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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 We live in an increasingly materialistic society in which nearly everything is for sale. The effects of this development are ambivalent: while we can pick and choose the accoutrements that best fit our lives and the image we want to project, the ability to fulfill those wishes and goals is still impacted and dictated by our class status, our gender, our sexual orientation and our race. What I can consume depends on the amount of currency I have – be it social, cultural or monetary. And with the freedom to consume also comes the pressure to do so. Membership and acceptance in a community can be dependent on our ability to buy the latest fashion and the newest gadget or to travel to the hippest vacation spot. And this pressure, too, is gendered: adhering to beauty standards, for a woman, often involves footing the bill for expensive make-up, clothes, gym memberships or even plastic surgery. In this issue of *gender forum*, the contributors discuss various aspects of consumer culture and examine the myriad and often problematic ways in which consumption and gender are interrelated.

2 In the article “Feminism from a New Perspective: The Single Girl and Bachelor Phenomena”, Susanne Schmitz and Julia König shed some new light on the rise of consumer culture after the second world war and describe the ways in which the economic situation enabled women to establish themselves in the workforce and thus gain an independence they had never enjoyed before.

3 Situated in a different watershed era, in the booming 1980s, the film *American Psycho* focuses on the negative effects of consumerism in the milieu of the so-called "yuppies". In her the article “Consumerism and Madness in Mary Harron’s *American Psycho*”, Svetlana Asanova traces the debilitating pressure to conform, and the resulting superficiality that drive the protagonist of the movie to murder. Here, the focus lies on the male psyche, as "engaging in commodified recreational activities started to lose its stigma as being a women’s domain", and men began to be specifically targetetd as consumers in the second half of the 19th century.

4 In the third contribution, Ole Reinsch discusses the phenomenon of the *flapper girl*. With a side-by-side analysis of *flapperdom* in the US and in Germany, he tries to anwer the question as to whether this consumption-oriented approach to femininity with its focus on physical appearance has feminist potential. "These women’s hedonism is highly marked by consumption: consumption of mass industrial products, consumption of mass culture and mass media, consumption of urban nightlife, consumption of sexuality", he writes. But did

this, albeit temporary, freedom to consume contribute to the goals of the women's and suffragette's movements?

5 This issue also features a review by Rosemary Onyango, who discusses the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. Here, too, questions of possession and consumption are considered, as Skloot examines the life of Lacks, whose cells were used for medical research without her knowledge or consent. Lacks and her family were never reimbursed, though the research with her cells has yielded numerous marketable results. Do we have a right to our own body? Does this right extend beyond death, and does it include tissue that was removed? Crucial to these considerations are the facts of Lack's status as a poor, black woman, which Skloot also takes into account in her analysis.

Feminism from a new perspective: the single girl and bachelor phenomena

By Susanne Schmitz and Julia König, University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract:

In this article we argue that the phenomenon of the single girls can be seen as feminist. The factor of consumption is an important link to other feminist movements, further we try to involve the *Playboy* magazine as a part of the sexual revolution. Hugh Hefner and the single girls claimed the right to enjoy their sexuality further they struggled against patriarchal society. In this paper we will show that against different feminist positions, the *Playboy* magazine in the early 50s initiated the creation of the so-called new bachelor who can be seen as the counterpart of the so-called single girl. Besides, the article links the American bachelor and single girls to the solitary women in Germany. All of them were searching for strategies to disengage themselves from the patriarchal construction of society.

1 The state of being single among women and men is not new. Even 100 years ago, the American and German populations included singles or people who lived alone. Publicly they were associated with mostly negative images. However since the 1930s, several terms – including *the bachelor and the single girl* – emerged in which singles were connoted positively within mainstream discourse (Chudacoff). The emerging playboy of the 1930s belongs to the category of the bachelor, as well – that man who prefers playing and consuming to working and getting married (Kimmel 255). He prefers “consuming” his counterpart, the working, urban young woman, the Single Girl. From a popcultural standpoint, the icons of this phenomenon would be the movie-couple Rock Hudson and Doris Day. Throughout history this phenomenon can be located before the global economic crisis of the 1920s in the shape of the so-called *flapper girls*. After World War II there was a resurgence for the verve of tough women. It was the era of the single girls, who demanded, like Rosalind Russel in *His Girl Friday*, “take me as I am instead of changing me” (Faludi).

2 However, was this single girl phenomenon just a temporary fashion, does it represent movie characters of the post-war era or was it a social movement that we can consider feminist? There is no general definition of what a so-called single girl represents – besides the fact that she lived on her own – as she is defined by heterogeneity. If one takes the socio-scientific state of research into consideration, the scientific community is at odds and three terms can be found to describe the *state of living alone*. According to Bachmann, the terms for being single and living alone seem to exist as semantic metamorphoses which are rarely comprehensible, and that everyone can apply when it comes to the subject of a “disengaged life”. In this essay, the term single will be applied for any form of a solitary life. Even though the more neutral word “single” substituted the terms *Bachelor* and *Spinster* from the 1960s

onwards, the term Bachelor will be used for solitary men, as we want to place the phenomenon of the single-girls as well as the Bachelor in a historical perspective. Further we use the term phenomenon for solitary women within the USA and we will be discussing at least briefly about the German solitary women as a social movement. Sidney Torrows claims that social movements are characterized by people who do not participate in the political and public sphere are now involved in the active shaping of the latter. According to this claim, one could argue that the single girls in Germany after World War II were a social and to some extent feminist movement, whereas one has to speak of the US single girls as a phenomenon since social phenomena are only to be understood within their process-related structural frame, according to the sociologist Norbert Elias. Within these structures the participants form constellations that are within and in relation to society subordinated to a mutual alteration. This way of looking upon single women from a historical perspective is neglected in academic literature so far. Disengaged women, who in a way can be considered to be marginalized in society to date, are a global socio-cultural phenomenon. Their history reaches far into the past. Within historical discourse, these women were confronted with several stereotypes. At the turn of the century it was above all the self-dependent immigrant women in the USA who caused the American women of the Victorian era quite a headache. Using a racist morality, the latter fiercely fought the former. At this point it is crucial to mention that this marginal group possessed the power to constitute an independent community. After World War II, white middle-class women moved into the discourse of an independent and consumption-oriented femininity. Here in the discourse, consumption primarily refers to the consumption of sex.

3 In Germany the situation was a bit different. Here it was the women who supported each other to secure their existence as well as the existence of their relatives within the devastated landscape of the post-war years, all of that completely self-determined and without any men. Within this community, it was possible to live in lesbian relationships for the first time without having to face legal or social repercussions. Hence the women had a responsibility not only for themselves but for their relatives and friends, as well (Schulze and Meyer 30-43). Already during the last years of war, many women moved together into apartment-sharing communities, voluntary or not, and often remained there after the war. Women-households can be seen as a consequence of the war. As a result of living together it became possible for the women to secure their existence and to start the reconstruction. After 1945 it became an urgent necessity for the women help each other and reconstruct the destroyed nation, due to the fact that many men did not return from war or were captured by

the allied forces. At that time there was no distinction between single women and wives, neither conceptually nor socially, – as many lived without a man. They were just referred to as women. Nevertheless discrimination against self-sustaining women existed. In contrast to the USA, it is of interest for the German post-war situation, that a difference was made between the so-called *Trümmerfrauen*, or women of the rubble and the so-called American *sweethearts*. The former were reconstructing Germany through hard work whereas the latter were sustaining their existence through contact with soldiers of the allied forces. Both practices were a reality for everybody during the post-war years, one had to work, one exchanged things, one organized, one celebrated. But there was a distinction between the working *Trümmerfrauen* on the one hand and the consuming *Fräuleins* or *sweethearts* on the other. While within official discourse the former group became the icons of the recovering Germany, it could happen very fast to a *Fräulein* to get denounced by a neighbor, to get attacked or even to get their head shaven as a so-called American prostitute (Bauer).

4 Like her American counterpart, the German women consumed as well as worked. But in contrast to the USA, the destruction of the war led to the opening of structures which lead to a society of independent women. That this society can be understood as a movement as well as a realization and not only as a lifestyle, is shown by the public debates within the print media of the 1940s read by women. Instead of cooking recipes and fashion advice, alternatives to the common family model were openly discussed. For instance, in 1948 the women's magazine *Constanze*, which was later called *Brigitte*, was published for the first time. While *Constanze* was promoting the emancipation of women and the abolition of marriage during the late 1940s, a backlash occurred during the 1950s: traditional values were on the agenda again. The status of being a mother and wife was again the focus of the time. After the collapse of the Nazi regime a strong wave of emancipation took place. This “new” woman considered herself to be innovative and broke away from old role models, in private as well as in public life (Schlaffer). Not until the further process of the post-war years and with the return of men did the situation change and people began discussing the solitary lifestyles of women again. The men who returned saw their social normality threatened – nothing was as it used to be. Where they had had control over their families and wives years ago, they were now confronted with emancipated women who did not want to give up their newly gained freedom. One can see this discrepancy between the genders by the rate of divorce which increased drastically. In 1948, every sixth marriage ended in divorce, in comparison to that it was only every twelfth right after the end of the war. Especially the so-called war marriages were breaking up quickly. Realizing that not only the cities and streets

were completely destroyed but the gender order was destroyed as well seemed to completely humiliate the men in their gender role. Just as there were no women anymore who were conforming to traditional gender roles, the nation of men did not exist after being propagated by the Nazi regime for the last 13 years. Not few men that returned refused to talk about what they experienced in war and insisted on taking their old position as family provider. As they already felt humiliated through the war years and the defeat, they wanted to reconstruct the old rules within the strange and unknown world. The women who had done everything on their own for the last years were now asked to give up their new positions and go back to the kitchen.

5 In public life and in all four sectors the *Überparteiliche Frauenausschüsse* were founded. At first they were a contact-point for the allied forces; they were also responsible for the organization of help for the hunger and housing crises. After 12 years of an autocratic one-party-landscape that had revoked women's right to vote, the whole spectrum of women within the committees was represented, among the women were lawyers, teachers and so on. In the beginning these committees supported the needy and helped them with the absolutely necessary. Later they became politically active. They dealt with the questions concerning the reconstruction. For this reason they founded working teams in different German cities. These teams were concerned with health and nutrition as well as questions of economy, housing and construction. Soon the number of members reached 5000 and represented a serious political movement.

6 The women who participated in these committees were not confronted with the problem of being discriminated against concerning their marriage status. During the post-war years these women had learned to be responsible for themselves and their families, which meant making important decisions without their men. Now the value of support by other women increased. A lot of young solitary women had developed great self-esteem and were no longer tempted by marriage (*Emma*). Due to the lack of men there was no real variety for the women to choose from. Approximately three million men were killed in war. With this figure in mind, one soon spoke of women as being in excess (Schubert and Kuhn), which can be seen as a discriminating moment in history as the term excess already implies an unnecessary amount of women. However one can assume that the women living in these household-communities did not think of themselves as being in excess. This term leads to the men's anxiety, for had it not been them, the former world's heroes and conquerors, who thought of themselves as being useless in this new society of women?

7 The solitary women's movement, which was insulted by the term *being in excess*, can be called a feminist one due to their self-determined living. However the movement was seen as being problematic in a way by other political parties. Hence the bourgeois ideal of marriage was much propagated among the population. German politicians wished to see the women in the kitchen again soon after the balance between the amount of women and men was re-established. Particularly the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) saw families without a male provider as a relic of the dark past whereas traditional families with a male provider functioned as representatives of a better future. Women were discouraged from political activity and the party executives prohibited their actions in the women's committees. While solitary women were accepted, an interest in a return to the old values and old normalcy increased among the population. To date the fact that the women accepted their old roles quickly and without protesting is still a phenomenon which is not understood by women's historiography.

8 The negative connotation of being single in Germany from the 1950s onwards has its counterpart in the American anti-communist containment politics, in which above all the nuclear family, with the father as provider and the mother as the household manager, and its sexual morality should be secured. Nevertheless the picture of the consuming and not preserving woman asserted itself. One of the representatives of this change is the journalist and later editor-in-chief of the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, Helen Brown. Her book *Sex and the Single Girl* represented a guidebook for the lives of many women. In the book Brown draws attention to the old-fashioned beliefs regarding the perception of women. By depicting the Single Girl as sexually active, attractive, admirable and able, within private as well as public sphere, Brown provoked a scandal in American society (Cargan 200-208). Even though the book was not seen as a feminist one, it is in our opinion much more radical than one of the classic feminist books, *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published one year later and written by Betty Friedan. Brown's call for a self-determined, sexually aggressive and fulfilled life with changing partners can be interpreted from a present-day view at least as feminist as Friedan's book about "the problem that has no name". In contrast to Friedan, Brown postulated a fulfilled sexual and career-orientated life with a lover even after marriage.

9 Equivalent to the Single Girl phenomenon, one of the most important magazines for men emerged in 1953: *Playboy*. Since the release of the first US issue in December 1953, the magazine has had a high male readership, but at the same time it was rejected vehemently by the majority of the population. In fact Hugh Hefner was initially seen as a part of a masculine rebellion against conformity (Cuordileone). This rebellion was connected with the early

stages of the sexual revolution. The propagated adultery was combined with articles on African-American music, literary extracts from the Decameron as well as contemporary works and left-orientated political debates (Hefner). The vehement response that followed can be positioned within the *Playboy's* historical context in the Cold War. The magazine opposed *the return to morality* propagated by the government. Particularly the Single Girl was preferred to a wife or in the words of Barbara Ehrenreich "Playboys loved women and hated wives" (Ehrenreich). The magazine represented an attack on the rigid, American post-war era dominated by sexual-, social-, political and gender-norms. It transformed the traditional American husband and father into a Playboy (Preciado 57). Now, a counterculture emerged for the first time and was completely new in its way for the USA, as there was no kind of Boheme or Beat-Generation yet (Preciado 18). During the global economic crisis, the image of the consuming instead of working man had taken a back seat, but after the end of World War II it emerged all the more.

10 From a feminist point of view, the Bachelor, as well as the Single Girl can be understood as a destabilization of normative gender relations. Depicted in historiography as a crisis of masculinity, it rather represented an adjustment as well as a struggle for new concepts and forms femininity and masculinity. The magazine initiated a re-organisation of sexual – and gender codes, so that one can identify two models of masculinity for the 1950s – one the one hand the figure of the charming playboy, here we think of James Dean for instance, and the figure of the "hypermasculine man" on the other hand (Kimmel). The *Playboy* stands for a constructed masculinity that was a result of a series of image - and information technologies (Preciado 31), and it opposed a naturalistic image of manhood. The fact that the stereotypical white, white-collar middle-class husband did not conform to either of the two models only increased the pressure on men. This opposition was favored by the new economic conditions of the post war era, which let the original body image of man become more and more a memory. The *Playboy* tries to define the turning to the interior space of the private life as a "process of masculization of the home and not just as a feminization of the urban bachelor" (Preciado 30). Through the re-distribution of traditional spaces, which were attributive to the feminine and the masculine, a breaking of normative society constructions could take place. Within these counter-spaces, which can be defined as heterotopic, the moral codes are invalidated. In the case of the single girls, bachelors and playboys, this restructuring of normative codes can be found at the margins of society. However the phenomena of the single girls and bachelor managed to come out of the margins into the middle of society.

11 Through the emerging comfort and the possibility of individual consumerism, the masculine body changed. Now consumerism meant a new way of identity construction and offered a way to shift hegemonic codes of society. From the 1960s and 70s onwards, self-gratification within the new bachelor subculture was brought into focus. The emotional as well as material satisfaction had its roots in the anxiety and insecurity due to the political climate, the economy and the thread of a nuclear catastrophe (Andrew 38). Thanks to the so-called sexual revolution, which harshly criticized the bourgeois forms of living, books like Brown's appeared to be very old fashioned and magazines like the *Playboy* were defined as hostile against women. In fact the way women were depicted changed in the magazine towards the well-known and sexist bunnies. Furthermore one can see this change in the transformation of the journalistic articles. Now, the reader will not find literary abstracts or articles with a political message, but more and more depictions of playmates and pin-up girls. While the reader was supposed to get the impression of a voyeuristic gaze into the private and interior of the neighborhood at the beginning of the 1950s, through the depiction of lightly dressed ladies in a domestic environment, the depiction of playmates and pin-ups was meant to function only as entertainment and satisfaction of the masculine reader. The depiction of women was intended to protect the bachelor from being called insinuations of homosexuality by his environment. However it is remarkable, that particularly these images were taken and constructed not through a male gaze but by a woman, the photographer Bunny Yeager.

12 To conclude, one can see the point of intersection between single girls and bachelors or playboys in a historical perspective. Both sides rejected the patriarchal-constructed society and developed a counter-model for their own identity construction. This counter-model of both sides is similar in their main features. Both groups defined themselves with the means of consumerism, as they consumed sex and material goods. The motivation of the single-girls as well as bachelors had its foundation in the becoming of subjects in their own history and the counteracting of old patriarchal structures of society.

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Consumerism and Madness in Mary Harron's *American Psycho*

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Abstract:

Situated in a different watershed era, in the booming 1980s, the film *American Psycho* focuses on the negative effects of consumerism in the milieu of the so-called "yuppies". This article traces the debilitating pressure to conform, and the resulting superficiality that drive the protagonist of the movie to murder. Here, the focus lies on the male psyche, as "engaging in commodified recreational activities started to lose its stigma as being a women's domain", and men began to be specifically targeted as consumers in the second half of the 20th century.

1 Every day in our lives we are surrounded by objects that we have acquired. These objects can represent a memory, a tie to one's identity, or a symbol of someone's social status. But what happens in a culture where the surplus of goods leads to excessive consumption and commodification not only of objects, but of people as well? Consumerism has become a point of concern for many in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Miles 9). And at the beginning of the new millennium, its effects are more present than ever.

2 The media are overflowed with images of the next 'it'-thing: be it a new bag, a new gadget, or a new hip location. The medial portrayal of modern consumerism ranges from light and comedic, such as *The Shopaholic* novels by Sophie Kinsella or the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) to the rather dystopian view of Western consumerism that one can find in the films *Fight Club* (1999) or *American Psycho* (2000).

3 Mary Harron's film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's novel, which was written in the context of a growing concern about the 1980s consumer culture, depicts this darker side of consumerism and the inner emptiness and isolation to which it leads its characters. For many people consumerism has been the only societal practice that they have ever experienced, hence, it is difficult to separate oneself from it without looking into its origins and examining the phenomenon in its entirety.

4 The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine the evolution and the establishment of the present-day consumer culture. I would like to give a critical analysis of the impact of the media in creating and promoting consumer culture and the influence it exercises on consumers through the medium of advertising, particularly, on male consumers since the protagonist of Harron's film is male and a member of a men-only clique. Specifically, I would like to focus on media's negative impact on the consumer psyche because Easton's novel was created during the heyday of the Wall Street yuppie culture and the rise of a new kind of narcissist.

The Evolution of Consumer Culture: from town fairs to globalized dream consumption

5 In order to proceed with the topic, it is necessary to point out that there are different approaches to the term 'consumption' among theorists. According to Douglas J. Goodman and Mireille Cohen, it is "the set of practices through which commodities become a part of a particular individual" (Goodman & Cohen 2). These theorists, therefore, emphasize the connections between people and the goods they consume which means that even mass-produced commodities, once acquired, become instantly individualized. This, certainly, corresponds with the model of 'traditional consumption'.

6 'Traditional consumption' refers to the period when consumed goods were either produced within a family or, at least, locally. Hence, there was a personal connection to the consumed goods. The closest equivalent to modern-day shopping were weekly markets or bigger seasonal fairs which were "virtually international markets" (5), however, with several great differences: most goods were not displayed and the main practice was bargaining, not browsing (5).

7 In contrast to the above-mentioned definition, Mark Swiencicki defines "'consumption,' 'consume' and 'consuming' as the mere use of manufactured goods or services, whereas a 'consumer' is one who acquires such goods or services by exchanging money" (Swiencicki 774). He does not stress any connection that is established between a consumer and the acquired goods, focusing more on the monetary exchange and the utility of such goods: a definition that corresponds to the modern state of consumerism.

The origins of modern consumption and its establishment

8 The exact transition period from traditional consumption to consumer culture is difficult to pinpoint. Most theorists and historians agree that the change occurred after the Industrial Revolution (Stearns 44). There are, however, those who argue that this development took place "anywhere between the sixteenth century and the 1980s" (Miles 6). Whether the origins of consumerism are to be found at 17th century French fairs or English markets in the 18th century, it is indisputable, among scholars, that any phenomenon similar to consumer culture was not present in the Western world before the 19th century (Goodman & Cohen 6).

9 Such development is linked to the rise of a 'mass society' where the population is concentrated in urban centers, rather than in isolated locations. This transition from a rural to an urban environment was accompanied by loosening of the communal ties and the shift from a collective to an individual self (Cushman 600). Evidence exhibits a "radically different way

of life in terms of social structures, social values and attitudes, [...] a society built upon the thirst for novelty” (Miles 6ff).

10 The increase in population fueled the increase in demand for production which, in turn, had to be matched by changes of supply in an expanding marketplace. The growth of working class purchasing power, thanks to the industrial employment, played a crucial role in the emergence of the new consumer society (Swienicki 786). The increase in consumption accelerated while the gap between producers and consumers widened. First, standardized goods became available at low cost and then “gradually, luxurious consumer goods became everyday items” (Miles 6ff). According to Ralph F. Bogardus: “Youth had already bought into modern taste by 1926, so consumer culture was in place” (513) and Peter Stearns confirms: “The symptoms accelerated fairly steadily into the 1920s, when much of the characteristic contemporary apparatus of consumerism was either fully established or, at least, clearly sketched” (Stearns 45).

11 After the Second World War, “consumerism appeared to be emerging as a way of life on an unprecedented global scale” (Miles 8). In many post-war countries, consumption was a way in which a society could display that it could restore itself after a difficult time. Especially in the US, people felt the need to indulge rather than to save money (Cushman 600). Consumption was easy, efficient, and, often, pleasant (Goodman & Cohen 22ff). Not only a consumer society, but a consumer “culture” was emerging: thanks to the rise of advertising, the visual world of commodities was accessible to the working majority.

12 Consumerism had had the ability to transcend social classes, it had been significant not only on the economic and social, but on the cultural level as well (Stearns 53, Reisch 228f). This progress was greatly facilitated by the evolution of mass media, particularly, in the way the advertising industry, a “major ideological tool” (Jhally 78) of the marketplace, was using the means of mass media in order to reach closer to consumers via magazines, radio, and, later, television and the World Wide Web.

The development of advertising: selling of desire in an image-based society

13 At the end of the 19th century, advertising was changing greatly as society was shifting from traditional consumption to consumer culture. New printing techniques were introduced to create visually more appealing advertisements to elicit a more emotional rather than a reasoned response, to induce feeling rather than thinking (Jhally 84). By the turn of the century “‘an image industry’ [as Jackson Lears calls it] had emerged [...], and advertising was the ‘quintessential institution’ in its development” (qt. in Bogardus 511).

14 Visual advertisements were placed on posters, in newspapers and, of course, in magazines. The evolution of media eventually allowed to include radio into the spectrum and to reach consumers directly in their homes (Stearns 46, Bogardus 514). Sut Jhally takes the implementation of the new media into advertising strategies even further: “The [...] integration of first radio and then television into the advertising/media complex ensured that commercial communication would be characterized by the domination of imagistic models of representation” (Jhally 78).

15 Due to the growth of the manufacturing industry and the introduction of new leisure goods, such as sports equipment or uniform, the advertising industry needed to find a way to persuade consumers to buy products that were outside of the scope of their basic necessities, particularly in the post-war period. The intention was to shift buyers’ objectives, to identify what people wanted as opposed to what was necessary, to single out their longings. Once identified, they could be substituted and satisfied through commodities and consumption of countless objects (Bogardus 518). Advertising assumed a kind of therapeutic role by providing an illusory cure (Cushman 605). By using fantasies and unfulfilled desires, advertisements were able to create emotional involvement in commerce (Michael 119, 139). The commodities, as depicted in advertisements, played multiple psychological and social roles in relations to people. Sut Jhally describes these relations in the following way:

The object world interacts with the human world at the most basic and fundamental of levels, performing seemingly magical feats of enchantment and transformation, bringing instant happiness and gratification, capturing the forces of nature, and acting as a passport to hitherto untraveled domains and group relationships. (Jhally 80)

16 It is apparent that with this description he refers to a certain symbolic nature of commodities. As John Beynon explains: “‘Desires’ replaced ‘needs’ and what people were became increasingly based upon what they owned” (14). Selling desires fueled the development of consumerism at an ever-increasing rate. Aloysius Michael characterizes it as “voracious consumption” (Michael 129).

17 It has been mentioned before that the advancing consumerism was able to blur class lines, but it was able to transcend gender, as well. Given the choice and freedom to consume, who profited more from this opportunity: men or women?

Men as active consumers: stylish dandies vs. domestic goddesses

18 For a long time after the rise of consumerism, there has been a widespread misconception in the Western world, especially in America, that women were major

consumers since they did most of the shopping (Swienicki 773). However, some historians agree that this view is misconstrued: “consumerism began to be [mistakenly] pinned on women” (Stearns 44). Men consumed as well: “They almost certainly spent more on consumer goods than women did, and certainly they controlled more of the resources, but they did consume differently” (44). And this difference was significant: women would typically buy the goods in retail outlets, from grocers or in department stores. Whereas men, who without doubt could visit a department store, would also have non-retail outlets at their disposal, such as saloons (for drinks and tobacco), lodges (for uniforms), clubs (for books), athletic clubs and various associations (for equipment and supplies) (Swienicki 790). From the late Victorian men’s clubs to masonic clubs to American health clubs in the 1980s: the history of lavish male consumption goes back more than a century. In fact, the evidence would suggest “that late-Victorian men probably did consume about twice the value of personal/recreational commodities as women” (776ff).

19 And while men were seen as workers and rational consumers in the public spheres, women were associated with more private, domestic leisurly consumption (Goodman & Cohen 83). Mary Roberts supports this hypothesis: “For men, an acceptable form of consumption was the collecting of art [...]. For women, consumption became attached to the rising cultural ideal of female domesticity” (825). Women as weaker, more susceptible sex were even encourage to channel their proclivity for shopping into “appropriate domestic outlets” (826), especially after the new disease of kleptomania became largely attributed to middle-class women.

20 To promote consumption, advertisements targeted male and female consumers separately. Jackson Katz goes as far as stating that “advertising, in a commodity-driven consumer culture, is an omnipresent and rich source of gender ideology” (135). Indeed, advertisements in women’s magazines were predominantly for fashion items and domestic products (Bogardus 511, 518), whereas men’s journals portrayed masculine consumption as both “glamorous and manly” (Swienicki 775). The striking fact was that men openly used cosmetics, such as “shaving soaps, aftershave lotions, pomade oils, and hair dyes, to cosmetics for training one's mustache” (781). The new healthy and muscular male ideal emerged in the late-Victorian era. Fitness became rather fashionable, as well as sports uniforms and equipment and health club membership (782). The exclusive athletic clubs in the late 19th century promoted conspicuous consumption more aggressively than any other institution, with hefty membership fees, strict dress code, and elaborate driking parties (783f).

We shall see later that this ideal never fully disappeared; the yuppies of the 1980s only perfected this masculine icon.

21 During the second half of the 19th century, ostentatious consumption transcended not only gender, but also class: working-class men started using clothing, jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles to express themselves. The New York City B'hoys, dandified street toughs, were searching for "women, fights, commercial entertainment and alcohol. [...] Such flamboyant displays suggest that working-class men linked the public display of consumption with class and gender pride" (Swienicki 787). Thus, engaging in commodified recreational activities started to lose its stigma as being a women's domain.

22 Advertisers sought to cater to this market of a new fashion-conscious male consumer. To quote John Beynon: "The male body became the peg on which to attach new fashion codes" (103). He confirms that this change was due to commercial pressures rather than changing sexual politics. Retail outlets for men, magazines for men, cosmetic products for men were reliving a renaissance since the time the late-Victorian fashion introduced the new ideal. By the 1980s the male body began to be objectified and eroticized as much as the female body before. It marked the emergence of the new "man-as-a-narcissist": a playboy who wore great clothes and acquired beautiful cars and women (Beynon 102f). A narcissist projects certain charm and success, creates a winning impression without forming any emotional attachments. The protagonist of Mary Harron's film is exactly this specimen of the 1980s consumer culture.

23 As noted above, by the second half of the 20th century, consumer culture was firmly in place. The post-war economy depended "on continual consumption of nonessential and quickly obsolete items and experiences" (Cushman 600f). Consumerism penetrated innumerable aspects of social life: holidays, courtship, and, even, divorce (Stearns 54). And practices of consumption came to dominate social relations while all aspects of social life were constituted as commodities (Wyllie 63). Whilst the intensity of consumption increased, so did the cases of neurosis and psychosis "and a gnawing sense of emptiness in the self" (Cushman 601). Next, I will explore the harmful effects of consumer culture on consumers' mental health.

Consumer madness

24 Aloysius Michael approaches the topic of mental disease with following words: "Neurosis and psychosis are the products of culture, [and] our culture has found many roads

to insanity” (151). Despite the pessimism of such approach, it is clear that consumerism was, unarguably, a new road that society set itself upon.

25 One of the reasons for the anxiety was the direct influence that living in consumer culture had on mental health. Such terms as ‘money madness’ or ‘consumer madness’ are used metaphorically, however, in certain cases, excessive consumption and obsession with material possessions has led to psychological trauma (Haubl 203ff).

26 Society and social dynamics changed in the course of transition from traditional consumption to consumer culture. Aloysius Michael refers to it as “suffocating artificiality” of society (85). He names technological progress as the catalyst for creating the chasm between “the warm humanity” (85) that lived as a community and the new society where men and women lived through artificial, surrogated emotions in separate, yet identical houses, shopped at the same stores, and watched the same films (86). Philip Cushman also describes a world “in which flash is valued over substance, opportunism over loyalty, selling ability over integrity, and mobility over stability” (603).

27 This view of society in the second half of the twentieth century was supported by the thriving image-based culture. And popular culture was full of images of glossy, eroticized objects available for consumption. Even films adopted this visual style from advertising; it featured quick cuts, stylized shadows, and close-ups (Taylor 147). Carla Freccero supports this theory by referring to it as “the MTV-style postmodernist aesthetic of surface adopted by Generation X [for which Ellis has been dubbed a spokesperson]” (51). Devoid of substance, appearance was, and still is, all that counts (Michael 158).

28 The remarkable feature of mental illness of that time was that the need for the perfect appearance imprinted onto the symptoms: it created an image of a mentally healthy individual on the outside hiding the illness on the inside: a kind of ‘surface sanity’. To quote psychologist and writer Douglas LaBier: “What looks like normalcy and successful adjustment for these people is actually adaptive sickness” (53). Consumers immersed themselves in the illusory world of surfaces and appearances, as a result, a growing sense of disorientation was experienced (Jhally 85). The adaptive sickness of these, for the most part, successfully employed people allowed them to appear quite ‘normal’ to their colleagues and family, exhibiting only a few slight quirks. In private, however, they were undeniably disturbed, inclined toward sado-masochism, grandiosity and in extreme cases to dismemberment, cannibal lust and drinking enemies’ blood (LaBier 52f).

29 Mass consumption entered and influenced everyday lives at a psychological level, according to Lunt and Livingston, “affecting the construction of identities, the formation of

relationships, the framing of events” (qt in Miles 9). The focus on exterior and appearances is a leitmotif in Ellis’s book, and it will be analyzed more closely in the third part.

Patrick Bateman, an ideal psychotic yuppie consumer?

30 Though the dominance of the yuppie culture was short, from 1983 when the term was first mentioned by a Chicago Tribune columnist until 1987 when the stock market crash marked the beginning of the end of the yuppie heyday, the term is still present in the modern vocabulary and culture¹ (Manning 2000). Though caricatured by the media that described the yuppie, a term that stands for “young urban professional” (Piesman & Hartley 2), as a new kind of ruthless careerist who takes everything for granted with greed and lack of concern for others (LaBier 139), this distinctly new kind of business professional emerged on a large scale in the City and on Wall Street.

31 The yuppie was a byproduct of the expanding financial sector (Beynon 105) that was remarkably transformed into a glamorous, even sexy, profession during that time (Taylor 25). Though the job itself could mostly be described as lacking substance and meaning, giving it up was not an option for most young businessmen (LaBier 140). These glorified accountants and salesmen were enjoying the benefits of their bloated salaries because the paycheck was in itself “the criterion for value” (Michael 116) and the measure of success, while satisfaction had to be sought elsewhere (Stearns 56). Consumption, or, more notably excessive consumption, was the primary outlet. It was a kind of “satisfaction achieved via the marketplace” (Jhally 79).

32 John Beynon described a typical ‘80s yuppie in the following manner:

[...] posing, parading and swaggering around the City in his pinstripe and power-look suits, ties and accessories, swinging his attaché case, talking animatedly on his mobile phone, endlessly flickering the pages of his Filofax, slicking his hair and using every excuse to get into and out of his suit, his tie, his striped shirt and, of course, his Porsche. (105).

Hence, the yuppie, a term with a mainly masculine connotation (Beynon 105), could literally be distinguished by his clothes, accessories, and labels attached to them: he wore Armani, drove a Porsche, and carried a Gucci briefcase (Manning 2000). Thus, in the commodity image-system, a worldview typical for the twentieth century capitalism, one is defined by possessions rather than personality (Jhally 80). In the yuppie cosmos of the 1980s, brand-

¹ Geraint Anderson’s novel *Cityboy: Beer and Loathing in the Square Mile* focuses on a stock broker in London who leads a life of excessive consumption, and it even references *American Psycho* in one of the characters who likes to be addressed to as “Patrick” because of his affinity for the protagonist of Ellis’s novel (Anderson, Geraint. 2008. *Cityboy: Beer and Loathing in the Square Mile*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 167f).

name commodities became the only referential authority. And the fictional embodiment of the yuppie lifestyle, a total consumer Patrick Bateman lives his life under the governing principle of commodity (Weinreich 66). He is the hollow center of Ellis's novel that the author wrote while living in New York City, conflicted by temptation and glamour of the conspicuous consumption of his sleek rich friends on the one hand and the aversion to greed and superficiality of that world on the other (Murphet 1).

The world of appearances

33 The milieu of mostly white, excessively consuming young men that Ellis found himself in during his stay in New York, was the kind of place, where “the notion of appearance, once linked to notions of self-respect, gradually came to have less to do with character and reputation and more to do with simply looking good” (Haskell 128). Claire Wyllie concurs: “[...] the image is the currency of consumer culture” (67). Substance was replaced by style and surface, and it triumphed “in the ultimately illusory world of appearances” (Jhally 85). Ellis exposes this setting in his novel. He explains: “I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface – food, clothes – that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action” (quoted in Freccero 51). The visual medium of film had the ability to translate this kind of world of perfect facades onto the screen.

34 The smooth shiny surfaces are the first aspect of set design that attract viewers' attention in the scene in which the camera pans through Bateman's impeccably decorated lifeless apartment. The spectator notices the multitude of hard polished surfaces, from the living-room coffee table to the black-and-white framed poster of a falling businessman, to the ultra-modern stainless steel kitchen, to protagonists's reflections in the poster of Les Mis and in the bathroom mirror. Bateman is surrounded by reflections of himself and his reflection is a blank, but glossy veneer.

35 The apartment looks like it has been copied out of an interior design catalogue, most likely *The Sharper Image* that was in vogue in the eighties (Manning 2000). Advertised commodities, once source of enjoyment, became stepping-stones to social status (Roberts 829). Thus, a space that in the time of traditional consumption would have reflected the personality of the owner turns into a random collection of popular and trendy pieces which, in turn, still characterizes the owner in a way. According to Douglas Goodman & Mireille Cohen: “In consumer culture, it is not what you produce that defines your individuality, but what you buy. Our individuality is expressed through what we consume and display“

(Goodman & Cohen 93). Here one could draw a parallel to David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) where the nameless narrator discusses his fetish for IKEA merchandise in the monologue that reflects a "sad juxtaposition of personal identity and consumer goods" (Windrum 305). This film also deals with the problem of excessive consumption and its impact on consumers' identity and expresses anti-consumerist critique that is vocalized in Tyler Durden's discourse: "You're not your job, you're not how much money you have in the bank, you're not the car you drive, you're not the content of your wallet, you're not your fucking khakis" (qtd in Windrum 305). In the case of *American Psycho*, you literally are what you consume.

The socialized body

36 The consuming protagonist Bateman is introduced during the scene in which he presents his apartment before introducing himself: "I live in the American Gardens Building on West 81st Street, on the 11th floor, my name is Patrick Bateman, I am 27 years old" (TC 0:05:29). In Mary Harron's adaptation, the main character, played by the perfectly-cast Christian Bale, is "beautifully dressed, hardbodied, and a psychopath" (Freccero 51f). His body is perfection, as polished and smooth as the furnishings in his apartment. It is a product of rigorous exercise and the excessive use of cosmetics. His first monologue, which is intercut with some subtle product placement by Yves Saint Laurent and L'Occitane, is a mind-numbingly detailed description of his morning routine, complete with enumeration of all the beauty products that he uses to look and stay young:

[...] if my face is a little puffy, I'll put on an icepack while doing my stomach crunches. [...] After I remove the icepack, I use a deep pore-cleanser lotion. In the shower, I use a water-activated gel cleanser. Then a honey-almond body scrub. And on the face, an exfoliating gel scrub. Then I apply an herb mint facial mask, which leave on for ten minutes [...]. I always use an aftershave lotion with little or no alcohol because alcohol dries your face out and makes you look older. Then moisturizer, then an anti-aging eye balm, followed by a final moisturizing protective lotion. (TC 0:05:48-0:07:02).

37 Bateman puts a lot of effort into perfecting his exterior. The basis for such rigorous self-care practices lies in the socialization of a modern body and its perception in a system of desires "that inspires a deeply internalized duty to discipline and normalize one's body. To be thinner, more toned, less gray, and less wrinkled, and to hide a variety of imperfections" (Thompson & Hirschman 150).

38 The cultural ideology of a socialized body enforced through mass media, social relations, and advertising is responsible for consumers' image of the ideal or more desirable

body, and the consumption practices that these self-concepts encourage (151). Staying fit means exercising control over one's body, whereas fat becomes a sign of laziness and weak character (Stearns 69). The image-based culture reinforces the myth of youth and the desire to look young by all means available. Indeed, visibility, the display of the self as a commodity is primary in constructing social relations and identity (Wyllie 67).

39 Craig Thompson and Elizabeth Hirschman note that the implemented self-care practices are defined by “a dialectic between asceticism [...] and the hedonistic pursuit of gratification and pleasure” in the contradictory consumer culture (150). The scene in the film that depicts this dualism in the most vivid manner is the workout scene which starts with a shot of the most healthy-looking snack of berries and fruit and mineral water and then proceeds to Bateman violently doing crunches to the video of a murder scene from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Bateman's body stays fit and healthy without contributing to his peace of mind, but his inner desires run amok projected on the screen: he is torturing himself with this extreme exercise routine, but he would rather be torturing somebody else.

Consuming identities

40 In the credits sequence, the camera moves slowly through a chic restaurant over the plates of exquisitely arranged dishes past fashionably dressed men and their dates and over to Patrick and his friends with their hair slicked back, clean-shaven fresh young faces, despite the alcohol and drug consumption. They are distinctly dressed in the best Italian suits with clever accessories, but they cannot tell each other apart: “Is that Reed Robinson over there? - [...] That's not Robinson. - Well, who is it then? - It's Paul Allen. - That's not Paul Allen. Paul Allen's on the other side of the room over there” (TC 0:02:57 – 0:03:06). They are all dressed according to exchangeable fashion-models, and, consequently, all characters become virtually interchangeable, subject to Ellis's device of deindividualization of the yuppies (Weinreich 70). As Patrick explains himself:

Allen has mistaken me for this dickhead, Marcus Halberstram. It seems logical because Marcus also works at P&P, and in fact does the same exact thing I do. He also has a penchant for Valentino suits and Oliver Peoples glasses. Marcus and I even go to the same barber, although I have a slightly better haircut. (TC 0:18:00 – 0:18:19)

41 Their trendy clothes are without doubt very stylish, and “style is the way that people express their individuality in consumer culture” (Goodman & Cohen 93). Unfortunately, this expression of individuality has value only if it is recognized by others, and the reflected recognition is what influences a person's self-esteem (93). But Bateman and his entourage

keep mistaking each other: Paul Allen calls Patrick Marcus and his lawyer – Davies (TC 0:27:07, 1:32:19). Thus, the absence of recognition leads to his frustrated search for identity through consumption and murder (Weinreich 72). Patrick's obsession with getting reservations, being with the most beautiful woman, or living in the most exclusive building are parts of a commodified identity construct. Indeed, in consumer culture "identities become commodities to buy, and like other commodities, there are competing identities on the market" (Goodman & Cohen 37).

42 The identity of a banker is supplemented by the most desirable status symbols, which can be something as small as a business card. Bateman and his colleagues present their new business cards in an attempt to impress each other by their unique style and taste. Ironically, the comic duel of the business cards only affirms the interchangeability of the characters. Everyone, including Bateman, is a vice president in the department of mergers and acquisitions, and, remarkably, they are all listed under the same phone number. The scene is full of exaggerated drama as they draw the business cards and the camera zooms in on the elegant fonts. Bateman nearly faints at the sight of Paul Allen's card and his heart pounds: "Look at that subtle off-white coloring. The tasteful thickness of it. Oh, my God. It even has a watermark" (TC 0:20:11 – 0:20:19). Enraged by his failure to procure the best status symbol, he commits his first on-screen murder in the next sequence. He stabs a homeless man saying: "You know what a fucking loser you are?" (TC 0:22:28). He is addressing the homeless man, though it is possible that he is talking about himself and his own dissatisfaction with his life and work.

The inner madness

43 The most noticeable peculiarity about the work of the Manhattan yuppies is that they seem to never be doing any work. As Martin Weinreich puts it: "The only business activities described are lunches in expensive restaurants, a demonstration that socializing is the only labor being exerted" (65). When in his office Bateman either watches TV or listens to music, or pretends to be doing a crossword puzzle. And in an attempt to look busy in front of a detective, he starts giving styling advice into an empty phone, as if quoting from a style section: "John, you've gotta wear clothes in proportion to your physique. There are definite do's and dont's [...] of wearing a bold-striped shirt. A bold-striped shirt calls for solid-colored or discreetly patterned suits and ties" (TC 0:32:27 – 0:32:39). As much as providing comic relief, this particular scene illustrates the fact that the job is only a money source to provide for the hedonistic pleasures pursued. Evelyn, Bateman's fiancé, states that he hates the job,

but when asked as to why he insists on working, he angrily replies: “Because I want to fit in!” (TC 0:10:20). Because he does not have a true distinctive identity, he strives for conformity.

44 However, combined with a constantly growing competitive environment in the workplace, the cutthroat corporate world is the catalyst for creating what Annalee Newitz describes as “capitalism’s monsters” (2):

Mutated by backbreaking labor, driven insane by corporate conformity, or gorged on too many products of a money-hungry media industry, capitalism’s monsters cannot tell the difference between commodities and people. They confuse living beings with inanimate objects. And because they spend so much time working, they often feel dead themselves. (Newitz 2006: 2)

Ellis’s characters, rather caricatured versions of the real Manhattan yuppies, do not waste their precious time on work, they are fully occupied with dining and partying. Nevertheless, Bateman does struggle with feeling pressure. His emotions are close to those experienced by his real life counterparts of the 1980s: “Narcissism as well as feelings of fraudulence, inner emptiness, terror, and self-disgust” (LaBier 61). He is, unarguably, a narcissistic type who is indulging in his fantasies.

The consumerist psycho

45 The title of the novel and the film is strikingly unambiguous about the nature of its main character: he is, indeed, a psychopath. And while the film leaves a lot of the violence of the novel either completely out, moves it off-screen, or stylizes it (King 131f), there is no doubt that the protagonist is gravely disturbed. He himself recognizes that, without a hint of irony: “I’m into, uh, well, murders and executions, mostly”, he says when asked about what he does for a living (TC 0:56:33).

46 Despite his seemingly perfect life and all the commodities he possesses: his spacious apartment, a high-paying job, an attractive fiancé and a mistress, he is driven to extreme violence. Neither the author nor the director offers an explanation or even a reason for Bateman’s behaviour. He does admit to being “a child of divorce” (TC 0:25:55), though it is not clear if he is talking about himself or about Marcus Halberstram who he is impersonating for Allen. But there is no apparent history of abuse or trauma. Hence, contrary to the tendency to psychologize and to narrativize the serial killer in the media by turning their killings into comprehensive patterns, *American Psycho* provides the spectacle of killing without delving into Bateman’s backstory. This trend is typical for what Mark Seltzer called “a wound culture [...] a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (qtd in Rarick 214).

47 Annalee Newitz offers an interpretation of the serial killer narrative in the twentieth-century by attributing violent behaviour to being “socialized by watching movies or television [...] in a culture which is saturated by mass produced, alienated images that can be consumed by anyone, anywhere – repeatedly and meaninglessly” (21f). Indeed, Bateman listens to pop music on his way to work, at work, and on the way to a restaurant. He works out to a slasher film and murders to the sound of *Huey Lewis and the News*. And his excuse to escape from an unpleasant situation, such as Luis’s confession of love or Evelyn’s crying involves returning “some video tapes” (TC 0:49:42, 1:18:46), an answer that is as absurd as it is true to the satire of “the shallowness and cruelty of 1980s American capitalism” expressed in the novel and magnified in the film (Abel 42). The critique is succinctly demonstrated in the scene when Bateman while having dinner with friends, delivers a seemingly heartfelt speech where he lists all the things they could do to make the world better, e.g. “end apartheid”, “stop terrorism”, “promote civil rights” and “equal rights for women”, and “most importantly [...] less materialism” (TC 0:12:00-0:12:33), at which point Bryce simply snorts at the absurdity of the statement. And though his other friends are listening with serious expressions, nod, and seemingly acknowledge the truth in his words, nobody changes their patterns of consumer behaviour. In fact, the next shot is of Patrick withdrawing a big amount of cash from an ATM and following a woman he presumably kills later.

48 The inability to attain the coveted commodities frustrates and enrages him because in consumer culture money and material possessions are the only solutions to dealing with psychological problems (LaBier 9). As the film progresses, Bateman’s insanity seeps onto the surface like sweat through the cracks in his perfect veneer: he murders Paul Allen because he has a better business card, was able to get reservations at Dorsia, and the fact that he is the one handling the ‘Fisher’ account and not Bateman. This is followed by the near murder of Luis Carruthers because of an even more sophisticated business card. The symbolic creation of the capitalism’s monster is shown when the ATM asks him to feed it the stray cat. This sequence culminates in an epic shoot-out after which Bateman breaks down in an elevator; his insanity is no longer controllable. This leads to a lengthy emotional confession to his lawyer on the phone.

49 As a matter of fact, Patrick tries to come clean about his crimes several times during the film. Firstly, to Paul Allen: “I like to dissect girls. Did you know I’m utterly insane? (TC 0:26:37), then to Evelyn: “My need to engage in homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be corrected, but I have no other way to fulfill my needs” (TC 1:17:04), and, finally, as I have mentioned, to his lawyer: “I guess I’ve killed maybe 20 people. Maybe 40!” (TC

1:23:40). But his interlocutors are distracted by superficial things and do not hear him. Allen only notices Bateman's tan and boasts about his own tanning bed at home, Evelyn is distracted by complementing a friend's bracelet, and Carruthers only asks where he bought the overnight bag (it's Jean Paul Gaultier). As for his lawyer, not only does he not see Bateman for who he is, but he also claims to have seen Allen in London. With this statement the narrative comes full circle to Bateman's characterization of himself at the beginning of the film: "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman. Some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me only an entity, something illusory" (TC 0:07:03-0:07:14). As a character, he is "stark and vacuous, filled only with signifiers of murder and indulgence" (Soar 11).

Patrick Bateman: a vacuous entity

50 After having characterized Bateman as an illusory entity, the film deprives the audience of any kind of certainty. In the end, neither Bateman nor the spectator is sure if the preceding violence and disturbance happened in reality and were ignored by the society, or if all of it was restricted to Bateman's imagination, and the single outlet for his homicidal tendencies was the notebook his assistant found in his desk. And his final voice-over speech which offers no prospect of "resolution, redemption, or retribution" is just as unsettling (King 133f). As the camera moves in on an extreme close-up of Bateman's blank eyes, he concludes:

There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed. My pain is constant and sharp, and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact, I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this, there is no catharsis. My punishment continues to elude me and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself. No new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant nothing. (TC 1:36:30-1:37:23)

51 Indeed, his friends continue talking about reservations and acquaintances, drinking, laughing, and speaking on the phone. The restaurant is still full of well-dressed polished yuppie men and women, who are unaware of any of the horror that Bateman has inflicted on them and on himself. This outcome supports the fact that "there is no truth to be found beneath appearances, and the accumulation of Bateman's successful, unnoticed, and ultimately deeply unsatisfying torture-murders that do not teach him – or the rest of us – anything" [...] (Freccero 52).

52 Unfortunately, Bateman's ostensible, unapologetic superficiality and neglect for the human emotional interaction fit perfectly within the milieu of the Wall Street yuppies. They

are incapable of seeking intimate contact because of absence of self in them (Michael 106). Philip Cushman states that the empty self “may be expressed in many ways, such as low self-esteem [...], values confusion [...], eating disorders [...], drug abuse [...], and chronic consumerism [...] (604). In the film, the characters fill the void with violence, drugs, and noise. Julian Murphet describes the protagonist as an “ideal consumer [with] mental substance composed entirely of messages emanating from commodities” (64). And there is no outside beyond the smooth surface world; therefore, Bateman cannot be alienated from it (Weinreich 77). He is trapped in this commodified surface world of voracious consumers and the symbolic “This is not an exit” sign in the restaurant only emphasized the fact that there is no escape.

Conclusion: “This is not an Exit”

53 In this paper I explored the origins of the modern consumer culture and the negative impact it has on consumers, focusing on the screen adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and its real-life setting: the Manhattan world of yuppies in the 1980s.

54 It is evident that the nature of consumption has changed in the course of history due to the industrialization and the increase in population in the late 19th century. In order to make profit, manufacturers involved advertising as a way to attract consumers and convince them to buy the products they did not necessarily need. By using evolving print technology to focus on fantasies and desires of the public, advertising industry was able to create images of coveted objects: objects of desire. Thanks to advertising, its major ideological tool, consumer culture was able to transcend both class and gender. Male consumers were equally as active as female though they consumed differently.

55 With evolving consumption and its promotion, a new problem began to arise: excessive consumption had a destabilizing effect on the mental state of many consumers. Due to the visual nature of advertising, the focus shifted onto appearances and image. People with mental illnesses reacted to this by overadapting: suppressing their symptoms under the mask of sanity.

56 The developing marketplace and the rise of corporations in the 1980s in the United States put a new kind of pressure on business professionals. Many tried to deal with anxiety and depression by consuming excessively: an activity that was able to alleviate the psychological state only temporarily. A new kind of individual thrived in such environment: a narcissist. They were charming and appealing and completely detached emotionally. Ellis based his main character on this new type of careerist.

57 In Ellis's fictional world of appearances, narcissistic Bateman is the central figure. He is perfect-looking and devoid of any positive human emotion. A psychopath in the superficial environment of the Manhattan yuppies, he soothes his rage, albeit unsuccessfully, by murdering and consuming, sometimes simultaneously. With no discernable identity, this protagonist is a paper-mâché of a man comprised of layers of labels, advertisements, logos, and bits of pop music trivia. If one could peel these layers, in the end one would see that there is nothing left to find, only a hollow center.

58 A BBC documentary *The Century of the Self* (2002) suggests that consumer culture emerged as a tool of controlling the masses driven by primitive impulses of sex and aggression postulated by Freud. In order to function as a society, its members have to be controlled and soothed by commodities, even if it directly contradicts the principals of democracy. Psychoanalysis played a crucial part in constructing the modern self. As Philip Cushman points out: "Applied psychology was used in advertising, marketing, and personnel work". But if controlling primitive drives is the main point of consumer culture, then Bateman is a failed experiment: his urges cannot be assuaged by consuming commodities.

59 Consumerism is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. Modern consumer culture is based on polar opposites: on indulgence and abstinence, on pleasure and guilt. Consumer is a 'king' who, in reality, reacts to advertisers' subconscious suggestions. And while most consumers are aware of being subtly manipulated they still participate in consumer culture. The undisputable fact is that everyone is involved in consumer culture in one way or another. We both desire and hate consuming. And while *American Psycho* is a satirical cautionary tale for consumerism - extreme consumption traps one in a shallow world of empty commodities from which there is no escape - at the moment, there are few alternatives to consumer culture. Although there have been endeavors to change it in the past fifty years, e.g. the hippie movement in the 70s, the materialistic 80s proved them unsuccessful. Philip Cushman suggests that in order to change the society, it is necessary to reshape political relationships and cultural forms, to put emphasis on community and tradition (607). In the past few years, there has been a growth in popularity of artisanal production, sustainable agriculture, small local brands, etc. – a phenomenon that can be viewed as an attempted reversal to 'traditional consumption'. Unfortunately, these changes have been too small and insignificant to be considered a paradigm shift.

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Flapper Girls – Feminism and Consumer Society in the 1920s

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Abstract:

Flapper Girls were young women in the years after the First World War who acted explicitly as apolitical individuals. First and foremost, one associates a certain style of fashion with women during the twenties: the bob, rouge on the cheeks, powder on the knees, and short skirts. This is the typical flapper-like behavior: smoking in public, driving in cars, dancing the Charleston or the Shimmy, excessive consumption of alcohol in times of prohibition, nightly celebrations in jazz clubs and at petting parties, where men and women had premarital sexual experiences. These women's hedonism is highly marked by consumption: consumption of mass industrial products, consumption of mass culture and mass media, consumption of urban nightlife, consumption of sexuality – 1920s consumer society in Germany as well as in the United States received a noticeable boost. The phenomenon of the Flapper and its image in the public sphere will be taken into consideration in regards to its connection to consumer culture with its various facets. In particular the question will be discussed to what extent the Flapper Girl phenomenon has feminist potential.

1 The Jazz-Age, the *roaring twenties* in the USA, the golden twenties (*Goldene Zwanziger*) in the Weimar Republic were characterized by economic prosperity, cultural blossoming and many social changes: the foundation of the Weimar Republic 1919 granted the right to vote to both men and women and hence granted the possibility of political participation to women; in the USA, women were granted suffrage in 1920. Nearly every schoolbook deals in this context with the presence and the phenomenon of the *New Woman* during the decade following the First World War. According to her representation in the media, the *New Woman* is the embodiment of cultural, social and technical progress: besides the newly gained right to political participation, women increasingly had the opportunity to find their way into employment; technical home appliances facilitated the 'modern' housewife's daily routine with the hope that she would have more leisure time and liberty. It is always that one image of the woman of the 1920s, being more self-confident, more independent and more emancipated, that is transported from then until today. These images of course are to be considered critically. In a more realistic view, women's suffrage appears not as successful as it should have been: the political groups and parties that emerged in most instances from the suffrage movement did not overcome the disjunctive lines of class and race. Therefore, it is not possible to distinguish one kind of women's politics in that era (Dumenil 99-111). Furthermore, in 1920, only one-third of the women entitled to vote actually did go voting (cf. Dumenil 107; Boyer Sagert 14). Whether this is a high or a low percentage could be disputed.

2 Young women in the years after the First World War who acted explicitly as apolitical individuals are, for instance, the so-called *Flapper Girls*. First and foremost one associates a certain style of fashion with women during the twenties: the bob, rouge on the cheeks, powder on the knees, short skirts and ‘objectively’ cut clothing (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) (Kessemeier 32). Primarily contemporary celebrities like Olive Thomas, who acted the leading role of Genevieve King in Alan Crosland’s movie *The Flapper* (1920), is along with other film stars like Louise Brooks or Colleen Moore not only a role model in reference to the aesthetic appearance but also to a whole lifestyle (Boyer Sagert 5). In this context it is equally necessary to mention the couple F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, who personified the spirit of hedonism of the Roaring Twenties in the public sphere like nobody else (Boyer Sagert 23-33). Especially Fitzgerald’s texts like “Flappers and Philosophers” (1921) or “Bernice Bobs her Hair” (1920) are literary evidences for the obviously typical flapper-like behavior: smoking in public, driving in cars, dancing the Charleston or the Shimmy, excessive consumption of alcohol in times of prohibition, nightly celebrations in jazz clubs and at petting parties, where men and women had premarital sexual experiences [1]. These women’s hedonism is highly marked by consumption: consumption of mass industrial products, consumption of mass culture and mass media, consumption of urban nightlife, consumption of sexuality – 1920s consumer society in Germany as well as in the United States received a noticeable boost. The impact of the flourishing economic circumstances on the phenomenon of the *Flapper Girl* can be seen in its ending when the global economic crisis began in October 1929, as well as in the political measures within the German labor market after 1933, and the reforming measures of the New Deal in the USA between 1933 and 1939 – these deep incisions in consumer culture and society put the end to the public appearance of the *Flapper* and to the phenomenon itself. [2] In the following, the phenomenon *Flapper* and its image in the public sphere will be examined in regard to its connection to consumer culture with its various facets. In particular the question will be discussed to what extent the *Flapper Girl* phenomenon has feminist potential.

3 The *Flappers’* contemporary German counterpart is the so-called *Gretchen, Girl* or *Garçonne* (Frame 21-58). This typification comes along with a certain hierarchic order by questioning each attitude to and function for the progress-oriented society: the virgin pigtailed *Gretchen* merely is an obstacle, the *Girl* of American origin is utterly primitive, and the *Garçonne* has that kind of virile spirit of progress, but she runs the risk of becoming too inconvenient (Frame 21f). This pattern seems absurd of course, the more so as this should apply to all European women. Yet, this leads to the essence of the medical and eugenic

discourse of the Weimar era. Lynne Frame points out precisely in what way the *New Woman* of the time and all her types of appearances have been analyzed and reviewed by a large number of popular-scientists and health professionals, foremost gynecologists among these, considering the degree of femaleness of their appearance and behavior: “die Angst, daß mit dem langen Haar und der Beschränkung auf Heim und Herd auch die Weiblichkeit selbst verschwinde oder sich zumindest zurückgezogen habe und unter dem jungenhaften Äußeren und dem freizügigen Benehmen der sogenannten Neuen Frau immer schwerer zu erkennen sei” (Frame 25). The consequences of this biological valuation procedure are quite easy to comprehend. The less ‘feminine’ a woman’s appearance is, the less ‘marriageable’ she is considered to be. She might be a great danger to a potential husband – he might end up unhappy in this marriage. In case of an unhappy marriage, the following is at stake: “die geistige und körperliche Gesundheit nicht nur des Individuums, sondern auch der Gesellschaft” (Frame 28). On the one hand the phenomenon *Flapper Girl* or *Garçonne* appearing as an androgynous woman, in a superficial view, is a phenomenon of temporary fashion, on the other hand the *Flapper* is within the bio political discourse of the time as a proper threat of the ‘racial hygiene’ and for the entire society. The short hair, the objectively cut clothes that leads the attention from the ‘feminine curves’ to the legs, the sportive and slim body – all these outward attributes are not only a hype of fashion; it is the expression of a blurring of gender roles. The contemporary gynecologists diagnosed that as *intersexuality*, a high percentage of assumed male characteristics in a woman (Frame 28). The criticism of the *Flapper Girl* was aimed beyond the condemnable trend. In 1922, when Hedda Hoyt published her article “Long Skirts Mean That the Saucy, Little Bobbed Head Must Go” in the *Daily Democrat-Tribune*, she did not only affront some kind of girls’ look:

In accordance with the evolution of dress, flappers are destined to be relegated [sic] to the junk heap of forgotten pasts. The little knee-length skirts and saucy hats are doomed to rest in the garret with the hoop skirts and bonnets of other days. The same bobbed head-dress is to receive the same fate of the spit curls of yester-year. The household cook is to fall their heir to the low-heeled sandals. (quoted in Boyer Sagert 212)

The lecture of these explicit lines reveals that Hoyt, who is obviously interested in fashion, wishes the young women’s fashion to go back to the type of the *Gibson Girl*. This type of female fashion existed since the end of the 19th century and marked a certain kind of a *new woman*; she was chic, fancy and glamorous. The desired comeback of the *Gibson Girl* after the First World War was not to come (Boyer Sagert 1ff). The question of class is crucial in this context. Indeed, *Gibson* as well as *Flapper Girls* were the embodiment of the self-

confident 'modern' woman. Yet, the *Gibson Girl* represented this with her elegance in the *upper class*, whereas the *Flapper Girl's* image was *white* and *middle class*. To what extent the *Flapper* was actually only a *white middle class* woman is questionable and will be discussed later.

4 It is no wonder that Hedda Hoyt saw the culmination of the 'non-female' and therefore the height of moral and social evil in the length of a woman's skirt. She went on to say: "And the culprit who wished all of this on us is-the long skirt. There is no use arguing about it, the long skirt is coming back" [3] Clothing, fashion, make-up and hairstyles were a ubiquitous issue in the public discussion and this is celebrated in detail. Ellen Welles Page opens her article "A Flappers Appeal to Parents", published December 6, 1922 in the *Outlook*, by describing elaborately and extensively her outward appearance:

If one judges my appearance, I suppose I am a flapper. I am within the age limit. I wear bobbed hair, the badge of flapperhood. (And, on, what a comfort it is!) I powder my nose. I wear fringed skirts and bright colored sweaters, and scarfs, and waists with Peter Pan collars, and low-heeled "finale hopper" shoes. (Welles Page 607)

It is remarkable that Ellen Welles Page writes about her style of clothing, her make-up and her hair before she says anything else. Again, it is obvious at this point that fashion is one of numerous emblems for the mass culture and industrial mass production in the twenties. The access to fashion was not only permitted to the upper classes. The textile industry's mass production grants lower prices for fashion. [4] According to this the first definition of the type operates strongly by applying the requirements in fashion. Not until later did the author provide information about her behavior and activities: "I adore to dance. I spend a large amount of time in automobiles. I attend hops, and proms, and ball-games, and crew races, and other affairs at men's colleges" (Welles Page 607). Again at this point, the dependency on mass production and mass culture that marks a *Flapper's* lifestyle is evident. Car-driving in the USA became increasingly popular after 1919. In that year alone, 6,8 million cars were on the streets, and ten years later, that number had reached 122 million (Boyer Sagert 3). This can also be seen as a symptom of economic and industrial mass production. The commitment to dancing can also be seen as a hint to the character of social changes, too: urbanity. In 1920 in the United States, the percentage of inhabitants in urban areas was higher than the ones in rural areas (54,3 million versus 51,4 million) (Boyer Sagert 3). It was the big city that held the possibilities of dancing in bars and nightclubs. This example shows that all attributes defining the *Flapper Girl* depended on material consumerism. It seems only fair in this list of

flapper attributes if Ellen Welles Page admits in her text that she was not following some of the contemporary trends of the time:

I don't use rouge, or lipstick or pluck my eyebrows. I don't smoke (I've tried it, but I don't like it), or drink, or tell "peppy stories". I don't pet. And, most unpardonable infringement of all the rules and regulations of Flapperdom, I haven't a line. (Welles Page 607)

These lines seem almost apologetic; the author is virtually embarrassed that she stated at the beginning she might be a Flapper Girl. However, Lynne's explanations show that this typification by ascribing certain outward and inward attributes is an inherent part of the biopolitical discourse of the time. Conversely, this practice offered the possibility of orientation and self-regulation for women: "Gleichzeitig waren die Frauen selbst deutlich auf der Suche nach Vorbildern und Maßstäben, mit deren Hilfe sie ihre eigene Stellung – und ihre Möglichkeiten – in der Gesellschaft beurteilen konnten. [...] Indem Typologien Frauen mit neuen Identifikationsmustern versorgten, erlegten sie ihrem Verhalten doch auch gewisse Restriktionen auf." [5]Ellen Welles Page is a manifest example for the USA, for what Frame states for Weimar Germany. Her different degrees of flapperdom that she brings up a little bit heavy-handedly fit in this "Klassifizierungsmanie, diesen 'Furor des Rasterns'" (Frame 22):

But then –there are many degrees of flapper. There is the semi-flapper; the flapper; the superflapper. Each of these three main general divisions has its degrees of variation. I might possibly be placed somewhere in the middle of the first class. (Welles Page 607)

Besides the act of self-regulation, at this point, the interpretation for her own identification is obvious. It is remarkable that she classifies herself somewhere in the range of the *semi-flapper*, which appears obviously not as offensive and scandalous as the *superflapper*. Apparently, she wishes to clarify in the first place that she is not dangerous for the society. That is eventually in line with her concern that she points out in the following. Instead of searching the confrontation with those who criticized Flapper Girls like Hedda Hoyt, she asks for understanding. She recognized in this affair a part of the generation gap and often stresses the otherness of this "Younger Generation" and the "older generation" (Welles Page 607). In this respect, she tries to end her article in a conciliatory way:

Oh, parents, parents everywhere, point to us the ideals of truly glorious and upright living! Believe in us, that we may learn to believe in ourselves, in humanity, in God! Be the living examples of our teachings, that you may inspire us with hope and courage, understanding and truth, love and faith. [...] Is it too much to ask? (Ibid.)

As conciliatory and obviously well behaved Ellen Welles Page appears at this point, she does not fail to stress on the seriousness and – even this – on the intellectual requirement and character of *flapperdom*:

It requires an enormous amount of cleverness and energy to keep going the proper pace. It requires self- knowledge and self-analysis. We must know our capabilities and limitations. We must be constantly on the alert. Attainment of flapperhood is a big and serious.

Again, here she brings up the necessity of self-knowledge and self-analysis, which seemed to be a valid and important topic for women after the ‘Copernican turn’ brought about by Freud, and which concerns in this respect, of course, one’s sexuality.

5 The seriousness of *undertaking flapperhood*, that Ellen Welles Page emphasized, is evident considering the economic circumstances of 16-to-29-year-old women. In the United States as well as in Weimar Germany after the First World War, women’s employment rose significantly. First and foremost, women worked in white-collar occupations such as secretaries or saleswomen. Saleswomen, for example, were considered to be more distinguished than industrial workers. They had to take care of their outward appearance and had to deal with customers from the upper classes when they worked in retail sales. They were deemed to have “größere Identifikations- und Mobilitätschancen” (Frevert 517). Fashion and cosmetics were at the same time commercial calculation to increase the profit in sales. Thus, the research mainly points out the exploitative situation of women’s employment in the 1920s: repeating mechanic and other directed works, requiring lesser qualifications, and offering a lower salary of 10 to 25% in comparison to men, and shorter professional life. It is plain that women began to have increasingly better chances to gain employment, but it is also pointed out that opportunities for economic and social success were rare (Frevert 512ff). Due to the low salaries, unmarried women often were bound to their parental home in spite of being employed. While stating this disadvantage and discrimination, women’s role as consumers at that time also must be seen. They had their own money and they decided how to spend it. Thus, they were not only underprivileged objects, they were in the same way acting and consuming subjects. This, of course, took place in the public sphere that could also be seen in the media: *Flapper Girls* often appear often appeared on magazine covers or in advertising.

6 Moreover, it has to be stated that women’s limited economic independence were also limited temporally:

Die unübersehbare Tatsache der weiblichen Angestellten bildet den Boden, auf dem sich die Vermutungen und Anschauungen über das standardisierte, unromantische

Girl erheben. Die Statistik spricht eine deutliche Sprache: Mitte der zwanziger Jahre gibt es fast 1,5 Millionen angestellte Frauen – Verkäuferinnen, Stenotypistinnen, Sekretärinnen –, 1907 war es nur ein Drittel davon. Die überwiegende Mehrheit der weiblichen Angestellten ist jünger als 25 Jahre, über 90 % ledig. [...] Wenigstens gibt es einen geringen Freiraum zur Selbstdarstellung, zumindest ein kleiner Schritt in die Öffentlichkeit ist getan; zudem öffnet sich dank des wenn auch knappen eigenen Gehalts für die ledige Angestellte eine Zeit lang ein begrenztes Experimentierfeld (und ein größerer Phantasieraum), bevor sie Ende zwanzig als Ehefrau in die Küche zurückkehrt. (Hecken 155ff)

Hecken brings up the term ‘begrenztes Experimentierfeld’ which leads directly to the feminist moment of being a *Flapper Girl* in the 1920s. The economic independence in the described period of time was the warrantor for young women to act as consumers. They defined themselves through consumerism, and thus assigned themselves to one particular type of woman by expressing it in fashion, hairstyling, cosmetics and sexuality. The feminist moment is the fact that for a certain time women escaped within this bio political discourse from the label ‘marriageable’ as long as their economical situation allowed them to finance this lifestyle. It is from there that the category of desire that can be applied in this case: desire for personal, individual art of shaping one’s life and also sexual liberty. Exactly this *drive*, to use the Freudian expression, would be oppressed within marriage, which had to be entered for social and economical reasons. The view on the glamorous image of the *Flapper Girls* in the media obscured and obscures the view on this part of *flapperdom*. Maybe this is what Ellen Welles Page meant by the necessary cleverness and the by the "big and serious undertaking". Consumerism and the consumer society, based on capitalism, acted and functioned as a vehicle for the *Flapper’s* self-reliance, the emancipation, at least as long as a economically necessary marriage could be postponed. The ‘birth of pop culture’ in the Twenties – which can be considered as an image of mass production, mass consumerism and foremost mass media – functioned as a stage for the *Flapper Girl* in the public sphere, and at the same time in a reciprocal way was the substructure for a medical and eugenic discourse, as shown, where the different types of the *New Woman* were enrolled.

7 Young working class women, as indicated, were often white-collar-employees, but nevertheless they struggled to earn a living (Peiss 335). One possibility to keep up the *flapper* lifestyle was the so-called *treating*: it was the habit, that in bars or clubs – in most cases – men invited women for drinks or the cover fee and so on. Kathy Peiss portrays this practice in her short but very significant study concerning working-class sexuality in New York between 1880 and 1920 (Peiss 330-340). In bars, clubs, cabarets and other places that allowed any premarital sexual approaches like flirting or *kissing-games*,[1] it was in some circles custom

that women have been willingly invited to dance, for drinks, for entrances up to jewelry and clothing. In some way as 'return-service', women granted any kind of erotic or sexual interaction from flirting to sexual intercourse (Peiss 333). The chosen term 'return-service' requires a short explanation, because the practice of *treating* could easily be mistaken for prostitution. In the discourse of the time, this was heavily contradicted and negated by the women. The line to prostitution was rather drawn by the working class women, who considered themselves to be respectable women. Their most punchy argument was that they absolutely do not take money for any sexual interaction. The fact that *treating* was a quite prevalent custom and possibility to keep up the lifestyle that was marked by some sort of hedonism and free sexuality which was a fundamental part of many women's lifestyles, Kathy Peiss described it as following:

Within this range, there existed a subculture of women who fully bought into the system of treating and sexual exchange, by trading sexual favors of varying degrees for gifts, treats and a good time. These women were known in underworld slang as "charity girls", a term that differentiated them from prostitutes because they did not accept money in their sexual encounters with men. (Peiss 333)

These meetings of course took place in urban centers like New York. For example, the district of Harlem held quite an attraction also for white middle-class people. They often had the racist impression that African Americans would have a more frank exposure to sexuality. The carriers of amusement societies and clubs considered themselves lucky with this kind of 'tourism', given all the paying customers. The visitors had the impression that they were in an exotic milieu and, thus, in Harlem, one could behave against all social conventions. This also meant a rising homosexual community. Many women took advantage of the opportunity to practice homosexual experiences. Making such new experiences and testing oneself – this came to the fore rather than labeling oneself as homo- or heterosexual (Faderman 156ff).

8 As seen, in the working-class, young people had these more free and aperture conventions, which of course can be seen as "cultural and personal revolt against the conventionality of the American middle class" (Kay Trimberger 132). The fact that *Flapper Girls* from the middle class acquired these conventions brought the phenomenon *Flapper Girl* into the public perception, where the image of the *Flapper* was white and from the middle class. On the contrary, the real phenomenon was white as well as black, from the middle class as well as from the working class. The effect was, as shown, that within the contemporary bio political discourse, women who claimed to belong to *flapperhood* escaped in some way from male influence. Their boyish look, their athleticism made them on the one hand unable to be married, and on the other hand they stood for a glorified type of the *New Woman* in the

1920's. The economical freedom they took in this time was not enduring, but thus they had the possibility to decide on their own how to live – at least for a certain time and without being bound to men. This is – without claiming *Flapper Girls* a feminist movement – the feminist potential within the phenomenon *Flapper Girl*.

Author's Note:

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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. Rebecca Skloot. United States: Crown Publishers, 2010.

By Rosemary Onyango, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston Illinois

1 The thriving pharmaceutical industries, modern medical breakthroughs and increased dependency on prescription medicine have captured much media and academic interests lately. Rebecca Skloot's acclaimed book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* contributes to this discourse. It incisively weaves issues related to gender, race and class with health, medical practice myth, art, miracle, history and science and exposes the benefits and abuse of medical advances. At the center of this book is Henrietta Lacks, a poor black woman who died in 1951 of cervical cancer, but the cells from the deadly tumor that were taken without her knowledge or consent live on. "HeLa," the term scientists used to name her miraculously productive cell line, would propel to fame numerous laboratories, scientists and scholars creating a multi-billion dollar industry.

2 Rebecca Skloot, an award-winning science journalist plunges the reader into the wonders medical research can perform and how easily and ruthlessly it can exploit society's most vulnerable patients. Her book contributes to the area of medical advances that has been documented in the Golden Gate Award winning documentary, *The Way of All Flesh* produced by Adam Curtis while affiliated with BBC, London. This riveting documentary was created following visits and interviews with the Lackses, some relatives and community members who knew Henrietta. Skloot, who had a chance to view the documentary, acknowledges Curtis' effort to give Henrietta recognition. Moreover, Skloot addresses issues about the history of medical research and practice and ethics that other researchers such as Harriet Washington covers in *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black America from Colonial to the Present*, 2008, a shocking revelation of medical experimentation on African Americans that won a National Book Critics Circle Award. Also, in her 2011 book *Deadly Monopolies: The Shocking Corporate Takeover of Life Itself--And the Consequences for Your Health and Our Medical Future*, Washington has penned a spellbinding story of how corporatization of scientific research has developed a tendency to place priority on high profit margins regardless of the consequences to human health needs.

3 Skloot's odyssey into the bloodline of Henrietta Lacks whose cells are etched in a web of medical breakthroughs led her to trace, excavate and record an astonishing story of a less well-known heroine of modern science. A large corpus of data partly consisting of Skloot's documentary-like look of Lack's hometown of Clover in Virginia allows us to see its remnants that are suggestive of a place frozen in the era of the Great Depression. Moreover, her research draws on thousands of interviews with Henrietta Lack's kin, lawyers, ethicists, journalists, scientists at and beyond Johns Hopkins. Part of the data also includes journals of Henrietta's daughter, Debora and a vast range of archival photographs, journal and newspaper articles, legal documents, and reports.

4 Skloot captures a mosaic of voices dealing with real life situations in the language of each speaker, some of whom, had been hitherto overlooked. Her writing combines journalism with literary nonfiction and includes valuable updates on the major characters, an afterword and notes on chapters. Deep scars of racism are woven in the family's voices that are beleaguered by a variety of issues. These range from their anger about little knowledge about how Henrietta's cells have been used and resentment of their betrayal, to mistrust of researchers, and thrill about the cells' contribution to modern science.

5 The book's strength includes the honesty that permeates its numerous pages with respect to the research process. The candid manner in which Skloot has pieced up the information exposes contradictions in medical advances and an era of racism that impacted how Henrietta was treated and what became her husband and children's legacy. Skloot's interactions with Henrietta's family reveal their vulnerability, trials, fortitude and generous spirit among others. Their religious faith fond and painful memories of Henrietta seem to hold them together.

6 Also, Skloot unearths vital information about Henrietta and HeLa cells that arouse different emotions in the reader. These range from awe- inspiring revelations about the miracle cells with an estimated weight and height of over 50 million metric tons and 350 million feet respectively that have enjoyed more fame than the five feet tall woman who contributed them. Skloot's revelation that by time the Lackses were trying to absorb the shock that HeLa had been used to advance medical science, the cells had been launched in the outer space to test human cells in zero gravity, used to study lactose digestion, appendicitis, and longevity and had been instrumental in supporting myriad medical advances including genetic mapping, cloning,

fertility, polio vaccines, and a host of drugs to treat diseases such as herpes, leukemia, influenza, hemophilia, Parkinson's and to suppress cancer, among others.

7 Skloot makes us aware that amidst these breakthroughs lie a family that has had its unfair share of health problems. Besides being targeted preys of scientists' investigating HeLa, Skloot reveals that Henrietta's husband Day was battling prostate cancer, Zakariyya the son was declared deaf and legally blind, her daughter Debora was partially deaf and dependent on costly prescription medication and all seem to be scathed by economic poverty and psychologically scarred. These sentiments are partially but tellingly captured in Debora's words:

But I always have thought it was strange, if our mother cells done so much for medicine, how come her family can't afford to see no doctors? Don't make no sense. People got rich off my mother without us even knowin about them takin her cells, now we don't get a dime. (Skloot 9)

8 Additionally, the chapters have captivating titles such as "Too Young to Remember"...1951-1965 and "Illegal, Immoral, and Deplorable" ...1954-1966 that capture the sentiments related to family members and those of scientists, journalists in chapters 15 and 17 respectively. Skloot sheds light on the genesis of informed consent that was triggered by a 1957 court case involving Martin Salgo who became paralyzed from the waist down after a routine procedure when his doctor withheld information about possible risks. "And it would be decades before anyone thought to ask whether informed consent should apply to cases like Henrietta's, where scientists conduct research on tissues no longer attached to a person's body" (132). The book has complex technical vocabularies and medical procedures explained in layperson's terms and in specific contexts.

9 Reading about Henrietta's life is both rewarding and disturbing but Skloot's account enable us to catch a glimpse of her humanity including her love for her family, hospitality and generosity juxtaposed with the excruciating pain she endured during treatment at Hopkins whose medical units of the 1950s were divided by race. Henrietta's human side contrasts sharply with the insensitivity of doctors, researchers and laboratories that seemed immune to being held accountable.

10 Close family members some of whose photographs are included discover a void of information that they must strive to fill. Many times the researcher becomes a "participant" as Henrietta's kin ask several questions about the cause and nature of her cancer. Her daughter

Debra in particular seemed to have an insatiable longing and desire to separate fact from fiction and myth from reality about the uses to which her mother's cells have been and can be put (cloning, curing blindness etc). Several times Skloot explains to family members what has been done with HeLa cells and helps to ignite Henrietta's daughter's passion about her mother's cells and the mystery surrounding her sister's death, the two people she barely knew. Debora states, "I want to go to centers and colleges and all that. Learning places. And I want to get the medical record and autopsy report on my sister" (252). This transient reversal of roles in research has far reaching consequences that open up emotional scars and initiate positive actions. Skloot contributes to enlightening Henrietta's family and assists them in gaining access to the cells, and medical details and records that had hitherto not made available to them. The effects on Debora include taking pictures at the graveside, planning to set up a webpage, and her dream to build a museum that will help to immortalize memories about her mother.

11 By including the story about John Moore, a white man diagnosed with leukemia whose cells doctor, Golde had developed and marketed, Skloot indicates that exploitation of patients was not necessarily restricted to blacks and to women. Like Henrietta, Moore was slated to be a victim of medical abuse had his lawyer not uncovered that his cells had fetched over 3 million dollars. Conversely, Ted Slavin case challenges the perception that one begins to have about doctors' greed during this era. After his doctor's disclosure that his body was producing substances that were valuable for researchers, he willingly offered to sell them. Skloot reminds us that despite heavy media publicity the Lackses were not aware of Moore's lawsuit and that Henrietta herself remained relatively unknown and less spoken about by her surviving family members. Buried in unmarked grave, her cells would generate a flurry of research activities, build careers and benefit millions of patients. As Deborah confirms: "You know what's weird? The world got more pictures of my mother cells than it do of her" (235).

12 It is not easy to pinpoint weaknesses in a book of this depth and magnitude. Skloot appears to have a personal stake in this research and thrusts her effort, time and resources into it. However, Day's limited participation in the study of his wife's life and in relation to HeLa leaves some gaps in the narrative of this family's history and its link with issues in medical science. Also, the process of gathering data plunges her into issues poverty, sexism, racism about which her predisposition and sensitivity appear elusive. For instance, her discovery that the black and

white Lackses do not mix although they live about a mile apart elicits no reaction from her. Also, when Skloot visits Debora and learns that she sleeps in her office because of the tension with her husband, Pullum, Skloot does not document her thoughts on this but proceeds to describe the room and the décor. If Skloot's detachment is for the purpose of lending objectivity to her research, it has also prevented readers from gaining deeper insights.

13 Also, Skloot indicates that for more than a decade prior to writing the book she harbored the curiosity about the life and children of "The Woman in the Photograph" and what her thoughts about her cells would be yet, the reader gets the impression that other than revealing the story of Henrietta, her cells and family, she scarcely expresses the extent to which she quenched her curiosity.

14 Overall, Skloot's research that spans a long period and inspiration cast a ray of light in the life of the Lackses. Through telling the story of Henrietta's life, we witness a resurrection of sorts. The book account of the secrets of, and spotlights on modern medicine stirs recognition of medical ethics. It is an invaluable resource to be read and discussed by a diverse audience.

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