49</sup> Nina Lykke & Rosi Braidotti, *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace* (London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), discusses the false societal gender roles as 'monstrous construct(s)', p.18.

<sup>50</sup> Further examples of the coldness can be found on pages, 96, 100, 101, 124, 129, 373. The often repeated white tulips and stainless steel (p.269) endorse the feelings of chill.

<sup>51</sup> Dir. Mary Harron, Lions Gate Films 2000. *Glamorama* was published before the film was cast.

<sup>52</sup> Usually comparisons are drawn with acquaintances. Victor's use of famous strangers enforces the superficial nature of society.

<sup>53</sup> Joel Black, p.179.

Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations*, and Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.66, also discuss Plato's definition of a simulacrum as a copy for which there is no original.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182. Black discusses the connections of acting and murder, giving examples of assassins who have chosen theatres as killing venues.

<sup>55</sup> Pages 316, 321, 326, 330, 360, 382 & 414.

<sup>56</sup> Confetti appears in countless scenes, including pages, 88, 90, 96, 129, 167, 318, 329, 391, 441.

<sup>57</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

<sup>58</sup> Not only do the camera crews repeatedly beat the medics to the bomb scenes, they are followed by the paparazzi, CNN and local TV, only then do the ambulances arrive (G. p.355).

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<sup>59</sup> Jean Baudrillard discusses a similar implosion of boundaries with regard to modern identities, *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> The film monopolises on Mendes's ability to hold the action within a framework of rich, limpid colour. Acting and reality are concurrently divided and blended by visually placing scenes, such as the evening meal, within a physically balanced frame, whilst frighteningly lifelike neuroses refuse the constraints of such a boundary. The 'perfect' house frames the action, Lester is looking at a framed picture when he is shot in the back of the head.

<sup>61</sup> Echoing Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (London: Abacus, 1992), Lester takes the ultimate 'Mac-job'.

<sup>62</sup> The Channel Four live documentaries *Big Brother 2000 & 2001*, in which ten contestants allowed their every move to be transmitted to an eagerly watching public, demonstrated how mundane an all-encompassing 'watching' can be.

<sup>63</sup> Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (London: Picador, 1992), p.149-50.

<sup>64</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>65</sup> Bidy Martin discusses this fear of 'ordinariness' in 'Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary', quoted by Penelope Deutscher, *Yielding Gender* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997). Although conforming to stereotypes, both pretty, blonde Angela and the homosexuals under discussion are attracted by the 'lure of existence without limits' (p.123).

<sup>66</sup> What constitutes 'waste' is a central topic within DeLillo's *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998), as discussed in Section Three.

<sup>67</sup> Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*, p.283.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the historic tendency to define masculinity as calm, rational and reasonable, the postmodern narratives at the centre of this study vividly display men who are equally likely to be hysterical, unpredictable and unreasonable. Victor Seidler describes the way in which masculinity became part of a 'modernity ... organised around a particular vision of the rational self who is able to guide his life through reason alone.'<sup>1</sup> However, the actions of the characters within the texts discussed above demonstrate the futility of this. Rather than unquestioningly adopting a future-directed system, which requires masculinity (and all categories) to be controllable, postmodern writing embraces characters who are instead discursive and open to debate, eager to assess the way in which information and knowledge are manipulated and used. Such writing acknowledges the impossibility of controlling, curing, even *describing* all eventualities and furthermore suggests that a constant anticipation of the future facilitates the premature declaration of the demise of specific states and conditions (for example certain viruses and illnesses). This is a false out-dating of circumstances which have the potential to return. Examples of this backlash are illustrated by the ruptures and re-visiting characteristic of an ongoing circularity. The proliferation of killer diseases such as T.B., formerly believed to have been eradicated, and the abilities of powerful new viruses, like B.S.E and AIDS, to outsmart their future-focused scientific adversaries suggest that not all development or technological 'progress' necessarily causes changes for the better. Indeed some scientific interventions leave situations worsened, rather than improved, for instance by removing inherent resistance to certain micro-organisms and building up immunities unhelpful to survival.

Postmodernity points out the inadequacy of an 'ever-onward' teleological, so-called progressive way of thinking, it contests such containing strategies as a formulaic masculinity, and indeed reflects an increasing dissatisfaction with created, restricting stereotypes. Modernity has been traditionally framed as a belief in teleological progression, whereas postmodernity is unfixed and never-ending, portrayed by these texts as offering boundless experiences of the edge. Julia Kristeva sees this boundary-threatening behaviour exemplified by the authors of texts which dare to challenge accepted norms:

The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, as a consequence perverts language – style and content. But on the other hand, as the abjection is both the abject's judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality.<sup>2</sup>

The writer is not capable of dissolving the traditional insistence on satisfaction, formed and definable, due to his/her lateness to the scene. No matter how recent the writing is, it is always too late. John Frow underlines this by terming the author a late-comer; furthermore Lyotard reiterates that whatever is written can only ever reconstitute that which has already been 'experienced'.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the seemingly hopeless nature of disputing linearity and the compulsory adoption of 'proper' ways, authors continue to repeatedly challenge grand narratives, patterns and rules.

This cannot be done by simply offering alternative rules and should rather prioritise the *experiencing* of pleasure above the choice of the (relative) security of plannable re-numeration and gratification. The postmodern choice is sometimes criticised as opting for pleasure whatever the outcome and perpetuating what it analyses. Frow terms it a product of the combined crises it investigates, 'the self-fulfilling prophecy of its own impossible autonomy'.<sup>4</sup> Kristeva agrees with Frow,

pointing out that discussion does tend to sustain rather than diminish. However, she also illuminates the vital role played by death when striving to be released from restriction:

It is only after his death, eventually, that the writer of abjection will escape his condition of waste, reject, abject. Then he will either sink into oblivion or attain the rank of incommensurate ideal. Death would thus be the chief curator of our imaginary museum; it would protect us in the last resort from the abjection that contemporary literature claims to expend while uttering it.<sup>5</sup>

Bill Gray, the reclusive author in DeLillo's *Mao II*, and Jack in *White Noise* with his debilitating fear of death, like Kristeva, remind us of the finality of death. It is suggested that a kind of comfort can be drawn from the fact that finite borderlines and meeting up with expectations will no longer be a cause for anxiety.

Cyberspace is posited as having the potential to provide this longed-for infinity; *Underworld's* Sister Edgar chooses to spend the afterlife there; William Gibson points out its simultaneously vast, yet embracing confines; Donna Haraway suggests that cyber-identities are more appropriate than the cultural stereotyping tolerated for so long. In answer to theorists who claim technology should be handled with caution, Haraway argues that as humans are cyborgs already, in that technology is systematically part of them without the need for plastic or metal insertions, then cyber possibilities to re-cast the self should be welcomed. *Vineland's* Frenesi, although not physically micro-chipped, is tailed relentlessly by the government via computerised surveillance systems, normative ideas of gender behaviour and dominating men. She provides a clear example of the thoroughly encoded body.

Haraway's detractors include Ziauddin Sardar who sees technological cyberspace as an area dominated by white, middle class Americans and Europeans rather than an arena fostering discourses of liberation and equality. Whilst Haraway rejoices that 'the old dominations of white capitalist patriarchy seem nostalgically

innocent', it is still necessary to be alert to the fact that the danger of containment has not gone away; white capitalist patriarchy has simply gained more highly sophisticated tools.<sup>6</sup> Seidler also promotes this awareness, stating that an enthusiastic espousing of purported 'postmodern' thought should always leave room for questions. Otherwise, there is a danger that amongst the celebration of difference, oppression and subordination by those most powerful will continue to flourish.

At the centre of the debate about whether cyber-technology can help or hinder a more individual identity lies sexuality. As William Simon proposes:

In the spirit of Foucault, we must begin to see sexual behaviour as an evolving phenomenon whose meanings and truths are part of the continuing production of social reality, of the continuing production of our current versions of the human.<sup>7</sup>

Sexuality, like the rest of human identity, is not inherent and inalterable, but negotiated and constantly evolving; one of the major characteristics of postmodernity itself. Again to quote Simon:

The achievement of a sexual identity for most of us is a continuing act of *bricolage*, a process of assembly that joins the past and present, a process where the value of all personal history must risk fluctuation in significance.<sup>8</sup>

This process is disabled by pressures to conform to the currently preferred stereotype; pressures which impinge on any potential to feel desire and guilt. The memories, thoughts, hopes and regrets about what sex *should* be like easily overwhelm the supposed 'reality' of the moment and can cause acute isolation. The tension and repression instigated by this coercion leads to the reliance on psycho-therapy which abounds throughout these texts. Humans allow sex to be deceptive and all social life mirrors this dissimulation, with civilised actors pretending that certain facts are unknown, and feelings unfelt, for the sake of a peaceful existence and the confirmation that life is 'as it should be'. Any breakdown of the civilised façade controlling thoughts and actions causes panic. What is classified as anxiety more

precisely describes alternative realities breaking through the barriers of what has come to be accepted as the 'norm'. This would re-classify what passes for reality most of the time into 'madness', and that which is already called madness would become simply a refusal of boundaries and an opting out of social conditioning.

The difficulty in re-defining terms such as madness and sanity, reasonable and unreasonable, lies not only in the problems of communication that would arise but the unleashed potential for violence to be categorised as 'reasonable'. Whilst the majority of people would like the opportunity to act in a manner which is more appropriate to them personally, behaviour such as that illustrated by Patrick in *American Psycho* would meet widespread condemnation, despite his justification of the mayhem as: 'my reality'(A.P. p.345). Although Patrick's 'breaking out' is hard to applaud, it seems obvious that searching for a pre-ordained identity amongst the ambiguity of contemporary life can only be delusional. The toxic wasteland that is the new century's world, is not a place of linear causality, nor discernible separation between subject and object. These narratives reiterate the hopelessness of inflicting meanings in such a world. Rigid gender categories and societal norms can only create false and brittle defining lines, which are always prone to fractures, leaving humans vulnerable, exposed and constantly under-achieving.

Consumer goods are mass-produced to fulfil the perceived 'needs' of this insecure population. The perfect 'body' becomes part of the wide-scale commodification; simply another item to be purchased. Bodies are punished with exercise, coerced with drugs, and altered with surgery in order to conform to the desired 'norm'. Ugliness and deformity are aligned with illness. Those decreed 'sick' are consequently marginalised, their negative identity used in the systematic construction of what is desirable. The language of illness, 'curing', 'healing',

'eradication', 'correction', insinuates constant improvement rather than any possibility of varying states existing simultaneously. The body is 'built', ideologically, semiotically, technologically and culturally, within the preferred boundaries of fitness and health. Prosthetics, such as false breasts, legs and eyes, ensure that even losing part of an 'original' body does not justify a different appearance; in a culture of sameness unobtrusive conformity is everything. However, the same prosthetics ironically recall the endless *diversity* of bodily potential, rather than illustrating a particular identity, they suggest that bodies *can* be altered and adapted. Sophisticated technologies allow the physical inter-action of human and machine, a development Freud predicts in his comment:

Man has ... become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but these organs have not grown on him and they give him trouble at times.<sup>9</sup>

*Glamorama* illustrates the trouble that such bodily adaptations can cause and equally the characters' determination to have them. What is deemed 'desirable' is increasingly bound up with societal gender coding - even dreams and fantasies are adapted to conform to the societal desired. All of these narratives show evidence of this 'dreaming'; indeed both *Glamorama* and *American Psycho* could represent nothing more than fantastic dreams, with no verifiable reality invoked at any point.

Rather than dreaming, action is prioritised, men should not waste time looking back but should rather be permanently thrusting ahead. Nick in *Underworld* projects this intense activity towards career and familial matters in an attempt to deflect the attraction of wayward violence and unsanctioned sexual activity. Civilising influences claim that in order to be fulfilling, life must push beyond feeling. The modern world is presented as a place where there is no time to actually *enjoy* life; all available time must be dedicated to 'creating' an existence within the sanctioned

ideal. Even leisure pursuits are not leisurely but assist in the honing of identity. This emphasis on constant effort has resulted in an enormous increase in the profile of 'retirement'; delusive attempts are made to move towards the mapped-out future which is believed to be benignly waiting. Despite postmodern theorists' insistence that there is no perfect future which can be conveniently reserved, life is allowed to become a risk-free charade comprising a reasonable salary, possessions, and investment plans in an attempt to guarantee this non-existent and impossible entity. Life has no bone-trembling experiences, no succumbing to vertigo, or traversing the edge. Death's fall, it is believed, will come suddenly, and offer complete annihilation. Rather than conclusive, Bataille views this annihilation as ongoing and all-encompassing. This belief causes him to:

(Visualise) everything that exists destroying itself, consuming itself and dying, each instant producing itself only in the annihilation of the preceding one, and itself existing only as mortally wounded. Ceaselessly destroying and consuming myself in a great festival of blood. I imagine the frozen instant of my death.<sup>10</sup>

He claims that to focus on a single point (like the projected, perfect future) and believe that there *can* be a definitive version is self-deceiving. Below the surface of the false and constructed social life he maintains that there is nothing but a 'pure violence' - what he terms 'interiority'. This interiority, like Kristeva's abjection, defies definition by representing the areas where seeming opposites inside and outside, clean and dirty, whole and fragmented, even opposing theories, meet and meld. Bataille dares humans to strip away all external parts and experience an inner fall into this limitless abyss. A growing realisation, albeit often unacknowledged, that this is the option is the driving force behind the confusion and madness at the heart of these contemporary characters' lives. This awareness, that all aspects of life are

performed and acted within certain constraints, does not make facing the complex and contradictory nature of postmodern 'realities' any less daunting.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Victor J Seidler, *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity & Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.45.
  - <sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.16.
  - <sup>3</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.81.
  - <sup>4</sup> John Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory & Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.63.
  - <sup>5</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.16.
  - <sup>6</sup> Donna J Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology & Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', *Simians, Cyborgs & Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p.245.
  - <sup>7</sup> William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.135.
  - <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p.80.
  - <sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation & its Discontents*, Trans. & Ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), p.39.
  - <sup>10</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, Ed. & Intro. Allan Stoekl, Trans. Allan Stoekl, C R Lovitt & D M Leslie Jnr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.238.

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