

The Transformation of Masculinity in Late Capitalism

Narratives of Legitimation and Hollywood Cinema

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Summary

This thesis contends that a number of popular Hollywood films from the 1990s present evidence of a transformation in the legitimate ways of acting for white heterosexual men in contemporary Western metropolitan society. I argue that the transformation is intimately tied to the rising dominance of what I call a neoliberal 'narrative of legitimation'. What is significant about my intervention, and distinguishes it from previous studies of representations of masculinity in film, is the use of the theoretical lens of legitimation and my focus upon late capitalism as a normalising principle. Each of the four chapters is dedicated to a close reading of a single film, *Falling Down*, *Se7en*, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*. Through an interrogation of the films, as well as an appraisal of the critical literature that has responded to them, I will argue that a fundamental change has taken place in the legitimate expectations, motivations and justifications that inform the representation of masculinity in late-twentieth-century Hollywood cinema.

The necessity for such a change is framed in the films as a response to an urban environment represented as a cynical, indifferent and chaotic hell that has to be resigned to as the only 'real' reality. My analysis proposes that through the narrative trajectory of these films conflicting models of masculine conduct are put forward yet successively abandoned, leaving only a single model that is fully aligned to neoliberal ends. This model abandons any attachment to family, nation or community and affirms a resigned individualism that merely maintains itself, unable to attach to or affect the world around it. Such a conflict of narratives, however, also leaves open the possibility of attesting to alternative narratives incommensurable with the prevailing neoliberal narrative of legitimation.

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CONTENTS

	Introduction	1
	A transformation in the understanding of masculinity	4
	Norm and neoliberalism	10
	Legitimation and the normative statement	15
	Metanarrative and postmodernity	18
	Narrative, genre and cinema	23
	Overview of chapters	28
1	Falling Down	34
	1.	
	<i>Falling Down</i> as white male identity politics	37
	<i>Falling Down</i> as American imperialism	40
	<i>Falling Down</i> and patriarchy	43
	<i>Falling Down</i> and cynical realism	47
	2.	
	Legitimation	52
	Lyotard and legitimacy	54
	Mythic narrative	56
	Metanarrative	61
	Postmodernism	65
	3.	
	Violence and legitimacy	69
	The scapegoat	70
	Sacrifice, myth and tragedy: Oedipus	73
	<i>Falling Down</i>	76
	Conclusion	83
2	Se7en	87
	1.	
	The city	90
	2.	
	Mills	96
	Mills and organic representation	98
	Mills and the action-image	101
	Doe and the encounter	104
	Doe and transcendental recognition	108
	From Mills to Somerset: acting to seeing	112
	A crisis of the action-image	115
	Somerset and the crisis of belief	118
	3.	
	Narratives and events	121
	Conclusion	126

3	American Psycho	129
	1.	
	<i>American Psycho</i>	131
	The film <i>American Psycho</i>	135
	2.	
	What is the genre of <i>American Psycho</i> ?	141
	The language of <i>American Psycho</i>	144
	Tropes of language in <i>American Psycho</i>	145
	Lacan and psychosis	148
	Deleuze and sadism	152
	3.	
	Foucault and the genre of neoliberal capitalism	157
	The market as the organising rationale for society	158
	<i>Homo oeconomicus</i>	160
	The invisible hand	164
	Deleuze and Guattari: capital become transcendent	169
	4.	
	<i>American Psycho</i>	173
	Patrick Bateman: the subject of capitalism	176
	Conclusion	180
4	Fight Club	182
	1.	
	Critical readings	186
	Giroux and the problem of violence	186
	Žižek, <i>Fight Club</i> and violence	192
	2.	
	A movie about thought	199
	Capitalist drone	204
	Support group addict	208
	Fight Club leader	211
	Traitor of Project Mayhem	216
	3.	
	The specifics of masculinity's neoliberal narrative of legitimation	223
	Conclusion	233
	Capitalist cynicism or belief in the world?	236
	Bibliography	241
	Filmography	250

Introduction

This thesis contends that a number of popular Hollywood films from the 1990s present evidence of a transformation in the legitimate ways of acting for white heterosexual men in contemporary Western metropolitan society. I will argue that this transformation is intimately tied to the rising dominance of what I will call a neoliberal ‘narrative of legitimation’.¹ What is significant about this intervention, and distinguishes it from previous studies of representations of masculinity in film, is the use of the theoretical lens of legitimation and its focus upon late capitalism as a normalising principle. Each of the four chapters is dedicated to a close reading of a single film released between 1993 and 2000 that displays representations of masculinity in crisis. Each reading addresses dominant themes raised in the critical literature that responds to these movies in order to situate my own focus upon narratives of legitimation. I then

¹ I have kept the American spelling of legitimation, rather than the English ‘legitimation,’ throughout the text to remain consistent with the translations of Lyotard’s work.

go on to map out a number of the narratives that are contested in the films. The theoretical components that construct my argument will be gradually introduced and expanded upon throughout the four chapters. Through the interrogation of these films, as well as an appraisal of the critical literature that has responded to them, I will argue that there has been a fundamental change in the legitimate expectations, motivations and justifications that inform the representation of masculinity in late-twentieth-century Hollywood cinema.

The reason for choosing to study the representation of white heterosexual masculinity, a field that some may feel is already overly privileged, comes from a concern not only to address specific popular Hollywood representations that firmly place normative humanity in the figure of the white male hero, but also to trace the transformation in the normative role that this figure performs.² My aim, therefore, is to intervene in the discourses surrounding the study of masculinity and provide a new means of theorising to account for why there has been such concern with the 'problem' of masculinity since the 1970s. This privileging has the undesired effect of banishing other racial, ethnic, sexual and gendered 'others' to the margins of the text. Yet paradoxically, it is precisely the question of how to break with this normative model of masculinity and its 'others' that motivates this thesis. The goal is to show how narratives, in particular narratives of white heterosexual masculinity, are legitimated so the threat of the 'other' is kept at bay. As such, racial, ethnic, sexual and gendered difference haunts the text throughout. Consequently, by tracing the social norms of

² Rosi Braidotti in an interview with Judith Butler criticised the institutionalisation of gender studies as: 'the take-over of the feminist agenda by studies on masculinity, which results in transferring funding from feminist faculty positions to other kinds of positions. There have been cases [...] of positions advertised as 'gender studies' being given away to the 'bright boys'. Some of the competitive take-over has to do with gay studies. Of special significance in this discussion is the role of the mainstream publisher Routledge who, in our opinion, is responsible for promoting gender as a way of deradicalizing the feminist agenda, re-marketing masculinity and gay male identity instead.' 'Feminism by Any Other Name', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6.2+3 (1994), 27-61 (pp. 43-4).

masculinity and its transformation in late capitalism, as represented in cinema, it is possible to show how the 'other' is 'othered' in ways that are specific to neoliberalism.

My argument is grounded on the premise that particular forms, or genres, of masculinity are created through the acceptance of a narrative of legitimation that structures acceptable and unacceptable conduct within its confines. With the rise of a new narrative comes the contestation over the legitimate actions and expectations of men within this new order. Neoliberalism, as the preeminent social narrative since the 1970s in the Western world, has created certain expectations, specific visions of reality and forms of common sense that are in conflict with other, more traditional, structures of social organisation. This vision of the world is then cemented through organised social interventions at all levels of production, reproduction and consumption. My focus in this thesis, then, is on how this conflict between narratives has been represented in cultural production, specifically cinema, through representations of men confronted with this new reality. Evidence of this negotiation I suggest is at its height in male crisis films of the 1990s. I argue that Hollywood film gives us a privileged modality in which to witness this negotiation and contestation of the conflict between narratives of masculinity as it is so bound to the industrial and market pressures of globalised capitalism as well as the popular response of a world audience. These films bear witness to the battles for validation of a particular narrative, a battle, I will argue, that is ultimately won by the narrative that affirms a neoliberal vision of reality. Moreover, the films aim to pathologise or criminalise conduct that does not conform to the norms of this narrative. Yet, through this contest, they also leave open the possibility to attest to alternative narratives incommensurable with the prevailing neoliberal narrative of legitimation. Such conflict presents an encounter that ungrounds the legitimacy of a

single narrative and demands bearing witness to another reality. The final question remains, do we relegate the encounter to fantasy or can we believe in this world, this encounter that affects us? The aim of this introduction, then, is to position my argument in relation to current theorising of masculinity and explain my approach in more detail before addressing the films in the four chapters.

A transformation in the understanding of masculinity

The suggestion that there has been a change, a transformation, a crisis even, in the social, cultural and academic understanding of white heterosexual masculinity is not new, having been postulated since the 1970s.³ This work has grown in volume and complexity to the present but became most pronounced towards the end of the twentieth century, coming to a head in what John Beynon calls ‘the masculinity in crisis summer’ of 2000. As he states: ‘While bookshops across the United States were full of boy-crisis books, the press in the United Kingdom carried endless articles on the subject following the publication of Anthony Clare’s book [*On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*].’⁴ The 1990s saw an unprecedented concern with the state of masculinity in journalistic, popular and academic writing.⁵ As Robyn Wiegman claims: ‘The 1990s were, after all,

³ Michael S. Kimmel lists a number of publications that were representative of the ‘men’s liberation’ movement that sprang up in the 1970s in response to the changing situation of men especially with regard to feminism: Jack Sawyer, *On Male Liberation* (1970); Warren Farrell, *The Liberated Man* (1974); Marc Feigen Fasteau, *The Male Machine* (1975); Herb Goldberg, *The Hazards of Being Male* (1975) and *The New Male* (1979); Jack Nichols, *Men’s Liberation* (1975); and two anthologies Deborah David and Robert Brannon, *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (1976) and Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer, *Men and Masculinity* (1974). Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 185.

⁴ John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), p. 79.

⁵ Brenton J. Malin has identified the 90s as a decade that showed particular concern with representations of men in crisis: ‘While [the] critique of traditional manhood is at least as old as the counterculture of the ‘60s, this sense of crisis seemed to gain a particular cultural currency in the ‘90s. Robert Bly’s popular book *Iron John*, for instance, was published in 1990, the same year Bill McCartney’s men’s group, the Promise Keepers, held their first meeting. Similarly, such magazines as *The Nation*, *Los Angeles Times*

the decade in which masculinity's marking had become a primary feature of U.S. popular culture, not to mention a burgeoning academic subfield.⁶ What was surprising about these events was not only that masculinity had been moved from the shadows as the underlying universal benchmark for humanity into the glaring light of cultural visibility, but that men themselves were questioning their own patriarchal dominance. Presaged by Antony Easthope in his *What a Man's Gotta Do* he gives this 'call to action':

It is time to try to speak about masculinity, about what it is and how it works. [...] Despite all that has been written over the past twenty years on femininity and feminism, masculinity has stayed pretty well concealed. This has always been its ruse in order to hold on to its power. Masculinity tries to stay invisible by passing itself off as normal and universal.⁷

The sudden visibility and self-awareness of masculinity was greeted with hope by some and anxiety and anger by others. It also produced a palpable sense of guilt, confusion and fear in many men. The sense of intense personal struggle with these questions is apparent in the confessional mode that marks out this literature.⁸ Concurrently, there was a call, made most forcefully and popularly by Robert Bly in his bestseller *Iron John:*

Magazine, and *New York Times Book Review* variously took up this masculine crisis, essays such as "The Prejudice Against Men" (Marin, 1991), "The Trouble with Male Bashing" (Stillman, 1994), and "What do men want? A reading list for the male identity crisis" (Schweder, 1993) all pointing to this sense of a crisis in '90s masculinity. [...] A number of gender scholars throughout academia (Kimmel, 1996, 1993; Jeffords, 1994; Connell, 1993; Messner, 1993; Rotundo, 1993; Segal, 1993; Miles, 1989; Halberstam, 1998; Faludi, 1999) have discussed this crisis of masculinity as well, excited by the ways in which this crisis might challenge traditional masculine values and open up discussions of alternative views of masculinity'. *American Masculinity under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties 'Crisis of Masculinity'* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 8-9.

⁶ Robyn Wiegman, 'Unmaking: Men and Masculinity in Feminist Theory' in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. by Judith Kegan Gardiner (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 31.

⁷ Antony Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

⁸ An interesting account of the 'fears' of writing about straight white males is given in Fred Pfeil's *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995). Many men's studies works begin with a declaration of their personal reasons for writing about men and masculinity. Anthony Astrachan for example, introducing his book, *How Men Feel: Their Response to Women's Demands for Equality and Power* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1988), gives a detailed account of his difficulties with dealing with his then wife's employment opportunities and how these difficulties led to marital breakdown.

A Book about Men, for a return to a true masculinity, one that eschewed the feminisation of contemporary culture and embraced its inner grizzly man.⁹ The literature appeared to be an open contestation of what masculinity *should* be. Though the notion of a crisis of masculinity was, and still is, hotly contested it is obvious that a transformation in the understanding of masculinity had taken place.¹⁰

The dominant cause attributed to this transformation and the foundation of Men's Studies literature is the rise of feminism in the 1960s and its gradual inclusion within the academy. As Tim Edwards points out: 'From the 1970s onwards, many men working in political and academic circles alike were exposed to, if not forced to confront, feminism and indeed feminists whether in their working, academic, political or personal lives.'¹¹ This leads him to conclude that 'it is arguable that the entire canon of critical men's studies of masculinity constitutes little more than a reaction to second-wave feminism'.¹² While the dominant theoretical and intellectual challenge to patriarchy was through feminism, changes in the world of work also had widespread and far-reaching consequences for men. The transformation of the understanding of masculinity has been intimately tied to changes in the U.S. economy, and, as a consequence, the global economy. The decisive shift from large-scale industrial economies to ones based upon information and services taking place since the 1970s, the end of the 'job for life' and the scaling back of the family wage, placed the traditional role of men as breadwinner and patriarch under threat.¹³ Combined with the visibility

⁹ Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press, 2004).

¹⁰ For an overview of the discourse of crisis in the study of masculinity see Chapter 1 of Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006). For my own take on such a crisis of masculinity see, Tom Harman, 'The Crisis of Masculinity as Deleuzian Event', *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, 3 (2011), 26-31.

¹¹ Edwards, *Cultures*, p. 25.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See Barbara Ehrenreich 'The Decline of Patriarchy' in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. by Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 284-290.

of feminist and civil rights discourses, the unquestioned position of men as ‘rulers of the world’ felt less plausible even though positions of power and influence remained firmly in their hands. It was not only an economic unviability that haunted masculinity, but its legitimacy. As Clare argues in *On Men*, ‘It is true that patriarchy has not been overthrown. But its justification is in disarray.’¹⁴ This rupture in patriarchy was seen by some authors as the opening up of the possibilities for a better form of masculinity, one that had heeded the lessons of feminism and would denounce the ‘patriarchal dividend’ for a more equitable future.¹⁵ Men had a chance to ‘change’ if only they would renounce their violent, macho or masochistic ways.¹⁶ The underlying call from profeminist writers was: get rid of patriarchy and there would, at last, be justice.

Certainly, the argument to rid us of patriarchy seems appealing for those concerned with questions of domination and justice, but translating it into everyday experience and political practice proved much more difficult. The relationship between men, masculinity and patriarchy within these discourses remained unclear. It is interesting that, in the 1990s, feminist discourse was moving away from patriarchy as a theoretical tool precisely for this reason. As Judith Butler states in her influential *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990: ‘The notion of universal patriarchy has been widely criticized in recent years for its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists.’¹⁷ Butler points towards Michel Foucault’s theorisation of power in *The Will to Knowledge* to highlight the problems

¹⁴ Anthony Clare, *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p. 4.

¹⁵ The term ‘patriarchal dividend’ is utilised by R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 79.

¹⁶ Masochism has become a major theme in theorising contemporary masculinity, see especially David Savran, *Take it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

with utilising what she calls a juridical model of power when analysing gender.¹⁸ She suggests that by conceiving of power as repression or domination by an external force one presupposes a position outside of power that is distinct from it, but also repressed by it. Foucault saw sexuality as this domain created as an outside by the juridical model of power. Sexuality was supposed to be a free energy that was necessarily repressed by the social order. However, Foucault argues that sexuality was not the object of repression but actively created by the discourse that evoked it. If we apply this theoretical model to patriarchy, where power is held by men over women, women appear as the repressed agency outside of power and free from its taint. Patriarchy is an enticing concept for those working against dominant gender relations precisely because it places the position of power in a particular univocal sex, men, and marks out the 'others' as distinct, repressed, but also the site of true liberation. While this position is politically mobilising, once subjected to scrutiny inevitable paradoxes arise such as when men do not wield power, or power is held by those other than men. Patriarchy could name domination but could not explain it.

There have been attempts to overcome this paradox in the literature on masculinity by suggesting that men's power over women is collective power and, therefore, not held by any single man but placed within institutions; or, as Susan Jeffords suggests, a 'masculine point of view' which she defines as a disembodied power to influence men and women but is, as such, unrealisable.¹⁹ Both of these positions point towards an institutionalised and social understanding of gender organised from above to regulate individuals, yet fail to give a clear account of how this form of domination is

¹⁸Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (London: Penguin, 1998).

¹⁹ Kenneth MacKinnon, *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media* (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 15-16; Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. xiii.

legitimated. Butler's own position is discursive: both sex and gender are constructed in and through repeated utterance; essentially, the gender binary is maintained through the performance of normalised social relations which she calls the 'heterosexual matrix'. The gendered subject appears through *language*, and it is in the conventions of language that power is negotiated. Patriarchy is normalised through gender performance which makes the unequal access to power appear natural. The political project and the contestation of power manifested in discourse would, therefore, not come from outside of discourse but from within. As she explains:

The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside of this field, but only *a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices*. [...] [T]he task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize [my emphasis].²⁰

Butler suggests that there is no outside of power, only relations between powers, and it is only by illuminating the legitimation and normalisation of particular structures which hide the workings of power that critique can take place. It is this power to 'engender, naturalize, and immobilize' particular norms of masculinity through legitimating narratives that shall be the focus of what follows. What is apparent in relation to contemporary masculinity, however, is that certain means of legitimation have come into question and been challenged while leaving the fact of male domination intact. The question then becomes, what kind of masculinity has been challenged, and what form of masculinity has been constituted in its place? If certain norms of masculinity have become visible to the critical eye, namely patriarchal or authoritarian masculinity, what has come to replace these norms as the invisible, normalised determinant of contemporary white, heterosexual masculinity?

²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 7.

Norm and neoliberalism

The first thing needed to begin to answer this question, then, is a consideration of how male domination can be maintained despite its challenge from both men and women. With the rejection of sex role theory in the 1980s, Masculinity Studies has turned to Connell's notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' to theorise masculine domination. It has been widely used in the literature but has raised questions as to its theoretical merit. Hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities reproduce a similar dualism that is critiqued by Butler's notion of juridical power. Demetrakis Z. Demetriou has argued:

The secondary literature that employs the concept of hegemonic masculinity tends to reproduce the dualism constructed by Connell. Hegemonic masculinity is presented as a 'thoroughly heterosexual,' violent, or even criminal configuration of practice. It is always seen, as Patricia Martin noted, as a 'substantially negative' type that is unified and coherent. Hegemonic masculinity is thus united by its ugliness and negativity and by its opposition to femininity and subordinate masculinities.²¹

This, I would argue, is a consequence of Connell's insistence that, first, masculinity is an epithet for domination and second, the aim of this domination is the domination of women. Within this framework it is hard to account for any subtle negotiations of power or the potential for any radical change. While suggesting that masculinity is socially and historically constructed, by reifying domination in masculinity there appears to be no way out of patriarchy.

What is missed in such an analysis is the investment in and negotiation of power that goes beyond mere gender relations and is rather constitutive of these relations. As

²¹ Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique', *Theory and Society*, 30 (2001), 337-361 (p. 347).

Susan Bordo states: ‘within a Foucauldian/feminist framework [...] it is indeed senseless to view men as the enemy [because] most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individuals did not create and do not control – and that they frequently feel tyrannized by.’²² In this sense the radical consequences of Butler’s position need to be maintained. The question of the norm is transformed in Butler from a top-down deployment of oppressive and restrictive generalisations that are ‘taught’ to, or ‘enforced’ upon, citizens by a repressive ruling elite, towards a notion that each social actor arises through the repetition and maintenance of normative linguistic and social practices. The radical point of Butler’s thesis missed by maintaining the juridical notion of power is, precisely, that masculinity is a *product*, and not the cause, of discourse and cannot transcend the structures that create it.

What I argue is problematic about Butler’s thesis as much as Connell’s, however, is that, having found an adequate theory of normative statements, she too quickly generalises the cultural norm into an overarching theory of the heterosexual matrix, which, though culturally constructed, cannot account for the specificity of its own construction or why it would change. This failure would suggest that specific gender practices are a consequence of larger social determinants than merely the maintenance of heterosexuality. In this vein Philip Goodchild has argued that, rather than the study of ‘power’ in gender relations, the study of capital is necessary as it *encompasses* concepts of power and sexual difference.²³ As I have already suggested and as I will argue further

²² Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999) quoted in Gardiner, ed., *Masculinity Studies*, p. 13.

²³ ‘Following the work of Michel Foucault and feminist theorists in particular, recent studies of culture and society have identified innumerable operations of power in society. In comparison, an emphasis on capital may seem naively Marxist. My argument is not that such cultural manifestations of power are unimportant or do not exist, but that they are *encompassed* by a global market. [...] Concepts of ‘power’ evaporate under closer analysis; concepts of ‘sexual difference’ remain tied to imaginary and symbolic

through the course of the thesis this social determinant that has come to structure gender relations in contemporary Western society is capitalism and more specifically its neoliberal form.

In this assertion I am in agreement with Jean-Joseph Goux when he suggests that there is a dominant mode of signifying within culture that carries across different domains. He argues:

I have gradually reached the conclusion that all processes of exchange and valuation encountered in economic practice set up mechanisms in relation to what I am inclined to term a *symbology*, which is in no way restricted to the economic domain. This symbology entails a system, a mode of symbolizing, which also applies to signifying processes in which are implicated the constitution of the subject, the use of language, the status of objects of desire – the various overlapping systems of the imaginary, the signifying, the real.²⁴

Goux goes on to argue that this does not automatically place the economy, or in Marxist terms the economic base, as ultimate cause:

It is not a matter, then, of ascribing to economic symbology an anterior or causal role. We can only note within the historical world of sociality correspondences and contradictions between its procedures and those that govern signifying metabolisms (sic).²⁵

If this is the case, then it is clear that the neoliberal form of economic symbolisation has become the global dominant from the 1970s. David Harvey, who has convincingly charted its rise, describes neoliberalism as, in the first instance, a theory of political and economic practices. It proposes that human well-being can be maximised by freeing the individual entrepreneur within a context of free trade, free markets and strong private

orders leaving feminist theory *qua* feminist tied to psychoanalysis. Neither are self-posting like the logic of capital.' Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 146. n. 5.

²⁴ Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. by Jennifer Curtiss Gage (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 113.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

property rights. The state becomes the guarantor of these institutions, setting up military, defence, police and legal structures to aid its functioning. Neoliberalism is also defined by the expansion and creation of markets. This is not confined to the economic domain, however, but extends to those institutions which have traditionally been seen as outside of the market (water, health care, social security, education etc.). Advocates of neoliberal theory now hold positions of influence across educational, financial, business and governmental institutions in most states across the globe. According to Harvey, 'Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated in the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.'²⁶

While neoliberalism as a theory is now the dominant discourse it has taken time and concerted, even violent, effort for these ideals to become institutionalised. Beginning with a crisis of capital accumulation everywhere apparent at the end of the 60s, a conflict over how to solve this crisis took place. From a choice between central planning, social democracy and liberating market forces the latter won out. However, this was neither as inevitable nor as obvious as it may appear in retrospect. Harvey continues: 'The capitalist world stumbled towards neoliberalization as the answer through a series of gyrations and chaotic experiments that really only converged into a new orthodoxy with the articulation of what became known as the 'Washington Consensus' in the 1990s.'²⁷ What had been an ideological program of a minority and the concerted effort of class solidarity between the world's wealthiest businesses in the 70s and 80s was, by the 90s, the wholesale installation of the neoliberal paradigm. As Harvey claims:

²⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 13.

The success of Reagan and Thatcher can be measured in various ways. But I think it most useful to stress the way in which they took what had hitherto been minority political, ideological, and intellectual positions and made them mainstream. The alliance of forces they helped consolidate and the majorities they led became a legacy that a subsequent generation of political leaders found hard to dislodge. Perhaps the greatest testimony to their success lies in the fact that both Clinton and Blair found themselves in a situation where their room to manoeuvre was so limited that they could not help but sustain the process of restoration of class power.²⁸

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the 1990s was the first era in which neoliberalism became a truly global norm.

While the history of neoliberalism has been well charted, my main concern in this thesis is to map out the consequences of this transformation on the representation of white, heterosexual masculinity. If the neoliberal 'symbolology' has become dominant what does the world come to look like and what ends can be legitimately pursued by men? What are the common-sense notions of reality under such a regime, and what happens to previous common-sense notions of masculinity? My work is, therefore, meant as an extension of and an addition to the readings already produced in this field, particularly Susan Jeffords and Yvonne Tasker's analysis of representations of masculinity in 1980s and early 1990s Hollywood action movies, as well as Stella Bruzzi's analysis of the father in post-war Hollywood film.²⁹ What marks out the originality of my contribution, however, is the alternative theoretical lens I employ to frame my analysis. This is drawn from the work of Jean-François Lyotard, René Girard, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and his co-authored work with Félix Guattari, and Slavoj Žižek and places its focus firmly upon mapping out the ideal

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 62-3.

²⁹ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) and *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993); Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-war Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2005).

structures legitimated through different regimes of social normalisation. Distinct from traditional feminist and Marxist approaches I will adopt a poststructuralist theory of legitimation as my methodology. I will argue that a particular image of the world is created by the acceptance of the neoliberal paradigm of discourse, a common-sense view of reality, and men's position within it, that comes to take the place of more traditional views of masculinity defined through social responsibility, fatherhood, and nation. This transformation does not occur, however, as a smooth transition from one state to another but as a site of crisis and conflict with all the attendant threats of madness and criminality. Chapter 1 and 2 of this thesis look at the films *Falling Down* and *Se7en* respectively as evidence of cinematic representations of masculinity that perform the delegitimation of these traditional ways of acting.³⁰ They then go on to instate a new model of masculinity that takes its place as the legitimate masculine norm. In Chapter 3 I present *American Psycho* as paradigmatic of this new norm.³¹ The account of neoliberalism that I set out there is concerned with outlining the ideal relations organised and normalised by neoliberal discourse which describe the 'rationality' of neoliberal man, or rather neoliberalism's *homo oeconomicus*. Chapter 4 will go on to ask how such a norm can be challenged through an analysis of David Fincher's *Fight Club*.³²

Legitimation and the normative statement

As I mention above, Butler's theory of normativity addresses many of the problems inherent in gender theorisation but while her notion of performativity has been widely used, especially in the cultural theorisation of masculinity, my approach draws on a

³⁰ *Falling Down*, dir. by Joel Schumacher (Warner Bros., 1993); *Se7en*, dir. by David Fincher (New Line Cinema, 1995).

³¹ *American Psycho*, dir. by Mary Harron (Lions Gate Films, 2000).

³² *Fight Club*, dir. by David Fincher (20th Century Fox, 1999).

different poststructuralist heritage in the work of Lyotard, Deleuze and Foucault.³³ Each of their work is intimately concerned with how a field of immanent forces is structured in thought. Their analysis takes a number of different forms and conceptions, examples being Lyotard's Discourse/Figure, narratives of legitimation and genre, Deleuze's image of thought, abstract machine and assemblage, and Foucault's apparatus (*dispositif*), episteme and governmentality, but each concept derives from an attempt to explain the ordering of the world that does not rely upon transcendence. From this starting point they ask, how do these transcendent structures arise and organise social reality and, hence, their mutual concern with judgement?³⁴ There is, therefore, an emphasis placed upon legitimation rather than truth, and the focus of analysis is not based upon any performance as such but upon how such a performance is judged. They ask the question, what are the criteria of judgement that authorise or deauthorise a performance? Key here is the move away from the psychoanalytic determinants of the phallus towards ideal structures that come to constitute social orders.³⁵ The way in

³³ For recent examples of the use of performance and performativity in the analysis of masculinity see Donna Peberdy, *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) and Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

³⁴ This is witnessed through their mutual engagement, more pronounced in Deleuze and Lyotard's work, with Kant's third critique, the *Critique of Judgement*.

³⁵ A particularly clear explanation of Foucault's *modus operandi* that has influenced my own approach to the question of masculinity is given in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*, ed. by Michel Senellart trans. by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). 'The question here is the same as the question I addressed with regard to madness, disease, delinquency, and sexuality. In all of these cases, it was not a question of showing how these objects were for a long time hidden before finally being discovered, nor of showing how all these objects are only wicked illusions or ideological products to be dispelled in the [l]ight of reason finally having reached its zenith. It was a matter of showing by what conjunctions a whole set of practices – from the moment they become coordinated with a regime of truth – was able to make what does not exist (madness, disease, delinquency, sexuality, etcetera), nonetheless become something, something however that continues not to exist. That is to say, what I would like to show is not how an error – when I say that which does not exist becomes something, this does not mean showing how it was possible for an error to be constructed – or how an illusion could be born, but how a particular regime of truth, and therefore not an error, makes something that does not exist able to become something. It is not an illusion since it is precisely a set of practices, real practices, which established it and thus imperiously marks it out in reality. The point of all these investigations concerning madness, disease, delinquency, sexuality, and what I am talking about now, is to show how the coupling of a set of practices and a regime of truth form an apparatus

which I will frame the question of a transformation in the understanding of masculinity in my thesis is inspired primarily by Lyotard's use of George Kalinowski's formula for a normative statement: *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a.*

In Lyotard's reading a prescriptive statement is made normative by the prefix, *it is a norm decreed by y.* What is so helpful with this formalisation are the questions that it raises about the legitimation of such a *y*. It asks what name can be invoked to legitimate an action? How are we to judge whether such authority is legitimate or illegitimate? Rather than being just a cynical mask of power, the *y* needs to garner assent and conviction to its legitimacy. This focus brings to bear the whole question of the construction of truth and the nature of reality and is, therefore, not only a question of political belief but of technological and scientific verification, or as Foucault puts it 'veridiction'.³⁶ It is a question of knowledge and power.

Legislative and executive functions are distributed between the *y* who decrees the norm and the *x* that carries it out. Problems arise, however, when we ask what has the authority to authorise such a *y*. In our current democratic institutions this authorisation is garnered through the voting system: the government has authority over me because I authorise it. Logically this is a *petitio principii* or circular reasoning: the answer would result in an infinite regress unless it is summarily halted by *y* being identified with a transcendent authority or Idea such as God, Life, 'the people', 'our ancestors' etc. The way that this aporia, this site of undecidability, is precluded, Lyotard suggests, is through narrative. Narrative acts as a means of joining phrases from

(*dispositive*) of knowledge-power that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist and legitimately submits it to the division between true and false' (p. 19).

³⁶ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 36. Veridiction is when a discourse is turned into a site of truth and then subjected to the rules of verification by specialists able to determine this truth from falsehood or error.

heterogeneous phrase regimens in order to disperse this absence of justification along a diachronic axis. Hence, narrative becomes a privileged object of study to discern its attempt to nullify the logical aporia of legitimation. Narrative is the way the world is explained, joined together, made sense of and justified.³⁷ The question then becomes, for Lyotard, what kind of narrative justifies a social order and what joinings does it make possible? By deciphering the particularity of the *y* makes it possible to understand the narratives and codes of conduct that regulate social roles and relations between social actors. From the multiplicity of heterogeneous and contradictory acts a regulatory norm can be deciphered. Throughout the thesis I will keep returning to this formula to frame the transformation from one regime of normative masculinity to another.

Metanarrative and postmodernity

Another reason for turning to Lyotard is his explicit theorisation of a shift in the social order that came about at the end of the 1960s. In Chapter 1, where I address Joel Schumacher's 1993 film *Falling Down*, I draw a parallel between the transformation in the understanding of masculinity and Lyotard's reading of the change from a modern to a postmodern society. In his arguments around the postmodern Lyotard suggests that the modern social order authorises itself by recourse to an Idea, a *y* that legitimates its existence. As he states about the modern period, 'the thought and action of the 19th and 20th centuries are governed by an Idea (in the Kantian sense): the Idea of

³⁷ An early formulation of Lyotard's approach to narrative is set out in his *Instructions païennes* (Paris: Galilée, 1977) quoted in Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). 'A decisive perspective has just been opened: that history is made of clouds of narratives, narratives reported, invented, heard and played out; that the people does not exist as a subject, that it is a heap of billions of little futile and serious stories, which sometimes get attracted into constituting large narratives, sometimes disperse in to fanciful wanderings, but which in general just about hold together, forming what's called the culture of a civil society' (p. 114).

emancipation'.³⁸ Whether it is liberation through knowledge or wealth, or the liberation of 'the people' or the proletariat, the promise of freedom validated the means to its attainment. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard calls this narrative of legitimation a grand narrative or metanarrative. The structure of metanarrative proposed by Lyotard is directed towards ends, a goal to be achieved, a result to be aimed for. This gives rise to the characteristic mode of modernity: the project.

The postmodern is, for Lyotard, precisely the delegitimation of this grand narrative. As he states: 'I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.'³⁹ He gives a number of reasons for such a transformation including those I have set out above as coextensive with the rise of neoliberalism:

The decline of [meta]narrative[s] can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means; it can also be seen as an effect of the redeployment of advanced liberal capitalism after its retreat under the protection of Keynesianism during the period 1930-60, a renewal that has eliminated the communist alternative and valorized the individual enjoyment of goods.⁴⁰

Lyotard is unwilling to speculate on a single cause for this transformation but suggests it is coterminous with a crisis of belief and an equal and opposite demand for thought. It is here that Lyotard equates this experience to Nietzsche's exposition of 'European nihilism'.⁴¹ He argues that it is through the cultural demand for truth that truth itself is

³⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. by Julian Pefanis and others (London: Turnaround, 1992), p. 36.

³⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. xxiv.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 37-8.

⁴¹ Nietzsche writes in 1888: 'What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs; this destiny announces itself everywhere. [...] For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving towards a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect'. *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufman and trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 4.

ungrounded. The demand for legitimation creates the conditions for its own delegitimation. This transforms the speculative apparatus – that which has knowledge of knowledge and places it within a totalising framework that guarantees its legitimacy – from one that defines the limits of knowledge, its legitimate boundaries, into one language game among many in which certain rules need to be adhered to in order to play each game. The totality of knowledge is split into a network of language games that have no necessary connection and no means of organising or legitimating a unity or totality. It is this process of delegitimation that Lyotard sees as the mark of postmodernity. Postmodernity can be seen, therefore, as a moment of crisis in a particular form of transcendent authority: a crisis of the grand narratives of legitimation. A confluent crisis in the legitimate authority of patriarchal masculinity in line with such social transformation can be witnessed, I argue, in the social, cultural and academic concern with the question of masculinity since the 1970s.

Has there been, consequently, a loss of all narratives of legitimation with the fall of the metanarrative of emancipation? It is here in Lyotard's discussion that he sets out the argument for a new form of legitimation described by systems theorists (particularly Niklas Luhmann) as 'performativity'. This is the valorisation of the maximum input/output ratio or, more abstractly, what he calls in *The Postmodern Explained to Children* 'success'. As he argues there: 'success is the only criterion of judgement technoscience will accept. Even so, it is incapable of saying what success is, or why it is good, just or true, since success is self-proclaiming, like a ramification of something heedless of any law.'⁴² Yet this success does have a measure in neoliberal discourse, the measure of profit on the market. 'Performativity', therefore, does 'accelerate the process of delegitimation' but only of the metanarrative of

⁴² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, p. 30.

emancipation.⁴³ What it realises as universal instead is the economic genre or, in other words, the metanarrative of profit. What becomes 'good, just' and 'true' is success on the market. Metanarrative has not so much been overturned as transformed.

Lyotard himself goes on to argue that it is the economic genre that is dominant in contemporary society.⁴⁴ What makes my engagement with Lyotard unique, then, is the extension of his use of the normative statement, and its relation to narratives of legitimation, to consider the postmodern, late capitalist or neoliberal society which is foreclosed in Lyotard's own work. By moving on to consider capitalism most directly in relation to 'gaining time', Lyotard misses out on a possible critique of capitalism already inherent in his analysis. In extending the use of the formula for the normative phrase, *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*, to an analysis of neoliberalism I am able to produce a systematised analysis and criticism of its own narratives of legitimation. To constitute this work, therefore, I will expand upon Lyotard's formula throughout the thesis with recourse to a number of other theorists, most notably Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari.

The transformation in the understanding of masculinity is a privileged site in which to carry out this task because it poses precisely the sort of crisis of legitimation, and process of delegitimation, that is at the heart of Lyotard's thinking on the postmodern. What is presented in the discourses on masculinity that have arisen since the 1970s is a conflict between competing and contested narratives of legitimation.⁴⁵ Such discourses draw on different means of validation to make arguments for the correct conduct of men. Each narrative can be thought of as being dominated by a

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), §240-64.

⁴⁵ The particularly vehement rejection of Bly's work is a case in point.

means of justification, a call towards universal ends, a *y* that must attain assent to be accepted. It must, therefore, call upon empirical evidence and theoretical models as evidence of its own truth. Yet, this empirical evidence remains equivocal. As Lyotard argues, the only givens within language are phrases and it is the contestation of their linking that takes place between narratives of legitimation.

In *The Differend* narratives of legitimation are referred to as genres.⁴⁶ Each genre can be considered to propose different and rival linkings in a combat over the truth of their ends. As Geoffrey Bennington neatly puts it:

The genres must be thought of as proposing rival linkings, or as linking to just one of the universes co-presented by an equivocal sentence [...] and these rival linkings must in some sense be in conflict. Further, insofar as genres reduce the contingency of the sentence to come, then they can be thought of as potentially suggesting a pseudo-necessity of their sentences as a way of 'winning out' over rival genres. This is the precise point at which the philosophy expounded in *Le Différend* encounters ethics, as a question of judgement and justice.⁴⁷

There is, therefore, a conflict that takes place over the linking of phrases that is played out across different domains of social and cultural production. This conflict is not merely theoretical however but also ethical and political. In *The Differend*, Lyotard sets up this contestation within the legal framework of litigation. The site that I will be investigating, however, which most literally represents such a conflict, and specifically the violent conflict between men, that not only deals with questions of morality and law but also has been dominant in the appraisal of contemporary masculinity, is American cinema.

⁴⁶ I have maintained the use of the term 'narratives of legitimation' because any 'genre of discourse' may have a number of narratives of legitimation and the narrative of legitimation cannot be confined to one discourse but plays itself out over many. For example, liberalism and neoliberalism would be two different narratives of legitimation within the political genre but also have specific affects upon the genre of economics, philosophy, morals etc.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard*, pp. 134-5.

Narrative, genre and cinema

Hollywood cinema provides a privileged modality to look at the dominant norms of masculinity. Not only has it constantly focused upon narratives of masculinity (in genres such as the Western, action movies, crime thrillers, romantic comedies etc.), but also, as a part of neoliberal globalisation, it provides a powerful and popular medium able to present particular narratives to a world-wide audience. Aiming for box-office revenues, Hollywood cinema presents and reproduces mainstream values creating a certain consistency to these texts. One of the main elements of this consistency is the focus upon narrative. The central position of narrative in the study of Hollywood film has been attested to by Stephen Neale:

The focus of the cinematic institution, of its industrial, commercial and ideological practices, of the discourses that it circulates, is narrative. What mainstream cinema produces as its commodity is narrative cinema, cinema as a narrative. Hence, at a general social level, the system of narration adopted by mainstream cinema serves as the very currency of cinema itself, defining the horizon of its aesthetic and ideological possibilities, providing the measure of cinematic 'literacy' and intelligibility. Hence, too, narrative is the primary instance and instrument of the regulatory processes that mark and define the ideological function of the cinematic institution as a whole.⁴⁸

Cinema, therefore, and in particular Hollywood cinema, produces narratives that order and organise particular linkages rather than others regulated by industrial and commercial concerns as well as market success.

Neale goes on to explain how narrative always begins with a disruption, an event whose frustration and resolution marks the diachronic extent of its telling. In genres such as the Western, gangster films and detective movies, traditionally focussing upon

⁴⁸ Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 19-20.

male characters, such an event is figured through violence; a crime is committed and order is (re)established equally through violence. What Neale considers important about the 'elements' of the story, however, is that they are not reducible to a signified of order or disorder, or are merely the product of narration. Rather, 'they are signifiers articulated in a narrative process which is simultaneously that of inscription of a number of discourses, and that of the modification, restructuration and transformation they each undergo as a result of their interaction.'⁴⁹ He goes on to state: 'equilibrium and disequilibrium, order and disorder are essentially a function of the relations of coherence between discourses involved, of the compatibilities and contradictions that exist between them.'⁵⁰ Neale is suggesting, similarly to Lyotard, that the elements of the narrative are not 'in themselves' signs of order and disorder but are presented as such through the conflict between discourses which try to appropriate them. Narrative in cinema is a site for the contestation of discourses which resolves to legitimate certain linkings over others. In these masculine dominated genres, however, this legitimation is garnered by an accepted form of violence. In Neale's terms, this combat is ideological.

These narratives are not just static, however, and the events that they respond to are the same historical and social occurrences that affect their audiences. What is interesting, moreover, is that narrative arises from a certain problematic disruption of normality which needs to be brought back in line within a dominant discourse. Something happens which cannot be accounted for; a site that produces anxiety, confusion, aggression and fear but also possibilities, an openness towards the future and change. The cinematic narrative, when it is at its most potent, poses a problem, something incommensurable, at the heart of the dominant discourse. The task of the

⁴⁹ Neale, *Genre*, p. 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

narrative is to resolve this aporia. It also, however, remains its witness. Narrative Hollywood cinema, then, not only shows us the norms of the dominant discourse and how these norms are validated as legitimate but, most crucially, they show this in relation to an event that disrupts such a norm. The event that becomes urgent in the 1990s, causing a response over a number of cinematic texts, is precisely the transformation in the norms of masculinity experienced as such an aporia.

Philippa Gates in her study of representations of masculinity in detective films, *Detecting Men*, lists a number of releases from 1999 and 2000 as constituting a genre of ‘male crisis’ movie: *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, *Magnolia*, *The Sixth Sense*, *American Psycho*, *The Beach*, *Memento* and *Unbreakable* all present men experiencing crises that directly question their normative masculine roles.⁵¹ There are also a number of British releases of the time, *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*, that explicitly deal with a renegotiation of masculine roles in relation to the deindustrialisation of the UK under Thatcher.⁵² Particular actors have been singled out in the literature on film masculinity as representing masculinity in crisis, especially Michael Douglas, but also Tom Cruise, Bill Murray and William H. Macy.⁵³ Furthermore, Tom Hanks has been seen to be paradigmatic of the ‘new man’ in the 90s.⁵⁴ It is not my intention here, however, to draw up a definitive list of ‘male crisis’ movies or to produce a study of actors who have played roles of men in crisis. My aim in this thesis is to draw from a number of texts that

⁵¹ *American Beauty*, dir. by Sam Mendes (Dreamworks Pictures, 1999); *Magnolia*, dir. by Paul Thomas Anderson (New Line Cinema, 1999); *The Sixth Sense*, dir. by M. Night Shyamalan (Buena Vista Pictures, 1999); *The Beach*, dir. by Danny Boyle (20th Century Fox, 2000); *Memento*, dir. by Christopher Nolan (Summit Entertainment, 2000); *Unbreakable*, dir. by M. Night Shyamalan (Buena Vista Pictures, 2000).

⁵² *Brassed Off*, dir. by Mark Herman (Channel Four Films UK/Miramax USA, 1996); *The Full Monty*, dir. by Peter Cattaneo (20th Century Fox UK/Fox Searchlight Pictures USA, 1997); *Billy Elliot*, dir. by Stephen Daldry (Universal Focus, 2000).

⁵³ See Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in American Film* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997) and Peberdy, *Masculinity and Film Performance*.

⁵⁴ See Fred Pfeil, ‘Getting Up There with Tom: The Politics of American “Nice”’, in *Masculinity Studies*, pp. 119-140.

present crises of masculinity in the 1990s common motifs or tropes that try to render the 'truth' of contemporary urban reality for white, heterosexual men. Each of the films that I have chosen present men who are at odds with their reality; their ideas about themselves, and the world that they live in, are incongruous with the reality that they inhabit. The aim of the narrative in each of these films, then, is to arrive at a single 'real' reality. However, in line with the legitimating processes that order such films, this is also framed as a return to what was always already true. This reality is the one in which the y of the contemporary narrative of legitimation becomes accepted as the norm and final determining instance that cannot be questioned. Moreover, its unquestionable nature is figured through violence.

The films that I will be looking at in the four chapters of my thesis, *Falling Down*, *Se7en*, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, can, therefore, all be considered 'male crisis' movies but their dominant 'combination' of discourses, to use Neale's term, can be described under the 'social problem' genre and generally termed realist. Gates has described the social problem film as a sub-genre of the crime film along with the gangster film, detective film and the thriller. These films display a 'shared setting of a contemporary urban milieu and the similar address of the conflict between social order and anarchy, between individual morality and the common good'.⁵⁵ Whereas she argues the detective movie aligns the audience's point of view with the detective and the gangster movie with the criminal the social problem movie displays an ambiguity and contestation around definitions of the law. These movies follow characters that act after a breakdown of the law as a means to re-establish a new relationship to it and to reassert order. What is distinctive about 'male crisis' films is that the distinction

⁵⁵ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: SUNY, 2006), p. 8-9.

between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' remains ambivalent. Often, as with the four films that I will be discussing, identification in the beginning of the film is transformed by the end of the narrative. These films, therefore, show a challenge to accepted definitions of good and bad, just and unjust, and work to establish a new order free from such ambiguity. What is pertinent, however, is that in all the films that I have chosen there is ambivalence towards this new reality, a doubt to its justice or morality. The 'problem' of masculinity feels unresolved whilst still being determined by this new situation. The contestation between models or genres of masculinity that is displayed in these films makes any simple designation of good and bad to these models seem inadequate. Whilst being concerned with realism, they are witness to, in Lyotard's terms, a differend, an uncrossable heterogeneity of discourses in which any choice between them by reference to a single idiom is an injustice to one or the other.⁵⁶ Yet, finally, this choice is made in each of these films and the narrative of neoliberal legitimation is the only one that remains.

The ambivalence of these films has not affected their popularity, each being a huge commercial success. It has, however, affected the critical response to them. There has been uncertainty around any clear moral or political statement made by these films which has been read as, at times, incoherence, perversion or sham on the part of their authors. This particular form of moral judgement repeats the un-nuanced accounts of gender that I have critiqued above, in that it does not ask the question of what determines the good from the bad, the right from the wrong and the righteous from the criminal or consider that these determinations remain multiple even in one film. My aim

⁵⁶ Lyotard states: 'A case of differend between two parties takes place when the "regulation" of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.' Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 9.

by utilising a poststructuralist theory of legitimation is to undertake a reading of masculinity that is not bound to notions of an essentially good or bad male conduct but, rather, to discover the position from which such judgements can be made and justified. It is through these means I will show how a certain form of masculinity is normalised through narratives of legitimation in Hollywood 'male crisis' films of the 1990s.

Masculinity in crisis has been represented from the tragic (*Falling Down*, *Se7en*) to the darkly comic (*American Psycho*, *Fight Club*), but each of these narratives conclude with a reassertion of 'reality'. This 'reality' acts as the legitimate measure of what is allowed to appear and what is not, what is (retroactively) considered to be criminal, hallucination or madness and what is 'normal'. Reality is contested in these films but it is the narrative that wins out that comes to determine what is 'real' and what is not. The reality shown in the films that I have chosen here is not presented as just, good or ideal however, but as an indifferent, undetermined and cynical hell without moral guide. Culturally and historically constructed, 'reality' narrates and normalises prescriptive statements covering over the aporia of validation so that the *y* of authorisation remains hidden. My thesis aims to make visible the logic of this contemporary *y* that validates the conception of 'reality' presented in male crisis cinema from the 1990s in which white, heterosexual masculinity re-finds its place.

Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 looks at Joel Schumacher's 1993 *Falling Down* as a particularly vivid example of the cultural engagement with the question of the role, and social position, of white, heterosexual masculinity in 90s Hollywood cinema. As with the other films that I am

addressing, the film was a popular success. As well as box office returns, its appeal was marked by some U.S. audiences reportedly clapping and cheering as Michael Douglas's character, D-Fens, rampaged through the golf courses and ghettos of Los Angeles. The film also aroused protests, however, over the depiction of minorities and defence workers with some theatres being picketed. This polarisation of opinion was also apparent in the critical literature. Some critics suggested that the film was merely a tempered vigilante movie, D-Fens indulging in cathartic violence against those 'others' that had encroached upon the dominance of white heterosexual masculinity. Others defended D-Fens as a victim of a world that no longer needed him. What was apparent was that D-Fens's position as both hero and victim led to ambiguity and confusion around the moral message put forward by this representation of white heterosexual masculinity in crisis.

The first section of the chapter draws from a selection of the reviews and critical literature that have responded to *Falling Down* to show how the question of white, heterosexual masculinity has been theoretically framed. I map out the dominant features of four of these analyses, highlighting the concerns of identity politics, American imperialism, patriarchy and cynical realism, and show how these considerations point towards the theoretical problematic I argue lies at the heart of the contemporary study of masculinity, namely the delegitimation of one genre of masculinity and the consequent legitimation of a new one. The second and third parts of this chapter go on to answer the two questions that are raised by this approach, namely, what are the narratives of legitimation that are displayed in the film, and how is one narrative justified as the only 'correct' or 'good' narrative of legitimation, delegitimizing all others?

Having highlighted the contestation over and ambivalent acceptance of the reality presented in *Falling Down*, chapter 2 turns to another popular film of male crisis, David Fincher's 1995 *Se7en*. *Se7en* stands out from other serial killer movies of the time for the moral ambiguity surrounding the motive behind the serial killer, John Doe's, crimes. The undecidability around questions of justice, what values it should define, and men's special place as executioners of such values, are key themes that connect these readings of 90s representations of masculinity. Once again, the movie presents the contestation of three narratives of legitimation and uses the motif of the 'sick' city present in *Falling Down* and takes it to a particular extreme. Turning to Deleuze's discussion of difference from his book *Difference and Repetition*, I give an account of Mills, Doe and Somerset's narrative of legitimation that outlines a logic to each of their conduct. The victory of Somerset's narrative, I argue, affirms a nihilistic relation to difference, where the world is seen as a place of chaos that should not be determined. The film suggests that any belief that it should be is naïve, mad or criminal.

In chapter 3 I turn to Brett Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* and its film adaptation as paradigmatic of the narrative of legitimation embodied in both Prendergast and Somerset. The isolated nihilistic individualism confronting a city figured as hell is formally enacted through Ellis's writing. The genre of both the novel and the film has been contested and has had decisive effects upon how they have been received by critics and audiences. The novel, on the one hand, goes beyond generic boundaries and creates its own logic disrupting literary norms. In his formal inventiveness, it is as though Ellis has taken capitalism as a genre which *creates* the subject Patrick Bateman. On the other hand, the film presents itself as a satire negatively commenting on capitalism and masculinity *through* the character of Patrick Bateman.

This, I argue, is why the novel, *American Psycho*, is integral to a thesis otherwise focused on film. Ellis directly plays with the means of joining phrases which in the text renders perceptible the psychotic, sadistic but also banal structures of capitalism. It, therefore, neatly expresses Lyotard's notion of a narrative of legitimation, or genre, as the joining of phrases in accordance to a particular logic and for specific ends. What makes it exceptional, however, is how it takes this logic to its limits, expressing the horrifying consequences of the domination of a single genre. The film, on the other hand, while still engendering a vision of the capitalist subject, takes this subject as the object of the movie. Its satire of capitalism is undertaken, therefore, through Patrick Bateman from an external position of judgement and does not reproduce the formal conjunction of phrases that comes from following capitalism's normative demands to the letter.

My analysis, therefore, maps out the tropes of language used by Ellis and draws parallels between these formal techniques and Lacan's discussions of psychosis in the case of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber and Deleuze's discussion of sadism in his early essay *Coldness and Cruelty*. Both of these readings designate a particular structure of subjectivity that closely matches Lyotard's formula for the normative statement. What is significant in *American Psycho*, however, is that the *y* of legitimation that organises the novel's narrative becomes capitalism itself. Through a close study of Foucault's discussion of neoliberal governmentality from his 1978-9 lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, I set out the logic that orders this reality for the neoliberal subject and the image of the world legitimated by such an order. Finally, I draw from Deleuze and Guattari's discussions of capitalism in their *Anti-Oedipus* to show how this system manifests itself and is invested even by those who lose out from such an organisation.

The final chapter of the thesis asks the question of how the neoliberal narrative of legitimisation can be contested. More than any other Hollywood film of this period David Fincher's 1999 *Fight Club* represents a cinematic confrontation with the genre of neoliberal capitalism. The film was, once again, a massive success that polarised critics. *Fight Club* is particularly relevant to my analysis as it appears to take up the challenge of representing psychic interiority that is left wanting in the film of *American Psycho*. The film's device of splitting the main protagonist into two separate characters dramatises the conflicted and contested nature of the dominant narrative of legitimisation within a single subject. This chapter, therefore, once again, examines the formal and thematic tropes developed by the film to undertake an analysis of how narratives of legitimisation are constructed and challenged.

This emphasis draws particular attention to the representations of and responses to violence in the film. To make the contrast of my approach clear I focus, in the first section, on two particular conceptualisations of violence drawn from the film in the work of Henry A. Giroux and Slavoj Žižek. I suggest, in contrast to these two arguments, that masculinity is central to the film but not in the way that it has been presented in its critical reception, as a violent protest against capitalism or a pathological display of male bonding. *Fight Club* is, rather, a coming-of-age tale and a reworking of the oedipal drama which, in its conclusion, assures and promotes a heterosexual and patriarchal masculinity as a mode of normalised power that is against male bonding and violence and which disavows the encounter and its specific form of violence. The confrontation with violence in the film is resolved into a rite of passage into an intersubjective world which is ultimately reordered to include the love object, Marla.

The event that challenges the dominant narrative of legitimation, in the form of Tyler's embodiment of Jack's desire, is framed, once again, as pathological and criminal. It does, however, display a counter narrative to capitalism through the destruction of images. By destroying images Tyler proposes a break from, and a challenge of, all narratives. I suggest, most contentiously, that the appraisals of the fight clubs and especially Project Mayhem negatively evaluate this form of violence. The film presents two forms of violence: one that destroys images and one that protects them. Finally, the ultimate violence brought down on Tyler through Jack's self-castration decides the contest and the neoliberal narrative of legitimation is affirmed. However, the flash frame of pornography that interrupts the clichéd final scene of the film suggests that Tyler, as the embodiment of Jack's desire, is not dead but ready to interrupt Jack's new narrative of heteronormativity.

In the conclusion to this chapter and to the thesis as a whole I finalise my reading of Lyotard's normative statement, designating the individual and its disavowed relation to the market as the final legitimating instance of the neoliberal narrative of legitimation.

This comes at the cost of making all other forms of conduct that do not affirm this individual as impossible, pathological or criminal. Yet, through the contestation of narratives witnessed in these films there is left open the possibility to attest to alternative narratives, a differend, incommensurable with the prevailing neoliberal narrative of legitimation. This encounter ungrounds the legitimacy of a single narrative and demands bearing witness to other possible universes. The final demand remains: do we relegate the encounter to fantasy or can we believe in this world, this encounter, that affects us and takes us beyond the genre of masculinity designated by neoliberalism?¹

Falling Down

Directed by Joel Schumacher and starring Michael Douglas, *Falling Down* has been taken up by critics as a particularly vivid cultural engagement with the question of the role, and social position, of white, heterosexual masculinity at the end of the twentieth-century. On its release in 1993 it topped the American box office for three weeks and was reportedly greeted with shouts and applause from some cinema audiences.⁵⁷ A sign of the film touching a nerve with the cinema going public was not only its popularity: some U.S. cinemas were picketed by minority groups angry at their depiction in the film and complaints were made by the defence workers' union protesting the portrayal of one of their rank. The movie's popular appeal was also not matched by critical praise, receiving negative comment from both conservative and liberal sources.⁵⁸ This popular appeal and public condemnation of the film led some commentators to claim that *Falling Down* was simply a vigilante movie, the audience colluding with the white male protagonist and indulging in exploitative and cathartic on-screen violence against those 'others' that had questioned his dominance. This reading was made problematic for critics, however, by the film's supposed submission to political correctness: presenting positive images of ethnic, racial and sexual difference. This 'lapse' was put down to either a failure of nerve in the film to show its 'true colours', or, the director's confusion over the film's ideological position.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See Mark Salisbury, 'He's "an ordinary man at war with the everyday world" ...', *Empire*, (July 1993), 76-8, and Carol Clover, 'White Noise', *Sight and Sound*, 5 (1993), 6-9.

⁵⁸ Jude Davies, "'I'm the Bad Guy?": *Falling Down* and White Masculinity in 1990s Hollywood', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 4 (1995), 145-152 (p. 146).

⁵⁹ 'Joel Schumacher's slick, deeply confused exploitation movie *Falling Down* is a thriller designed to fan the flames of urban paranoia.' David Ansen, 'Revenge of a Supernerd', *Newsweek*, 1 March 1993, p. 80. 'In many respects *Falling Down* [...] makes obvious efforts to make its universalizing narrative conform to some demands for political correctness.' Davies, "'I'm the Bad Guy?'"', p. 148.

In this chapter I will argue that the film does not sit easily under these readings and propose a new mode of analysis that provides a means of accounting for the ambivalent reception and representation of white, heterosexual masculinity in cinema of the 1990s. What has made *Falling Down* such a rich source of debate has been its resistance to easy categorisation, especially under rubrics of either masculine 'backlash' politics, or the 'Angry White Male' genre.⁶⁰ This resistance and ambivalent presentation of white, heterosexual masculinity highlight a failure in theoretical models to account for and explain masculinity's representation in *Falling Down*, but also in the other films of male crisis of the 1990s that I will be dealing with in subsequent chapters (*Se7en*, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*). Though 'backlash' politics and political correctness, no doubt, play a part in considerations of the film, especially in regard to the contemporaneous political and theoretical concerns, a rigorous theoretical reading of the film cannot be reduced to such notions. I will argue, as does Richard Dyer, that *Falling Down* presents, and multiplies, a striking ambivalence about the representation of white masculinity at the end of the twentieth-century.⁶¹ To further this contention, however, I want to explain this ambivalence through the terms of social transformation. This, I will suggest throughout the thesis, is not as Brenton J. Malin has suggested of 90s masculinity that it is 'contradictory', upholding both macho and sensitive masculine ideals in an uneasy balance, but, rather, conforms to a particular logic at play in the construction of masculinity in late capitalism.⁶²

⁶⁰ The 'Angry White Male' genre is most famously portrayed in Charles Bronson's *Death Wish* series which had five outings from 1974 to 1994. 'Backlash' is a term used by Susan Faludi to describe a growing number of cultural productions in the West which react against feminist discourse and politics. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, (New York: Crown, 1991).

⁶¹ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 220.

⁶² Brenton J. Malin, *American Masculinity under Clinton*, p. 192. Throughout his book, Malin traces convincingly the contradictions that are displayed in representations of masculinity in American popular culture of the 90s. He argues that: 'Ultimately, even as they seem to defile previously established conceptions of masculinity – the president, the action hero, the leading man – these new deployments of masculinity worked to reproduce conventionalized masculine values and anxieties, but in the subtly

The first section of this chapter will look at a selection of the reviews and critical literature that have responded to *Falling Down* to show how the question of white, heterosexual masculinity has been theoretically framed. The critical literature on the film proceeds from a number of different premises and theoretical positions that situate and inform my own reading. I will draw out the dominant features of a number of these analyses, highlighting the concerns of identity politics, American imperialism, patriarchy and cynical realism, and show how these considerations point us towards the theoretical problematic I believe lies at the heart of the contemporary study of masculinity, namely the delegitimation of one mode of masculinity and the consequent legitimation of a new one. In the second and third parts of this chapter I will go on to answer the two questions that are raised by this approach, namely, what are the narratives of legitimation that are displayed in the film, and how is one narrative justified as the only 'correct' or 'good' narrative of legitimation, delegitimizing all others?

1.

***Falling Down* as white male identity politics**

Falling Down tells the story of an ex-defence worker, Bill Foster (Michael Douglas), more commonly referred to by his licence plate D-Fens, who after being stuck in a traffic jam, decides to leave his car and 'go home'. 'Home', however, is his ex-wife's house who has a

different form of the new, sensitive male' (p. 59). Pointing out contradictions, however, has limited conceptual power to explain why transformation had taken place in the 1990s or why these specific contradictions appear at this time.

court order against him visiting. On his journey through the ghettos and golf courses of Los Angeles the violence of his interactions with those he meets on the way becomes more and more excessive. When news of these events reaches the police department, it appears that only soon-to-be-retired cop, Prendergast (Robert Duvall), is able to recognise that the criminal is a white middle-class male. He tracks D-Fens to the end of the pier on Venice Beach where ex-wife Beth (Barbara Hershey) and daughter Adele (Joey Hope Singer) are cornered. Not wanting to go to jail, and so that Adele can receive insurance payments from his death, D-Fens fanes a gunfight with Prendergast and is shot, falling from the pier into the Pacific Ocean.

Carol Clover's appraisal of *Falling Down* in *Sight and Sound* on its release in the U.K. gives the most thoroughly contextualised review of the film in the critical literature. Situating it in relation to contemporary arguments around the construction of white, heterosexual, male identity in the United States, she positions *Falling Down* as concomitant with the men's movement, white male populist writers and broadcasters such as Joe Bob Briggs and publications such as *Heterodoxy*.⁶³ Clover places the film in a current of political and social sensitivity towards the position and authority of white masculinity that were part of the backdrop to the film's release. She suggests that the fracturing of the polity into identity based groups, dominated by discourses of multiculturalism and political correctness, saw not only minority groups claiming oppression, but the beginnings of white men seeing themselves as a specific group, and not as the default universal category against which others are judged.

⁶³ Joe Bob Briggs is an American film critic, writer and comedy performer whose persona is one of an unapologetic redneck and male chauvinist. Most famous for his love and reviews of drive-in b-movies, Joe Bob Briggs has also written *Iron Joe Bob* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1992) lampooning Robert Bly's famous *Iron John* (1990). *Heterodoxy* was a conservative newsmagazine published between 1992 and 2001 in a tabloid format by the David Horowitz Freedom Center, edited by David Horowitz and Peter Collier. Its focus was on satirizing what it saw as political correctness on college and university campuses across the United States.

Rather than describing *Falling Down* as merely a vigilante movie hiding under a veneer of sophistication, or evidence of a Reagan-Bush backlash, Clover considers the film as evidence of a newly acquired consciousness of white masculinity as an identity of its own. As I will expand upon later in the chapter, this development is articulated, for Clover, through the relationship between the neo-Nazi Nick (Frederic Forrest), D-Fens and Prendergast as the unobserved and fundamental structural element that organises and supports the effect that the film has on its audiences, and particularly white men. These characters, Clover suggests, are part of a continuum. Nick, the neo-Nazi, positions D-Fens as 'not sick' but 'your average short-tempered neighbour who just happened to break one day'; D-Fens is the seer, on a journey through contemporary Los Angeles; and Prendergast is the pragmatic realist.⁶⁴ D-Fens is, therefore, according to Clover, positioned in the film as not delusional or psychotic but as seeing clearly the state of society around him. Prendergast, as the double of D-Fens, is similarly affected by ethnic and female encroachment into his world but through his moderation and humour he is the one who survives. The film consequently acts as a diagnostic with 'demographic precision' of the state of white male consciousness in the early 1990s. This consciousness Clover defines as, being the guy that 'everyone is mad at and wants compensation from [...] the guy who theoretically owns the world but in practice, in this account, not only has no turf of his own but has been closed out of the turf of others'.⁶⁵

Clover is well aware of the problem with this representation, in that it discounts and covers over the disparity between the situation of the average white male and the socially and politically peripheral position of women and ethnic minorities. What interests her, nonetheless, is that this representation has been made in the first place—

⁶⁴ Carol Clover, 'White Noise', *Sight and Sound*, 5 (1993), 6-9 (p. 8).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 8-9.

that the position of white masculinity has been questioned as ‘the great unmarked or default category of western culture’.⁶⁶ This claiming of a specific identity is consolidated in her reading by taking up the discourse of victimhood. The average white male’s claim to this status is through what she describes as his fiscal and spiritual bankruptcy. D-Fens is reduced from a tax-paying member of society, protecting the nation by building bombs, to nothing but an insurance policy for a family that no longer wants him. In this analysis, *Falling Down* marks the beginnings of a consciousness for white masculinity but also the ‘resigning from public responsibility’ of the average white male.⁶⁷

Clover’s reading is compelling. Her emphasis is upon the position of D-Fens as both hero, a misunderstood champion of traditional values embodied in white masculinity, and victim of a transformed society, whose journey shows the true state of society in late-twentieth-century Los Angeles. Interestingly, she points towards the uptake of a victimised identity and the paradoxical position of the hero/victim in the construction of white masculinity in the character of D-Fens. The paradox of the hero/victim and his relationship to the truth of society is an observation that I will theoretically develop through the work of René Girard at the end of this chapter. This newly acquired visibility of D-Fens as victim, however, dominates Clover’s text and a discussion of the third position in Clover’s continuum of white masculinity, Prendergast, is not elaborated upon. It is precisely the ‘invisibility’ of Prendergast that needs further articulation to understand how *Falling Down* does not simply slip into the glorification of the ‘Angry White Male’ as the heroic victim of contemporary society, and suggests, rather, a transformation in the legitimate model of action for white, heterosexual masculinity in the character of Prendergast.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

***Falling Down* as American imperialism**

This transposition to Prendergast as the legitimate model of white masculinity is suggested by Liam Kennedy in his appraisal of *Falling Down*, 'Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States'.⁶⁸ For Kennedy, whiteness and masculinity embody a form of imperialist power. The film, though expressing a crisis of imperialist power, re-centres white masculinity as the preeminent moral position from which to judge society. Kennedy argues that America, marked by a sense of crisis in economics, politics and social cohesion in the early 1990s, saw a growing call on the previously unmarked category of whiteness, and in particular white masculinity, as a subject-position that is both fragile and under siege. Evidence for the appearance of this identity, especially in middle-class white males, can be found, for Kennedy, in Republican opposition to affirmative action, which was presented as a form of discrimination against whites, economic decline in real wages, job insecurity affecting men's normative role as breadwinner, and the 'culture wars' interpreted as an attack on white, male, heterosexual authority within academia.

Kennedy does not consider this a waning of the dominant position of white masculinity however, and considers talk of a terminal 'crisis of masculinity' as presumptuous. Much as Sally Robinson has described the crisis of masculinity discourse in her *Marked Men* he states: 'I believe this crisis has in many ways been recognised and successfully managed by white males; the very rhetoric of crisis is one that has been franchised and mobilised by those incarnating it.'⁶⁹ As he argues here the discourse of crisis becomes a way of claiming victimhood and displacing the oppressions

⁶⁸ Liam Kennedy, 'Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States', *Journal of American Studies*, 30 (1996), 87-100.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 90. Sally Robinson, *Marked Men*, especially pp. 20-1.

experienced by those considered as 'other' to the American Imperial system. This is not, then, merely a (neo)conservative backlash but a sophisticated process at work across many levels of cultural production. *Falling Down* represents an example of this category of cultural production that has particularly courted and caused controversy over its representations of both white males and ethnic minorities, portraying a white male as a victim of the system and of society at large.

Kennedy's reading of *Falling Down* also focuses upon its representation of Los Angeles, claiming that D-Fens sees 'what is going wrong' in the society around him. Kennedy states: 'it is this image of contemporary America as a fractured, disputatious polity which is predominantly reinforced in the film narrative as the *sine qua non* of D-Fens' falling down.'⁷⁰ While Kennedy draws attention to D-Fens's journey through the territories of Los Angeles he believes that the film avoids specific critique of the hierarchy of urban territory, painting it all with the same brush of democratic disintegration and moral equivalence. Kennedy argues that the filmmakers 'acknowledge race and class antagonisms while privileging the perspectives of a (de)centred white male subjectivity'.⁷¹ This, he suggests, is particularly acute in the scene of the black protester whose symbolic position is taken up by D-Fens in his use of the phrase 'not economically viable' in the last scenes of the film.

Following his postcolonial critique, Kennedy conceives of D-Fens's character as embodying western and vigilante narratives of imperial conquest, where the white male goes out into an alien nation and conquers it through violence.⁷² This is reinforced when an allegorical gunfight between the sheriff and the bad guy is set up between

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 93.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 95.

⁷² For an in depth analysis of American frontier myths see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979).

Prendergast and D-Fens. D-Fens, however, experiences no renewal through this violence and finds that he has literally run out of space at the end of the pier facing 'the law'. This scene highlights the importance of the figure of Prendergast in Kennedy's reading:

D-Fens' death is both a self-sacrifice and a mode of symbolic transference which ensures the reproduction of white masculine authority in a new register. *Falling Down* may parody the imperial individualism of white American manhood but it does not negate it, rather it retells the story of the (re)making of this manhood as a morality tale for multiracial, late imperial America.⁷³

This morality tale is specifically pitched at white males, consequently, relegating women and ethnic minorities to a mass of 'others' threatening the position and dominance of white masculinity. It is from this position that the film can moralise about 'the things going wrong' with American society. Therefore, Kennedy argues, the politics of tolerance, while espousing 'common ideals', still holds on to an image of American society joined together by national imperial symbols, privileging the centrality and invisibility of whiteness and masculinity, and relegating those 'others' whose lives are structured by dominance, once again, to the margins.

Kennedy's reading, unlike Clover's, addresses the structural position of Prendergast in relation to D-Fens. Unfortunately, whilst alluding to 'transference' between D-Fens and Prendergast, Kennedy does not make clear what the transference is, or whether it is a transformation in this masculine role. Though it is possible to agree with his reading of the United States as being historically defined by a disavowed imperialism, it is unclear how he sees this imperialism being affected or changed by the crisis discourses noted. This reading gives the impression that the imperial organisation of power is monolithic and unchanging, and that the appearance of a white male consciousness is merely what makes this form of power visible. Though D-Fens is,

⁷³ Kennedy, 'Alien Nation', p. 99

no doubt, the main protagonist of the film, his position as victim and hero is ultimately sacrificed for the alternative model of masculinity embodied by Prendergast. What needs to be explained, then, is this difference between D-Fens and Prendergast and its subsequent effect upon our understanding of the performance of contemporary masculinity. This will, consequently, point towards the larger transformations in social organisation to which Kennedy eludes.

In what follows, I will expand upon how *Falling Down* articulates these models of masculinity which, as Clover has pointed out, also includes Nick, the neo-Nazi. This reading will have consequences to how we view the legitimate practice for white masculinity and what mode of power this expresses in 'late imperial America'. Therefore, there may be a re-articulation of white male power but there is also a transformation of the objects and aims of that power. Can this power be explained in terms of patriarchy then, rather than imperialism?

***Falling Down* and patriarchy**

Jude Davies, in his extended analyses of *Falling Down*, also sees in the film an engagement with contemporary social and historical problems and highlights the fusing of two parallel crises—one of representations of white masculinity, and the other of post-cold war U.S. economics and history.⁷⁴ What animates his engagements, however, are comments made by the director of *Falling Down*, Joel Schumacher, and actor, Michael Douglas, in an interview given to *Empire* magazine on the film's release in the U.K. In the interview Schumacher states: 'Movies reflect society, and there have been

⁷⁴ Jude Davies has engaged with *Falling Down* on three separate occasions in "'I'm the Bad Guy?"; 'Gender, Ethnicity and Cultural Crisis in *Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day*', *Screen*, 36 (1995), 214-232; and Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in American Film* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997). These engagements have been sensitive to contemporary debates in critical film theory and popular cultural trends, but his evolving view also appears to be in response to internal difficulties inherent to his elaboration of the film.

several movies in the US about anger in the street but they had all been by African-Americans. Well, they're not the only angry people in the United States.⁷⁵ Davies suggests that Schumacher is implying that a definitive treatment of 'anger' needs to come from a culturally central and pre-eminent position of white masculinity. Davies rhetorically sets up the movie as a production of cynical patriarchal masculinity which is subsequently tempered by a need to include other positions because of the cultural demand for political correctness.

The analysis that Davies produces, however, is continually undercut by the ill-defined relationship between masculinity as a mode of domination, and political correctness as a culturally imposed sanction on white male power. This is witnessed in "'I'm the Bad Guy?": *Falling Down* and white masculinity in 1990s Hollywood'. Here Davies states that 'I aim to show that what lies behind these senses of confusion and danger [for critics of the film] is the film's employment of some elements of "political correctness" and multiculturalism in order to formalize and to reinforce patriarchal gender and ethnic hierarchies'.⁷⁶ Davies sets up the movie as a tempered backlash movie but the reason that he gives for the critics' ire is that *Falling Down*, unlike other films of the time such as *Groundhog Day*, and in contradiction to his stated aim, *fails* to formalise and reinforce gender and ethnic hierarchies, part of what he considers to mark the films 'inconsistent politics' and even 'incoherence'.⁷⁷

Throughout his first two appraisals of the film, Davies makes use of a concept of 'political correctness', very much apparent in popular discourse of the time, suggesting

⁷⁵ Joel Schumacher, quoted in Mark Salisbury, 'He's "an 'ordinary man at war with the everyday world" ...', p. 77.

⁷⁶ Davies, "'I'm the Bad Guy?'" , p. 146.

⁷⁷ *Groundhog Day*, dir. by Harold Ramis (Columbia Pictures, 1993). Jude Davies, "'I'm the Bad Guy?'" , p. 146 and Davies and Smith, *Gender*, p. 35.

that Joel Schumacher cynically employs elements in the film to appease its audiences.⁷⁸ His conception relies upon making patriarchal white masculinity a continuum from a 'bad' masculinity, which in *Falling Down* is embodied by the neo-Nazi, Nick, to a 'good' masculinity which is basically a cynical appeal to political correctness. In this sense, political correctness effectively means presenting positive relations between white males and women or ethnic minorities, and is embodied in the film at times in D-Fens and at others in Prendergast. This is shown most vividly in Davies' reading of the confrontation between D-Fens and Nick. He states:

[D-Fens] construes America as essentially multicultural, as composed of people with diverse ethnic and gendered identities and sexual orientations. The speech [at the back of the surplus store] distances D-Fens from patriarchal exclusivity and 'masculine' closedness. For a moment, the film presents in D-Fens a paradigmatic synthesis of political correctness and 'true' masculinity.⁷⁹

But as soon as the film validates D-Fens's credentials as 'good guy' he telephones his ex-wife, threatening her, shattering his politically correct status. This oversimplified conception of 'good' and 'bad' masculinity ends up making Davies' reading of the finale of the film particularly confused. Both D-Fens and Prendergast's actions are listed for their 'good' and 'bad' traits, and being unable to come up with a measure that differentiates one from the other, Davies calls upon another mode of differentiation to mark the difference between the two. This comes in the form of identifying D-Fens with the black protester marking the difference between D-Fens and Prendergast at the level of economics. He argues: 'In the final scene D-Fens and Prendergast are differentiated

⁷⁸ Jude Davies, "I'm the Bad Guy?", p. 149. Political correctness is also a dominant theme in the *Empire* interview with Joel Schumacher and Michael Douglas on *Falling Down's* release in the U.K. See Salisbury, 'He's "an 'ordinary man at war with the everyday world" ...'. For a detailed account of the debate around political correctness in the 90s see John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and two collections, *After Political Correctness: The Humanities and Society in the 1990s*, ed. by Christopher Newfield and Ronald Strickland (Oxford: Westview Press, 1995) and *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities*, ed. by Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson (London: Routledge, 1995). For a discussion of political correctness in relation to a crisis of masculinity see Sally Robinson, *Marked Men*.

⁷⁹ Jude Davies, "I'm the Bad Guy?", p. 149.

most strongly because one has a job and the other one does not. D-Fens, unable to provide even maintenance payments for his child, has more in common with the black protester than he has with Prendergast.⁸⁰ This commonality between D-Fens and the black protester seems crucial, but comes as some surprise because this connection is barely mentioned throughout the article. The complex relationship between D-Fens and the black protester is elaborated further in Davies and Smith's later appraisal of the film, suggesting that '*Falling Down* positions its protagonists explicitly with relation to politicised discourses of identity', yet the suggestion that economics is more of a determinant than race or gender is still left at the level of suggestion, rather than argumentation.⁸¹ Added to this, reference to the inconclusive outcome of the *Crossfire* television debate about *Falling Down*, where Barry Slotnick and Michael Kimmel unsuccessfully defended the position of D-Fens, confirms for Davies and Smith that the film is equally open to right or left-wing appropriation.⁸² Therefore undecidability is what defines the film for Davies.

Davies's reading shows, as with Kennedy's, the use of an underlying schema of power—for Kennedy, imperialism, for Davies, patriarchy—that fails to elaborate any real motivational or organisational coherence to the characters of D-Fens and Prendergast. Both of these positions fall into what Butler would call a juridical model of power, where power is held by one party in a monolithic and dominating fashion that victimises its 'others'. The problem with this model of analysis is that it does not specify any motivational or organisational practices other than the supposed self-apparent maintenance of its own power. Despite identifying some purported positive and

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 151.

⁸¹ Davies and Smith, *Gender*, p. 36.

⁸² *Crossfire* was a current events television debate program that aired from 1982 to 2005 on CNN. Its format was designed to present and challenge the opinions of a politically liberal pundit and a conservative pundit.

negative traits of masculinity, Davies fails to uncover any reasons for the organisation of these modes of behaviour, and also negates the temporal transformation of identification through the film, which organises and imposes viewing positions on the audience, finally legitimating one single position.

What this analysis does highlight is the necessity to address how valuations of 'good' and 'bad' masculinity are measured in the first place. Davies's inability to evaluate can be read as a symptom of the ambivalent nature of the choice between different models of good and bad masculinity, and the essential conflict over these valuations. In other words, if 'good' and 'bad' masculinity is undecidable between D-Fens and Prendergast what *makes* the decision? To render these concerns visible a more thorough examination of the characterisation and an explanation of the organisation of viewing positions and audience identification throughout the movie is needed to comprehend why *Falling Down* has had such influence on its audiences and to deduce the cultural work that it produces. This has been provided, in part, by Paul Gormley's engagement with the film in his book *The New-Brutality Film*.

***Falling Down* and cynical realism**

Gormley characterises *Falling Down* with *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Strange Days* and *Se7en* as embodying a new aesthetic that appeared in 90s cinema which he calls the 'new-brutality' film. This aesthetic 'attempt[s] to renegotiate and reanimate the immediacy and affective qualities of the cinematic experience within commercial Hollywood'.⁸³ Gormley's concern is with how the cinematic image can affect viewers with a bodily immediacy that subordinates a reflective or critical position of judgement.

⁸³ *Reservoir Dogs*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Miramax, 1992). *Pulp Fiction*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Miramax, 1994). *Strange Days*, dir. by Kathryn Bigelow (20th Century Fox, 1995). *Se7en*, dir. by David Fincher (New Line Cinema, 1995). Paul Gormley, *The New-Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect, 2005), p. 8.

To achieve this end, Gormley argues, there has been recourse to blackness and the use of African-American images and popular culture as a site of the 'real' or 'new' in the white American cultural imagination.

Falling Down is important for Gormley as a representative of the affective power of African-American imagery in the white American cultural imagination in the early 1990s. Gormley's thesis is that *Falling Down* tries to mimic the rage represented in films such as *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society* in the character of D-Fens, a white man, who is similarly failed by the American Dream.⁸⁴ This mimesis is evident in the genre of the film which Gormley describes as a 'social-problem' movie.⁸⁵ *Falling Down*, unlike postmodern blockbuster movies, such as *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon*, which are overt pastiches of the action movie genre, presents itself as concerned with the reality of Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century.⁸⁶ The film achieves this, Gormley suggests, by controlling audience's viewing positions by means of identification and focalisation:⁸⁷

Falling Down attempts to control its viewer's responses, and more particularly the white cultural imagination, by provoking a body-first affective response, and at the same time, directing the thoughts and reactions that such a response evokes. The film wants to situate its viewers within a framework of knowledge where they imagine that they have seen the truth of 1990s' white American identity – and a viewing position from which there is very little scope for manoeuvre outside of the movie's own logic and imagined knowledge.⁸⁸

Following Deleuze, Gormley suggests that post-Second-World-War classical realist cinema suffered a crisis, not in financial terms but in aesthetics and belief. The

⁸⁴ *Boyz N the Hood*, dir. by John Singleton (Columbia Pictures, 1991); *Menace II Society*, dir. by Allen Hughes & Albert Hughes (New Line Cinema, 1993).

⁸⁵ Gormley, *New-Brutality*, p. 44.

⁸⁶ *Die Hard*, dir. by John McTiernan (20th Century Fox, 1988); *Lethal Weapon*, dir. by Richard Donner (Warner Bros. 1987).

⁸⁷ 'Focalisation' is a term coined by the literary critic Gérard Genette and aims to describe how the narrative of a text is presented from a particular point of view. See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

⁸⁸ Gormley, *New-Brutality*, p. 44.

belief that an individual could achieve ends and have an effect upon a global situation could no longer be supported. This crisis threw up a new kind of image which had five characteristics: 'the dispersive situation, the deliberately weak links, the voyage form, the consciousness of clichés, the condemnation of plot.'⁸⁹ Accordingly, Gormley suggests *Falling Down* responds to this crisis by initially trying to reanimate the connection between the protagonist and the protagonist's actions and situation in the figure of D-Fens who tries to take control of his situation, yet eventually discredits this position and its referents as nostalgic, psychotic and redundant.⁹⁰

To create these affects Gormley argues that the film constructs three viewing positions through which it organises audience identifications. The first of these is that of 'the white negro'.⁹¹ Gormley draws associations between D-Fens and black characters in the film, specifically the black protester, the child in the Whammyburger, and the youth who helps him with the rocket launcher, which situate D-Fens in the position of cultural alterity normally denied the white male. This association draws its affect, Gormley argues, from 'the way that blackness provokes both an immediate, affective response, and operates as a site of authenticity and the real in the white cultural imagination'.⁹² For Gormley, this cultural appropriation not only depoliticises African-American culture but also primitivises it, making black anger comical and pathetic.

The second viewing position is one of cultural nostalgia. Not only does the black protester recall images of civil rights protest from the 50s and 60s, but D-Fens' 'buzz-

⁸⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson & Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone, 1986), p. 210; Gormley, *New-Brutality*, p. 50.

⁹⁰ I shall return to these themes and a more detailed reading of Deleuze's 'new image' in connection to *Se7en* in the next chapter.

⁹¹ *The White Negro* is also the title of the much discussed book by Norman Mailer, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1957).

⁹² Gormley, *New-Brutality*, pp. 58-9.

cut', horn-rimmed glasses and 'nerd pack' in his shirt pocket harks back to an era of work, family and nation promoted by state department films of the 1950s.⁹³ This construction of the character of D-Fens based upon representations of the 50s doubly removes him from a sense of immediacy and authenticity for the viewer.⁹⁴ Gormley draws on Slavoj Žižek's argument that postmodern viewers are fascinated with the idea of the 'naïve' viewer, someone capable of viewing events and believing them, without the self-reflexive and ironic distance of the contemporary audience.⁹⁵ D-Fens embodies this position, still believing in work, family and nation in a world where these ideas are no longer tenable.

The first two viewing positions of 'the white negro' and cultural nostalgia are intertwined in the first part of the film. Gormley believes this a necessary precondition to taking up the final viewing position of 'cynical realism' which is prescribed as the 'true reality' of contemporary America. Gormley suggests the position of cultural nostalgia is first problematised by being presented as a form of cultural psychosis in the scene where D-Fens stabs Nick, the neo-Nazi. Similarly, D-Fens's position as nostalgic 50s throwback comes to be pathologised when D-Fens 'cracks up', and this view is cemented through the videotape images that he plays when he reaches Beth's house. By pathologising D-Fens, the audience is encouraged by the film to shift their identification from D-Fens to the figure of Prendergast. Prendergast as the parallel of D-Fens is the only character who recognises D-Fens's actions, but is not presented as being as deluded as him. As Gormley states:

⁹³ Sally Robinson, in her book *Marked Men*, suggests that the watershed for secure images of masculinity in the United States was the 1968 presidential election (p. 5).

⁹⁴ See Cynthia Rose, 'Review', *Sight and Sound*, 6 (1993), 52-3. Rose comments on the comic nature of D-Fens's character in relation to the 'reality' of Prendergast and the female characters of Beth, Sandra and Amanda Prendergast.

⁹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1991). This argument could explain the appeal of such films as *The Truman Show*, dir. Peter Weir (Paramount Pictures, 1998).

Prendergast is not a naïve classic spectator who still believes that individuals can still modify milieux and maintain the American Dream through individual action. Instead Prendergast believes that actions are always individualised and local rather than global and encompassing. He accepts that his contemporary urban existence is one of anarchy, chaos and fragmentation on the ground while not fundamentally challenging the 'they' who have lied to those people about the death of the American Dream.⁹⁶

This position he calls, following Sloterdijk and Žižek, 'cynical reason'. Cynical reason is a 'paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it'.⁹⁷ Prendergast becomes the only validated viewpoint from which the audience are lead to see the 'truth' of contemporary Los Angeles. Gormley maintains that Prendergast has now taken up the mantle of hero of the action-image but now a cynical one. He cannot have a decisive effect on the total situation represented by the film and cannot believe in the American Dream, only maintain its structures.⁹⁸

As discussed above, Clover points out the structural necessity in the film to represent of a continuum of the three positions of white, heterosexual masculinity in Nick, D-Fens and Prendergast. In Kennedy's, Davies's and most convincingly in Gormley's appraisals of the film they suggest a transformation of legitimate masculinity on the model of Prendergast. Gormley's appraisal interestingly points towards the breakdown of belief in the American Dream and the instantiation of a new model of

⁹⁶ Gormley, *New-Brutality*, p. 66.

⁹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 29, cited in Gormley, p. 66. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. by Michael Eldred (London: Verso, 1988).

⁹⁸ Perplexingly, Gormley concludes that: 'The "real" unspoken revealed by these films is the racial rage which drives white cultural and cinematic production' (p. 189). While I agree there is certainly racial tension inherent to the presentation of the film, I would suggest that an appraisal of these relations be made on the film's own terms rather than in relation to the contemporaneous films *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society*. It is only by maintaining the tenuous connection to these films that Gormley can pronounce the supposed failures of *Falling Down* to not understand the connection that he makes between these films. I also find problematic Gormley's reification of the 'immediacy, affect and paranoia black bodies produce in the white cultural imagination' as an unquestioned given in his analysis (p. 69). This does not, however, invalidate his perceptive appraisal of the distinction being made between D-Fens and Prendergast. I would agree that D-Fens' position is being delegitimised and Prendergast's legitimised and that this is to maintain a central role for white masculinity, but the negative motivation for this as 'racial rage' has limited explanatory power, cutting down the complexity of power relations.

action which he calls cynical realism. He does not go on to explain, however, the positive transformation of values that this breakdown engenders, or why this transformation would take place—namely what is the socio-cultural necessity, or mode of being, of ‘cynical realism’. For whom is cynical realism instantiated, and what objects does it effect, particularly, in this thesis, with regard to heterosexual masculinity? These questions motivate the following chapters and will be elucidated throughout the thesis. First, however, I will set out the method by which I want to approach the analysis of the differences between the white male characters. That is, through the notion of narratives of legitimation.

2.

Legitimation

The means with which I want to address these questions is the theoretical lens of legitimation that is informed by poststructuralist philosophy, and particularly Jean-François Lyotard. What makes legitimation such a useful method of analysis for my thesis is that it distinguishes between specific legitimate social roles, practices and expectations that are normalised within particular cultural contexts. These are marked out from those actions and models of being that are othered, as being impossible, unreasonable, criminal or insane in such a social order. Practices of legitimation have a particular genealogy that transforms through time and are sensitive to cultural transformation. However, these practices also present themselves as timeless, universal and common-sense. Legitimation only works through its acceptance as the norm, as effectively constituting reality. This legitimating function marks the invisibility of power that creates the everyday world through normalised repeated actions which mould the

present but also form a particular image of the past and the future, the possible and the impossible, the good and the bad. My thesis, therefore, looks at the contestation between specific narratives of legitimation.

What is apparent in *Falling Down* is that, rather than there being one single narrative of legitimation, there are three narratives, embodied in the three heterosexual white male characters that are not only mutually exclusive but also antagonistic towards each other. Each presents a vision of 'reality' and man's legitimate place within it. The question then arises of which is the 'real' reality, the true common-sense that is legitimate for the modern day audience, and how is it legitimated? Central to how I will conduct this analysis, then, is the work of Lyotard. As Fredric Jameson points out in his foreword to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard's use of the frame of reference of legitimacy, though dealing with questions of science and knowledge, connects his work to a broader political question of the ordering of society. The use of this terminology is specifically associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, and Jameson reads *The Postmodern Condition* as a 'thinly veiled polemic against [...] Habermas's concept of a 'legitimation crisis' and vision of a 'noise-free', transparent, fully communicational society'.⁹⁹ He goes on to note that legitimation only becomes a problem when the tenets of legitimacy are put into question, and it is around this 'crisis' of legitimacy that Lyotard puts forward a narrative analysis as a mode of differentiating forms of social legitimation.

My reason for using this narrative analysis to look at *Falling Down* is as an explanatory tool to make distinctions between characters, and to connect these distinctions to wider cultural debates around the transformation of the social order

⁹⁹ Fredric Jameson, 'Foreword' in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. vii.

from what has been considered modern to a postmodern society. The aim is that, by differentiating the qualities of the characters around a central organising principle, a judgement can be made on what the film presents as the defining legitimating instance: that which judges what can and cannot appear. This will lead to a consideration of how this legitimisation takes place. My analysis, therefore, is based upon a linguistic model but is utilised to show how actions are organised and evaluated according to differing criteria of judgement. *Falling Down* is pertinent to this study as it visually depicts the contestation between narratives which are specifically tied to the fate of white heterosexual masculinity in a contemporary context. In Lyotard's terms, the film is the site of a differend in which the conflict of heterogeneous discourses is played out. The next section will, therefore, outline Lyotard's argument and read it through the characters of Nick, D-Fens and Prendergast.

Lyotard and legitimacy

In 'Memorandum on Legitimacy' Lyotard poses the question: who has the power to normalise a statement, to make it legitimate? Lyotard sets this up as such:

For the prescription *it is obligatory for x to perform action a*, the normative phrase would be *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*. In this formulation the normative phrase designates, here in the name of *y*, the instance which legitimates the prescription addressed to *x*. The legislative power is held by *y*.

He continues:

If we ask who *y* could be to command such legislative authority, we soon find ourselves slipping into the usual aporias. We encounter the vicious circle – *y* has authority over *x* because *x* authorises *y* to have it.¹⁰⁰

Lyotard shows that this formula has an infinite regression that can only be summarily completed. The position of *y* can be variously filled in yet its final validation usually

¹⁰⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. by Julian Pefanis and others (London: Turnaround, 1992), p. 52.

comes in the form of some otherworldly authority such as God, Life or any big Other.¹⁰¹ However, the gap that is created by this problem of legitimation, the gap between the utterance and its authority or legitimacy, remains. Lyotard believes that the logical gap has historically been covered over in two ways by narrative. The aporia of authorisation is masked by narrative in such a way that it either goes backwards on a diachronic axis towards origins, or forwards towards ends. The former comes in the form of mythic narrative, which Lyotard finds essential to traditional communities, and the later towards emancipation or what Lyotard calls, in *The Postmodern Condition*, metanarratives.

I will connect these two narrative means of legitimation respectively to the characters of Nick and D-Fens to show how their worldviews can be distinguished from one another, and then go on to discuss the third construction of legitimation in the character of Prendergast that comes to be the final legitimised position for white heterosexual masculinity in *Falling Down*.

Mythic narrative

In articulating the difference between two forms of narrative legitimation, Lyotard sets out a brief summary in 'Memorandum on Legitimacy' of his approach to language. He sees language not as a toolbox that can be dipped into by speakers when they wish to communicate; rather, the only givens of language are *phrases*. First, these phrases

¹⁰¹ Lyotard here draws upon Lacan's terminology to designate a position that is transcendent to the subject. As Dylan Evans explains: 'The big Other designates radical alterity, an other-ness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law, and hence the big Other is inscribed in the order of the symbolic. Indeed, the big Other *is* the symbolic insofar as it is particularized for each subject. The Other is thus both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject.' *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 133.

‘situate within the universe they present, an addressor, and addressee and a referent’.¹⁰²

Second, for Lyotard, each phrase arrives as an event; there is no predefined or necessary connection between what happens (the phrase or the event) and its outcome, no necessary linkage between one phrase and another. Though there are genres of discourse that have rules of connecting phrases (which I will deal with further in chapter 3) these connections can always be rearranged or changed, something that has been most prevalent in modernist writers.

The event puts into play a particular ‘universe’, therefore, putting into question the connection of these universes which needs to remain coherent to maintain an ordered vision of the world. This ordering of universes, as Lyotard argues, can successfully take place through narrative. Lyotard, in his essay, first deals with mythic narration and takes as an example the Cashinahua people studied by André Marcel d’Ans. Lyotard here is interested in the pragmatics of a myth’s narration, the form that it takes, and its perpetuation within culture. In the pragmatics of the Cashinahua narrative the addressee has to be an adult male or a girl prior to puberty, the addressor has to be a man with a Cashinahua name and the referent can be any of the Cashinahua. Lyotard explains: ‘the constraints acting upon the pragmatics of narration should be understood as rules for the authentication and conservation of narratives, and therefore of the community itself, through the repetition of names.’¹⁰³ I will quote from Lyotard at length to clarify his position on the function of naming.

Names, or what Kripke calls ‘rigid designators’, define a world, a world of names – the cultural world. This world is finite because in it the number of available names is finite. This world has forever been the same. Each human comes into this world with a place, that is, with a name that will determine his or her relationship to other names. This place in effect controls the sexual, economic, social and linguistic exchanges which one has the right or the duty to have (or not to have) with others

¹⁰² Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained*, p. 53.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 55.

who bear names. An event [...] can only be introduced into the tradition when it is framed within a story – a story subject to the rules of naming as much in what it tells (its referents: heroes, places, times) as in the manner of its telling (its narrator, its audience). So the void which in principle separates two phrases, and makes the phrase into an event, is filled by narrative, itself subordinate to the repetition of the world of names and to the permutation of names across the instances. In this way the Cashinahua identity, the *we* that draws together the three narrative instances, escapes the vertigo of contingency and nothingness. And as narrative has an intrinsic capacity to collect, arrange and transmit descriptions, as well as prescriptions, evaluations and feelings (exclamatory and interrogative phrases, for example), this tradition transmits obligations attached to names, along with prescriptions for particular situations, and legitimates them simply by placing them under the authority of the Cashinahua name.¹⁰⁴

Lyotard's point is that the Cashinahua overcome the event, the singularity of each phrase, by placing it within the narrative organised around naming.¹⁰⁵ The event is taken up in a story bound by names and anything outside of these bounds *is not*; it is not authorised within the system of names. This narrative function organises the Cashinahua world into a totality which designates rules and roles which, when these rules and roles are played out by the community, create a form of politics in which the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 56-7.

¹⁰⁵ My use of Lyotard's Cashinahua narrative here is meant as a means of making distinctions between narratives of legitimacy. I do, though, find the use of a reified Third World 'other' as a means of theoretical legitimation here problematic, displaying theory's own demand for legitimation. Homi Bhabha has described how a number of Western intellectuals have engaged with Third World texts, including Lyotard's, as a metaphor of 'otherness' to contain difference. He states, 'Montesquieu's Turkish Despot, Barthes's Japan, Kristeva's China, Derrida's Nambikwara Indians, Lyotard's Cashinahua 'pagans' are part of this strategy of containment where the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation. The 'Other' is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot-reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment. Narrative and the *cultural* politics of difference become the closed circle of interpretation. The 'Other' loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its 'desire', to split its 'sign' of identity, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse. However impeccably the content of an 'other' culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is its *location* as the 'closure' of grand theories, the demand that, in analytical terms, it be always the 'good' object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination and is the most serious indictment of the institutional powers of critical theory.' 'The Commitment to Theory', *New Formations*, 5 (1988), 5-23 (p. 16). For an interesting critique of Lyotard's use of the Cashinahua through feminist theory see Sara Ahmed, 'Beyond Humanism and Postmodernism: Theorizing a Feminist Practice', *Hypatia*, 11 (1996) 71-93. Kerwin Lee Klein places Lyotard's use of the Cashinahua in an evolving relationship with his engagement of the distinction between 'master' and 'local' narratives. Klein draws out a number of theoretical problems with Lyotard's formalisation of the Cashinahua narrative system, particularly his use of the Cashinahua name as a 'rigid designator'. 'In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History' *History and Theory*, 34 (1995), 275-298.

legislative and executive powers are joined. This conjunction of legislative and executive power can be called 'totalitarian'.

This formation of authority organised around the name of the people can be witnessed in the emergence of Nazism, where the name of the Aryan takes the place of the legitimating authority. Lyotard sees in the Weimar Republic a democratic urge by its sovereign people to 'return to the source', to the sagas of the Nordic peoples, where Germans could identify with Germanic heroes to heal the wounds of defeat and crisis. The pragmatics of this narration of legitimation, as with that of the Cashinahua, are organised around the exception. As Lyotard explains, 'Aryans are the true men – the only ones. That which is not Aryan lives only because of a failure in the functioning of the vital principle. It is already dead. All that remains is to finish it off. The Nazi wars are sanitary operations, purifications.'¹⁰⁶

To start my analysis of *Falling Down*, I will first focus on the character Nick, the neo-Nazi. His role can be articulated through Lyotard's mythic narrative of legitimation. The first time we meet Nick he is listening to the police radio, following the events of D-Fens' journey. D-Fens enters the shop and Nick realises it is the man that the police are looking for. D-Fens is looking for hiking boots and Nick proceeds to show him some of the stock, using the occasion as a chance to verbally abuse two customers suggesting that the Vietnam jungle boots are good for 'stomping queers'. Nick believes that he has found someone who shares his views as D-Fens does not react to his homophobic remarks. D-Fens, seeing a police car pull up outside, moves to the changing rooms at the back of the shop. Nick hides him and continues to display his views, suggesting that Sandra be known as an 'officer-ess' to distinguish her sex, and ushers her on her way. These scenes demonstrate the disparity between the culturally heterogeneous

¹⁰⁶ Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained*, p. 62.

contemporary LA and the views of Nick, shown as threatening and confrontational to anything other than white American male heterosexuality.

D-Fens, clutching his gym bag to his chest, asks why Nick did not hand him over to the police, and Nick says that he is not going to turn him in and that he is his friend. Nick takes D-Fens into the back of the shop and proceeds to show him war memorabilia: a World War I gas mask and a can of Zyklon B. Finally Nick presents a rocket launcher and says that it is for D-Fens. D-Fens, taken aback, asks why and Nick responds: 'Because I'm with you. Don't you get it?'¹⁰⁷ Nick has heard about the incident at the Whammy Burger and thinks that D-Fens has attacked 'a bunch of niggers'. Nick insists: 'I'm with you. We're the same you and me, we're the same don't you see?'

This insistence upon identification between Nick and D-Fens comes in two parts. The first is the identification of a subject that bears the signs of sameness: white, male, heterosexual, American; the second is the identification of and revulsion towards an object exterior to that sameness; in this instance it is the 'niggers' that Nick thinks D-Fens is threatening in the Whammy Burger store. Nick believes that D-Fens is carrying out the 'sanitary operation' that he dreams of, and wants to give him the tools to carry out this task.

D-Fens is incensed by this; he insists, 'we are not the same. I'm an American, you're a sick asshole!' Nick, shocked by this affront, asks 'what kind of vigilante are you?' and turns on D-Fens as he tries to leave. Nick demands: 'Who the fuck are you? Are you fucking with me?' and D-Fens rebukes: 'I am just disagreeing with you. In America we have the freedom of speech, the right to disagree.' This Nick cannot allow and pulls a gun, shouting: 'Fuck you and your freedom. Who the fuck are you? You fuck, you faggot fuck.'

¹⁰⁷ All future citations from the films I am analysing are my own transcription from the DVD.

This transformation of D-Fens from friend to enemy is a moment when D-Fens becomes unrecognisable, in other words, the moment of the event. D-Fens's disagreement marks the event of transformation which sparks anger and aggression in Nick in his effort to re-establish a known narrative framework. This is when D-Fens is pronounced a 'faggot' and evidence is searched for to validate this new claim as Nick rummages through D-Fens' gym bag. Nick finds the snow globe that D-Fens has bought for his daughter and his eyes light up as he exclaims: 'What is this doing in there? Faggot shit!' and throws it against the wall.

Nick proceeds to handcuff D-Fens and suggests that in jail he will be raped by a 'big buck nigger'. As he bends over D-Fens, preparing to handcuff him, he repeats, 'give it to me!' literally to get his other hand into the handcuff, but the demand also has connotations of sex, as the camera shows a close-up of Nick's mouth repeating the words almost in a whisper. D-Fens, looking to escape his captor, reaches into his pocket and pulls out the butterfly knife that he has taken from the Porto Rican gang and turns, stabbing Nick in the shoulder. Nick, now incapacitated, repeats, 'Oh my God!' to which D-Fens replies, brandishing a gun, 'Good, freedom of religion. Now you're getting into the swing of it. Feels good to exercise your rights doesn't it?' and shoots him.

Nick is shown to be racist, homophobic and sexist in direct comparison to D-Fens. Nick follows what Lyotard describes as a mythic form of legitimation which joins the 'true men', displacing those 'others' as exterior and in need of extermination. This is made even more complex in the film where Nick's homosocial relationship with D-Fens turns into one with overt homoerotic and homo-sadistic tendencies. The 'Aryan' mythic narrative places power over bodies in the hands of white heterosexual masculinity through its legislative function, giving Nick the executive power over bodies that do not fit this description. Nick's mythic legitimation is presented in the film as being justly

overcome by D-Fens's own 'superior' model, justified by recourse to the notion of freedom, yet D-Fens's murder of Nick (which is not explicitly necessary as Nick is incapacitated by the knife wound) makes problematic his relationship to his own mode of legitimation which I will discuss further in the next section.

Metanarrative

What, then, is the difference between Nick and D-Fens's position? Returning to Lyotard, if we understand Nick's covering over the event, the phrase that does not fit in with his narrative of white supremacy, as mythic narrative that legitimates his actions by returning to origins (Neo-Nazi blood and soil), can we associate D-Fens with narratives of emancipation or metanarratives, forward towards ends? Lyotard regards metanarratives as conjoined to a theory of Republicanism, which he understands as the separation of legislative and executive powers. This, however, has a consequence for popular identity. Lyotard explains:

Republicanism is more than the separation of powers: it demands the fission, even the disintegration, of popular identity. It is not just about representation: from the perspective of language, it is an organisation of regimes of phrases and genres of discourse which relies on their dissociation, thus allowing a "play" between them or, if you prefer, preserving the possibility of accounting for the event in its contingency. This organisation I will call *deliberative*.¹⁰⁸

The organising principle of the deliberative process, or as Lyotard states 'the highest end', is embodied in the interrogative prescriptive phrase: *What ought we to be?* This question raises an inevitable uncertainty about who this 'we' is and what ends this 'we' should aim for. There are, therefore, a plurality of narratives and any number of identities possible under this regime. The narratives this organisation needs to make it legitimate are, hence, narratives of emancipation or metanarratives. As Lyotard states:

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 58.

Like myths, [metanarratives] fulfil a legitimating function: they legitimate social and political institutions and practices, forms of legislation, ethics, modes of thought and symbolics. Yet unlike myths, they do not ground this legitimacy in an original 'founding' act but in a future to be brought about, that is, in an Idea to realise. This Idea (of freedom, 'enlightenment', socialism, general prosperity) has legitimating value because it is universal. It gives modernity its characteristic mode: the *project*, that is, the will directed towards a goal.¹⁰⁹

Lyotard argues that this society, though being legitimated by such a project, depends upon an existing community to carry out the project in its name. There is, as a consequence, a tension between the original community that founds the Idea and not knowing what this community is to be. It is this dynamic that causes the ferment and decomposition of the original community. According to Lyotard, 'Sovereignty does not belong to the people but to the Idea of the free community. [...] The republic invokes freedom against security.'¹¹⁰ The demand for freedom outweighs the call for a communal identity.

Yet, in spite of this openness to the event, the republic does call on the name of 'the people', just as in the Preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789, the Assembly, in the name of the French people, takes the place of the legitimating instance. Placing the representatives of the nation in charge of the deliberative process does not mean invalidating the narrative of emancipation; rather it means that being 'French' or 'American' for the citizen becomes concomitant with being 'free'. This necessarily means obeying the executive powers and protecting (or spreading) 'the Idea' of freedom in the name of the nation: one gives up freedom in the name of universal emancipation.

Returning to *Falling Down*, the question of emancipation, the nation, and their relation to white masculinity is set up from the first scene. Yet, it is precisely this dream of freedom and white men leading the nation that is placed into question. D-Fens is

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 61.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 62.

stuck in his car in a traffic jam, as helpless as the children on the school bus next to him, unable to control or affect his situation. He is not on the road to emancipation but is a subject trapped by society. No longer at the vanguard of America's march towards liberty and prosperity, D-Fens, leaving his car, is 'going home' to at least take his place as father, his last bastion of patriarchal power. However, this power, equally bound to the model of freedom created through Republicanism, has also left him. As a defence worker D-Fens has been able to provide for a wife and child. Working for the nation has permitted him the freedom of a 'private life', the domain of the family, but since losing his job he has lost everything. The notions of nation, family, and job are connected to the metanarrative of emancipation which is meant to legitimate D-Fens's place in the community as a position of honour and power. This specific connection of phrases, the logic of their joining, is meant to validate D-Fens but this validation has failed.

There are a number of different tropes of D-Fens's character that are comically played upon in the film. The importance of communication in a single language is apparent in D-Fens's dealing with Mr Woo in the Korean market, but the tropes of property, family, communication and masculinity are all played out in D-Fens's meeting with the Porto Rican gang members when he steps onto their territory. As D-Fens takes a rest on some wasteland, two gang members approach him and ask him what he is doing there. They tell him he is trespassing on private property. After D-Fens suggests that he did not see any signs they point to the graffiti and ask 'what do you call that?'. D-Fens does not see this as a legitimate sign within his narrative and responds, mocking their use of swear words, with 'maybe if you wrote it in fuckin' English then I could fuckin' understand it?'. When it appears as though things will turn violent D-Fens tries to reason with them. He suggests that this is a territorial dispute and that he has wandered onto their patch and that, as it is their home, he respects that and asks for

them to let him move on. The gang members reject this and demand a toll, suggesting his briefcase. When D-Fens refuses one of them pulls a knife, but D-Fens is still not prepared to give up his briefcase and complains: 'I was willing to mind my own business, I was willing to respect your territory and treat you like a man, but you couldn't leave it alone could you? You couldn't let a man sit here for five minutes and take a rest on your precious piece of shit hill.' This, as with the other encounters on his journey, ends in violence as communication breaks down, as the 'reasonableness' of his discourse fails to legitimise his actions. This model of legitimation through metanarratives is not legitimate for the gang members.

D-Fens, therefore, represents a particular embodiment of white masculinity that is bound to the idea of the freedom of men to own property on which to raise a family, and who is legitimated by 'the nation' as its representative. D-Fens legitimates this position through the metanarrative of universal reason and freedom, yet within the film all we see in the case of D-Fens is this system's failure: each of his encounters appears as a conflict that has no agreed terms and descends into violence, with D-Fens appearing as an anachronism within postmodern Los Angeles. In this way, the event of D-Fens's dislocation from authority is concomitant with the delegitimation of his narrative.

Revisiting the scene in which D-Fens kills Nick, though D-Fens holds up freedom as legitimate against Nick's narrative of extermination, D-Fens crosses the line from being a citizen, being an object of the law, to taking the executive powers into his own hands by killing Nick. D-Fens, by confronting the limits of his mode of legitimation, has had to step out of their bounds and is seen, and sees himself, on the other side of the law. This scene marks the transformation of D-Fens from being a legitimate citizen, an American, bound to U.S. legislative and executive practices, to taking on both of these roles himself: making and carrying out the law. This is actualised in the film when D-

Fens shoots Nick and he falls into a mirror that shows D-Fens reflection. D-Fens's image of himself is shattered and consequently changes his attire, from white collar worker, to what Jude Davies has described as 'look[ing] like a Viet Cong soldier': he is America's 'other'.¹¹¹ By stepping outside of the limits of his narrative of legitimation D-Fens becomes a law unto himself, having to legitimate his own sense of right.

Postmodernism

By stepping outside of the law its representatives are now following D-Fens and it is Prendergast, the 'good cop', who attains the legitimate narrative. The difference in each man's idea of the 'good' marks out the distinction between D-Fens and Prendergast's narratives of legitimation. This difference is located predominantly around their means of communication. Contrary to D-Fens, each conversation in which Prendergast engages takes into account the particularity of the respondent, employing different sorts of utterances that designate different positions between sender, addressee and referent. Unlike D-Fens, who positions himself as the bearer of truth, both before and after his transformation, Prendergast engages in discourse to gain a specific result which does not rely upon his position as a man, or an officer of the law, but by drawing upon the desires of the addressee. I argue that Prendergast's use of these differing approaches demonstrates his sensitivity to *language games*. These language games have a number of properties, as Lyotard explains:

The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players (which is not to say that the players invent the rules). The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a 'move' or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the

¹¹¹ Davies, 'Gender, Ethnicity...', p. 221.

game they define. The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game.¹¹²

By arguing that language games are precisely 'games' Lyotard is suggesting that the aim of these games is to win; as he says, 'to speak is to fight.'¹¹³ In D-Fens's case, throughout his travails he has drawn upon certain 'external' justifications to legitimate his position; in Mr Woo's shop this comes in the form of America's financial help to Korea; with the Porto Rican gang it is the respect for property and speaking as men; in the Whammy Burger outlet he suggests that 'the customer is always right'; and of course, with Nick, draws upon freedom of speech. Prendergast is presented contrastingly as a jovial realist, drawing upon the present situation to get things done. This is demonstrated throughout the film by his ability to garner information from witnesses and family members that the 'strong arm' tactics of his colleagues are unable to attain. It is also present in how he responds to his wife, firstly consoling her yet finally changing tactics to make her concede to his demands.

The difference between D-Fens's and Prendergast's communicational style is also highlighted through D-Fens's preference for male interlocutors and Prendergast's for female ones. Prendergast has a special relationship with Sandra, gets information from the Porto Rican gang member's girlfriend, and finds out about D-Fens's ex-wife and child by playing upon the interests of D-Fens's initially reluctant mother. Where D-Fens causes an eruption of violence, Prendergast opens up communication. Prendergast has no recourse to the metanarratives that D-Fens utilises but rather draws upon the immanent desires of his respondents. In this respect, Prendergast's actions are not legitimated by their truth value, or a call to a higher aim, but by their effectiveness and efficiency. Prendergast's sensitivity to language games does not rely upon claims to

¹¹² Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 10.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

reason or universality, and therefore exhibits what Lyotard would call ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’, which places Prendergast in a postmodern relation to narratives of legitimacy.¹¹⁴ In other words, Prendergast’s heroic status is not judged by the justness of his ends, but by the effectiveness of his means and the economy of its result.

In describing the two forms of narrative discussed above, Lyotard places the mythic narrative on a diachronic axis pointing towards origins, and metanarratives pointing towards ends. The postmodern narrative in this sense is fundamentally related to the present in that it acts on maintaining and reacting to the system in its local and immanent functioning. Its legitimation is, therefore, not provided by names in the case of mythic narrative, or accession to the project of national identity which aligns itself with reason and the project of freedom in metanarrative, but to performance outlined by the immanent goals of the system. This form of legitimation covers over the event not by the narrative’s resemblance to legitimated denotative utterances, but by its ability to produce results in the system which supports it. Prendergast, in his role as a police officer, holds a position that can carry out the executive function of the state to maintain its laws, but his position is not legitimated like D-Fens’s as a call to freedom and reason but by his effectiveness at his job, catching criminals. Prendergast does not call forth a new world but the maintenance of the present.

By applying these narratives of legitimation to the three white male characters in *Falling Down* it is apparent that they define different and competing modes of social organisation that organise and position ‘correct’ material relations between bodies and negating others. These modes of legitimation necessarily call upon an authority and a narrative means to justify their position. In the case of Nick it is the mythic narrative

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. xxiv.

that calls upon origins and designates a particular 'people', or identity, defined through sex (male), race (white), sexuality (heterosexual) and nationality (American), as the 'true men'. With D-Fens it is the metanarratives of freedom and reason embodied in the project of the nation towards emancipation and the fight against tyranny, which calls upon notions of nation, family and job. For Prendergast the narrative of legitimation is one of performance, where, by application of his skills, he is able to apprehend D-Fens before he kills his ex-wife and daughter, which drew upon the pragmatics of language games and his effectiveness of means. These means of legitimation are all present in the film but what may appear as being the obvious, or common sense, victory of Prendergast needs to be placed in question if we are not to see social structures as natural bearers of a just and good law. In Lyotard's terms, we must testify to a differend so that the heterogeneity of discourses is not subsumed into a single idiom. In order to make visible how one form of legitimacy, that of Prendergast, comes to be seen as the final and only legitimate position for white masculinity I will suggest, in the next section, that this legitimating process has a fundamental relationship to violence. As will be seen, violence will come to be a key theme throughout the four chapters.

3.

Violence and legitimacy

In the previous section, following Lyotard, I distinguish three narratives of legitimation corresponding to the three white male characters in *Falling Down*. These narratives of legitimation organise a mode of conduct for each of the characters which determine

their relations with the other characters and situations represented in the film. This is particularly apparent in relation to the limits of these modes of conduct; *where the forms of legitimation were put into question is where violence erupted and escalated throughout the film*: when Nick is challenged as a 'sick asshole', when D-Fens's authority as an American, a man, a father and a husband are questioned and when Prendergast sees a threat to women and children. The characters hold convictions of what is legitimate and illegitimate violence, when violence can be exerted and when not. Yet, as soon as violence is unleashed, however this violence is justified, an escalation of reprisals takes place until only one position is left.

What, then, is the relation of violence to these forms of legitimation, and how does *Falling Down* represent only one of these narratives as the 'correct' moral position? In other words, which violence is justified or 'good'? Returning to Lyotard's normative phrase, *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*, how do we agree upon the authority of *y* without falling into the aporia of validation? Do we have to relegate it to a vague idea of 'belief' or is there a way of determining the unanimous validation of this big Other? This perspective raises a number of questions about the structure of the film and the strategic placement of its characters. If, as I have suggested in the previous section, Prendergast takes up the final legitimated position in the film, that he is, in a sense, the hero, then why is the lead character arguably D-Fens and not Prendergast? This ambiguity and paradoxical position of D-Fens marks much of the confusion around interpretations of D-Fens's role in the critical literature. As mentioned previously Carol Clover presents D-Fens as both hero and victim, and Jude Davies's interpretation of D-Fens is equally ambiguous. Even Michael Douglas notes in an interview in *Empire Magazine* that, 'Some people may see him as a hero, [...] most will probably see him as a psychotic.' Joel Schumacher continues: "I think the fact that many

people are disturbed by the fact that they can't work out whether Michael is the good guy or the bad guy *is the point.*"¹¹⁵

A feasible answer to the question of D-Fens's functional position in the film is not immediately apparent and its paradoxical nature accounts for the questions around the moral position of the film and affective investment in D-Fens. Why did audiences cheer D-Fens's actions if he were not a 'hero'? Why did defence workers picket the movie, if he were not psychotic? In this concluding part of the chapter I want to suggest that there is a profound correlation between the position of D-Fens and what René Girard in his influential book *Violence and the Sacred* has called the 'scapegoat function'. By addressing this second question of the functional position of D-Fens in *Falling Down* I want to move towards answering the first question of how the transcendent position of the *y* is legitimated.

The scapegoat

How, then, can D-Fens be considered a scapegoat, and how does this add to an understanding of the legitimating function presented in *Falling Down*? In *Violence and the Sacred* René Girard draws bold conclusions about the essential relationship of violence to religion in primitive rites and, consequently, in its representation in myth and tragedy. Violence, for Girard, is a fundamental part of the human condition which once enflamed is very difficult to extinguish. Violence that affects the community threatens to engulf it by means of retaliation—where, once revenge takes place, it engenders an ever increasing cycle of violence and counter violence that threatens to destroy the community, unless it finds a means of placating and controlling this violent urge. Therefore, the community, when seeking to contain and direct this violence, does

¹¹⁵ Salisbury, 'He's "an 'ordinary man at war with the everyday world" ...', p. 77.

not look towards a 'guilty party', who may continue the cycle of revenge, but a substitute victim for whom revenge is not possible. It is by venting the violence of the community on this victim that stops the reciprocal violence that threatens to engulf it.

This, then, is the fundamental role of sacrifice within religion: to protect the community from its own violence and direct this violence towards a suitable party. As Girard states, '*Religion* in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence.'¹¹⁶ The transcendental character of this violence is essential for Girard to distinguish 'good' violence from 'bad' violence.

Only the transcendental quality of the system, acknowledged by all, can assure the prevention or cure of violence. This is the case no matter what the consecrating institution may be. Only by opting for a sanctified, legitimate form of violence and preventing it from becoming an object of disputes and recriminations can the system save itself from the vicious circle of revenge (p. 24).

Sacrifice, for Girard, is evidence of an originary moment when the community, broken down by reciprocal violence, violence of all against all, was transformed into a violence of all against one. The creation of unanimous violence against a single member of the community restored order and prosperity to the community validating this violence as 'good'. Sacrifice functions as a return or repetition of this inaugural act, reinstating order in the community. The sacrificial victim is therefore doubly substituted; originally the victim was a member of the community but some trait singled them out as worthy of death, substituted for the guilt of the community; and then secondly, this original scapegoat is substituted for a sacrificial victim held by the community to perform its rites. The sacrificial victim, therefore, occupies a paradoxical position of being both

¹¹⁶ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 23. All further references to this edition are given in the text.

connected and disconnected from the community, destructive of the community but also its saviour.

The double nature of the substitution aids in hiding the community's violence from itself. The sacrificial act covers over the violence and lays responsibility for its troubles on an outside source, once again doubly: first, on an exterior impetus for the community's disintegration, the scapegoat, and second, for its 'divine' healing through legitimated violence embodied through some form of deity. The community considers itself separate from this violence, appeasing its members of guilt and responsibility. The sacrifice appears as a magical, though effective, act. By joining in unanimous violence against the scapegoat the community heals its divisions and through the sacrifice brings back prosperity. For Girard this is the function of religion:

Religion, then, is far from 'useless.' It humanizes violence; it protects man from his own violence by taking it out of his hands, transforming it into a transcendent and ever-present danger to be kept in check by the appropriate rites appropriately observed and by a modest and prudent demeanour. Religious misinterpretation is a truly constructive force, for it purges man of the suspicions that would poison his existence if he were to remain conscious of the crisis as it actually took place (pp. 134-5).

As a consequence the sacrificial process becomes necessary when order and hierarchical distinctions in society breakdown. This Girard calls the sacrificial crisis:

The *sacrificial crisis*, that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference is effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community. [...] The sacrificial distinction, the distinction between the pure and the impure, cannot be obliterated without obliterating all other differences as well. One and the same process of violent reciprocity engulfs the whole. The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions – that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their "identity" and their mutual relationships (p. 49).

The function of the sacrifice of the scapegoat is to reassert cultural distinctions and to bring back order to the community. The scapegoat is offered up to save the community and to appease its members of their own guilt.

In order to argue that D-Fens acts as a scapegoat in *Falling Down*, I want to examine Girard's discussion of *Oedipus the King* as exemplary of the representation of the scapegoat function in cultural production. I will then pinpoint the similarities between these forms of representation and *Falling Down*.

Sacrifice, myth and tragedy: Oedipus

For Girard Greek tragedy is uniquely placed to make us aware of the function of sacrifice to the community. Tragedy, as an art form, appears at the point where the Greeks were dealing with a 'sacrificial crisis' as the community transformed from an archaic theocracy to a new order based on state and law. Tragedy, then, holds a key to understanding the function of sacrificial rites through their dramatic re-articulation and representation. Tragedy's power, for Girard, lies in its structure, which pits equal parties against one another. He argues:

If the art of tragedy is to be defined in a single phrase, we might do worse than call attention to one of its most characteristic traits: the opposition of symmetrical elements. There is no aspect of the plot, form, or language of a tragedy in which this symmetrical pattern does not recur (p. 44).

The tragedy on which he draws to illustrate his contention is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. Girard notes how the character of Oedipus is often praised by critics of the play for its 'individuality', endowed with 'generosity' and the bearer of a 'noble serenity' which, however, is interrupted by fits of anger that bear its tragic flaw. Girard questions the claim that anger is the sole possession of Oedipus, distinguishing him from the other characters. He claims, rather, that anger and violence are in no way the sole property of

Oedipus. The only real difference between the anger of the characters is that Oedipus's anger begins the plot. Tracing the relationship between Oedipus, Creon and Tiresias, he sees symmetry in each of the characters' swings from serenity to anger. Each sees themselves as offering a detached and exterior view of events, which is legitimated by their positions as 'experts'. Girard states: 'Each believes himself to be an impartial observer, detached from the action; each wants to assume the role of arbitrator and judge,' (p. 69) yet once their position is challenged they fly into a rage, all following a passage from calm to anger.

By making the suggestion of the radical symmetry of the protagonists, Girard is arguing that there is no real distinction between the 'true' and 'false' narrative and that this judgement is only made afterwards by the victorious party; only afterwards one of them takes on the guilt for the breakdown of the social hierarchy. As Girard explains:

At this point a strange and well-nigh fantastic thought suggests itself. If we eliminate the testimony brought against Oedipus in the second half of the tragedy, then the conclusion of the myth, far from seeming a sudden lightening flash of the truth, striking down the guilty party and illuminating all the mortal participants, seems nothing more than the camouflaged victory of one version of the story over the other, the polemical version over its rival – the community's formal acceptance of Tiresias's and Creon's version of the story, thereafter held to be the true and universal version, the verity behind the myth itself (p. 73).

How is it possible to validate and justify this choice between equal claimants other than it being one case of violence conquering and silencing the other? Surely this would lead to merely another violent contestation by Oedipus's allies. If symmetry is the case, then how is the difference drawn? In the Oedipus myth it is through Oedipus's unique charge of parricide and incest.

Girard examines these crimes outside of the familial setting and considers what they signify to the wider polis. He suggests that by killing the king, his father, Oedipus destroys the hierarchical distinctions within the group. This transforms the authority of

the paternal relationship to one of fraternal revenge. The same occurs with Oedipus's incest with his mother, which destroys the other familial distinction between mother and son. Girard sees this loss of distinctions as analogous to violence. The crime that Oedipus commits is the loss of distinctions, but rather than being the responsibility of the whole community this flaw is placed upon one of its members.

The crimes of Oedipus signify the abolishment of differences, but because the nondifference is attributed to a particular individual, it is transformed into a new distinction, signifying the monstrosity of Oedipus's situation. The nondifference became the responsibility, not of society at large, but of a single individual (p. 76).

By bearing the sign of non-difference, that is, being singled out as the bringer of violence to the community, Oedipus is accused of the crimes of parricide and incest. Oedipus's presence threatens the social order and through his expulsion brings back order to the community. It is not, therefore, the justice, or rectitude of the judgement that brings back order to the community, but, firstly, the attribution of guilt onto the scapegoat through the attribution of the 'ultimate' crime, and, secondly, the unanimous violence against the scapegoat that is carried out in the name of an 'ultimate' or transcendent violence validated by the whole community.¹¹⁷ The firm belief in the guilt of the scapegoat has no more validation than the unanimity of the decision. As Girard continues: 'The slightest hint, the most groundless accusation, can circulate with

¹¹⁷In a different register Deleuze and Guattari argue that Oedipus is a function of social repression that traps desire. Deleuze and Guattari's conception of desire could be considered the analogue of violence in Girard. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone Press, 2000). 'Oedipal desires are not at all repressed, nor do they have any reason to be. They are nevertheless in an intimate relationship with psychic repression, but in a different manner. Oedipal desires are the bait, the disfigured image by means of which repression catches desire in the trap. If desire is repressed, this is not because it is desire for the mother and for the death of the father; on the contrary, desire becomes that only because it is repressed, it takes on that mask only under the reign of the repression that models the mask for it and plasters it on its face. Besides it is doubtful that incest was a real obstacle to the establishment of society, as the partisans of an *exchangist* conception claim. We have seen that there were other obstacles. The real danger is elsewhere. If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors. Despite what some revolutionaries think about this, desire is revolutionary in its essence – desire, not left-wing holidays! – and no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised' (p. 116).

vertiginous speed and is transformed into irrefutable proof. [...] The firm conviction of the group is based on no other evidence than the unshakable unanimity of its own illogic' (p. 79).

By bringing back peace, the sacrifice of the scapegoat appears to validate the correctness and logic behind the choice of the specific victim: by attributing all the ills to this sole individual, his expulsion is the cure to the social crisis. This marks the paradoxical situation of Oedipus being both hero and victim, sacred to and scourge of the community. What remains hidden then is not Oedipus's secret desire to kill his father and sleep with his mother, but the community's violence against one of its own to create and enforce a transcendently justified order. Girard concludes:

The anathema's true object is not Oedipus, who is only one thematic element among others, but the unanimous quality of his selection which, if it is to remain effective, must be shielded from scrutiny, protected from any outside contact or intervention. This anathema still operates today in the form of neglect, through our total indifference to the concept of collective violence and our refusal to attach any significance to the phenomenon, even when it thrusts itself upon our attention (p. 84).

In light of Girard's analysis of Oedipus, I will argue that a similar form of disavowal characterises the scapegoat function in *Falling Down*.

Falling Down

In this final section I will draw out and analyse the parallels between Girard's account of Oedipus and that of D-Fens in *Falling Down*. As I suggested in the second section of this chapter, Nick, D-Fens and Prendergast are distinguished from each other through different narratives of legitimation much like how Girard describes the relation between Oedipus, Creon and Tiresias. In the film, D-Fens sets off on a journey in which violence escalates throughout the community and ends with his acceptance of guilt, sacrificing himself for the wife and child he was (according to Prendergast) going to kill. D-Fens

enters into discourse with other men (such as the store owners, the gang members, Nick, and Prendergast) who hold different views from his own, each certain of their position of right; and when each of their views are put into question, anger erupts and violence flares. D-Fens overcomes these questioners but only by force. It is D-Fens's delusion about his role in society, as bearer of right and reason, that begins the violence and, left with no way back, on the end of the pier with no allies and now outside of the community, D-Fens accepts his guilt and is killed.

If D-Fens is a scapegoat, as I am arguing here, there must be a sacrificial crisis being experienced by the community which demands a new sacrifice, there must be a problem that puts people at each other's throats that needs the sacrifice of a scapegoat to expiate the community's guilt. To be effective, the sacrifice would need to address those things that affect the whole community. This prompts a reconsideration of the largest part of the film, D-Fens's travails through Los Angeles. He is confronted with everyday situations in a multicultural city: traffic jams, high prices, the fear of mugging and gang violence, beggars asking for money, bad convenience food; but also the fear of job insecurity, the divide between rich and poor, and ghettos next to golf courses. The sacrificial crisis is precisely addressed to the symptoms and contradictions of late capitalism. D-Fens's adverse reaction to them, taking the law into his own hands, legitimated by his belief in an open public sphere of debate based upon reason and the rights of the family, gives expression and release for the viewer to these everyday frustrations and fears. D-Fens, therefore, after giving expression to the angers of the community, framed as the film's audience aligned to the dominant position of white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity, suffers the consequences of living them out through ostracism from the community and eventual death.

Returning to the *Empire* interview, Joel Schumacher seems to have a presentiment of the sacrificial-crisis:

His [D-Fens's] release is so identifiable to all of our angers because they're simple ones. [...] Getting out of a car in the middle of traffic; the desire to maybe pull out a gun if you don't get something your way. You're watching this man do these things he's only dreamed of before, and there's a high that goes with it. But, like all abhorrent behaviour that makes you high, there's a price and I think the reason we don't do these things is because, like Michael [Douglas], you cross the line. If you pull out a gun when you don't get what you want, you'll eventually use it, because what if the person still says no? What if that person says, 'I don't care how many guns you pull I'm still not giving you your burger or your breakfast'? What do you do?¹¹⁸

Schumacher presents a situation where anger begins to escalate in the community and seems to understand this as a system of limits that, though exceeding these limits may be exhilarating, places one in a direct relation to violence and possible death. By crossing the line, one steps out of the community and can expect to face the unanimous violence of this community against oneself. This unanimous violence is presented as an insuperable power, a divine violence. The problems of the social order are, therefore, blamed not upon the social situation but D-Fens's approach to it; *D-Fens's narrative of legitimation is incorrect for late capitalism and by holding on to his convictions he steps outside of the community and is threatened with death*. By threatening the community he draws out this transcendent violence. The film can, therefore, be said to have a socially cathartic function by expressing current frustrations and placing the guilt on the almost comic character of D-Fens, the death of whom, though tragic, both in its dramatic and emotive sense, seems necessary to bring back order.¹¹⁹ Michael Douglas can be seen as

¹¹⁸ Salisbury, 'He's "an 'ordinary man at war with the everyday world" ...', p. 77.

¹¹⁹ For Girard sacrificial catharsis is the means of preventing violence spreading throughout the community by displaying violence in a ritual setting and displacing it onto the scapegoat. Catharsis, in this sense, is a purging of the guilt of the community over its own violence, restoring its self image as 'good'. An interesting approach to catharsis and sacrifice is presented in Mark Pizzato, *Theatres of Human Sacrifice: From Ancient Ritual to Screen Violence* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005). He suggests, through a Lacanian analysis, a distinction between a melodramatic catharsis, which presents a simple distinction between good and evil, and tragic catharsis, which presents a 'sacrifice of the sacrifice' clarifying unconscious symptoms which can thereby be transformed (p. 39).

specifically embodying this exceptional being through his 'star appeal' rather than the more 'human' Robert Duvall.¹²⁰

How does the community morally justify this violence against one of its own? As with the story of Oedipus, *Falling Down* suggests that the family marks the site where legitimation or delegitimation takes place. There is, therefore, a structural significance to the position of women and children (particularly the image of the young girl) in the movie that acts as the focus of legitimation and to justify action taken when the limits of behaviour are breached. The family, in this sense, structures the roles for Prendergast and D-Fens, and it is the transformation of the white, male heterosexual view of women and children that is presented in the parallel evolution of these two characters. D-Fens has not accepted that he can no longer rule over his wife and child: he is on his way 'home' but has no home or family to go to. Prendergast, meanwhile, comes to accept the loss of his daughter, and starts to express his own opinions and desires to his wife. *Falling Down* presents the nuclear family as a place of fear, aggression and anxiety from which men need to withdraw: in D-Fens's case, so that Beth and Adele can be free of his idealistic paternalism and for Prendergast, to be free from his desire to be a father, and from his smothering, mentally insecure wife. The freedom of Adele from the clasps of 'the father' in the form of both D-Fens and Prendergast acts to justify the violence done by Prendergast and the guilt accepted by D-Fens.

There are, therefore, two connected concerns; the social that is represented as a site of conflict concerning the whole community, and the familial that subsumes the social within a narrative of inter-familial relations, and specifically for D-Fens, his threat to Beth and Adele. Social concerns are corrected by, and reduced to, specific gender

¹²⁰ The specific position of Michael Douglas as a 'star' is taken up by Cynthia Rose in her review of the film (p. 53) and Jude Davies and Carol Smith (*Gender, Ethnicity*, pp. 25-6). The relationship between the 'star' from film and sport and the sacrificial victim is taken up in Mark Pizzato, *Theatres of Human Sacrifice*, (pp. 61-6).

regulations cut off from the community. The sacrifice that needs to take place is that of man in relation to women and children, whose approval is seen as reward and legitimation for adherence to cultural norms. *Falling Down*, however, does not promise satisfaction in the sphere of the family, which is consistently represented as a site of trauma, but only within the world of work and work relations, or more literally for Prendergast, within the law.¹²¹

The blame for conflict within the community is upon the individual, represented by the male character, not learning the correct gender and generational relations. The tragic/comic exemplification of their constructed nature, however, comes in the form of Beth's conversation with the police officer about D-Fens's restraining order, where the distance that is to be kept by D-Fens from her and Adele becomes peculiarly arbitrary. Beth thinks that there is a defined limit that is written 'in law' whereas it becomes apparent that this is arbitrarily set by a judge who wishes to 'make an example' of him. Strangely, in relation to traditional narratives, in the case of D-Fens, the limits that he oversteps are that of being overzealously patriarchal. By holding on to outdated relations, and stepping outside of the rules, D-Fens marks the line that cannot be crossed by those within the community without the threat of death. These lines, unconventional for traditional gender criticism, are staked around the freedom of women and children from the patriarchal relationship. The ritual aspect of D-Fens's sacrifice returns order to the community by granting freedom not only to women and children but also this new image of masculinity, and the 'event' that causes the rupture in the social fabric is subsumed under this new narrative.

Such familial relations cover over the social nature of the limits that D-Fens marks out. It suggests that familial relations are merely an organising principle for the

¹²¹ This is exemplified by importance of Sandra's relationship to Prendergast in the script.

wider community as demonstrated by D-Fens's revelation at the end of the pier. When D-Fens uses the phrase from the black protester, 'I'm not economically viable', he reveals the real social demand that he has not lived up to and accepts this guilt, giving his life so that Adele can receive the insurance money that she will receive from his death. Prendergast acts, therefore, in the name of the law, which is willingly acceded to by D-Fens as just, but this law is determined through the terms of economics. Prendergast draws down the 'ultimate' judgment, the judgement that cannot be responded to, and sets the limits of the social.

This is where *Falling Down* maintains its tragic connection to Oedipus. I would suggest that this is what Joel Schumacher means when he states: "I think the fact that many people are disturbed by the fact that they can't work out whether Michael is the good guy or the bad guy is the point."¹²² As I mentioned in the introduction to the chapter *Falling Down* presents, and multiplies, a striking ambivalence about the representation of white masculinity at the end of the twentieth-century. The ambivalence lies in the audience's relation to D-Fens's 'falling down'. D-Fens is a tragic character, overcome by a system that he cannot understand and whose lack of knowledge marks him as innocent; only being guilty of his lack of knowledge. This 'true' knowledge acts as an eternal truth, an act of God, fate or destiny, which draws down the ultimate judgement of death. If we return to Lyotard's formula, *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*, the position of *y* is taken up exactly by the social body whose just laws are carried out by *x*, in the form of Prendergast. The ironic point which is highlighted by Girard's analysis is that the just law is an arbitrary outcome of the ability to wield this ultimate violence in the threat of death, but, most importantly, *that the social body accept this violence as necessary for its continuance*. The

¹²² Salisbury, 'He's "an 'ordinary man at war with the everyday world" ...', p. 77.

violence that the community does to itself is expressed precisely as a norm, and it is not until the norm is shown to be violent *in itself* that a new sacrificial crisis will arise.

Through this formula we can see how the model of Prendergast does not present itself as the bearer of violence, but as the natural bearer of 'the good'. Girard's analysis demands from the community a loss of innocence, in that the community is not 'good' in itself, but is defined by the transcendent power of a *y* that embodies violence. What is significant about *Falling Down*, however, is that fate, as the justified *y* of legitimation and the accepted parameters of the community, is economic viability.

What has made *Falling Down* so popular but also of critical concern, however, is the fact that the film does not so easily resolve this transformation of legitimation. The film leaves ambiguous the morality of a sacrifice made for economic viability, which is emphasised in the film by us not seeing D-Fens shoot Sandra at the end of the film, which would dispose the viewer more firmly against D-Fens. Though the sacrifice seems necessary, an act of fate or destiny, in my opinion, it does not feel just in a simple or Manichean way. The notion that D-Fens's narrative should be treated by common-sense as 'wrong' and Prendergast's as 'right' seems open to debate. This may also account for the difficulty in theorising the film. Does that mean to say that D-Fens's moral position is correct? I would suggest not. What I would suggest is that, the question of social transformation and its final justification through economic viability highlighted by D-Fens's journey and sacrifice is left wanting, and critically opened by the film; an empty space left where no answer is given, and no solution found, only an enigmatic problem, a *differend*.

The phrase 'I'm not economically viable' is the driving force of the narrative but also shows the narrative's failure to resolve this event. D-Fens's economic unviability and the travails it engenders invest a desire to confront and transform social relations.

This desire played out through the scenarios of the film, however, is finally rendered impossible and psychotic through the intervention of Prendergast's narrative of legitimization. 'I'm not economically viable' calls forth the sacrificial crisis and the demand for a new narrative in which to account for this event which is legitimated by the 'divine' violence of the community (the 'they' that no longer reward the defence worker but rather the plastic surgeon). This new narrative demands transformation come in the form of male subjectivity renouncing power over women and children and a return to work to resolve the event. But, *Falling Down* does not exhaust the event. The film's story, though presenting an 'inevitable' conclusion, leaves open an ethical demand of how to react to the event of the economic unviability of masculinity in late capitalism. Tragically, however, it threatens madness and death to those that take up such a demand.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that *Falling Down* presents the economic unviability of a particular form of masculinity in contemporary America. This form of masculinity, organised through a metanarrative of emancipation, is presented as aberrant within contemporary American culture. The film's plot centres on D-Fens's disruption of everyday life through his mistaken belief in the white American male's position in the world. His lack of knowledge is based on an idealised view of the family, national identity and the world of work. As a consequence the private domain of home and family and the public realm of reasoned debate are no longer available to him. It is, no doubt, this knowledge that the audience is (retrospectively) meant to take up as being obvious and common-sense. As D-Fens's double, Prendergast acts to restore the law and represents a legitimate model of masculinity for contemporary America. This model

renounces the ideal of fatherhood and family for the pragmatic relationships of work, represented in the film as a place where he can once again secure his manhood. *Falling Down* is, therefore, a cultural product that openly addresses and performs the contestation of legitimate modes of masculinity in 1990s America around the terms of economic viability.

My analysis demonstrates that narratives of legitimation in the film organise modes of conduct performed by the male protagonists and through their contestation generate the dynamic of the story. The story is resolved by one narrative being successfully taken up by the destruction and acquiescence of all others. *Falling Down* positions the white American male as normalised (that is to say, turned into an everyday hero) through work and the law but in opposition to paternal power. Moreover, I suggested that this legitimation of Prendergast's narrative has an effect on the spatiotemporal orientation of masculinity that positioned it as a safeguard of the present in contradistinction to D-Fens's ideal of a better future and Nick's defence of a pure origin. What I presented as apparent in the film, however, and witnessed to by the ambivalent readings and audience reaction, is that D-Fens's economic unviability and the travails it engenders invests a desire to confront and transform social relations. Nonetheless, this desire, played out through the scenarios of the film, is finally rendered impossible and psychotic through the intervention of Prendergast's narrative of legitimation. The event of D-Fens's 'falling down' opens up the social to questioning but also singles him out as the scapegoat, the destroyer of differences, the creator of chaos, that needs to be destroyed to bring back order. The film acts as a disavowed fantasy of cultural agency, the space that white masculinity has traditionally filled, that is finally rejected for the 'reality' of Prendergast.

I suggested that the problematic event of economic unviability motivates the creation and contestation of narratives, as witnessed by the creation of the film itself. Yet the film's supposed solution in Prendergast's narrative, I propose, does not resolve the problem; it shows, rather, that there is a contestation taking place around the terms of masculinity. The film deliberately expresses doubts about the 'reality' that is being legitimated and normalised through D-Fens's sacrifice and the justice that *Falling Down* presents does not appear just, but rather necessary or expedient. Justice here is not the start of a new beginning, leading to a better future, but the acceptance of the way things are. Following Gormley, we can call this cynical realism. Prendergast's acceptance of the unquestionable nature of the social order when he states that 'they lie to everybody; they lie to the fish', marks out the inevitability of the current system, even though it may lie, pollute and kill. D-Fens's acceptance of this fact at the conclusion of the film in his own sacrifice signals his concession to this reality in the monetisation of his own life.

White heterosexual masculinity in *Falling Down*, in the form of Prendergast, once again takes the central legitimated role but with a loss of faith in any vision of its universally just nature. Unable to question the 'they' (the *y*) that lie to everybody, the white men are like the fishes around the pier, part of a system that goes beyond them and which they cannot affect. White masculinity must renounce ideas of social transformation and be resigned to the maintenance of the present in order for Adele to have her party which she is to enjoy even when her father has been killed and Prendergast's linguistic play is cynically used to cover over his inability to affect anything other than his immediate pragmatic relationships. *Falling Down* does not appear to have conviction in its portrayal of Prendergast's victory and the pathos of D-Fens's travails and sacrifice is the cipher for our own insecurity at ushering in this new reality.

The question of how to determine such a morally ambiguous reality is the concern of my next chapter. Here I will address David Fincher's 1995 *Se7en*. Similar to *Falling Down*, *Se7en* presents men in relation to an unlawful and fractious urban environment. Once again, a conflict can be traced in the narratives embodied in the three principal male characters as well as the final victory of just one. My emphasis in the next chapter is on how each of these narratives tries to determine the chaotic and indifferent city represented in the film. This inevitably concerns moral questions of good and bad, sin and salvation and law and criminality. Each narrative embodies a moral order that legitimates itself in different ways and presents different legitimate modes of masculine action. In order to further understand these means of legitimation I will turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze to extend my analysis of the structure of, and the conflicts that arise between, each of these narratives.

2

Se7en

Se7en, directed by David Fincher and released two years after *Falling Down*, shares a number of similar characteristics to Schumacher's film. Like *Falling Down*, *Se7en* received mixed reviews on its release, but was also a box office success, staying at number one for the first five weeks of its release.¹ As with the other 'male crisis' movies I look at here, it is based in a contemporary urban setting and deals primarily with men's relationship to this environment. Moreover, its bleak story broke with conventional, redemptive Hollywood endings and its plot played with expectations of genre boundaries.² What makes *Se7en* stand out from other serial killer movies is its ambivalent presentation of the nature of the serial killer's crimes. This ambivalence around questions of justice and what value system should define it, and men's special

¹ Amy Taubin, 'The Allure of Decay', *Sight and Sound*, 1 (1996), 23-4 (p. 23).

² David Fincher recalls thinking on reading the script, 'first you thought it was going to be a cop movie, then you thought it was going to be a thriller, and then at the end it's really a horror movie'. Mark Salisbury, 'Seventh Hell', *Empire*, 80 (1996), 79-87 (p. 82).

place as executioners of such values, are key themes that connects my readings of 90s representations of masculinity.

In *Se7en*, as with *Falling Down*, there are a number of competing narratives embodied in male protagonists that contend to be the true bearer of knowledge about the city and its problems. The story is motivated by the aberrant relationship to the current social order experienced by one man, serial killer John Doe (Kevin Spacey). This relationship, as with *D-Fens*'s, places him in conflict with the law. Contrary to *D-Fens*, however, this conflict is not because of his lack of knowledge or naïve belief in a defunct social order but because of his desire to bring about a new law and transform society through his acts of murder. The criminal justice system in *Se7en* is represented not by one model of masculinity, as in *Falling Down*, but by two: the soon-to-be-retired, gifted but jaded, black Detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman), and out-of-town, hot-headed rookie, white Detective Mills (Brad Pitt). As with *D-Fens*, played by Michael Douglas, it is the white Hollywood star, Brad Pitt, playing Mills who is the tragic figure who lacks knowledge and will eventually be punished at the film's conclusion. Once again, it is the bearer of the traditionally normative marks of white, heterosexual masculinity who is the film's ultimate victim.

The film follows the last seven days of homicide detective William Somerset's career, as he is joined by his replacement, David Mills, a young detective from 'upstate' who has transferred to a position in the city. They are assigned to investigate a spate of murders by a man basing his killings on the Seven Deadly Sins. After completing the first five murders of Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Lust and Pride, the killer, known as John Doe, hands himself in saying he will sign a full confession if Somerset and Mills accompany him to find the last two victims. The three men drive into the desert, and at seven p.m.

on the seventh day a package is delivered by courier addressed to Mills containing his wife's head. Doe explains that he had tried to 'play husband' with Tracy (Gwyneth Paltrow) but that it had not 'worked out', therefore killing her and her unborn child. His own sin had been Envy of Mills' normal life. The final irony being that, by taking revenge and killing him, Mills will, himself, complete Doe's work by becoming Wrath. Mills does kill Doe, and the film ends with Somerset remaining in work and Mills a broken man.

The film stands out as being primarily concerned with moral justice, or as Richard Dyer suggests, sin.³ While *Falling Down* ends more conventionally with the fully justified death of the criminal D-Fens (however unjust this feels), *Se7en* ends with the feeling that justice is impossible; that for the law to be upheld injustices must happen. Throughout this chapter I will develop the specific moral construction of the three narratives of legitimation in Mills, Doe and Somerset, showing how each differs as well as how each narrative challenges the other. This will lead to the question of how each of these narratives try to deal with the contingency of the event that disrupts their narrative and how one narrative remains at the conclusion of the film as the only one possible.

The contestation of narratives in *Se7en* is motivated first and foremost by each character's fundamental relation to the city. As I suggested in the last chapter, the victory of Prendergast over D-Fens comes through D-Fens's acceptance of the reality of economic viability. This acceptance, however, leaves a city that is described as 'sick' and a system run by a 'they' who care little for those outside of its rules. The representation of the city as 'sick' is particularly apparent in *Se7en* by the extreme manner in which it is characterised as a place of horror, death and decay. The nameless city, and the

³ Richard Dyer, *Seven* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

character's reaction to it, marks the crux on which each of the three men's narratives is staked. The city acts as the essential plot device in the film. It is this malevolent place, and what to do about it, that animates the moral tension in the film. Returning to Girard's thesis, it is the question of the city as a site of violence and indifference that marks the sacrificial crisis for the community at large. I will, therefore, first address *Se7en's* representation of the city before moving on to assess the modes of legitimacy each character expresses in response to the challenge it places.

1.

The city

Andrew Kevin Walker, who wrote the screenplay for *Se7en*, claims: 'The idea [for *Se7en*] was really something I first thought of when I was living in New York City. I lived there for about five years and I was miserable just about every minute of every day.'⁴ This misery is made palpable in Fincher's visual depiction of the city, which is never named in the film, and its portrayal is given considerable attention in the critical literature.⁵ Particular focus has been placed on the technical choices made by Fincher, cinematographer Darius Khondji and designer Arthur Max to create *Se7en's* dark, decaying atmosphere. Of note is the silver retention process, not normally used in film production because of cost, where the silver is reapplied to the film stock to deepen the darks. Richard Dyer in his extended appraisal of the film explains:

⁴ Caroline Westbrook, 'Killer Instinct: Interview with Andrew Kevin Walker', *Empire*, 80 (1996), 86 (p. 86).

⁵ *Se7en*, like *Falling Down*, was shot in Los Angeles, although it does not share the same aesthetic as the latter film and is more reminiscent of New York.

Khondji seems to have determined the base means of *Seven's* [sic] 'crepuscular aesthetic' with certain fundamental cinematographic decisions: Panavision Primo lenses ('very sharp, very graphic and contrasty') and Kodak stock 93 for interiors ('all the gritty stuff'), 45 for daytime and 87 for night-time exteriors (giving especially 'rich' blacks). The processing used a resilvering technique. Silver is normally taken out of prints, partly to save money, partly because a blander, less contrasted look is believed to be what people want. In the technique used for *Seven*, [sic] the silver is put back in the processing – the stock 'run first through colour baths then re-souped as black and white', making rich, black blacks and desaturated colours.⁶

This treatment of the film was matched with a similar concern for the colour palette used. Dyer continues: 'The colour signature of *Seven* [sic] is oligochromatic, that is, composed of a very limited, closely related range of colours: white, cream, grey, slate, ochre, beige, brown, black and dirty, acidic greens.'⁷ Sound is equally important to presenting the city as an inescapable presence that seeps into and invades all its parts. Ambient noise is present throughout the film polluting the spaces and suggesting no escape from its influence. As Dyer points out, you hear the film before you see it, noise coming from car horns, sirens, the neighbours in the next apartment, the television. The first scene opens onto Somerset getting ready for work. His life appears, even in these first few seconds of the film, to be an effort to bring order to this chaos as his rigorously ordered apartment and personal effects are overlaid by the noise of the city.

The importance of the representation of the city in *Se7en* as a theme has also been highlighted in a number of theoretical studies. These have suggested that, on the cultural level, what motivates *Se7en's* depiction of the city is a white fear of black and urban culture. Continuing the discussion of Hollywood cinema that I addressed in relation to *Falling Down*, Paul Gormley relates the desire to re-inscribe cinema with affective power in the 90s to the adoption of images that use, or are drawn from, black

⁶ Richard Dyer, *Seven* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 62.

⁷ Ibid.

cultural production. In *Se7en* he adduces: 'the desire and anxiety that the white cultural imagination associates with images of contemporary black culture [...] [which] is most marked [...] in *Se7en's* imitation of the aesthetic styles of the contemporary media images that are both a cause and symptom of the perception of contemporary African-American culture as immanently violent.'⁸ Drawing on Amy Taubin's observations, Gormley suggests that the use of shallow focus is designed to make the audience uneasy; to make them feel as though something could jump out from the corner of the image at any moment. Playing on the notion that the camera could be the unsuspecting witness of a random or unexpected event, this form of camera work is more commonly connected to video recording and documentary footage used in television crime shows than Hollywood cinema. This, along with the particularly dark aesthetic, creates an image 'from which violence could erupt at any given moment'.⁹

Similarly, in 'Places of Horror', Steve Macek situates *Se7en* among a spate of American cultural productions, in television and cinema, such as *Cops*, *Batman* and *The Crow*, that have, from the 1980s, represented the city as a 'hell' and a place of 'moral breakdown' from which the middle-classes want to escape. Macek argues that this form of representation mobilises ascent to a particularly conservative political position that expresses the fears of suburban, white culture. He claims: '*Se7en* validates suburbia's long-standing revulsion towards a (mostly poor, mostly of color) inner-city understood as *essentially* unruly and beyond hope.'¹⁰

Both of these readings argue that a dominant white cultural imagination is reacting with fear, but also with intrigue, to a black urban 'other', to which it is drawn as

⁸ Paul Gormley, 'Trashing Whiteness: Pulp Fiction, *Se7en*, *Strange Days*, and Articulating Affect', *Angelaki*, 6 (2001), 155-171 (p. 163).

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 164.

¹⁰ Steve Macek, 'Places of Horror: Fincher's *Seven* and Fear of the City in Recent Hollywood Film', *College Literature*, 26 (1999), 80-97, (p. 89).

a means of entertainment but also repelled from as a group that needs to be overcome and controlled. However, both authors also implicitly suggest that this is an *abstract fear* but remain content to reify particular groups (blacks, the urban poor), and fail to address this more fundamental desire and fear of a relation to an unknown other, or outside, that resists determination. Macek appears to show an understanding of this when he quotes Homi Bhabha's suggestion of a distinction between difference and 'the known' which articulates conservative attitudes:

The conservative suburban attitude is founded on the fear of difference; and a narrow-minded appeal to cultural homogeneity. It is a kind of national paranoia that draws the boundary between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable ever more tightly around the norm of the 'known'.¹¹

I would contend that the fear of marginalised groups that animates dominant cultural norms is a rationalisation of the fear of the other, or of difference itself, that motivates the desire to draw distinctions between 'the self' and this undetermined other.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the position of the norm, as a narrative of legitimation that determines addressor, addressee and referent, situates the boundaries of the 'known' and what lies within or outside of these boundaries. It is at these boundaries that violence erupts in an effort to determine difference. The act of determining difference by bringing it into the known is the point at which the law marks the inside and outside of these boundaries, the acceptable and the unacceptable, the good and the bad. For Girard, the sacrificial crisis is the moment when the law needs to be reasserted and this is exactly where difference is determined and placed within agreed boundaries. *Se7en* presents the city as the place where rigid differences have become blurred and identities dissolved, and it is in relation to this question of how

¹¹ Homi Bhabha, 'Bombs Away in Front-line Suburbia', in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 299, quoted in Macek, p. 89.

difference should be determined that the three characters of Somerset, Mills and Doe are placed.

In the last chapter I framed this question with reference to Lyotard's concept of narratives of legitimation, each narrative joining together phrases in particular and distinct ways to cover over the aporia of authorisation and the contingency of the event. Difference, here, is determined through distinct narratives embodied in each of the white male characters. In this chapter I continue these concerns but in terms of narratives being evidence of a particular logic of representation that arises from an effort to comprehend and deal with difference. I will, therefore, be looking at the logic of different forms of representation that make up the narratives of legitimation of the three principal characters, Mills, Doe and Somerset. For this task I will turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze. I have three reasons for utilising the work of Deleuze for this task. First, he has consistently dealt with the philosophical question of difference, particularly in his seminal text *Difference and Repetition* which presents a critique of representation in order to construct a concept of difference *in itself*.¹² Second, he has undertaken a direct philosophical engagement with the images that cinema produces in his books *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*.¹³ Third, Deleuze's philosophy of the event is directly engaged with formulating an ethics that attempts to determine the ground for moral action.¹⁴ All of these concerns build upon the understanding of narratives of legitimation that I began to develop in Chapter 1 and to which I will return throughout my thesis as its organising principle.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1992); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989).

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of Deleuze's philosophy of the event dealing with moral questions see James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Logic of Sense: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), especially 'Chapter 4: Morals and Events', pp. 135-174.

In Deleuze's most highly regarded text, *Difference and Repetition*, first published in 1969, he critiques what he calls a dogmatic image of thought which ties thought to representation and common sense that stops us from grasping difference as a 'thought without Image'.¹⁵ Representation is critical here as it is from the ground of representation that, Deleuze argues, philosophy legitimates itself but also betrays itself. Deleuze puts into question the legitimacy of representation as the foundation of philosophy, suggesting instead a pre-representational field of forces is its true legitimate ground. Returning to Lyotard's statement on norms that *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*, Deleuze, in his own way, questions the foundations on which this y is constructed and what legitimacy it draws upon to justify the actions of x. In sum, Deleuze addresses the question of the genesis of thought, setting out the fundamental ground from which judgments can be legitimately made.¹⁶

The rest of the chapter will develop the three narratives of legitimation that are represented in the characters of Mills, Doe and Somerset through Deleuze's critique of models of representation. Each of these narratives is remarkably close to the specific way Deleuze describes how certain philosophers and, in his cinema books, film-makers, have accounted for difference. Much like Lyotard's reading, these narratives are means of containing difference and fending off the contingency of the event and it is to a consideration of the event that I shall turn at the end of the chapter.

¹⁵ Deleuze, *Difference*, p. 132.

¹⁶ For a detailed study of the genesis of thought in Deleuze see Joe Hughes, *Deleuze and the Genesis of Representation* (London: Continuum, 2008).

2.

Mills

Se7en presents three approaches to confronting indifference through three narratives that try to make sense of the city. The first that I want to address is Mills's, who acts as one of the focal points of attachment in the film. Like him, we are new to the city and do not hold the knowledge of either Somerset or Doe and, like Mills, we are led towards this knowledge by them both as they play the role of his 'teachers'. Mills comes across as the average, white American male who displays a natural propensity to do good. This is already suggested by the choice of actor in the young and handsome Brad Pitt, a high profile Hollywood actor, with star appeal and known at the time for his roles as a movie 'hero'.¹⁷ The desire of Mills's character to do good is set out at the beginning of the film. Before the opening credits, Mills meets Somerset for the first time at the scene of a murder. Somerset wants to take a moment, go to a bar, and talk with Mills about his transition to a post in the city, but Mills refuses in a rush to get started in his new role. Somerset asks Mills a question that is troubling him: why did he seek to be transferred here? Mills, looking uncomfortable and out of place in the city, bumping into people, yet trying to hold a pose of authority, suggests that he shares the reasons that Somerset had had before he decided to quit. Somerset, shocked by Mills's assumption about his own motives, retorts: 'But, you've only just met me!' Mills, feigning incomprehension, rattles out: 'I thought maybe I could do some good.' This appears as a flippant remark but contrasts his position to that of a jaded cop at the murder scene who, when asked if the child of the murder victim saw the shooting, replies, 'who gives a fuck?'

¹⁷ Pitt had begun to break into the Hollywood elite the year before *Se7en's* release with his well-received roles in *Interview with the Vampire*, dir. by Louis de Pointe du Lac (Warner Bros, 1994), and *Legends of the Fall*, dir. by Tristan Ludlow (TriStar Pictures, 1994).

There is also an intertextual appeal from Mills's to an archetypal figure of a cop trying to do good. When leaving for work, Mills says to his wife, Tracy, 'Serpico's got to go!'. This reference to Al Pacino's character in Sidney Lumet's 1973 film *Serpico*, based on a true story of a cop who singlehandedly cleans up the corruption-ridden New York police department, suggests that Mills holds a clear understanding of good and evil, defined by a division into the good guys and the bad guys in relation to an essentially just law.¹⁸

Furthermore, *Se7en* portrays Mills as a man of action, out to bring justice to the city. When writing the screenplay for *Se7en*, the distinction between the Mills and Somerset was emphasised by cutting many of Somerset's lines, where he would convey meaning merely through a look whereas, as Dyer notes, 'Mills is constant hubbub', knocking into things, making jokes, chattering.¹⁹ Mills is perpetual action and reaction to everything around him. Mills wants to act for 'the good', which, so far, for him, has appeared to be self-evident, as much as his actions have brought those who are outside the law into line with it. Good and bad, correctness and error, are defined through a supposed implicit knowledge held within the hero that is acted upon, violently if need be, to bring about this 'justice', and to bring order to what is not ordered. Mills's statement 'I thought that maybe I could do some good', is rushed out and quickly covered over as though out of embarrassment, maybe at its naivety, but also his unquestioning understanding of what the phrase may mean. It is this understanding that will be challenged through the events of *Se7en*.

¹⁸ *Serpico*, dir. by Sidney Lumet (Paramount, 1973).

¹⁹ Dyer, *Seven*, p. 51.

Mills and organic representation

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze takes issue with the implicit understanding of 'the good' that I have suggested characterises Mills. He argues that the assumption that has most blighted philosophical enquiry is the belief that the thinker 'naturally' thinks and wants the true and that this truth is 'good'. By making this presupposition, philosophy has traditionally sided with the 'natural man', one who is not tainted by the knowledge of the time, and places its faith in private man's 'natural capacity for thought'.²⁰ As Deleuze explains, the assumption that this philosophy holds 'consists only of the supposition that thought is the natural exercise of a faculty, of the presupposition that there is a natural capacity for thought endowed with a talent for truth or an affinity with the true, under the double aspect of a *good will on the part of the thinker* and an *upright nature on the part of thought*'.²¹

Immortalised in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, Deleuze argues that philosophy traditionally proposes that everyone can think. You may doubt anything you wish other than that this thinking discloses your being. This assertion contains an implicit subjective presupposition that 'everyone knows' what is meant by self, thinking and being; that the 'I', to think, and its being, (I think therefore I am) are all presupposed as the self-evident ground of thought. By presuming that 'everybody knows' what it means to think, it matters little which term is begun with, whether the self, thought or being, since everything is prejudged by what Deleuze calls an image of thought. Deleuze, following Nietzsche, suggests that this image of thought is dogmatic, orthodox or moral. By connecting the good to the true, and the true to thought, thought is moralised in advance. As Deleuze states: 'When Nietzsche questions the most general

²⁰ Deleuze, *Difference*, p. 130.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 131.

presuppositions of philosophy, he says that these are essentially moral, since “Morality alone is capable of persuading us that thought has a good nature and the thinker a good will, and that only the good can ground the supposed affinity between thought and the True”.²²

Using this presupposition as a starting point, Deleuze sets out a precise definition of what he calls common sense and good sense, or *cogitatio natura universalis*, which validates and justifies this image of thought. Common sense is expressed, for Deleuze, as the collaboration of all the faculties in the harmonious recognition of an object – in other words, what is recognised is the supposed same object of sight, touch, imagination and conception. This suggests that, in common sense, there is a unity of a subject that recognises objects, and therefore, as a consequence, recognises itself in the unspecified object. In good sense, there is a distribution of objects as empirically situated things. The self is recognised as the Same through which qualified objects exist but equally these qualified objects only exist through the supposition of the self. These two complementary parts are, first, the supposed unity of the faculties in a self of ‘I think’ and, second, the model of recognition that determines the harmonious contribution of the faculties. In recognising an object one recognises oneself and the truth of recognition constitutes the truth of the self. This is what Deleuze calls ‘organic representation’. What, then, happens when this ‘self’, the self of organic representation, is confronted with the undetermined or the indeterminate? How does it deal with difference? In order to preserve the integrity of organic representation, Deleuze contends, difference is seen as ‘against’ the true, as error or sin. Difference, in this instance, is considered aberrant or evil and needs to be determined to bring it in

²² Ibid. p. 132.

line with the good. According to Deleuze, 'On the basis of a first impression (difference is evil), [organic representation] is proposed to "save" difference by representing it.'²³

By basing the foundation of the self upon recognition, thought is bound to the recognisable and the recognised enforcing conformity to all the preestablished values laid out by the contemporary social order. Deleuze continues:

[H]ow derisory are the voluntary struggles for recognition. Struggles occur only on the basis of a common sense and established values, for the attainment of current values (honours, wealth and power). A strange struggle among consciousnesses for the conquest of the trophy constituted by the *Cogitatio natura universalis*, the trophy of pure recognition and representation.²⁴

Difference is relegated to error or aberration that needs to be brought within the realm of recognition. Common sense has little need of thought because it already recognises evil when it sees it: evil is difference. Recognition is, therefore, seen as being on the side of the good which makes no greater claim than to be self-apparent and recognised. Moreover, difference is turned by organic representation into the threat of catastrophe that destroys representation. However, despite the effort of organic representation to cover over difference, the continued threat of catastrophe bears witness to its own irreducible nature. As Deleuze points out, 'does not difference as catastrophe precisely bear witness to an irreducible ground which continues to act under the apparent equilibrium of organic representation?'²⁵ As I will show, this catastrophe that shatters Mills's mode of representation are the 'sermons' of Doe.

²³ Ibid. p. 29.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 136.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 35.

Mills and the action-image

I have set out above how Deleuze describes common sense and good sense as being connected to a form of representation which he calls 'organic' and which presents a certain type of morality, based upon recognition, and a certain manner of confronting difference, as catastrophe. This model of representation can be read as informing Mills's narrative. It is representative, in Deleuze's reading of cinema in his two *Cinema* books, of a particular mode of filmic production characterised by the classical Hollywood period. Classical Hollywood cinema, epitomised by D.W. Griffith, King Vidor and Howard Hawks, produced a model of cinematic production that Deleuze calls realism. According to Deleuze, realism has two defining features: milieus (environments) and behaviours. The milieu in realism is determined geographically, historically and socially. The space of the film is a particular place that can be located in the world. Behaviours are the reactions of the characters to the challenges set by the milieu.²⁶ Deleuze claims:

The milieu and its forces incurve on themselves, they act on the character, throw him a challenge, and constitute a situation in which he is caught. The character reacts in his turn (action properly speaking) so as to respond to the situation, to modify the milieu, or his relation with the milieu, with the situation, with other characters. He must acquire a new mode of being (habitus) or raise his mode of being to the demands of the milieu and of the situation. Out of this emerges a restored or modified situation, a new situation.²⁷

This, for Deleuze, is encapsulated in the formula: situation – action – modified situation (SAS'), which he names the action-image.²⁸ The action has the form of a duel or series of duels, either with the milieu, others or himself, that challenge the hero into a response.

²⁶ The model for this form of movie for Deleuze is Griffith's *Intolerance* (Triangle Distribution Corp., 1916) but can also be seen in such classic movies as *The Maltese Falcon*, dir. by John Huston (Warner Bros., 1941), *Sunset Boulevard*, dir. by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1950) and more recently in films that draw from these traditions such as *L.A. Confidential*, dir. by Curtis Hanson (Warner Bros., 1997).

²⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, pp. 141-2.

²⁸ Deleuze also develops another formula of the action-image, which he calls the small form, where the action discloses a situation and modifies subsequent action (ASA'). I will only be dealing with formula SAS' here as this relates most directly to Mills' narrative of legitimation.

The relationship between the milieu and behaviours that it forces is one of antagonism but also dependency. This is also why the main protagonist is a representative not just of himself but of the community. As Paola Marrati notes: 'the hero only becomes a hero, that is to say, he or she is up to the situation and capable of responding to the challenge of the milieu, only to the extent to which he or she represents the community. It is only through the mediation of the community that an individual can become a leader and accomplish a great deed.'²⁹

Returning to *Se7en*, we can see that Mills enters a situation which is represented as corrupt and in need of transformation. Mills wants to *act* to bring transformation to the situation by doing good, necessarily as a stand-in for the community. He wants to find the 'bad guy' and bring him to justice. A crime is encountered, sets up the duel of opposing forces within the milieu, and leads Mills through the film to the final action and confrontation that would ideally bring about a new situation; traditionally the nullification of the 'bad guy' and the reassertion of order in the community. Mills is thoroughly permeated by the situation that he finds himself in, completely engaged and constantly agitated by it; he wants to act to bring about transformation, and reacts to what happens to him.

As I have set out here, Mills embodies the narrative of the traditional action hero. He may engage in violence but this is to bring order back to the community and it is as the representative of this community that he legitimates himself. Filling in the positions of Lyotard's normative statement, the decree of *y* is authorised through the name of 'the people'. It is through common sense and common consent that he makes his decisions and by his ability to recognise 'the bad guy' as a threat to the image of the community.

²⁹ Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy*, trans. by Alisa Hartz (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008) p. 101.

Popular audience's expectations around the action-movie genre of this narrative would align their identification firmly with Mills heroic character. Therefore, in this situation there is a particular morality being presented that is in line with the dominant values embodied in the representation of what this community believes itself to be. However, while, in realist cinema, this would be the dominant narrative of the film, it is not the case in *Se7en*. Rather, the film places the realist moral narrative in contention. The static tableaux set out by John Doe thwart Mills's action and deny him any reaction. Staging the Deadly Sins contests his moral narrative with one that is fundamentally different. This also transforms the expectations of the audience. While the action-image is dominated by the movement of the indomitable will of the hero towards an inevitable conclusion, Doe's crimes thwart this movement enforcing a direct experience of time. The transformation of Mills, the questioning of Mills's narrative of legitimation and his status as hero, disrupt the classical Hollywood action-image in *Se7en*. John Doe is not just the 'bad guy', antagonistic to the hero, but throws down a fundamental challenge to Mills's narrative of legitimation, or 'image of thought' and places into question the moral foundations of 'organic representation'.

What is at stake here, then, is less the traditional duel between forces of good and evil but rather the contestation of competing narratives battling over the rules by which actions are to be determined and punished in the contemporary city. These narratives are, once again, embodied in male characters in competition over who represents the 'correct' moral law. Mills's narrative of legitimation, rather than being complemented by Doe's, is in fact challenged by it. It is, therefore, Doe's narrative of legitimation to which I now turn.

Doe and the encounter

For Mills, the city has lost its community values and has become a hell of indifference that he tries to determine through his actions. The encounter with John Doe's crimes, however, fundamentally challenges his narrative of legitimation. Doe's crimes are out of the ordinary, unlike anything Mills has formerly dealt with. Each of the killings is set up as a tableau that is to be *read*, each one accompanied by the name of a Deadly Sin written in the material of this sin (grease for Gluttony, blood for Greed, etc.). These crimes are not just 'crimes of passion' or 'gang crime', determined by action and reaction and simple cause and effect, but are marked by a design that is meant for an audience: these crimes are meant to be seen, meant to be read. This is not the act of punishing a personal offence or making someone 'disappear' but is *intended to transform the perception of the witness through a visceral shock and make the spectator think*. As Somerset says when reporting back on the Gluttony killing, 'You don't risk the time it takes to do this unless the act, itself, has meaning.' As I have discussed in relation to the action-image, the milieu has presented a challenge to our heroes in the form of Doe's crimes, but it appears different from the usual challenge set by Hollywood convention, and this is portrayed through the nature of the image. Each image is complete in itself, as though it is divorced from the contingencies of its context in order to set-out its essential nature. By negating the specificity of the victim as a member of a community, the message that Doe creates is one of universal values. Rather than a race to stop the criminal actions of a murderer like in other serial killer movies, such as in Clarice's race to stop Buffalo Bill killing his next victim in *The Silence of the Lambs*, the detectives are confronted by staged images, where the action has already taken place

only leaving signs.³⁰ Doe's crime, therefore, is meant to have meaning *in itself*: it is meant as a revelation of a truth independent of its actors. In each of the killings Doe is forcing the viewer to look, not at him, but at values beyond the world each of the victims inhabits.

This situation does not fit with the notion of action and reaction that the behaviourism of realist cinema demands. It creates an image that makes action impossible. The viewer has to be a *reader* of the image to decipher Doe's narrative and is forced into inaction. It is this creative staging of the tableau that has drawn comparisons between Doe and an artist.³¹ Mills and Somerset, rather than being able to bring these acts in line with their own law, have to decipher the rules of Doe's game.³² In the film they cannot immediately react to change the situation, to bring back order, but are constantly forced to sit and wait for something to happen. The killings are, therefore, not just acts that bring about a transformation in empirical relations but are the transformation of how one thinks about those relations. They are an act of bringing to consciousness; to make one aware of something that is not usually perceptible in our habitual manner of being.

The importance of the crimes as the organising principle, over and above the characters, is evident in the advertising for *Se7en*. The main billboard and, later, DVD cover, shows both Pitt and Freeman but is dominated by the Seven Deadly Sins, each named and crossed through with red ink. Chris Pula, the New Line marketing chief, who oversaw the marketing for *Se7en*, described the star of the movie as 'the crime, the

³⁰ *Silence of the Lambs*, dir. by Jonathan Demme (Orion Pictures, 1991).

³¹ For an extended discussion of this comparison see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 6-11.

³² Philippa Gates, in *Detecting Men*, suggests that the role of the 'criminalist', the person who gets 'inside the serial killer's mind', became pervasive in the mid-1990s (p. 3).

seven deadly sins'.³³ With the title also stylised and the repetition of sevens throughout the film (seven days, seven killings, seven ticks on the metronome, seven p.m. on the seventh day) *Se7en* displays an overdetermined organisation. Amy Taubin has described this repetitive schema as 'pat', 'pretentious' and 'slipshod' but fails to grasp the dialectic being set up between chaos and order that motivates the film.³⁴ It is this aggressive determination of the city that creates the horror of *Se7en's* murders, not through violent action but by the indomitable will to create such a message. We do not see Doe 'at work' but rather see his completed creations that bear meaning. *Se7en*, by the way that it represents the crimes of John Doe, challenges the classical Hollywood action-image with a different aesthetic.

The crimes, therefore, halting response, necessarily force us to think; they precipitate a violence upon thought. Returning to Deleuze's critique of representation in *Difference and Repetition*, it is the violence of an encounter that Deleuze suggests, in a detailed reading of Plato, is necessary for the beginning of thought.

[T]he claws of absolute necessity [are] an original violence inflicted upon thought; the claws of a strangeness or an enmity which alone would awaken thought from its natural stupor or eternal possibility: there is only involuntary thought, aroused but constrained within thought, and all the more absolutely necessary for being born, illegitimately, of a fortuitousness in the world. Thought is primarily trespass and violence, the enemy, and nothing presupposes philosophy: everything begins with misosophy.³⁵

³³ Maria Matzer, 'Selling Seven: Case Study on the Marketing of New Line's *Se7en*', *Hollywood Reporter*, Movies and the Media Special Issue, 342:42 (1996), 13-15 (p. 14). The importance of the crimes rather than the killer was also in evidence as Kevin Spacey's name was deliberately kept out of the advertising material and his name does not appear in the film until the final credits. Reviewers were also discouraged from disclosing Kevin Spacey's role in the film. See Jason Scott, 'The Persona of *Se7en*', *Scope*, 1 (2005) <<http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=1&id=7>> [accessed 8th November 2011] (para. 27 of 31).

³⁴ Taubin, 'The Allure of Decay', p. 23.

³⁵ Deleuze, *Difference*, p. 139.

This violent encounter with something in the world that forces thought, Deleuze insists, is not one of recognition, but of sense, and that sense is opposed to recognition. As described above, Mills's mode of legitimation is organised by recognition which bears directly upon the senses and can be recalled, imagined or conceived. It presupposes a harmonious functioning of the faculties in a common sense which makes action possible. This is not the case for the violence of the encounter. Deleuze states: 'The object of encounter [...] really gives rise to sensibility with regard to a given sense. [...] It is not a quality but a sign. It is not a sensible being but the being *of* the sensible. It is not the given but that by which the given is given.'³⁶ It is in this sense that the encounter is not recognised through the senses as an object of perception grasped in the empirical exercise of all the faculties, organised by common sense, but pushes the faculty to its limit at which what is encountered can only be sensed and is, therefore, from the point of view of recognition, unintelligible. It becomes a transcendental exercise: an object of thought rather than experience. The encounter forces sense to sense what can only be sensed, or what Deleuze calls the *sentendum*, and in this act it also pushes memory to its transcendental exercise, to remember what can only be remembered, the *memorandum*, and finally pushes thought to grasp what can only be thought, the *cogitandum*. From the encounter to thought each of the faculties has broken the form of common sense and is taken to its limit. Doe, by presenting a crime that defies the terms of action and reaction, forces thought to begin.

I have argued, following Deleuze, that the violence of the encounter marks the beginning of thought. In *Se7en*, the images that Doe creates force thought by halting reaction and taking it outside of its habitual boundaries of the recognised. But do Doe's

³⁶ Ibid. p. 139-40.

'lessons' take us beyond recognition, or do they not, rather, displace recognition from the realm of action and reaction onto a narrative of eternal values?

Doe and transcendental recognition

Deleuze describes the encounter as the beginning of thought, yet does Doe force us to think something new, or is what Doe asking us to learn still connected to a certain model of recognition? According to Deleuze, for Plato, what is encountered can be distinguished from recognition by being the object of what he calls a 'contradictory perception'.³⁷ What is recognised is the object of fore-knowledge and does not require thought, whereas what is encountered and forces thought, for Plato, is the coexistence of contraries. When a sensation is experienced through a faculty, such as 'to touch', in the act of touching one feels something's hardness but also the possibility of its absence, to touch is to experience the possibility of both. It is here that this narrative of legitimation falls back on recognition; not on what is recognised in perception, as in organic representation, but what is *recognised in the sign*: no longer limited to the confines of organic recognition, recognition becomes pure and unlimited. According to Deleuze 'this other thing, enveloped within the sign, must be at once never-seen and yet already-recognised, a disturbing unfamiliarity'.³⁸ Being unrecognised in perception the sign calls upon a reminiscence, but, unable to recall an empirical remembrance, the sign can only be assigned to a mythical present. Thought is then forced to think of a pure thing in itself. 'Thus, under the pressure of reminiscence, we are forced to think such things as Largeness which is nothing but large, Smallness which is nothing but small,

³⁷ The discussion that Deleuze draws upon is from *The Republic*, VII, 523d-524c.

³⁸ Deleuze, *Difference*, p. 142.

Heaviness which is nothing but heavy, or Unity which is nothing but one.’³⁹ Things are tied to an inviolable and infinite essence of which they are an expression. Rather than being local and contextually specific to a community of users, recognition becomes universal and infinite applicable at all times and in all places. This infinite essence, for Doe, has been divulged in Christian moral law which he takes to be the ultimate expression of ‘the good’. For the Gluttony killing we are presented with a tableau: the obese man, face submerged in spaghetti sauce, force-fed until he burst. In this image Doe wants us to recognise not the man but the essence of his actions that embody the term Gluttony. The term is literalised and points beyond empirical particularity towards a transcendent idea. The Deadly Sins are, therefore, eternally evil and point toward a moral truth beyond the empirical world.

Deleuze describes this creation of essential and indubitable transcendent ideas as tying thought back to representation and a betrayal of thought:

Having discovered the superior or transcendent exercise of the faculties, Plato subordinated this to the forms of opposition in the sensible, similitude in reminiscence, identity in the essence and analogy in the Good. In this manner he prepared the way for the world of representation, carrying out a first distribution of its elements and already covering the exercise of thought with a dogmatic image which both presupposes and betrays it.⁴⁰

Rather than the encounter being the beginning of thought, of a thought without image, the contrary perception submits us to the values of the already known. In his choice of victims, Doe does not demand thought but the submission to a dogmatic image of thought. We are all supposed to know what is ‘good’ and ‘evil’ by referring to Christian moral edicts, and these principles are no longer tied, as in the case of Mills, to a community (organic values) but to an ideal of universal and transcendent justice. In

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 142-3.

Lyotard's formula, the *y* would be authorised by the 'word of God' as the final legitimating instance. This set of values, then, justifies violence to enforce these moral laws. The problem of modern society, for Doe, is the loss of this knowledge, and the will to enforce its divine law. Doe, by taking each sin and turning it upon its perpetrator, *in extremis*, forces one to consider its opposite, not as an empirical moment but as a transcendental essence. By pushing difference to contradiction, Doe finds the infinite of God's law in the finite experience of everyday life, and the task he undertakes is to reveal this law to a fallen society. By turning the sin against the sinner Doe finds its eternal essence. Difference is, therefore, determined not by recognition but through contradiction: by positing identity through everything that it is not. It is through contradiction that difference becomes determined by essence and, consequently, that this essence is claimed effectively 'real' as opposed to the contingency of passing phenomena. In the case of Doe we are forced to think of temperance, generosity, zeal, chastity, humility, kindness and gentleness as transcendent ideals by positing their opposites in the Seven Deadly Sins. Difference is tied back to identity held in metaphysical essences.

Yet, explaining his actions to Mills and Somerset, Doe's description of the 'crimes' of his victims presents prejudice rather than moral superiority, baseness rather than profundity. He describes them as:

[a]n obese man, a disgusting man who could barely stand up, a man who if you saw him on the street, you'd point him out to your friends so that they could join you in mocking him, a man who, if you saw him while you were eating, you wouldn't be able to finish your meal. And after him I picked the lawyer [...] a man who dedicated his life to making money by lying with every breath he could muster to keep murderers and rapists on the street. A woman, a woman so ugly on the inside that she couldn't bear to go on living if she couldn't be beautiful on the outside. A drug dealer, a drug-dealing pederast, actually. And let's not forget the disease-spreading whore.

This choice of victim appears reactionary at best, as Dyer points out: ‘Doe is mobilising widespread views, or rather, where you don’t share them, prejudices: against fatness, legal shenanigans, rape, murder, narcissism, drug dealing, paedophilia, prostitution.’⁴¹ Doe wants to purify the world, make it aware of the purity of ideas, but placed in a conservative moral order. Drawing on Alice Turner’s study of the iconography of hell in Western art, Kirsten Moana Thompson in her appraisal of *Se7en* states:

Turner’s observation locates the ideological imperatives of Christian sin as rooted in the reinforcement of social hierarchy and the pathologizing of sexuality and difference. Transgression *within* the family threatened social hierarchy, and so the Seven Deadly Sins were a means of social control for the Catholic Church, whose temporal power in turn depended upon its cautionary tales of eschatological judgment. Dramatized in the peripatetic morality plays that starred Satan, Death, and the Sins as leading characters, the Seven Deadly Sins had a repressive function, for women were consistently likened with *vanitas*, and Jews were associated with greed (through usury). The plays also reflected homophobia, misogyny, erotophobia, and disgust for the body as part of the Pauline influence in the Catholic Church.⁴²

For Doe the city represents the fallen empirical world and through the sacrifice of his victims, himself and Mills, (as the necessary intermediary of the community and representative of the empirical world), he tries to prove the validity of his claims: that the action that Mills takes, even though it may be for the good of the community, are not good *in themselves*. The base nature of Mills’s justification in the good of the community is compared to the infinite ‘truth’ and power of another world of the pure idea. Doe’s plan to destroy Mills’s world by taking the life of his wife and unborn child, is meant to make him sense the love, the Idea of love, that goes beyond his mere empirical existence to one that is timeless, infinite, and is created in thought. This is the power and resonance of the flash frame of Tracy’s face as Mills battles over the choice that Doe has

⁴¹ Dyer, *Seven*, p.12.

⁴² Kirsten Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 113.

left him: the choice of confirming Doe's logic by killing him; or not killing him, and leaving Tracy unavenged. Mills is in a double bind; whatever path he chooses he destroys his own narrative of legitimation. Tracy's face marks the unrepresentable that Mills has been forced to recognise. Doe shows Mills this other transcendent world, but a world which Doe can only affirm through the negation of this one. Doe's victory and critique come through the destruction of Mills's narrative of legitimation, his destruction of the family as the final bastion of the community, to replace it with another narrative that no longer believes in this world and would destroy it to assert its truth. Doe's world is pure and beyond this corrupt finite and temporal plane.

This is not, however, the conclusion of the movie. There is another model of legitimation that survives this destruction and which proposes the failure of Doe's vision, offering another possible vision of the world. That is Somerset's narrative.

From Mills to Somerset: acting to seeing

As I have argued above, the images that Doe presents create an encounter that assaults the senses and forces thought. Yet Doe, after opening up the senses to a thought of difference that is not tied to recognition, betrays this thought by tying it back to a morality that is equally bound to the recognised: a transcendent and infinite representation. Doe rejects the physical world and its subjection to the body for an ideal plane that is only reached through the negation of the finite. Doe acts, like Mills, from a belief in a 'better' world, a better world to come, but for Doe this is an eschatological belief.

There is one character in the film, however, who does not act either from his emotions or on his beliefs: that is Somerset. From the first shots of his highly ordered apartment and his concern for the victim's child, the viewer is presented with an image of a thoughtful, compassionate and rigorous man who has been worn down by the nonsensical shocks and vicissitudes of the city. As a highly respected and acclaimed black actor, choosing Morgan Freeman for this role is significant in how it places into question the two previous narratives of masculinity embodied by Mills and Doe. That a black man should take up the final legitimated role in the film signifies a transformation in the dominant narrative of masculinity and raises doubts around the readings given by both Gormley and Macek about the fear incited by African-American imagery. The character of Somerset is also distinct from other black characters, such as Roger Murtaugh played by Danny Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* series or Sgt. Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson) in *Die Hard*, both of whom play the 'buddy cop' role to affirm and normalise the leading white character.⁴³ Somerset in *Se7en* does not affirm Mills's character but rather, as Amy Taubin points out, serves as the audience's point of identification.⁴⁴ Somerset plays the aspirational role of the man who is in control of himself, the embodiment of rational self-sufficiency.

Dyer, in his book *White*, argues that Prendergast's victory in *Falling Down* normalises the position of white domination by showing an extreme image of whiteness in the form of Nick and D-Fens that is pathologised, criminalised and finally destroyed. Left as a residue are the positions of normality and ordinary, 'plain, unwhite whiteness'

⁴³ *Lethal Weapon*. Dir. Richard Donner. Warner Bros. 1987. *Die Hard*. Dir. John McTiernan. 20th Century Fox. 1988. These films have been important to the study of masculinity and its relationship to the question of race. For detailed engagements with these films see, Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*; Fred Pfeil, *White Guys*; Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*.

⁴⁴ Taubin, 'The Allure of Decay', p. 23.

in the character of Prendergast.⁴⁵ This position consolidates the invisibility of whiteness as the position of unquestioned power. Prendergast, as the 'average guy', in comparison to the star appeal of Michael Douglas's D-Fens, is unmarked and can take on the mantle of the representative of the unassuming commonality of humanity, the expression of reality distinct from its filmic extremes. It is interesting in *Se7en* that it is Somerset, played by Morgan Freeman, who takes up the final legitimate position in contrast to the 'extreme whiteness' of both Mills/Pitt and Doe/Spacey. Rather than whiteness here, it would appear that it is heterosexual masculinity outside the bounds of race that is at question as it is Freeman who is the invisible normalised bearer of common sense and legitimate reality. *Se7en's* treatment of race as unmarked has been mentioned by a number of commentators as it successfully negotiates a particular narrative of legitimation, one that is defined by resigned individuality, beyond the markers of race to set up a common reality of a world which cannot and should not be determined without the gravest of consequences.⁴⁶ The position of Somerset does not, however, merely supersede the role of white hero to a more politically correct vision of masculinity, but rather signals a distinct transformation in the form of narrative of masculine legitimation. I began to outline this transformation in the case of Prendergast in *Falling Down*. In my analysis of *Se7en* I shall show how Somerset's narrative of legitimation connects to wider transformations in cinematic production suggested in Deleuze's account of cinema.

⁴⁵ Dyer, *White*, p. 223.

⁴⁶ Gates, *Detecting Men*, p. 200-1.

A crisis of the action-image

What we find in *Se7en* is Somerset's narrative intimately bound to a new means of creating images. As I have already mentioned in connection to Gormley's analysis of *Falling Down*, Deleuze argues that a new means of image-making in cinema arose after the Second World War. With Italian neo-realism and later the French new wave a new regime of image was formed distinct from that of the old realism. This cinema will become, in contrast to the cinema of milieu and behaviour, the cinema of the encounter, or optical and sound situations. As Deleuze claims: "This is a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent [*de voyant, non plus d'actant*]."⁴⁷ *Se7en* continually highlights the visual and the auditory for the viewer, not only in its visual style but also in its script. At their first meeting Somerset is worried for his replacement, Mills. Seeking to protect him from the traumatic city, Somerset's first piece of advice to his partner is to 'look and to listen'. The priority of looking and listening, here and in the crimes of Doe, over acting is paralleled in what Deleuze describes as a crisis in classical Hollywood cinema.

The cinematic narratives of legitimation presented in the characters of Mills and Somerset correspond, in a Deleuzian reading, to different forms of image-making which each define particular genres and historical periods of cinematic production. The two lead protagonists in *Se7en* present two alternative forms of cinematic character, from two different traditions of cinema: the classical Hollywood action hero, as I described above in the character of Mills, and a new type of actor or, rather, non-actor in the character of Somerset. As I mentioned, the number of lines spoken by Somerset was

⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 2.

deliberately reduced, at times, to just a look or a gesture.⁴⁸ This role is particularly suited to Morgan Freeman's acting style which Dyer calls 'expressively minimalist', and relies upon subtle gestures rather than grand actions.⁴⁹ Neo-realist cinema, famously De Sica's 1948 *The Bicycle Thieves*, but also other movies of the genre, would employ non-professional actors, or non-actors, for roles in their films to try to attain this new, less staged image.⁵⁰ Deleuze describes how a new sort of actor was required who would not know beforehand how to react to a situation but would rather show it: 'not simply the non-professional actors that neo-realism had revived at the beginning, but what might be called professional non-actors, or, better, 'actor-mediums', capable of seeing and showing rather than acting, and either remaining dumb or undertaking some never-ending conversation, rather than replying or following a dialogue.'⁵¹ Following the tradition of minimalist acting, from what has been described as 'New Hollywood' in the 1970s, Morgan Freeman represents the modern character's inability to act in the face of a situation that goes beyond them.⁵²

This change in the form of acting also marks, for Deleuze, a transformation in the lead character's association with the viewer, where, rather than identifying with the hero of action, the main protagonist is identified with the viewer. Deleuze suggests: 'the character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of response or an action. He records rather

⁴⁸ 'Fincher: 'We trimmed stuff for Morgan. Morgan is one of those guys who'll come up to you and go, "I can just look at the guy and do all this, you can cut this stuff."' Judy Sloane, 'Killer Movie', *Film Review 2* (1996), 33-42 (p. 34), quoted in Dyer, *Seven*, p. 80.

⁴⁹ Dyer, *Seven*, p. 51

⁵⁰ *The Bicycle Thieves*, dir. by Vittorio De Sica (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche/Umbrella Entertainment, 1948).

⁵¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, pp. 19-20.

⁵² See Noel King, 'New Hollywood' pp. 60-7 in *The Cinema Book*, ed. Pam Cook, 3rd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 2007).

than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action.⁵³ In the case of *Se7en*, we have been provided with both means of identification: Mills, as the classic action hero, and Somerset, a witness or seer rather than a hero.

Somerset's role is defined by his ability to 'read' a situation, to understand what he sees and hears and to draw meaning from it. Yet this understanding does not lead to decisive action in the film but only to a recording of evidence. This disillusionment with the power of taking decisive action is communicated in a conversation between Somerset and Mills while waiting for a match for the finger prints found at the Greed murder. Somerset asks Mills:

SOMERSET You meant what you said to Mrs Gould didn't you, about catching this
guy?

MILLS (nod)

SOMERSET I wish I still thought the way you do.

MILLS You wanna tell me what the hell you think we're doing?

SOMERSET Picking up the pieces. We're collecting all the evidence, taking all the
pictures and samples, writing everything down, noting the time things happen.

MILLS That's all?

SOMERSET That's all. Putting everything in a neat little pile and filing it all away on
the off chance that it will ever be needed in the courtroom: picking up diamonds on a
deserted island, saving them in case we get rescued.

MILLS Bullshit!

SOMERSET Even the most promising clues only lead to others. So many corpses roll
away unrevenged.

Somerset recognises his work as the administration of evidence, of locating and defining events, their time and place, so that they might possibly be used in a conviction.

Judgment always comes too late and the value of actions is only evaluated afterwards.

⁵³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 3.

Having lost belief in his actions Somerset has become merely an administrator, a witness to events that have little relation to him. The cinema of action has transformed into a cinema of optical and sound situations that deny response yet their value for Somerset, like the diamonds on the desert island, awaits a final validation from their rescuers.

Somerset and the crisis of belief

The crisis of the action-image that Deleuze discusses is not just connected to a new form of image-making but to a social, as well as artistic, transformation that takes place after the Second World War. Deleuze ascribes this transformation to a number of causes, but, in his reading, the breakdown in the power of the action-image is most profoundly put into question in cinema by a demand for thought. This demand for thought, as a consequence, destroys belief. Deleuze explains:

[T]he crisis which has shaken the action-image has depended on many factors which only had their full effect after the war, some of which were social, economic, political, moral and others more internal to art, to literature and to the cinema in particular. We might mention, in no particular order, the war and its consequences, the unsteadiness of the 'American Dream' in all its aspects, the new consciousness of minorities, the rise and inflation of images both in the external world and in people's minds, the influence on the cinema of the new modes of narrative with which literature had experimented, the crisis of Hollywood and its old genres [...] Certainly, people continue to make [action-image] films: the greatest commercial successes always take that route, but the soul of the cinema no longer does. The soul of the cinema demands increasing thought, even if thought begins by undoing the system of actions, perceptions and affections on which the cinema had fed up to that point. We hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it – no more than we believe that an action can force a situation to disclose itself, even partially. The most 'healthy' illusions fail.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 206,

This loss of belief gives rise to an image with a number of characteristics listed by Deleuze: *'the dispersive situation, the deliberately weak links, the voyage form, the consciousness of clichés, the condemnation of plot.'*⁵⁵ These characteristics are particularly evident in the work of American directors such as Robert Altman, Sidney Lumet and Martin Scorsese in the 1970s. As Thomas Elsaesser notes, Hollywood films in the 1970s displayed 'a kind of malaise already frequently alluded to in relation to the European cinema – the fading confidence in being able to tell a story'.⁵⁶ This lack of confidence, particularly in the power of narrative, is apparent in Somerset's narrative of legitimisation. The city no longer makes sense for him but, rather than being knocked about by the contingencies of a world which he has no control over, like Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, Somerset has protected himself from the world through the ordering of his conduct and his detachment from his emotions.⁵⁷ Somerset is not immersed in the world but is separate and separates himself from it. Rather than forcefully ordering the world like both Mills and Doe, Somerset has abandoned it and cut off all ties apart from his privileged position as an officer of the law.

This disconnection with the world is reinforced through Somerset's relation to both women and children. Somerset's past is revealed to the audience when Tracy turns to him for advice as she has found out that she is pregnant with David's child. This leads Somerset to recall his own experience:

I had a relationship once. It was very much like a marriage. We got pregnant; this is a long time ago. I remember getting up one morning and going to work, just another day like any other, 'cept it was the first day after I knew about the pregnancy and I felt this fear for the first time ever. I remember thinking, how can I bring a child into a world like this? How can a person grow up with all this around them? I told her I

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁵⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, 'The Pathos of Failure: The Unmotivated Hero of in Hollywood of the 1970s', *Monogram* 6 (1975), 13-19, (p. 13), quoted in Noel King, 'New Hollywood' pp. 60-7 in *The Cinema Book*, ed. Pam Cook, 3rd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 2007), p. 62.

⁵⁷ *Taxi Driver*, dir. by Martin Scorsese (Columbia Pictures, 1976).

didn't want to have it and over the next few weeks I wore her down ... I can tell you now, I know, I'm positive that I made the right decision but there's not a day that passes that I don't wish that I had made a different choice.

Somerset, in order to maintain emotional detachment and his distance from the world, so that he does not have to feel the fear of responsibility for others, forfeits a wife and child. The position of witness that Somerset takes up makes a certain world possible and legitimates a certain narrative; one that questions the 'truth' of both Mills and Doe and makes 'objective' judgement possible. Following Deleuze, this detachment enables the possibility of bearing witness to difference. The possibility of difference, however, is experienced by Somerset as the loss of all values in a world that remains stupid. Somerset is able to contemplate difference, but cuts himself off from the world. He feels as though he has no connection with those around him.

In relation to the two previous narratives of legitimation of Mills and Doe, Somerset's narrative once again abandons difference 'in itself' for a narrative protected from the contingency of events. By seeing difference dissolve all forms of value Somerset sees the world fall into madness and it is through Somerset's eyes that we view the world of *Se7en*. For Deleuze however, disengaging from difference actively creates this image of a stupid, apathetic and malevolent world. Deleuze describes the consequences of the individual cut off from the world, one who only contemplates the undifferentiated ground of difference rather than joining it, as experiencing any determination of this ground as being cruel and violent. These individuals are beautiful souls: 'All determinations become bad and cruel when they are grasped only by a thought which invents and contemplates them, flayed and separated from their living form, adrift upon this barren ground. [...] Perhaps this is the origin of that melancholy which weighs upon the most beautiful human faces: the presentiment of a hideousness

peculiar to the human face, of a rising tide of stupidity, an evil deformity of a thought governed by madness.’⁵⁸ Both Mills and Doe are seen to place a violent determination upon difference, one that Somerset disavows but which leaves him only with despair. Somerset’s narrative is, therefore, another mode of legitimation that organises and structures his actions, or rather, inaction. This narrative of legitimation places the position of *y*, the legitimating instance, not in ‘the people’, as for Mills, or in God, as for Doe, but in himself as the legislator of his own actions. These actions are determined, however, by the need to remain distinct from the world of difference. Mills sets himself apart from difference by recourse to the community, Doe through a belief in a transcendent order, Somerset through the immanent practice of organising his own world. Mills and Doe’s narratives of belief in a transcendent community or God destroy one another leaving the narrative of a loss of all belief in the figure of Somerset. These are the three narratives of legitimation that are contested in *Se7en* and, as the individual set apart from difference, Somerset holds the final legitimate narrative.

3.

Narratives and events

In my reading I have suggested that *Se7en* presents three narratives embodied within its three principal characters that contest what is to be done about the city as a malevolent site of uncontrolled difference. Each of these narratives has a logic that is

⁵⁸ Deleuze, *Difference*, p. 152.

played out against one another and out of which only one remains as the normalised and legitimate narrative for contemporary masculinity in the form of Somerset. Yet, Somerset's narrative does not go unchallenged in the film. He is still prey to an event that disrupts his composed exterior. Somerset's ability to witness all events with detachment, his ability to cover over the event with his narrative of legitimation, is challenged in *Se7en*, not as one might expect by Doe, but by Mills. In a bar after the Lust killing, both men justify their visions of the world in which a person like Doe exists. Mills holds on to the narrative of the hero; of bringing the bad guy to justice: the criminal, as with the insane, is outside of the community in whose name he acts to bring unity. Alternatively, Somerset sees the malevolence as a symptom of everyday society, that there is no community, only an outside facing every individual who must satisfy themselves and cannot afford to care for others. Mills challenges Somerset's reading by questioning his image of the world as not 'the truth', but a certain perspective upon it:

SOMERSET You know this isn't going to have a happy ending, it's not possible.

MILLS Yeah, well, if we catch him I'd be happy enough.

SOMERSET If we catch John Doe and he turns out to be the devil, I mean if he's Satan himself, that might live up to our expectations, but he's not the devil, he's just a man.

MILLS You know, you bitch and you complain and you tell me these things. If you think you're preparing me for hard times, thank you but ...(*raises hand*).

SOMERSET But you got to be a hero. You wanna be a champion. Well let me tell you, people don't want a champion, they want to eat burgers, play lotto and watch television.

MILLS Hey, how'd you get like this? I wanna know.

SOMERSET It wasn't one thing, I can tell you that.

MILLS Go on.

SOMERSET I just don't think that I can live in a place that embraces and nurtures apathy as though it were virtue.

MILLS You're no different. You're no better.

SOMERSET I didn't say I was different or better. I'm not! Hell, I sympathise, I sympathise completely. Apathy is a solution. I mean, it's easier to lose yourself in drugs than to cope with life; it's easier to steal what you want than earn it; it's easier to beat a child than to raise it. Hell, love costs, takes work and effort.

MILLS We are talking about people who are mentally ill. We are talking about people who are fuckin' crazies.

SOMERSET No, no, no. We are talking about everyday life here. You can't afford to be this naïve.

MILLS Fuck off. See, you should listen to yourself. You say that the problem with people is that they don't care, so I don't care about people. That makes no sense. You know why?

SOMERSET You care?

MILLS Damn right!

SOMERSET And you're going to make a difference?

MILLS Whatever! The point is that I don't think that you're quitting because you believe these things you say, I don't! I think you wanna believe them because you're quitting. You want me to agree with you and you want me to say yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right, it's all fucked up, it's all a fuckin' mess, we should go and live in a fuckin' log cabin, but I won't. I won't say that. I don't agree with you. I do not. I can't.

However much Mills's 'I can't' qualifies his own argument as based upon belief it still has an effect on Somerset. Mills questions Somerset's narrative as precisely that, a narrative, that creates the world that he lives in. It also shows how Somerset's doubt of everything has not gone far enough. He has not reached the other side of his nihilism to doubt his own narrative.

What is interesting about this exchange is how Mills's questioning of Somerset's narrative of legitimation through the terms of belief disrupts his usually calm and composed exterior. After this scene Mills goes home to Tracy, to whom he affirms his love, and Somerset returns to his apartment. Alone in bed, he turns to his ticking metronome, the metronome that signifies Somerset's ordering of his world, and throws it across the room. Unable to sleep he takes out his other, more violent means of

organising the world, his switchblade, and repeatedly throws it into a dartboard. It is the question of belief, how to believe in the world, how to reattach to it, that is the event that disrupts Somerset's narrative of legitimation.

It is obvious that this event is not just a problem, in the sense of a puzzle to be worked out, like the crimes he is so good at solving, but something that places into question his whole mode of being: that disrupts his methods of control, creating a violent reaction. As we saw in the previous chapter, Lyotard describes narrative as a means of joining phrases and each phrase arrives as an event; there is no predefined or necessary connection between what happens (the phrase or the event) and its outcome, no necessary linkage between one phrase and another. Though there are genres that have rules of connecting phrases, these rules are continually put into question by the next phrase-event. The event puts into play a singular 'universe' that questions any possible connection of these universes. Through narrative a coherent world is created but when the coherence of this narrative is contested it acts not just as an intellectual challenge but also as pathos, as an 'I feel'.⁵⁹

Each of the three main characters of *Seven* has a distinct narrative which makes sense of events that happen to them. Mills creates his narrative around recognition defined by a community. Anything outside this, such as the event of Doe, is considered criminal or insane. Doe legitimates his narrative upon a timeless and infinite identity in God which needs to be piously adhered to or violently punished. Somerset's narrative, however, does not protect the community or enforce its transcendent and universal

⁵⁹ 'The occurrence, the phrase, as a what that happens, does not at all stem from the question of time, but from that of Being/non-Being. This question is called forth by a feeling: it is possible for nothing to happen. Silence is not as a phrase in abeyance, but as a non-phrase, a non what. This feeling is anxiety or surprise: there is something rather than nothing.' Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 75. For a discussion of the necessity of 'feeling', particularly the feeling of the sublime, for Lyotard's philosophy of language see James Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), pp. 82-9.

'truth'. More than the others, his narrative is able to perceive each phrase-event, to bear witness to them, even to collect them as evidence. But he accomplishes this only so long as he separates himself from any connection to their necessity and forgoes any action. For Somerset, therefore, the event that causes a crisis is in how he connects to the actual events that happen to him; how can he reattach himself to a situation where these events have effects; how can he believe in the world?

Somerset's narrative has been challenged by Mills but not destroyed, however. The ordering of the universe, as Lyotard explains, can successfully take place through narrative because it can admit all events, but places them in relation to a finality that imposes its own logic upon what has happened: 'Wherever in diegetic time it stops, its terms make sense and retroactively organizes the recounted event.'⁶⁰ And, moreover, by having the last word, narrative redeems itself from the contingency of the event and places itself in the position of virtue. As we saw in the last chapter, through the sacrifice of the scapegoat one narrative is chosen that validates its necessity above the others and orders events according to its logic. The event, therefore, marks the place of contestation, the place where a choice must be made and the place where winners and losers are chosen. In *Se7en* Doe hopes to have the last word; what is left, however, is the confirmation of Somerset's narrative.

Though finding humility in relation to Mills when he asks to be kept on the case, and a new found affection, Somerset does not have to deal with this for long. The seven days of *Se7en* are leading to a final transformation and resolution of each of Mills's, Doe's and Somerset's narratives. As I have shown, Mills is the tragic naïve hero whose world (and narrative) is shattered by Doe; Doe's narrative is resolved through its own

⁶⁰ Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 151.

logic of finality and death; whereas Somerset's narrative, rather than being transformed by the others, is preserved, despite the challenge of both Mills, Doe and even his own plan of escaping through retirement.

At the outset of the film, Somerset is looking to retire, to escape from the city and make a new life for himself. Through his encounter with Mills and Doe this path ceases to be open to him. All that remains is for him to continue his work in a world that makes no sense. In the end we have the dilemma of what to do; there is no 'natural' justice and there is no divine justice, what is left is the arbitrary and piecemeal justice of the justice system which merely picks up the pieces. This is why, rather than just a fadeout after Doe's death the final scene represents a perfect conclusion to the film, even though it was requested by the film studio (and maybe even because it was requested). The quote by Ernest Hemingway cited by Somerset: 'the world is a fine place, and worth fighting for', is shorn of its logical motivation and only left with a bare repetition as Somerset can only agree with the second part. We bear witness to difference as the loss of all values, the birth of the individual and the cutting of ties with the community and God, and even family and progeny. *Se7en* marks masculinity's loss of legitimation as a leader of the people, or the bearer of essential or divine wisdom and becomes legitimate as the lone perpetuator of the present.

Conclusion

The problem that *Se7en* addresses is the problem of how to act for 'the good' in a world that appears as a chaotic state of indifference. The film gives us three narratives that try to address this problem in Mills, Doe and Somerset. The story invalidates two of these

approaches leaving us with the final narrative of Somerset. *Se7en* covers over the event by leaving us with the nihilistic narrative of Somerset. The movie also leaves us, however, with the feeling of injustice. Mills's questioning of Somerset's reality as a narrative of legitimation displays the constructed nature of his world but finds no means to go beyond it and create something new.

As with *Falling Down*, the family is key in *Se7en* to legitimating each narrative, but in different ways. For Mills the family is integral to his place within the community valorising a traditional patriarchal relationship and its furtherance through procreation. Doe's relationship is with God as the ultimate transcendent patriarch and has no need to continue his line of decent as his destiny lies in another world. Somerset, though being represented as strictly heterosexual cannot see a future for himself beyond the perpetuation of the present and his rejection of family and progeny affirms rather than denies the nihilism he sees around him. Once again, as with *Falling Down*, the family is used as a means of organising and legitimating particular social modes and represented as a place of trauma.

In this chapter I have suggested that *Se7en* presents the moral unviability of two narratives of masculine legitimation, one, the narrative of 'the people', the other, the narrative of divine justice in the word of God. What comes to take its place, however, is not another version of 'the good' but the impossibility of any communal sense of 'the good'. Any action that tries to work for these ends is seen as hopelessly misguided or criminally insane. What is left is the injustice but also the necessity of 'the law', a job that must be done to merely survive in the present. Both *Falling Down* and *Se7en* present a pathologised masculinity, but this pathologisation takes aim, not just at the murderous individual but at modes of belief in realities different from that which is

presented as the only one possible. *Se7en* ends, as does *Falling Down*, with the only place of legitimate action being within work which is, of course for the two detectives, within the law. Yet, once again, this is a flawed reality that one is resigned to rather than being a place where order and prosperity are attained. Heterosexual masculinity, in this order, is not depicted as having power over others but as having power over oneself. This power is a manifestation of the dominant narrative of legitimation, a resigned individuality that cuts off all ties with the community, with transcendence, and with progeny, to affirm a system which is beyond question or action but is seen as necessary.

If, as I have argued, Hollywood films are ideologically motivated, joining phrases to affirm a particular social order, who does this new narrative work for? Why would masculinity have to resign itself to a world presented as chaos and a law that is unjust but necessary? What creates these values and organises these actions? And finally, how is it possible to affirm the event in a world like this? It is these questions that I will address in relation to Mary Harron's 2000 adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's modern cult classic *American Psycho* and David Fincher's 1999 adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* in the next two chapters.

3

American Psycho

Where *Falling Down* presented the city as 'sick' and *Se7en* dwelt on the city as a place steeped in the Seven Deadly Sins, the first lines of Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel, *American Psycho*, are 'abandon all hope ye who enter here', the same words that adorn the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. The city, this time New York, is presented as a modern-day hell in which the novel's protagonists are immersed. This is not a journey of moral learning for its 'hero', however, and there is no Virgil to guide Patrick Bateman. The city is once again represented as the maleficent background to a crisis in masculinity.

In this chapter I have chosen to look at a novel and its film adaptation in order to propose the importance of genre as a means of organising expectations in how the public mediate these two works. For both, their genre has been contested and has had decisive effects upon how they have been received by critics and audiences. The novel,

on the one hand, goes beyond generic boundaries and creates its own logic disrupting literary norms. In his formal inventiveness, it is as though Ellis has taken capitalism as a genre which *creates* the subject Patrick Bateman. On the other hand, the film presents itself as a satire negatively commenting on capitalism and masculinity *through* the character of Patrick Bateman. This, I argue, is why the novel, *American Psycho*, is integral to a thesis otherwise focused on film. Ellis directly plays with the means of joining phrases which in the text renders perceptible the psychotic but also the banal structures of capitalism. It, therefore, neatly expresses Lyotard's notion of a narrative of legitimation, or genre, as the joining of phrases in accordance to a particular logic and for specific ends. What makes it exceptional, however, is how it takes this logic to its limits expressing the horrifying consequences of the domination of a single genre. The film, on the other hand, while still engendering a vision of the capitalist subject, takes this subject as the object of the movie. Its satire of capitalism is undertaken, therefore, through Patrick Bateman from an external position of judgement and does not reproduce the formal conjunction of phrases that comes from following capitalism's normative demands to the letter.¹ This chapter will deal primarily with Ellis's novel to show how his formal inventiveness mirrors the logic of late capitalism and to consider how Mary Harron's adaptation responds to the challenge of visually rendering this logic in film.

Distinct from *Falling Down* and *Se7en*, *American Psycho* does not show the contestation of narratives of legitimation but rather the exploration of a single one, the

¹ The relationship between the novel and the film could be seen as analogous with Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between 'literature' and genre fiction in the form of detective novels: 'As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save its own; but the masterpiece of popular fiction is precisely the book which best fits its genre. Detective fiction has its norms; to 'develop' them is to disappoint them; to 'improve upon' detective fiction is to write 'literature', not detective fiction.' quoted in Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 55.

narrative of Wall Street trader Patrick Bateman. In the previous chapters I argued that particular models of masculinity are pathologised in *Falling Down* and *Se7en* in order for a new form of masculinity to be legitimated as the norm: the 'real' reality of contemporary masculinity. In *American Psycho*, however, masculinity is presented as psychotic but with no other model to contest it. By focussing solely on the narrative of legitimation of Patrick Bateman, Ellis explores the limits of what is possible and impossible within a particular organisation of phrases. This organisation, however excessive, bears a striking resemblance to the 'reality' posed by both Prendergast and Somerset. As I have suggested from my reading of Lyotard, mythic narrative, and metanarrative in both *Falling Down* and *Se7en*, are no longer considered the legitimate narrative structures to organise society and have been sacrificed for a new logic. In this chapter I argue that in *American Psycho* Ellis creates a literary mapping of this new narrative of legitimation that now defines men's position within the contemporary social order.

1.

American Psycho

American Psycho is the first-person narrative of a Wall Street trader, Patrick Bateman, which recounts his daily and nightly activities: going to restaurants, clubs and shows, his workout and beauty routine, what is on the *Patty Winters Show*, shopping, engaging in recreational and prescription drug use, and the torture, rape and murder of various people by ever more gruesome means. While the majority of the book is taken up with

the banalities and vacuousness of ever-repeated trips to restaurants and roll calls of what people are wearing, the murder scenes become more and more brutal and graphic, describing, in intimate detail, Bateman's horrific acts. The book, contrary to traditional narrative trajectories, does not end with Patrick being punished for his crimes or with any sign of redemption, only the continuation of his hatred and disgust played out in a world that does not care.

American Psycho, Ellis's third novel, and what Naomi Mandel calls his 'definitive work', was the cause of great controversy even before its release in 1991.² Parts of the text, parts that were the most graphically violent and sexual, were leaked to *Time* and *Spy* magazines causing an uproar of protest that persuaded the publishers, Simon & Schuster, to pull out of publishing the book at the last minute. It was subsequently released by Vintage, yet its reputation for being one of the most scandalous novels of the last thirty years was assured.

The response in the press was resoundingly negative. While not demanding the censorship of the book itself (i.e. the involvement of the state-legal process), a number of critics demanded that the novel should not be published or that the public should not buy it.³ The moral outcry can be rationalised as a response to the particularly gratuitous

² Bret Easton Ellis: *American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. by Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 1.

³ This was the line taken by the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) who called for a boycott, calling it 'a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women.' 'NOW Chapter Seeks Boycott of 'Psycho' Novel', *New York Times*, 6 December 1990, quoted in Julian Murphet, *American Psycho: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 69. The boycott was also called for by Roger Rosenblatt in the *New York Times* who, after denouncing the book in a particularly morally-superior, self-righteous, yet prurient tone, railed; 'That nonact would give a nice ending to our tale. It would say that we are disgusted with the gratuitous degradation of human life, of women in particular. It would show that we can tell real books from the fakes. It would give the raspberry to the culture hustlers who, to their shame, will not say no to obvious rot. Standards, anyone?' Roger Rosenblatt, 'Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?', *New York Times*, 16 December 1990. Even Fay Weldon in *The Washington Post* suggests: 'Look, I didn't want you to actually read Ellis's book. I did it for you.' Fay Weldon, 'Now You're Squeamish?: In a World as Sick as Ours, It's Silly to Target "American Psycho"', *The Washington Post*, 28 April 1991.

descriptions of rape, mutilation and murder, especially of women (even though there are murders of most classes of people in the novel), but this was matched equally by the repugnance towards the great majority of the book which was taken up with the banal, repetitious, affectless prose of Patrick Bateman's monologue.⁴ The conjunction of graphic murder, banal and lifeless prose and the fact that this was meant to be 'literature', rather than some kind of genre novel for particular interest groups, caused such consternation that blaming the author as a sick fantasist, morally lambasting the novel on grounds of taste, and as fundamentally 'not literature', seemed the easier option than actual appraisal of the work. It appears as though, with no moral guide, only the generically ambiguous voice of Patrick Bateman, the novel crossed the boundaries between professional critical detachment and 'real life' effecting a visceral reaction beyond the norms of criticism.

Addressing these responses in his study on *American Psycho*, 'Judgement is Not An Exit', Marco Abel suggests that the response was divided between answers to three confluent questions: first, was the book moral; second, was it satirical; and third, was it skilfully written? He explains:

Those who condemn the novel as immoral consistently reject its satirical component and deny Ellis any skill whatsoever; those who are willing to entertain that the novel might have a moral purpose attempt to rescue the novel from its detractors by making as good a case as possible for the text's satirical intentions and effects. Critics' attitude toward Ellis's style, in turn, tends to be determined by how they judge the overall effect of the novel: those who judge it as conservative reject his style as skill-less; those who judge the novel as more or less good satire think of the style as at least not entirely pointless.⁵

⁴ Violence constitutes less than ten percent of the text. Murphet, *American Psycho*, p. 17.

⁵ Marco Abel, 'Judgment is Not An Exit: Towards an Affective Criticism of Violence With *American Psycho*', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 6 (2001), 137-154 (p. 141).

In attending to these comparative judgements Abel suggests that what is not addressed in the criticism is the affective violence unleashed on its readers by the novel and that the criticism was a means of dealing with this violence. As lovers of literature how were these critics meant to deal with such a grotesque book that had no moral tone to guide them? These three questions were ways of eliding any complicit engagement with the text and a means of judging the text from an exterior position. The responses were, therefore, the symptom of attempts to deal with the event of the book as a violent assault. As such, it becomes apparent that the reactions were ones of self-defence and victimhood. The book and the author, being the architects of this violence, were valid targets for condemnation which, consequently, blinded the critics from engaging with the affects that this textual violence created, or questioning why violence would be used to such effect.⁶ Consequently, as Abel suggests, 'if nothing else, the value of the book is that it forces its audience to encounter the undeniably visceral response they have'.⁷

However, this visceral response was not necessarily due to the representations of violence in the text. As Elizabeth Young points out in her article, 'The Beast in the Jungle, The Figure in the Carpet', there are much more violent works available for public consumption produced every day.⁸ The difference with *American Psycho* was that it was not safely bracketed as genre fiction and that Ellis's 'greatest crime' was to have come

⁶ In Carla Freccero's article, 'Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*', *Diacritics*, 27 (1997), 44-58, she draws upon Judith Butler's 'Burning Acts: Injurious Speech' to trace how the liberal polity demands a subject of violence who acts as the private and locatable source of the violent deed which works to discount a focus upon the violence's contextual and historical materialisation. 'Judith Butler traces how the polity elides or effaces the violence of history (a continuative, iterated process of wounding, a transitivity not imaginable as originating from a singular source), by establishing a moral framework of accountability whereby a subject is brought into being, in Nietzschean fashion, to stand as the cause of the injurious "deed" [...]. She notes that the process, the process of demanding accountability for injury, not only produces a subject as an effect that then stands in as the cause, but also produces from action a discrete act, a singular deed that can be isolated and can serve as an object of prosecution' (pp. 48-9).

⁷ Abel, 'Judgement', p. 144.

⁸ Elizabeth Young, 'The Beast in the Jungle, The Figure in the Carpet: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*', in *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction*, ed. by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press with Serpent's Tail, 1992), pp. 85-122 (pp. 85-93).

from the privileged position of being part of the establishment, and his work considered 'literature'. Ellis's novel, therefore, marks a certain event which not only questioned the limits of critical and detached response but also generic boundaries. The novel challenged accepted social narratives of not only literary legitimation but also social legitimation and it was this that caused the violent response.

As with *Falling Down*, *American Psycho* breached for its audience any easy distinction between fiction and reality, causing violent affects beyond the text. The novel's power to disrupt the generic boundaries between what is considered real and what is considered fantasy created a challenge to the accepted norms of cultural production: it placed into question the implicit organisations that structured literature, but also reality. The book, therefore, acted as an event that disrupted contemporaneous narratives of legitimation. The challenge of this event brought about violent responses from critics to silence, discredit or nullify it. It also, however, brought about responses that tried to comprehend this popular but problematic text. Thus, the film of *American Psycho*, released nine years after the novel becomes a part of this response.

The film *American Psycho*

The film of *American Psycho* was first optioned in 1991 as a David Cronenberg project that would star Brad Pitt and was to be screenwritten by Ellis himself, but conflicts of vision arose between Cronenberg and Ellis. As Ellis recalls: 'David said, "I want a screenplay that has no violence, no sex, no restaurant scenes, no club scenes, and I want it to be 60 pages long because it takes me two minutes to shoot a page," I didn't know

what he was talking about.⁹ After this false start, the project was eventually handed to Mary Harron who had proved her hand at directing on the biopic of the militant feminist and author of the SCUM Manifesto, Valerie Solanas, in *I Shot Andy Warhol*.¹⁰

In contrast to the novel, the film, released in 2000, was generally well received.¹¹ This would, no doubt, in part be due to the decade of cultural transformation since the book's publication but can also be attributed to the choices made by Harron and Guinevere Turner in adapting the novel for the screen. The marked distinction in reception between the novel and the film is the focus of Abel's, as well as David Eldridge's, articles. Abel highlights the transformation of the novel into a traditional social satire. The introductory scenes of the film draw upon the visceral power of the novel yet this tactic, he suggests, is quickly abandoned for a cinematic rendering of sign and meaning; effectively turning from affective engagement with the audience to representation.¹² Abel, drawing from Deleuze, suggests that this form of representation is a type of moral judgement, reproducing values rather than creating them. The film, in this sense, follows the criticism of the novel in that it takes what Abel argues some critics saw as the acceptable characteristics of the novel, namely that it is a satire of 80s Reaganomics, and turns it into the leitmotif of the film. As Abel states:

⁹ Quoted in Murphet, *American Psycho*, p. 72.

¹⁰ *I Shot Andy Warhol*, dir. by Mary Harron (The Samuel Goldwyn Company/Orion Pictures Corporation, 1996).

¹¹ Stephen Holden describes the film as a 'dazzling period satire'. 'Murderer! Fiend! (But Well Dressed)', *New York Times*, 14 April 2000, section E, p. 1. Richard Porton called it 'a mordantly funny death knell for a despicable decade and a cautionary tale tailor-made for the uncertain present'. 'American Psycho: Review', *Cineaste*, 25 (2000), 43-45 (p. 45).

¹² Affect has become a term taken up in Deleuzian literature for a number of ends. Steven Shaviro neatly sums up the distinction that Brian Massumi's makes between emotion and affect that goes some way to frame Abel's discourse: 'For Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective, or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful, a "content" that can be attributed to an already constituted subject. Emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions.' Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), p. 3.

Without question, according to the film, Ellis's novel negatively judges its representation of Wall Street America; in turn, the film positively judges what it perceives to be the novel's satirical representation and does its best to clarify this purpose. The novel's violence, in all of this, functions merely as a metaphor for capitalism's cannibalistic cruelty – one that can be accepted precisely because it merely allegorizes the larger point of the novel.¹³

Abel's point is that, by turning the text into an overt satire, Harron's depiction of *American Psycho* nullifies the violence of the text. The textual violence, however, cannot be reduced to representations of violence but is embodied in the novel's power to provoke affect which comes, rather, from its formal qualities. This power is, therefore, not drawn solely from the representation of violence, which is minimised in the film, but also from the violence elicited by the boring, repetitious, life-less and soul-less accounts of brand naming and consumption, which are transformed in the film into a more or less coherent who-done-it story that leaves out anything that would hinder this reading.

David Eldridge, on the other hand, praises Harron's use of similar devices to the novel but in a filmic register. He claims: 'Harron's Bateman [...] is an intertextual creation, a fictive persona. But since Harron is constructing a cinematic Bateman, she draws on cinematic references, rather than "literary" sources, to achieve the exact same undermining of his identity.'¹⁴ Eldridge wishes to praise the film for this translation of the text but, I would suggest that, while there may be intertextuality in both the novel and the film, there is a more profound difference between the two. First, the film is already repeating the trait of the novel, re-presenting a formal device in order to be faithful to the book. Secondly, while in the film there may be pleasure for the detached viewer in recognising filmic references, to say, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or *The*

¹³ Abel, 'Judgement', p. 142.

¹⁴ David Eldridge, 'The Generic American Psycho', *Journal of American Studies*, 42 (2008), 19-33 (pp. 31-2).

Shining, the novel, by forcing the first-person narrative on the reader, connects this pleasure, taken from the reader's cultural knowledge, or rather cultural consumption, and turns it back against them as evidence of a psychotic expression of selfhood.¹⁵ The novel presents as viscerally uncomfortable the violence that occurs when anything can be joined to anything else, even brand names and murder, which the film and its creation of Patrick as an object of satire cannot replicate. Eldridge's conflation of the novel and the film's rendering of Patrick Bateman covers over the critical power of Ellis's novel which is dispersed in the film.

The most evident difference between the novel and the film is the formal inventiveness of Ellis's text that draws upon a number of linguistic tropes that 'act out' the concerns of the book rather than representing them. As suggested, with the traditional form of camera work and plot devices the film does not live up to the formal demands of Ellis's text. The one trope that is fundamental in the novel, and most obviously elided in the translation to the film, and the one that most challenges its translation into cinema, is the ability of the novel to inhabit more fully a first-person narrative. While it is true that the novel can be considered a satire, the first person narrative makes it extremely difficult to create distance between the reader and Bateman. As Julian Murphet points out in his *Reader's Guide*, the novel is bookended by two signs: 'Abandon all hope ye who enter here' scrawled in blood red lettering on a wall in downtown Manhattan and 'This is not an exit' once again written in red on a door in Harry's.¹⁶ The entrance to hell and the lack of an escape route produce a nightmarish, claustrophobic, somnambulistic and solipsistic interiority to the novel, yet this interiority is not one of emotional self-searching. It is, rather, one created

¹⁵ *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, dir. by Tobe Hooper (Bryanston Pictures, 1974); *The Shining*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick (Warner Bros., 1980).

¹⁶ Murphet, *American Psycho*, p. 64.

exclusively from the arbitrary connection of social signs. In the novel Patrick appears as a consequence of language, that the language speaks him, rather than him being the source of this language. By using the first-person Ellis creates an automatic identification with Patrick's position of enunciation, the position of the 'I', which places the reader in complicity with his acts. This no doubt creates, along with the tropes of language that I discuss below, the shock that the book has had upon its audience. Moreover, Ellis's use of the first-person challenges any easy binary of exteriority and interiority, reality and fantasy, blurring its boundaries and questioning its tenets and, as a consequence, transforming how we 'read' our place in the contemporary social order.

Harron's film, on the other hand, struggles to attain this kind of interiority. Because of the exteriority of the camera Bateman ends up being presented as the supposed master and instigator of his own destiny, a narcissistic, comic and pathetic character, and identification is blocked. The device that Harron turns to instead of the binary of interiority and exteriority is surface and depth. This is, arguably, more sympathetic to the cinematic register. Bateman is often presented in reflection; in mirrors, reflected in a picture frame or seen through a smoked-glass partition. This reflection, however, rather than the contemplation of, or on, any deeper self, remains resolutely just a surface. As he states at the beginning of the film while he removes a herb-mint facial mask in the mirror: 'There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe even you can sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there.' The stripping of the face-mask only reveals another mask, his own identity, a simulacrum with no reality behind it. This relation between surface and depth is not questioned,

however, in the film. Surface is considered to be the effect of a malign capitalism that empties depth of its meaning and value. The audience can sit secure in that they have the moral depth to resist the dehumanisation of capitalism revealed by the depraved and comic Patrick Bateman. The novel, in contrast, places into question the easy binary distinction between interiority and exteriority, surface and depth, causing panic in the reader as to where the novel's morality lies and, accordingly, the reader's relation to it. The film, by making *American Psycho* into a straight satire and treating Patrick as an object of judgement, frees the audience from any uncomfortable identification and can enjoy the movie from the placid position of the moral high ground.

By representing Patrick Bateman from the external position of judgement, the movie creates him as an extreme character singled out from the norm. This trope can be seen as one that joins all of the male crisis movies I discuss here. By turning the main white protagonist into an extreme of white masculinity creates him as a scapegoat legitimately in need of sacrifice. What marks out *American Psycho* as different is that it leaves no normalised position other than Bateman's world. We are left only with Patrick's 'extreme' as the reality that we are subjected to. By turning *American Psycho* into a strict satire, however, Patrick becomes a comic representation that is generically othered as 'the bad' and distinct from 'reality'. It is apparent from the reviews that the film, by taking up this distinct genre, was able to please the critics and produced a vision that satisfied these particular norms. It still, however, continues to have a real effect on the audience due to the power of Ellis's creation to resist assimilation into a literary or filmic genre.

In the rest of the chapter I will develop a close reading of the relationship between Ellis's text and the logic of late capitalism. The shock and the violence of the

text, I will argue, comes from creating a discourse that too closely mirrors the contemporary dominant political genre, the genre of neoliberalism. Rather than taking up a literary genre, I suggest, Ellis aims to take the logic of the Wall Street trader, the logic of contemporary capitalism, to its limits. It is, therefore, not a genre that we can step outside of and judge from an external position, but one that determines our actions each day. In the course of this chapter I will suggest how this logic is expressed in Ellis's text through its formal linguistic construction and compare it to the contemporary logic of late capitalism to show the similarities between the two. I will, therefore, be concerned here primarily with the novel and will return to its cinematic translation at the end of the chapter.

2.

What is the genre of *American Psycho*?

It is here that I return to Lyotard's concern with the joining of phrases. For Lyotard a genre is a means of joining phrases from different phrase regimens and of legitimating that collocation.¹⁷ As I have pointed out previously, there is no necessary connection between a descriptive and a prescriptive statement. Between 'the door is closed' and 'open the door' there is no essential connection or relation of consequence. An abyss

¹⁷ As Leonard Lawlor points out, genre in French must be heard in two ways, first, as referring to literary genres but also, secondly, to genera or kinds. For Lyotard this invokes not only Wittgenstein's work on language games but also Aristotle's multiple meanings of being. 'The Postmodern Self: An Essay on Anachronism and Powerlessness,' in *The Oxford Handbook to the Self*, ed. by Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 696-714. Genre in French can also mean (grammatical) gender.

separates phrase regimens.¹⁸ Genre, for Lyotard however, is a means of connecting phrases, of legitimating certain couplings, and defining certain ends. The importance of genre is to connect phrases from different phrase regimens and to legitimate this connection. This is where genre is connected to the political: in its mode of linking. Formal politics is a mode of linking phrases and designating what is or is not possible, what should and should not happen in a particular society. It, therefore, takes itself for a genre, a genre that authorises itself over all others. When a political genre gains hegemony it presents itself as the genre of genres, as holding the final authority and having legitimate power over its subjects. Where this authority comes from is played out in the normative phrase that can prefix any prescriptive. Once again we return to our formula: *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*. It is in the normative phrase that genre and politics meet. Genre legitimates action, setting limits and acts as judge of what may or may not appear.

As I suggested in the introduction, the films that I am studying fall into a number of different filmic genres. However, instead of focussing upon designating elements of genres that are present in the films, I have focussed upon political genres embodied in a number of the main male characters. These political genres organise a particular worldview which I have been calling narratives of legitimation. In my discussions of *Falling Down* and *Se7en*, I showed how Nick, in *Falling Down*, legitimated his actions by referring to a narrative of origins, both D-Fens, and Mills in *Se7en*, referred their actions to being representative of 'the people', and Doe's justification came from the 'word of God'. The confrontation of each of these narratives brought about a contestation as to which was truly valid. As Lyotard explains:

¹⁸ Lyotard's use of the term 'abyss' is taken from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.

Politics always give rise to misunderstandings because it takes place as a genre. This genre varies according to the nature of the authorization inscribed in the normative prefix. The names invoked (the y's) [...] determine the genre as myth, as deliberative consensus, as divine right...: *Our Ancestors have always...; By decision of..., we, the Assembly of representatives of the people...; I, emperor by the grace of God, ordain....*¹⁹

Political genre, therefore, is organised by a logic that authorises itself through recourse to a founding form of legitimation that is implicit to it and plays itself out according to the y that is evoked. This is the meta-prescriptive power of genre which acts as a law, justification or even demand for action. Genre legitimates, or rather creates, certain actors to perform certain actions, frees them from the anxiety of justification and gives them the authority to make prescriptive statements as a consequence of this authority.

As Lyotard continues:

By prefixing the prescriptive with *it is a norm decreed by y that x ought to carry out such and such an action*, the normative wrenches x from the anxiety of idiolect [...] which is also the marvel of the encounter with the other and a mode of threat of *Ereignis*. This threat, this marvel, and this anxiety, namely the nothingness of a 'what-is-to-be-linked', are thus normalised. [...] The normative, excluded as it is from the ethical, leads into the political. It constitutes a community of addressees of the prescriptive, who qua addressees of the normative, are advised that they are, if not necessarily equal before the law, at least all subject to the law.²⁰

Political genre, or the law, constitutes an ideal set of relations that submit its addressees to its norms. The event, the contingency of an encounter, is covered over by genre so that anxiety can be abated but at the cost of submission to the rules of a genre that is taken as a political norm. The normative phrase creates a world that is under its jurisdiction and polices those boundaries, and the subject of genre polices itself by mapping the world cut out by its ideal relations onto the world of their own experience.

The dominant political genre becomes a metaprescriptive haunting all acts, judging

¹⁹ Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 141.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 143.

them as to whether they are legitimate. It creates a world in which authority is normalised by the institution of a dominant genre that is legitimated by accepted aims and goals proposed by the correct connection of phrases. Genre subjects phrases from different regimes to one logic that connects them and legitimates this connection. In Lyotard's words:

The normative is a phrase about a phrase, a metalanguage [...]. Its metalinguistic constitution marks the function of authority: to throw a bridge over the abyss between heterogeneous phrases. By declaring such and such a phrase permitted, such and such a phrase prohibited, and such and such a phrase obligatory, authority subjects them, whatever their heterogeneity might be, to a single set of stakes [...] With the normative, whatever its supposed legitimation and whatever the form of this legitimation (myth, revelation, deliberation), one genre seizes upon heterogeneous phrases and subordinates them to the same set of stakes.²¹

The dominant political genre sets itself up as the final instance, the bottom line, able to judge and make circulate all genres or to halt them. These dominant political genres have taken a number of forms. Yet, as I have suggested, myth, revelation and deliberation in both *Falling Down* and *Se7en* are no longer considered the legitimate genre and have been sacrificed for a new logic. I argue that in *American Psycho* Ellis tries to make apparent this new narrative of legitimation that now defines men's position within the contemporary social order. What, then, are the stakes that are set out in *American Psycho* and have been indicated in the victory of Prendergast in *Falling Down* and Somerset in *Se7en*, and which give rise to the terrifying figure of Patrick Bateman? What is the logic of the genre that legitimates these character's actions?

The Language of *American Psycho*

²¹ Ibid. p. 143-4.

If we take into account Lyotard's thesis then the decipherment of the Patrick Bateman's narrative of legitimation put into play in the novel would come from reading its manifest content as symptoms of a legitimating schema, a rationale to the mode of joining phrases, that points towards the ungiven *y* which legitimates certain connections and utterances and makes others impossible. As I have already suggested, Ellis's formalism is of great importance if meaning is to be gained from the text and can be considered to be the moral guide that appears so obviously absent without a narrative voice to mediate or manage our relation to the protagonist. This linguistic play bears the weight of Ellis's critical inventiveness.

Tropes of language in *American Psycho*

As we have seen, Lyotard describes genre as a means of joining phrases. John Conley notes about Ellis's use of conjunctions: 'Perhaps Ellis's "and" demands something on the order of a grammatical neologism that would denote not simply conjunction and coordination but an unencumbered flexibility.'²² Ellis's means of conjunction consists of the connection of relatively autonomous, indicative statements that convey information that is given without question. Clauses are then strung together, with no necessary connection other than being a chronological flow that remains directly wedded to the present. The writing attains the form of listing objects and events as so many facts that are immediately recognised, evaluated and discarded, leading to no synthesis or conclusion. Like a constant procession of Polaroid snaps, or the movement of a film

²² John Conley, 'The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis', *The Arizona Quarterly*, 65.3 (2009), 117-139 <<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=0000001907899611&Fmt=3&clientId=43168&RQT=309&VName=PQD>> [accessed 28 February 2012] (para. 5 of 33).

camera, events register on a sensitive plate only to be replaced by new ones.²³ This scene from the chapter 'Shopping' exemplifies Patrick's moment by moment recollections recounted as if in a dream:

Right now I'm moving down Madison Avenue, after spending close to an hour standing in a daze near the bottom of the staircase at the Ralph Lauren store on Seventy-second, staring at cashmere sweater vests, confused, hungry, and when I finally took hold of my bearings, after failing to get the address of the blond hardbody who worked behind the counter and who was coming on to me, I left the store yelling "Come all ye faithful!" Now I scowl at a bum huddled in the doorway of a store called EarKarma and he's clutching a sign that reads HUNGRY AND HOMELESS...PLEASE HELP ME, GOD BLESS and then I find myself moving down Fifth towards Saks, trying to remember if I switched the tapes in the VCR, and suddenly I'm worried that I might be taping *thirtysomething* over *Pamela's Tight Fuckhole*. A Xanax fails to ward off the panic. Saks intensifies it.²⁴

The conjunction does not lead to any greater understanding or deepening of our knowledge, merely the connection between one phrase and another. This connective power however attains an intensification which, as I shall explain below, goes from the habitual to the psychotic.

There are privileged objects of connection within Ellis's text, however. He connects so many proper names. Whether it is the name of a bar or shop, his work colleagues and girlfriends, or the designer names of the clothes that they wear and the numerous products that he buys, Patrick's world is made up of names that signify a content that never gains any depth. This affects the way that the text is read: it can be

²³ This is added to by Ellis's use of technical cinematic terms in the book which conflate Patrick with a camera or a machine or place him within a movie. See particularly *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), p. 265. See also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone, 2000). "The reign of images is the new way in which capitalism utilizes the schizzes and diverts the flows: composite images, images flattened onto other images, so that when this operation reaches its outcome the little ego of each person, related to its father-mother, is truly the center of the world. Much more underhanded than the subterranean reign of the fetishes of the earth, of the celestial reign of the despot's idols, is the advent of the Oedipal-narcissistic machine: "No more glyphs and hieroglyphs, we'll have the real objective reality ... our Kodak-vision. ... To every man, to every woman, the universe is just a setting to the absolute little picture of himself, herself. ... A picture! A Kodak snap, in a universal film of snaps"" (p. 265-6).

²⁴ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 177.

skimmed like a celebrity gossip magazine. The names, rather than defining singular entities tied to a qualitative thinghood, become interchangeable with any other object that has reached the 'dignity' of attaining a proper name. The emptying of the signified of its power to affect acquires 'dignity' only through a pre-established representation (the *New York Times* review etc.) and the predefined knowledge of its commodity status (its brand name). Consequently, the unlimited capacity to connect these signifiers together creates a smooth surface on which everything slips and slides. Even Patrick is constantly misrecognised, his own identity constantly slipping, his 'image' interchangeable with so many others. Each of these people or things is swiftly evaluated; each colleague is just a 'dumb bastard', each girlfriend is just a 'hardbody'; each object is predefined, pre-evaluated, with its specific use and function, that either functions well or badly but can have no other effect. Patrick also treats himself like an object, constantly subjecting himself to punishing workouts, pampering himself with massages and facials, going through a lengthy beauty regime. As he says "You can always be thinner," ... "Look...better."²⁵

This means of joining phrases is absolutely dependent upon the first person narrative that Ellis has utilised and acts as a means of coordination. The first person, as I have mentioned, creates an interiority and a filtering of all experience through the subjectivity of Patrick who acts as a medium through which the world is distilled. Moreover, this provides the temporality of the text that is constantly brought back to Patrick's present emotional state. Patrick lives these emotions intensely as the position from which each experience is measured. His corporeal body is barely touched by the outside world, however, only worked on or looked at, and his acts are presented with a cold objectivity, as though recounted from a distance, and, even with their violent and

²⁵ Ibid. p. 372.

horrific content, appear to have little effect on, what can be considered in the novel, the 'real' world around him; without intersubjectivity he is utterly absorbed in himself and only experiences an emotional interiority. This is not a case of soul searching or looking for meaning, however, but merely the registering of the rise and fall of his intensive states. It is as though Patrick is a machine attached to an intensive flow of which the novel is the recording of the undulations of his mental state. He is, therefore, not a man of ease and relaxation but constantly agitated, forever at work, on his own body, on what he consumes, and on the bodies of others. He wants to find mastery but only relives these intense emotional states. Patrick repeats reviews and knows all the brand names, yet all this work is for no reason other than to maintain their strict repetition.

These three tropes form the backbone of Patrick Bateman's textual construction and the foundation of his subjectivity. The connective principle of 'and' joining phrases, the disjunctive principle of 'either ... or' in relation to the objects considered either good or bad, and the conjunctive principle of '...and so it's me' placing Patrick at the centre of his world.²⁶ These tropes work together to form a subject, but one that is radically cut off from the world in a solipsistic relationship to himself with no relation to an outside that would put into question his self-absorption. This particular structure of subjectivity bears resemblance to Jacques Lacan's description of a psychotic personality which, as I will show in the next section, confirms Bateman's moniker as a 'psycho'.

Lacan and psychosis

²⁶ It is interesting to note here how well the character of Patrick Bateman follows the description of the creation of the subject given by Deleuze throughout his oeuvre. See in particular Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 68-106.

Bateman's characteristics as a subject dominated by language, the emptying of the signifier, and the pre-eminence of interiority bear a striking resemblance to Lacan's diagnosis of Judge Schreber's paranoid psychosis in his 1955–56 lectures *The Psychoses*.

Lacan suggests:

How can one fail to see in the phenomenology of psychosis that everything from beginning to end stems from a particular relationship between the subject and this language that has suddenly been thrust into the foreground, that speaks all by itself, out loud, in its noise and furor, as well as in its neutrality? If the neurotic inhabits language, the psychotic is inhabited, possessed, by language.²⁷

My concern here is the structure of this 'possession' by language. Lacan, through his analysis, points out that these tropes, set out above, have a particular organising principle that motivates their construction, a particular and intimate relationship to the big Other. This big Other, as I have shown in the first chapter, is structurally situated in Lyotard's formula in the position of the *y*.

Lacan's lectures on the psychoses are dominated by a rereading of Freud's analysis of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber's account of his psychotic episode in his book *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*.²⁸ What Lacan argues is symptomatic of the psychotic is a personal relation to a higher power, that comes to dominate the subject. He states: 'what does he talk to you about? About himself no doubt, but first about one object that isn't like any of the others [...] – he speaks to you about something that has spoken to him' (pp. 40-1). Schreber, in his writings, speaks of a fantasised being that has spoken

²⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book III, 1955-1956: The Psychoses*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 250. All further references to this edition are given in the text.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XII (1911-1913) The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Vintage, 2001). Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, trans. and ed. by Ida Macalpine and Richard A. Hunter (New York: New York Review Books, 2000).

directly to him, a God to which he has an intimate relation.²⁹ Moreover, after his initial breakdown this intimate relationship begins to structure his whole existence so that the relationship between signifiers, organised by the speech of God, become more important than the 'reality' he once occupied. Though this imaginary reality, or phantasmagoria, created by his new relationship to his own language is experienced by the subject as unreal, the delusional psychotic is still utterly certain as to the necessity of his delusions.³⁰ The psychotic is now in direct relation to his language, which becomes all important.

The reason for this loss of distinction between a delusional relation to language and reality, for Lacan, is the failure of the Oedipus complex in childhood. Without rivalry with the father the subject takes the father's position as a *model* on which to apprehend himself on the Imaginary plane. The master signifier is foreclosed for the subject and without access to this master signifier, or as Lacan puts it 'a nihilating signified', the subject experiences a hole in the Symbolic order. He tries to fill this hole with an imaginary image of himself and, consequently, the psychotic process is a means of coming to terms with this revelation.³¹ In Lacanian terminology this means that the psychotic mistakes the 'little other' for the big Other, that the Imaginary is taken for the Symbolic order. Therefore, the psychotic responds to language but with no reference to an external repressive order. The psychotic subject, as a consequence, experiences the

²⁹ Lacan describes the course of Schreber's breakdown as such: 'First there were several months of prepsychotic incubation in which the subject was in a state of profound confusion. This is the period in which the phenomena of the twilight of the world occur, which are characteristic of the beginning of a delusional period. Towards the middle of March 1894 he was admitted to Flechsig's clinic. In mid-November '93 the hallucinatory phenomena began, the spoken communications which he attributes to different grades in this fantasmatic world, consisting of two levels of divine reality, the anterior and posterior realms of God, and of all sorts of entities that are in a more or less advanced stage of reabsorption into this divine reality' (p. 217).

³⁰ '[T]he delusional, as he climbs the scale of delusions, becomes increasingly sure of things that he regards as more and more unreal' (p. 77).

³¹ See Lacan, *Psychoses*, p. 204 and p. 249.

signifiers as more important than the meanings that they signify. The metonymic process of joining these signifiers comes to dominate the psychotic and the latter's experience of reality becomes less and less real.

As I suggested above, Patrick Bateman's discourse is defined by a dominant form of conjunction, the connection of proper names that have no real substance based upon the privileged position of the first person pronoun. In *American Psycho* Patrick's monologue speaks of himself but in a language that speaks for him through the repetition of phrases, the repetition of opinions, the repetition of brand names and the objectification of what is around him. He is spoken by something else which is never explicitly articulated but imbues his words with significance. As Lacan argues of the psychotic: 'The spoken hallucinatory phenomena that for the subject have a sense in the register of interpellation, irony, defiance, allusion, always allude to the Other with a big O, as if it were a term that is invariably present but never seen and never named except indirectly' (p.256). Yet, this significance is also, paradoxically, void of meaning, empty, as though the signifiers are merely important as words themselves without any connection to a lived reality. As Lacan says of Schreber's God: 'God, his imaginary interlocutor, understands nothing about what goes on within, nothing at all about living beings, and that he never has anything to do with anything but shadows or cadavers. Moreover, his whole world has been transformed into a fantasmagoria of shadows of *fleeting-improvised-men*' (pp. 78-9).³² These *fleeting-improvised-men* could well be Patrick's Wall Street colleagues, ciphers who are infinitely replaceable.

³² The whole quote here from Lacan illuminates Patrick's delusional psychosis: 'So what, in the final analysis, are we going to say about the delusional? Is he on his own? This isn't the feeling we get, either, since he is inhabited by all sorts of existences, improbable ones, certainly, but whose meaningful character is in no doubt. This is an initial datum, whose articulation becomes more and more elaborate as his delusion advances. He is raped, manipulated, transformed, spoken in every possible way, and, I should say, chattered. You can read in detail what he says about what he calls the birds of the sky and their

It is the intimate, personal relationship of the individual with this big Other, the Symbolic order transformed into the Imaginary, that organises the psychotic's behaviour and places the individual's laboured attempts at articulating this interior world as their central concern and position of aggrandised importance. Patrick Bateman displays all the symptoms of Lacan's psychotic but why does Ellis's creation go to such sadistic extremes in his interior world? Once again, it is in the structure of language and its relationship to an organising principle, or *y*, that an answer can be found.

Deleuze and sadism

The importance of language, its detachment from an exterior Symbolic order and the prioritisation of the individual's relationship to his intimate interlocutor are deemed by Lacan to be symptoms of psychosis but from where, in this structure, does *American Psycho's* famed violence arise? While displaying similar tropes of language to Lacanian psychosis and Judge Schreber's writing, the genre of Ellis's novel also corresponds with the work of the Marquis de Sade. The content of Ellis's prose as well as the form of his writing marks it out as sadistic. These formal qualities have been discussed by Gilles Deleuze in his early essay on masochism and sadism, *Coldness and Cruelty*. Here he suggests a particular relationship between the language of demonstration and sadism

chirping. This is clearly what is at issue – he is the seat of an entire aviary of phenomena – and this is the fact that inspired this enormous communication of his, this book of some five hundred pages, which is the result of a lengthy activity of construction that for him was the solution to his internal adventure. In the beginning, and at a later moment as well, there is doubt over what the meaning refers to, but there is never any doubt for him that it does refer to something. With a subject like Schreber, things go so far that the whole world ends up caught up in this delusion of meaning, in such a way that it can be said that, far from his being alone, there is almost nothing in his surroundings that in some sense isn't him. On the other hand, everything he brings into being in these meanings is in a certain sense void of him. He phrases it in a thousand different ways, and especially for example when he remarks that God, his imaginary interlocutor understands nothing about what goes on within, nothing at all about living beings, and that he never has anything to do with anything but shadows or cadavers. Moreover, his whole world has been transformed into a fantasmagoria of shadows of *fleeting-improvised-men'* (pp. 78-9).

that affects all the resulting descriptions of rape and torture. For Deleuze, demonstrative language in Sade points towards the libertine's desire to expound a higher logic. Deleuze argues that demonstration acts as a meta-function of language and a recourse to principles. Demonstration, then, appears between sequences of description and points towards the organising structure of sadism. The sadist does not mean to teach, or to convince, or to prove a point, but rather to *demonstrate* that reasoning is a form of violence which he, himself, embodies. According to Deleuze:

The point of the exercise is to show that demonstration is identical to violence. It follows that the reasoning does not have to be shared by the person to whom it is addressed any more than pleasure is meant to be shared by the object from which it is derived. The acts of violence inflicted on the victims are a mere reflection of a higher form of violence to which the demonstration testifies. Whether he is among his accomplices or among his victims, each libertine, while engaged in reasoning is caught in the hermetic circle of his own solitude and uniqueness – even if the argument is the same for all the libertines.³³

What the assessments have failed to dwell on to any extent in the critical assessments of *American Psycho* are Bateman's music reviews that function as curious adjuncts to the main text of the novel. I suggest these three chapters which review the work of Genesis, Whitney Houston, and Huey Lewis and the News are of fundamental importance to the dynamic of the text. The first review comes after Patrick's first killing in the novel and the others after particularly violent scenes. The transformation of tone from violent murderer into authoritative music critic ratifies Patrick as a man, if not of taste, then of knowledge. It presents him as a legitimate judge, transforming his language from aggressive assertion to a disinterested and detached form of evaluation, from description to demonstration. These chapters can therefore be considered as demonstrations of Patrick's knowledge and taste, but also of how this crass form of

³³ Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. by Jean McNeil (New York: Zone, 1991), pp. 18-19.

judgement repeats a critical language of bland generalisation and cliché that speaks through Bateman. The sadistic element comes in the form of expounding and enforcing this form of reasoning onto the world. What is important here is not the content of the reviews, which are couched in eulogising platitudes, but the form of self-satisfied judgement which defines right and wrong through no other authority than the individual's taste.

The music reviews, with their form of personal judgement, therefore have a mirroring effect on the scenes of violence whose use of language is different from the style of the writing in the majority of the text. From listing, reportage and surreal dream the violent sequences, while being descriptions, become more akin to such demonstrations. As the scene turns to violence Patrick comes to centre stage but as if in the third person, describing from a distance, or the position of an ideal viewer, what he is doing. The description takes on a form of vicious but cold-blooded objectivity that speaks the language of control and judgement.³⁴ In the chapter 'Lunch with Bethany', Patrick lures an ex-girlfriend back to his apartment and confronts her with a nail gun:

Perhaps on instinct, perhaps from memory, she makes a futile dash for the front door, crying out. Though the chardonnay has dulled her reflexes, the Scotch I've drunk has sharpened mine, and effortlessly I'm leaping in front of her, blocking her escape, knocking her unconscious with four blows to the head from the nail gun.³⁵

At the end of his brutal and pointless torture Patrick, as though to finish the demonstration, reveals his contempt for her inability to conform to his worldview.

³⁴ As Julian Murphet notes: 'The violence in the book should be understood as an act in language, the attainment of a certain kind of literary flair, which is elsewhere obviated by reification, repetition, and inanity. It is an act in language which is undergirded and informed by a profound race and class arrogance, homophobia, misogyny, and solipsistic vanity. But its effect is to launch these passages on to a different stylistic plane, which is really one of the major reasons that these passages leave such an impression.' *American Psycho*, p. 45.

³⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 245.

'And another thing,' I yell, pacing. 'It's not Garrick Anderson either. The suit is *Armani! Giorgio Armani.*' I pause spitefully and, leaning into her, sneer, 'and you thought it was *Henry Stuart.* Jesus.' I slap her hard across the face and hiss the words 'Dumb bitch,' spraying her face with spit, but it's covered with so much Mace that she probably can't even feel it, so I Mace her again and then I try to fuck her in the mouth once more but I can't come so I stop.³⁶

The word 'stop' draws to an abrupt end the chapter, and the demonstration, and focuses the reader's attention on the linguistic construction of this violence.

Demonstration, according to Deleuze, points towards a personal element chosen from the possible choices of the context but also an impersonal element, a pure Idea that subordinates the first. This Idea dominates and structures the libertine's actions. Deleuze claims: 'The task of the libertine is to bridge the gulf between the two elements, the element at his actual disposal and the element in his mind, the derivative and the original, the personal and the impersonal.'³⁷ This necessity to bridge the gap between the Idea and reality accounts for the monotony and repetition of the sadist but also the acceleration and condensation of his actions. As Deleuze continues:

He cannot do more than accelerate and condense the motions of partial violence. He achieves the acceleration by multiplying the number of his victims and their sufferings. The condensation on the other hand implies that violence must not be dissipated under the sway of inspiration or impulse, or even be governed by the pleasures it might afford, since those pleasures would still bind him to secondary nature, but it must be exercised in cold blood, and condensed by this very coldness, the coldness of demonstrative reason.³⁸

In a similar structure to Lacan's diagnosis of psychosis, Deleuze argues that the sadist identifies fully with the transcendent figure of authority which he describes here as 'the superego'. By identifying so strongly with the superego, the sadist expels his own

³⁶ Ibid. p.247.

³⁷ Deleuze, *Coldness*, p. 28.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 29.

ego to the outside world and punishes it. Hence the peculiar paradox of Sade's language in that it is essentially the language of a victim. Deleuze writes: 'Only the victim can describe torture; the torturer necessarily uses the hypocritical language of established order and power.'³⁹ Patrick's recounting of his consumption and destruction are externalisations necessitated by his desperate need for identification with this illusive but ever-present organising principle.

I have argued that the language of *American Psycho* is psychotic in relation to Lacan's theory of paranoid psychosis and that it is sadistic in relation to Deleuze's reading of the Marquis de Sade. In both of these cases the psychotic and the sadist speak of something else, either the big Other for the psychotic or the Idea embodied in demonstrative reason for the sadist. In applying these readings the pressing question then becomes, what is the logic of this big Other and this Reason that *American Psycho* articulates? Returning to John Conley's assessment of the novel, he notes that:

Ellis's [...] sentences dramatize at a syntactical level the dissipation of specificity and particularity into interchangeability and equivalence – a drama that otherwise goes by the name of capitalism. For it is not only that Ellis writes about capitalism, but that Ellis literally writes a world made of money, for his grammar and syntax are formed in its image; Ellis is truly a writer of capitalism because it is capitalism that his sentences exemplify.⁴⁰

Taking Conley's analysis to be fundamentally correct how, then, does Ellis's formal inventiveness, his psycho-sadistic language, speak the logic of late capitalism and how does it articulate an understanding of the formation of the subject in this context? In other words, how does the structure of contemporary capitalism repeat the genre of *American Psycho*?

³⁹ Ibid. p. 17.

⁴⁰ Conley, *Poverty*, para. 6 of 33.

3.

Foucault and the genre of neoliberal capitalism

In order to answer this question I want to turn to Michel Foucault's consideration of neoliberalism in his 1978-9 lectures translated as *The Birth of Biopolitics*. In this work neoliberalism is presented as the dominant mode of what Foucault calls 'governmentality' in the contemporary West. Foucault addresses neoliberalism's historical materialisation as the legitimate power of the state after the Second World War. This analysis is particularly relevant to my thesis in that he is not necessarily or immediately concerned with empirical historical events but rather the genesis of a particular regime of truth which allows certain relations to appear, certain statements to be made, and certain practices to be normalised: we could say, in a Lyotardian register, its means of joining phrases, its genre. For Foucault, this means the creation of things that 'do not exist' but become objects of practices. As he states in regard to his thesis here and in relation to his wider project:

The point of all these investigations concerning madness, disease, delinquency, sexuality, and what I am talking about now, is to show how the coupling of a set of practices and a regime of truth form on apparatus (*dispositive*) of knowledge-power that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist and legitimately submits it to the division between true and false.⁴¹

In these lectures Foucault lays out the transformation in the logic of the state and its shift from *raison d'État* to Liberalism and then to neo-Liberalism. For my purposes here

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 19. All further references to this edition are given in the text.

I want to concentrate upon the general outline and internal logic that Foucault sets out with regard to neoliberalism. This has a number of distinct parts which, I argue, mirror the formal logic laid out in *American Psycho*.

The market as the organising rationale for society

The ascendancy of neoliberal ideology after World War II was due, in part, to the reaction against state organisation and interventionism. In Germany the question for the neoliberals was how to found and legitimate a new state based on the market after the defeat of National Socialism and the destruction of war. For the United States the situation was different. The state had originally been founded upon liberal ideals, which had always been central to political discussion there, and so the question that had gained greater urgency, and the adversary that the neoliberals set themselves against, was how to free itself from threats to market freedoms coming from Keynesian-style economics, planning and social and economic programs.⁴² The common enemy was the interventionist state and the remedy to this was, for the neoliberals, to base the state upon the principles of the market. This is the profound difference for Foucault between liberalism and neoliberalism. The market would be the guarantor of freedom and consensus would be achieved by engaging in the market. Any form of planning or intervention, according to the neoliberals, especially the German *ordoliberals*, led directly or indirectly to Nazism.⁴³ In this sense the dehumanisation that was

⁴² 'I think these three elements – Keynesian policy, social pacts of war, and the growth of federal administration through economic and social programs – together formed the adversary and target of neo-liberal thought, that which it was constructed against or which it opposed in order to form itself and develop.' Foucault, *Birth*, p. 217.

⁴³ See Foucault, *Birth*, chapter 5: 7th February 1979, pp. 101-128, for an extended discussion of the *ordoliberal* rationalising of the planned state as inevitably leading toward Nazism. See also Graham Burchell 'Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self' in *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-*

traditionally attributed to industrial capitalism was transferred to the state that was seen as the arbiter of standardisation, the eliminator of difference and the destroyer of freedom. The market came to represent the place of freedom, individuality and difference.

The problem was, therefore, how to maintain a state and civil order without appearing to directly inhibit the freedom of the market. In order for the state to base itself upon a market economy a number of transformations needed to take place that mark out the distinction between the eighteenth-century form of liberal doctrine and modern neoliberalism. Rather than a theory of *laissez-faire*, the market could no longer be merely left alone but needed to become the model upon which all social relations were based. This required a change from the market as a place of exchange to a site of competition, which involved intervening in the market to make the conditions for competition possible, thus transforming the market from a natural given to a historical objective. Governmentality must follow competition, which is now the essence of the market, all the way down. You no longer govern because of the market but for the market. According to Foucault 'The problem for neo-liberalism is [...] how the overall exercise of political power can be modelled on the principles of a market economy' (p. 131). The neoliberals, therefore, took the formal principles of the market and referred them to the art of government. As Foucault states: '[Neoliberal government] has to intervene on society so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society and by intervening in this way its objective will become possible, that is to say, a general regulation of society by the market' (p. 145).

Neoliberal government marks itself as not just an economic government but a government of society.

This society, where competition takes place, according to Foucault, is not the society of consumers but of the entrepreneur: the producer. 'I think this multiplication of the "enterprise" form within the social body is what is at stake in neo-liberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society' (p. 148). Rather than studying the mechanisms of exchange or of production the neoliberals looked to study what economists call 'substitutable choices'. This meant transforming how labour was conceptualised, not as just an abstract ratio of labour power to time, but as an element of production with diverse motivations and interests. As Foucault states: 'to bring labor into the field of economic analysis, we must put ourselves in the position of the person who works; we will have to study work as an economic conduct practiced, implemented, rationalized, and calculated by the person who works' (p. 223). The worker is no longer an economic object but an active economic subject: 'This is not a conception of labor power; it is a conception of capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage, so that the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself' (p. 225).

We can see, then, that the market has become the dominant paradigm of governmentality, the organising principle of the neoliberal genre. The power to legitimate this form of organisation (or joining of phrases) depends upon the creation of the productive and competitive individual. What then is this enterprise for himself?

Homo œconomicus

Foucault states: 'An economy made up of enterprise-units, a society made up of enterprise-units, is at once the principle of decipherment linked to liberalism and its programming for the rationalization of a society and an economy' (p. 225). The unit for the application of analysis, the subject that appears within this discourse, is what Foucault calls *homo œconomicus*. In neoliberalism, though, he is no longer the liberal man of exchange but an entrepreneur. '*Homo œconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neo-liberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo œconomicus* as a partner of exchange with *homo œconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings' (p. 226). The individual, as entrepreneur, becomes the central element of analysis, and the application of market principles can be generalised to all of his behaviour, even that which is traditionally considered external to the market. The market model comes to be seen as rationality itself, in that a person who acts for their interests, who allocates scarce means to specific ends according to social and contextual knowledge, is acting according to 'reality'.⁴⁴ As Foucault suggests, '*Homo œconomicus* is someone who accepts reality. Rational conduct is any conduct which is sensitive to modifications in the variables of the environment and which responds to this in a non-random way, in a systematic way, and economics can therefore be defined as the science of the systematic nature of responses to environmental variables' (p. 269). Rational

⁴⁴ As Michael A. Peters states: 'Neoliberal economics has expanded its horizon to the status of a megaparadigm for the social sciences. No longer content to analyze and describe *economic* behavior (alongside other behaviors) in terms of choices involving the allocation of scarce resources, neoliberalism aggrandizes itself to the position of a global social science able to explain all rational conduct, or even simply all behaviour.' *Poststructuralism, Marxism and Neoliberalism: Between Theory and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. viii.

action is therefore measured by the optimisation of satisfaction of interests through limited means by the individual.⁴⁵ Reason is transferred to the logic of the market.

Foucault suggests that this conceptualisation of the subject is defined by individual choice that is both irreducible and non-transferable: irreducible, in that any choice reaches its limit at the point of choice between the painful and the non-painful; and non-transferable, in that this choice is my own, of which Hume's sceptical aphorism is the perfect example: 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.'⁴⁶ This 'subject of interest', as Foucault theorises it, is in direct opposition to the subject of right. The subject of right is split between the freedom of his 'natural' or 'divine' rights and the submission to the sovereign, to which he cedes some of his freedom for his own protection. The subject of interest, on the other hand, cedes to the contract with the sovereign, not because of an implicit or explicit contract to which he must adhere but because it is in his interest to do so: the contract is only secondary to interest. The subject of right accepts the negativity and self-renunciation to the contract and splits himself between an ideal of an originally relinquished freedom that is then given over to an external but transcendent power. The subject of interest, however, never gives up his or her interests, but in following them they, nevertheless, correspond to the interests of others. By following individual interests, the economist suggests that they correspond spontaneously with the interests

⁴⁵ Nikolas Rose argues about this new subject of government: 'The enhancement of the power of the client as customer [...] specifies the subjects rule in a new way: as active individuals seeking to "enterprise themselves", to maximize their quality of life through acts of choice, according their life a meaning and value to the extent that it can be rationalized as the outcome of choices made or to be made. [...] Within this new regime of the actively responsible self, individuals are to fulfil their national obligations not through their relations of dependency and obligation to one another, but through seeking to *fulfil themselves* within a variety of micro-moral domains or "communities" – families, workplaces, schools, leisure associations, neighbourhoods.' 'Governing "Advanced" Liberal Democracies' in *Foucault and Political Reason*, pp. 37-64 (p. 57).

⁴⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 463.

of others. As with the example of the contract, by following the personal interest for security the subject's interest corresponds to an interest that benefits all.

Foucault argues: 'with the subject of interest, as the economists make him function, there is a mechanism which is completely different from the dialectic of the subject of right, since it is an egoistic mechanism, a directly multiplying mechanism without any transcendence in which the will of each harmonizes spontaneously and as it were involuntarily with the will and interest of others' (p. 275-6). It is possible here to connect D-Fens, Mills and Doe to the man of right who is distinguished from both Prendergast and Somerset as men of interest. D-Fens, Mills and Doe all hold on to a form of transcendence to justify their actions; D-Fens, after losing his job, tries to hold on to the legitimate position of patriot and father, his rights as an American and husband; Mills acts in accordance to an ideal of justice in relation to a transcendent community, he is given rights to act in the name of 'the people'; Doe acts in accordance to what he deems as God's word, his divine task, to teach the community God's will. Each renounce a part of their lives for the transcendence of what they see as 'the greater good'. Prendergast and Somerset on the other hand are skilled workers, good at their jobs demanding some respect and an income. Prendergast realises his interest in the job again, counter to his wife's desires, by searching out D-Fens. Somerset, in his desire to know without the responsibility of attachments to the world through a wife and child, renounces any other life and continues as witness to a lost and meaningless society. Both are pragmatists who deny any transcendence yet whose interests correspond to the 'greater good' as qualified members of the police force. As pointed out in the first two chapters these are different modes of organisation that are structurally distinct and draw upon contrasting modes of legitimation. Consequently the films delegitimize the

juridical logic of the contract in favour of a theory of the market where the contract would be secondary to interest. In this new regime, as Foucault continues, 'We could not be more distant from the dialectic of renunciation, transcendence, and the voluntary bond of the juridical theory of the contract. The market and the contract function in exactly opposite ways and we have in fact two heterogeneous structures' (p.276). In neoliberalism the subject of interest comes to the fore and designates the legitimate mode of action. We can see in the figure of Patrick Bateman the hallmarks of this subject of interest. This transformation from contract to interest, however, also transforms how the subject relates to the world and how it legitimates its actions. This points us towards the theoretical importance of Adam Smith's concept of the invisible hand to the new narrative of legitimation created by neoliberalism distinct from its use in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberalism.

The invisible hand

According to Foucault, what becomes apparent with the subject of interest, or *homo oeconomicus* in its neoliberal guise, is that to maintain its coherence it needs to follow its own interest at all costs. But this also transforms the world in which the subject of interest lives; from one of order governed by a sovereign, his rules and codes, to a chaos of unknowable influences, interests, and contingencies. Interest can be affected by unknown events half-way around the world without my being able to control it. It is precisely this unknowability, however, that gives credence to the individuality of my choices. It is here that Adam Smith's famous dictum of the 'invisible hand' finds its place: the 'invisible hand' acts as rationalisation and foundation from which the subject of interest legitimates his egoistic choices working from the best knowledge available to

him at the time.⁴⁷ This invisible hand is seen by Foucault as a stand-in for a theological conception of the natural order where, behind the chaos, there is a providential organising system that works for the good of all. This system, however, is necessarily unknowable and beyond calculation. The only way to maintain the natural running of this system is to follow one's own interests and to actively *not* follow the idea of the collective good because this cannot be known.

There is, therefore, a particular structural position of the invisible hand within neoliberal discourse. As Foucault states: "Through the notion of the invisible hand, Smith would be someone who more or less implicitly fixed the empty, but nonetheless secretly occupied place of a providential god who would occupy the economic process a bit like Malebranche's God occupies the entire world down to the least gesture of every individual through the relay of an intelligible extension of which He is the absolute master' (p. 278).⁴⁸ The invisible hand, therefore, is the correlate of *homo œconomicus* and is that which founds and legitimates its actions as justified. As Foucault explains:

Economic rationality is not only surrounded by, but founded on the unknowability of the totality of the process. *Homo œconomicus* is the one island of rationality possible within an economic process whose uncontrollable nature does not challenge, but instead founds the rationality of the atomistic behaviour of *homo œconomicus*. Thus the economic world is naturally opaque and naturally non-totalizable. It is originally and definitively constituted from a multiplicity of points of view which is all the more irreducible as this same multiplicity assures their

⁴⁷ This is also where the concept of risk and its attendant concerns of responsibility as hallmarks of neoliberalism come in to play.

⁴⁸ David Graeber writes, 'Recall here what Smith was trying to do when he wrote *The Wealth of Nations*. Above all, the book was an attempt to establish the newfound discipline of economics as a science. This meant that not only did economics have its own peculiar domain of study – what we now call "the economy," was very new in Smith's day – but that this economy operated according to laws of much the same sort as Sir Isaac Newton had so recently identified as governing the physical world. Newton had represented God as a cosmic watchmaker who had created the physical machinery of the universe in such a way that it would operate for the ultimate benefit of humans, and then let it run on its own, Smith was trying to make a similar, Newtonian argument. God – or Divine Providence, as he put it – had arranged matters in such a way that our pursuit of self-interest would nonetheless, given an unfettered market, be guided "as if by an invisible hand" to promote general welfare. Smith's famous invisible hand was, as he says in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, an agent of Divine Providence. It was literally the hand of God'. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), p. 44.

ultimate and spontaneous convergence. Economics is an atheistic discipline; economics is a discipline without God; economics is a discipline without totality; economics is a discipline that begins to demonstrate not only the pointlessness, but also the impossibility of a sovereign point of view over the totality of the state that he has to govern. Economics steals away from the juridical form of the sovereign exercising sovereignty within a state precisely with the formulation of this essential incompatibility between the non-totalizable multiplicity of economic subjects of interest and the totalizing unity of the juridical sovereign (p. 282).⁴⁹

Homo œconomicus announces the end of an exterior form of all-powerful and all-knowing sovereign, yet his place is left empty but structurally intact. As we have seen in Foucault's reading, the position of the provident God is still in place but has merely changed in character. Judgement has become pragmatic in relation to a mobile set of conditions which are then judged by reference to their success or failure in relation to the market which is sanctified by a transcendent principle of order in the 'invisible hand'. The neoliberal subject appears out of a particular transformation in the site of legitimacy. By creating the market as a place of truth and freedom, in which interests can be satisfied and has competition as its essence, economists were able to define a mode of rational conduct that could be applied to all actions, be they economic or not.

*The subject of interest is an individual who can have no bonds to others or work in common with them other than through a spontaneous meeting of their interests (i.e. for profit) and the world appears as a chaos of conflicting values that should not be interfered with but which should be judged in relation to its success or failure on the market.*⁵⁰ The

⁴⁹ The similarity between Foucault's description here and Lyotard's description of the Postmodern Condition are striking, yet Lyotard fails to address the, now vacant, structural position of God in relation to postmodernity, leaving his text unresolved.

⁵⁰ Margaret Thatcher's famous statement that there is no society, only individuals, rings true here. As David Harvey writes: 'In May [1979] Margaret Thatcher was elected in Britain with a strong mandate to reform the economy. [...] She recognized that this meant nothing short of a revolution in fiscal and social policies, and immediately signalled a fierce determination to have done with the institutions and political ways of the social democratic state that had been consolidated in Britain after 1945. [...] There was, she famously declared, 'no such thing as society, only individual men and women' – and, she subsequently added, their families. All forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favour of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values. The ideological assault along these lines flowed from Thatcher's rhetoric was relentless. 'Economics are the method', she said, 'but the object is to change the

subject of interest is embodied in each of the three victorious models of masculinity represented in *Falling Down*, *Se7en* and *American Psycho*.

If we return here to Lyotard's normative phrase it can be seen that the positions of *y* and *x* have been filled in neoliberal reasoning by the market and *homo oeconomicus*. *Homo oeconomicus*, however, does not relinquish his freedom or submit himself to any rules set down by a transcendent God or sovereign but must follow his own interests which are then submitted to the trial of their profitability on the market. Subjection has become internalised as has the guilt of an unpayable debt. The subject of interest measures himself against the sovereign of profitability which always remains unknown. This unknowability of the market has a number of consequences. It multiplies the interests that are possibly expressed in society and which can become legitimated by the market, broadening the scope of legitimate action from the confines of the disciplinary models imposed from a sovereign model of social relations; but, conversely, also demands the absolute submission of all areas of life to the market model, in that any interests that are not marketable are illegitimate, and interests which are not mediated through the market are necessarily 'unreasonable' in that reason is defined through the market model.⁵¹ Everything is submitted to the test of profitability. There is no longer an external figure who acts as a stand in for the *y*, the boss, the policeman, the father, that would envisage a stable image of accepted authority but an internalised structural position which subjects all interests to the judgement of profit: if you are profitable anything goes, if not you are illegitimate or mad. As with Schreber we are

soul'. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, pp. 22-3. It also ties into the representation of the city as a chaotic, hellish place of diverse and uncontrollable interests in all the films that I am studying here.

⁵¹ See Gilles Deleuze's influential essay 'Control and Becoming', in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 169-77, in relation to the transformations from disciplinary society to what he describes as control society.

now in relation to an intimate and personal God. The psychotic, in Lacan's analysis, takes this position of the master signifier not as a rival but as a model. He has now, though, in the genre of neoliberal discourse, become the bearer of reason: the lunatics are running the madhouse.⁵²

Interest in this formation becomes defined by two poles. At one pole, the personal, the irreducible and non-transferrable element of individual taste and choice which, at the other pole, is created and validated by an impersonal system that holds out the promise to satisfy this desire as long as it is submitted to judgement on the market. As with the sadist, the personal is merely a choice taken from the impersonal element, the market, which is the definitive principle which must be adhered to to maintain the image of the coherent and powerful self.

In his study Foucault shows how the subject of interest is constructed as an ideal object of neoliberal discourse, how it creates 'what does not exist' and submits it to the judgement of true and false. He does not, however, answer the question of how this structure is actualised in practice. How does this form of subjectivity become possible in

⁵² The comparison between corporations and psychopathy has been made by Joel Bakan in his popular *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2004). 'Unlike the human beings who inhabit it, the corporation is *singularly* self-interested and unable to feel genuine concern for others in any context. Not surprisingly, then, when we asked Dr. Hare to apply his diagnostic checklist of psychopathic traits (italicized below) to the corporation's institutional character, he found there was a close match. The corporation is *irresponsible*, Dr. Hare said, because "in an attempt to satisfy the corporate goal, everybody else is put at risk." Corporations try to "*manipulate* everything, including public opinion," and they are *grandiose*, always insisting "that we're number one, we're the best." A *lack of empathy* and *asocial tendencies* are also key characteristics of corporations, says Hare – "their behavior indicates they don't really concern themselves with their victims"; and corporations often *refuse to accept responsibility for their own actions* and are *unable to feel remorse*: "if [corporations] get caught [breaking the law], they pay big fines and they...continue doing what they did before anyway. And in fact in many cases the fines and the penalties paid by the organization are trivial compared to the profits they rake in." Finally, according to Dr. Hare, corporations relate to others *superficially* – "their whole goal is to present themselves to the public in a way that is appealing to the public [but] in fact may not be representative of what th[e] corporation is really like." Human psychopaths are notorious for their ability to use charm as a mask to hide their dangerously self-obsessed personalities. For corporations, social responsibility may play the same role. Through it they can present themselves as compassionate and concerned about others when, in fact, they lack the ability to care about anyone or anything but themselves' (pp. 56-7).

contemporary capitalism? How is the market able to embody this power, making it have real effects and consequences? And, why would individuals submit themselves to this form of subjectification? What is the power of capital that it can take the place of a providential god? Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari can help us think through these questions in their *Anti-Oedipus*.

Deleuze and Guattari: capital become transcendent

What the previous analysis leaves unanswered, then, is the question of how the authority of the invisible hand is realised as being anything other than a necessary fantasy to support Adam Smith's argument. I do not have the space here to develop this reading in detail but want to draw upon what Deleuze and Guattari discuss as the necessary conditions for the birth of capitalism.

Drawing from Marx, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that, for capitalism to appear it was necessary for two processes to coincide: the creation of 'free workers' and the creation of decoded money, or capital. This coincidence creates the possibility for, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, capital to become filiative, that is, capital is able to reproduce itself. Quoting Marx they argue:

Capital becomes filiative when money begets money, or value a surplus value – 'value in process, money in process, and, as such capital ... Value ... suddenly presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a motion of its own, in which money and commodities are mere forms which it assumes and casts off in turn. Nay more: instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters now, so to say, into relations with itself as surplus-value; as the father differentiates himself qua the son, yet both are one and of the same age: for only by the surplus-value of £10 does the £100 originally advanced become capital.⁵³

⁵³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 227.

This begetting becomes possible when capital has directly appropriated production and capital has become industrial capital. Capital, therefore, no longer has to deal with actual qualified things (workers, commodities), rather, these objects now come to depend upon the differential relation set up between variable capital (labour power) and constant capital (means of production) which is essentially mediated through the banks. On the one hand there is a flow of payments, in the form of incomes to wage earners, on the other hand, a flow of capital that is not realisable in the here and now but is a means of financing based on the potential for returns at some undefined point in the future that is constantly deferred. There are, therefore, two different kinds of money that are in no way assimilable. One type of money, is actualisable in terms of wages to buy commodities, and, as a consequence, draws from the other non-actualisable or transcendent flow of industrial capital. It is the difference between these two types of money that Deleuze and Guattari suggest economists try to hide but which is also the reason for the lowest in society to invest in this system:

Hence one is correct in speaking of a profound *dissimulation* of the dualism of these two forms of money, payment and financing – the two aspects of banking practice. But this dissimulation does not depend on a faulty understanding so much as it expresses the capitalist field of immanence, the apparent objective movement where the lower or subordinate form is no less necessary than the other (it is necessary for money to play on both boards), and where no integration of the dominated classes could occur without the shadow of this unapplied principle of convertibility – which is enough, however, to ensure that the Desire of the most disadvantaged creature will invest with all its strength, irrespective of any economic understanding or lack of it, the capitalist social field as a whole.⁵⁴

The flow of financing, the subjective and abstract essence of wealth, becomes the transcendental principle. Capital, as finance capital, acts as pure and legitimate potentiality which must be kept flowing at all costs. This flow is immaterial and

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 229.

unpossessable but creates the power to determine what appears and what does not, what has value and what does not: capitalism as a narrative of legitimation.⁵⁵ In order to keep these flows in conjunction capitalism has two tendencies; one that demands the new, the different, the decoding of all traditional codes and bonds, what Deleuze and Guattari call a schizophrenisation of society in order to unleash desires and new creative couplings that would produce profit for the system; the other that demands the submission of this flow of decoded desire to the flow of capital in which it finds its legitimation and repression. In other words; be free, live dangerously and expressively, as long as you are profitable.

It is here, in the 'mutant' flow of capital that interests are found, invested in and measured. These interests Deleuze and Guattari call antiproduction. They are means of realising, or absorbing, the surplus-value that the capitalist machine produces: creating lack where there is abundance, scarcity in the midst of plenitude. The private person invests in their interests, their hobbies, their recreational activities, and, therefore, conforms to the rules of capital so that they can draw off their share of pleasure from its flow. As a consequence, interest reinforces and invests the system. In Deleuze and Guattari's words:

We have seen how the capitalist machine constituted a system of immanence bordered by a great mutant flow, nonpossessive and nonpossessed, flowing over the full body of capital and forming an absurd power. Everyone in his class and his person receives something from this power, or is excluded from it, insofar as the great flow is converted into incomes, incomes of wages or of enterprises that

⁵⁵ This form of differential relation is figured by Deleuze and Guattari as an 'infinite debt'. The banks create a debt to themselves which can never be repaid because, if it was, the flows would cease. As Deleuze and Guattari state 'An economist of the calibre of Bernard Schmitt finds strange lyrical words to characterize this flow of infinite debt: an instantaneous creative flow that the banks create spontaneously as a debt owing to themselves, a creation *ex nihilo* that, instead of transferring a pre-existing currency as a means of payment, hollows out at one extreme of the full body a negative money (a debt entered as a liability of the banks), and projects at the other extreme a positive money (a credit granted the productive economy by the banks) – "a flow possessing a power of mutation" *that does not enter into income and is not assigned to purchases*, a pure availability, nonpossession and nonwealth' *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 237.

define aims. We see the most disadvantaged, the most excluded members of society invest with passion the system that oppresses them, and where they always *find* an interest, since it is here that they search for and measure it. Interest always comes after. Antiproduction effuses in the system: antiproduction is loved for itself, as is the way in which desire represses itself in the great capitalist aggregate. Repressing desire, not only for others but in oneself, being the cop for the others and for oneself – that is what arouses, and it is not ideology, it is economy.⁵⁶

It is, therefore, not belief in the market that causes submission to capitalism but the desire for access to this ‘pure potential’ of a limitless capital that will satisfy any want and can make any world appear: capitalism’s immanent heaven. Capitalism’s logic claims that the more you submit the more chance you have of accessing this miraculous power, the more you are a slave the more you will be the master of your world. This is the double bind of capitalism.

The preceding argument with regard to the structure of capitalism as laid out by Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari can be summarised under four headings:

1. In neoliberalism the logic of the market is applied to all relations, even the non-economic, and creates the entrepreneur of him/herself as its productive unit.
2. *Homo oeconomicus* becomes the rational measure of action not divided by duty to a transcendent sovereign but rather must follow his own interests.
3. The legitimating principle of the invisible hand comes to ‘fill in’ the place of God, and the market occupies the position of the lost sovereign as God’s representative, legitimating the egotistical actions of the subject of interest in the name of the market.
4. Desire is wedded to the flow of capital as capital represents an unlimited potentiality that appears to engender itself.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 346.

4.

American Psycho

I have been arguing that Patrick Bateman is a textual construction based on the logic of late capitalism. The image of capitalism that I have been invoking is of a particularly global sort. So why is Patrick an *American Psycho* rather than just a psycho? I have already suggested, in the first chapter, that national identity is placed into question in the new masculine narrative of legitimation set out by Prendergast. D-Fens's reliance upon the figures of a job for life, fatherhood and nation are undermined as being illegitimate in modern America. If Patrick Bateman embodies the narrative of legitimation for this new form of normativity why would nation dominate his moniker?

The notion of national identity, I would argue, similar to that of fatherhood and work come to be incorporated in the new narrative of legitimation but under the auspices of this new *y*. Nation would, therefore, no longer connote a 'we', an abstract grounding community, that would need to be defended and fought for, but would rather define a certain 'asset' that would add or diminish the possibility of benefiting one's wage stream. Nationality, gender, ethnicity, etc. would mark one out as occupying an identity that could maximise or minimise your potential within the market. Nationality would, then, no longer signify being a member of a community but rather, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, place one in the role of 'application [...] in a code':

The person has become 'private' in reality, insofar as he derives from abstract quantities and becomes concrete in the becoming-concrete of these same

quantities. It is these quantities that are marked, no longer the persons themselves: *your capital or your labor capacity*, the rest is not important, we'll always find a place for you within the expanded limits of the system, even if an axiom has to be created just for you. There is no longer any need of a collective investment of organs, as they are sufficiently filled with the floating images constantly produced by capitalism. To pursue a remark of Henri Lefebvre's, these images do not initiate a making public of the private so much as a privatization of the public: the whole world unfolds right at home, without one's having to leave the TV screen. This gives private persons a very special role in the system: a role of *application*, and no longer of implication, in a code.⁵⁷

Nation, as with all other forms of identification, becomes an image that is attached to the incorporeal flow of capital. In this configuration, capitalism, as with psychosis in Lacan, divorces the signifier from its connection to the signified and, in capitalism, becomes an image modulated by the flow of capital. This emptying of any connection to a material support in capitalism is interestingly displayed by comparing the 1980 film, *American Gigolo*, written and directed by Paul Schrader, with *American Psycho*.⁵⁸

Julian Kaye (Richard Gere), the American Gigolo, embodies a particular form of the American dream. Good at his job, giving pleasure to women for money, he reaps the rewards and indulges in the pleasures of material goods. The camera dwells on him driving along the freeway in his open top Mercedes SL and choosing from fashionable clothing; laying out shirts and ties, selecting the best combinations. This sensitivity and sensuality, however, is ultimately punished by those who wish to control him. Yet it is these traits that also save him, through the love of Michelle (Lauren Hutton). The film warns of the punishment for believing in the American dream: of individuality, self-determination and enjoyment. *American Gigolo*, however, presents an alternative dream, apart from the vicissitudes of capitalism, in which America is still presented as a defined place of sensuality and human connection.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 251.

⁵⁸ *American Gigolo*, dir. by Paul Schrader (Paramount Pictures, 1980).

In *American Psycho*, on the other hand, Patrick feels nothing and gains no enjoyment from what he does but is merely compelled by a logic that he desperately tries to conform to. Patrick is not being ironic when he states 'I just want to fit in', he literally is the horrific image of conformity made up of the images of capital. The American dream as embodied by neoliberal capitalism produces the American Psycho. America is no longer a place, a sensuous corporeality, but an 'anywhere', one image among others vying on the flows of capital.⁵⁹ As Patrick concludes in the novel, answering a question that comes from nowhere and, for no reason, summarises; 'Well, though I know that I should have done *that* instead of not doing it, I'm twenty-seven for Christ sakes and this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or a club in New York, maybe *anywhere*, at the end of the century and how people, you know, me, behave, and this is what being *Patrick* means to me, I guess, so, well, yup, uh...' ⁶⁰ The narrative of legitimisation of neoliberal capitalism universalises itself and yet personalises itself, a personal relation between the universe and the individual mediated through your bank balance.

America, in this system, represents a competitive position on the market which needs to show itself as being attractive, fashionable and contemporary whilst also violently protecting its interests. Hence, the profound contradiction of US nationalism: on the one hand, America is the land of the free, the greatest country in the world, and a beacon of freedom, liberty and progress; on the other, the US displays a paranoid fear of

⁵⁹ It was Locke who said: 'In the beginning, all the World was America', John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [1698] ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 301. This was a very empiricist position, inasmuch it paralleled the idea of the mind as a tabula rasa with that of discovered land as a terra nullius. Martin A. Kayman argues that this is paralleled under globalisation by English as a 'lingua franca'. Martin A. Kayman, "America Again?' Locating 'Global Culture'", *Estudos Em Homenagem a Margarida Losa*, ed. by Ana Luísa Amaral and Gualter Cunha (Oporto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2006), 239-49.

⁶⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 399.

the outside world, where threats from 'enemies' can be seen everywhere aiding and abetting the policy of the pre-emptive attack: American psychosis.⁶¹

Patrick Bateman: the subject of capitalism

How does this configuration of capitalism map onto the linguistic tropes that I have already discussed with regards to Ellis's creation of Bateman? On the formal level we can see how money acts like Ellis's 'and'; the means of conjunction with the ability to join disparate and non-communicating elements. The commodity or brand as the proper name is the privileged object of conjunction designating, not a value in itself, but a value in relation to the market of which it is a part, only nominally connected to any reality or use. And all this is dependent upon the subject of interest, the entrepreneur of himself; the solipsistic interiority of an individual only interested in their ability to draw off their share from the flow of capital. Yet these easily identifiable corollaries are contingent upon a more fundamental and more englobing form of expression that must be legitimated so that the market can be applied to all relations. The market is presented as being the place of truth and freedom, which creates a rational and moral subject legitimated by market relations: the subject of interest. To remind ourselves this narrative of legitimation is neatly expressed in the formula, *it is a norm decreed by the market (y) for the subject of interest (x) to perform action a.*

The power and originality of Ellis's text is not just to mimic the content of capitalism, to suggest that, in some way, it is bad in itself, but to foreground these tropes, pushing them to their limits, and therefore pointing towards neoliberal

⁶¹ For a more detailed account of this formation see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, pp. 195-6. See also Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (London: Cape, 1966).

capitalism's principles, the narrative of legitimation upon which it is founded. Ellis shows that market rationality is psychotic and market freedom is not morally disinclined to murder. By using both psychotic and sadistic language Ellis draws the reader's attention to not only the structural relationship between the subject and a transcendent organising principle but also to the vision of world these principles create. This is exemplified in those moments in the text when Patrick expounds in grandiose statements his worldview:

Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire – meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in [...] this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged.⁶²

In these lines Ellis neatly summarises the normative position alluded to in both *Falling Down* and *Se7en*.

Murphet regards as a failure Ellis's recourse to meta-language by not maintaining the stylistic 'insideness' or immanence of the novel, yet, I argue, it is the necessary recourse to the worldview created by this form of subjectification, and its global all-encompassing, nature that gives Patrick Bateman's and capitalism's violence their sublime charge.⁶³ By explicitly changing registers Ellis corroborates the discourse of the novel as not a mere reflection on, or representation of, the 'depersonalisation' or 'fictionality' of the contemporary capitalist subject, merely calling for a simple recourse to meaningful social and emotional content to abate its consequences. Rather, Ellis's text points to the universalising narrative of capitalism itself, being the contemporary

⁶² Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 374-5.

⁶³ Murphet, *American Psycho*, pp. 50-3.

narrative of legitimation in which interest is invested at all levels and its principles taken as universals.

Here we see the distinction between the film and the novel. The film presents itself as a satire and uses the comic pathetic character of Patrick Bateman to denounce the folly of capitalism. Yet, while the film points towards the content of capitalist masculine subjectification it avoids drawing our attention to the mode of expression of capitalism. By judging Patrick we are not thrown back upon our own subjection to capitalism's narrative of legitimation, its means of organising our own phrases, which is done so brilliantly by Ellis's formal manipulation in the novel. We can, therefore, when watching the film, sit safe in the seat of judgement looking down upon yuppie Wall Street trader, Patrick Bateman, as an object of ire, and lament the cruelty and injustice of the world, without experiencing the vertigo of the system in which we live taken to its limit. This, as Abel suggests, is the affective power of the novel which is dissipated in the film. The film, in its adaptation of the novel, fails to make its syntax repeat the syntax of capitalism but rather reflects upon it.

There is a moment in the film's conclusion, however, when the camera does take on Patrick's subjective viewpoint. In the final scene at Harry's, after trying unsuccessfully to admit his guilt to his lawyer, he sits with his friends and turns to Bryce. The camera cuts to his point of view and the soundtrack mutes the incidental noise to a single note played by violins and Patrick's voice-over. The camera slowly pans over the clientele at the bar as he intones:

There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my indifference towards it, I have now surpassed. 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, there is no catharsis,

my punishment continues to elude me, and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself. No new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant nothing.

The camera, in the final lines turns back on Patrick and slowly zooms in on his unblinking eyes, holding the image for a few seconds before cutting to black and the credits.

Here, at the conclusion of the film, the camera moves towards the interiority set up in the novel. What is most frightening about this image is its banality. It is the image of the everyday world as he scans the bar, at people chatting and drinking. Once again, as with *Falling Down* and *Se7en*, we reach reality, but reality through the unblinking eyes of Patrick Bateman. In both *Falling Down* and *Se7en* the main character of the plot is a tragic figure that lacks knowledge and, in both films, prepares the way for the revelation of the legitimated mode of conduct at the film's conclusion. The new narrative of legitimation is embodied in the position of the lead figure's double who presents a mode of action that is deemed appropriate and for which D-Fens, Mills and Doe are finally sacrificed. The sacrifice, then, appears as a necessity, a natural outcome and the working of destiny rather than the imposition of a violent law. Similarly in *American Psycho* Patrick is also head-strong, forthright, sure of himself but also lacking knowledge and insight. However, there is no sacrifice in the text, no moment of revelation for Patrick of the error of his ways, and no imposition of a 'natural' law. As he says: 'my punishment continues to elude me, and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself. No new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant nothing.' The resolution of the film and the tragic moment for the audience comes through the realisation that there is not this cathartic sacrifice that heralds the new law; this is the law and it sees itself as legitimate. *American Psycho* does not propose

redemption by promising a new law that is normalised through sacrificial violence as just but rather tells us that there is no divine justice: we are in hell.

Conclusion

As Lyotard suggests, presenting a genre as the only one possible, formulating a narrative of legitimation, can constitute a morality and a form of reason but, in consequence, makes an ethics impossible. Patrick Bateman's narrative of legitimation shows a fantasy world in which everything fits together, nothing questions or delimits his power, there is no 'no' that would demand a concern for justice and knowledge. This 'no' is a certain violence that comes from the outside and is what I described in the last chapter as an encounter. The encounter, the event, demands thought and is itself justice. *American Psycho* shows the horror of any genre taking itself as law, as normality, as reality. It also shows, however, how this narrative is invested by desire, is desired in itself, to satisfy interests that are created within this particular system. White, heterosexual masculinity in the form of Wall Street trader Patrick Bateman is shown to follow these conjunctions of phrases, or is rather created through them, much as his victims are created by the same system. Repressor and repressed are created within the same system as its necessary gears.

In the final moments of the film Patrick laments the loss of the event, the violent encounter, the 'punishment' that still eludes him, which is the essence of meaning and learning. The violence of the encounter is drawn upon as an ethical necessity to break through the psycho-sadistic interiority of a narrative of legitimation. If white, heterosexual masculinity is to break out of its contemporary subjection to the neoliberal

narrative of legitimation how will it do this? David Fincher's film *Fight Club* appears to directly address this question and to which I now turn.

4

Fight Club

More than any other Hollywood film of this period David Fincher's 1999 *Fight Club* represents a cinematic confrontation with the genre of neoliberal capitalism. Similar to the films previously discussed, *Fight Club* is a male-dominated, contemporary, urban, social critique, centring on a white male character in crisis subjected to a system that he cannot control and which he feels unable to affect. In *Falling Down*, *Se7en* and *American Psycho*, the films concluded by taking up a dominant narrative of legitimization that defined a particular form of masculinity which, I have argued, is in line with neoliberal capitalist aims. The films present an individual with a nihilistic relation to a world that he is unable to connect to or change, only perpetuate. This narrative conclusion is presented as being natural, common sense and destined; that is, a return to reality. While *Falling Down* and *Se7en* normalised this narrative, the novel *American Psycho* pathologised it by taking its logic to its limits through formal experimentation. *American Psycho* showed how violence, rape and murder were not antithetical to the logic of late capitalism but legitimately within its bounds as long as profitability and interiority were

maintained. This critique was neutralised in the film, however, by individualising and satirising these traits as the property of a single man (the anti-hero) Patrick Bateman rather than the normalised structure of late capitalist subjectivity. The failure of the film to replicate the critique of the book was due to the film not following the novel's formal experimentation which demonstrated capitalism's very means of joining phrases, its psychotic interiority and sadistic individualism, but rather reproduced the conventions of the satiric genre.

Fight Club is particularly relevant to my analysis as it appears to take up the challenge of psychic interiority that is left wanting in the film of *American Psycho*. As Amy Taubin suggests, *Fight Club* is a 'Hollywood movie [that takes] place [...] inside someone's brain'.¹ By utilising specific narrative and filmic techniques the film addresses this challenge not only through the famous conceit of Tyler being Jack's subjective projection, his idealised alter ego, but also through the highly praised formal experimentation and special effects in the film.² Adapted from Chuck Palahniuk's debut novel, *Fight Club* tells the story of an insomniac 'recall co-ordinator' (the narrator who sometimes refers to himself as Jack, played by Edward Norton) who, on the recommendation of his doctor to find a cure for his sleeplessness, joins a support group for testicular cancer to find out 'what real pain is'. Finding relief from his insomnia by being able to cry, Jack becomes addicted to these groups. However, when a new participant, Marla Singer (Helena Bonham-Carter), begins to frequent the groups he can no longer cry and, therefore, once again cannot sleep. After an unexplained explosion destroys his apartment, Jack goes to live with his new friend, anarchist and

¹ Amy Taubin, 'So Good it Hurts', *Sight and Sound*, 11 (1999), 16-18 (p. 18).

² See Gavin Smith, 'Inside Out: Gavin Smith Goes One-on-One with David Fincher', *Film Comment*, 35.5 (1999), 58-68 and William Brown and David H. Fleming, 'Deterritorialisation and Schizoanalysis in David Fincher's *Fight Club*', *Deleuze Studies*, 5 (2011), 275-299.

entrepreneur, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), with whom he starts an all-male bare-knuckle fighting club. This club becomes highly popular with disaffected males leading to the club coming out of the basement and initiating a terrorist project named Project Mayhem. Jack eventually, after the death of his friend Robert 'Bob' Paulson (Meat Loaf Aday) on a failed 'homework assignment' for the project, realises that he has created Tyler as an alter ego in order to change his circumstances. Wanting to regain control of his life he tries to destroy Project Mayhem and kill Tyler and in the process secures the affections of Marla.

The film's device of splitting the main protagonist into two separate characters dramatises the conflicted and contested nature of the dominant narrative of legitimation within a single subject. This technique transforms the dynamic of the film from good guy versus bad guy, as witnessed in the Western and detective genre exemplified in *Falling Down* and *Se7en*, and the monolithic subjectivity of the serial killer in *American Psycho*, to one in which the contest to be resolved is split within one psyche. *Fight Club*, in its structure, undermines the exteriority of the camera's position instead making its images an expression of subjective representation. This technique disarms the audience's position of external judge because there is no external position from which to view the action. It also nullifies any essentialist reading of masculine subjectivity and stages the violent processes of subjective construction and the conflicts that arise within narratives of legitimation through the visual medium of film. Much as in *Se7en's* rejection of Mills' organic representation or action-image, *Fight Club*, while remaining bound to a generic realism, transforms the site of legitimation for this realism from visual perception, the camera acting as an objective 'eye' on the world, to thought, as the subjective determinant of the images that appear.

This chapter will, therefore, examine the formal and thematic tropes developed by the film in order to undertake an analysis of how narratives of legitimation are constructed and challenged. The aim, as has been the case throughout the thesis, is to carry out a reading of masculinity that is not bound to notions of an essentially good or bad male conduct but rather how a certain form of masculinity is normalised through narratives of legitimation in Hollywood cinema of the 1990s or, in other words, the genre of masculinity in late capitalism. As with the other films I have addressed, this form of analysis is particularly productive in relation to the critical readings that have so far been made of the film because it highlights the dynamic and contested nature of narratives of legitimation. It reveals the narrative's structural limits that, when challenged, produce violence. It is this particular way of approaching representations of violence that makes this method of analysis vital when addressing Hollywood cinema by avoiding the moralising pitfalls present in much Masculinity Studies literature of reading men and masculinity as essentially violent. My analysis does not, therefore, disavow violence, rather, it sees violence as either conservative or liberating: violence either tries to maintain, or tries to destroy an image of thought. To make the contrast of my approach clear I will focus on two particular conceptualisations of violence in the work of Henry A. Giroux and Slavoj Žižek.

1.

Critical readings

As can be expected from such a popular and high profile movie, *Fight Club* has already received a wide range of critical assessments directly relating to the themes that have motivated my own work.³ First, I want to distinguish my method of analysis from two of the other readings that have been made of the film. I want to show the foundations, and consequences, of taking up these differing theoretical models to demonstrate why looking at *Fight Club* through the lens of legitimation avoids similar critical impasses. I will then go on to produce a detailed reading of the dynamic of narratives of legitimation in the film before concluding with the specific significance of white, heterosexual masculinity to the film and its relation to the narrative of neoliberal capitalism.

Giroux and the problem of violence

As is the case with the films addressed in the previous chapters, *Fight Club* received mixed critical appraisal on its release. As Lynn M. Ta contends: '*Fight Club* [...] exploded into an array of polarized discourse surrounding the film's critical yet problematic portrayal of late capitalism's obsessive push for profits and excessive consumerism, and, more importantly, the latter's damaging effects on an American masculinity gone soft.'⁴ As Ta's foregrounding of masculinity reveals, what has dominated many of these

³ For a comprehensive list of articles dealing with *Fight Club* see William Brown and David H. Fleming, 'Deterritorialisation and Schizoanalysis'.

⁴ Lynn M. Ta, 'Hurt So Good: *Fight Club*, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism', *Journal of American Culture*, 29 (2006), 265-277 (p. 265).

readings has been the aim of defining a motive for the film's representation of a fearful and emasculated masculinity reacting with violence to a malevolent and dehumanising corporate and consumer capitalism. The question that these readings pose is: is the film an authentic political statement with the aim of making a 'better world' opposed to capitalism, or is it a cynical reassertion of masculine power? These assessments, therefore, in an implicit fashion ask whether the film can provide a model for effective political action and social change. The general consensus is 'no'.⁵

The reason for this reaction is because of the film's representation of violence. The violence of *Fight Club* had been the most contentious aspect of the film's release and received an uproar of morally outraged responses from the right-wing press.⁶ Yet, the film has also been contentious for Leftist academics. While the stylised representations of violence were no doubt part of the attraction of the film for many of its audience, its handling was considered by some to be divisive. A particularly vivid example of this position is Henry A. Giroux's sustained attack on the film.⁷ His reading presents the film as an elaborate sham which pretends to question capitalism while secretly reinforcing its tenets. As a representative example of a liberal democratic approach to the question

⁵ J. Michael Clark writes: '*Fight Club* [...] focus[es] [...] upon the heterosexist isolationism and individualism which others argue is a symptom, perhaps even a cause, and certainly not the solution for our current economic and environmental woes.' 'Faludi, *Fight Club*, and Phallic Masculinity: Exploring the Emasculated Economics of Patriarchy', *Journal of Men's Studies*, 11 (2002) 65-76 (p. 65-6). Bülent Dicken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen argue: 'The problem with *Fight Club* is that it falls into the trap of presenting its problematic, violence, from a cynical distance. *Fight Club* is of course extremely reflexive and ironic. It can even be said that it is an irony on Fascism'. 'Enjoy Your Fight!: *Fight Club* as a Symptom of the Network Society', *Cultural Values*, 6 (2002), 349-367 (p. 365). See also Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates: a selection of writings from February to October 1917* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 257.

⁶ Alexander Walker of the London Evening Standard wrote, 'It is an inadmissible assault on personal decency. And on society itself.' Quoted in, 'How to Start a Fight,' booklet in *Fight Club* two-disc special edition DVD, p. 14.

⁷ I take my reading here from the article 'Brutalised Bodies and Emasculated Politics: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and Masculine Violence', *Third Text*, 53:4 (2000-1) 31-41. Giroux also addresses *Fight Club* in 'Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence', *JAC*, 21 (2001), 1 – 31, and with Imre Szeman in 'Ikea Boy Fights Back: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and the Political Limits of Nineties Cinema' in *The End of Cinema As We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*, ed. Jon Lewis (London: Pluto Press, 2002) pp. 95-104.

of violence and masculinity my discussion focuses on the theoretical foundation of Giroux's argument.

What makes Giroux's reading interesting, and why it appears that *Fight Club* causes him such consternation, is the model of politics against which he measures the film. It is immediately apparent that Giroux has a definite view of what correct political action should be and the values that it should emulate: these are reason, communication and freedom. The introduction to his article 'Brutalised Bodies and Emasculated Politics' complains that 'the basic problems of society' are not being addressed in this current 'cynical' climate.⁸ After listing these problems, he goes on to suggest that *Fight Club* is evidence of such cynicism. He argues: '*Fight Club* largely ignores issues surrounding the break up of labour unions, the slashing of the US workforce, extensive plant closings, downsizing, outsourcing, the elimination of the welfare state, the attack on "people of color", and the growing disparities between the rich and the poor', and moves on to complain: '*Fight Club* offers up a notion of politics in which oppression breeds contempt rather than compassion, and social change is fueled by totalitarian visions rather than democratic struggles.'⁹ The model of politics that Giroux draws upon here is a particular ideal of liberal democracy in which representatives are able to engage in reasoned debate to resolve conflicts, granting rights to the oppressed and easing the burden of the disadvantaged. With regular recourse to the notion of freedom, there are obvious parallels here between Giroux's argument and what I described in the first chapter, following Lyotard, as a metanarrative of emancipation.

Consequently, for Giroux violence becomes an inflammatory and problematic term. *Fight Club* is a particularly evil lure in that it holds out the erotic, and therefore

⁸ Giroux, 'Brutalised Bodies...', p. 31.

⁹ Ibid. p. 34.

sinful, appeal of power. Giroux explains: 'By maximising the pleasures of bodies, pain, and violence, *Fight Club* comes dangerously close to giving violence a glamorous (sic) and fascist edge.'¹⁰ This paradoxical connection between pleasure and pain, not to mention glamour and fascism, is not drawn out in Giroux's reading but is, rather, used to create a moral distinction between a bodily, violent, yet strangely pleasurable realm of power and, on the other hand, a space of communication and sociality that is free from all forms of violence, and pure in its aims.¹¹

By utilising this more or less explicit Cartesian mind/body binarism and Enlightenment discourse Giroux's analysis is founded upon a theoretical model that has been extensively critiqued by poststructuralist and feminist thinkers, particularly for its disavowal of the body as a site of thought.¹² Giroux, desperate to split the sinful body from the purity of reason, finds violence everywhere but cannot see the violence embodied in a position, like his own, which relies upon a preconceived representation of what is 'correct' and who is 'repressed' in an image of a 'good' community.¹³ The parallel between Girard's analysis of 'good', transcendent violence, legitimated by the unanimous decision of the community and 'bad' violence that destroys these hierarchies

¹⁰Ibid. p. 36.

¹¹ Giroux's argument closely mirrors Habermas's call to complete the project of the Enlightenment. Simon Malpas neatly summarises Habermas and Lyotard's opposing positions: 'In the light of th[e] fragmentation of society, and the simultaneous disruption of traditional forms of justice, culture and identity, there are two types of possible response. The first is the approach taken by [...] Habermas. Habermas sees modernity as an incomplete project and wants to further its aims by overcoming the disintegration of contemporary society. This must be done, he argues, by striving to reach consensus between the different language games through negotiation. [...] Lyotard's aim is the opposite of this. He sees the grand narratives as having always been politically problematic; for example, the universal ideas of reason and freedom from superstition provided a moral basis for colonial domination through capitalist expansion and missionary terrorism in Africa and the Middle East.' *Jean-François Lyotard* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 29.

¹² Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984); Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Claire Colebrook, *Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹³ As Bill Readings notes: 'According to Lyotard any politics that remains within the realm of representation is necessarily complicit with the exclusionary politics that have oppressed women, workers, ethnic and sexual minorities, and others as yet unrecognizable'. *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. xxviii.

I discussed in chapter 1 is clear. Interestingly however, this violence/pleasure/irrationalism is embodied in masculine performance. As a trope common to Masculinity Studies, masculinity as a term has swapped places with what feminist authors have shown was historically deemed the feminine as the site of irrationality and pathology.¹⁴ Giroux argues:

Violence in *Fight Club* is treated as a sport, a crucial component that lets men connect with each other through the overcoming of fear, pain and fatigue, while revelling in the illusions of a paramilitary culture [...] Violence in this instance signals its crucial function in both affirming the natural 'fierceness' of men and in providing them with a concrete experience that allows them to connect at some primal level. As grotesque as this act appears, Fincher does not engage it – or similar representations in the film – as expressions of pathology.¹⁵

In this reading, masculinity is situated as regressive homosociality and a pathological embodiment of aggressive power, and is considered by Giroux morally abhorrent, to be discarded if society is to prosper. Aggressive homosocial masculinity is created as the scapegoat whose sacrifice will bring back order to the community.

By splitting reason and action Giroux is able to moralise about the 'unreasonable' or 'pathological' nature of any act if that act does not conform to the representation of the 'good' within his particular liberal democratic narrative of legitimisation. As I mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, it is *doxa* today to describe gender as historically and socially constructed, and therefore to present masculinity as contingent rather than essential, but by conflating masculinity and power/violence (and as a consequence femininity with nurturing and caring, reinstating all the tired clichés)

¹⁴ See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1984); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830 – 1980* (London: Virago, 1987); Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad, and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2008).

¹⁵ Giroux, 'Brutalised Bodies...', p. 36.

gender is made, once again, insuperable. This tactic aims, it appears from Giroux's argument, to morally tarnish any male conduct that is not organised through a concern for masculinity's others on the model of patriarchal heterosexual authority. Yet this demand for a guilty/benevolent conscience does not do away with masculine power but merely reinforces the juridical model of power that I critiqued in the introduction which repeats the formula of domination and victimhood. By placing an object (man) as the essential bearer of an abstract relation (power) reifies gender and 'masculinity' is doomed from the start.

Giroux's reading of *Fight Club* shows that this juridical model of masculinity/power - others/non-power, so effectively critiqued by Judith Butler, was still a dominant mode of critical discourse articulated on the subject at the time. By disavowing the body, the physical, and its effect upon thought and relying upon a communicational model of social interaction these analyses lead little further than astonished outrage and the denunciation of masculinity and the cry for more 'humanity'.¹⁶ By placing the good in a particular narrative of legitimation the metanarrative of human emancipation, defined by democratic and reasonable debate, suffers the same fate as D-Fens and Mills in that they are delegitimated through the new narrative of neoliberal legitimation. Giroux sees the 'critical intellectual' as this representative (hero), speaking for the oppressed and protecting democracy.¹⁷ Yet, as Lyotard makes clear, this community no longer exists in the postmodern condition and

¹⁶ Both Clark and Ta draw upon Susan Faludi's conclusions as to the task of modern masculinity, 'is not, in the end, to figure out how to be masculine - rather [...] figuring out how to be human'. Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow, 1999) p. 607, quoted in J. Michael Clark, 'Faludi, *Fight Club*, and Phallic Masculinity', p. 74.

¹⁷ Giroux argues: '*Fight Club* reminds us of the need to reclaim the discourses of ethics, politics, and critical agency as important categories in the struggle against the rising tide of violence, human suffering, and the specter of fascism that threatens all vestiges of democratic public life. Precisely because of its ideological implications, *Fight Club* posits an important challenge to anyone concerned about the promise of democracy, and what it might mean for critical intellectuals and others to take a stand against the dominant media.' 'Brutalised Bodies...', p. 41.

there is no form of organic representation that can account for it. Giroux's unquestioned position as a privileged white male academic and representative of those ethnic and sexual others without a voice repeats the imperialist discourse whose transformation has precisely motivated the production of the films I have been discussing. His work becomes a nostalgic call for a lost community of clear and transparent communication; a call for the loss of naturalised and benevolent authority in Lyotard's metanarrative of emancipation.

What is essential, therefore, for a rigorous engagement with the notion of masculinity represented in *Fight Club* is to reconsider the relationship between masculinity and power/violence so that ideas of 'essential guilt' of a reified violent masculinity no longer detract from an engagement with, and challenge of, real relations of power and formations of normalised domination. If masculinity is merely a subject position that arises as a *consequence* (and not the cause) of the violent assertion of a narrative of legitimation we must reconsider our approach to the analysis of representations of violence. This reconsideration is already attested by Slavoj Žižek.

Žižek, *Fight Club* and violence

Žižek argues, in contradistinction to Giroux, that violence rather than communication and consensus is necessary for social transformation, and has analysed *Fight Club* directly to illustrate this contention in a number of places.¹⁸ For example, in the section entitled 'Redemptive Violence' in *Revolution at the Gates* he argues that *Fight Club* gives

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*; 'The Violence of the Fantasy' *The Communication Review*, 6 (2003), 275-287; 'The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link' in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. by Molly Anne Rothenberg and others (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); 'An Ethical Plea for Lies and Masochism' in *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, ed. by Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004).

us a clue as to how to break out of the repressive capitalist sphere. When discussing the scene in which Jack beats himself up in front of his boss Žižek asks: ‘What does this self-beating stand for?’ He responds:

On a first approach, it is clear that its fundamental function is to reach out and re-establish the connection with the real Other – to suspend the fundamental abstraction and coldness of capitalist subjectivity, best exemplified by the figure of the lone monadic individual who, alone in front of the PC screen, communicates with the entire world.¹⁹

Žižek suggests that, rather than humanitarian compassion we need violence to breach the divide between us and the other. This approach holds inevitable risks but, according to Žižek, is necessary:

Although this strategy is risky and ambiguous (it can easily regress into a proto-Fascist macho logic of violent male bonding), this risk has to be taken – there is no other direct way out of the closure of capitalist subjectivity (p. 252).

For Žižek, violence is a means of breaking through the subjective barrier and reaching out to the foreclosed other. This reaching out shatters identity but also disrupts the power relationships that are organised by this identity.

Moreover, Žižek sees this act of self-violence as *staged*, as in a masochistic ritual. By the slave beating himself the master becomes superfluous. The relationship of domination is dramatised in the self-beating as one that makes explicit the implicit violence of the arrangement and makes apparent the subjects own willing submission to it. It is only by registering the libidinal investment in the mode of subjection and confronting oneself with it in a violent staged act that the bond to this subjection can be broken. As Žižek argues, ‘you cannot oppose the “redemptive” awareness of being

¹⁹ Žižek, *Revolution*, pp. 251-2. All further references to this edition will be given in the body of the text.

oppressed to the “pathological” enjoyment the hysterical subject derives from this very oppression’ (pp. 253-4). To engender liberation the violence and pleasurable engagement with it needs to be acknowledged and, furthermore, literalised. Žižek continues; ‘*the only true awareness of our subjection is the awareness of the obscene excessive pleasure (surplus-enjoyment) we derive from it; this is why the first gesture of liberation is not to get rid of this excessive pleasure, but actively to assume it – exactly what the hero of *Fight Club* does*’ (p. 254). The aim of the initial beating is to assume the libidinal attachment to the master. Actual liberation is then found in *Fight Club*, for Žižek, when Jack shoots himself, killing Tyler, his alter ego, freeing himself from the masochistic enjoyment. ‘Norton will no longer have to beat himself – now he will be able to beat the true enemy (the system)’ (p. 253).

This reading of Jack’s ‘liberation’ into being an autonomous revolutionary political agent is problematic, to say the least, and does not ring true to the actual conclusion of the film where Jack, after shooting himself, rejects the project of revolution for the security of a heterosexual relationship with Marla. Moreover, Žižek, contrary to the thrust of his argument up to this point, does not go on to suggest that there is any real liberation represented in the film but, rather, concentrates on the masochistic ‘pathological’ enjoyment of this self-beating; what Žižek describes as enjoying the symptom. The acting out or staging becomes a symptom which is enjoyed in itself. Capitalist subjectivity has an excess that is then enjoyed through a ‘false transgression/excitation’ which only goes to affirm the original relationship of domination. Therefore, *Fight Club* is admonished by Žižek for its failure to inaugurate ‘a genuine revolutionary breakthrough’ (p. 259). In the fight clubs this failure is marked by the fighters not ‘interven[ing] in the social body’ (p. 257). When they do ‘intervene’

through the plot to destroy the credit card company buildings known as Project Mayhem, however, it is considered, by Žižek, to also be another expression of the obscene excess of capitalism as well as a visual precursor to attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001. This 'American terrorism' is, therefore, according to Žižek, only an outgrowth, or the underbelly, of the system itself. Therefore, *Fight Club* fails because it is either too introvert or too extrovert. If the violence is self-violence it is not political and if the violence is exteriorised it is fascistic or terrorism but both are merely the consequence and outcome of capitalism.

By polarising the interiority of subjection in personal enjoyment and exteriorising action as only a consequence of external forces Žižek suggests any action is either perverse or socially determined. With his analysis of *Fight Club*, Žižek presents us with an ideological double bind. If we realise the excess pleasure of capitalist subjectivisation in the violent self-beating we are only achieving a masochistic interiority not connected to a social body; and if we do venture into 'the social body' this act is merely a symptom of the excess of the power structures, or in my terminology, narrative of legitimation, already in place. Žižek's supposed violent act that leads to liberation only leads, in his reading of *Fight Club*, to an interiority that is much the same as the one that the violence was meant to liberate us from (the explicit rather than implicit enjoyment of domination – perverts of capitalism) or to a recapitulation of the dominant discourse (I only act as a creation and consequence of the dominant power). This formulation closely mirrors the subjective interiority and dominance of a single narrative of legitimation that I presented in my reading of *American Psycho* and is why I am suggesting an emphasis upon the differend between narratives of legitimation is necessary for a more productive reading of *Fight Club*. Žižek's supposed praise of a

necessary violence in the film finally leads in his argument to its rejection. Is this move not his own 'false transgression/excitation', affirming a risqué praise of violence only to denounce it as ultimately puerile, to argue for violence but then to disavow its consequences?

While I am in agreement with much of Žižek's diagnosis of contemporary politics and criticism, and will utilise some of his insights later in the chapter, his reading of *Fight Club* does the film a disservice. I suggest that a closer reading of the film clarifies much of what Žižek, in his language of paradox, is trying to articulate about violence, but fails in this reading. I will, therefore, not reduce the violence of *Fight Club* to a universal evil, as in Giroux, or give the alternatives proposed by Žižek, that this violence only leads to masochistic interiority or overt fascist or terrorist organisation. The violence that I want to highlight, and that will allow us to bring the analysis of these films to a conclusion, is that of the encounter: an event that comes as if from an 'outside' and that interrupts narratives of legitimation. In order to begin this reappraisal the rest of the chapter will decipher the narrative of legitimation for each of the subjective positions that Jack takes up. This will involve assessing how each formation organises its objects of desire and its relation to death. These two figures are essential as they define the motivational poles of each subjective structure. It is by mapping the limits of these worlds through the violence that arise at their boundaries that we can trace the particular dynamics of each narrative of legitimation. Most contentiously, this will mean reassessing the reactionary readings of Project Mayhem and foregrounding the role that heteronormative masculinity plays in reasserting and resigning oneself to a specific narrative of legitimation. It is Jack's need to hold onto a, however cynical, position of

white, heterosexual masculinity that legitimates the abandonment of any revolutionary and political potential that the film may unleash.

In both Giroux and Žižek's readings masculinity is a symbol of a form of aggressive violence that is disavowed by the authors as either amoral or puerile. Masculinity in these contexts is merely a byword for embodied aggression devoid of thought. I suggest, in contrast, that masculinity is central to the film but not in the way that it has been presented in its critical reception, as a violent protest against capitalism or a pathological display of male bonding. *Fight Club* is, rather, a coming-of-age tale and a reworking of the Oedipal drama which, in its conclusion, assures and promotes a heterosexual and patriarchal masculinity as a mode of normalised power that positions itself against male bonding and violence and which disavows the encounter and its specific form of violence. The event that challenges the dominant narrative of legitimation, in the form of Tyler's embodiment of Jack's desire, is framed, once again, as pathological and criminal: as a descent into indifference. The confrontation with violence in the film is resolved into a rite of passage into an intersubjective world which is ultimately reordered to include the love object, Marla.

Violence is, therefore, presented as necessary to break out of subjective interiority but *only*, according to the narrative closure of the film, as access to a legitimated form of homosocial hierarchy and heterosexual desire which brings back order and is an escape from the threat of emasculation, homosexuality and violence. This order is not considered as a universal expression of 'the good' in the film, however, but as necessary to return to 'reality' and 'normality' and an escape from madness. The nuances of the representations of violence in *Fight Club*, then, need to be reassessed in relation to the ends that this violence wants to achieve in response to the particular

narratives of legitimation that are put into play. In other words, violence in the film works in two opposing registers: it either affirms or destroys a narrative; it either affirms or destroys an image of thought. The first form of violence, the violence of the encounter, comes to disrupt a given genre and this violence is either affirmed or met with a second form of counter violence that is all too brutal in the legitimate conservation of an image of thought. Yet, however this challenge to Jack's narrative of legitimation may be covered over in the film, we are still its witness, and it remains a challenge that *Fight Club* appears, in spite of its narrative resolution, to endorse. It is these dynamics that I will elucidate below.

As I have already suggested, *Fight Club* is exemplary in my analysis for its depiction of subjective interiority. Through formal play the film can articulate a relationship to the event that is not reduced to a naïve view of psychological interiority or empirical particularity. The subject presented in the film is a split subject, who does not have full access to, or control over, his actions, but is rather the outcome of material and psychological processes that constitute him within a world. Moreover, returning to Foucault's argument in the last chapter, Jack is very much a subject of interest created in a world of forces that go beyond him and which he cannot control validating his own egotistical choices. Jack's environment is formed by organising his relationship to objects through pleasure and pain.²⁰ How then, is it possible to change this world other than by destroying his relationship to these objects; by going beyond the good and evil of an image of thought and confronting the real material relations that create his world?

²⁰ Foucault writes: '*Homo œconomicus* is someone who pursues his own interest, and whose interest is such that it converges spontaneously with the interest of others. From the point of view of a theory of government, *homo œconomicus* is the person who must be let alone. [Yet,] *homo œconomicus*, that is to say, the person who accepts reality or who responds systematically to modification in the variables of the environment, appears precisely as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment. *Homo œconomicus* is someone who is eminently governable.' Foucault, *Birth*, p. 270

The next section will, therefore, detail how *Fight Club* transforms the audience's relationship to the camera in order to present a subjective image. I will then develop a reading of the four distinct phases of Jack's transformation from capitalist drone, to support group addict, to fight club leader, and finally, to disillusioned traitor of Project Mayhem. The aim is to show how the violence of the encounter that disrupts narratives of legitimation is convincingly portrayed in the film, but also to show how, in the conclusion, this rupture is finally rejected in the name of heterosexual masculinity. *Fight Club* ultimately mythologises the fight with capitalism into an oedipal drama for the twenty-first century. The film remains ambivalent, however, and does not fully reject Tyler's questioning of the dominant narrative of legitimation.

2.

A movie about thought

From the opening credits of *Fight Club*, it is apparent that the film is directly concerned with the affective material production of thought; in other words, how thought is the outcome of material processes that *create* representations rather than being the *result* of representation. As David Fincher attests in an interview soon after the release of the film, 'the movie is about thought, it's about how this guy thinks. And it's from his point of view, solely.'²¹ The creation of this subjective interiority is set up from the first moments of the film. The movie begins with a sloshing sound and the image of what looks like the interior of a flooded cave. We come to realise, however, that it is actually

²¹ Smith, 'Inside Out', p. 62.

the microscopic processes and chemical reactions taking place in the brain. Fincher has suggested that this place is the brain's 'fear centre'.²² We then go on a journey as what would traditionally be conceived as the camera (actually computer-generated imagery) pulls backwards, eventually breaking the surface of the skin through a follicle revealing huge drops of sweat and the towering hairs of a man. The camera speeds down his nose and along the barrel of a gun eventually halting at the two dots of the aiming sights and then refocusing on the man's swollen and terrified eyes, finally bringing some depth of field to the image.

The relationship set up between the camera and the brain suggests that what appears on the screen for the rest of the movie is merely the consequence of microscopic processes taking place in the narrator's head that are interpreted through the camera from a particular distance and point of view. The images, therefore, suggest themselves not as photographic evidence of an objective 'outside world', but rather modulated and mediated through the neurological functioning of the narrator's brain. The camera becomes an extension of thought. Discussing the kind of image that he wanted to create for the film, Fincher states: 'It's gotta move as quick as you can think. We've gotta come up with a way that the camera can illustrate things at the speed of thought.'²³

Fincher renders this speed of thought in the first scenes of the film as the camera descends impossibly through buildings and flits backwards and forwards in time. Moreover, the apparatus that constitutes the filming process, its materiality, is also significantly foregrounded in the film. The audience's attention is drawn to the processes of film projection; Tyler even pointing out 'cigarette burns' on the film itself.

²² *Ibid.* p. 61

²³ David Fincher quoted in Smith, 'Inside Out', p. 58

At one moment the film reel appears to come off its spool as Tyler/Jack makes a speech. Through this formal play the underlying foundation of the images, the materiality of film, is constantly brought to the fore as a support for representations that are dependent on processes that go on behind the scenes. They are, therefore, the consequence of the machinery that makes the images possible. The camera, in this new role, does not try to represent or dramatise an 'external' reality but is rather a means of representing the images that are contingent upon an unrepresentable substrate. The cinematic framework and the machinery of thought are conflated so that the images that are presented on the cinema screen are not considered objective facts but subjective creations. What is particularly modern about this means of representation is that thought is considered as a dependent representation contingent upon the body as a source of these representations. Thought, on this model, is not considered as separate from bodily functioning but rather as an index of processes that are, as such, beyond the individual's control. What they come to represent are means of coping, rationalising or displacing what is happening to this body but also, as a result of this formal play, render the subjectivity of the image palpable. This is most in evidence in *Fight Club* when Tyler burns Jack's hand with lye and his thought processes are literally rendered on the screen.

The turn to a modern image of thought is ironically mimicked in the opening credits of the movie. The first scene, a static image of the cave, a trope of the Platonic metaphor for thought, is transformed into a mobile image of neurological functioning. This change is mirrored by the music that accompanies the opening credits. The sound track begins with the sound of classical music but is then 'scratched' into a frenetic modern heavy techno beat, speeding us along the journey to its compelling rhythm. The

cave as a trope of the classical image of thought, of reflection and interpretation of essential forms, is transformed into a mobile, immanent and frenetic modulation of forces.²⁴

The connection of the camera to the subjectivity of Jack also affects the traditional role that the voice-over plays in the film.²⁵ Rather than being the voice of truth that guides the audience from an omnipotent position outside of the film, the voice-over follows the limited knowledge of the narrator and merely explains the images that are in front of him. Deleuze describes in *Cinema 2* how, with the crisis in the action-image, a new form of narration appears: 'narration ceases to be truthful, that is, to claim to be true, and becomes fundamentally falsifying. This is not the case of "each has its own truth", a variability of content. It is a power of the false which replaces and supersedes the form of the true, because it poses the simultaneity of impossible presents, or the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts [...] every model of truth collapses, in favour of the new narration.'²⁶ Jack's voice-over is essentially detached and cynical, as though playing the part of the postmodern viewer, self-reflexive about his position as a consumer of images, unable to be affected by the melodrama of the film. The voice-over makes sense of the images but not from a position of superior or external knowledge but as a cynical subjective rationalisation.²⁷ Fincher suggests that the way the camera follows the narration is the visual equivalent of a stream of consciousness and that the movie 'take[s] the first forty minutes to literally indoctrinate

²⁴ The trope of Plato's cave has been discussed in connection with *Fight Club* in Nancy Bauer's 'Cogito Ergo Film: Plato, Descartes and *Fight Club*' in *Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. by Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) pp. 39-57.

²⁵ Discussing the use of voiceover in the film Fincher explained: 'A lot of the typical development-speak was thrown around: "You can't have it all in voiceover because voiceover's a crutch." ... I was like, "It's not funny if there's no voiceover, it's just sad and pathetic.'" In Smith, 'Inside Out', p. 61.

²⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 131.

²⁷ Special effort was made to create the correct sound for the voiceover. 'You know we had such a hard time getting the timbre of Edward's voiceover, because it had to sound like a thought. We ended up using five different microphones trying to get this sound.' In Smith, 'Inside Out', p. 68.

you in this subjective psychotic state'.²⁸ The suggestion of the psychotic nature of this subjectivity mirrors *American Psycho's* similar use of voice-over as a means to express an internal discourse that is not so much addressing an audience but rather itself.²⁹

These formal techniques create a viewing position for the audience that emphasises the constructed nature of the film but also the constructed nature of subjectivity. By drawing attention to the material foundation and hidden structuring elements of both cinema and subjectivity, *Fight Club* makes the audience aware of the constructed and contingent character of the images and, therefore, their possibility of being constructed otherwise. What is important in this means of representation is not the content but rather how the content is structured by the form. In *Fight Club*, subjectivity and visual representation go hand-in-hand to constitute the particularly stylised representations of each of the different subjective worlds that are traversed through Jack's transformation. In sum, the movie constitutes a modern image of thought that deals directly with the construction of narratives of legitimation and their contestation within a single subject.

Fight Club creates representations that have specific coordinates that maintain the images' consistency and which are destroyed by an encounter in the film that shatter them. As the following analysis will make clear, these forms of subjectivity are organised around objects of desire and a certain image of death which need challenging to break free from the confines of each narrative. Violence, pain or the threat of death is the form of this challenge. Violence and destruction, then, become means of

²⁸ Smith, 'Inside Out', p. 62.

²⁹ As Omar Lizardo notes in connection to the advent of postmodern/late-capitalist societies: 'instead of speaking of a simple replacement of bourgeois asceticism with consumerist perversion, it is more accurate to speak of an advent of a *split subject* caught *between* hysteria and perversion. This split subject therefore is more accurately characterized as psychotic.' *Fight Club*, or the Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism', *Journal of Cultural Research*, 11 (2007), 221-243 (pp. 225-6).

transformation, coming from an outside to challenge narratives, or means of warding off this threat of death, conserving a narrative and one's place in it. It is the examination of each of Jack's successive subjective constructions, or narratives of legitimation, that I turn to in the next section.

Capitalist drone

In order to make clear distinctions between each of the narratives of legitimation put forward in the film I will need to systematise my reading somewhat. I will address the particular *telos* of the film's narrative after outlining the characteristics of each of the narratives of legitimation. How, then, does *Fight Club* represent and symptomatise the contemporary capitalist narrative of legitimation? Tracing back the origin of his predicament at the start of the movie, Jack says: 'For six months I couldn't sleep'. Jack's insomnia seems to be a consequence of the world that he occupies as a late-twentieth-century office worker. Jack's alienation is directly related to a world of simulacra: the world is far away and everything is a copy of a copy of a copy. Jack's boss arrives at his desk, the camera purposefully cropping his head from the frame. He appears as the faceless form of authority laying out, in bureaucratic jargon, his orders for the day. In this montage of Jack's working life, Fincher uses a similar tracking shot and computer generated imagery to that in the opening credits but, rather than coming out of the brain, the camera comes out of a dustbin. Jack narrates: 'When deep space exploration ramps up it will be the corporations that name everything: the IBM stellar sphere, the Microsoft galaxy, planet Starbucks'. The mirroring of these two shots suggests that there is a similar structural logic in place as that between the brain as mediator of images and corporations as mediator within capitalism. The processes of consumption organise the

life processes from the micro to the macro and, even, here, the intergalactic level. The objects that organise our daily acts are labelled with corporate names, possessed and commodified by agencies that are invisible but are structurally significant.

Capitalism as a means of organising life processes in this context is even extended to desire. Jack, sitting on the toilet in his condo, confesses that: 'Like so many others I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. [...] We used to read pornography, now it was the Horcha collection'. Desire in capitalism is literally constituted as the joining of images. Fincher brilliantly conceives this two dimensional conjoining within an abstract, imaginary space in the scene. Jack throws down the catalogue he has been looking through, and the camera focuses on the open page which contains a picture of an empty apartment and the phrase, 'use your IMAGINATION...'. The apartment, then, magically fills up with items, each accompanied by its made-up 'IKEA' name and product information. As the camera pans around the room Jack enters the frame and we see that it is actually his apartment. He is able to construct his world out of the images of Capital, creating the perfect narrative of home comforts, but which remains essentially substanceless and lacking depth. Just as pornography is configured as the substitute for 'real sex', these images are presented as a fantasy that is a substitute for 'real life'.

This is not the only systematisation of capitalist subjectivity set out in *Fight Club* however. The presence of death also haunts this structure in a particular guise. Within the two-dimensional world of capitalism the relationship with death is placed at a distance. Death is represented as something that happens to other people and merely figured as an equation in relation to business profits. Jack, in his position as recall coordinator, travels around the United States assessing accidents that happened with

his company's cars. Jack's role here is to apply the formula: 'Take the number of cars in the field (a) multiplied by the probable rate of failure (b) then multiply the result by the average out of court settlement (c). $a \times b \times c = x$. If (x) is less than the cost of a recall, we don't do one.' Death is subordinate to profit, merely a regrettable hindrance to profit making. Assessing one wreck, the local dealers quip about the death of those in the accident with malevolent glee. One says to Jack: 'The teenager's braces are wrapped around the backseat ashtray. Might make a good anti-smoking ad?' The second adds: 'The father must have been huge. See where his fat has burned to the seat and his polyester shirt: very modern art!' Both of these comments refer back to the two-dimensional world of images, particularly images that are meant to be consumed.

Jack's own relationship to death as a capitalist subject is ultimately nihilistic and catastrophic. He muses that: 'On a long enough time line the survival rate for everyone drops to zero'. When flying between his business appointments he prays for the plane to crash or have a mid-air collision. The only hope of escape from his alienation is annihilation, not only for him, but for his 'single serving friends' as well. Again, in the scene where Jack fantasizes a plane crash, computer generated imagery is used to represent Jack's imagination and points towards a privileged relationship Fincher sets up between the two. Death appears to be real, and is extravagantly rendered, but is a fantasy put in place by a particular subjective organisation.

The ultimate consequence of this form of organisation is Jack's insomnia. Jack is like the living dead, what Lizardo calls, 'a numb zombie' with no aim or goal other than to mindlessly consume images.³⁰ He goes to his doctor to try and ease his insomnia through medication but rather than a chemical cure the doctor recommends chewing

³⁰ Lizardo, *Fight Club*, p. 228

valerian root and exercise. After pleading that he is in pain, the doctor suggests going to a support group for testicular cancer as 'that's pain!'

Interspersed throughout these opening scenes there are almost unnoticeable flashes of a figure cut into the film. Tyler Durden, as Jack's alter ego, is already haunting Jack's existence between the frames of the movie. Tyler, as the figure that will facilitate the rupture in Jack's narrative of legitimation, is already making his presence felt subliminally, interrupting the narrative as if from another place. Jack does not need Tyler yet but with the failure of the support groups to cure his insomnia he will eventually come to inhabit Jack's waking life.

Capitalist subjectivity in *Fight Club* is represented as being alienated in a world made up of images speaking a language of jargon and profit. The legitimate form of desire is the joining of these images as an expression of 'personhood', and mastering the language of jargon is a measure of success. The perverse consequences are that death becomes either an image that is cynically commodified, just an image among others to be joined for profit, or the thought of catastrophic annihilation. Jack's insomnia is a symptom of this anesthetised life and needs something to change it. He does this first by changing his relationship to death, and he does that through attending the support groups.

Support group addict

Critical reception has described the support groups, particularly 'Remaining Men Together' as a feminisation of men.³¹ Bob is read as being the ultimate symbol of emasculated masculinity; literally, that capitalism has castrated him. Men weeping in each other's arms are ironically held up as possessing strength and courage. While I would not deny this reading there is also another dimension to Bob and his 'bitch tits'.

Why is it that Jack finds freedom in Bob's tits? Between Bob's breasts Jack finds acceptance. 'And then, something happened, I just let go. Lost in oblivion, dark, and silent, and complete, I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom.' By giving up hope Jack is cured of his insomnia. But, it is only by becoming a nobody, losing his name, remaining silent and mimicking death, that he can receive the warmth of life. There, suspended between life and death, Jack is greeted with empathy and warmth.³² Bob, in this framework, can be read as a mythological mother figure to Jack who promises both consolation and annihilation, and Jack becomes a child, or as he puts it: 'I was the warm little centre that the life of this world crowded around.' The lineaments of an oedipal

³¹ Lizardo states: '[L]iterally feminized men abound in the film. The primary example in this regard is anchored by the tragic-comic portrayal of the character Robert "Bob" Paulson', *Fight Club*, p. 222. See also Brian Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 78.

³² It is interesting to quote Deleuze's description of immanence here in relation to Jack's position within the support groups. 'What is immanence? A Life ... No one has described what *a* life is better than Charles Dickens, if we take the indefinite article as an index of the transcendental. A disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him. But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder, and he becomes once again mean and crude. Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of *a* life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a "*Homo tantum*" with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such individuality fades away in favour of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life ...' *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. by John Rajchman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), pp. 28-9.

triangle are beginning to take shape within the narrative trajectory of the film. Bob and the support groups are aligned with the feminine, the nurturing, the passive and the pre-genital. If capitalism is non-sexual through the joining of images, the support groups are asexual sites for mutual compassion: the embarrassment of Chloe's desire 'to get laid one last time' given in a speech at the support group makes this abundantly clear. In this womb Jack finds salvation, and the monastic and ethereal music that accompany these scenes, as well as the church setting, support this revelation. In this place of warmth and protection Jack becomes the centre of the world, and it is this state of childlike narcissism to which he becomes addicted.

What mobilises this distinction from Jack's other life as office worker is the group's common relationship to death. Any sign of life is accepted as worthy. As long as Jack can pretend to have the same personal relationship with death as the others in the group he feels accepted. Without this relationship, however, Jack is just a tourist. As Jack narrates, 'Every evening I died, and every evening I was born again, resurrected. Bob loved me because he thought my testicles were removed too. Being there, pressed against his tits, ready to cry: this was my vacation.' For Jack the groups are like recreation or vacation from his real life as a capitalist drone. Marla spoils all of this. Her presence at the support groups means Jack is no longer the centre of this world. While Jack's enjoyment of this situation remains hidden by the whole group's relationship with death, listening to each other's needs, his personal enjoyment is not made apparent. While this invisibility is maintained he does not have to question this enjoyment. But, when he finds that someone else can also enjoy this position, as soon as

there is an other, it exposes his narcissistic enjoyment. Her lie exposes his, and they are both tourists to death.³³

Marla, then, appears as an intruder and a rival to enjoyment. Her arrival is experienced by Jack as an attack, a disease and a threat of death but also as a site of desire. Jack complains: 'If I did have a tumour, I'd name it Marla. Marla, that little scratch on the roof of your mouth that would heal if you'd only stop tonguing it, but you can't'. The visual depiction of Marla also connotes death. Her pale face and eyes covered by dark glasses with smoke pouring from her mouth makes her look like an imitation of the grim reaper. This eruption of death and desire is the event that shatters Jack's new narrative of legitimation. Jack confronts Marla and they split up the week's meetings so they do not have to meet, but the illusion of integration into the group is shattered and Jack no longer fits in. Jack rejects the encounter with death and desire but is haunted by it.

Both capitalist subjectivity and the support groups depict a sealed homogenous world that is dominated by a *y* that organises non-sexual images of desire (the IKEA porn and Bob's motherly breasts) and presents a particular image of death (catastrophe and blissful nothingness). They also arouse a particular experience of death: in capitalism the living death of zombified insomnia; in the support groups, the eruption of the desire of the other. Marla brings about a threat to Jack's world, the event of another phrase/universe, which interrupts his narcissistic enjoyment of the support groups. Yet, it is this threat that brings about desire and makes Jack act and finally break out of his interiority. Marla becomes, as is traditional in action movies, the motivation of the film.

³³ As Žižek states in relation to violent outbursts at the racialised other: 'what 'bothers' us in the 'other' (Jew, Japanese, African, Turk) is that he appears to enjoy a privileged relationship to the object – the other either possesses the object-treasure, having snatched it away from us (which is why we don't have it), or poses a threat to our possession of the object.' *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 8.

However, the film has already given a presentiment of Jack's triumph over Marla's threat. What gives us this foreknowledge of the final abandonment of Tyler, the embodiment of Jack's desire, at the end of the film is the connection that is made between Marla as the object of desire and Jack's place in Bob's large motherly breasts at its beginning. Marla's world could be considered as a substitute or fetish for the womb like warmth of the support groups, by actively seeking her out she becomes the legitimate promise of satisfaction and passive envelopment. I will expand upon this reading below, but, for the moment, Jack is not yet able to turn her into his object of desire. He, first, needs to break out of his isolation and passivity, and finally become active. This is the beginning of Fight Club.

Fight Club leader

When Jack arrives home from a business trip to find his condo mysteriously blown-up he wonders what to do. He rings Marla, but he is not yet strong enough to make this leap into someone else's world and hangs up without saying anything. Jack then rings Tyler; he is ready to conjure up and fully identify with his ideal ego so that he can gain the strength to break through his self-enclosed passivity and alienation.³⁴ How does he do this? By hitting himself. In the film, however, this is not posed as his idea, but Tyler's. Before allowing Jack to come and stay with him Tyler asks Jack to hit him. There is no real justification for the fight but it is, rather, an experiment, a question thrown at life itself. What are my limits and what is my relationship to the outside world? As Tyler says, 'How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?' However

³⁴ Žižek following Lacan states: 'the "ideal ego" stands for the idealized self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be, I would like others to see me)'. *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) p. 89.

'stupid' or 'crazy' it may appear, by sharing an experience, and particularly a bodily experience, by hitting each other they break into each other's world and become friends.

This relationship to the outside world becomes almost immediately social, but also anti-social. As men begin to join in this ritual fighting the norms of sociability and hierarchy are disarmed. It is unclear what this strange desire is to test bodily limits that has no reason and no interest to serve, yet, by destroying the means of joining phrases and the hierarchy of values that are inherent to them these men are able to test themselves on a level playing field and affirm their own existence. This destruction of images inspires Tyler's speech in the fight club basement.

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

Fight Club, therefore, does not act as a place of masochistic enjoyment, enjoying the symptom of domination, as Žižek suggests but rather a place to destroy images and have a 'real' experience not mediated by social roles and hierarchy: an intimate and immanent negotiation between bodies. The now infamous first two rules of Fight Club, 'you do not talk about Fight Club', reinforce the demand to not represent these experiences, to not place them into a narrative, to not let the club legitimate a joining of phrases.

Moreover, after drawing men together *Fight Club* begins to have effects beyond the nightly liaisons. First, Jack turns his passive aggressive cynicism at work into openly confrontational discourse. Second, Jack's personal appearance is destroyed and with it his social acceptability. As Lizardo states: 'fighting in so far as it entails the destruction of the body entails the disabling of the body as a tool of commodified sociability'.³⁵ Third, it leads to the confrontation between Jack and his boss precisely over the disavowed relationship to death within the capitalist system.

In order to blackmail his boss, Jack confronts him with the hidden violence that his company does to its unsuspecting customers: the deaths caused by the financial desire for profit that takes precedence over the safety of others that is reduced to an equation. The boss is shocked because Jack should know his place, he should be playing by the rules that are set out by the invisible contract, or rather those normalised by the capitalist narrative of legitimation. The second mode of violence that this highlights is that between worker and boss. The intrigue of this scene is, as Žižek points out, that it works on the level of exteriorising a certain relation: not one just of force against the worker but the worker's own interiorisation of this violence that he does against himself. Therefore, the violence that he enacts against himself is the violence of his boss's, or the 'system', but, moreover, it is the violence that the subject sanctions against himself to save himself from actual violence or for mere survival. Jack literalises his internalised subjection. By playing out this scene Jack 'lives through' this violence and becomes equal to it. The absurdity of Jack beating himself makes the eruption of violence appear as though authorised authority has gone too far, and the boss submits to Jack's demands so as maintain the unquestioned and legitimised form of violence.

³⁵ Lizardo, *Fight Club*, p. 235.

Fight Club creates equals, or rather an immanent hierarchy. The hidden form of power, the power that 'goes without saying', which is supported by the acceptance of a given *y* that organises the joining of phrases, is shown to be a form of legitimated violence. In Girard's terms this would be the 'good' form of violence that is legitimated by reference to a transcendent authority. Tyler wants Jack to reject this transcendent authority by accepting the final authority of death. Whilst making soap Tyler burns Jack's hand with lye in order to make him confront and accept this relationship. He intones:

Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers bailed what does that tell you about God? [...] You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you, he never wanted you, in all probability he hates you. [...] We don't need him. Fuck damnation, fuck redemption. We are God's unwanted children? So be it! [...] First you have to know, not fear, that someday you're going to die. [...] It's only after we've lost everything that we are free to do anything.

By confronting this threat of death, of non-existence within a narrative of legitimation, and living through it makes it possible for Jack to transform the world which he inhabits. Tyler is trying to persuade Jack to give up his attachment to images in order to reach life. Fight Club, by testing limits within its confines, gives these men the strength to challenge their own subjection to embedded and structured organisations outside of the club, making them take responsibility for, rather than just being a passive victim of, the violence of the system. By becoming active and taking responsibility for the organisation of their worlds these men no longer limit their actions to the club but come out of the basement and question the limits of the social itself.

Fight Club offers a way for disaffected men to confront their limits in a way that is not based upon the images of capital. Rather than working to earn the money to join images, to make the correct image, Fight Club destroys images. By confronting the limits

of the capitalist narrative of legitimation, *Fight Club* begins to disrupt it. The first homework assignment that Tyler gives out is to start a fight and lose. By engaging people in an aggressive manner, by disrupting their everyday patterns of behaviour and then letting them feel empowered through the process, to let them feel as though they can confront violence with their own resources, places power and decision-making back into the hands of each person. Each person is confronted with a problem, an event, an encounter, to which they are able to respond. The limit of their being is opened up, is undecided or undecidable, and requires an intimate interaction and interrelation with the forces that created this encounter forcing thought, a thought that is likewise not decided in advance and can never be closed off. These scenes in the film are marked by a real comical edge that is in direct contrast to Jack's cynicism as a capitalist worker. What Tyler appears to be doing with his homework assignments is destroying representations. The other homework repeats this pattern: destroying DVDs, getting birds to shit on cars, smashing tv aerials, recommending oil to fertilise the garden. What Tyler proposes is the destruction of an image of thought, and with it the capitalist narrative of legitimation.

Within the subjective organisation set up by *Fight Club* desire has no object but is figured through bodily experience that comes before representation and death becomes the limit but also access to what is most vital. When Tyler has a car crash he exclaims, 'We just had a near life experience'. By making death the productive limit *Fight Club* shatters the capitalist and support group narratives that try to preserve life through passivity and demands the becoming active of thought in relation to an encounter with the world.

Traitor of Project Mayhem

Project Mayhem has been the cause of most of the comments about *Fight Club's* supposedly fascist leanings.³⁶ The group of black-clad, skinhead men, refuting their names and not asking questions goes against any liberal individualist ideology. These images may seem like anathema to our everyday common sense view of liberation or freedom but the freedom capitalism promises is merely the freedom of the market which hides its violence behind its own narrative of legitimation. None of the men in Project Mayhem disavows the violence that they are placing on themselves; rather it is an active choice, taking responsibility for violence but also for their own power. The 'space-monkeys' are not 'duped' by the charismatic leader but instead invest their desire in a project that opens up a future for them. The supposedly mindless repetition of the rules of Project Mayhem becomes a means of acting, of remaining true to the project.

Project Mayhem's ultimate aim in the film is to destroy the debt record.³⁷ The project aims to blow-up the headquarters of leading credit card companies so that the customer information is wiped and 'we all go back to zero'. By doing this Tyler hopes to open the future to new possibilities that are not organised by the ends of capitalism. By bringing everyone back to zero, Tyler hopes to create an immanent field that is not hierarchised by representations, or by access to the flow of capital, but intimately negotiated between bodies. While initially revelling in the breakdown of authority Jack

³⁶ The film has been described on its release as 'an apology for fascism', see Damon Wise, 'Menace II Society', *Empire*, 126:12 (1999) 100-106, (p. 104). Critical literature has also made drawn out this comparison, in particular Robert von Dassanowsky, 'Catch Hannibal at Mr Ripley's Fight Club if You Can: From Eurodecadent Cinema to American Nationalist Allegory', *Film International*, 5:3 (2007) 14-27, and also Diken and Laustsen, 'Enjoy Your Fight!'

³⁷ In the novel the aim is to destroy the national museum; Tyler is trying to free people from history rather than capitalism. "This is our world, now, our world," Tyler says, "and those ancient people are dead." Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 14.

quickly places Tyler as the figure of authority and legitimacy in his world. Setting up the second axis of the oedipal configuration, Tyler comes to embody the father figure for Jack that Tyler has been so keen for him to be rid of. This becomes most apparent when Tyler and Marla become sexual partners, the third axis. Jack sees himself, once again, as the figure of the child. The irony is, of course, that it is Jack who is actually sleeping with Marla. The reassertion of the oedipal drama in Jack's relation to Tyler and Marla can be read into this configuration. Not, however, from Freud's initial reading from Sophocles, as the father restricting access to the mother as the bearer of 'the law', but rather from his further elaboration and origin myth of culture in *Totem and Taboo*. Tyler becomes the 'primordial father', the Father-Thing that appropriates all enjoyment to himself, the figure of desire or the 'obscene jouisseur' as Žižek names him.³⁸

Jack, throughout the initiation and expansion of Project Mayhem, has taken the back seat. When he meets Bob in the street and Bob praises the almost mythical figure of Tyler Durden he becomes more and more jealous of Tyler's position as leader. He does not believe that he is being consulted or receiving the recognition he deserves. This desire to be noticed turns him into a jaded person jealous of others. Instead of rejecting images, as Tyler has suggested, Jack maintains the necessity of the recognition of his own image and that he be placed in his rightful position in a hierarchy of images. Jack is the figure of the ego, desperate to be noticed as a person of value and worth. The desire 'to be somebody', somebody with qualities and a predefined value that should be respected causes Jack to abandon Marla to an overdose and to take revenge upon Angel Face (Jared Leto), causing real sadistic violence to others. This violence wishes to destroy everything which is not itself, essentially conservative, cynical and reactionary in the maintenance of its own image. I have already suggested in the last chapter the

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 313

psycho-sadistic nature of this violence in which the individual takes revenge upon a world that does not conform to its own narrative. This move towards a personal narrative and its psychotic nature is economically alluded to after Jack beats Angel Face to a pulp when Tyler intones: 'Where did you go, psycho-boy?'. This episode marks the disintegration of Tyler and Jack's relationship. Tyler leaves, but what does this mean in relation to our knowledge that Tyler and Jack are the same person? The dissociation between the two marks the point where Tyler's mission of equalisation is coming to its denouement and the time when Jack reacts violently against this dissolution of his 'self', his ego.

The motivation for Jack to destroy Project Mayhem comes when Bob, Jack's mother substitute, gets shot by the police. This is the final straw for Jack in Tyler's destruction of images. In order to banish death and to conserve those things he loves (specifically framed as female) in his own narrative Jack needs to kill Tyler. This is also the point at which Jack realises his affection for Marla and when Jack comprehends Marla's threat to Project Mayhem. Marla is a threat inasmuch as Jack takes her as an object of desire which threatens the immanent relations of desire set up by Tyler. By Marla becoming the object of desire for Jack, desire no longer acts as an abstract subjective essence unattached to objects and constantly evolving.³⁹ Instead, desire is directed towards an object that represses those desires that go beyond it and strives to maintain or preserve its image. Just as Patrick Bateman is made up of the images of Capital, Jack creates himself by distinguishing himself from the image of the feminised other. Desire becomes, once again, enchained to the maintenance of images which are strictly aligned to heterosexuality.

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari state: '[Freud's] greatness lies in having determined the essence or nature of desire, no longer in relation to objects, aims, or even sources (territories), but as an abstract subjective essence – libido or sexuality.' *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 270.

Jack desperately wants the (symbolic) law back. Without the law as a transcendent measure and judge he does not know what he possesses (other than his own immanent forces) he does not know his own place in the system (other than the one in which he inhabits from moment to moment). This, he feels, is a descent into indifference. What better way, then, to reassert difference than through sexual difference? Jack chooses Marla when he decides to disavow desire. Jack has to destroy Tyler, his own desire, so that he can have Marla as object and stand-in for this desire. Jack's means of retaining this sovereignty over himself in the film is to hand himself over to the authorities and to admit guilt for his actions. He hopes that the law can, once again, give him his place in the social order much as it does for Prendergast in *Falling Down* and Somerset in *Se7en* and even in Patrick Bateman's failed attempt in *American Psycho*. What he does not count on, however, is that members of Project Mayhem are police officers as well. His relief at handing over the responsibility for his actions to a higher power after his confession at the police station is destroyed by the police officers threatening him with Tyler's sanctioned punishment for such an act of castration. By handing himself over to the law Jack negates desire but Tyler turns this acceptance of symbolic castration into the moment to threaten real castration, inverting Freud's castration fear.

Jack escapes the attentions of the police officers and finally confronts Tyler. The final sequence of the film, when the story returns to the filmic present from which Jack's flashback began, shows Jack's final victory over Tyler. This victory constitutes the acceptance of responsibility for his actions, that is, his acceptance of guilt, and the need to turn violence onto himself to destroy Tyler as the figure of his own desire. Contrary to Žižek's reading of Jack's liberation into being an autonomous revolutionary agent,

Jack's shooting himself in the mouth constitutes a self-castration in which the ego affirms only itself as the driving force of its actions. It affirms the responsibility of the individual and the resignation to an alienated subjectivity defined by lack and cut off from others unless mediated through a particular ordered narrative in which the ego is at the centre. Like Girard's sacrifice of the scapegoat, order and hierarchy are resumed but this is not a communal affair rather a personal one. The subject takes on responsibility through guilt and confirms individualism. The subject denounces the 'we', not only of community but also the impersonal or suprapersonal element that structures the unconscious banishing it to madness and hallucination.⁴⁰ This is represented quite literally in the dialogue between Tyler and Jack:

JACK I'm begging you please don't do this.

TYLER I'm not doing this; *we* are doing this. This is what *we* want.

JACK *I* don't want this.

TYLER Right, except *you* is meaningless now. We have to forget about *you*.

⁴⁰ Emile Benveniste explains the particular importance of the 'I/you' pair in organising subjectivity: 'A special correlation which we call, for want of a better term, the *correlation of subjectivity* belongs to the *I-you* pair in its own right. What differentiates "I" from "you" is first of all the fact of being, in the case of "I," internal to the statement and external to "you"; but external in a manner that does not suppress the human reality of dialogue. The second person [...] is a form which assumes or calls up a fictive "person" and thereby institutes an actual relationship between "I" and this quasi-person; moreover, "I" is always *transcendent* with respect to "you." When I get out of "myself" in order to establish a living relationship with a being, of necessity I encounter or I posit a "you," who is the only imaginable "person" outside of me. These qualities of internality and transcendence properly belong to "I" and are reversed in "you." One could thus define "you" as the *non-subjective person*, in contrast to the *subjective person* that "I" represents; and these two "persons" are together opposed to the "non-person" form (= he).' (p. 201) "[W]e" is not a quantified or multiplied "I"; it is an "I" expanded beyond the strict limits of the person, enlarged and at the same time amorphous [...] In a general way, the verbal person in the plural expresses a diffused and amplified person. "We" annexes an indistinct mass of other persons to "I"' (p. 203). Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971). Deleuze and Guattari dispute Benveniste's '[tying] the system of language to the understanding of ideal individual, and social factors to actual individuals as speakers.' (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), p.524 n.10) They argue that, through the analysis of indirect discourse: 'subjectifications are not primary but result from a complex assemblage [...] what comes first is not an insertion of variously individuated statements, or an interlocking of different subjects of enunciation, but a collective assemblage resulting in the determination of relative subjectification proceedings, or assignations of individuality and their shifting distributions within discourse. Indirect discourse is not explained by the distinction between subjects; rather, it is the assemblage, as it freely appears in this discourse, that explains all the voices present within a single voice.' (p. 79-80)

JACK You're a voice in my head.

TYLER You're a voice in mine.

JACK You're a fucking hallucination. Why can't I get rid of you?

TYLER You need me.

JACK No, I don't, I really don't anymore.

TYLER Hey, you created me. I didn't create some loser alter ego to make myself feel better. Take some responsibility.

JACK I do, I am responsible for all of it and I accept that, so please I'm begging you, please call this off.

Jack wants to return to the 'I' and 'you' that define responsibility, lack, and representation. The way that he does this is by his own castration. By shooting himself in the head he destroys his own desire. The reward for this sacrifice, however, which is framed as the real motivation of the film is the acceptance of Marla as the legitimate object around which to organise his interests and as the sanctioned motivation of his desire. Jack becomes a 'coherent' subject in that he disavows the split nature of his subjectivity placing desire outside of himself and reifying it in an object. The acceptance of gendered difference marks acceptance of this disavowal of the self. By taking up a heterosexual male identity, Jack now becomes the hero of the film, recognised by other men (ironically considering Marla's oedipal position) as 'one tough motherfucker', and able to promise that 'everything will be fine'. Tough, white, heterosexual masculinity is finally established as the ultimate goal of the film, not embodied by Brad Pitt however, but by Ed Norton.

Nevertheless, Fincher does not give this image the last word. After the credit card companies headquarters collapse, destroyed by Project Mayhem, a single frame of pornography flickers on the screen, as though Tyler had done his splicing work on the film reel of *Fight Club* itself. Desire flickers into life again between the frames of the

movie questioning this all too contrived ending. Heterosexual masculinity in the film is presented as norm and as a return to reality, but with no belief in its veracity or truth.

Fight Club presents, similar to the other films that I have discussed throughout this thesis, a model of masculinity that is strictly heterosexual but does not believe in the essentially 'good' or 'just' nature of this image. Rather, heterosexuality is presented as a cynical acceptance of 'reality' and the best way to survive in a world represented as chaos. *Fight Club's* ending, therefore, can be read in two registers: either it affirms the cynical acceptance of a reality that we do not believe in; or, alternately, it affirms something in reality that destroys our ordered notion of precisely that reality. These alternatives cannot be resolved in any analysis that claims to show the 'true' meaning of *Fight Club*. Rather, this undecidability marks the aporia of legitimation, the differend, between two heterogeneous narratives presented in the film and demonstrates the importance of this means of analysis. What can be said is that within the dominant neoliberal narrative of legitimation that organises the contemporary world cynicism wins out, tainting the affirmation of alternatives to the heteronormative narrative as signs of madness and criminality and relegating them to fantasy. The success of Hollywood is, no doubt, to circulate such fantasies but precisely as that, distinct from the real 'reality' of neoliberal capitalism that takes place outside of the darkened cinema hall.

This does not stop us, however, from reading in the film a critique of heterosexual masculinity conceived as a cynical and reactive reassertion of identity, the law of representation and the rule of images, and a resignation to an 'I' and a 'you' rather than an affirmation of a 'we'. To affirm a masculine identity Jack must put an end to change, to desire without image, by killing desire in himself. Desire, according to the

final logic of the film alluded to in the inserted frame of pornography, however, cannot be annulled and interrupts the ending as an event that disrupts the heteronormative masculine narrative of legitimation.

3.

The specifics of masculinity's neoliberal narrative of legitimation

I have developed, in the above analysis, four narratives that Jack passes through in the film: capitalist drone, support group addict, Fight Club leader and traitor of Project Mayhem. Each has a particular structure that organises desire and a specific representation of death. The final narrative, when Jack rejects Tyler as the embodiment of his own desire, once again takes up the theme of sacrifice in which an aberrant form of masculinity is destroyed in order for 'reality', however cynical or abject, to return. Consistent with my analysis in the last three chapters, what remains is a representation of masculinity that is in line with a neoliberal narrative of legitimation in the preservation of the individual as the final legitimating instance. *Fight Club* differs from the other films, however, by reinstating the female as the redeeming object of desire that wards off the passivity of capitalism and the support groups and the threat of homosexuality inherent to the fight clubs. Though the film initially takes aim at, and successfully symptomatises, the capitalist narrative of legitimation, its 'real problem', according to Jack's narrative trajectory, is his passivity framed through his lack of a sexual partner. The homoerotic overtones of Jack with a gun in his mouth at the beginning of the movie validate this return to a strict active heterosexual masculinity. In

this manner the critique of capitalism in the main dramatic narrative is reduced to a complaint that capitalism emasculates men who are then unable to enter into 'adult', responsible, monogamous heterosexual relationships.

Not enough critical attention has been given to this specific *telos* set out in the film and can explain the problematic polarisation of the film's theoretical appraisal.⁴¹ When conceiving of the filmic rendering of Palahniuk's novel Fincher recalls: 'I read the book and thought, How do you make a movie out of this? It seemed kind of like *The Graduate*, a seminal coming of age for people who are coming of age in their 30s instead of their late teens or early 20s [...] So the movie is really about that process of maturing'.⁴² In Fincher's reading, the aim of the novel is for Jack to move from immaturity, that is, not knowing what the 'correct' love object is, to maturity, the acceptance of this love object and capacity to engage in a monogamous heterosexual relationship. The problem that the film deals with, very much like *The Graduate*, is how to organise masculine subjectivity so that it knows the correct object of desire. This is obviously the tale that Freud tells about Oedipus.⁴³

I mentioned at the beginning of my analysis of the film that *Fight Club* ultimately mythologises the fight against capitalism into an oedipal drama for the twenty-first century. What I want to make evident is the function that this mythologizing has in constituting a narrative of the 'real', and delegitimising what lies outside of this 'reality'. Oedipus becomes the ultimate structure to legitimate the dominant narrative of

⁴¹ Lizardo argues that criticism focussing on the representation of masculinity in *Fight Club* miss the essential socio-political motivation of the film. What this position fails to take account of is how representations of masculinity precisely organises assent to such socio-political narratives of legitimation.

⁴² Smith, 'Inside Out', p. 60.

⁴³ *The Graduate*, dir. by Mike Nichols (Embassy Pictures (US)/United Artists (non-US), 1967). This could be considered a recurring theme in Fincher's movies up to his most recent remake of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, dir. by David Fincher (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/Columbia Pictures, 2011).

legitimation. Jack's final return to 'reality', to the non-split subject no longer enchained to his interior monologue, or attached to his externalised alter ego, comes at the price of a sacrifice of this part of himself as precisely fantasy and hallucination. This comes through resigning himself to personal responsibility and guilt, relegating this other world to perversion and madness. 'Reality' is only a consequence, as we know, of partitioning off certain relations to fantasy, affirming one 'reality' over all others. What is crucial in this process, however, and is made evident in these films, is the taking up but equally the disavowal of a symbolic order from which to judge this split.

Discussing Lacan's theory of identification, Žižek describes this retroactive production of meaning:

The 'effect of retroversion' is based precisely upon th[e] imaginary level – it is supported by the illusion of the self as the autonomous agent which is present from the very beginning as the origin of its acts: this imaginary self-experience is for the subject the way to misrecognize his radical dependence on the big Other, on the symbolic order as his decentred cause.⁴⁴

By killing the primordial father in the figure of Tyler, Jack actually takes on the Name-of-the-Father, Tyler Durden, and takes on the power of the, now dead, father's name. Jack finally affirms the identification with the (symbolic) law by destroying its connection to real violence and desire; no longer the sign as the index of an encounter and the moment of thought but the symbol in a system of meaning. Sacrifice is the accession to the symbolic order.⁴⁵ The actions of desire are consequently no longer acted but become images judged according to a pre-established set of values; the father is created

⁴⁴ Žižek, *Sublime*, p. 104.

⁴⁵ In a Lacanian reading Richard Boothby claims that 'the general function of sacrificial practices is to establish the operation of the signifier. It is a rereading that takes its initial clue from the likeness of blood sacrifice to the dynamics of castration, in which the installation of the symbolic function is conditioned by a violation of the body's imaginary wholeness'. Richard Boothby, 'Altar-Egos: Psychoanalysis and the Theory of Sacrifice', *JPCS: Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 1:2 (1996), 47-61 (p. 55).

through a leap out of the world becoming a symbolic place holder. What is affirmed by this self-castration, however, is not the 'natural' authority of the symbolic law but the individual's acceptance of this law as necessary, even if they do so cynically. The 'imaginary self-experience' believes that it is making a choice, that it is 'the origin of its acts' in choosing castration, as Žižek states, but precisely through this castration the 'radical dependence on the big Other' is misrecognized. The individual can be cynical towards the law, not believe in it, critique it as arbitrary whilst still affirming the subject – this 'I' that is cynical, nihilistic and critical – that is created by the symbolic law and, therefore, affirming the law once again. Is this 'I' not the subject of interest that Foucault deciphers from his reading of neoliberal governmentality? The subject of interest, in this reading invests in the symbolic law not for a community or to become part of society but in order to draw off and satisfy its own interests from the symbolic law. There is no essential nature to the symbolic law only that the symbolic law is essential in organising power through the individual. Much as in Lacan's description of psychosis, an intimate relationship is set up between the subject and the big Other detached from the reality of the world whilst affirming the necessity of his own unreal reality.

How does this complete our understanding of the organisation of the neoliberal normative statement: *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*? In the last chapter I argued that the formula for the neoliberal narrative of legitimation was, *it is a norm decreed by the market (y) for the subject of interest (x) to perform action a*. With the imaginary identification but also disavowal of the symbolic order, the subject (mis)recognises itself in the position of the y. If, within the neoliberal narrative of legitimation the 'I' takes on the position of the y, not as an exterior organising principle (of, say, the father, the boss, the state, the sovereign, god etc. as was

the case in Foucault's subject of right), but as the legitimating instance, producing the subject of interest, then the formula in neoliberal capitalism becomes: '*I*' (*the subject of enunciation*) decree that it is obligatory for '*I*' (*the subject of the statement*) to perform *action a*.⁴⁶ Yet, the symbolic order that the subject of enunciation depends upon, and is a consequence of, is precisely submitted to the laws of the market. It is this relationship and dependence that is disavowed through castration. The market produces the '*I*' of enunciation, the '*I*' of the private person, that the subject of the statement must serve to realise. However much capitalism operates on immanent principles its foundation is the subject of enunciation, the subject of interest, the '*I*', which, henceforth, becomes transcendent and therefore infinite and timeless. In this formulation the subject is not in debt to a community, a sovereign or God but in infinite debt to himself and must punish himself for the non-realisation of this fantasy '*I*'.

Infinite debt is, therefore, crucial in forming the means from which to legitimate a narrative of legitimation. It creates the position from which judgements can be made.

As Deleuze states:

Man does not appeal to judgement, he judges and is judgable only to the extent that his existence is subject to an infinite debt: the infinity of debt and the immortality of existence each depend on the other, and together constitute 'the doctrine of judgement.' The debtor must survive if his debt is to be infinite.⁴⁷

The debt that becomes infinite for modern man is not, as Lyotard suggested, to those other *y*'s, ancestors, the people, or to God, but a debt to the '*I*' that is envisaged as being

⁴⁶ 'The social field, where everyone acts and is acted upon (*patit*) as a collective agent of enunciation, an agent of production and antiproduction, is reduced to Oedipus, where everyone now finds himself cornered and cut along the line that divides him into an individual subject of the statement and an individual subject of enunciation. The subject of the statement is the social person, and the subject of enunciation, the private person.' Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 265.

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 126-7.

the one who profits from my own resignation. I submit in order that the 'I', which I serve, may continue its infinite phantasmic existence. The subject is split between the transcendence of its own image created by the images of capital and the reality of subjecting the body to humiliation in order to realise the wage stream that make such joining of images possible. It is this split that is disavowed in neoliberal subjectivity. The stream of images remains properly mobile, flexible, and evolutive on the flows of capital while the structures to extract and maintain that flow become ever more strict and restrictive. The conclusion to *Fight Club* proposes the necessity of bringing this judgement down upon oneself in order for this 'I' to live, to become immortal. In *Fight Club* the law has failed, the father has failed, God has failed. All that is left is for Jack to submit himself to his own judgment; to judge himself, to castrate himself and to judge others in relation to himself in order for his image to survive. This self, this 'I', however, being a consequence of capital, recalls all the most hackneyed and clichéd images from history's repertoire, resuscitating old images of heterosexual love as the only legitimate representative of desire on which capitalism once again feeds. Capitalism has no belief in these images, however, yet needs them and actively produces them in order for the incorporeal flow of capital to be sustained.

What is specifically neoliberal about *Fight Club's* rendering of the subjective structure is the evacuation of the role of the symbolic father of any real authority. In neoliberalism authority no longer resides in the image of a sovereign, as Foucault has convincingly argued, but in the ability to draw off a wage stream from the flow of capital, the image's use. Jack is not presented as a charismatic leader who embodies reason and displays a coherent and unified identity; that role is taken by Tyler. He is rather a resigned character resolved to reality after a traumatic psychological

experience that uses Tyler's image to assure his own position. The position of the symbolic father is thus vacated of authority and replaced by the role's necessity in forming a coherent 'normal' identity. The role of the father, as the model of authority, can be disavowed or cynically distanced because what is essential is not the role of authority but rather the position as a place holder within the symbolic order which must be maintained as a support for the self. You do not need to believe in the role, just in its necessity in ordering images. As Žižek claims:

[T]his is how ideology seems to work today, in our self-proclaimed postideological universe: We perform our symbolic mandates without assuming them and 'taking them seriously.' While a father functions as a father, he accompanies his function with a constant flow of ironic-reflexive comments on the stupidity of being a father [...] This is how we are today believers – we make fun of our belief, while still continuing to practice them, that is, rely on them as the underlying structure of our daily practices.⁴⁸

Power, in this sense, is not embodied in a figure that rules over a field of forces in a disciplinary manner, rather power is held in the structure that conjoins images. One can be cynical of one's place in such an order while the mechanisms of power that endorse this position still turn. Jack is well aware of the contingency of his position but castrates himself in order to control images, specifically the images of the feminised other.

Far from being a symptom of a post-oedipal universe, this cynical distance taken from authority is seen by Deleuze and Guattari as, precisely, the fulfilment of Oedipus. They argue: 'Psychoanalysis and the Oedipus complex gathers up all beliefs, all that has ever been believed by humanity, but only in order to raise it to the conditions of a denial that preserves belief without believing in it (it's only a dream: the strictest piety today asks for nothing more).'⁴⁹ Deleuze and Guattari suggest an intimate relationship

⁴⁸ Žižek, 'The Violence of the Fantasy', p. 280.

⁴⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 304.

between Oedipus, psychoanalysis and capitalism as mutually validating narratives of legitimation. They argue, therefore, that belief is retained by relegating real forces of desire to fantasy and imagination (believing without believing). This has fundamental consequences for how subjectivity can be theorised and critiqued. A narrative of legitimation cannot be overturned just by having knowledge of its constructed nature or even the details of its construction. It can be well known and in plain sight, but still function smoothly to order our everyday lives. The prevailing attitude, then, becomes one of cynicism. Žižek clearly sets out this problematic in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.⁵⁰

Fight Club presents, similar to the other films that I have discussed throughout this thesis, a model of masculinity that is strictly heterosexual but does not believe in the essentially 'good' or 'just' nature of this image. Rather, heterosexuality is presented as a cynical acceptance of 'reality' and the best way to survive in a world represented as chaos. The figure of the father in *Falling Down* and *Se7en* embodied in D-Fens and Mills was shown to be naïve and lacking knowledge because they put this role above the interests of the self-enclosed individual and was ultimately punished for this lack. The conclusion of the two films discredited belief in the role of men as legitimate bearers of authority, able to lead others. Authority had been vacated in favour of an authority over

⁵⁰ Žižek, *Sublime*, p. 33.

oneself, a resignation to a world that one cannot affect that was embodied in the films by Prendergast and Somerset. The result, I have argued, is paradigmatically rendered in *American Psycho* as the solipsistic interiority of the psychotic Patrick Bateman. *Fight Club* maintains the interiority of *American Psycho* while reasserting the heterosexual relationship as a means out of the alienation of capitalism. It does this, however, not through the destruction of the individual, creating an imminent relation between forces, but through the pathologising of all other relations of desire other than the fetishisation of women. *Fight Club* maintains the individual as the final legitimating instance that must reach maturity through resigning itself to the symbolic order by cutting itself off from the workings of desire. The individual still works to connect the 'correct' images but their relationship to capital is disavowed through the emphasis upon sexuality being rendered as distinct from, and free of, the organisation of the symbolic order. Heterosexual masculinity in *Fight Club*, contrary to Giroux and Žižek's readings, negates the violence of the fight clubs and Project Mayhem and instead becomes the key means of naturalising and internalising the symbolic law.

The violence of Tyler, on the other hand, contrary to the oedipal narrative of the film, erupts to destroy and discredit these images, showing them to be a trap that enchains and beguiles life. Tyler is rendered as fantasy, as hallucination and madness, his work the work of a terrorist or fascist, yet the film revels in this representation. The film retains its power to affect audiences and present them with a challenge, an encounter, a violence to thought, that has gone beyond the cinema to create real movements of desire in the world.⁵¹ The challenge becomes whether men outside of the strictures of the cinematic experience can direct violence at the images of themselves to destroy a narrative that enchains them to the ends of capital? *Fight Club*, therefore, can be both a fetishised image that we return to as a fantasy of agency producing more images upon which capitalism can feed or it can act as a call to repeat the self-violence that destroys the neoliberal narrative of legitimation. This call remains, however, linked to the threat of madness, criminality and death.

⁵¹Fight clubs have sprung up around America after the release of the film. "Fight club draws techies for bloody underground beatdowns", *USA Today*, Associated Press, 29 May 2006.

<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-05-29-fight-club_x.htm> [accessed 30 September 2013]; Bruce Rosenstein, "Illegal, violent teen fight clubs face police crackdown", *USA Today*, 1 August 2006 <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-07-31-violent-fight-clubs_x.htm> [accessed 30 September 2013].

Conclusion

In the introduction I argued that the discourse around the understanding of masculinity had become the site of contestation from the 1970s. A particular legitimate mode of masculinity had come into question and been challenged. However, this challenge left the fact of male domination intact. My thesis has aimed to give an answer to the question that is raised by this position, namely, what kind of masculinity has been challenged and what form of masculinity has been constituted in its place. I have undertaken this task through the analysis of four American films of male crisis from the 1990s framed through the use of Lyotard's narratives of legitimation and its relation to the formula for the normative statement, *it is a norm decreed by y that it is obligatory for x to perform action a*.

I have argued that in *Falling Down* and *Se7en* a contest between narratives is played out between the principal male characters and that a new narrative organised through the submission to a neoliberal world-view has become the dominant determinant of 'reality' in these films. The effect these images have depends upon the valorisation of an individual unattached to notions of fatherhood, family, nation or community and who is resigned to a world envisaged as sick, hellish and beyond control. With recourse to the work of Foucault, I suggested that this individual was a 'subject of interest' created through a disavowed relation to the market, a position I found paradigmatic in the rendering of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. In the last

chapter I asked whether this narrative was challenged in the film *Fight Club*. The answer, as with the other movies discussed, was yes and no. The dominant narrative was questioned, alternatives offered, but these alternatives were determined through the narrative resolution of each film as either naivety, madness or criminality. The cinematic representations were fascinated by these images but nevertheless endeavoured to place them in a realm safely contained by the cinematic apparatus as unreality.

If this is the case, then cinema could be said to have acted as a site of creative elaboration of fantasy as well as its denunciation. Fantastic images are created only to be denounced as precisely that, fantasy. The cinema becomes a ritual site to indulge in fabulation, as long as the images envisaged remain detached from actual movements in the world. These images proliferate as long as they do not threaten the structures that create them. The popularity of the films that I have discussed demonstrates an investment of desire from a large audience that can account for the anxiety caused in the films' critical appraisals. Such anxiety is warded off in the films, however, by threatening a legitimated violence against conduct that is not narratively resolved as a return to reality. The legitimation of such violence, nonetheless, relies upon a normalised vision of reality that 'goes without saying' and forms the common-sense limits of a particular narrative of legitimation that goes beyond the cinema and a *y* that must be maintained to make such a world consistent.

This contemporary model of legitimation, moreover, does not rely upon a representation of a better world to come to which we are led by a benevolent figure of authority, reason and justice. The latter model is founded upon a belief in a 'natural' authority embodied in a transcendent community and its leaders to structure reality: in Lyotard's terms a metanarrative. Hence, the *y* of legitimation is occupied by an

exteriorised authority such as 'the people' or God. Rather, in the neoliberal narrative of legitimation this position is vacated but left structurally intact. Within such a structure individuals locate themselves by identifying directly with the symbolic law not just as its subjects. This law, however, is submitted to the vicissitudes of the market; it is no longer a place regulated by codes of conduct but by the necessity to produce a profit. Masculinity, here, as the traditional figure of authority, goes from being an external representative of the law, determining reality from on high, to being a certain image that functions within a symbolic order. In this configuration you do not have to believe in the law, or consider it is essentially true or just, only know that it is necessary so that the individual can follow his own interests.

As a consequence, the neoliberal narrative of legitimation has survived, even precipitated, an attack on patriarchy whilst still maintaining its structures. It becomes legitimated, not through a belief in the benevolence and justice of the father, the sovereign or a community but instead, by the 'free choice' of individuals who take up 'roles' to satisfy their own interests supposedly independent of such a law. The 'I' of enunciation, the private person, becomes the legitimating instance. Such 'freedom', however, relies upon the market and consists of the freedom to connect images created by this market. The submission to the images of capital becomes legitimated and even desired as a means for individuals to satisfy their interests. I repress myself, I repress those around me, so that this 'I' has the chance to partake in the joining of images. The question that needs to be answered if there is to be a break with such a narrative is how can we sever the attachment to the fantasy 'I' that keeps us tethered to the cynical neoliberal narrative of legitimation?

Capitalist cynicism or belief in the world?

If the 'I', as the fundamental support of fantasy, is what keeps us attached to neoliberalism's narrative of legitimation, how can we break our attachment? Here, *Fight Club's* creation of Tyler Durden becomes instructive. Taking inspiration from the philosophy of Deleuze, one way to break our attachment would be the transformation in belief.¹ Žižek argues that it is not enough to take a cynical distance from the roles that we perform and the images that we consume if that cynicism maintains the same images. We must, therefore, on the contrary, renew a connection to those things which happen to us. Of necessity, we would have to not dismiss or distance ourselves from our experiences but rather believe in the world that affects us. According to Deleuze the problem of belief is of particular relevance to cinema:

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. [...] The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. [...] Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link.²

The necessity of belief also accounts for the importance of the body in making such a connection palpable. Deleuze continues:

What is certain is that believing is no longer believing in another world, or in a transformed world. It is only, it is simply believing in the body. It is giving discourse to the body, and, for this purpose, reaching the body before discourses, before words, before things are named.³

Belief in the body, in the encounter with the world, means not falling back upon the constituted narrative that explains experience in advance and from a particular viewpoint, the viewpoint of constituted power. It also means the destruction of images, images that organise the good and the bad through the model of recognition. It demands

¹ For a detailed discussion of Deleuze's 'belief in the world' see Joe Hughes, 'Believing in the World: Toward an Ethics of Form' in *Deleuze and the Body*, ed. by Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 73-95.

² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, pp. 171-2.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 172-3.

a break with narratives of legitimation. This break is not considered a tranquil affair by Deleuze, however, and necessarily requires a form of combat against constituted powers but also against the self:

combat appears as a combat against judgment, against its authorities and its personae. But more profoundly, it is the combatant himself who is the combat: the combat is between his own parts, between the forces that either subjugate or are subjugated, and between the powers that express these relations of force.⁴

If we follow Deleuze and consider that the 'modern fact' is that we no longer believe in the world, then *Fight Club* represents a clear engagement with this fact. It also proposes combat, and specifically combat against the self, as the royal road to break with narratives of legitimation. *Fight Club*, through the character of Tyler Durden, presents a particular relationship to the violence of an encounter and the anxiety created when a new phrase arrives, which is to become the proper object of belief.

As I argued in Chapter 2 following Deleuze, the encounter makes us aware of an originary difference outside of organic and transcendent forms of representation, denying both the imaginary objects of identification and symbolic exclusive differentiations. We could say that difference in itself becomes apparent precisely at the point of conflict between these realms and the Real. As I argued in my analysis of each these films, the experience of difference appears as catastrophe, evil, indifference, violence and death but also the beginning of thought. What *Fight Club* suggests, in the figure of Tyler, is the need to accept, affirm and even invite this violence if there is to be a break with narratives of legitimation. Each narrative warns or threatens death at its limits; *Fight Club* suggests that these are false limits and that beyond them there is an experience of sociality and desire which breaks through capitalist alienation. This sociality is not to be found in a project deferred until a future moment when perfect

⁴ Deleuze, *Essays*, p. 132.

relations will be realised as in the project of emancipation however. Rather, sociality is found in combat and through Project Mayhem where our experience towards death is affirmed in each moment. *Fight Club's* narrative and most of the critical literature banish this affirmation of violence to pathology, perversion, terrorism or fascism, thereby denying the film's call for thought. Conversely the film's public appeal holds itself up as a cultural event that has been libidinally invested by many audiences beyond the confines of the cinema to question the limits and the presuppositions of the self.

In each of my analyses a film of masculine crisis resolves itself through the dominant neoliberal narrative of legitimation but remains ambivalent towards the justice of such a narrative. White heterosexual masculinity is reasserted as the norm but in a particular guise, one that is not connected to family, community, nation or God but only to the self as the privileged object over which one has legitimate authority. In *Falling Down* and *Se7en* this was rendered as tragic but necessary. *American Psycho* took this logic of interiority to its limits by showing the psychotic violence that was legitimated by such a narrative of individualism founded upon the market. However, both the novel and the film did not show any escape from this logic. *Fight Club* appears to directly challenge the neoliberal narrative of legitimation. Its oedipal narrative trajectory, however, proposed the way out of capitalist alienation is through the heterosexual relationship. Heterosexuality in all the films is presented as the best means to hold on to an image of the masculine self that is not deemed as passive, effeminate or child-like. Heteronormativity is not presented as essentially good or just, however, but as just another image that serves the maintenance of the self able to draw off some power from the flow of capital: the 'real' reality of contemporary masculinity. In a more sinister fashion, however, it is shown as necessary in avoiding the threat of violence, pathology, and criminality.

What is specifically neoliberal about these threats is that they are not considered as threats to the community as in the metanarrative of emancipation but threats to the self's ability to satisfy its interests in a world constructed as chaos. In sum, there is a fundamental change in the genre of masculinity represented in male crisis movies of the 1990s; a transformation that is in line with neoliberal ends that submit all relations to the logic of the market. The neoliberal narrative of legitimation precisely relies upon this individual cut off from the world enchained to the imaginary conjunction of images. The films present this subjective structure as the 'real' reality which must be recognised to return to normality.

All the films that I have analysed, however, suggest unease about the reality they are confronted with. As is well known, the word 'crisis' derives from the Greek *κρίσις*, meaning discrimination, decision, and *κρίνειν*, meaning to decide. A crisis marks the point of decision, a moment when things can go either way. American male crisis movies have formally enacted this crisis by leaving a space for the aporia of legitimation to be seen and a differend to be attested. In the end, however, as long as these alternatives are relegated to the site of fantasy, as fetishes of the 'I' that consumes them, merely attached to the movements of the market, we cynically endorse the dominant neoliberal narrative of legitimation. It is possible, however, to believe in the events that happen to us; to take seriously the encounters that shake our worlds. It is possible to think beyond the constituted narratives and images of capital and learn to confront the conservative violence of a social order. We do this by affirming the liberating violence of the encounter with difference that shatters our belief in a single reality. This encounter opens up other phrase/universes counter to the dominant neoliberal narrative of legitimation and the genre of masculinity it incites. It demands the beginning of thought

and not its closure. In the cinema of masculine crisis there still can be seen a demand for a masculinity that has yet to be thought in a future that has yet to be made.

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