Protagonists Fighting for Their Identity in *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*

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Abstract

Both novels *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* have similar themes in their narrative, but their actual connectedness has never been explored. When put side by side, their protagonists' issues appear to stem from the same problem: they are both overwhelmed by the increasing amount of input from their surroundings. So much so that they conflate their identity with their possessions. Or, in Butlerian terms, their identity is no longer performative, but acquisitive: the main characters no longer identify through their actions, but through their consumption. This causes a mental detachment from the world called derealisation, which alienates and forces them to resort to violence to connect with their environment. The derealisation also causes a form of unreliability to appear in the novels, as the main characters start to fall apart more and more. This is an examination of how the protagonists react to such stressful environments, according to their respective novels *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*.

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Introduction

The novels *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk are controversial works of literature. Both books prominently feature violence and have received negative criticism because of it. They have been analysed through many different lenses and critics have focused on different elements, but rarely have these books been contrasted with each other. Both main characters suffer from similar illnesses and experience the same problems. They have often been named together when discussing transgressive literature. Both novels revolve around three major themes: masculinity and/or identity, violence, and unreliability. Violence is intricately tied to masculinity, and identity and unreliability have an effect on each other as well. All three themes, however, are all very important factors in a post-modern environment, and the effect they have on a person. Modern-day society forces the main characters of *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* into a state of derealisation.

When a person's perception of reality is altered in such a way that it seems unreal, that is called derealisation. People feel a sense of disconnect from the world around them or are unable to make sense of it anymore. *Fight Club*'s unnamed

protagonist keeps referring to a "numbness" and the fact that everything feels like it is a copy of its original self. He is no longer able to interact meaningfully with the world around him because it all seems fake. Patrick Bateman is so obsessed with status, appearances, and himself that he no longer cares for anyone around him anymore, causing him to distance himself from his environment, which subsequently feels strange to him.

Both main characters of their respective novels experience stress from their environments, which manifests in similar ways: in *American Psycho,* Patrick Bateman's psychopathic tendencies are never explicitly explained, but there is ample evidence that suggests they originate from his isolationist lifestyle, without any way to let off steam. As mentioned before, the protagonist of *Fight Club*'s numbness and insomnia keep plaguing him. Again, the root of the problem is never explicitly addressed, but he manages to relieve some stress by fighting, which eventually leads to his alter ego wanting to rid society of the burdens of modern day life and go back to a more primal lifestyle. Both characters unknowingly adopt a persona to simultaneously combat the environment that spawned them, but also helps them re-integrate into that environment by their actions acting as a cry for help.

Judith Butler is a literary and gender theorist, who proposed the idea of gender identity as performative, which means that gender is not a static thing, but fluid and ever-changing. To her, someone's identity is not simply a summation of all the facts that make up that person, but what a person does. A parent is not a parent just because they produced a child, but because they take care of that child, for instance. In the aforementioned novels, Bateman is simply playing at being a businessman, rather than actually being a businessman. And the main character of Fight Club has all defining traits erased from him, leaving him only with his possessions as a marker of identity.

Identity

A definition of the word "identity" is necessary to understand what its effect is on a person, fictional or otherwise. Judith Butler wrote in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* a clearly defined interpretation specifically of gender as an important category of identity. While she focuses on the subject of *gender* identity, she manages to define gender *identity* as well:

> In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of freefloating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (…) There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (33)

The important distinction Butler makes is the claim that gender, and thus identity itself, is *performative.* Identity does not come from "being" something or someone, but from *acting out* its norms, values, and beliefs according to, or especially when they *do not* conform to dominant societal norms. According to Butler, identity comes from setting yourself apart from your environment:

> Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (23)

Butler's definition of identity means that similarities are not what makes a person a person, but what differentiates them from the crowd around them. Identity is not simply made through association, but by differentiation. *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman might *look* like a businessman, but it's what sets him apart from his colleagues that makes him Patrick Bateman.

This also means that identity is a conscious effort. A person cannot simply "be" one thing or another; they have to consciously *want to* be so. A reader might call *Fight Club*'s Tyler Durden[1] a rebel because he pees in rich people's soups, but that reader needs to understand Tyler's motivation behind that act for him to become an actual rebel. And only much later does Tyler find a cause to actively, deliberately, rebel against. Until then Tyler was just playing at being a rebel, playing childish pranks on people.

Identity can change over time. And, taking into account Butler's opinion that the action begets the identity, a person can only change their identity by changing their behaviour. In an interview with Reddy Vasu for *Agenda Feminist Media*" Butler explains:

> The first point to understand about performativity is what it is not: identities are not made in a single moment in time. They are made again and again. This does not mean identities are made radically new every time they are made, but only that it takes some time for identities to be brought out; they are dynamic and historical. In fact, if we ask what is distinctive about 'being' human, it will probably turn out that human being is always about becoming. (…) In this sense, it is always in the context of a certain constellation of social power that I am able to pose the question of my own becoming differently. Through what constellations of social discourse and power was I brought into the world? (116)

[1] From this point on, this paper will assume Tyler Durden and Jack are two separate entities.

One act of rebellion might indicate a person is a rebel (as in Tyler's case), but only through repetition of that act can he be designated as a rebel. That designation also has an unspoken expiration date. While that date might vary from person to person and from act to act, performativity means that Tyler has to keep showing his performance to others to stay a rebel. What's more, identity is not a self-appointed task: they need to recognise and validate the performance as belonging to the category you want to belong to. Performativity is not something a person simply does, that person needs the approval of others to be validated. And not just approval, but also feedback. As long as the actor feels respected as an actor, their identity has been established. As Kathy Dow Magnus says:

> With reference to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's dialectic of recognition, Butler clarifies that the subject is not simply produced by an abstract power or law, but comes to be in and through her concrete relations to others. (95)
>
> (…)
>
> Recognition cannot merely be thought in terms of the subject seeking recognition from the other; it must also be understood as the subject approaching and experiencing the other. (96)

With this definition in mind, Tyler Durden's acts of petty rebelliousness (peeing in soup, inserting phalluses in film reels) have no audience other than Jack, the narrator of *Fight Club*. To Jack, Tyler is a rebel, but Tyler does not seem to need Jack's approval to perform his actions. According to Butler, a covert rebel is not a rebel at all; therefore Tyler's actions are a lot less cool than Jack thinks.

Masculinity

Perhaps obviously, but not unimportantly, masculinity is a subcategory of identity, and the same definitions are applicable here. As per Butler's definition, whatever is considered masculine needs to be performed by people typically coded as "male." An exhaustive list of all traits typically coded as "masculine" are unstable, as well as temporally and culturally determined, and so might not apply to every single reader. The following traits and activities will be of importance while discussing *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*: violence, physical fitness or interest in sports, physical appearance, a successful career and being affluent, sexual activity, a dominant attitude towards others, and an interest in technology and electronic gadgets.

As previously mentioned, Butler states that maintaining these traits is not enough to be codified as "male" or "masculine." These traits need to be upheld constantly, and perceived by others. This combined with the fact that Butler stresses differentiation, means that approval is not guaranteed. Yes, gender is performed, but if the other person does not acknowledge it, it might as well not have happened at all. Differentiating yourself through identity as a whole is relatively easy: a person consists of all the things that make up that person as a whole. There's enough difference between any two to earn your identity. But the closer the relationship is between the subjects, the more difficult it is to find differences. How do you differentiate someone from their same-gendered colleague who has the same hobbies? How someone's masculinity differs from any other male-coded person is where many sources of friction come from.

Derealisation

A second important term necessary to understand the full scope of *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* is the psychological condition Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID).

People diagnosed with DID construct a second (or more) identity as a result of trauma or other causes. Not all of the symptoms are relevant, but two that are especially prevalent are derealisation and depersonalisation. Depersonalisation occurs when a person does not feel in tune with their own body anymore. They can have out-of-body experiences, have trouble accessing their memories, or do not feel in control of their limbs. Derealisation is when a person feels disconnected from the rest of their surroundings. They can feel like time is speeding up or slowing down, they perceive things either overwhelmingly strong or surprisingly little of it, and can feel overwhelmed by input from their environment. Because of this, they feel numbed to the world. Through overstimulation, they "shut down" and experience the world as unreal. This in turn alters their behaviour to the world.

Stephen Gold writes:

> In 21st century technological society everything *is* "a copy of a copy of a copy." In this sense, dissociation is not an exotic diagnostic entity. Dissociation, in the form of experiential disconnection, interpersonal isolation, and alienation from our surroundings, is a normative characteristic of modern life (…). Increasingly daily living deprives us of contact with the natural environment, surrounds us with communities with whom we experience little affiliation, and discourages us from attending to our own feelings and convictions. Instead, we are encircled by landscapes of concrete, glass and steel, mired in social settings that are transient and lack a sense of belonging, and bombarded by a kaleidoscope of pulsating sights and sounds that distract us from subjective experience and focused contemplation. (31)

Gold mainly focuses on the movie adaptation of *Fight Club*, but this also applies to the novel version as well. Important to assume is that the modern lifestyle as depicted in

the two novels is the cause of this dissociation. The evidence for this is especially strong in *American Psycho*, but there is ample evidence in *Fight Club* that many of the characters suffer from derealisation and depersonalisation.

The unreliable narrator

The story of *Fight Club* revolves around the fact that Tyler Durden is a product of Jack's imagination. Only then does the realisation hit that Jack is so disconnected from himself that he invented a second persona to come to grips with his environment. Similarly, in *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman performs increasingly disturbing acts on his victims without any repercussions. Near the end of the book, his actions seem so absurd it is almost impossible to take him seriously anymore. At those points, the veracity of the story the main characters are telling is called into question. In "The Rhetoric of Fiction" (1961), literary critic Wayne C. Booth coined the term "unreliable narrator" to describe this phenomenon. Over the years, others such as Ansgar Nünning (1998) and Terence Patrick Murphy (2012) have criticised and made additions to Booth's original description. Rather than examining, evaluating, and re-explaining Booth's original definition, it is much more useful to examine the critics' amendments to come to a more nuanced description. J. Alexander Bareis' article "Ethics, the Diachronization of Narratology, and the Margins of Unreliable Narration" offers multiple points of clarification that help nuance Booth's definition of the unreliable narrator.

An important detail about the unreliable narrator is that the reader needs to understand what exactly the job of a narrator is, and how they can become unreliable. Bareis has the following to say:

> Phelan distinguishes between six types of unreliable narrators divided into what for him are the three main activities of narrators—reporting, interpreting, and

> evaluating. Accordingly, unreliable narrators can either misreport, misinterpret, or misevaluate, or they can underreport, underinterpret, and underevaluate. This correlates with the three main domains of unreliability: facts, values, and knowledge. (44)

The narrator has three jobs: reporting on what is happening, interpreting it correctly and giving backstory where necessary, and pronouncing judgment over the narrative. If any of these three fail, the narrator can be considered unreliable. The distinction between “mis-“ and “under-“ is an important one, as those can occur under different circumstances. *Fight Club*’s twist hinges on the fact that Tyler does not realise Tyler Durden is a figment of his imagination (underinterpretation). Meanwhile, *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman shrugs his psychotic episodes off without much thought (underevaluate), leaving the reader unsure what to think about Bateman’s actions.

Identity, or the lack thereof

In Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club*, the unnamed protagonist commonly referred to as Jack, is almost completely featureless. The only thing the reader knows about him is that he works for a car company, and even the specific brand is unknown. Jack, in essence, is completely bland. He has no defining traits, preferences in food, brands (other than IKEA, more on that later), or sports. The reader knows nothing about him, not even his actual name. According to Butler’s theory about identity, Jack is a nobody. He does not act out anything. But that is more or less the point. Jack is supposed to be an everyman, a blank slate the reader can identify with to make *Fight Club*’s message hit home harder. His character is therefore as nondescript as possible, to contrast with Tyler Durden. The main character is never given an actual name (although in the script of the movie version he is called Jack), he is never shown to have any

friends, parents, or relationships, other than those with Marla and Tyler. He even speaks in free indirect speech ("I shake the guy's hand and say, good fight" (51), for example), which means Palahniuk is essentially robbing Jack of his own voice. Jack is speaking through a filter so no characterisation of his speech is possible. The reader only understands the barest bones of what he says, not the exact words he uses or the emotions behind them. Jack's only defining traits are that he dislikes his job and that he is completely immersed in consumer culture.

Jack works as a recall campaign coordinator. He coldly explains he simply applies a formula. If there is a defect in a car, Jack is sent to see which is cheaper for his company: recalling the cars and fixing the defects, or paying all of the lawsuits if they decide to ignore the defect. No morality is involved, such as deciding whether the defect is relatively harmless or could potentially cost lives. A defective dashboard light is treated the same as a fault in the car's brakes. All that is needed of him is that he solves a logical puzzle. Jack has been stripped of his humanity and turned into a machine.

The only other thing the reader knows about Jack is that he owns a condominium on the fifteenth floor, and that it is filled with IKEA furniture. That is the only brand he uses to identify himself. When that condominium gets blown up, he says to the police officer, "I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. This was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The television was me. It was me that blew up" (110-11). Jack literally equates himself with his home. Since every described piece of furniture came from IKEA, Jack's whole personality is as deep as an IKEA showroom. That is not to imply that he is a shallow person, but that there is nothing that sets him apart from anyone else. Jack's personality is designed by others. And he says that other people in society are the same (note the "people I know," rather than "friends." Jack

doesn't have friends, he just knows them): "And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (43). Jack recognises he is not alone in this, but he does not seem to care. Jack's ability to care has been scrubbed off by consumerism.

While Jack might be bland due to a lack of engagement with any brands, Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* suffers from blandness because he clings too much to brand identification. All throughout the novel brand names are dropped left and right, from the manufacturer of his VCR to his suits made by famous designers. The reader is constantly bombarded by names of everything Bateman sees, almost to an obsessive level. Even the suits of his colleagues need to be identified and compared to his own. At first glance, this might show how smart and sophisticated Bateman is, knowing all these names by heart. But underneath this layer of class lies a gaping chasm of emptiness. Upon closer reading, it becomes apparent that Bateman does not *like* anything. Yes, he dresses well and uses fancy products, but not because he actually prefers those to inferior brands. He uses them because others have told them these are the better products. Whenever Bateman voices an opinion about a brand or object, it is usually followed by the original owner of the idea:

> "You can't stay angry at me because I think the pizza at Pastels is… *crusty.*"
>
> *"Brittle,"* he says, shooting me a glance. "The word you used was *brittle.*"
>
> "I apologize," I say. "But I'm right. It *is.* You read the review in the *Times*, right?" (105)

Early on in the novel, the very first time he speaks more than a few short sentences is when he talks about all the problems in the world, ranging from apartheid to curing

AIDS, college education for the middle class, conserving natural resources, terrorism and world hunger, and many others, continually interspersed with "we have to." In a speech of roughly 350 words, Bateman enumerated all the problems affecting the world at the time, some of which would be of no importance to a young businessman as himself. Virtually no one in his friend group would care about Social Security for the elderly or finding shelter for the homeless. In fact, in that very same chapter, Bateman and a friend mocked a homeless person on their way to a dinner party. But Patrick does not seem to be aware of the irony in his own speech. He is simply reciting a news article he must have read or seen in the past. He is simply a sponge of popular opinions, absorbing and disseminating other people's ideas.

Returning to Judith Butler's theory of identity as performative, there is no way to distinguish Bateman from his colleagues. At the same dinner party mentioned above, Patrick compares himself to one of the few people not in his direct friend group, and it is immediately clear he does not like the outsider: "Stash doesn't speak. Even though he's probably uncomfortable at the table with us since he looks nothing like the other men in the room – his hair isn't slicked back, no suspenders, no horn-rimmed glasses" (12), Apparently all the men in the room (apart from Stash) look incredibly alike in their business outfits, but they do not appear to make an attempt to differentiate themselves from each other. While there is a supposed dress code for their line of work, Patrick's friends seem to take that dress code wherever they go, even to a casual place like a dinner party. They all seem to identify with their work and need to constantly reaffirm that particular image, even among friends. All of them seem incapable of relaxing for fear of losing their image as a successful businessman and thus losing status. For them, their appearance is what they are, constantly. This idea is taken to the extreme all throughout the book. There is a constant theme of mistaken identity: all people in suits

look alike. Patrick and his friend group never seem to be able to come to a conclusion about who they see in a restaurant, and no one comments on it anymore, almost to the point where it becomes a running gag to the reader. In several instances, Bateman gets confused for someone else, and he does not correct them, either out of politeness or for self-interest. But once again, this only highlights the point that people and their characteristics seem so bland to be virtually interchangeable:

> Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam (even though Marcus is dating Cecilia Wagner) but for some reason it doesn't really matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P&P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable. (86)

From this quote, one particular thing stands out: facts about people seem to describe these people. While suits of the same brand might have a similar look, having the same barber does not make people look alike. Patrick's indignation over how he obviously is not dating Cecilia Wagner ("even though" conveys a mood of displeasure) shows that, to him, who you are dating is a defining characteristic. And yet, he does not correct Owen on his mistake, because he does not seem to mind being mistaken for a different businessman. Patrick Bateman literally is a sum of his parts, and nothing more.

The question remains: why does Patrick live the life he does? He dislikes his job, he does not particularly care for his girlfriend, and yet he keeps up this charade of success and pleasantries. Going back to Butler, you are what you act out, and at some point, Patrick finally admits: "Patrick," she says slowly. "If you're so uptight about work, why don't you just quit? You don't have to work." "Because," I say, staring directly at her, "I… want… to… fit… in" (228). Finally, the reader gets to see the true Patrick

Bateman. All of the socialising with friends, going clubbing, eating at fancy restaurants, and so on, was all for a single purpose: wanting to be like the rest. In true Butlerian fashion, Bateman faked it until he made it. There is no trace of motivation or reasoning to find in *American Psycho*, but from this quote the reader can conclude Bateman simply wanted to be happy, and he thought the only way to do so was to follow in the footsteps of his peers. All of the grandstanding, the expensive lifestyle, the job he hates, and so on, was just to fill the void of his personality. Patrick Bateman is not a person with emotions, feelings, and preferences. Patrick Bateman is a businessman.

Punching through derealisation

As mentioned earlier, Stephen Gold diagnoses Jack with symptoms of derealisation. The novel never provides an official diagnosis, even though Jack visits a doctor on several occasions. The only hint the reader gets about Jack's condition, and the one Stephen Gold latches onto is the following:

> I went to my first support group two years ago, after I'd gone to my doctor about my insomnia, again.
>
> Three weeks and I hadn't slept. Three weeks without sleep, and everything becomes an out-of-body experience. My doctor said, "Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong. Listen to your body." (19)

Jack refers several times to a numbness caused by the insomnia, but he might have misattributed that symptom to the wrong cause. Presuming that the insomnia is indeed caused by derealisation, that might be the actual source of Jack's sleeplessness. Jack keeps referring to his experiences as "numb," as if things fail to penetrate his consciousness. One particular phrase that is repeated verbatim, except for

capitalisation, is “you can’t touch anything and nothing can touch you.” (21, 96-97) This is one of the most important symptoms of derealisation: the feeling of being disconnected from your environment. This could merely be a coincidence. After all, insomnia and derealisation share many symptoms. But the fact that this exact phrase is repeated verbatim could be a sign that it is important to consider. Like Jack himself, his ailment is never named out loud, but it’s certainly there.

At first, Jack goes to support meetings because they make him cry. They provide a release valve for his emotions. Seeing other people suffer makes Jack aware of his own feelings, makes him get in touch with himself again. Jack’s fellow support group goer Marla explains it best:

> There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with. Oh, but now there was dying and death and loss and grief. Weeping and shuddering, terror and remorse. Now that she knows where we’re all going, Marla feels every moment of her life. (…)
>
> “Funerals are nothing compared to this,” Marla says. “Funerals are all abstract ceremony. Here, you have a real experience of death.” (38)

In these groups, Marla and Jack are both regularly confronted with grief, people in the process of loss. The sympathy, perhaps even fear of that grief makes them feel alive. It is a visceral reminder that life is temporary. That is a wake-up call for them. It shakes them awake and allows them to live life to their fullest, until they get desensitised again by society and their mundanity. That is why Jack invents the fight club.

Fight Club is a simulation. It temporarily puts the fighter in danger, but that danger is never lethal. There might be wounds and bruises, but those heal over time. Moreover, fighters can tap out anytime, so the risk is only minimal. But its effects are real. Jack describes several times how fighting gives him a rush of adrenalin. He is not

fighting to win, but to get back in touch with reality, and with himself. Jack the nobody, after a fight, win or lose, becomes Jack the somebody. He feels in control again, ready to face society: "After a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off. Your word is law, and if other people break that law or question you, even that doesn't piss you off" (49).

As he describes it, the world becomes less loud. Less overwhelming. Being overwhelmed is a sign of not feeling in control, and that is exactly what fight club is trying to remedy. It gives power back to the people drowning in society. The wounds Jack sustains during fight club become a badge of honour. They show others that you are not afraid anymore:

> Just by contrast, this makes me the calm little center of the world. Me, with my punched-out eyes and dried blood in big black crusty stains on my pants, I'm saying HELLO to everybody at work. HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I am zo ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me. (64)

Using Butler's theory of performative identity, during Fight Club Jack is obviously performing his role as a fighter, but the days after Fight Club, everyone can still see the fruits of his performance. Even when he is not actively performing his role as a fighter, people can still attribute that trait to him.

Similarly, Patrick Bateman also has issues dealing with his environment, although he only admits it near the end of the novel, when his mind is starting to fall apart:

> Everything failed to subdue me. Soon everything seemed dull: another sunrise, the lives of heroes, falling in love, war, the discoveries people made about each

> other. (…) There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin, hair – but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. (271)

Here, Bateman actually voices his depersonalisation, which explains many of his previous actions. During the entirety of the novel, Bateman is trying to pierce his veil of depersonalisation and reaching out towards real life, but struggles to connect with anyone he interacts with. All his violence has been an act to get others to notice him, to no avail. Ironically when his mind has deteriorated the most is when he is finally able to voice his desire to fit in: "I decide to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia (…), I leave a message, admitting everything, leaving nothing out, thirty, forty, a hundred murders. (…) and finally, after ten minutes of this, I sign off by concluding, 'Uh, I'm a pretty sick guy'" (338).

Evidence for his quest for feelings can be found in the ways Bateman describes his bloodshed. Or more precisely, his emotions afterwards. Whenever he commits an act of violence, Patrick usually describes the rush it gives him. After his first major assault, stabbing a homeless person in the stomach and eyes several times, he runs away and comments: "Afterwards, two blocks west, I feel heady, ravenous, pumped up, as if I'd just worked out and endorphins are flooding my nervous system, or just embraced that first line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped that first glass of Cristal." (127) This display of aggression, even possible murder, causes a rush of adrenalin Bateman becomes addicted to. From that point onwards, his shows of force and murder get more and more gruesome. Bateman is getting addicted to killing. In the quote above,

he equates his rush to three different things, all of which are addictive in nature. That could be a sign of his increased dependence on the adrenalin, necessitating more and more outrageous acts to get the same feeling. And indeed, later on, he discusses happiness with his secretary, but the subtext is clear to the reader: "'People can get accustomed to anything, right?' I ask. 'Habit does things to people'" (359). Bateman himself recognises his addiction at this point, but does not know how to handle it. He is asking others for advice, yet skirting around the subject.

The surge of adrenalin causes a second effect in Bateman, which is similar to Jack's experience in *Fight Club.* The rush causes Bateman's mind to unburden and allows him to think more clearly. Through violence, Patrick fights through the disconnect with his surroundings and allows him to connect with the real world again: "The aftermath. No fear, no confusion." (294) In essence, Patrick Bateman lives his life through the deaths of others. Only by killing them can he feel alive.

Unreliability

In its shortest definition, a narration can be summed up as someone speaking about something to someone. When it comes to unreliable narration is that the subject matter of the speaker is called into question. The speaker may be impaired in some way, or might not fully comprehend the situation. What makes *Fight Club* so interesting on a narrative level is that the narrator's subject matter is very clear, but the narrator himself is the source of the ambiguity. The novel is presented as if Jack is the narrator, and everything Tyler Durden says happens "off-screen," but as it turns out that is just an assumption on the reader's part. This leads to two connected unanswered questions: first off, "how is this even possible," and the second one is "how much of the narrative is to be trusted?"

The first question, “how is it possible that Jack and Tyler Durden are the same person,” is left unanswered. The narrative suggests Tyler Durden is some sort of hallucination, as Jack clearly sees Tyler sitting next to him on the airplane, and fights with him before starting Fight Club. But even Jack’s own words contradict themselves: “Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He’s a disassociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination” (168). There is a clear difference between a projection and a dissociative personality. In a projection, a subject sees something in front of them, as Jack imagines seeing Tyler. In the case of a dissociative disorder, the subject becomes the other person. And the novel treats Tyler as both: to Jack, Tyler is a figment of his imagination, somehow being a physical person who eats, sleeps, and has a job. Tyler cannot be the same person as Jack, because according to Jack, they can be in different locations at the same time. But to others, Tyler and Jack are the same person, or there is no Jack at all. Marla has sex with Tyler and is surprised when Jack says to her that his name is not Tyler. Jack is seemingly capable of switching between identities with completely separate memories. While Jack being able to perceive Tyler as a different person altogether might make sense to him, it does not make sense to the reader, and the narrative does not help to guide that understanding.

The second question, “how much of the narrative is to be trusted,” is unanswered as well, but also beside the point: the reader likely already figured out that the Jack/Tyler Durden persona is improbable, so it has to be taken with a certain amount of scepticism. But the answer to this question is that it is both: Jack and Tyler are the same person, yet simultaneously Tyler is part of Jack’s imagination. Everything in the novel is simultaneously true and untrue, because everything that happened, actually happened to Jack, yet the reader cannot trust his observations in the slightest. *Fight Club* defies

making sense, because it is the account of a person sliding into dissociation-induced madness.

In a sense, finding the truth in *Fight Club* is an exercise in futility. It raises many questions it never answers. *Fight Club* is not an accurate depiction of someone living with a mental illness. The essence of madness is that it is ephemeral, uncatchable, like trying to replicate a scent: impossible to pin down and point at exactly, only approximated, never fully identified. And that is exactly what unreliability does to a narrative: always on an in-between phase, never certain one way or another, always keeping both sides in mind. Every time you think you have the answer, it eludes you. *Fight Club* revels in the questions it raises, and laughs at the answers you attribute to it.

Near the end of the novel, Bateman is starting to unravel more and more. Chapters become shorter, his speech and actions become more erratic, and his narration becomes nonsensical, in one chapter even turning to third-person, rather than first person. At some point, he starts hallucinating and gets lost in paranoia:

> I'm having a sort of hard time paying attention because my automated teller has started *speaking* to me, sometimes actually leaving weird messages on the screen, in green lettering, like "Cause a Terrible Scene at Sotheby's" or "Kill the President" or "Feed Me a Stray Cat," and I was freaked out by the park bench that followed me for six blocks last Monday evening and it too spoke to me.
> Disintegration – I'm taking it in stride. (380)

While it is never explained how Bateman got into this situation, he has been taking more and more painkillers and a wide variety of drugs (both of the prescription and the illegal kind). Cocaine is constantly mentioned throughout the book, and it is known for causing hallucinations, violent tendencies, and paranoia (Morton).

By now, it is obvious that from this point onward, Patrick's narration is not to be trusted anymore. Since the sole method of focalisation, the lens through which the observer sees the world, is through the eyes of the main character, there exists no world external to Patrick Bateman. This is exactly the problem with the unreliable narrator: without a second perspective, the reader does not know which parts of the narrative world are different from their own reality. But that works retroactively as well: everything Bateman has said up to this point is suddenly cast into question. The reader now has reason to assume not all of the murders and violence perpetrated up to this point might have actually taken place either. And there is evidence to back that up. Relatively early on, a chapter details a panic attack or psychosis, told in one giant paragraph without any introduction or explanation. It is an insight into Bateman's mind at that particular moment, and is never referred to again. Either the psychosis has taken place and is another indicator of a fraying mind, or it has not, which is equally damning. Another piece of evidence is that there two instances of Patrick not exactly knowing what time of year it is:

> And though I cannot be positive that I'm not hallucinating, there seem to be midgets dressed in green and red elf suits and felt hats walking around with trays of appetizers. (174)

> I passed what I thought was a Halloween parade, which was disorienting since I was fairly sure this was May. (133-34)

While in the first example Christmas elves can be unsettling to see unexpectedly, the way Bateman describes "not [being] positive [he is] not hallucinating," rather than being surprised is a tipoff that not everything he has reported to have seen so far might have been entirely truthful. In the second example, Patrick's sense of time is off by five

months. And again, the doubt in his narration, as he is only "fairly" sure of the exact month of the year indicates this might have happened before.

Finally, there is doubt about his violent actions. More and more inconsistencies keep popping up, surprising even Patrick himself. In one particular chapter he kills Paul Owen, who is his friend and co-worker, who often joins Bateman for dinners and hangouts. Patrick mails his severed limbs to London, and writes in blood on the walls. Throughout the rest of the novel, no one mentions his death or disappearance, except a detective sent to investigate Paul Owen's disappearance:

> "'But…' I stop. 'Has anyone seen him in London?'
>
> Kimball looks at his book, flips a page and then, looking back at me, says, 'Actually, yes.'
>
> 'Hmmm,' I say.
>
> 'Well, I've had a hard time getting an accurate verification,' he admits. 'A… Stephen Hughes says he saw him at a restaurant there, but I checked it out and what happened is, he mistook a Hubert Ainsworth for Paul, so…'" (262)

Even when Bateman publically confesses this crime to his layer to get recognition for his act, the lawyer denies the possibility of Owen being murdered. After a seemingly endless parade of cruelties and absurdities, a second source finally appears and contradicts Bateman, showing the reader that Patrick's account is not to be trusted. All his previous actions suddenly collapse, because if a very prominent character's death turns out to be fictitious, all the anonymous murders he supposedly committed are not to be trusted anymore, either.

Conclusion

There are several obvious similarities between Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*: both feature middle to upper class white men in 1980s-1990s America with a focus on consumerism, but are told in vastly different ways. While *Fight Club* wears its message almost like a badge of honour, in that people should focus less on consumerism and materialism, *American Psycho*'s message is more covert, almost like a character study of the effects of modern society on a single individual. But underneath the veneer of spectacle and violence lie more similarities: Both the protagonists of these novels are deeply troubled individuals who use similar methods to break out of their monotonous life. Both of them have psychological issues and become increasingly unreliable as a narrator. Many people who have examined these novels have noticed several of these clues, but none of them have put the thematic pieces together. As such, each theme is examined separately and can lead to different interpretations, such as that *Fight Club* is a call to regain one's masculinity, or that *American Psycho* is an example of how effeminate men have become. But a different interpretation emerges: both main characters of *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* are so deeply entrenched in a consumerist society that it has eroded all of their identity, leaving them unable to interact meaningfully with their environment. To use Judith Butler's theory of performativity again: both Jack and Patrick Bateman are so obsessed with what they *have*, they forgot to think about what they *are.* Both Jack and Patrick Bateman have realised this, and are literally lashing out at their environment in order to feel something. Their lack of identity causes a depersonalisation, widening the gap between them and the world around them. Their violent behaviour is their own way of getting back into contact with the real world, which is becoming more and more unfamiliar to them. Jack and Patrick's violence is not just a random element in their

respective novels, but born from a desire to be heard again. Their use of violence is not an attack on society, but a request to re-join that same society that made them outcasts in the first place.

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