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**Human Body as a Subject to Violence in American
Transgressive Fiction**

Master's Thesis

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma „Human Body as a Subject to Violence in American Transgressive Fiction“ vypracoval samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedl jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this master's thesis and that I have not used any sources other than those identified as references and listed in the bibliography.

V Olomouci dne 31. 5. 2023

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Introduction

This paper focuses on a group of books of American literature from the second half of the 20th century which belong to a literary genre known as transgressive fiction. Such fiction became infamous for shocking the audience with scenes of explicit violence, aggressive depiction of sexuality, controversial political opinions, or acts which violate generally shared notion of morals and ethics. Violence, as a common motif in transgressive fiction, becomes the focus of this paper which aims to analyze its forms and to define its role within the given set of novels. The emphasis will be put on violence which is acted upon people and the human body and whether such violence complements, reflects, or contradicts the overall ethics of the given novel. To cover American literature of the second half of the 20th century, which is often considered as the beginning of transgressive fiction in its pure form, I selected three novels by authors coming from various backgrounds, beliefs, and agendas, namely: William Seward Burroughs, Bret Easton Ellis, and Chuck Palahniuk. The novels which are the objects of my analysis are generally considered by scholars as exemplary works of transgressive fiction, and all of them share a high degree of open violence in their content.

To operate within the field of transgressive fiction, the paper starts with the theory of discourse and transgression by Michel Foucault and Chris Jenks, which will serve as a philosophical framework for establishing this fundamental aspect of transgressive fiction. Then I will define it as a genre with its characteristics, history, and development which is intricately linked to satire, folk culture, and carnival. As a theoretical framework for this paper, I will use a study of Robin Mookerjee, who interprets transgressive fiction from the view of historical development of what he calls “the mock-epic,” and a study of Coco d’Hont who links socio-historic contexts to the key themes of transgressive fiction of the same time period, which she then identifies as fictional “social laboratory” of the given culture. For violence, as a common way of transgression, is often acted upon the body, I will employ the theory of carnivalesque and Kathryn Hume’s study of violence.

Using these theories, I aim to put the human body in the context of the genre and to analyze its pivotal role within the display of violent acts in the selected works. I argue that the human body in transgressive fiction is employed as a fictional corporeal space in which beliefs, ideologies, or moral norms are questioned, challenged, and performed. Body violence thus serves a metaphorical manifestation of both external and internal powers which dominate over a given socio-historical context and warp the way of thinking and understanding the world and its people.

1 Introduction to the Theoretical Part

There is always more to literature. Ever since its beginnings, literature created a space where beliefs, myths, ideas, theories, stories, and various thoughts, within the context of time and space, were declared, defended, expressed, or questioned and doubted. Literature is a cornerstone of both the normative discourse and its greatest critiques. It is the latter which Leslie Fiedler in his article “No! In Thunder” praises and advocates for as the only example of serious art, even though such art was and often is less popular among people and many times causes outrage within the literary circles of academics, literary critics and more conventional authors: “The problem of the nonacceptance of serious fiction lies elsewhere: in the fact that to fulfil its essential moral obligation, such fiction must be negative.”¹ In his rather biased words, he claims that authors who do not rebel, protest, challenge and question common beliefs and norms in our society and life in general, those whose books are positive, optimistic, cheerful and affirmative of the rightness of the way of life we as the Western society have chosen, are purveyors of commodity-fiction.²

Such writers tend to neglect disorder, dirt, non-conformism and skepticism and this neglect invalidates them from being considered as authors of the novel in Fiedler’s criteria: “Ambiguity is the first resource of the serious novelist.”³ It is this crucial importance of ambiguity in art which leads Fiedler to despise “Books, with their blend of rationalism, determinism and quasi-scientific objectivity, were variously hailed when they appeared as examples of Realism, Naturalism, Verism,” for they only view “Man as the product of a perhaps unplanned but rationally ordered and rationally explicable universe, a product which science can explain, even as it can explain the world which conditions him.”⁴ The moral obligation of writers is, according to Fiedler, to show us the ugly and problematic part of humans, to remind us of abundant flaws and cruelties of our systems and

¹ Leslie Fiedler, “No, in Thunder!” (*Esquire*, 1 Sep. 1960), 4.

² Fiedler, “No, in Thunder!” 8.

³ Fiedler, “No, in Thunder!” 15.

⁴ Fiedler, “No, in Thunder!” 10.

to point to the absurdity of existence which must be better embraced by us all since it is the inevitability: "We have been forced to learn that our humanity is dependent not on the answers we hope for but on the questions we are able to ask."⁵ They must teach us that uncertainty is the essential condition of living, they must say no to hypocrisy, pretense of peace and all the lies produced along and by our conformity and ignorance.⁶ Even though Fiedler's article is highly subjective and harshly attacks many generally acclaimed authors whose novels so to speak "survived the test of time," it is a good starting point to enter the problematics of less conventional and often blatantly provocative genre of transgressive fiction.

1.1 Discourse

What Fiedler talks about is that good authors should always in some degree cross social norms, moral boundaries and reader's expectations received from reading conventional literature. In other words, good authors should transgress. To understand this act, we need to define discourse because it helps us to recognize acts of transgression. Discourse is a process of communication, of conversation on a certain topic or in a certain field. It is a sum of all the knowledge and thoughts which are generally considered to be true, however the truth is what warps those discourses for it is not as ultimate as one might think. In Foucault's pioneering work on discourse, he claims that within every discourse lies great power for those who can control it.⁷ Since discourse is a manifestation of our perception of the world, of how we understand things and ourselves, its development must be watched closely by those of power:

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures

⁵ Fiedler, "No, in Thunder!" 11.

⁶ Fiedler, "No, in Thunder!" 6.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. by Robert Young, transl. by Ian McLeod (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 51-52.

whose role is to ward off its power and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.⁸

Every social system strives for maintaining its importance and irreplaceability, and in every system, there are some groups of people who have bigger control over discourses (mainly public authorities, representatives, or state institutions). Foucault recognizes three main procedures of exclusion which facilitate keeping discourse under control within its limits: prohibition or forbidden speech, the opposition between reason and madness, and the opposition between true and false, or in other words, our will to truth.⁹

The prohibition is the commonly most well-known tool, it is the fact that what we can publicly say, without any further negative consequences for us, is limited and greatly given by the social and political system with its main ideologies, we live in. The most significant group of prohibited topics are taboos. Those are certain topics, thoughts and courses of action which are considered by the society as possibly dangerous, destructive, sinful, or reprehensible, and therefore taboos are often avoided and repressed. Sexuality and politics are such topics. Madness can serve as another tool of exclusion from the discourse, since when somebody is referred to as being insane or fool (usually only by certain authorities and institutions which are considered as having the right to do so), that immediately disqualifies that person from participation in a discourse of any topic. According to Foucault, these two procedures are over time slowly becoming more fragile and uncertain, as our society is shifting towards bigger openness, and are therefore being assimilated by the last one—the will to truth.¹⁰

Foucault's theory rests on the presumption that our Western society is largely controlled by authorities and institutions which support the systems of exclusion in order to remain in power:

⁸ Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52.

⁹ Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52-55.

¹⁰ Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 55-56.

It is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices, such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries; learned societies in the past and laboratories now. But it is also renewed, no doubt more profoundly, by the way in which knowledge is put to work, valorized, distributed, and in a sense attributed, in a society.¹¹

A discourse is a sum of all that can be truthfully said about something, a set of methods, techniques and instruments, and a corpus of rules, definitions and propositions considered to be true, and in Foucault's words is often not open and penetrable to anyone who does not meet certain requirements—who is not qualified.

It is possible in times of a great discovery or revolutionary theory to be speaking the truth despite not being “in the true” of the given discourse for not obeying its “rules of discursive policing.”¹² Those who violate the discourse this way whether it is a religious or ethical, biological or medical, juridical or political, or even literary one, are condemned to speak the truth only from the exterior, since if accepted as being “in the true” the discourse would have to be completely reformulated and undergo upheaval. Foucault claims, that this discursive policing tends to exert pressure on those participating in the given discourse to obey the rules and shared truths (conformity), which might be manifested in the way for example the Western literature for centuries gravitates towards grounding itself on the natural, on the moral, on sincerity and on science so it remains “in the true” of literary discourse.¹³

We can interpret that claim as a possible explanation why most books produced in each era usually aligns with the shared morals, taste, opinions, ethics, and habits of the society it is meant for. Those would be the authors whose importance in art Fiedler harshly downgrades as “purveyors of pseudo-novels.” Based on this theory, Foucault argues that due to our centuries long obsession to foster various discourses, to expand or retract them, to enrich or limit them, but mainly to gain control over them, we as

¹¹ Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” 55.

¹² Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” 61-62.

¹³ Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” 55.

Western civilization are greatly logophilic, however that is only the more obvious side of that, because what is missing from the discourse reveals something else as well:

Yet it seems to me that beneath this apparent veneration of discourse, under this apparent logophilia, a certain fear is hidden. (...) No doubt there is in our society, (...), a profound logophobia, a sort of mute terror against these events, against this mass of things said, against the surging-up of all these statements, against all that could be violent, discontinuous, pugnacious, disorderly as well, and perilous about them - against this great incessant and disordered buzzing of discourse.¹⁴

If anyone takes action to address that fear (whether it is in speech or in written word as in novels) and unleashes the terrors which are kept outside the discourse, then that individual performs an act of transgression.

1.2 Transgression

The founding definition of transgression in philosophy, was conducted by Foucault in his "Preface to Transgression," where he describes transgression as an act which firstly requires a limit since neither can exist alone for it requires a firmly outlined discourse. Since limit could not exist as forever uncrossable and transgression would be pointless when its limit is only illusionary or non-existent, there is a mutual relation of dependency between limit and transgression since one presupposes the other and complements it.¹⁵ Transgression is also only a temporary act, because once it crosses the limit, it retracts back only to repeat the process again testing whether the limit has changed in reaction or not, or in Jenks's words: "Transgression confirms limits, it shows a consciousness of limits not their absence."¹⁶ According to Foucault, once transgression attacks the limit enough times, the limit can either become even more firm or slowly shifts to include that

¹⁴ Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 66.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression" in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. & trans. by Donal F. Bouchard (Cornell University Press, 1977), 33-34.

¹⁶ Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003), 95.

which had been excluded: “Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, to recognize itself for the first time).”¹⁷ It is therefore inevitable that both concepts work in a constant flux and wholly depend on their social and temporal context.

Transgression might be understood as an act which checks whether some rules, norms or the nature of a given discourse have undergone any change in either way: “Its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise.”¹⁸ Chris Jenks expands Foucault’s theory of transgression to provide it with some social context, he says that to transgress is not only to go beyond the social boundaries or norms set by law, convention, or commandment, but it also tests their validity, it is therefore a “deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation.”¹⁹ Transgression can thus serve as tool for assessing the distance and breaking points between the opposite ends in series of continua such as good-evil; sane-mad; sacred-profane; high-low; or normal-pathological.²⁰ It is also an external force which checks whether the limits are up to date, or already obsolete. For example, in the case of the normal-pathological scale of society, Jenks describes the normal acts as those which compose solidarity and continuity whereas pathological manifest individualization, interruption and fragmentation, therefore when the public faces pathological behavior in a form of transgression, they recognize the limits which were violated and re-evaluate their validity. If the limit then meets the current collective morals and sensibilities the act is denounced: “Crime creates outrage, punishment gives rise to expiation, the normal has its boundaries once more confirmed.”²¹ However if that is not the case, the quality or even the existence of the particular limit is put into question.

¹⁷ Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 34.

¹⁸ Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 35.

¹⁹ Jenks, *Transgression*, 2.

²⁰ Jenks, *Transgression*, 2.

²¹ Jenks, *Transgression*, 25.

The capacity of transgression “to challenge, fracture, overthrow, spoil or question the unquestionable can no longer be contained as naughtiness or occasional aberration. Transgression is part of the purpose of being and is the unstable principle by which stasis either sustains or transforms,”²² both Jenks and Foucault argue that on its own, it contains nothing negative. It is neither “good” nor “bad,” it exists as an untamed energy which breaks through any limitations to find out whether they are penetrable without further negative consequences, in which case they are outdated and already absorbed what used to be excluded, or if their violation causes any repercussions, then it reinforces the need of those limits. In other words, it is always only the current system and society (socio-historical context) with its corpus of beliefs, morals, ideologies, and values, which attribute a certain act of transgression as negatively dangerous, subversive, reprehensible, sinful, or criminal; or as potentially progressive, revolutionary, liberating, or emancipative, therefore as a positive one.

1.3 Transgressive fiction

1.3.1 Defining transgressive fiction

Although its roots are reaching to the very beginnings of literature in the form of satire and critique, transgressive fiction is a relatively recently recognized literary term referring to a genre of books written mainly since the post-war period of the 20th century. However, it is not easy to give a definition of such a complex term, since its core transgressive books do not create a neatly defined cohesive category. In 1990s', Michael Silverblatt was one of the first literary theorist to recognize the growing popularity, within the greater cultural context, of what he called “transgressive writing:”

I was not surprised to hear what the young writers are interested in. There was no talk of minimalism (the parade is past), or postmodernism (an aberration of the academy); the talk was all about the new thing: transgressive writing. Exploring the sexual frontiers implicit in

²² Jenks, *Transgression*, 81.

Mapplethorpe's photographs or Karen Finley's performances, transgressive writing has violation at its core: violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body.²³

What he initially considered as a rather local and temporal trend, was, as he later admits, a sign of a more profound change of the Western culture. Artists no longer hesitated to openly attack dated sexual and gender norms, or to put on display some of the long neglected dark sides of the society (such as incest, various forms abuse, drug addiction, or dysfunctions in nuclear family).²⁴ Such defiant energy of various authors changed the literary and academic discourse by invading it from the outside and by bringing up several historically taboo topics which fostered, in Silverblatt words, a specific type of author: "The transgressive writer is more honest, knowing that all desire is unsafe, that all fantasy is trumped up style, that all transgression is a mixture of violations of style and personal risk."²⁵ Transgressive fiction, however, did not emerge out of a sudden, its development started much earlier and only in the last decades of the 20th century established its own genre, due to its proliferation since the 1960s', overall popularity, founding authors such as Henry Miller, William S. Burroughs, Hubert Selby Jr., Bret E. Ellis, Irvine Welsh, or Chuck Palahniuk, whose works often caused controversies, or even resulted in lawsuits.

Jenks suggests that the core intellectual events which have affected our way of thinking, and which therefore could have facilitated the emergence of transgressive fiction, were Enlightenment that stripped religion of its sacredness, and the proclamation of death of God by Nietzsche which amounted into a profound re-evaluation of values and opened a space for insecurity. Such argument is directly derived from Foucault's emphasis on the absence of God in the modern society which according to him resolves into existential doubts, general relativity of values, and uncertainty:

²³ Michael Silverblatt, "Shock Appeal: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us? The New Fiction of Transgression" (*LA Times*, 1 Aug. 1993).

²⁴ Silverblatt, "Shock Appeal: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us? The New Fiction of Transgression."

²⁵ Silverblatt, "Shock Appeal: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us? The New Fiction of Transgression."

To kill God is to liberate life from this existence that limits it, but also to bring it back to those limits that are annulled by this limitless existence as a sacrifice; (...) The death of God does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it.²⁶

Jenks elaborates on that idea and says that transgression in such abundance, as it has been since the post-war times, is a modern (and particularly postmodern) phenomenon related to the liberation and emancipation of a human individuality, which then aspires to challenge authorities, traditions, and truths while the notion of togetherness and the collective sense of belonging slowly ceases to exist. Limits are ever since more vivid and in greater proximity alluring us to transcend them whatever they may be: physical, racial, legal, moral, national, sexual, or aesthetic.²⁷ Therefore, modernity as such generated “an ungoverned desire to extend, exceed, or go beyond the margins of acceptability or normal performance.”²⁸ Transgression thus became in Jenks’s terms “an intellectual implement and a life-enhancing practice” of those striving for sovereignty in the post-structuralism and postmodern culture.²⁹

In the Western culture and modern society becoming more individualistic, globally oriented, and still shaken by the post-war trauma and existential crisis, people are compelled to transgress; they cannot do other way:

The only way that a limitless world is provided with any structure or coherence is through the excesses that transgress that world and thus construct it - the completion that follows and accompanies transgression. Transgression has become modern, post-God initiative, a searching for limits to break, (...) God becomes the overcoming of God, limit becomes the transgression of limit.³⁰

²⁶ Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 32.

²⁷ Jenks, *Transgression*, 4-8.

²⁸ Jenks, *Transgression*, 8.

²⁹ Jenks, *Transgression*, 109-110.

³⁰ Jenks, *Transgression*, 90.

From this perspective, the urge to transgress might seem as a relatively new phenomenon within the literary discourse. However, M. Keith Booker, who while talking about the literary practice of our civilization and its contribution to genuine social change, claims the opposite: “Transgression and creativity have been inextricably linked throughout the history of Western culture.”³¹ Which he then illustrates on the works by Dante Alighieri and John Milton whose transgressive acts were necessary prerequisites to their poetry in *The Divine Comedy* and *The Paradise Lost*. He goes even further when arguing that in the context of our civilization, based in Judeo-Christian culture, the very human existence began as violation of God’s rules when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Gardens of Eden. And even the birth of Hellenic myth can be traced back to Prometheus’ bestowal of fire upon humanity in an act of fundamental transgression against the gods of Olymp.³² Booker suggests that testing limits is an inherent feature of human nature which corresponds to Jenks’ observations: “Transgression, in whatever form it might take, is as old as the nature and reinforcements of rules – which it breaks.”³³

As much as people are often afraid of opening problematic topics and addressing the archetypal chaos and disorder (what lies outside the discourse) with all its inherently dark and negative sites, popularity of many famous controversial pieces of art and stories proves that what features terror might also raise desire and curiosity, or how Fiedler puts it:

The thrill we all sense but hesitate to define for ourselves — the thrill of confronting a commitment to truth which transcends all partial allegiances — comes when Dante turns on Florence, de Sade on reason, Joyce on Ireland, Faulkner on the South, Graham Greene on the Catholics, and Abraham Cahan or Nathanael West on the Jews.³⁴

³¹ M. Keith Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991), 2.

³² Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 1-2.

³³ Jenks, *Transgression*, 80.

³⁴ Fiedler, “No, in Thunder!” 7.

Jenks addresses the temptation to transgress as an inevitable given:

What is forbidden, what is beyond the boundary, what is potentially unclean carries with it a propulsion to desire in equal measure. The banned fuels and magnetizes the lust, and the condemned object, place, person, or course of action takes on a mesmeric eroticism.³⁵

It is indisputable that acts of transgression have always been part of human reality, and that transgression made its way to several pieces of literature over the history. However, we need to understand the difference between the transgressive fiction, in the last decades of the 20th century, and literature which, although it contains transgressive elements, is not recognized as belonging to such genre.

To clarify one false assumption, which might occur from reading about transgression, I must stress that there is no objectively given line that would demarcate whether a certain novel is transgressive or not, or, in Fiedler's words, whether a writer is thought-provoking rebel or a conventional author of banal books. Even though such clear-cut classification of literature would be convenient, it is far from the truth. As with many other literary phenomena, transgressiveness of a given novel operates on a scale and reaches a certain degree which yields to time-dependent socio-historical sensibilities. In other words:

All works of literature have some transgressive potential, even when they appear to be fully in complicity with dominant ideologies. Because literature tends to exaggerate the effects and ideas it imports from its cultural and historical context, such works can expose contradictions and 'seams' in dominant ideologies that might not otherwise be apparent.³⁶

What transgressive fiction of the 20th century does differently than prior other genres, is that it tends to violate and cross in a much larger extend than is usual a certain set of shared moral values or social norms, destabilize

³⁵ Jenks, *Transgression*, 45-46.

³⁶ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 17.

hierarchies, question dominant ideologies and authorities, challenge aesthetic limits and conventions, and therefore attack the taste of the public. Transgression becomes not only a major theme of the novel, but also one of its most deliberately chosen goals.

As I illustrated with Jenks's take on transgression, the need to transgress has been especially urgent since the rise of modernity, secularization of the Western society, sexual revolutions, women emancipation and the overall liberation of arts and literature. Several key features (of both form and content) of transgressive fiction can be understood as deriving from the legacy of modernist literature with a somewhat postmodern twist of daring relativism and straightforward openness for experimentation with morals and values. Booker argues, that due to the proliferation of transgressive fiction over the last 60 years, it has been gradually adopted as an "official mode of literary discourse," and that many books which are now considered as transgressive fiction have become institutionalized and therefore increasingly ineffectual in its impact. Its subversive energies have become absorbed and appropriated as a way of entertainment, reflexivity and anti-realism match the now conventional paradigm of postmodernism, and any sort of rebellion against the established order has been turned by the mass culture into a calculated fashionable stand.³⁷ If this was, however, the entire truth then transgressive fiction would be an emptied-out genre with intentionally shocking aesthetics serving only to entertain the reader while remaining just shallow-deep of things. It would be a fully integrated part of the mainstream literature with small potential to raise questions, to provoke or disturb the official discourse, and the term transgressive would be an utterly purposeless attribute of it. However, the aftermath of publication of books by Ellis, Palahniuk, or McCarthy, which caused upheaval among official authorities and within the literary discourse, and the general high interest of both academics and public proves the opposite.

³⁷ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 6-8.

It is true since norms and boundaries are given by the current socio-historical context, thus what was shocking after publishing might not be considered controversial as the time passes, transgressive novels might lose some of their transgressive potential and immediate energy. Booker argues that, despite considering transgressive fiction as an integrated part of postmodern discourse, readers should aim to seek for transgressive energies within the text:

Given the difficulty with which works of art achieve any kind of authentic transgression in our modern cultural climate, perhaps the time has come for (...) reading them in a manner that highlights and emphasizes transgressive elements. Perhaps it is time to focus on the ways in which works are subversive, rather than on the ways they aren't.³⁸

Therefore, we should rather ask ourselves: “What it is that is being transgressed against in transgressive literature?”³⁹ He recognizes three most critical strategies in recent years which are able to release the transgressive energies: Marxist criticism towards the global dominance of capitalism, feminism revealing gender discrimination and the ideology of patriarchy, and poststructuralism which demonstrated how much our literary tradition is formed by logocentrism.⁴⁰ What Booker suggests, is that “Literary transgression has genuine political force only when it is carried out against a highly specific target. In literature, at least, a rebel without a cause is no rebel at all.”⁴¹

1.3.2 Transgressive fiction as the mock epic

A different history and role of transgressive fiction is offered by Robin Mookerjee who in the book *Transgressive Fiction* tracks the predecessors of this genre back to the tradition of satire, which stands opposite to the epic literature as “the mock epic,” a genre which undermines the core beliefs

³⁸ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 9.

³⁹ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 2.

⁴⁰ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 9.

⁴¹ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 11.

of a society at a given time and confronts them with its twisted uncanny image. In doing so, he develops a new reading of transgressive fiction as a more aggressive branch of satire or at least as a style which greatly embraces satiric and humorous methods of writing. Mock epic ridicules the core beliefs using humorous juxtapositions, sarcasm, and irony, employing hyperboles, mimicry, exaggerations, and vulgar language, therefore creates an ambiguous caricature of the given society rejecting any set of ideologies or beliefs as an absolute truth: "Satire, then, makes no claim of telling truths, but reveals a different order of truth by chipping away at the ground of literature: the conventions and beliefs with which its practitioners begin."⁴² Such features satire shares in common with transgressive fiction, which aims for a similar effect however more aggressively: "Playing with vocabularies culled from various genres of discourse, transgressors disrupt the consistency of 'voice' in the usual sense and use explicit carnal imagery as a reminder of visceral reality."⁴³ What defines literary transgression to Mookerjee is that:

It achieves an audience among the cultural elites while maintaining neutrality, a refusal to take sides in the debates brought up by the subject matter of the work. This masterstroke forces the audience to face the subject matter of the work directly, rather than through the optic of a system or theory.⁴⁴

Even though, its authors usually take pains to be politically ambiguous in their works, they provide us with a critical social commentary without any ambition to seek solutions, therefore, in the end, are soon recognized as often politically problematic. Mookerjee argues, that what those works aim is: "Either an expansive, inclusive range, expanding the novel beyond a single story arc, (...), in order to depict the plurality of discourses and perspectives in the postmodern world, or turn to a story-type outside the story itself as a reflection of that world."⁴⁵ Therefore, transgressive

⁴² Robin Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 25.

⁴³ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 6.

⁴⁴ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 2.

⁴⁵ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 172.

fiction often seeks to portray unknown and socially excluded characters, to tell unheard stories, to challenge well-established ideas with unfamiliar ones, or in other words to “fill the gaps in society’s awareness of its component peoples.”⁴⁶

Satirists play in Mookerjee’s theory a trickster role which undertakes to reject the grand narratives of the official epic literature and produces its own narratives unsettling to the ruling classes and social norms coming from “the transgressive artist’s penchant for revealing what is true but not ordinarily visible.”⁴⁷ Transgressive writer is, thus, an equivalent to the new satirist. According to Mookerjee, satire flourishes in transitional times, transgression as an aggressive form of it appears in times of great instability such is the whole postmodern era beginning in late 1960s. Satire, transgression and modernist styles derives their characteristic traits from the same sources, they employ similar methods (complex time frame, nonlinear narrative, use of doubling, frequent allusions, dark humor, or use of voice), thus are usually overlapping. Transgressive elements can be found in many of modern and most of the postmodern books.⁴⁸

Contrary to Booker, Mookerjee considers transgressive fiction as a new postmodern phenomenon and daringly recognizes it as “the most significant literary movement of our time.”⁴⁹ However, Mookerjee’s theory sometimes overestimates the importance of the mock epic revealing the truths liberated from theories or ideologies. Even satirists have some agenda to follow may it be their subjective opinions and values, they cannot rebel without a cause, from his writing we can see he is many times rather biased, because despite the tendency of mock epic to stay mostly ambiguous and ideology neutral, it must always incline towards some system or ideals. Mookerjee’s analysis, nevertheless, succeeds in contextualizing transgressive fiction, in its modern form, as a genre largely deriving from postmodern literary practice, and provides valuable recognition of the importance of humor in transgressive fiction, even if it is often macabre and visceral.

⁴⁶ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 173.

⁴⁷ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 10.

⁴⁸ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 2-17.

⁴⁹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 14.

1.3.3 Transgressive fiction as an open social laboratory

While Mookerjee considers transgressive fiction as a postmodern form of satire, and Booker concentrates on its energies contributing to political changes, Coco d'Hont focused on transgressive fiction as genre with its own development, history, and limits fundamentally affected by the changes of its socio-historical context. She builds up her theory of this genre by broadening Jenks' arguments on the social role of transgression and its capability to critically comment the official discourse. In her book *Extreme States*, she maps the evolution of transgressive fiction in the USA from the 1960s to 2000, focusing on the way how dominant American ideologies are reflected, exaggerated, and mainly critically interrogated by it.

She suggests a different way of reading transgressive fiction than which was, in her words, often unfairly characterized by critics as “a fashionable celebration of misbehavior and criminality” and the term transgression itself was unreasonably limited by becoming only “a synonym for shock, violence or political incorrectness.”⁵⁰ According to d'Hont, transgression, despite its ambivalent status as both social and antisocial, and its constructive and deconstructive potential, is mainly a social mechanism which reflects the dynamic process of ideological development in society, and thus can serve to ideological reconceptualization and reconstruction. Therefore, transgressive fiction can be understood as a fictional representation of the transgressive dynamics that occur in its socio-historical context.⁵¹ D'Hont's method of reading allows seeing “transgressive fiction as a historically evolving type of literature that shifts shape along with the constantly changing extra-textual context it interacts with,”⁵² and: “By visualizing the transgressive processes taking place in its conflicted extra-textual context through exaggeration and distortion; transgressive fiction creates opportunities for critical analysis.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Coco d'Hont, *Extreme States: The Evolution of American Transgressive Fiction 1960-2000* (Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature. Kindle Edition, 2018), 1-3.

⁵¹ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 4-7.

⁵² D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 3.

⁵³ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 9.

The most pivotal aspect of d'Hont's theory is interpreting transgressive fiction as a symbolic social laboratory (a fictional space) where political systems, complex ideological structures, and narratives such as consumer capitalism, patriarchal masculinity, or the nuclear family are inevitably opened for critical analysis, dissected, and explored without the intention to suggest clear solutions. Within such virtual space, the reader is offered a kaleidoscopic view on the transgressive processes at work in the extra-textual normative and legal frameworks of the society it is produce in:⁵⁴ "Through aesthetic experimentation and a strong reliance on physical symbolism, this type of fiction uncovers frequently obscured implications of central social ideologies, showing their inherent inconsistencies and damaging side effects."⁵⁵ However, she is well aware that these texts neither create a coherent and clearly defined literary movement, nor evolved from a clear linear path, but are rather a cyclical and organic form of criticism produced by authors with various backgrounds and agendas who turned "fiction into a powerful site of social analysis."⁵⁶

According to d'Hont, as much as transgressive fiction can sometimes be controversial and radical, it rarely calls for a direct political action since it has an analytical rather than revolutionary function: "Its very nature as an exaggerated, distorted and metaphorically inspired environment visualizes otherwise obscured ideological mechanisms and limits while offering opportunities for their critical discussion."⁵⁷ And thus its dominant purpose is to open and maintain such fictional lab where we can create and explore alternative social relations.⁵⁸ This proposition is in accordance with Jenks's take on transgression:

The nature of the risk, the threat, and the ways in which that risk is handled are most instructive concerning the moral bond and the social structure of the society in question. Herein lies the artistry of

⁵⁴ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 15-20.

⁵⁵ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 20.

⁵⁶ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 17.

⁵⁷ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 180.

⁵⁸ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 170-181.

transgression, the diagnostic role of transgression, and the value of transgression as a touchstone of social relations.⁵⁹

He too recognizes the potential of transgression and derived transgressive fiction to reflect changes and development of the extra-textual context.

1.3.4 Transgressive characters

To characterize typical protagonists of transgressive fiction we cannot avoid a certain degree of generalization, since they do not occur in a coherent group of books. However, one of the marking traits they share in common is pointed out by d'Hont: "Many characters in transgressive texts cross boundaries between the ideological and the physical to (re)construct the limits that demarcate their identities, lifestyles and beliefs."⁶⁰ Therefore, they often find themselves in a position of social oppression, of social expectations they cannot or do not want to live up to, of marginalized groups which either feel alienated or are openly discriminated by the dominant society. Fiedler indirectly characterizes transgressive characters while describing the latest thought-provoking novels:

The protagonists of the best recent books are not self-righteous, long-suffering, diminished prigs, who want only to live in peace and are sure they know what peace is. From the most sympathetic to the least, they are troublemakers like their authors, who will not let the world rest till it acknowledges that they exist.⁶¹

Many times, they make, whether consciously or subconsciously, a decision to go against the dominant ideologies and to fight back the oppressor whoever or whatever, they consider, it may be. "If boundaries, prohibitions and taboos are to be tested in a transgressive manner then the relationship between the perpetrator and the act must be willful and intended, not accidental or unconscious,"⁶² therefore to attribute someone as a transgressor, the element of free choice must be a key presupposition.

⁵⁹ Jenks, *Transgression*, 33.

⁶⁰ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 173.

⁶¹ Fiedler, "No, in Thunder!" 15.

⁶² Jenks, *Transgression*, 177.

Sometimes those characters might be victims of certain culture or political system with its seemingly rigid rules, outdated morals, norms, expectations, or requirements; but more often they are individuals with unyielding desire to live and act accordingly to their own values, rules, and goals. However, according to Jenks, in the Western increasingly governed society the transgressive act and the criminal act are often compounded:

Transgression is a part of the social process; it is also part of the individual psyche. (...) Practically this may mean that a defining feature of late-modern society is that our actions are organized through a stern paradox. Namely that people (...) who feel trapped, threatened, or violently constrained by external forces beyond their control seek excessive and transgressive experiences which, in some cases, are even more threatening to their survival and, tragically in many cases, threatening to the survival of innocents also.⁶³

Jenks, thus, outlines a common feature of those protagonists to fall under domain of crimes or other illegal activities. Their most urgent need is sovereignty—the primacy of self-determination over servility and obedience which often leads them to the periphery of society as thieves, drug dealers, drug addicts, prostitutes, criminals, prisoners, or murderers, to the world of social isolation and solitude: “The contemporary rebel is left with neither utopianism nor nihilism, but rather loneliness.”⁶⁴ This intriguing paradox and moral tension become symptomatic of transgressive characters. Jonathan Dee finds such personal ambiguity as a significant source of their allure:

Because our motives are often hidden from us, because the canvas of even our own experience can be too much for our eye to take in, we look to writers to help make comprehensible the reasons why people act the way they act, why they transgress, why they fail to transgress. In this

⁶³ Jenks, *Transgression*, 186.

⁶⁴ Jenks, *Transgression*, 6.

respect the fictional outlaw has at least as much to teach us as the upright citizen.⁶⁵

To make a criminal the focal point of the story does not mean to abandon all social norms and ignore moral consequences, but as Dee claims, it complicates reaching a final judgment of a character in the mind of the reader since several moral viewpoints and multiple possible judgments are provided within the work itself.⁶⁶

1.3.5 Carnavalesque

D'Hont describes transgressive fiction also as a genre which "Appears to act as a carnivalesque 'safety valve' through which people can express antisocial feelings and frustrations."⁶⁷ Mookerjee emphasizes, as well, the carnivalesque qualities of transgressive fiction as a key feature of satire, and Jenks argues that: "Carnival acts through strategies that ape, parody and indeed parallel the dominant social order."⁶⁸ What all of them imply, is that the quality of carnivalesque is always to some extent, whether explicitly or not, present within the transgressive fiction. The carnivalesque is, due to its inevitable connection to the social order, closely related to the theory of social classes, oppression, and hierarchies which is loosely complementary to Foucault's theory of discourse and transgression. Even though interpretation of transgressive fiction from the perspective of social clash is possible and valid, it is not the aim of this paper. However, the concept of carnivalesque helps me to contextualize the role of human body within transgressive fiction since this genre frequently employs explicit corporeal imagery and often emphasizes the bodily experiences.

A study of the relation of transgression and carnivalesque is conducted by Peter Stallybrass, in his book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, where he maps the terrain of literary and cultural history and links domains of transgression from early modern to modern Europe with a focus on

⁶⁵ Jonathan Dee, "Readymade Rebellion: the Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction" (*Harper's Magazine*, 1 April. 2005).

⁶⁶ Dee, "Readymade Rebellion: the Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction."

⁶⁷ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 5.

⁶⁸ Jenks, *Transgression*, 162.

a dichotomy of what he calls “the bourgeois official culture” and “the low culture,” building upon the literary theory of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. According to Stallybrass, cultural categories of high and low and the ranking of literary genres or authors are never separate from the analogous hierarchies of social classes: “The high/low opposition in each of our four symbolic domains – psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order – is a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures.”⁶⁹ The high class (the elite) consists of the most powerful socio-economic groups of various prominent people and institutions which resides in the center of cultural and executive power as the main authority to shape the discourse, whereas the low class are the marginalized and oppressed people (the poor, the suburbs, the underground)—the low-Other which historically provoked both disgust and desire, therefore were rejected from the official discourse in the process of exclusion of anything low and filthy. Rosemary Jackson, in her study on literary subversion, adds to this that exclusion of the Other is always an ideological gesture which corresponds to current dominant ideas and cultural sensitivities: “The concept of evil, which is usually attached to the other, is relative, transforming with shifts in cultural fears and values. Any social structure tends to exclude as ‘evil’ anything radically different from itself or which threatens it with destruction.”⁷⁰

Stallybrass argues, that even though the “top” constantly attempts to reject and eliminate whatever sign of “the low,” it is at the same time fascinated by it and realizes that the identity of official culture is dependent upon that low-Other and symbolically includes it in its own fantasy life as an eroticized constituent.⁷¹ The dominant culture is both inspired and horrified by the ‘low’ culture and entertainment of the Other:

The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear, and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the

⁶⁹ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 3.

⁷⁰ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Routledge: Tylor & Francis e-Library, 2009), 30.

⁷¹ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 2–5.

social level. It is for this reason that what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central (like long hair in the 1960s).⁷²

Carnival and linked festivities are “instances of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure,”⁷³ and in carnival: “The official and unofficial are locked together; (...) Symbolic polarities of high and low, official and popular, grotesque and classical are mutually constructed and deformed.”⁷⁴ Such festivities have always been a major part of cultural life in Europe, and took shapes of fairs, processions and competitions, popular feasts, comic shows, the circus, public dancing and theatre, or open-air amusements involving wearing masks and costumes of mystical creatures and animals.

However, Booker also points out: “One must not forget that the carnival itself is in fact a sanctioned form of ‘subversion’ whose very purpose is to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion – a sort of opiate to the masses.”⁷⁵ Yet, even such sanctioned form of disorder sometimes had an impact on the official culture which eventually absorbed, institutionalized and appropriated some of the subversive energies directed against it, thus what used to be transgressive was accepted, and became an integrated part of the academic discourse as well.⁷⁶ Therefore, carnival could be understood, just as d’Hont meant with the “safety valve,” as an organized disorder, a period when classes swap places, rules and laws are turned upside down, and social hierarchies undergo inversion. It is a temporary liberation from the established order: “So, the human body, the social body, the corpus of knowledge become interchangeable and the carnival, or the style of carnivalesque, enables us to glissade from one to another – defecation, dissociation, deconstruction.”⁷⁷

Carnavalesque does not, however, affect only the content of the text (motifs, themes, and imagery) but the form as well. Jenks characterizes carnivalesque as “The perfect postmodern device, it is style unrestricted,

⁷² Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 5.

⁷³ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 19.

⁷⁴ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 16.

⁷⁵ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 4.

⁷⁶ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 7.

⁷⁷ Jenks, *Transgression*, 169.

method without parameter or rigor, decentred identity and a continuously broken chain of signifiers,”⁷⁸ and in the field of language, carnival shares many of its devices with postmodern literature which involves travesties, parodies, satire, black humor, and banter laden with slang expressions, folk jokes, curses, and profanities mocking whatever is considered as sacred and serious. Stallybrass says that the carnival laughter “has a vulgar, ‘earthy’ quality to it,” which derives its humor from exaggerated corporeality and the “grotesque body” which is in sharp contrast to the classical, pure body of pictured in high culture.⁷⁹ To this Booker adds, that carnivalesque especially emphasizes the physical aspects of being a human like sex, death, procreation, or excretion, therefore is loaded with a great transgressive potential and subversive energies.⁸⁰ In summary, I will use the concept of carnivalesque as a quality of transgressive fiction which opens a space where grotesque, dirty, repulsive, contaminating, and noisy corporeal realities of human experience are embraced.

1.3.6 The body in transgressive fiction

When Silverblatt noticed the emergence of “transgressive writing,” he also detected an increasing interest of its authors in bodily experiences, explored greatly in their works. He argues that to those authors any action viewed through the lenses of the body can become an opportunity for revelations: “The underlying idea of transgressive thinking is that knowledge is no longer to be found through the opposition of dialectical reasoning. Instead, knowledge is found at the limits of experience. The body becomes the locus for the possibility of knowledge.”⁸¹ In accordance with it, major characteristic themes of transgressive fiction recognized by Jenks include eroticism, death, taboo, and violence which is in a dynamic relation to the other four.⁸² All of the listed themes require one overarching aspect and that is the presence of a human body at disposal. For none of the themes can be performed

⁷⁸ Jenks, *Transgression*, 164.

⁷⁹ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 8-23.

⁸⁰ Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, 12-17.

⁸¹ Silverblatt, “Shock Appeal: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us? The New Fiction of Transgression.”

⁸² Jenks, *Transgression*, 93.

without a physical body which then becomes a site of where violence or eroticism is done upon or comes from. In transgressive fiction, the human body and experimentation with its shapes, abilities, sensations, and transformations gained a great significance in achieving transgression.

The importance of human body in transgressive fiction was outlined in the definition of the carnivalesque as one of its core qualities. In the terms of it, Stallybrass interprets the body as a representative example of the clash between the classical (high culture, official discourse) and its opposition in carnival (low culture, transgression): “The shape and plasticity of the human body is indissociable from the shape and plasticity of discursive material and social norm in a collectivity.”⁸³ The high culture finds its legitimation in the classical and thus obsessively strives for a firm grip over the classical depiction of body as a vessel of high virtues, pure beauty, and reason where any sort of bodily processes and deviations from the norms are suppressed or straight up taboo. Despite its allure, the body is observed only from distance and almost alienated to its environment and nature.⁸⁴

In opposition to the classical, Stallybrass characterizes the carnival (transgressive) body as: “A mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in process of exchange; and it is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context,”⁸⁵ the body is always in the process of becoming, and in carnival this fluidity and proneness to change is largely exaggerated resulting in a disproportionate, off-balance, parodic, obscene, or animal object. If the classical sticks only to rationalistic view of the body as a disembodied object denying any of its biological purposes, the realism of carnival brutally emphasizes exactly such purposes and capacities, therefore creates “an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks, and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, ‘spirit’, reason).”⁸⁶ This binary opposition of extreme states of the body

⁸³ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 21.

⁸⁴ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 21–26.

⁸⁵ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 22.

⁸⁶ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 9.

opens a gap in between where a third hybrid form emerges, a fluid grotesque body which combines and embraces both human and animal poles of the body: “The grotesque is the intrusion of the one into the other, or the invasion of the space between.”⁸⁷

The capability of every body to display grotesque qualities is recognized by Mookerjee a significant and powerful tool in satire which uses explicit somatic imagery, excretion, genitalia, and sexual desire to strip down the image of human from any external norms and forms to its natural state.⁸⁸

Transgressive scenes, such as those depicting coprophilia, confront the reader with the reality of the physical, in spite of the fact that we experience it through a verbal description. The blank style common among American transgressive writers further emphasizes the physical - which is beyond the reach of ideas or lessons.⁸⁹

Thus satire and transgressive fiction, in Mookerjee's opinion, might gravitate towards sort of materialism in depicting human body under control of basic drives, impulses, and unchanging aspects of experience therefore as rather untouched by any progress or culture.⁹⁰ However, I argue that the corporeal imagery and grotesque depiction of the body in transgressive fiction, does not serve only humorous purposes or as a sort of rebellion against the “high culture,” but as mentioned by Silverblatt, it is also employed to explore, experience, and transgress some of socio-historical realities and ideologies.

Although Tim Edwards, in the collection of essays *Cultures of Masculinity*, deals mostly with the body in relation to gender, he also analyses how it is portrayed in the Western culture and draws a link between the human body and the society it resides in. According to him, the human body has been historically analyzed within the limits of several problematic dualisms: nature vs culture, male vs female, body vs mind; however, it was always

⁸⁷ Kathryn Hume, *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 39.

⁸⁸ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 49-52.

⁸⁹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 158.

⁹⁰ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 159.

rather treated like being “invisible” and rarely recognized as an independent object with its own complex relations. In Foucault's theories, the body is an important theme, yet he analyzed it primarily only in terms of power, institutions, punishment, and regulations, so mostly as a passive object upon which acts are acted. Therefore, Edwards argues, that Foucault only reworked the old dualisms and perpetuates essentialism and biological determinism.⁹¹ Edwards proposes abandonment of such essentialism and dated dualisms which would facilitate deeper understanding of the body within the society since both are inherently mutually interdependent and inseparable: “The body is an unfinished biological entity that is both shaped by society and an active player in its formation.”⁹² In other words, he considers the body to be rather interpreted as a corporeal entity playing active role in shaping the society while also being shaped by the socio-historical context at the same time.

This claim aligns with d'Hont's approach of interpreting transgressive fiction as a social laboratory of which the body is an integral part. Transgressive texts often carry the status of shocking, overly explicit or rebellious for their cruel use of bodily violation as their stylistic feature. She outlines the role of the body in the chapter “The Mind-Body Problem: Connecting Ideology and Physicality” where she claims that the ending of the 20th century was marked by exploration of the physical as an important subject of debate, therefore the limits to a body, which was already a “fluid phenomenon,” were stretched. Bodies are depicted as fluid, moveable and transforming and became another fictional site where ideological systems can be reformed and critically interrogated in the process of transgression.⁹³

1.3.7 Violence in transgressive fiction

Here I must make a clear cut between the fictional and the real-world violence because only the former one is the subject of this paper, since it

⁹¹ Tim Edwards, “Auto-mechanics: Masculinity, Reflexivity and the Body,” in *Cultures of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 141-144.

⁹² Edwards, “Auto-mechanics: Masculinity, Reflexivity and the Body,” 149.

⁹³ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 173-175.

is a frequent motif in literature and arts in general, whereas the latter is a social phenomenon with utterly different effects. For the analysis of violence in fiction, I will use a study by Kathryn Hume who focuses on “off-putting” novels or what she calls aggressive or user-unfriendly fiction: “Aggressive fiction tramples readers sensibilities, offends and upsets willfully and deliberately.”⁹⁴ Those texts attack mostly the middle-class economic structure, class beliefs, dominant lifestyle and philosophies, or literary expectations, and bring up themes of ecological degradation, inhumanity on racial or gender grounds, inhumanity on animals, or growing underclass. Readers also might have to deal with possible unpleasant emotional aftermath of reading it, due to unsettling images and uncomfortable information, and overall confrontation with the full enormity of the given problem.⁹⁵ For all mentioned characteristics and novels used to support her arguments, I will consider Hume’s classification of aggressive fiction as mostly synonymous to transgressive fiction.

Another crucial feature which Hume identifies as typical for the aggressive fiction is that it shows the reader plenty of what is wrong, often violently shatters reader’s morals and sensitivities, but does very little to give answers to the problems it reveals. It refuses to guide the reader to understand what is right, rejects any a priori judgments and thus pushes the readers to think for themselves:

When we enjoy traditional fiction, we and the author usually share basic cultural values. (...) The degree of discomfiture caused by aggressive fiction can free us from our usual mental schemata by making them inoperable. This fiction liberates us from automatic responses. Instead of applying formulas, we must think and test our interpretive template and try to construct new ones.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 8.

⁹⁵ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 7–10.

⁹⁶ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 169.

The readers learn no ethics from the characters and must think their own way through the clash of values to derive any sense of meaning from the texts, which is even further complicated due to the contradictions carried at the heart of those texts without any ambition to resolve them.⁹⁷ Hume claims that: “Aggressive fiction aims both to upset the reader’s beliefs and to disturb that reader’s comfortable confidence in the reading process.”⁹⁸ It achieves this by making our routine interpretive strategies unsatisfactory, therefore challenges us to put more effort into making sense of what was said by exploring other ways of thinking without passively accepting automatically arising answers to the posed problems: “We are supposed to feel our way to our own conclusions.”⁹⁹ Hume identifies five kinds of attack which she divides into two categories: intellectual attacks such as narrative speed and destabilization of ontological beliefs; and emotional attacks which are: complaint, the grotesque, and extreme sex or violence which can lead to three natural responses of terror, horror, or revulsion.

Her take on the fictional violence is defined by the system of laws and rules (norms, or limits in general) for “all law presupposes violence,”¹⁰⁰ therefore violence is the main target for law restrictions and criminalization in general. Such set of laws and rules is inevitably required to keep the society in peace, to keep the community possible, and to prevent its disintegration. Therefore, this set has been over the evolution of human society internalized by its members and aggressive fiction uses violence to attack exactly this internalized set of laws: “The degree of discomfort we feel while reading tells us just how much we have internalized such laws.”¹⁰¹ And it also challenges our notion of humanity and what it means to be without law: “These texts question the relationship between individual freedom and community well-being. These texts also invite us to ponder what makes us human and humane.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 166-170.

⁹⁸ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 9.

⁹⁹ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 170.

¹⁰⁰ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 139.

¹⁰¹ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 125.

¹⁰² Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 117.

Michael Staudigl introduces in his essays a phenomenological interpretation of violence as a relational phenomenon where a key claim is that violence is not an exception in human behavior but its inherent part and an example of negative sociality.¹⁰³ The relational understanding of violence leaves behind traditional scientific dichotomies of order/disorder and violence/counter-violence since both inevitably encompass the other within itself. They are interdependent in their constitution, which means that every system of laws (orders) presupposes the possible emergence of violence (disorder) which it aims to recognize, define, categorize, and thus criminalize so it can be lawfully answered by executive force (counter-violence) that the system is legally capable to employ.¹⁰⁴ In other words: “The meaning ‘violence’ is attributed to this social event in relation to a given order and, secondly, that it is founded with agency,”¹⁰⁵ where the set of orders is intrinsically embedded in the dominant political, cultural, and ideological context of every society, thus what is considered as unlawful violence depends on the particular society.¹⁰⁶

Staudigl analyses diverse faces of violence which involve three ways of how we experience vulnerability: one can be a performer of violence, a recipient, or a witness (bystander, reporter, therapist, or judge). However, despite experiencing violence through the lenses of our bodily reality: “Our embodied existence functions as the ultimate point of reference of all violence,”¹⁰⁷ it deeply impacts our sense of autonomy, identity, and social or cultural integrity beyond physical form as well. He argues that our sense of integrity and personal identity is inevitably formed and limited by outer institutions and norms derived from politics, religion, or science, as well as their symbolical representations in the field of language, culture and works of art. Such institutions and representations become gradually internalized

¹⁰³ Michael Staudigl, “Introduction: Topics, Problems, and Potentials of a Phenomenological Analysis of Violence” in *Phenomenologies of Violence*, Barber, Michael D., and Michael Staudigl (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 4.

¹⁰⁴ Staudigl, “Introduction: Topics, Problems, and Potentials of a Phenomenological Analysis of Violence,” 6-8.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Staudigl, “Towards a Relational Phenomenology of Violence” (Published online, Springerlink.com, 7 March. 2013), 55.

¹⁰⁶ Staudigl, “Towards a Relational Phenomenology of Violence,” 55-56.

¹⁰⁷ Staudigl, “Introduction: Topics, Problems, and Potentials of a Phenomenological Analysis of Violence,” 18.

as the person matures within the system, thus we become vulnerable and exposed to verbal, symbolic, or structural forms of violence.¹⁰⁸

Such claim aligns with Hume's reding of violence as an attack of our internalized set of laws due to which we are not vulnerable only in our embodied integrity but also in any symbolic articulations of such integrity:

This vulnerability extends from the physical violability of our organic body (in, e.g., beatings, torture, rape), via the disrespect of its normative articulation (in the various forms of social and political exclusion), to the denigration of its practical cultural concretization (in the various forms of, e.g., racist discrimination).¹⁰⁹

On this basis, any form of violence always leaves both a physical and a mental mark regardless the position we experience it from, since physical damage or abuse also shakes our sense of dignity, autonomy, beliefs, or values; and non-physical violence such as injustice, discrimination or racism affects the body which then responds in stress-hormone production, tension, or negative changes of mental health.

Hume is aware of the less desirable side of the law system, which must work in terms of limits and regulations, therefore demands some sacrifices of individual liberties, and can damage those individuals who do not match the current norms. "The way these texts manipulate our relationship to the law obliges us to think about the nature of law and about which laws seem justified,"¹¹⁰ aggressive fiction thus provides us with the opportunity to view our society from a new perspective, so we can critically re-evaluate which laws may be necessary for what benefit, which are generally always justified and desirable and how much individual difference is worth protecting: "Reconsidering how much we wish our thoughts to be bound by cultural rules is another version of reconsidering the laws and their limits."¹¹¹ Despite the shortcomings of any law system, after facing the implication of violence and imagining it happening to ourselves, the reader experiences

¹⁰⁸ Staudigl, "Towards a Relational Phenomenology of Violence," 53-54.

¹⁰⁹ Staudigl, "Introduction: Topics, Problems, and Potentials of a Phenomenological Analysis of Violence," 16.

¹¹⁰ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 116.

¹¹¹ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 125.

relief that they can return to normality, back to laws.¹¹² Jenks's describes this after-effect of transgression similarly as Hume of violence: "Transgressive behavior therefore does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them thus completes them. (...) Transgression is not the same as disorder; it opens up chaos and reminds us of the necessity of order."¹¹³ From the discussed arguments, we can assume that violence is to laws and rules as transgression is to limits and boundaries, or in other words violence is one of many possible means of transgression which temporarily breaks through so it can fall back often making the status quo even more desirable.

On the other hand, D'Hont argues that bodily violation does not work only as a reminder of the necessity of certain laws or as an appeal for their change but it is used as a transgressive metaphor creating a new fictional space where transgressive dynamics of ideological systems can be explored: "The violated body in transgressive fiction has increasingly become a metaphorical opportunity to imagine a new relationship between the ideological and the physical which moves beyond the restrictions physicality enforces."¹¹⁴ In transgressive fiction the changes in depiction of bodily violation is employed to stress the existence of violated, mutilated, abused, displaced and transformed bodies in the given extra-textual context. Naturally, such depiction is often exaggerated so the covert mechanisms of the political systems, ideological boundaries, and hidden aspects of society that cause bodily violations can be all visualized and critically interrogated.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 139-140.

¹¹³ Jenks, *Transgression*, 7.

¹¹⁴ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 175.

¹¹⁵ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 172-73.

2 Analyses of selected novels

In the next part of my thesis, I will analyze three books: *Nova Express*, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, to support my argument of human body as a fictional site where transgressive elements and ideas are performed and displayed. Therefore, I will focus on the use and depiction of human bodies and how their appearance, shape, health, or misery relate to the external forces or norms imposed by the portrayed social environment. I will pay attention to the stylistic devices employed to talk about bodies or physicality in general, and whether the novel uses corporeal imagery to illustrate directly or metaphorically some of its core ideas and ethics. I will also seek and identify violent elements in those texts, determine how they relate to the state of depicted bodies, to which degree they reflect some of the ideological policies, and how such acts of violence contribute to the overall transgressive potential of those texts.

Each analysis is divided into five sections which allow me to first provide fundamental facts about the author, the novel, its style, and literary features. Then I characterize the main protagonists and summarize the storyline, after which, I successively analyze the text regarding its corporeal and violent motifs using Hume's classification of literary attacks and working with analytical texts by Mookerjee and d'Hont that deal with the selected books. In the concluding section, I describe the socio-historic context of the given novel and associate it with displayed transgressive elements.

2.1 Nova Express

Nova Express is a novel written by William Seward Burroughs (1914-1997), published in 1964, and created using an experimental cut-up/fold-in method (aleatory literary technique) developed by Burroughs to loosen up the text and open space for randomized associations. The book is the third volume of the so-called “Nova Trilogy” (other two are *The Soft Machine* (1961) and *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962)) which is loosely derived from the narrative and events of the prior novel *Naked Lunch*. All mentioned works are considered to originate from one large body of text which was cut into short paragraphs or lines and rearranged back in random order resulting in a final textual montage. Therefore, they all consist of juxtaposed texts, follow fragmented narration without a linear plot, and are set in a dystopian futuristic society laden with omnipresent conspiracies and paranoia. They also feature the same protagonists, and share themes of drug addiction, graphic sexual imagery, dark humor, physical metamorphism, abuse of power, corruption of political systems and institutions, mass media manipulations, and pervasive surveillance on the backdrop of an alien invasion of the earth spreading virus residing in human language and communication itself: “Peoples of the earth, you have all been poisoned.”¹¹⁶ *Nova Express* is seldom covered in academic papers or books due to the popularity and more significant impact of *Naked Lunch* as a pioneering work of Burroughs’ later writing style and aesthetics. However, since both books have similar narrative and share same themes and used techniques, I will also use some scholar analyses of *Naked Lunch* to support my argument about *Nova Express*.

The formal aspect of the novel imposes pressure on the reader due to its frenzied pace, abrupt changes of characters and settings, and unexpected shifts within the fragmented storyline. While Mookerjee interprets Burroughs’ style in terms of accidental language as a means of satire and as “the trickster’s designs and their unintended results, without propositional logic,”¹¹⁷ Hume sees the narrative speed, caused greatly by the

¹¹⁶ William Seward Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 6.

¹¹⁷ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 65.

cut-up technique, as a form of intellectual attack on the reader who experiences a “sense of the narrative *accelerating beyond some safe comprehension-limit*.”¹¹⁸ She considers such style to be intentionally confusing and generating puzzling anomalies and phantasmagoria that would all suggest drug-like experience. The unbearable speed and the constant flow of phrases, images, and facts cannot be consciously controlled which subverts our generated systems of logic and order making readers feeling powerless and alienated: “Being unconstructed by the discourses of others makes one remarkably free; but without the power or impulse to build one’s own systems, one is likely to be passive, helpless, and vulnerable to others who are more organized.”¹¹⁹ Hume, thus, interprets the narrative speed as a deliberate step to amplify Burroughs’ view on the society or living in groups in general as chaotic, paranoia inducing, overly limiting, and repressive.

2.1.1 Plot and characters

The *Nova Express* opening chapter is called the “Last Words” of a prophet Hassan i Sabbah who urges the infected people on earth to “Listen to my last words anywhere. Listen to my last words any world. Listen all you boards syndicates and governments of earth. And you powers behind what filth deals consummated in what lavatory to take what is not yours. To sell ground from unborn feet forever,”¹²⁰ because people who cooperate with the invaders are in his words: “Liars who want time for more lies. (...) Collaborators with Insect People with Vegetable People. With any people anywhere who offer you a body forever. (...) Traitors to all souls anywhere.”¹²¹ And the cause for all such collaborations is an acquired language brought from the outer space: “What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you: *‘the word.’* Alien Word *‘the.’* *‘The’* word of Alien Enemy imprisons *‘thee’* in Time. In Body. In Shit. Prisoner, come out. The great skies

¹¹⁸ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 16.

¹¹⁹ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 37.

¹²⁰ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 3.

¹²¹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 4.

are open. I Hassan i Sabbah *rub out the word forever.*"¹²² Hassan i Sabbah does not appear as a character in the story, he might be only mythological, but his prophecy warning of alien invaders and human collaborators is quoted a couple times in the book and serves as a counterweight to the Nova propaganda used for enslaving the entire planet.

After this apocalyptic vision follows a report of an inspector J. Lee from the Nova Police, who claims that the world is in a state of emergency since everyone on the earth has been infected by an alien virus. He also announces a defense program: "I order total resistance directed against The Nova Conspiracy and all those engaged in it,"¹²³ and declares a war to this virus. We are thus introduced to the core storyline of the book narrated mostly by the Inspector J. Lee while tracking down the Nova Mob who are the source of the virus: "The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals. In *Naked Lunch*, *Soft Machine* and *Nova Express* I show who they are and what they are doing and what they will do if not arrested."¹²⁴

The Nova Mob is an interstellar gang of alien entities who travel across the universe and seek for life on planets so they can infiltrate it, exploit their resources, and take over the planet by spreading a virus to which the inhabitants become addicted. Some of the members of the Mob are Sammy the Butcher, Green Tony, The Subliminal Kid or Uranian Willy and their first goal is to infect human bodies:

Nova criminals are not three-dimensional organisms (...) but they need three-dimensional human agents to operate—(...) And if there is one thing that carries over from one human host to another and establishes identity of the controller it is *habit* (...) Now a single controller can operate through thousands of agents, (...) Some move on junk lines through addicts of the earth, others move on lines of certain sexual practices and so forth.¹²⁵

¹²² Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 4.

¹²³ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 7.

¹²⁴ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 7.

¹²⁵ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 56.

A single Nova criminal can thus infect several human bodies via habits or addiction to drugs, sex, money, power or even emotions such love: “Love is a second-run grade-B shit—Their drugs are poison designed to beam in Orgasm Death and Nova Ovens—Stay out of the Gardens od Delights—It is a man-eating trap,”¹²⁶ so the Mob gradually gains total control over such aspects of human life:

Who monopolized Immortality? (...) Who monopolized Love Sex and Dream? Who monopolized Life Time and Fortune? Who took from you what is yours? Now they will give it all back? Did they ever give anything away for nothing? (...) Listen: Their Gardens of Delights is a terminal sewer.¹²⁷

The Nova Mob is preparing plans to leave the earth once it is fully exploited and depleted: “All energy and appropriations is now being channeled into escape plans,”¹²⁸ and save themselves with a few dependent collaborators: “So they bribe the natives with a promise of transportation and immortality (...) ‘So we leave the bloody apes behind and on our way rejoicing right?—It’s the only way to live.”¹²⁹ The names “nova, nova heat, nova ovens, the Ovens, or nova formulae” are many terms referring to the same event when a hosting planet is destroyed in a nuclear explosion and becomes a nova star, which turns out to be the final step of every Nova Mob invasion. However, the Nova Police in cooperation with scientists, and thanks to the development of an apomorphine drug program, manages to successfully detect and arrest the Mob which at the end of the story becomes judged and sentenced. The external threat they posed to the earth is thus deflected and halted.

¹²⁶ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 6.

¹²⁷ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 5.

¹²⁸ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 40.

¹²⁹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 76.

2.1.2 Human body in *Nova Express*

In the novel, Burroughs works with a traditional dichotomy of body/mind, flesh/reason: “Word is flesh and word is two that is the human body is compacted of two organisms and where you have two you have word and word is flesh and when they started tampering with the word that was it and the blockade was broken and The Nova Heat moved in,”¹³⁰ therefore, human bodies are depicted as an original feature (possession) of people and the “word” as something alien acquired later. However, he alters the dichotomy because despite the primordial aspect of the body, it represents neither purity nor natural strength. On contrary, it emerges instead as one of the weakest points in human design: “The life form we invaded was totally alien and detestable to us—We do not have what they call ‘emotions’—soft spots in the host marked for invasion and manipulation.”¹³¹ Mookerjee considers the body materiality as inherently flawed: “The human body, with its metabolic and reproductive functions, is trapped in an organic process of connection and dependency, a sort of physical addiction,”¹³² therefore, its innate instincts, desires and emotional responses became easily exploitable in the hands of the Mob.

Nova Express is laden with graphic corporeal imagery in which bodies are in constant flux of changing forms, shapes or blending with animal anatomy whether it is “the Insect People of Minraud,” “a group of five scorpion men,”¹³³ or frequent dark scientific experiments: “Where flesh circulates stale and rotten as the green water—by purple fungoid gills—They breathe in flesh—(...) eating gills adjusted to the host’s breathing rhythm—eat and excrete through purple gills and move in a slow settling cloud of sewage.”¹³⁴ In this way, the novel transgresses our sense of body normativity and bends our expectations which results in a “shiver of revulsion” declared by Hume as a typical effect of the grotesque.¹³⁵ Dismembered bodies, mixing of body fluids, and obscure animal features inevitably attack reader’s assumptions

¹³⁰ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 76–77.

¹³¹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 135.

¹³² Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 70.

¹³³ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 69–70.

¹³⁴ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 92–93.

¹³⁵ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 83.

about the nature of human bodies and, as Mookerjee says, correspond to the formal composition of the text: “The human body becomes a cutup language, reduced to its parts but denied its overall logic. Burroughs reveals the ‘true’ appearance of the body beneath the skin, making a mockery of conventional faces and characters.”¹³⁶ However, Burroughs also presents those uncanny visions with dark humorous twist which results in an ambiguous response described by Hume as: “Horror *and* laughter, terror *and* play, rejection *and* a certain sadistic glee, repulsion *and* identification. (...) such a response is itself an attack, for these reactions contradict each other and cannot be held comfortably at the same time.”¹³⁷

Burroughs refers to the human body by words such “verbal units, the containers, worthy/unworthy vessels, or the flesh,”¹³⁸ which embrace the physical side of the body with all its carnivalesque features and bodily processes. On the other hand, it at the same time downgrades the body to an anonymized object with rather primitive qualities which foreshadows the way it is treated throughout the novel. Mookerjee suggests, that the body is stripped from its identity, simplified to basic instincts and impulses triggered by a kind of Pavlovian conditioning, and the scientists work with it as with a “raw material for molding.”¹³⁹ Bodies are truly mostly portrayed as test subjects in the apomorphine program and in Mob’s experiments to perfect their techniques of building addiction and to gain total control over people: “It was important all this time that the possibility of a human conceiving of being without a body should not arise.”¹⁴⁰

The process is as follows: the Mob enters a human body, starts detecting any weak points in forms of habits, sexual desires, or bodily pleasures, provides the host with it plentifully and once the host develops addiction to it, they take it away: “So the cadets learn The Basic Formulae of Pain and Fear— (...) Cadets encouraged or forced into behavior subject to heaviest sanctions of deprivation, prolonged discomfort, noise, boredom all

¹³⁶ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 66.

¹³⁷ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 83.

¹³⁸ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 40, 31, 76.

¹³⁹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 67-70.

¹⁴⁰ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 49.

compensation removed from the offending cadets (...)”¹⁴¹ Of course, the Mob also faced some resistance along the process, and they had to fight back and most importantly discredit the words of Hassan i Sabbah: “DON’T LISTEN to Hassan i Sabbah, (...) He wants to take your body and all pleasures of the body away from you. Listen to us. We are serving The Gardens of Delights Immortality Cosmic Consciousness The Best Ever In Drug Kicks. And *love love love* in slop buckets.”¹⁴² Therefore, there is a Nova propaganda which targets human bodies and lures people to indulge in bodily sensations.

“Gardens of Delights” is a term used by Lee for any bodily pleasures to which an individual can become addicted therefore easily influenced and eventually bribed or blackmailed. Sex, in particular, is used as a tool of power and control: “You see sex is an electrical charge that can be turned on and off if you know the electromagnetic switchboard—Sex is an electrical flesh trade,”¹⁴³ and people in the novel soon start practicing bizarre sexual activities introduced by the invaders:

The young man dropped Time on the bed— (...) His left hand dissolved in a crystal bulb where a stinger of yellow light quivered sharp as hypo needle—Orgasm Sting Ray—Venusian weapon—A full dose can tear the body to insect pieces in electric orgasms—Smaller doses bring paralysis and withered limbs of blighted fiber flesh.¹⁴⁴

Such possibility to externally manipulate biological desires is, according to Mookerjee: “Even more radical falsification of the idea that the human body is driven by natural impulses.”¹⁴⁵ Sexual desire is perverted by the invaders and gradually developed into addiction referred to as “the Orgasm Drug.” During one trial with a Nova Criminal a whole range of their techniques of manipulation are at display, Lee reports that the Criminal was: “Attempting to seduce the judges into Venusian sex practices, drug the court officials, and intimidate the entire audience chambers with

¹⁴¹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 92.

¹⁴² Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 5.

¹⁴³ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 160.

¹⁴⁴ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 97.

¹⁴⁵ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 65.

the threat of nova—In all my experience as a police officer I have never seen such total fear of the indicated alterations on any planet,”¹⁴⁶ therefore he tried to abuse both sexual desires and bodily cravings of humans, and as a last trick he menaced the audience with a nuclear detonation of the planet according to the Nova strategy “Operation Sky Switch also known as Operation Total Disposal.”¹⁴⁷

The body serves to the invaders as a gate for infiltration through which the virus is spread. The virus or the acquirement of language turns out to be also a trap which triggers development of the darker side in humans: “The virus attack is primarily directed against affective animal life—Virus of rage hate fear ugliness swirling round you.”¹⁴⁸ Once bodies are infected, people become capable of communicating and thus spreading the virus:

What does virus do whenever it can dissolve a hole and find traction?—It starts eating—And what does it do with what it eats?—It makes exact copies of itself that start eating to make more copies that start eating and so forth to the virus power the fear hate virus slowly replaces the host with virus copies—Program empty body—A vast tapeworm of bring down word and image moving through your mind.¹⁴⁹

From such description we can conclude that the goal of the virus is to replace individuals with masses, so it is even easier to be manipulated. Bodies become masses of bodies and the conspiracy is accomplished: “Vast communal immersion tanks melt whole peoples into one concentrate—It’s more democratic that way you see?—Biologic representation—Cast your vote into the tanks—Here where flesh circulates in a neon haze and identity tags are guarded by electric dogs snuffing quivering excuse for being.”¹⁵⁰ Burroughs favors neither body nor mind, and under such circumstances simple will to exist is compromised and everybody inevitably falls victim to the whole vicious circle of propaganda, totalitarian ideologies, confusion

¹⁴⁶ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 54-55.

¹⁴⁷ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 73.

¹⁴⁹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 73.

¹⁵⁰ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 151.

and fear: “To speak is to lie—To live is to collaborate—Anybody is a coward when faced by the nova ovens—There are degrees of lying collaboration and cowardice—That is to say degrees of intoxication.”¹⁵¹

Therefore, the novel warns us, as described by Mookerjee, from inherent flaws of the body which can easily become prone to manipulation and development of addictions to pleasures, sex, drugs, or emotions. Corporeal needs and instincts of people might be easily deceived and abused by those who can trigger it whether by means of regulations and controlled supply of what the bodies crave the most, or by exploiting its survival instincts in the threat of nuclear war. All of which serves a goal of gaining a complete control over the population.

2.1.3 Violence in *Nova Express*

The novel shows various forms of acts of violence which penetrate most of the scenes in the book. If it is not openly explicit, it often lurks in the background: “Brain screams of millions who have controller lives in that place screamed back from white hot blue sky—Can always pull the nova equipped now with tower blasts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”¹⁵² Sexual acts are never performed with affection or love but rather violently: “Mexican hands touching felt his pants slide down in soundless explosion of the throat and a taste of blood—His body twisted,”¹⁵³ and: “Oh my God I can’t stand it . . . That hurts that hurts that hurts so goooood . . . Oooooohhhh fuck me to death.”¹⁵⁴ Mookerjee adds to this: “Repeated descriptions of boys ejaculating evoke nonreproductive sex and sexual exhaustion,”¹⁵⁵ thus, a sex act becomes instead just another perverted fight over dominance and destruction. While the openly depicted homosexual sex does not transgress sexual norms and ethics of today’s society as much as in the last century, the extreme sadomasochism and sexual abuse carries radical transgressive energy even today. Although most male characters imagine or perform

¹⁵¹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 7.

¹⁵² Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 88.

¹⁵³ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 157.

¹⁵⁴ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 173.

¹⁵⁵ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 66.

homoerotic activities, the clash between masculine versus feminine qualities is still present in the form of dominance and passivity. Hume regards the excessive emphasis on male sexuality in the text to correspond with Burroughs' disdain for femininity if not directly an open misogyny: "Burroughs puts maleness and humanity in one set of values, femaleness and animality in the other. He links the female with oppressive order and control and the male with freedom."¹⁵⁶ The result is, according to Hume, a grotesque effect since men and women are portrayed as doomed to sexually interact with each other in order to procreate in spite of the obvious lack of interest and sexual pleasure from it.¹⁵⁷ Burroughs deliberately amplifies violent aspects of any kind of human interactions since in the story nobody shows mercy or sympathy with others, scientist and doctors use people for cruel experiments, and the police might intend to protect but is shockingly indifferent to casualties. The society is overloaded with news and information from various sources resulting in a massive confusion where one cannot tell the truth from propaganda, conspiracies, and disinformation, or as Hassan i Sabbah proclaims: "*Nothing Is True—Everything Is Permitted.*"¹⁵⁸

The population behaves as drug addicts, indulging in bodily sensations and pleasures which were institutionalized, however even that is turning out to be less satisfying as the final state of the invasion approaches:

And The Nova Law moving in fast—So they start the same old lark sucking all the charge and air and color to a new location and then?—*Sput*—You notice something is sucking all the flavor out of food the pleasure out of sex the color out of everything in sight?—Precisely creating the low pressure area that leads to nova.¹⁵⁹

And: "All nations sold out by liars and cowards. (...) These reports reek of nova, (...) You are dogs on all tape. The entire planet is being developed

¹⁵⁶ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 80.

¹⁵⁷ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 80.

¹⁵⁸ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 149.

¹⁵⁹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 75.

into terminal identity and complete surrender.”¹⁶⁰ The state of society seems utterly hopeless since violence, aggression and foul intentions were accepted as the norm. The virus itself works as a source of conflicts which is willfully supported by the Mob:

The basic nova mechanism is very simple: Always create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts— (...) that lead to the explosion of a planet that is to nova—At any given time recording devices fix the nature of absolute need and dictate the use of total weapons—Like this: Take two opposed pressure groups—Record the most violent and threatening statements of group one with regard to group two and play back to group two—Record the answer and take it back to group one—Back and forth between opposed pressure groups— (...) Manipulated on a global scale feeds back nuclear war and nova— These conflicts are deliberately created and aggravated by nova criminals.¹⁶¹

They use the planet as a kind of playground where several political systems and ideologies clash and everything heads towards a world-scale disaster. Knowing all of that, the portrayed world is laden with a sense of paranoia where one never knows whom to trust, whom to listen, what to do and what to believe in. Mookerjee focuses on the parasitic nature of the virus and many other relations or interaction in the text:

The junk virus is descended from a human-like organism and reveals the parasitism of human beings. Dependency is a living death, but, whether it takes the form of biological imperatives, or the addiction and co-dependency brought about by methods of control, it remains a stable condition. This is true not only in the lives of individuals but in institutions, which develop bureaucracy like a cancer.¹⁶²

This argument uncovers the hidden parasitic nature the depicted political system and its government agencies. Burroughs portrayed the world as

¹⁶⁰ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 13.

¹⁶¹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 53-54.

¹⁶² Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 71.

a vicious place where, just as in Foucauldian theories of institutionalized power, a small group of authorities in the position of power (those “boards syndicates and governments of the earth”) supported by the entire political, juridical and media press systems rule the world and manipulate with the masses:

A Technician learns to think and write in association blocks which can then be manipulated according to the laws of association and juxtaposition—(...) The Formulae of course control population of the world—Yes it is fairly easy to predict what people will think see feel and hear a thousand years from now if you write the Juxtaposition Formulae to be used in that period.¹⁶³

The executive power is as well oppressive and depraved: “Frankly we found that most existing police agencies were hopelessly corrupt,”¹⁶⁴ but also, they fight against crime only for the sake of appearance since the executives need criminals for their existence: “Now look at the parasitic police of morphine. First, they create a narcotic problem then they say that permanent narcotics police is now necessary to deal with the problem of addiction.”¹⁶⁵ The conflict thus enables and perpetuates itself. The position of the Nova Police also seems rather ambiguous, on one hand Lee says: “I am quite well aware that no one on any planet likes to see a police officer so let me emphasize in passing that the nova police have no intention of remaining after their work is done—(...) Any man who is doing a job is working to make himself obsolete and that goes double for police.”¹⁶⁶ Yet on the other hand they inevitably need the Nova Criminals to have any purpose which is cynically expressed later: “Now you are asking me whether I want to perpetuate a narcotics problem and I say: ‘Protect the disease. Must be made criminal protecting society from the disease.’”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 85–86.

¹⁶⁴ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 56.

¹⁶⁵ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 51.

¹⁶⁶ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 50–51.

¹⁶⁷ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 52.

One of the methods to combat the virus in the story is an apomorphine drug program which forces the subject to watch and live through some of the worst catastrophes, conflicts, acts of violence and immense terror humans have done to each other in the chase for power, control, desire, or lust. Burroughs employs examples taken from real historical events:

I used abstract reports of the experiments to evolve the formulae of pain and pleasure association that control this planet— (...) Pain is a quantitative factor—So is pleasure—I had material from purge trials and concentration camps and reports from Nagasaki and Hiroshima defining the limits of courage—Our most precise data came from Lexington Ky. where the drug addicts of America are processed.¹⁶⁸

Thus, the novel forces its readers to face dark moments of the history – the actual extra-textual context of the novel. A quintessential example of violence in its full range is shown as follows:

A stink of torture chambers and burning flesh filled the room—Prisoners staked out under the white hot skies of Minraud eaten alive by metal ants— (...) Prisoners screaming in the ovens broken down to insect forms—Life-sized portrait of a pantless corpse hanged to a telegraph pole ejaculating under a white hot sky—Stink of torture when the egg cracks—always to insect forms—Staked out spines gathering mushroom ants—Eyes pop out naked hanged to a telegraph pole of adolescent image.¹⁶⁹

In this scene human bodies are not only dismembered and mutilated, but also belong to brutally tortured people who were imprisoned and eaten alive. This image combines aspects of terrific moments of violence, sexual arousal, and body transmutations to inhuman forms on the backdrop of a nuclear disaster. The novel shows that when violence becomes a daily reality due to the existence of totalitarian systems, political oppressions, and tyrannical people of power who follow only their own agenda, everyone else then falls victim to such war for dominion over the world.

¹⁶⁸ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 86.

¹⁶⁹ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 42.

2.1.4 Socio-historic context and conclusion

Mookerjee's analysis of the novel aligns with his understanding of transgressive fiction as a form of "mock-epic" that satirizes some extra-textual aspects present in the society and culture which Burroughs found problematic. In the story, individual personality yields to the external force for homogeneity manifested in violent transmutations of the body within the very limits of its survival caused by drugs, infection, or carried out in the name of science:

This devolution results in a liminal state between life and death. Such a state is best represented by the primordial ooze into which Burroughs' unlucky characters repeatedly disintegrate. This is the basic matter from which the trickster, irrational and unpredictable, makes the world.¹⁷⁰

The body, therefore, becomes a part of the parasitic and exploitative network of relations between authorities, institutions and individuals which is constructed due to a mutual dependency or addiction of those involved. Mookerjee, thus, interprets the novel mainly in terms of a personal freedom: "Transgression is an assertion of freedom, but each author has a peculiar, unattainable vision of freedom. (...) Burroughs demonstrates the impossibility of freedom through depictions of abject helplessness, loss of agency, and sadistic domination,"¹⁷¹ which matches with Hume's ideas: "William S. Burroughs tried to imagine a society that would minimize the repressions demanded by living in groups."¹⁷² She comes to such similar conclusion on the grounds of her analysis and categorization of various attacks employed in the novel, namely: high narrative speed, the grotesque, and extreme sex and violence. However, if we use d'Hont's theory perceiving transgressive fiction as a fictional laboratory where the socio-historic context is interrogated, there emerges another possible interpretation.

¹⁷⁰ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 71.

¹⁷¹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 72.

¹⁷² Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 149.

Nova Express was written in the context of post-war experience when most people still well remembered, and many were traumatized by, the horrific events of WWII. The new reality in early 1960s did not offer more promising future due to the Cold War and especially the political confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union in Cuban Missile Crisis which threatened the world with a possibility of full-scale nuclear war. The almost inevitable escalation of political conflicts to open warfare and the tangible fear of it in the society pervades the novel:

We are still quite definite and vulnerable organisms (...) He looked down (...) He could feel danger—All around him the familiar fear urgent and quivering (...) He moved like an electric dog sniffing pointing enemy personnel and installations through bodies and mind screens of the fish city (...) —his brain seared by flash blasts of image war.¹⁷³

Just as the scientists in the novel in the apomorphine program, Burroughs applies similar strategy to the readers on *Nova Express*: “By God show them how ugly the ugliest pictures in the dark room can be,”¹⁷⁴ and exposes us to images of the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to manifest the urgency of the nuclear danger to the world: “pre-recorded heat glare massing Hiroshima,”¹⁷⁵ “the Blazing Photo from Hiroshima and Nagasaki,”¹⁷⁶ or “injury Headquarters Concentration with reports from Hiroshima—Some of the new hallucinogens and Nagasaki.”¹⁷⁷

The book therefore opens a fictional space where, similarly to the reality of Cold War, people face unprecedented danger of war which would lead to total annihilation of life on earth, where information is used to manipulate, where the countries themselves incline to tyrannical systems of oppressive control over its citizens. Corrupted politicians follow only their own interests completely careless to the suffering of others while being gravely terrified of a possible hidden enemy lurking perhaps even among

¹⁷³ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 95.

¹⁷⁴ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 13.

¹⁷⁵ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 13.

¹⁷⁶ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 71.

¹⁷⁷ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 88.

their own people. The world is in other words on a verge of a total collapse, and everyone feels that: “Electric storms of violence sweep the planet—Desperate position and advantage precariously held—Governments fall with a whole civilization and ruling class into streets of total fear—Leaders turn on image rays to flood the world with replicas—Swept out by counter image.”¹⁷⁸ The novel thus uses its socio-historic context and works as a dystopian fictional exaggeration of the state of the world during the Cold War where pervasive paranoia of both external and internal enemies cripples the society and disables reasonable and objective thinking. The virus itself can be interpreted as a metaphor for greed and will to control and rule over masses to which every individual has an inbuilt precondition in their nature. The portrayed system is after human bodies in order to gain total control over the population which becomes deceived, abused, and captured in hedonistic, violent and inevitably self-destructive behavior totally oblivious to the immediacy of nuclear disaster.

The novel, thus, employs transgressive elements to warn the readers of the danger of authoritative policies and manipulation by mass-media or other providers of information which usually serves a certain agenda. Bodies are sites through which such agendas and ideologies can be manifested through the means of state-operated drug supplies or technological dominance exploiting human habits.

¹⁷⁸ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 62.

2.2 American Psycho

Bret Easton Ellis (*1964), as a core member of a literary group called Brat Pack, authored several novels laden with shocking imagery and transgressive motives of brutal murders, sexual violence, and overall ambiguous ethics which are narrated mostly by morally depraved characters in a detached, affectless, and minimalistic style. In 1991, Ellis published a novel *American Psycho* which is no exception from his other works in this regard since it depicts a superficial and hyper-materialistic nature of the yuppie culture of late 1980s' in New York through the eyes of an unreliable narrator Patrick Bateman. Many aspects of the story, places and events are unclear due to a first-person and frequent stream-of-consciousness way of narration accompanied by Bateman's occasional hallucinations or psychic imagination. Mixing delusional visions and real events illustrate his fatal transition from a successful narcissistic banker into a deranged and psychopathic serial killer.

The novel challenges our notion of humanity and ethics delimiting interpersonal relations; it also radically transgresses every possible social or cultural boundary of violence and sexual behavior which, in its most extreme forms, display acts of rape, torture, mutilation, murder, necrophilia, and cannibalism. Hume states that Ellis used some of the most atrocious crime cases which took place in the real world and assembled it into a fictional mosaic that horrifies its readers. The transgressive energy is even more amplified by the close intimacy we are forced to experience with Bateman: "Part of the gut revulsion comes from the way we see this through Bateman's eyes,"¹⁷⁹ while also the voice describing the events stays shockingly detached and, on top of that, there are no clearly expressed ethics offered either: "The author's views are not explicit. This puts all obligation of the interpretation on the reader."¹⁸⁰ Since Hume focuses mostly on the formal side of the novel and its effect on readers, I will work with analyses by Mookerjee and d'Hont who, despite, detecting similar aspects in the text, come to different conclusions in the end. D'Hont applies her concept

¹⁷⁹ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 123.

¹⁸⁰ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 121.

of “fictional social laboratory” which facilitates reading the novel in terms of American capitalism, consumerism, and commodity fetishism: “The novel visualizes and interrogates the workings of neoliberalism, expanding and exaggerating the focus on this ideological system that dominated its extra-textual context during the 1980s.”¹⁸¹ Mookerjee, on the other hand, interprets the novel as a work forcefully satirizing the materialistic values dominant in the world which lead to a profound psychological crisis people suffer from. This crisis is then reflected in Bateman’s mental instability, intellectual ignorance, and emotional apathy: “Its main character (Bateman) does not have a meaningful psyche. (...) Abstract concepts, the kind evoked by readers who recoil from that world, are so numerous and overused as to be meaningless. Their absence from Bateman’s world echoes their lack of impact on daily life.”¹⁸²

2.2.1 Plot and characters

The story is set in the Wall Street business environment which, according to d’Hont, works as a fictionalized version of the American very financial center that: “Emphasizes its conceptualization of neoliberalism as a central social ideological framework.”¹⁸³ The protagonists of this place are hypermasculine, wealthy, and selfish young businessmen whose mentality is outlined right at the beginning when Bateman’s colleague Price describes himself: “I’m resourceful, (...) I’m creative, I’m young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I’m saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I’m an *asset*,”¹⁸⁴ by which he declares his importance in typically egoistic manner. Although they all base their value on the money they can make and the work they do, it is not a source of fulfilment or joy for them: “I mean the fact remains that no one gives a shit about their work, everybody hates their job, I hate my job, you’ve told

¹⁸¹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 110.

¹⁸² Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 205.

¹⁸³ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 112.

¹⁸⁴ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), 7.

me you hate yours,"¹⁸⁵ and Bateman later himself admits the same to a friend from university:

"I just don't want to talk about ..." I stop. "About work."

"Why not?"

"Because I hate it," I say. (...)

"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."¹⁸⁶

From such claim, we can assume there is an enormous pressure in the society at play on conformism and consumption, and especially the upper-middle class demands its members to meet certain living standards including acquisition of the latest fashion, luxury accessories, and designer furniture or visiting exclusive restaurants and elite clubs. Therefore, excessive consumerism is an absolute necessity and Bateman is anxiously obsessed with living up to this desired social status. The moment when the status would be questioned and his feeling of belonging would be threatened, results in anxiety and physical stress of which an example is a scene where he compares his new business card with colleagues:

"New card." I try to act casual about it but I'm smiling proudly. (...)

"It is very cool, Bateman," Van Patten says guardedly, the jealous bastard,

"but that's nothing...." He pulls out his wallet and slaps a card next to an ashtray. "Look at this."

We all lean over and inspect David's card and Price quietly says,

"That's really nice."

A brief spasm of jealousy courses through me when I notice the elegance of the color and the classy type. (...) I'm finding it hard to swallow. (...)

My card lies on the table, ignored next to an orchid in a blue glass vase.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 7.

¹⁸⁶ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 244.

¹⁸⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 48-49.

Mookerjee describes Bateman as a character who: “Applies the language of acquisition to every aspect of life,”¹⁸⁸ who, to an extent, identifies with the language of consumer product with its symptomatic stress on the origin and financial value of things: “Bateman’s concern with brand names is of course an exaggeration of the interest in status symbols associated with 1980s urban professionals. (...) Bateman’s obsessive cataloguing resembles the announcements at a runway fashion show or the marginal notes in a fashion magazine layout.”¹⁸⁹ D’Hont puts Bateman’s communication style to the context of transgressive fiction which often use destabilizing aesthetic techniques to amplify its intended effect: “Novels such as *American Psycho* echo the language of the extra-textual worlds they interrogate to exaggerate familiar discourse into an alienating word salad.”¹⁹⁰ In the blend of Bateman’s rather chaotic thoughts, words, and observations, we can notice narcissism and perfectionism concealing his suppressed low self-esteem, concerns about his public image, and neurotic nature liable to doubts about himself. At the beginning, he compensates those feelings for compulsive beauty routine, daily workout, designer clothing, upmarket furniture, and the latest modern technology which he frequently lists throughout the novel:

In the early light of a May dawn this is what the living room of my apartment looks like: Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. (...) The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; (...) Thin white Venetian blinds cover all eight floor-to-ceiling windows. A glass-top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin sits in front of the sofa, with Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don’t smoke. Next to the Wurlitzer jukebox is a black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 7.

¹⁸⁹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 197.

¹⁹⁰ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 16.

¹⁹¹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 28-29.

However, later Bateman turns to drugs, alcohol, sex, and violence while falling into depression, and psychic episodes which he treats with self-medicated pills:

I'm sweaty and a pounding migraine thumps dully in my head and I'm experiencing a major-league anxiety attack, searching my pockets for Valium, Xanax, a leftover Halcion, anything, and all I find are three faded Nuprin in a Gucci pillbox, so I pop all three into my mouth and swallow them down with a Diet Pepsi.¹⁹²

The novel does not have a complex storyline, it mostly consists of series of episodes of gruesome murders, cocktail parties, and business meetings on the backdrop of the gradual disintegration of Bateman's psyche. Despite graphic descriptions of the crimes and sex scenes and Bateman's closing confession, the story ends unresolved, and readers are left uncertain whether Bateman really committed all the murders or if it took place only in his delusional mind.

2.2.2 Human body in *American Psycho*

Since the setting of the novel is the business culture of New York with omnipresent idea of materialism and consumption ruled by what d'Hont accurately describes as: "Corporate ideological environment, which prefers style over substance,"¹⁹³ the body plays a pivotal role in the life of people as a sort of embodied extension of their lifestyles. Bateman truly experiences his body as a site that manifests his position in the social hierarchy. To meet standards imposed by the corporate ideals, he follows a strict diet and pays absurd attention to his daily beauty routine where every step is elaborately planned which is along with his immaculately organized flat in a noteworthy contrast to his otherwise chaotic life full of drugs, clubs, and pervert sexual desires:

¹⁹² Ellis, *American Psycho*, 155.

¹⁹³ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 113.

I inspect my hands and use a nailbrush. I take the icepack mask off and use a deep-pore cleanser lotion, then an herb-mint facial masque which I leave on for ten minutes while I check my toenails. (...) I wash the facial massage off with a spearmint face scrub. (...) In the shower I use first a water-activated gel cleanser, then a honey-almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub.¹⁹⁴

Mookerjee claims that through those processes, the body is inevitably greatly objectified, and its description employs the same language as for promotional or market purposes. Therefore, the value of a body becomes a subject of negotiation based on its current physical qualities to which an account is attached in the end.¹⁹⁵ Bateman and his colleagues regularly evaluate other people based on their style and physique which is especially the case for women whom they describe in highly sexist manner: “a woman—big tits, blonde, great ass, high heels,”¹⁹⁶ and if the body meets their standards, it is labelled as a token of “hardbodies.” Because seemingly everyone does this kind of physical evaluation, Bateman is obsessed with his appearance and always stays anxiously aware of the way he looks: “I say, offering my hand, noticing my reflection in a mirror hung on the wall—and smiling at how good I look.”¹⁹⁷ D’Hont interprets his rigorous body maintenance as a compulsive need for a control over the body which corresponds to the consumer ideology which depends on the fetishist use of objects.¹⁹⁸ She also states: “His body needs to be seen, and he spends much of his time encouraging people to look at him,”¹⁹⁹ therefore, he craves for being complimented and becomes deeply shocked if there appears another attractive man: “Hello, Owen, I say, admiring the way he’s styled and slicked back his hair, with a part so even and sharp it ... devastates me.”²⁰⁰

Although he hypocritically despises women acknowledging him only for his appearance, he at the same time frequently egoistically enlists his visual

¹⁹⁴ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 29.

¹⁹⁵ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 198.

¹⁹⁶ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 34.

¹⁹⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 14.

¹⁹⁸ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 113–114.

¹⁹⁹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 123.

²⁰⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 116.

qualities: “Why, for that matter, do I want to please Courtney? If she likes me only for my muscles, the heft of my cock, then she’s a shallow bitch. *But* a physically superior, near-perfect-looking shallow bitch, and *that* can override anything.”²⁰¹ According to d’Hont, the bodies are separated by the characters from personal identity and inner qualities: “The importance of their fetishistic relations to objects, combined with the fragility of those relationships, inspires Patrick and his peers to extend their fetishism to people. They objectify and dehumanize people they perceive to be ‘others,’ using them as fetish objects to represent the contrast to which they maintain their image as successful businesspeople,”²⁰² which results in a competitive, envious, and highly superficial environment where one’s body represents a living standard its owner can afford, or, in other words the body epitomizes a certain status within a social hierarchy and shows how much money one can make.

The flawless façade of every character in the novel opposes their degraded morals and overall shallow or simplistic minds, and covers the emotional emptiness hidden within them: “All it comes down to is: I feel like shit but look great.”²⁰³ D’Hont argues that the Wall Street culture is deliberately exaggerated to make visible its aggressive and corruptive corporate practices which deeply affect our world: “Moving beyond its exploration of the relationship between corporate ideology and corporeal social practice, *American Psycho* extends its focus to the direct representation of the impact of ideology on physical bodies.”²⁰⁴ The society of New York elite is portrayed as emphasizing how things look on the outside, the surface is to be representative of one’s own social status, and the body is radically objectified and graded accordingly. Human body becomes a polished shell that matters the most, the only feature people pay attention to, notice on each other, and assume that the way it looks directly corresponds the qualities of its owner. In such regard, the body works almost just as another example of high-end commodity to show, use, sell and consume

²⁰¹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 163.

²⁰² D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 119.

²⁰³ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 112.

²⁰⁴ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 114.

which Bateman pushed to an extreme literal sense in the carnage performed throughout the novel.

2.2.3 Violence in *American Psycho*

American Psycho became infamous for its excessive depiction of brutal violence. Physical violence performed by Bateman partly comes from his sense of superiority over people of lower social status, and it is especially the homeless and beggars whom he detests the most: “I pass an ugly, homeless bum—a member of the genetic underclass.”²⁰⁵ During his first encounter with a real homeless person, Bateman assails him heartlessly for being unemployed and not trying enough in life: “If you’re so hungry, why don’t you get a job? (...) Do you think it’s fair to take money from people who *do* have jobs? Who *do* work?”²⁰⁶ At the same time he is also disgusted by the person’s physical presence and his emotional distress of crying, sobbing, and shivering and the stench of the homeless person outrages him: “My rage builds, subsides, and I close my eyes, bringing my hand up to squeeze the bridge of my nose, then I sigh. ‘Al ... I’m sorry. It’s just that ... I don’t know. I don’t have anything in common with you.’”²⁰⁷ After that, Bateman starts stabbing that person with a knife into his face and stomach, and in cold blood leaves him on the street to bleed to death. D’Hont interprets this awful act to highlight problematic connections between the social practice and the dominant ideology: “Patrick’s increasingly horrific actions are not merely aimed at shocking the reader but function as exaggerated representations of neoliberal dynamics in the novel’s extra-textual context.”²⁰⁸ In her words, neoliberalism is supposed to establish equal opportunities, promises collective well-being, and provides individual freedoms through economic means. The book, however, gives nuance to this idea and makes the critical flaws and contradictions of its implementation in the real world shockingly visible.²⁰⁹ Bateman’s repugnance to homeless

²⁰⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 273.

²⁰⁶ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 135-136.

²⁰⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 136.

²⁰⁸ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 129.

²⁰⁹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 110-111.

people is, therefore, a token of his utter ignorance of: “How the economic system responsible for his own well-being excludes the person he mocks,”²¹⁰ and the way he reduces people to mere objects that either fit or not to his twisted idea of personal value manifests: “How the corporate emphasis on success and power in the story’s extra-textual context relied on dehumanization and objectification.”²¹¹

This first murder in the novel combines many characteristic aspects of Bateman’s killing: it happens very fast and totally unexpected by the victims who are initially mostly either people from the low social class (homeless, low-paid workers, or prostitutes) or people of ethnical or sexual minorities (people of color, immigrants, or homosexuals), therefore the brutal violence is directed towards some of the already most vulnerable members of the society. The murders are committed in an utterly abominable, ferocious and heartless manner using sharp weapons, heavy objects, and guns: “I start randomly stabbing him in the face and head, finally slashing his throat open in two brief chopping motions; (...) but to make sure the old queer is really dead and not faking it (they sometimes do) I shoot him with a silencer twice in the face and then I leave.”²¹² Bateman always aims for the face, throat or major arteries and leaves his victims terribly mutilated and suffering: “I slit his throat—easily, effortlessly—the spasmodic kicking that usually accompanies this routine,”²¹³ and he does not spare animals either and cruelly kills them along with their owners. In one particularly appalling scene he even kills a child over whose death he shows no remorse since according to his deviant mind it did not contribute to the society yet: “This thing before me, small and twisted and bloody, has no real history, no worthwhile past, nothing is really lost.”²¹⁴

During the peak of Bateman’s psychopathic series of murders, he starts also, despite their social status, killing some of his colleagues or old friends without any clear motives. The only person he has mercy with is Luis who turns out to be a latent homosexual in love with Bateman, which catches him

²¹⁰ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 113.

²¹¹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 121.

²¹² Ellis, *American Psycho*, 171-172.

²¹³ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 187.

²¹⁴ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 308.

completely off guard and he flees from the bathroom where he attempted to strangle Luis. Most of the following murders take place in Bateman's apartment and become a final part of his sex meetings with prostitutes. What initiates that is usually a display of extreme sadomasochistic sexual practices which he later pushes into a brutal torturing and gruesome slaughter:

Elizabeth, naked, running from the bedroom, blood already on her, is moving with difficulty and she screams out something garbled. My orgasm had been prolonged and its release was intense and my knees are weak. (...) and I strike out at her with the already wet butcher knife (...) blood shoots even into the living room, across the apartment, splattering against the tempered glass and the laminated oak panels in the kitchen.²¹⁵

He severs parts of the bodies, some of them burns in fire or dissolves in acid, or just keeps in the room: "What is left of Elizabeth's body lies crumpled in the corner of the living room."²¹⁶

After one of the scenes, Bateman even puts some severed body parts into his mouth and either eats it raw or uses it later for culinary experiments. Such display of cannibalism is interpreted by Hume as a motif of consuming or being consumed which is common in works of aggressive fiction that deal with criticism of capitalism: "Patrick Bateman literalizes his embodiment of the ultimate consumer by eating parts of his victims."²¹⁷ D'Hont, on the other hand, claims that: "Patrick's bodily violations carry a range of meanings and unravel how the maintenance of his corporate identity depends on transgressive engagements with objects and objectified people."²¹⁸ Extreme sex and violence is one of the very examples of such engagements in which bodies are used as inanimate sexual objects over which Bateman has a full control. Sex becomes a site in which Bateman demonstrates his dominance and masculinity and experience corporeal

²¹⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 297.

²¹⁶ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 298.

²¹⁷ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 138.

²¹⁸ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 117.

identity.²¹⁹ View from the extra-textual context, d'Hont states that: "Patrick's obsession with bodily violation is an exaggerated representation and critical interrogation of the neoliberal practice of commodity fetishism."²²⁰

On top of all the atrocities that happen in Bateman's flat, he also decides to record everything: "I place the camel-hair coat back over her head in case she wakes up screaming, then set up the Sony palm-sized Handycam so I can film all of what follows,"²²¹ he finds pleasure in torturing the victims and never shows any empathy or mercy with them: "My virtual absence of humanity fills her with mind-bending horror,"²²² and reminds them there is no escape: "Scream, honey, (...) No one cares. No one will help you."²²³ It is a shocking reality of the book which pervades all the murders that, despite Bateman's killing so many people (many of which in public), there is never anyone who would try to stop him, or who would even notice anything: "One hundred and sixty-one days have passed since I spent the night in it with the two escort girls. There has been no word of bodies discovered in any of the city's four newspapers or on the local news."²²⁴ Even though, he orders food and moves around the city covered in blood right after a murder: "In the back of the taxi it hits me that I'm still wearing the bloody raincoat,"²²⁵ and his bloodstained clothes and bed sheets are always washed in a public laundry, it seems that nobody can see it.

Bateman's favorite show "The Patty Winters Show" creates an illustrative background foreshadowing many of the upcoming committed crimes. It is a typical example of mainstream TV entertainment broadcasted in the morning covering a vast range of topics from the banal ones: "*The Patty Winters Show* this morning was about a boy who fell in love with a box of soap,"²²⁶ to those dealing with human body or illnesses such as schizophrenia, deformed people, home abortion kits or "people with half their brains removed."²²⁷ Some display horrific acts of violence of rape or

²¹⁹ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 120-121.

²²⁰ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 117.

²²¹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 253.

²²² Ellis, *American Psycho*, 339.

²²³ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 253.

²²⁴ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 381.

²²⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 224.

²²⁶ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 306.

²²⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 382.

“a man who set his daughter on fire while she was giving birth,”²²⁸ or interviews with criminals: “Via satellite on a lone TV monitor—three convicted Toddler-Murderers on death row who due to fairly complicated legal loopholes were now seeking parole and would probably get it,”²²⁹ and sometimes they present occasional combinations of both violent and banal:

This morning was about Nazis, (...) Though I wasn't exactly charmed by their deeds, I didn't find them unsympathetic either, nor I might add did most of the members of the audience. One of the Nazis, in a rare display of humor, even juggled grapefruits and, delighted, I sat up in bed and clapped.²³⁰

It is somewhat symptomatic for the mainstream culture and media to dive into serious issues of the society only to turn it into a shallow means of entertainment where killers are filmed as celebrities and human tragedies are displayed to catch the attention of audience which is too much distracted by it to draw any moral implications of those events.

The society is constantly exposed to deluge of tragic or violent events: “There were four major air disasters this summer, many of them captured on videotape, (...) and repeated on television endlessly. The planes kept crashing in slow motion,”²³¹ and audience is naturally both captivated and horrified by graphic imagery: “Blood pouring from automated tellers, women giving birth through their assholes, embryos frozen or scrambled (which is it?), nuclear warheads, billions of dollars, the total destruction of the world.”²³² Billboards, TV shows, radio broadcasts, pop-music, tabloids, news, movies etc. create a collage of records, photos, and images which Bateman's colleague Price illustrates with newspapers:

In one issue—in *one* issue—let's see here (...) strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist

²²⁸ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 360.

²²⁹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 144.

²³⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 162.

²³¹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 287.

²³² Ellis, *American Psycho*, 355.

rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis”—he flips through the pages excitedly —“baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis.”²³³

In this context, violence and crime is trivialized: “Someone gets beaten up, someone else dies, sometimes bloodlessly, more often mostly by rifle shot, assassinations, comas, life played out as a sitcom, a blank canvas that reconfigures itself into a soap opera,”²³⁴ and the only outcome of the display of human suffering or death is a numbing effect to which Bateman adds: “Since it’s impossible in the world we live in to empathize with others, we can always empathize with ourselves,”²³⁵ therefore, he suggests the only way to deal with the excess of violence is utmost individualism and self-isolation from other people. In the book, all the events (horrific and trivial) are blended and treated with the same degree of importance which, according to Mookerjee, mirrors Bateman’s life ethics: “He, with a fool’s naiveté, doesn’t know the difference and presents all acts in the same detailed pattern, as if the spurting blood from a murdered prostitute’s jugular vein were a kind of imported vodka.”²³⁶ Mookerjee, thus, suggest that Bateman is a simple creature (a “cipher”) that imitates the language and communicative style surrounding him. Although, he might occasionally display some elaborate ideas and eloquently utter current issues of the society such poverty, nationalism, or racism; he does so only because he heard that somewhere else and does not understand the complete set of values and merits that reside within.²³⁷

Due to the emotional and informational overload, the society grows desensitized or even utterly apathetic to violence: “Did you read about the host from that game show on TV? He killed two teenage boys. Depraved faggot. Droll, really droll.’ Price waits for a reaction. There is none.”²³⁸ Among

²³³ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 8.

²³⁴ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 355.

²³⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 261.

²³⁶ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 205.

²³⁷ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 199-202.

²³⁸ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 10.

Bateman's business friends, he is notorious for having interest in real stories of notorious serial killers: "You've always been interested in stuff like that, Bateman,' Reeves says, and then to Hamlin, 'Bateman reads these biographies all the time: Ted Bundy and Son of Sam and *Fatal Vision* and Charlie Manson. All of them.'"²³⁹ Despite finding gory and tragic stories amusing and using it as anecdotes in conversations, they consider Bateman's fascination in serial killers rather just annoying than unsettling or indirectly warning: "But you *always* bring them up,' McDermott complains. 'And always in this casual, educational sort of way. I mean, I don't want to know anything about Son of Sam or the fucking Hillside Strangler or Ted Bundy or Featherhead, for god sake.'"²⁴⁰

Bateman himself throughout the novel several times expresses his atrocious intentions, verbalizes his brutal thoughts and displays pathological behavior however it is neither noticed nor answered by the people he talks to. Whether it is when he suggests to his girlfriend Evelyn to get weapons for an upcoming Christmas party: "Or an AR-15. You'd like it, Evelyn: it's the most expensive of guns, but worth every penny.' I wink at her. But she's still talking; she doesn't hear a word; nothing registers. She does not fully grasp *a word* I'm saying,"²⁴¹ or his colleagues who do not even stop their monologue: "My life is a living hell,' I mention off the cuff, (...) 'And there are many more people I, uh, want to ... want to, well, I guess *murder*.' I say this emphasizing the last word, staring straight into Armstrong's face,"²⁴² and even women he meets and later seduces seem careless to his words:

"What do you think I do?"

"A model?" She shrugs. "An actor?"

"No," I say. "Flattering, but no."

"Well?"

"I'm into, oh, murders and executions mostly. It depends." I shrug.

"Do you like it?" she asks, unfazed.

²³⁹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 96.

²⁴⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 159.

²⁴¹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 130.

²⁴² Ellis, *American Psycho*, 146-147.

“Um ... It depends. Why?” I take a bite of sorbet.

“Well, most guys I know who work in mergers and acquisitions don’t really like it,” she says.

“That’s *not* what I said,” I say, adding a forced smile, finishing my J&B.²⁴³

This deafness or blindness to Bateman’s statements reaches an absurd degree at the end of the story when he openly confesses to one colleague that he is a psychopathic murderer:

“Wait. Stop,” I shout, looking up into Carnes’ face, making sure he’s listening. “You don’t seem to understand. You’re not really comprehending any of this. *I killed him. I did it, Carnes. I chopped Owen’s fucking head off. I tortured dozens of girls. (...)*”

“Excuse me,” he says, trying to ignore my outburst. “I really *must* be going.”

“No!” I shout. “Now, Carnes. Listen to me. Listen very, very carefully. *I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can’t make myself any clearer.*”

My stress causes me to choke on the words.

“But that’s simply not possible,” he says, brushing me off. “And I’m not finding this amusing anymore.”²⁴⁴

Although Bateman is attractive, successful, and has a well-paid job, thus achieves most goals of the consumerist and capitalistic society, he feels despair and longs for human connection:

While taking a piss in the men’s room, I stare into a thin, web-like crack above the urinal’s handle and think to myself that if I were to disappear into that crack, say somehow miniaturize and slip into it, the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No ... one ... would ... care. In fact, some, if they noticed my absence, might feel an odd, indefinable sense of relief.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 212.

²⁴⁴ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 404–405.

²⁴⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 232.

Despite Bateman's openly admired well-groomed visage and generally acknowledged high social status represented by his career and designer clothing, he is in terms of his statements, opinions, or thoughts mostly ignored, unrecognized, ridiculed or corrected by the others which make him frustrated and angry. His personal identity crisis is interpreted by d'Hont to serve as a metaphorical interrogation of neoliberalism and capitalism he adheres to. In order to maintain his social status of a Wall Street businessman and his identity as an embodiment of corporate ideals, he depends on objects and objectified people which he then uses, abuses, fetishizes, or consumes in the violent acts of transgression.²⁴⁶

He even believes to be a victim of emptied-out human relations. In the context of his story, "The Patty Winters Show" gives an ironic commentary on materialism and the yuppie culture in general: "Today's topic is Does Economic Success Equal Happiness? The answer, in Harry's this afternoon, is a roar of resounding 'Definitely,' followed by much hooting, the guys all cheering together in a friendly way,"²⁴⁷ whereas Bateman after a murder confesses: "Later my macabre joy sours and I'm weeping for myself, unable to find solace in any of this, crying out, sobbing 'I just want to be loved.'"²⁴⁸ The ignorance and indifference he faces from the surrounding and even close people amplify his sense of alienation which amounts into total terror and twisted ethics expressed in one of his many mental breakdowns: "I'm cursing the earth and everything I have been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer—all of it was wrong, without any final purpose. All it came down to was: die or adapt."²⁴⁹ From all Bateman's observations, he reaches a conclusion which foreshadows his inevitable downfall: "This is true: the world is better off with some people gone. Our lives are *not* all interconnected. That theory is a crock. Some people truly do not *need* to be here,"²⁵⁰ and "This is no time for the innocent."²⁵¹ His ethics to "die or adapt" which is only another form of

²⁴⁶ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 130–134.

²⁴⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 413.

²⁴⁸ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 357–358.

²⁴⁹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 358.

²⁵⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 233.

²⁵¹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 397.

the obsolete “survival of the fittest” are used for justification of killing other people especially those who, from his perspective, did not or could not “adapt.”

It is indisputable fact that violence in *American Psycho* reaches such extremity of its hideous and gory depiction that it stands out even among many other works of literature and it serves as a calculated shocking factor and exaggeration of common features of its genre if judged in isolation. However, in the context of other themes and motifs of the novel, the violence is also used to show it as an omnipresent reality of modern civilization and an integral dark part of human behavior which was cynically embraced by the mass-media, politicians, and culture in general.

2.2.4 Socio-historic context and conclusion

Ellis wrote *American Psycho* during the late 1980s' which was a time marked by a global rise of consumerism on the backdrop of economic turmoil and rampant growth of popular culture represented by mainstream music, television, and mass entertainment taking advantage of recent technologies. D'Hont characterizes that period as being marked by several financial crises, socio-economic instability, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and increase of urban crime, homelessness, and drug abuse. She then interprets the excessive body violence in the text to represent real-world acts of violence as: “A direct consequence of the ethics of greed and competitiveness Reagan’s definition of neoliberalism legitimized. Texts such as *American Psycho* suggest that violence and crisis are not antithetical to neoliberalism but examples of the transgressive dynamics on which this ideological system depends.”²⁵² The novel, therefore, reveals harmful effects and social impacts of neoliberalism as an ideological system of predatory economic policies and conceptualizations of success and freedoms through the means of fetishist relationships to commodities.²⁵³

The novel indisputably draws many of its themes and motifs from its extra-textual context and can be interpreted as a provocative critique mostly

²⁵² D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 9.

²⁵³ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 9-10.

of social issues connected to economic injustice and pathological obsession with profit on one hand, and antisocial individualistic tendencies within the population on the other, of which, Bateman is a metaphorical representation. Bateman himself claims in one of the final chapters:

There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, (...) *I simply am not there.* (...) Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. (...) no one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless. Each model of human behavior must be assumed to have some validity. Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?²⁵⁴

Mookerjee uses this excerpt from the novel as an illustrative climax of the psychological crisis caused by emptied phrases and abstract categories that infested our language: “The values assessed in *American Psycho* are essentially arbitrary, and they echo the ranking habits of our minds and the way we associate things, labels – even achievements with another abstraction that is our identity. Bateman’s ‘I simply am not there’ applies to the reader as well, not because the reader is materialistic, but because the reader maintains an abstract proxy-self, a self-concept or self-image based on arbitrary but shared methods of ascribing value.”²⁵⁵ To elaborate on Mookerjee’s idea, I suggest that the environment, as is depicted by Bateman, satirizes, criticizes, and highlights the world of over-consumption and aggressive materialism captures people like a non-selective informational hub that emits an overflow of information, news, opinions, thoughts, commercials, and new commodities with seemingly the same importance, which, in the end, makes its audience oblivious, passive, insensitive to human suffering, alienated from each other, and unable to foster meaningful relations:

²⁵⁴ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 391-392.

²⁵⁵ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 206.

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.²⁵⁶

The novel, thus, opens a fictional space where readers are challenged to think about the nature of evil through the eyes of a psychopath who is at the same time a handsome wealthy banker, thus an epitome of city life goals and ideals. The extreme violence is employed to visualize the brutality and tragedies happening on daily basis which is then often filmed, broadcasted, and spread via mass-media. Although, the novel does not reach a single conclusion and the story offers neither catharsis nor a solution, but rather makes its audience to think how the society deals with the flood of violence, what were the pre-conditions and causes for Bateman's development, and finally whether someone would genuinely *notice* someone like Bateman.

²⁵⁶ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 389-390.

2.3 Fight Club

The novel *Fight Club* was written by Chuck Palahniuk (*1962) who published it in 1996 as his first book. He soon after became a major writer of transgressive fiction whose main themes include family issues of parenting and childhood trauma, sexuality, existential questions of identity and death, but also social topics of values, morals, or religion. His novels often contain anti-consumerist ideas, challenge authorities and institutions, and subvert generally accepted beliefs while employing highly provocative and graphic imagery and violence. Palahniuk's writing style gravitates towards minimalistic use of language consisting mostly of short or even one-word lines and limited, simple, and straightforward vocabulary which often embrace dark or absurd humor. *Fight Club* is narrated in first-person in a fragmented non-linear style interrupted by frequent flashbacks and repetitive short phrases or words.

In Mookerjee's analysis of the novel, he considers it as a typical example of the mock-epic, thus as a social satire which displays most of the characteristic transgressive features such as: an alienated narrator, emphasis on body-driven and dangerous behavior, critique of consumerism, and ambiguous storyline. The economical and minimalist use of language creates automated juxtapositions of hackneyed phrases, motivational slogans, and abstract cliches, that is supposed to imitate the communication in consumer society the novel mocks: "Palahniuk's remarkable staccato storytelling is composed in short paragraphs and one-line interruptions that evoke the atmosphere of public address in airports and airplanes and instructional literature."²⁵⁷ Mookerjee also suggests that the brutal violence and proximity to death is presented as the only way out of one's inauthentic sense of identity, constructed by the society, towards personal liberation: "*Fight Club* is transgressive because it contains an idea that has (or had) little currency in culture and presents this idea as potentially valid,"²⁵⁸ which circles primarily around the fundamental topic of the text—

²⁵⁷ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 220.

²⁵⁸ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 219.

masculine self-actualization.²⁵⁹ D'Hont, as well, finds freedom and masculinity as the main themes: "*Fight Club* departs from an assumption of freedom as a specifically masculine phenomenon, arguing that society's freedom is threatened by the compromised status of masculinity as an ideological construct,"²⁶⁰ however, she interprets it with regard to its extra-textual context of which the book: "Explores the potential violent and oppressive consequences of neoliberalism's emphasis on freedom."²⁶¹ Most of the transgressive energy comes from a radical rejection of consumer ideas of masculinity and violent escape from oppressive strategies enacted by the political system. However, despite the destructive effect of the depicted body violence, the transgressive energy is, according to d'Hont, ultimately directed to a reconstruction of the system rather than its overthrow.²⁶²

Using the theory outlined by Hume, we can identify several forms of attack on the reader in the text. *Fight Club* narrative flows in a fast pace due to its short phrasing and textual cuts mentioned above, however, it does not reach such degree as *Nova Express*. Extreme violence is a given fact for the book, and I will analyze it closely in the next chapter; the same applies for the grotesque which pervades most of the depicted corporeal imagery. We can also see *Fight Club* as an example of an emotional attack of complaint that Hume defines as: "The relentless *articulation of discontent*, usually characterized by *strong emotive elements*,"²⁶³ since the narrator truly regularly accuses the authorities, laments, and whines about his unfulfilling life, however, Hume analyses the story from a perspective of an intellectual attack on our set of ontological assumptions. This set of beliefs creates our notion of what is reality which serves as an anchor in thought processes, therefore, according to Hume, texts that challenge these assumptions intend to provoke discomfort and subvert readers' confidence of understanding it because: "We assume the character's mind works the way our own does."²⁶⁴

²⁵⁹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 218-220.

²⁶⁰ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 143.

²⁶¹ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 142.

²⁶² D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 142-150.

²⁶³ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 44.

²⁶⁴ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 141.

Although, bending reality and unreliable narrator are common features of postmodern literature in general, it is especially prominent in *Fight Club* since the reader is not aware of the narrator's schizophrenic disorder for more than half of the book. Hume argues that such intellectual assault is employed by authors to challenge our reading habits and make automated responses ineffective: "We shall *not* own and consume the text. Instead of making the novel submit to us, these authors try to make readers submit to the text."²⁶⁵

2.3.1 Plot and characters

The narrator's name is never explicitly mentioned. However, he refers to himself as Joe. He is a middle-class young man, an example of everyman, who works as a recall specialist in a car company, lives alone, and suffers from depression and serious insomnia. He finds his work meaningless and absurd: "You do the little job you're trained to do. (...) You don't understand any of it, and then you just die,"²⁶⁶ and describes his life as overly mundane and dull: "I am helpless. I am stupid, and all I do is want and need things. My tiny life. My little shit job. My Swedish furniture. (...) This is how bad your life can get."²⁶⁷

Since therapy does not help, he starts visiting support groups for people with cancer, or other fatal diseases, where he feels safe to openly display his emotions and cry which mitigates his insomnia. However, during one support session of men with testicular cancer he notices a woman Marla who ruins everything for him: "With her watching, I'm a liar. She's a fake. She's the liar. (...) In this one moment, Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies."²⁶⁸ At the beginning they hate each other but gradually start having affair since they feel and think similarly. Marla is a psychotic, suicidal, and solitary woman who describes herself as: "The girl is infectious human

²⁶⁵ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 163.

²⁶⁶ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: An Owl Book, Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 12.

²⁶⁷ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 146.

²⁶⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 23.

waste, and she's confused and afraid to commit to the wrong thing so she won't commit to anything."²⁶⁹

Due to Joe's emotional distress, depression, and insomnia, he develops a dissociative identity disorder which works as an unexpected plot twist in the novel. At sleep and during schizophrenic hallucinations, his mind is operated by Tyler Durden: "We use the same body, but at different times,"²⁷⁰ who is Joe's projected hyper-masculine alter-ego: "I wouldn't be here in the first place if you didn't want me."²⁷¹ For most of the story, Joe thinks they are separate persons and kindred spirits, he admires Tyler for he personifies everything Joe cannot or dare not to do and say: "I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent. (...) Tyler is capable and free, and I am not."²⁷² One evening Tyler asks him: "I want you to hit me as hard as you can,"²⁷³ which initiates weekly fight clubs in a deserted house where men would violently beat each other under Tyler's tutelage. Later fight clubs turn into a radicalized anarchic movement with thousands of followers committing pranks, street riots, sabotages, theft, and attacks on local authorities or random citizens.

In that moment, things get out of Joe's hands and Tyler secretly establishes a terrorist organization called "Project Mayhem" which aims to cause chaos, cultural reset: "We wanted to blast the world free of history,"²⁷⁴ and total annihilation: "This was the goal, (...) the complete and right-away destruction of civilization."²⁷⁵ Therefore, Joe decides to stop Tyler and shoots himself in the head but thanks to a malfunction of the gun he survives and is hospitalized in a mental facility: "The world is crazy. My boss is dead. My home is gone. My job is gone. And I'm responsible for it all."²⁷⁶ In the final chapter, he is recovering but keeps seeing remaining signs of fight club

²⁶⁹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 61.

²⁷⁰ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 164.

²⁷¹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 168.

²⁷² Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 174.

²⁷³ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 46.

²⁷⁴ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 124.

²⁷⁵ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 125.

²⁷⁶ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 193.

activities but, due to the narrator's unstable psyche and occasional episodes of hallucinations, the end of the novel is left obscure.

2.3.2 Human body in *Fight Club*

Fight Club is written in an aggressive style of short lines employing visceral imagery of bodily processes, so in the exact opposite to what Joe describes as an overly sensitive and hypocritical way of communication in his cultural environment: "No one will ever say *parasite*. They'll say, *agent*. They don't say *cure*. They'll say, *treatment*."²⁷⁷ Joe finds the public discourse about dying and illness overly vague and insincere to which Mookerjee adds: "The implication is that in commonplace talk there is no word for death, or death as a label is not meaningful, having no correlate in a world of material things."²⁷⁸ The pain and constant reminder of inevitability of death is a reoccurring motif in the novel which emphasizes corporeal reality of living as an extreme way to reach what they consider an authentic personal experience. Mookerjee regards the emphasis on death in the text as a typical trope of transgressive fiction in which the characters seek out undesirable or dangerous situations to get closer to it. It is the reason why Joe and Marla visit the support groups which include brain parasites, testicular cancer, tuberculosis, brain dementia, blood parasites, or ascending bowel cancer, and both he and Marla are cynically fascinated by it: "Funerals are nothing compared to this. (...) Funerals are all abstract ceremony. Here, you have a real experience of death."²⁷⁹

They want to feel an almost tangible sense of death, or as Mookerjee puts it: "The true cancer sufferers have something valuable that the narrator lacks: a close relationship with death,"²⁸⁰ of which ill human bodies are representations:

All her life, she never saw a dead person. There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with. Oh, but now there was dying

²⁷⁷ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 35.

²⁷⁸ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 196.

²⁷⁹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 38.

²⁸⁰ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 222.

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.²⁸¹

There is a strong need in them to get in touch with their body, to seek for authentic sensations which often leads them to deal with the ugly and ill parts of themselves which they try to accept nonetheless: "I embrace my own festering diseased corruption,' Marla tells the cherry on the end of her cigarette. Marla twists the cigarette into the soft white belly of her arm. 'Burn, witch, burn.'"²⁸² Joe aims to show the bodies whole, to get under the flawless surface that dominates the culture, therefore, he talks about the body in a radically straightforward and graphic manner and presents it as generally sick or suffering from disease.

Once he finds a magazine *The Reader's Digest* with articles written from the perspective of body organs which he then frequently uses throughout the text: "I am Joe's Raging Bile Duct. (...) I am Joe's Grinding Teeth. I am Joe's Inflamed Flaring Nostrils. (...) I am Joe's Enraged, Inflamed Sense of Rejection,"²⁸³ "I am Joe's Blood-Boiling Rage,"²⁸⁴ or "I am the Pit of Joe's Stomach."²⁸⁵ Those lines illustrate Joe's state of mind and feelings of hatred, anger, distress, and anxiety all somatized and put on display through his body. The lines are examples of the grotesque body imagery in the book that emphasizes the undeniable visceral existence of many people to consist of body deformities, illness, pain, or other realities generally considered by the majority as "unnatural."

Typical case of a body transgressing corporeal standards is a former bodybuilder "Big Bob" who due to a testicular cancer underwent castration that resulted in gynecomastia. The disproportionate pair of breasts on otherwise muscular body is frequently stressed by Joe along with other descriptions of bizarre effects of disease on someone's body, to which Mookerjee adds: "Each has experienced a transformation that renders them

²⁸¹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 38.

²⁸² Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 65.

²⁸³ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 59-60.

²⁸⁴ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 96.

²⁸⁵ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 185.

inescapably grotesque and physical.”²⁸⁶ In Hume’s words, the grotesque manipulates the body and completes it with the often excluded “lower-body” functions to make the reader uneasy with the unclean, sick, and taboo: “Grotesque bodies are good at stirring up emotions; grotesque worlds use our emotions to waken up political or philosophical or ethical thought,”²⁸⁷ hence authors often use the grotesque to highlight some problematic social issues.²⁸⁸ In the case of *Fight Club*, the transgressive elements of body disease and impairments illustrate larger serious problems that progressively decompose the society from within.

The novel intentionally disrupts the artificial façade of consumer culture, Mookerjee claims: “Like diseased organs invisible in an otherwise healthy body, the novel is full of impurities in seemingly clean vessels.”²⁸⁹ D’Hont, regarding the extra-textual context, suggests that disease in the novel serves as: “Metaphor for the destructive and competitive ethics that govern the corporate environment in which the narrator works,”²⁹⁰ yet, on the other hand, is also points to a connection between illness and crisis of masculinity which becomes a basis for the later established Project Mayhem that: “Relies on physical transgression and aggressively defines masculinity in contrast to femininity, denouncing the feminine as synonymous with illness and weakness.”²⁹¹ D’Hont argues, that the lamentation over the crisis of traditional views on masculinity and the general decline of men’s dominance, deliberately exaggerated to point at the real social movements of dissatisfied men during the 1990s’ who openly interpreted such changes to cause the overall social instability.²⁹²

Masculinity, as a significant theme of the novel, is intricately linked to corporeal reality of men and an ideal image of male body. Masculinity and fatherhood are portrayed as undergoing crisis of ideals and values they used to represent, fathers are either uncaring and unconcerned about their family or utterly absent: “I knew my father for about six years, but I don’t remember

²⁸⁶ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 221.

²⁸⁷ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 108.

²⁸⁸ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 95.

²⁸⁹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 224.

²⁹⁰ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 12.

²⁹¹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 19–20.

²⁹² D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 144.

anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. (...) What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women.”²⁹³ Mookerjee points out that Joe genuinely believes that man’s identity can be established only in a group of other men, however: “He is not advocating male separatism as a social model.”²⁹⁴ Men feel hurt and confused about their role in the world and seek guidance: “What you end up doing, (...) is you spend your life searching for a father and God,”²⁹⁵ and eventually find purpose of life in their job: “If you’re male, and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And sometimes you find your father in your career.”²⁹⁶ However, most men end up caught in a mundane senseless job, never fulfil their true potential: “I see the strongest and the smartest men who have ever lived, (...) and these men are pumping gas and waiting tables,”²⁹⁷ and instead indulge in a comfortable middle-class life of consumerism that Tyler called “a little life.” In d’Hont’s words, Joe, contrary to Bateman, believes that his damaged masculine identity is indirectly caused by the consumer culture and fetishist relationship with objects because “The things you used to own, now they own you,”²⁹⁸ and his unhappiness is sourced from the ideological tensions within the society. Therefore, he strives for reconstructing his masculinity outside social expectations and possessions, which would eventually bring personal liberation.²⁹⁹

The consumer lifestyle is depicted not only as inevitably emasculating but also as creating a false idea of an ideal male body: “The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says,”³⁰⁰ which on one hand has a positive effect for challenging imposed beauty standards and exposing it as an integral part of the consumer culture that Mookerjee accurately characterized as: “Perfection and completeness are illusions sold

²⁹³ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

²⁹⁴ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 222.

²⁹⁵ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 141.

²⁹⁶ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 186.

²⁹⁷ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 149.

²⁹⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 44.

²⁹⁹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 143–144.

³⁰⁰ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

by advertising but also by religion.”³⁰¹ Yet on the other hand, the only offered alternative is a hypermasculine stereotypical world of men as creatures primarily designed to fight:

You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle everything. There’s grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn’t about looking good.³⁰²

Male body is, therefore, reduced to its capability to perform and be formed by violence, it should serve as a tool for survival and command respect. While superficial beauty of perfect male bodies is considered fake and weak, the protagonists did not look for a middle ground but chose its extreme opposite in bodies being harshly used, enjoyed, harmed, sensed, and injured: “I just don’t want to die without a few scars, I say. It’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body.”³⁰³ This line is interpreted by Mookerjee as one of the core ideas of the fight club which sparks “the beginnings of a new culture of experiential, body-centered consciousness,”³⁰⁴ that favors “wear and tear” lifestyle over immaculate appearance and illusionary permanence. This seemingly binary opposition: “namely, the radical physicality of the violated body and the clean, distant character of the corporate environment,”³⁰⁵ d’Hont regards to be depicted, in order to explore how they relate, affect, and define each other.³⁰⁶

Before Tyler emerged, Joe regarded himself trapped in a belief of never-ending progress and development to perfection imposed by the society he lives in: “I was too complete. I was too perfect. I wanted a way out of my tiny life,”³⁰⁷ and several times expressed his will to die: “I was tired and crazy and rushed, and every time I boarded a plane, I wanted the plane to crash.”³⁰⁸

³⁰¹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 222.

³⁰² Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 51.

³⁰³ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 48.

³⁰⁴ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 223.

³⁰⁵ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 14.

³⁰⁶ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 14.

³⁰⁷ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 173.

³⁰⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 172.

Men in the novel intentionally put their bodies in high-risk situations or near-death experience which borderline with self-destructive behavior that became characteristic for fight clubs: “At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves,”³⁰⁹ and “Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. (...) Maybe self-destruction is the answer.”³¹⁰ Not only that Tyler blows up Joe’s carefully maintained flat, makes him to give up on property and live in a desolate ravaged house, and even causes him being fired from his job, but he demands him fully embrace the finality of his life: “Someday, (...) you will die, and until you know that, you’re useless to me.”

In one scene, Tyler guides Joe through a sort of initiation to a new life philosophy based on radical existentialism and anarchy which first requires total surrender to pain and acceptance of death, they call it “hitting the bottom:” “It’s only after you’ve lost everything, (...) that you’re free to do anything.”³¹¹ Tyler firmly holds Joe’s arm, kisses the hand and pours lye on the wet mark left there by his lips: “This is a chemical burn, (...) and it will hurt worse than you’ve ever been burned.”³¹² During the agonizing process Joe suffers from terrible pain which he tries to keep under control by focusing on his memories of youth and considers it as a “guided meditation” while Tyler tells him that it is the “greatest moment of his life.” While the solution of lye dissolves Joe’s skin, Tyler describes him how to make nitroglycerin, and speaks of ancient people making great sacrifices in religious rituals to serve a greater purpose. This becomes a kind of rite of passage for all future members of the Project Mayhem.

The body is in the novel depicted emasculated, soft, and weak due to the consumer lifestyle and middle-class jobs, but also as yielding to cultural standards of beauty which require bodies to look well-groomed, clean, and in an attractive shape. In the context of masculinity, the men in the story must transform their bodies as a first step to get in touch with their “virility” and to display stereotypically masculine qualities such as physical strength,

³⁰⁹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 52.

³¹⁰ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 49.

³¹¹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 70.

³¹² Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 74.

resilience and mainly a capacity for fights, violence, and aggression represented by their tough, scarred, or wounded bodies. Such process takes the protagonists to experience extreme pain and risk of death which is viewed as a kind of therapeutic precondition for finding meaning in the world they live in: “We were still alive and wanted to see how far we could take this thing and still be alive.”³¹³ The human body is, therefore, employed as a site of raw authentic experience with transgressive potential that serve to embrace one’s mortality.

2.3.3 Violence in *Fight Club*

Violence works as a theme pervading majority of the text which is laden with imagery of external threats or potential injuries often uttered by Joe or Tyler as random facts without a relation to the storyline: “We could be wending in a river where a tiny fish will swim up Tyler’s urethra. The fish have barbed spines that flare out and back,”³¹⁴ “Spiders could lay their eggs and larva could tunnel under your skin,”³¹⁵ or “When a man is hit by lightning his head burns down to a smoldering baseball and his zipper welds itself shut.”³¹⁶ Joe also gives a lot of inside information about harmful chemicals and regular breaches of safety measures in the car company he works for: “There’s a front seat mounting bracket that never passed collision testing before it went into production,”³¹⁷ or “I know about the air-conditioning rheostat that gets so hot it sets fire to the maps in your glove compartment.”³¹⁸ He uses that to illustrate how the economic system does not care about the health of their customers as long as the overall profit stays above the occasional expenses of refunds or penalizations. Despite technological and social advances, all of this gives the impression that people are always at risk of being injured because danger might emerge even from the most trivial and ordinary activities.

³¹³ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 53.

³¹⁴ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 86.

³¹⁵ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 91.

³¹⁶ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 94.

³¹⁷ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 126.

³¹⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 99.

The fight club was spontaneously started by Joe and Tyler and soon there were many followers who wanted to join. Despite “The second rule of the fight club is you don’t talk about fight club,” it turned into a very popular event where many men of various age and professions participated in brutal one-to-one fights: “Most guys are at fight club because of something they’re too scared to fight. After a few fights, you’re afraid a lot less.”³¹⁹ Moreover, it becomes a social meeting and male bonding experience: “A lot of best friends meet for the first time at fight club,”³²⁰ and Joe sees it as a new kind of support group for anxious, lost, scared, or angry men who can escape their “little lives” and openly express their frustrations: “Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world. (...) After a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off.”³²¹ The event builds a close community with strictly outlined rules under the leadership of Tyler who is viewed as a role figure and whom newcomers must fight. Violence is fanatically praised as a raw energy and power the men train to both perform and withstand:

(He) got both my arms behind my head in a full nelson and rammed my face into the concrete floor until my teeth bit open the inside of my cheek and my eye was swollen shut and was bleeding, (...) and there was a print of half my face in blood on the floor.³²²

However, what also attracts them is the numbing after-effect of it: “Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered.”³²³ Hume views fight clubs as a secure place: “Where men can prove their manhood through physical violence and where they can take out their frustrations at fathers, at blue-collar jobs, at the unrealizable dream of becoming rich.”³²⁴ According to her, winning is not the point there, instead, men learn to give in to pain, to let go, and learn how to lose. It is as much about attacking and fighting as it is about accepting blows that fall regardless the damage.

³¹⁹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 54.

³²⁰ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 54.

³²¹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 49.

³²² Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 51.

³²³ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 53.

³²⁴ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 147.

Hume states that Tyler uses mystic vocabulary to justify brawls since liberation lies in surrender, and through pain people can find: “Total freedom from all the petty rules and social constraints of which one may not even be aware.”³²⁵ Therefore, Palahniuk creates a philosophy behind fight clubs, that address the mythical experiences of fear, challenge, or adrenaline rush of fights that are missing in the modern life, to draw reader’s attention with a messianic promise of revelation through body violence.³²⁶ The desire for freedom is a common motif of transgressive fiction, and according to d’Hont, *Fight Club* pushes such desire to an extreme belief that ultimate personal freedom requires: “The removal of physical restrictions hindering the development of freedom as an ideological construct,”³²⁷ therefore, it resides mainly in eternal life after death. This idea, however, leads to great human costs, body violation, and destruction in the name of reinventing dominant definitions of freedom. In one scene, Tyler threatens another man with a gun: “I’d rather kill you than see you working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television,”³²⁸ which, as d’Hont explains, serves as a striking image of how utopian and violent his idea of freedom is, since Tyler considers neither financial and social restrictions discouraging people from following their dreams, nor does he acknowledge the difference between freedom as an ideological construct and its limited application in practice.³²⁹

The already highly authoritative position of Tyler turns into a totalitarian form of control under the name “Project Mayhem” which consists of several separate committees (Assault, Arson, Mischief, Misinformation, etc.) It creates a complex military style organization that recruits every man who shows enough persistence and is willing to give up on personal life and possessions. The members stop using their names and are brainwashed by Tyler’s ideology which Joe witnesses in terror: “One space monkey is reading to the assembled space monkeys (...) ‘You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else,

³²⁵ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 148.

³²⁶ Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, 148-150.

³²⁷ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 140.

³²⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 155.

³²⁹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 154.

and we are all part of the same compost pile.”³³⁰ Initially, the members are assigned to perform the sort of physical pranks that Tyler used to do when he would insert an image of aroused genitals into a family movie projection or urinate into a soup bowl in exclusive restaurants. Mookerjee states that such provocative jokes are another example of: “Attempts to create flaws in the seamless surface of mainstream reality. However, their effect is mostly symbolic; they are an indication that Tyler must turn to drastic measures.”³³¹ The Project later starts operating all over the country committing violent crimes and causing chaos in order to capture people’s attention: “The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world,”³³² which would then spark a social uprising of the oppressed, poorest, or those generally trapped in unfulfilled life: “We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact, (...) So don’t fuck with us.”³³³

They also establish a “Paper Street Soap Company” to sell expensive soap bars made from human fat that they steal from a medical waste dump: “Liposuctioned fat sucked out of the richest thighs in America. The richest, fattest thighs in the world,”³³⁴ so in an ironic and morbidly humorous way the people of power and wealth unknowingly fund a social revolution targeted against them. Although this aspect of soap production would be, in Mookerjee’s interpretation, only another grotesque instance of revealing corporeal elements concealed in our daily reality, for d’Hont it adds to her argument of Project Mayhem being a capitalist movement that economically profits from the very consumer culture it despises and of which growth depends on violation of bodies which it literally consumes and sells back to people.³³⁵ She moreover states that: “The movement also signifies and critically interrogates existing neoliberal dynamics of trade, their reliance on

³³⁰ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 134.

³³¹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 225.

³³² Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 122.

³³³ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 166.

³³⁴ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 150.

³³⁵ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 154–155.

physicality and their maintenance of inequality and exploitative business practices,”³³⁶ which are then used as a foundation for the ideological construct of freedom. Therefore, despite initially endeavoring a social change and culture reset, the movement develops only into a radicalized reimagination of the consumer culture.³³⁷

Tyler accuses the political system of the US with its subordinate authorities and institutions of utter ignorance to social issues and injustice: “You don’t care where I live or how I feel, or what I eat or how I feed my kids or how I pay the doctor if I get sick, and yes I am stupid and bored and weak, but I am still your responsibility.”³³⁸ The people are portrayed frustrated and desperate and in a seemingly hopeless position which results in a sort of mental regression back to primitive force of violence, rebellion, and fury targeted at the cultural heritage or anything regarded worthy protection:

I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I’d never have. Burn the Amazon rain forests. (...) Open the dump valves on supertankers and uncap offshore oil wells, (...) and smother the French beaches I’d never see. (...) I wanted to burn the Louvre, (...) and wipe my ass with the *Mona Lisa*.³³⁹

The only way to start a profound social change is considered by them to be detonations of every sign of civilization that would ultimately result in a world-scale reset: “It’s Project Mayhem that’s going to save the world. (...) Project Mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover.”³⁴⁰ Interestingly, d’Hont’s analysis considers Project Mayhem to develop into a sort of “social disease” that is: “Rapidly spreading metaphorical illness that disrupts the social fabric through a range of physical pranks and increasingly violent terrorist attacks,”³⁴¹ and, in its terminal form, constantly proliferating across the country even beyond Tyler’s awareness. On the other hand, Mookerjee suggest the opposite: the society is already infected by fake beliefs of life permanence, perpetual

³³⁶ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 150.

³³⁷ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 161-162.

³³⁸ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 115.

³³⁹ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 123-124.

³⁴⁰ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 125.

³⁴¹ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 150.

progress and economic prosperity, and inadequate ideals of masculinity, to which Tyler's spiritual promise of regulated self-destruction would be a cure: "justifying destructive acts – a sort of chemotherapy on a global scale."³⁴² However, they both regard the novel's ending anticlimactic, and the portrayed social change failed. For Mookerjee, the story ironically demonstrates the inevitable circular nature of both political or spiritual revolutions that: "Begin as subjective experiences of enlightenment or liberation and end as rigid, hierarchical institutions,"³⁴³ while d'Hont argues that the initially revolutionary movement only restructured and reinforced the already oppressive practices of capitalist society, therefore, it illustrates that: "Transgression is a cyclical process of redevelopment rather than a destructive form of radicalism."³⁴⁴

The novel regards violence and anger as "traditionally" masculine qualities which are fostered by fight clubs as an energy to both express but also answer fears, frustrations, anxieties, or life unfulfillment of the generation of men who feel meaningless. Tyler transgressively tries to persuade the audience to accept violence as the only response against social constraints and which would allow them to achieve authentic sense of freedom. However, in the context of the story, violence is not portrayed only as transgressive force that would question or challenge, but foremost as a destructive one. Violence is, therefore, presented to cause situations where people are fatally injured, mutilated, and killed; buildings and property blown up or burnt; and which, despite being employed by the supposed victims of the political system, produces even worse reality of brutal anarchy and self-destructive ideology with devastating consequences.

2.3.4 Socio-historic context and conclusion

The novel was written at the beginning of the 1990s' which was a time of economic prosperity, rapid technological development, and immense

³⁴² Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 225.

³⁴³ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 227.

³⁴⁴ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 167.

popularity of mainstream culture offering mostly trivial entertainment while, at the same time, being infested with intrusive advertisement that would encourage the audience to indulge in excessive consumerism. Since majority of transgressive fiction attacks the predominant systems of values and norms present in the socio-historic context, *Fight Club* challenges and satirizes some of its most problematic aspects, namely: toxic work environment, extreme emphasis on constant self-improvement and development, the obsessive need to consume and to acquire material possessions: “Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don’t need,”³⁴⁵ or lonely reality of individuals alienated from each other without a sense of purpose and hope which results in an overwhelming crisis of spirit: “We don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but (...) we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression.”³⁴⁶

As d’Hont states, the extra-textual context is greatly determined by the neoliberal capitalism, mass production, and consumerism, however, she claims that the novel surprisingly does not provide an alternative to it, but instead rather brutally examines its core ideas and mechanisms: “*Fight Club* highlights and critically explores how these systems are constructed, how they rely on attractive ideological imagery such as freedom and masculinity, and how they painfully contrast with, (...), the everyday reality of social practice.”³⁴⁷ Although D’Hont sometimes overly relies on the Marxist interpretation of the novel as a critique of neoliberalism and its accompanying exploitative dynamic of trade or discriminatory conditions of personal freedoms, she also presents valuable examples of real-world violent acts that have parallels with violence in the story. For example, she mentions bombing campaigns of the Unabomber, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building by Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City in 1996, and the similarities between activities of Project Mayhem and crimes of the Michigan Militia movement, or bank robberies, bombings, and murders

³⁴⁵ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 149.

³⁴⁶ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 149.

³⁴⁷ D’Hont, *Extreme States*, 164.

committed by a white supremacist group called the Silent Brotherhood operating in 1980s'. The novel might, thus, intentionally use and exaggerate real conflicts to critically inspect how ideological redevelopments correlate with nihilistic view on one's life or with physical destruction in general.³⁴⁸

Even though, at the end of the last century, the US was one of the wealthiest countries in the world and most Americans did not face material hardships, a sense of alienation and lack of meaning spread in the society. Such depression comes from the feeling of being helpless and insignificant in confrontation with outrageous practices of big corporations, the injustice of social system, or environmental crises, but also in personal situations of suffering from fatal disease and dealing with one's mortality. Mookerjee concludes, that *Fight Club* visualizes the twofold nature of established models of living inside the boundaries of social institutions such employment, or romantic relationships, from which the protagonists try to break free because: "The conventions of life are incompatible with visceral experiences that form the basis of genuine identity,"³⁴⁹ only to later settle in reimagined form of existence that yields to the very same social influences, which suggests that: "The patterns instilled in us by life inside societal superstructures are inescapable."³⁵⁰

Transgressive escapism to the materiality of body, indulgence in physical sensations of sex, fights, and pain are in the book considered as a way to cope with everything happening in the world that an individual cannot influence. However, it is mainly the violence, which is provocatively offered by Tyler to the audience as a potential solution and cure that would bring spiritual enlightenment and social change, which makes *Fight Club* truly transgressive for trying to justify intended collapse of our civilization and self-destruction as valid scenario, while, at the same time, showing how nonsensical such strategy is.

³⁴⁸ D'Hont, *Extreme States*, 140.

³⁴⁹ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 227.

³⁵⁰ Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*, 227.

3 Conclusion

In the theoretical part of my thesis, I used the theory of discourse, developed by Foucault, to establish a theoretical framework for defining transgression which requires authoritative sets of rules and norms to be meaningful. Then, building upon works of Foucault and Jenks, I characterized transgression as a time-framed disruptions of complex systems of limits, hierarchies, and normative boundaries within the dominant culture and society which are enforced by a whole body of institutions and authorities such as: the judiciary, politicians, governments, official media, universities, science, or arts. Using theoretical observations of Silverblatt, Jenks, and Booker, I described transgressive fiction as its own genre emerging in its pure form in the post-war literary context and borrowing many of its characteristic features from postmodern literature and aesthetics. This genre soon became notorious for depiction of extreme violence, scandalous sexual behavior, drug abuse, perverted morals, and shocking storylines narrated by social outlaws, or people of depraved ethics in general. Although writers shortly recognized such controversial potential to attract public attention, hence many authors embraced those themes as their personal hallmarks, Mookerjee and d'Hont, among other scholars, state that transgressive fiction rarely works with offensive language, appalling motifs, and graphic imagery of sex or violence only for the sake of being willfully shocking.

Mookerjee considers transgressive fiction as a continuation of the mock-epic, a genre developing for centuries, which satirizes, imitates, and exaggerates aspects of its socio-historic context that the authors find problematic or simply ludicrous. D'Hont, on the other hand, presents an interpretation of transgressive fiction as a fictional space where acts of transgression are performed to challenge extra-textual limits, norms, and laws, or religious beliefs, political ideologies, and dominant lifestyles. Such "symbolic laboratory" then creates a possibility to test and interrogate events or ideas outside the novel in a greatly provocative manner consisting of visceral depiction of corporeal existence, radical reasoning, or open

violence. I then defined these features as carnivalesque qualities, and by employing theories of Booker and Stallybrass, I developed an argument that transgressive fiction serves as a virtual carnivalesque space of temporal disorder so the ideological structures and narratives can be critically examined, and traditional perspectives questioned.

Establishing the carnival as a characteristic attribute of transgressive fiction, I connected this genre with a theme of the human body and corporeal reality which is characteristically depicted in a vulgar, brutal, and expressive way. Since bodies often become violated, I worked with Hume's theory of aggressive fiction in which she describes various forms of attacks on readers' set of values and internalized social laws so their inherent normative, discriminatory, or even abusive effects are revealed. Along with descriptions of violence, transgressive fiction uses radical literary devices and portrays other uncomfortable situations to convey its intended message and disrupt the readers' expectations and reading experience. Therefore, the audience, to make sense out of the novel, is forced to abandon their automatic responses and a priori conclusions and draw their own instead. Based on such theoretical framework, I argue that open violence is yet another way how transgressive fiction subverts, interrogates, and makes visible some of the problematic aspects of its socio-historical context.

William S. Burroughs in *Nova Express* creates a world invaded by parasitic aliens which infected people on the Earth with a virus in the form of language. The ultimate point of the invasion is a world-scale explosion that would turn the planet into a nova star which intentionally resembles the effects of nuclear weapons used in WWII. The novel attacks the audience with a dizzying narrative speed, grotesque imagery of body transformations and violations. Burroughs radically transgresses our sense of normal corporeality by blending it with animal features and turning it into a test subject that reflects heartless and brutal methods of scientific or social experiments on people performed by institutions and authorities. The novel also transgresses norms of sexual behavior, especially of its time, and compares drug abuse to consumerism. Transgressions of social norms, accusations of mass media and the executive branch of states

for participating in the conspiracy against humankind, and depiction of the war propaganda abusing people's fear of annihilation, therefore serve to challenge the post-war political systems and visualize how violence continues to be a legitimate strategy of American policy.

American Psycho portrays a story of a young and successful Wall Street banker who leads a second life as a psychopathic serial killer that tortures and sexually abuses his victims in the most gruesome fashion. On one hand, he embodies the cultural and social ideals of his time, yet on the other hand, he also displays problematic features of such consumer culture: narcissism, object fetishism, and compulsive obsession with the exterior of people and things. The novel transgresses our expectations of human interactions, questions our social values and ethics, and subverts the capitalist ideology of prosperity and freedoms achieved exclusively by means of money, career, or personal effort. The shocking physical and sexual violence of mutilated bodies emphasizes some predatory extra-textual political, social, and economic concepts that depend on dehumanization of people and objectification of human bodies. Bodies, thus, serve as a site which both reflects the cultural demands and norms determining its ideal form, but which is also greatly affected, transformed, and violated by exploitative and aggressive practices deriving from the very same socio-cultural background.

The novel *Fight Club* is laden with corporeal imagery of disease, body deformations, and generally sick bodies which reflect the condition of society. Men, especially, seem to suffer from being emasculated by their mundane lives outlined by mainstream culture, trivial entertainment, and senseless middle-class career. The novel employs extreme physical violence as a kind of nihilistic coping mechanism against the identity crisis which transgresses our sense of self-preservation and ideas of affiliation with other people. Causing and withstanding pain is provocatively suggested to help accepting one's mortality and reach authentic corporeal experience. What started first as a form of radical therapy, was then applied in terrorist attacks and social chaos to the entire country to start a cultural reset and revolution against consumerism and capitalism. *Fight Club* transgressively

justifies an otherwise immoral and absurd philosophy of civilization renewal through its destruction. However, it, at the same time, shows that such strategy would lead to an even worse totalitarian reality which literally consumes human bodies and results in heavy casualties.

Regarding the three book analyses, transgressive fiction demonstrates capability to evolve and change along with its extra-textual context from which it inevitably draws motifs, themes, and ideas to explore. The genre can be, as d'Hont's theory suggested, interpreted as a literary medium that allows critical examination and interrogation of political ideologies, social rules and conventions, and cultural norms that dominate over the official discourse. In doing so, the genre employs radically expressive and provocative language, uses transgressive potential in the corporeal qualities of carnivalesque and grotesque, and attacks reader's sets of values, beliefs, and laws to highlight some of their potential flaws. All of that compose an uncompromising aesthetics which frequently works with graphic corporeal imagery. The textual analyses, therefore, proved that human body is a valuable site which manifests negative, exploitative, or violent effects of its environment determined by sets of imposed rules, standards, and requirements serving a certain ideological agenda. The transgressive violence performed on human bodies results in a powerful effect that facilitates to visualize and materialize foul practices and treacherous ideas that might otherwise remain invisible. It also induces visceral responses in readers who are usually offered neither catharsis nor guidance exclusively from the text. The aim of transgressive fiction is to make its audience to think for themselves and figure on their own whether the story presents arguments to maintain the current status quo, or rather suggests its change.

4 Resumé

V této diplomové práci se zaměřuji na literární díla žánru transgresivní fikce v rámci americké literatury druhé poloviny 20. století, ze které jsem vybral tři díla: *Nova Express*, *American Psycho* a *Fight Club*. Pro vymezení teoretického rámce používám definice diskurzu a transgrese navržené Michelem Foucaultem, které dále doplňuji poznatky Chrise Jenkse. Transgresi definuji jako dočasné narušení, překročení a záměrné nedodržení všeobecně stanovených společenských norem, hranic vkusu nebo akceptovaných představ normálního chování. Záměrem transgrese, která je vždy podmíněna časem a prostorem, je zjistit prostupnost daných limitů a testovat, zdali jsou tyto normy a pravidla stále platné a odpovídají společenskému nebo kulturnímu konsensu.

Použitím teorií M. K. Bookera, Petera Stallybrasse a Robina Mookerjeeho charakterizují transgresivní fikci jako žánr, který si stanovuje za cíl narušovat čtenářovy představy o společnosti a lidské povaze za použití provokativních myšlenek, šokujícího zobrazení fyzického i sexuální násilí či otevřeného popisu sexuality a tělesnosti se všemi jejími biologickými procesy a znaky. Tím transgresivní fikce využívá kvalit grotesknosti, chaosu a vulgárního humoru k nabourání čtenářova pohledu na dominující ideologie, metody nebo způsoby jednání, která jsou tak podrobena kritickému rozboru. K tomuto tvrzení využívám studie Coco d’Hont, která interpretuje tento žánr jako „fiktivní sociální laboratoř“, ve které jsou znázorněny absurdní, násilné a manipulativní aspekty společnosti a politického uspořádání v daném socio-historickém kontextu. Pro kategorizaci transgresivních prvků vycházím z poznatků Kathryn Hume, která analyzuje charakteristické literární prostředky a motivy sloužící k narušení čtenářových očekávání a jistot.

Kniha *Nova Express* zobrazuje drastické přeměny lidského těla způsobené jak drogovou závislostí, tak vědeckými experimenty v rámci boje

s mimozemským virem. Lidé jsou v textu záměrně zredukováni na anonymní tělesnou hmotu, což usnadňuje státem řízenou válečnou propagandu a totalitní kontrolu nad obyvatelstvem. William S. Burroughs tak upozorňuje na politickou manipulaci v dobách ideologických konfliktů a s tím spojené extrémní násilí s reálnou hrozbou nukleární války. *American Psycho* vychází z prostředí neoliberálního kapitalismu konce 80. let minulého století, jehož zhoubný vliv zobrazuje v postavě úspěšného bankéře a sériového vraha. Brutální vraždy se odehrávají na pozadí všudypřítomného konzumu a posedlosti zevnějškem. Tento kontrast poukazuje na objektivizaci lidského těla a dehumanizaci sociálně slabých obyvatel, čemuž v záplavě informací společnost nevěnuje pozornost. S tématem společenské krize a konzumerismu pracuje i *Fight Club*, ovšem klíčovou se stává otázka svobody jednotlivce a krize mužské identity. Lidská těla jsou vyobrazena deformovaná a postižená smrtelnými nemocemi, což odpovídá psychickému stavu moderní společnosti. Muži hledají smysl života skrze surové násilí a teroristické útoky ve jméno sociální revoluce. Kniha svým závěrem demonstruje nesmyslnost této strategie, jelikož vede pouze k sebedestrukci a chaosu.

Textovou analýzou vybraných knih docházím k závěru, že zobrazení, popis a charakteristika lidského těla určitého díla reflektuje dané ideologické a kulturní prostředí. Toto prostředí pomocí svých norem a standardů nevyhnutelně formuje, přetváří a ovlivňuje tělesnou zkušenost lidí v něm žijících. Vyobrazené násilí umocňuje negativní vliv daného společensko-politického systému na jednotlivce, kteří se často stávají oběťmi agresivních praktik nebo fyzických útoků, které svojí povahou odpovídají vládnoucímu systému a jeho ideologii. Transgresivní fikce tudíž svojí podstatou satirizuje, kritizuje, imituje a zviditelňuje svůj extratextuální kontext, ze kterého čerpá témata, ideje a situace pro zformování svého transgresivního potenciálu, což v poválečném kontextu nejčastěji bývají problémy spojené s odcizením, duševní krizí, kapitalismem, nebo neudržitelným konzumerismem. Kvůli oné

nezbytné provázanosti s danou dobou a prostředím se žánr transgresivní fikce neustále vyvíjí v čase, opouští stará témata a vyhledává aktuální, která by mohl radikálním a provokativním způsobem zobrazit.

5 Annotation

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In this thesis, I focus on American transgressive fiction of the second half of the 20th century from which I selected three novels, namely: *Nova Express*, *American Psycho*, and *Fight Club*. After establishing a theoretical framework based on Michel Foucault's theories of discourse and transgression, further developed by Chris Jenks, I define the genre of transgressive fiction with its characteristic features and themes. While employing concepts of the carnivalesque, grotesque, and Robin Mookerjee's theory of the mock-epic, I then link themes of human body and violence to the tradition of transgressive fiction. Using the method of categorizing literary attacks by Kathryn Hume and reading transgressive elements in the texts as a critical examination of dominant ideologies and systems from the extra-textual context, as proposed by Coco d'Hont, I further analyze the role of body imagery and violent acts portrayed in the selected novels. I focus primarily on the relation between the nature of violence performed on human bodies and the ideological, political, or social practices operating in the depicted environment.

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