

**“On The Brink of Knowing a Great Truth” : Epiphany and  
Apocalypse in the Fiction of Douglas Coupland**

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

The postreligious space of Douglas Coupland's fiction provides the backdrop for a disenchanted consumer collective nursed on advertising slogans rather than Sunday school parables. This thesis seeks to examine the ways in which Coupland re-sacralizes the currently secular concepts of epiphany and apocalypse in order to re-invest the lives of his suburbanite protagonists with a sense of wonder and the desire for transcendence. Coupland's fictional subjects represent a collection of fragmented subcultures that are dissatisfied with the bypassing of the "real" for a diet of shiny, happy, yet artificial, products. As their only collective reference points are media generated, the television and mall have become sanctuaries that inscribe a virtual grand narrative that provide little in the way of religious support. The subjects of Coupland's fiction move beyond what Jameson describes as the "waning of affect" in a depthless, zombie culture as they shun irony, cynicism and passivity to experience what Coupland deems "moments of transcendence and epiphany".

This thesis also seeks to place Coupland in context alongside five other postmodern authors in order to contrast Coupland's subjects' desire for re-enchantment with the often apathetic, "blank" inhabitants of the depthless spiritual landscapes of fiction by Brett Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Don DeLillo, Martin Amis and Chuck Palahniuk.

The thesis is divided into two sections: epiphany and apocalypse, with three chapters in each section. The first chapter focuses on how the epiphany's metaphysical and ideological presuppositions are problematic for postmodern fiction. Both the Christian and the modernist epiphany are largely absent in postmodern fiction, yet Coupland frequently uses the epiphany, investing it with ideas from both traditions, yet rewriting it for a postmodern context. The second chapter is the discussion of three quasi-initiation stories, Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* and Coupland's *Shampoo Planet*. This serves as a contrast between Coupland's use of epiphany as postreligious sacred experience, McInerney's problematic attempts to place an epiphany in a postmodern context, and the complete absence of epiphany in Ellis's work. Chapter Three is a discussion of the progression from momentary, singular epiphanies in Coupland's *Generation X* to the extended epiphany, or conversion narratives, of *Life After God* and *Hey Nostradamus!* This chapter also investigates Coupland's problematic relationship with postmodern "knee jerk" irony and how it must diminish if the epiphany is to manifest itself in the lives of his protagonists.

Chapter Four offers a discussion of the postmodern concept of apocalypse as nihilistic end-time fear, with a specific focus on Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, contrasting it with the Judeo-Biblical notion of apocalypse as a redemptive, hopeful structure that reveals truth and unlocks transcendence. Chapter Five discusses Coupland's engagement with both ideas of apocalypse, but emphasizes his privileging of the supernatural, purposeful nature of the cleansing Judeo-Christian visions of apocalypse. This chapter explores the saviour/destroyer technology of Coupland's *Microserfs* and the futuristic apocalyptic visions of *Eleanor Rigby*. The last chapter is a discussion of Martin Amis's *London Fields*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* and Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma*. All three apocalyptic novels have a female prophetess that predicts the doom, destruction and apathy of the future, yet *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the only narrative to envision a surpassing of the "future" for a glimpse of "eternity" itself, invested with hope and redemption.

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## **Introduction**

In the context of a contemporary postreligious culture, in which the proclamation of “truth” is not considered sacred, but profane, Douglas Coupland’s writing is deeply subversive and uncharacteristically countercultural in its relentless quest for truth. This thesis seeks to explore the development of Coupland’s radical search for “truth” in the analysis of spiritual themes and biblical motifs in his writing. Coupland’s work is haunted by a decidedly suburban acknowledgement of a spiritual “lack” and the rigorous search for the transcendent, even amidst the dulled normality of middle-class North American life. The first half of this thesis focuses on Coupland’s accomplishments in re-investing the secular, modernist epiphany with a sense of the divine, while continually negotiating its relevance in a postmodern context. The second half explores Coupland’s more overt, “radical” engagement with the apocalyptic, another term that, in Coupland’s fiction, is re-invested with the idea of a Judeo-Christian manifestation of divine revelation. The thesis also places Coupland in a literary context, both amongst writers of “blank fiction” such as Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney and Chuck Palahniuk, and “high postmodern” authors such as Don DeLillo and Martin Amis. In close textual readings of both Coupland’s novels and novels from the above authors, I argue that Coupland raises similar questions as these authors, arising from the shared experience of contemporary spiritual malaise. Like these authors, Coupland diagnoses an acute spiritual deprivation and explores various spiritual surrogates such as shopping, surfing the internet, pursuing entrepreneurial enterprise and gaining fame, and finds them inadequate in their homogenous materiality. Coupland, unlike the above listed

predecessors and peers, draws on remnants of quasi-orthodox Judeo-Christian theology in order to offer the alternative of actually searching for answers, grasping a sense of hope in a relentless search for “truth”. In Coupland’s fictional world of suburban surfaces, “truth” is not merely a collective language construction or individual perception, but a mysterious “reality” that must break through these surface distortions to expose a new, multilayered spiritual dimension that is continually sought in order to truly live.

The search for a post-secular spirituality is the defining feature of Coupland’s work, although in critical analysis of his work, it has often been dismissed, or forced into a generic “postmodern irony” mould. Although Coupland uses irony as a tool in order to dismantle the false claims of both consumerism and a pseudo-bohemian lifestyle, he continually argues that irony must be discarded in order to embrace epiphany. But critics such as G.P. Lainsbury, who claims that “irony is the dominant mode” of 1991’s *Generation X* (237), fail to recognize the importance of Coupland’s critique of irony and how it relates to the development of spirituality in the postmodern age. Irony is a useful tool that can expose contradictions and hypocrisy, but is wholly un-useful in constructing a world view; in Coupland’s own words “there’s nothing really nutritious or substantive” about irony (France 13). Mark Forshaw’s analysis of Coupland’s complex relationship with irony in his early works, particularly *Life After God* (1993), is helpful, but also ignores the need for a detailed analysis of Coupland’s reasons for abandoning irony in his later works. Forshaw longs for a re-emergence of irony in Coupland’s later writing, especially *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1997); the literal presence of both a supernatural reality and quest for an existing, stable truth are, according to

Forshaw, very dubious topics for Coupland's "more materialist" readers (40). Rather than exploring the deeper implications of Coupland's use of biblical themes, Forshaw reduces *Girlfriend in a Coma* to a political novel that contains "Hierarchical, hegemonic notions of Truth" that are dismissed as "deeply conservative" and "deeply oppressive" (56).

While Forshaw at least acknowledges both the post-secular complexities and the weight of such revolutionary and perhaps, disturbing, truth claims, many other critics have chosen not to even mention the "uncomfortable" subject matter. James Annesley's important study of *Blank Fictions* devotes a lengthy section to a discussion of *Generation X*, yet ignores its spiritual themes, focusing specifically on the role of commodity in the novel. Annesley's book, like Graham Caveney and Elizabeth Young's *Shopping in Space*, acknowledges the spiritual deprivation of the "blank" novels they analyze, but do not devote time to a discussion of the origins or implications of this depravity in the work of Coupland, Ellis and McInerney, among others. In two other important articles, Nick Heffernan and Veronica Hollinger focus on Coupland's critique of technology's identity-defining capacities in *Microserfs* (1995) and *Girlfriend in a Coma*, yet ignore these novels' manifold biblical allusions and questions concerning spirituality's relationship to technology. As Coupland's writing has progressed, and the interior lives of his characters are more developed, reviewers cannot avoid the overt spiritual quest that dominates novels such as *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003) and *Eleanor Rigby* (2004). Although Coupland's spiritual concerns are now highlighted in both critical reviews and academic writing on these later novels, most have overlooked the presence of the same questions and concerns in earlier novels such as *Generation X*,



*Shampoo Planet* (1992) and *Microserfs*. Articles by both Andrew Tate and William H. Katerberg are exceptions to this oversight, focusing specifically on the presence of epiphany, ritual and redemption in Coupland's fiction. This thesis aims to show that Coupland's early fascination with cataloguing popular trends, exploring both the merits and dangers of modern technology and emphasizing the commodification of both external and internal realities, is directly related to the overt theological questions and supernatural revelations that dominate his later writing.

I will attempt to demonstrate that Coupland re-appropriates traditional theological concepts for a postmodern world, relying on both pared-down contemporary jargon and poetic imagery to connote a spiritual dimension. One of Coupland's central theological premises is what, in *Shampoo Planet*, he calls the "blackness inside us all" (246). This emphasis is present in all of his novels, yet only in *Hey Nostradamus!*, a novel that focuses on a hypocritical religious subculture, does he use the biblical term "sin". His characters frequently feel the need to be cleansed of this corrosive darkness, yet Coupland often uses commodified references and the language of his popular culture to articulate this longing for spiritual purity, as in 2006's *JPod*: "I hoped that God would shake my Etch-a-Sketch clean overnight" (134). This desire for a sort of contemporary rebirth manifests itself in a more traditional sense in both *Miss Wyoming* (1999) and *Girlfriend in a Coma* as a character in each novel embarks upon a spontaneous pilgrimage, detaching themselves from the comforts of consumer culture, in order to find the "truth" about themselves, God and the nature of reality. Both Linus from *Girlfriend in a Coma* and John from *Miss Wyoming* return to civilization disappointed, not having found a sense of purpose in their lives, yet both characters are ultimately and

finally enlightened in ways they do not and can not plan: John in the context of a media-fostered, yet “normal” relationship and Linus in a completely unexpected and spectacular divine intervention.

Linus and John each endeavour upon a search for truth that, according to Coupland, defines the human condition, but this search for truth is not only enacted through traditional pilgrimages; his characters often begin this search in the most unlikely of places—the shopping mall, a Greyhound bus, a presidential inauguration. Although Coupland does not often rely on dogmatic, theological terminology to depict depravity or revelation, he does frequently allude to both poetry and narratives from the Bible. His reliance on the poetic use of biblical metaphor, as opposed to the jargon of systematic theology, is poignant, clearly a choice of premodern narrative over modern aphorisms. The ability of narrative and metaphor to express truth and disclose purpose is present throughout all of his writing. In a radio interview with Tom Ashbrook, Coupland claims that “What unites all people through time and history, regardless of place, is the need to make sense”. This “need to make sense” is evident in the desire many of Coupland’s characters have to become part of a story, to have the isolated moments of their lives strung together, to progress towards something that will disclose ultimate truth and meaning. The transformation of Janet Drummond, protagonist of *All Families are Psychotic* (2001), reflects the importance of narrative structure in the lives of so many of his characters:

Janet sensed that her opinion of life was changing. Two days ago, it had felt like merely a game of connect the dots—a few random dots, spaced

widely apart and which produced a picture of scribbles. But now? ...Her life was now a story. *Farewell, random scribbles*. (173)

Janet is now certain that the “dots would connect in the end to create a magnificent picture” (173); the presence of a story in her life indicates a certain knowledge of meaning and purpose, rather than the fear of randomness. In Coupland’s writing, patterns do not indicate cold determinism, but the possibility of identity, purpose and transcendence. In *Close Personal Friend*, an experimental film in which Coupland is interviewed, he explains that randomness is just a misperception based upon a limited point of view. Once the observer moves back and gains a larger perspective, he or she will discern a pattern. In Coupland’s fiction, this discernment of pattern and purpose is indicative of epiphany and engagement with transcendence.

Some of Coupland’s protagonists, including Claire from *Generation X* and yuppie want-to-be Tyler from *Shampoo Planet*, ultimately lose faith in the capitalist metanarrative, the only structure that they have inherited to enable them to read and connect the “dots” of their lives. Having received no religious instruction in their youth, they are left with no underlying paradigm to adhere to, to “make sense” of their individual life moments after abandoning a lifestyle built on the promises of a better material future. In *JPod*, in which Coupland features as an evil fictionalized version of himself (the anti-Doug), office worker Kaitlin claims that “Coupland said that unless your life was a story it had no meaning, that you might as well be kelp or bacteria” (256). Although *JPod*’s “Coupland” is an “evil” parody of himself, Kaitlin’s description is a fair representation of the connection between meaning and what Paul Fiddes calls



the “eschatological structure” (5) of narrative. Only in the hope for a certain, purposeful, defining “end”, can his characters find their purpose and live with a sense of hope.

Jean Francois Lyotard claims that the desire for linearity, as the one articulated so often in Coupland’s novels, is “itself perfectly modern”, a remnant of the Enlightenment narrative of human progress and emancipation (*Postmodern Explained*, 90). Coupland’s protagonists have clearly rejected a narrative arc designed by the encroaching technocracy, but they still desire a sense of structure and purpose. Only when they experience an epiphanic moment in which they briefly sense transcendence, acknowledging a reality that transcends the immediate time of the limited moment, do they gain a deeper understanding from a larger, more purposeful perspective. Coupland’s frequent apocalyptic overtones provide an inherent structure that relies more on a Judeo-Christian narrative than a modern one. His characters, burned by unfulfilled promises in the bright hopes of a capitalist future, clearly reject modernity’s vision of human betterment. Lyotard explains the failed promises of modernity’s grand narratives:

The thought and action of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are ruled by the Idea of the emancipation of humanity...The progress of the sciences, technologies, the arts and political freedom will liberate the whole of humanity from ignorance, poverty, backwardness, despotism. Not only will it produce happy men, but, thanks to education in particular, it will also produce enlightened citizens, masters of their own destiny. (97)

Both Coupland and his characters are wary of the idea that a more “developed” culture produces “enlightened citizens”. Coupland’s protagonists are often deadened, dazed and confused by the abundance of artificial reality. Although they are in a seemingly

godless technosphere, they are not “masters of their own destiny”, but become increasingly subservient to the very machine-dominated environment they have created themselves. Lyotard explains that “These ideals are on the wane in general attitudes in what we call developed nations” (97), and this dissatisfaction is plentiful among the middle class inhabitants of Coupland’s novels. In a short story titled “The Wrong Sun” from *Life After God*, the narrator realizes that “technology does not always equal progress”(75), a statement that echoes Lyotard’s own diagnosis that: “Technoscientific development has become a means of deepening the malaise rather than allaying it. It is no longer possible to call development progress” (*Postmodern Explained*, 91). This “malaise”, the defining, common subject matter of each novel discussed in this thesis, is both built and nurtured by this false sense of “progress”, a rationality that governs scientific achievement.

In the previously mentioned interview with Tom Ashbrook, Coupland clearly refers to a suspicion of the “Modern Project”, especially in its focus on scientific certainty rather than the possibility of religious wonder, a theme that reappears in many of his novels, as well as in his recent play *September 10, 2001*. Coupland defines a dilemma he calls “modernity versus eternity” which raises the question: “Do we believe in eternity or do we want to make a better tomorrow through the application of science?”(Ashbrook). In *Microserfs*, techie Dan, a computer worker on the helm of the Modern Project, confesses that his completely secular upbringing provides him with no pictures of an afterlife. The possibility of a reality that can’t be controlled, manipulated, and reduced to a formula or experiment is absent in the grand narrative of modernity. In the above interview, Coupland claims that there is “no overlap between the two”

structures provided by a vision of eternity or a trust in modernity. When the interviewer remarks that the protagonists of Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!* chose the narrative supplied by "eternity", Coupland simply replies, "There needs to be hope".

This type of "hope" in the unknown does not exist in the doctrine of modernity, in which "hope" is only grounded in stories we tell ourselves about man-made discoveries and statistics. Heidegger's critique of onto-theology is very helpful in understanding the "metaphysical" dimension of the modern project. According to Merold Westphal, Heidegger sees modern technology not as a collection of machines, but more as "a way of seeing the world, namely as a conglomerate of human and natural resources at the disposal of the human will to power" (Westphal 28). Heidegger claims that the omnipresence of modern technology is the "metaphysics of the atomic age" (Heidegger 52). Westphal explains that this statement does not indicate that technology is a replacement for metaphysics, but a belief system, a "mode of revealing" all of its own (23). But these "revelations" do not uncover layers of mystery, clarifying a sense of purpose; they are merely re-enforcements of the deceptively "sovereign" will of their human creators. In Heidegger's critique, Nietzsche's "Will to Power" becomes the will to will: "Pure will wills itself...Pure will is the sole content for itself as form" (qtd. In Westphal 24). Therefore, technology is guided by no standards other than those it has created for itself, and man, as the creator of technology, is the only subject—the only "divine" will (24). Indicating the secular "religious" experience of faith in modernity, Westphal notes that, "Those...who identify freedom with free enterprise and make this the immanent telos of human history are onto-theologians in an era of the death of God" (22). Heidegger's central critique of onto-theology is that "God" is not a means of



wonder, a mystery to be sought and worshipped, but a concept subservient to the guidelines of reason, used only to legitimate a narrative of man-centred progress, then ultimately abandoned when no longer needed (24). Westphal emphasizes that Heidegger's criticism of onto-theology is its inability to leave "space in the world of modern technology for this kind of faith" (38). The "kind of faith" absent in onto-theology, faith in the mysterious, divine Other, is the perplexing focal point of Coupland and his characters' search.

Coupland also sees a defining faith in betterment via technology as a hindrance to faith in the divine, and attempts to find the open spaces of mystery and wonder in his narratives. But Coupland's "faith" is not orthodox dogmatism; he decries doctrinaire thinking:

Somebody who thinks they've found some miracle truth is de-facto cattle-blinded...They've just stopped being curious. That's the scary thing. With them, it's 'Don't question me. Don't talk with me. Because I've got the truth.' (qtd. In Todd 89).

Although he reacts both against orthodox religious truth claims and the equally "religious fervour" (90) of atheistic truth claims in this early interview with Douglas Todd, the later *Girlfriend in a Coma* concludes with an angel proclaiming "You are on the brink of knowing a great truth" (268) to a group of his friends who have survived the apocalypse. The end of this novel, as well as the end of *Eleanor Rigby* and *Hey Nostradamus!* present transformed characters who have literally found "some miracle truth" in the form of prophetic visions, angelic messengers and apocalyptic warnings. But it is important to note that "truth" is not proclaimed through a human act of will, but

unveiled directly through the divine acting within history. These are truly “revelations”, and their recipients cannot control them or reduce them to theories or experiments. Interestingly, these “chosen” recipients are not scientists, philosophers, or even clergy, but “normal” human beings. It is clear, in all of Coupland’s fiction, that there is a truth to be found; truth is something that cannot be constructed, but only found through constant questioning. It is its own reality, only articulated through revelation and epiphany. Coupland’s characters must move beyond the modern conception of assuming precise knowledge of the origin, purpose and end of the universe based on reason and scientific experimentation; they must be seekers, relentless interrogators, constantly and humbly renegotiating their individual theologies. According to Coupland, “complacency devalues faith” as faith is based on our admittance that we don’t know all the answers, but that there is a truth worth searching for (Butler 6).

Coupland’s fictional depictions of spiritual quests are not placed in mystical locations, but in the homes and workspaces of a heavily commodified suburbia. He must negotiate the presence of faith in the midst of late capitalist society which, according to Ernest Mandel, is “a period of intense commodification in which the influence of the commodity penetrates into previously uncommercialized spheres” (qtd. in Annesley 118). As Coupland ironically “labels” the supposedly countercultural lifestyle choices of his characters, we become increasingly aware that there appear to be *no* uncommodified spheres in their world (Annesley 118). Fredric Jameson, drawing on Mandel, argues that we have entered the “last stage of capitalism”, which is also the “purest” stage of multinational or consumer capitalism, “a prodigious expansion of capitalism into hitherto uncommodified areas” (*Postmodernism* 36). Jameson notes that

one of the significant occurrences in the late capitalist era is the “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (9). This depthlessness indicates the extinction of the “hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside and of stigmatizing such models as ideological and metaphysical” (12). This focus on artificiality as a dominant reality indicates the loss of a dialectic between “essence and appearance” (12), thus collapsing the multi-layered “depth” model into the omnipresence of one-dimensional surfaces. This depthless world of surfaces, so clearly represented in Coupland’s fiction, is populated not by decentred subjects, but sojourners on a metaphysical quest. Jameson claims that “Capitalism, and the modern age, is a period in which, with the extinction of the sacred and the ‘spiritual,’ the deep underlying materiality of things has finally risen dripping and convulsing into the light of day” (qtd. in *Born* 212). Coupland seeks to re-invest both the consumer surfaces and flattened characters of his fictional suburbias with depth, identity and spirituality, and expose a clear, ever-present distinction between the artificial world of consumer heaven and the reality of both the “sacred” and “spiritual”.

Because of the central focus on the desire to escape the predominant metanarrative of consumerism, emphasized in both *Generation X* (1991) and *Shampoo Planet* (1992), Coupland was initially included in critical discussions of “blank fiction”. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney’s *Shopping in Space: Essays on American “Blank Generation” Fiction* and James Annesley’s *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* both see Coupland as a (supposedly less successful) successor to the New York blank fiction writers Brett Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney. It is helpful here to look briefly at Young, Caveney and Annesley’s



comments on the nature and characteristics of blank fiction in order to see how Coupland's fiction is influenced by the world of blank fiction, yet transcends its limited thematic and stylistic boundaries. The most notorious and critically acclaimed writers of blank fiction came on the New York literary scene in the mid-1980's; Tama Janowitz, Brett Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney, frequently called "the bratpack," were just as much media darlings as they were authors. According to Young and Caveney, they wrote "flat, affectless prose" that had as its central subject "consumer capitalism, media saturation, societal breakdown—the whole contemporary technocracy" (viii). The protagonists of their novels were spiritually dead, or at best asleep, immersed in a constructed world of wealth, glamour and endless empty pleasures. Annesley notes that the sense of "indifference and indolence" that is characteristic of the novels' protagonists accentuates our awareness of "urban despair" (1).

The blank, minimalist, yet enticingly glossy style of both Ellis and McInerney's novels made reading as easy (and irresistible) as channel surfing. Annesley, who includes a lengthy discussion of Coupland's *Generation X* in his chapter on "Decadence" sees enough similarities between the minimalist, easily accessible style of *Generation X* and that of blank fiction prose to include Coupland in this loosely defined genre: "Coupland's approach is 'underwrought', not 'overwrought', with his glib turn of phrase and continual emphasis on slogans making the text ...easy to digest" (125). Coupland's continual pop culture references and "emphasis on slogans" are emblematic of blank fiction which "does not just depict its own period, it speaks in the commodified language of the period" (Annesley 7). This use of "commodified language" points once again to a culture whose central reference points are media-generated. Both Elizabeth

Young and James Annesley argue that the “flat”, commodity-laden prose of blank fiction is a deliberate contrast to “seminal” works of what they deem “high postmodernism”. Young claims that this is because “high postmodern” texts do not appeal to young people, whose main source of “information” is popular culture—music press, style magazines, MTV (9). Young also detects a strong anti-academicism in blank fiction, as its authors “have an obvious distaste for the tired experimental strategies and resulting stasis of late, high postmodernist writing” (11). Annesley argues that blank fiction writers want to distance themselves from the “canon” of postmodern fiction, which includes the complex plots and political subject matter for writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and Toni Morrison (4). The writers of much more sparse, accessible blank fiction aim rather to collapse the gap between high and low culture, thus deconstructing the binary opposition of uninformed reader and cleverly ironic author. Blank fiction reflects the world of its readers by using their terms, the terms of commercial life that permeate what they know as “reality”. Young elaborates on the relationship between informed reader and accessible text:

Their entire lives have been lived out in a milieu wherein art and pop music, advertising, films and fiction have always been inextricably intertwined, inseparable from one another. This does not deny them critical insight but rather denotes an exceptionally sophisticated apprehension of these multifarious semiotic codes. (14)

The worlds of pop culture and “high art” intersect in blank fiction” and its most trained readers are those well versed in the intricacies of consumer culture.

In *Blank Fictions*, Annesley suggests that the “concentration on the function of the commodity...provides a way of reading the contemporary scene” (9). Coupland’s use of “commodified language” and emphasis on omnipresent consumerism are obvious features that he shares with both blank fiction authors such as McInerney and Ellis as well as “high postmodern” authors such as DeLillo and Amis. His prose style, with its pared-down, smooth, pop culture reference laden quips, also resists the complexities of high postmodern fiction. Yet there are also many direct contrasts between Coupland and these blank fiction authors, differences that Annesley, in particular, chooses to ignore when he distills *Generation X*’s metaphysical themes in order to fit his analysis of the novel within the blank fiction mould of complete commodification. One of Annesley’s own descriptions of blank fiction will help to highlight the differences between Coupland’s fiction and that of writers such as Ellis and McInerney:

The range of mass cultural references not only characterises blank fiction, but also positions it very precisely in a particular time and place...It’s not the dates that matter, nor is it situation or personalities. It’s the common features of the environment that provide these novels with their reference points. (Annesley 7)

In blank fiction, constructed, commodified spaces, and the “common features” of these environments are in the foreground of the novel, their presence often taking precedence over the “personalities” of the characters, who are frequently interchangeable, decentred subjects floating aimlessly through the technosphere. Because of this lack of character development in blank fiction, the epiphany is often absent, indicating an inability to



transform oneself when there is no clear distinction between appearance and an alternative “reality”.

The world of blank fiction tends to occupy the stylish urban scene with all its glitz and glamour, but Coupland frequently locates his novels in “normal” middle class suburban locations. Unlike blank fiction, the focus is not on indulgence, excess and the extreme as much as the mundane, the normal. Place is important, not because it takes precedence over character, but because it indicates the extent to which commodification has infiltrated even the ordinary realm of everyday life. Ellis and McInerney’s characters, numbed by over-saturation, fail to recognize their spiritual destitution. Coupland’s characters are also numbed and spiritually asleep, lulled by the gentler rhythms of suburbia that have promised them a life of comfort that is getting better every day. Although Coupland, as indicated by the title of 1992’s *Shampoo Planet*, does highlight his protagonists’ reliance on “product” as life-force, his focus is primarily on his characters’ need for change. In direct contrast to blank fiction, Coupland moves his focus from external environment to internal, and predominantly spiritual, needs. The decentred subject becomes, once again, a spiritual being in Coupland’s fictional world; although consumerism and comfort often numb the recognition of spiritual desire, sometimes the products themselves point the way towards epiphany.

Although Annesley is partially correct in his claim that Coupland is a successor to Ellis and McInerney, he neglects to recognize the decidedly different spiritual strand in Coupland’s writing that was present even in *Generation X*, yet expanded to practically consume the texts of the later novels. Bret Easton Ellis’s brutal, cruel portrayal of a luxurious, yet empty life with no moral boundaries in *Less Than Zero* (1985) exposes the

spiritual disintegration of his culture, yet fails to explore its origins or the possibility of any alternatives. Although he is portraying a one-dimensional world of surfaces and decentred, apathetic subjects, he is disengaged enough from that world to stand on the outside and represent it in a cold, harsh, perhaps even judgemental manner that Elizabeth Young deems puritanical (26). Yet his “diagnosis” of this spiritual malaise is superficial as it also treats the characters as if they truly are one-dimensional themselves; Ellis’s approach, I want to suggest, encourages the use of reductive labelling rather than truly challenging it. Although Ellis appears to clearly despise the depthlessness of his characters, he cannot see past it; Coupland, on the other hand, wants to give his characters a voice in order to counteract the labels, an attempt to re-instil depth into the depthless, commodified landscape. Coupland asks many of the same questions about moral boundaries as Ellis does, and deals with similar issues about the development of the self as McInerney, but he moves beyond a vivid, satirical depiction of the problem, spending much more time on the possibility of finding answers. Coupland’s main answer, in response to the apathy present in blank fiction’s alienating city spaces, is to encourage his characters to relentlessly question themselves, their environment and God.

Coupland has been labelled as a spokesperson, perhaps even a prophet, for his generation, a title he resents and repeatedly refutes. In 1989, he was offered \$22, 500 in advance to write a non-fiction account of Generation X; the final product, a fictional exploration titled *Generation X: Tales For an Accelerated Culture*, was not at all what the editors had expected ( Lohr). At the time, Coupland, who has a visual arts degree, was a sculptor who frequently wrote witty articles of non-fiction cultural commentary for magazines such as *Wired*. He decided that fiction was the best way to approach the

project; his aim in *Generation X* (1991) was not to “define” his generation, but to explore the tensions inherent in the lives of privileged “slackers” trying to move away from the confines of a reality determined by consumerism rather than spirituality. He revisits similar themes in *Shampoo Planet*, yet the novel’s protagonist, Tyler, is a devout disciple of the modern religion of materialism that *Gen X*’s bohemians desperately try to reject. *Life After God* (1993) appears to be a certain turning point for Coupland, as it is the first book that has the “loss of God” in privileged middle class culture as its central premise. This collection of short stories explores the interior world of a collection of characters, all coming to the crucial point of recognition of their own spiritual brokenness, what Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma* calls “a lack” (213), and need for change. It is clear from this collection that although popular culture is the surrogate paradigm for those who have been “raised without religion”, it is a false and inadequate one—it points towards a deep need which it is not itself equipped to meet. Although these glassy, thin, and ultimately artificial paradigms are initially common reference points, Coupland highlights the presence of a deeper set of reference points, in the form of spiritual questions about the nature of life, death and the possibility of afterlife that are common to all of humanity. These questions, and the act of relentlessly questioning, are at the heart of all of Coupland’s novels, beginning with *Generation X*, but becoming much more overt, moving into the foreground of *Life After God*, *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!* in particular.

This engagement with spiritual questions, and particularly the search for God in the midst of a hyperreality in which God is proclaimed dead, also indicates a certain progression in his novels. In an interview with Tony Watkins, Coupland explains that



the subject of God is like an “elephant in the room” that no one ever speaks about, and that his novels, particularly *Hey Nostradamus!* are an attempt to merely start a conversation about God and religion. Interestingly, Coupland himself sees this progression in his writing as a direct contrast to blank fiction writers such as Bret Easton Ellis who do little to investigate the interior worlds of their characters. Coupland claims that a negative review he read in the *New York Times* of Ellis’s *The Rules of Attraction* was the “spark” that inspired him to “give a voice” to these internal, spiritual concerns: “And she said there’s no politics, there’s no God—like God was just one of the things in a list, I remember. And then I was like, ‘Oh, there isn’t, is there?’” (Watkins). This review of Ellis’s 1987 novel caused Coupland to begin looking at films, TV and other areas of popular culture to see if spiritual, family, political and interior life were represented; this “gap” in popular culture instigated his desire to begin a dialogue in his work about the above topics. This pre-occupation with spiritual themes is evident even in *Microserfs* (1995), a novel about IT subculture that locates the production of and dependence on technology as an indicator of a deeper spiritual need.

Although blank writers like Ellis “resonate with the spirit of the age” (Annesley 5), Coupland, as I hope to demonstrate, uncovers another dimension of this “spirit”. He re-establishes a universality based on spiritual desires manifest in questions, a collective reference point that transcends an artificially constructed one. He is simultaneously in love with and wary of popular culture, as evidenced in his 1997 novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* that is named after a popular song, yet decries our deadening over-reliance on popular culture as daily quasi-spiritual sustenance. *Girlfriend in a Coma*, along with *Eleanor Rigby* (2004) both have the metaphysical subjects of prophecy, divine

judgement and a need for redemption in the foreground of the novel. These subjects, perhaps “foreign” to the contemporary, secular world represented in the novels, clearly open up a dialogue between Coupland, his readers and his critics about the sacred and profane topic of religious faith. *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003) is Coupland’s most complex theological novel; it centres around a high school shooting that becomes spectacle and media event, yet he humanizes the tragedy and shows it not as exploitative but tragic, complex and ultimately, hopeful.

This thesis is divided into two sections, the first focusing on the concept of “epiphany” and the second on the concept of “apocalypse”, with three chapters in each section. Chapter One briefly traces the historical and literary origins of the term “epiphany”, highlighting its evolution from a representation of the sacred to a modernist indication of secular enlightenment. I then focus on Paul Maltby’s argument that even the *secular* modernist epiphany’s metaphysical and ideological presuppositions are problematic for postmodern fiction. Although the modernist epiphany has been desacralized, it still hinges upon a quasi-mystical belief in a higher order of knowledge, which is absent in the anti-metaphysical cityscapes of most postmodern fiction. Although Douglas Coupland is frequently grouped together with both “blank fiction” writers and postmodern writing in general, he re-invokes the epiphany, rewriting it in order to re-invest it with sacred associations that are relevant for the postmodern context. The end of this chapter is an exploration of Coupland’s wrestling with the attempt to glimpse the edge of transcendence through epiphanic experience in his 1999 novel *Miss Wyoming*. In this novel, the deceptive layers of commodified Hollywood reality are

both a hindrance and a passageway to a new state of spiritual hunger and sense of wonder.

Chapter Two is a discussion of the function (through either presence or poignant absence) of the epiphany in three coming-of-age narratives: *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis, *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney and *Shampoo Planet* by Coupland. Ellis's novel centres around Clay, an apathetic depressive "subject" trapped within the constructed confines of his own material prosperity and limitless indulgence that take the place of traditional morality; the self has been all but annihilated, yet ambiguous traces of conscience indicate a paradoxical fear of and desire for identity. Ellis's flat, glossy world does not offer multiple levels of depth that are exposed through epiphany. *Bright Lights, Big City* also focuses on the central, unnamed character's loss of identity, and his misguided, confused attempt to regain it amidst the flashy lights and cocaine highs of Hollywood dreamtime. This blank anti-hero longs for an epiphany, and is not happy with one that he will have to manufacture; he longs to find the "universal solvent" that will define purpose and identity. *Shampoo Planet* is the story of Tyler, a college aged Ronald Reagan devotee, whose initial sole desire is to constantly re-invent himself with the cherished tools of capitalist enterprise. Unlike the protagonists of Ellis and McInerney's blank novels, Tyler ultimately experiences both catastrophic and redemptive epiphanies; he recognizes his own spiritual deterioration, but is also opened up to an experience of the sacred that enables him to construct an identity built on the possibility of a spiritual reality rather than the limitations of a material one.

Chapter three focuses specifically on the function of the epiphany in Coupland's *Generation X*, *Life After God* and *Hey Nostradamus!* In the discussion of *Generation X*,



I argue that Coupland presents two prerequisites for an epiphany to occur: the presence of a story and the absence of postmodern irony. I connect the desire for narrative, a compulsion to see pattern and purpose rather than isolated moments, with a deeper desire for community and awareness of spiritual reality. Referring to Lyotard's famous discussion of metanarratives, I also discuss how the desert pilgrims of *Generation X* are fleeing the oppressive consumer-driven paradigms of their previous lives, longing for a sense of structure and purpose. My discussion of *Generation X* also focuses on Coupland's witty usage of ironic marginal comments throughout the text, until his abandonment of them in the two chapters in which his central character, Andy, experiences epiphanies. Coupland's emphasis on the dangers of postmodern irony and cynicism is continued in 1993's *Life After God* that explores the spiritual hunger of suburbia. I incorporate author David Foster Wallace's critique of the "destructive" nature of irony as it parallels many of Coupland's own fictional examples. I also critique Richard Rorty's "liberal ironist" stance in light of Coupland and Wallace's anti-ironic sentiments. The second half of this chapter is devoted to a much later novel, *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003). The selection serves to highlight a development in Coupland's positioning of religion, God and spirituality at the centre of his work; in this novel the episodic epiphany has transformed into a developed, enduring epiphany or even long-term conversion. This novel, centred on the devastating slaughter of high school students in a school shooting, is Coupland's most explicitly theological as he examines the "problem of evil", the nature of religious hypocrisy and self-righteousness, and the polarities of legalism and grace as well as sin and redemption.

The second half of the thesis begins with a chapter on the origins of the Judeo-Christian concept of apocalypse in contrast to the popular notions of this term incorporated in contemporary film, TV and literature. This popularized version of apocalypse has erased its transformative purposes and divorced it from any divine source. Whereas the original apocalyptic writing involved divine judgement *and* redemption, contemporary fictional accounts envision a godless future in which we destroy ourselves. This section also discusses Baudrillard's notion of the postmodern apocalypse, an eternal period of waiting—a forever now—with no hope for an end and no knowledge of an origin. I argue that death is the only postmodern absolute and agree with author Zadie Smith that advertising lures contemporary culture away from recognizing this (xv). This chapter ends with an analysis of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, an apocalyptic novel centred on the fear of death and one family's refuge in the “pleasures” of consumer culture. This novel, both a seminal “high postmodern” text and thematic predecessor to Coupland, searches for spirituality, structure and meaning among the omnipresent codes and symbols of hyperreality.

Chapter five focuses specifically on Coupland's engagement with apocalyptic themes in his fiction. As with his use of the epiphany, he incorporates both the secular and Judeo-Christian approaches, reinvesting this term with its divine, de-legitimizing origins. Coupland incorporates the fear of nuclear holocaust, a man-made and completely destructive secular apocalypse, in many of his novels, yet I argue that he does this to indicate how an obsession with end-time fears offers a way to speak about and domesticate death, the terrifying other. In order to explore this point further, I discuss how *Microserfs* (1995) analyzes the corporate origins of a promised “heaven on

earth” that has replaced any genuine vision of eternity. This trade-off marks corporate technology as both the origin of apocalyptic fear and of a messianic hope for salvation from destruction. Coupland’s later novels focus more on apocalypse as revelation, an unwavering, subversive epiphany that challenges our constructed conceptions of “reality”. In *Eleanor Rigby*, lonely, embittered Liz Dunn is reunited with the son she gave up for adoption as well as introduced to a new, mysterious spiritual reality through his prophetic apocalyptic visions. These visions cause atheist Liz to “doubt my doubt” (117) as the introduction of apocalyptic imagery in her life transforms rather than destroys her.

The final chapter of the thesis is a comparison of the themes raised in three contemporary apocalyptic novels: *London Fields* by Martin Amis, *Survivor* by Chuck Palahniuk and *Girlfriend in a Coma* by Douglas Coupland. All three novels have a female prophetess who predicts the doom, destruction and apathy of the future, yet the first two use this prophetess as a tool to uncover, not a supernatural reality, but a cold, deterministic universe. In *London Fields*, the scorched cityscape of London reflects the spiritual deterioration of its residents, the central characters of Amis’s novel. The novel mourns the “death of love” in postmodern culture, and offers only one alternative: a love of destruction and death. Palahniuk’s *Survivor*, a backwards narrative about the lone survivor of a suicide death cult, also focuses on an obsession with death that leads to an internal apocalypse. Tender Branson, the novel’s protagonist, becomes a media figure and spiritual guide, but spends his free time in graveyards hoping to find some evidence of life after death. His psychic girlfriend provides no hope, as she only foresees earthly disaster. Although Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma* is also a narrative full of earthly



disasters, Coupland uses the apocalypse as a tool for the rebirth of spiritual hunger. In Coupland's fictional universe, death is not the final and only absolute; through a clear case of divine, revelatory intervention, his protagonists are assured that "truth exists" and are charged with a "Great Commission" to find it.

This thesis seeks to contrast Coupland's engagement with the concepts of "epiphany" and "apocalypse" with that of his contemporaries and predecessors. Although Coupland's fictional worlds are built of the same depthless, shiny building blocks as the worlds represented in fiction by Ellis, McInerney, DeLillo, Amis and Palahniuk, his characters are not equally depthless "pieces" of the environment. Because his characters are spiritual beings, rather than decentred subjects, Coupland chooses to re-invest the concepts of epiphany and apocalypse with religious meaning. The epiphanies and apocalyptic moments in Coupland's fiction are largely tools of divine intervention, enabling his characters to confront their inner "darkness" and experience redemption.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Revitalising Epiphany: *Miss Wyoming*

During a discussion about the effects of Douglas Coupland's secular upbringing recorded in *Third Way* magazine, Brian Draper asks Coupland "What do you need God for?". Coupland answers:

I think religion is important because it makes you feel that even if your day seems like it was small, it was big and you did something worthy. Even though you did not write a song or invent a theory, you did make some kind of metaphysical bridge or window.

Obviously intrigued with Coupland's concept of an everyday "metaphysical bridge or window", Draper pushes the point further, asking: "Are you suggesting in your books that people are looking for transcendence?". Coupland answers, "Primarily transcendence and epiphany, yes". In both this interview and his fiction, Coupland's two chosen terms, "transcendence" and "epiphany" appear to be inseparable. He emphasizes that in the midst of the mundane, the everyday, there is a possibility to find a previously obscured bridge or window to peer into and experience the reality that is beyond the physical universe. This transformative moment is Coupland's epiphany, the focal point of most of his fiction. But Coupland, often referred to as a "postmodern" writer, faces the challenge of incorporating the "authenticity" of epiphany into the synthetic, commodified landscapes of middle class suburbia. In order to do this, he must rewrite the epiphany for a postmodern context, investing it with both the mundane nature of a

Joycean moment of insight as well as the authority of divine revelation from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In order to see how Coupland has both broadened and rewritten the concept of “epiphany” for use in his fiction, it is helpful to investigate both the classical and sacred origins as well as the secularized evolution of the term “epiphany”. The word stems from the Greek “*epiphainein*” and means “to reveal” or “to show”. Jakob Lothe comments that the original Greek usage of the word is, “generally used of gods who show themselves, manifest themselves” (149). He also points out that it was used most often in reference to Greek drama, referring to the climax that arises when a god reveals himself on the stage and clears up its conflicts (149). The epiphany was originally used as a classical structural device; the plot was both formed around it and resolved through it, providing a nexus of meaning for the text. This provided the opportunity to emphasize the interconnectedness between the divine and the human. After the founding of the Christian church, the term was reclaimed and sacralized for use in the ecclesiastical calendar to indicate the concept of incarnation, the manifestation of God on earth in the form of Jesus Christ. This theophany is celebrated during the Christian festival of “Epiphany”, particularly focusing on the Magi’s visitation with the Christchild, as well as the events leading up to and including the baptism of Christ.

Both the arrival of the Magi to Christ’s birthplace and the baptism of Christ emphasize the meeting of the divine with human, within the person of Christ himself as well as in his interaction with others; both the humanity and lordship of Christ are revealed during these moments. The 1828 edition of Webster’s dictionary pinpoints II Timothy 9:10 as a key verse in the understanding of the concept of the epiphany:



This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

The word 'grace' is a key concept in the above passage, indicating that the *truth* of life, redemption and immortality has been *given* to humanity, manifest in the specific *revelation* of the person of Christ. The divine source of truth, the creator who surpasses the laws of His creation, has clothed Himself in humanity in order to reveal this truth in a very personal way. The individual recipient of this grace must understand that it is beyond his or her control; the revelation is made known specifically to individuals who must engage with it mentally, spiritually and emotionally. The very act of God's manifestation on earth, the epiphany, makes it possible for the individual to have a direct connection with the God of the universe through this specific revelation.

This original understanding of 'epiphany', in which divinity displays both power over and union with humanity on earth, evolved, in the early twentieth century, into a focus on the individual recipient of a quite different type of epiphany. This modern understanding of epiphany focuses not on God's strength and glory, but on the human intuition and imagination. Morris Beja argues that in the early twentieth century, amidst the religious scepticism and perceived fragmentation of modern reality, there was still a desire to seek some individual connection with an ambiguous concept of truth—the truth of things, the truth of the self. There was a desire for answers about a sense of "secret" truth contained in both the universe and ourselves, but Beja explains that, "No longer confident, however, of a divine answer, men have wanted their own; no longer willing to

wait for the truth until God calls them to it, they have sought it for today, on earth, here and now” (21). James Joyce, whose childhood was moulded by Roman Catholic doctrine, reappropriated the term ‘epiphany’ for a culture increasingly losing its faith in divinity’s disclosure of truth through incarnation. Joyce’s 1904 *Stephen Hero* focuses on a protagonist who keeps a notebook of what he called ‘epiphanies’. An ‘epiphany’ is then redefined as a “sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of a gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (211). This “sudden spiritual manifestation’ enables the possessor to “transcend the moment and reach a new sort of awareness”, gaining “a brief sense of some sort of reality” while experiencing “glimpses of truth” (Beja 51). Like Wordsworth’s “spots of time” this moment of illumination enables the individual to see “into the life of things”, temporarily experiencing a unity between the previously isolated subject and a universe (object) of meaning (45). Beja’s claim that the epiphany enables one to see the “inner nature of things” (30) implies that things *have* an intrinsic inner nature, a sort of *truth* or *reality* to be discovered, and that the self is capable of finding this truth in a moment of intuition and illumination.

Although Joyce uses the term “spiritual” in Stephen’s definition of epiphany, this “spirituality” is divorced from any religious sense of God as the one imparting truth and reality to the individual. This “revelation” has been de-divinized and transformed into an *instantaneous* moment of heightened awareness and understanding of the nature of reality, a reality that is neither created nor revealed by God. Joyce’s use of the term ‘spiritual’ is figurative, not referring to a connection between the individual and God, but to how the imagination, which leads to artistic creation, is a spiritual expression of the self (15). Richard Ellmann explains that:

The epiphany did not mean for Joyce the manifestation of the godhead, the showing forth of Christ to the Magi, although it was a useful metaphor for what he had in mind. The epiphany was the sudden 'revelation of the whatness of a thing', the moment in which 'the soul of the commonest object...seems to us radiant'.

(87)

The epiphany is thus focused, not on the relationship between God, the self and external reality, but on a deeper human understanding of the self and its relation to the world through the form of an artistic revelation. Ellmann continues: "The artist is charged with such revelations, and must look for them not among gods but among men, in casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments" (87). The artist does not emphasize or reflect, but usurp, God's place as creator. Paul Maltby notes that, in spite of the Joycean epiphany's "resolutely secular usage", the term can still "invest a spiritual insight with the charismatic authority and drama of religious experience" (12). This invests a secular act of creation and worship with the authority of instantaneous, untainted purity of insight. Malcom Bradbury comments that "the artist's task is to create art out of life, and means the artist must rival the God of creation Himself, filling everything with intangible aesthetic life" (168). According to Bradbury, Joyce's Stephen Hero wants to become "a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of evolving life" (168). This desire to transform the bread of daily life into the "radiant body if evolving life" clearly echoes the sacred act of transubstantiation. Ellmann suggests that the "Eucharistic" understanding of the



epiphany is “another term arrogantly borrowed by Joyce from Christianity and invested with secular meaning” (87).

Joyce and his contemporaries were disdainful, not only of religion, but also of the perceived supreme reign of reason. The epiphanic moment, as described and utilized by Joyce in his fiction, is a sort of imaginative intuition. This very romantic understanding of illumination is grounded in the belief that the epiphany is sudden, not gradual—a fragment that does not express an all encompassing truth, but provides a brief glimpse of “reality”. Beja notes two specific criteria for the manifestation of an epiphany:

- 1) The criterion of incongruity between the arbitrary sequence of events, circumstances that trigger the epiphany
  - 2) The criterion of insignificance of this ‘trigger’, which is often trivial, mundane.
- (13)

In other words, the events leading up to and instigating this illuminating moment are trivial in comparison with and bear no direct relation to the epiphany. Truth is something “secretive” which must be revealed. Although Joyce and his contemporaries divorced the notion of truth from the idea of a divine artificer, they still sought a type of secularized enlightenment and imaginative spirituality. There was: “A continuing need—perhaps even an intensified one—has been felt for the meaningful, unifying, “spiritual” emotions or experiences that would provide men with answers to some of their burning questions” (Beja 21). This desire for meaning presupposes a source of meaning, whether internal or external, or both.

In *The Visionary Moment*, Paul Maltby, directly referring to the secularized, modernist epiphany, claims that “an old theory of truth still enchants us” in literature that is “haunted by the idea of the salvational moment” (1). The central argument of his study on the (dis)placement of epiphany in the postmodern novel is that the convention of the “illuminating moment” has ideological implications and metaphysical presuppositions (2). He notes that the modern novel is structured around the centerpiece of the “salvational moment”, based on assumptions about the nature of truth, cognition and subjectivity (3). Maltby argues that the questions raised by postmodern critique will challenge the theoretical veracity of the epiphany. His “postmodern critique” challenges four notions presupposed by the convention of epiphany:

- (a) transcendent knowledge.
- (b) the mediation of occult facilities (e.g. “insight”) in the attainment of that knowledge.
- (c) the instantaneous reception of that knowledge (e.g. the “flash of insight”).
- (d) the proximity of redemption by virtue of the transfiguring truth ascribed to that knowledge. (3)

Maltby asserts that these supposedly “secular” claims to redemptive value through the instantaneous reception of a higher order of knowledge through a poignant, defining moment, in actuality, are analogous with both the “truth claims of mystical experience” and traditional religious conversion narratives (3). This “myth of a higher order” that provides a momentary sense of spirituality or even, salvation, presupposes the concepts

of selfhood and external truth. This moment of transfiguration or secular “spirituality” is a thinly veiled metaphysical experience that enables access to a “paradigm of knowledge that implicitly downgrades ‘worldly’ forms of knowledge” (5).

These assumptions raise two significant difficulties in light of postmodern critique: a belief in the stable nature of both the subject and objective reality, and the belief in an unmediated, pure access to a higher “truth”. The notion of a “stable” reality of subject or object is clearly refuted in Richard Rorty’s *Irony, Contingency and Solidarity* as he argues that there is no intrinsic nature to the self, thus no defining human identity outside of the social construction of collectively chosen language games (8). Both the decentring of the self and the contingency of any truth claims thwart the epiphany’s claims to transformative power. Rorty’s view, which echoes an (ironically) central tenant of postmodern critique, follows logically from the belief that there is no intrinsic nature to external “reality”. This implies the impossibility of an unmediated engagement with the “whatness” of an external physical world, as well as the impossibility of finding, experiencing and knowing a “higher order” of spiritual knowledge. According to Rorty, the truth is not “out there” (8) to be found, but a construction to be created. The notion of epiphany indicates an appearance-reality distinction, which is echoed in Beja’s claim that “We all live by illusions...the real truth remains a secret” (54). Rorty denies the reality/ appearance distinction, claiming that there is only one “reality” -- the constructed appearance that we weave together ourselves with the endlessly flexible tools of language (20).



This loss of the appearance/ reality distinction clearly precedes Baudrillard's concept of the "death of the real" (*Simulacra* 6). Baudrillard emphasizes that media-based simulations of reality, or simulacra, are now "so omnipresent that it is henceforth impossible to distinguish the real from the simulacra" (Kellner 101). Not only have we lost faith in a reality beyond our own constructions, our constructions have become increasingly artificial, "unreal" as their existence is based almost entirely on the production of capital. Emphasizing what she sees as the nefarious nature of homogenous hyperreality, author Zadie Smith argues that advertising has become an "evil force in the world, replacing the human voice with advertising copy" (xvi). She indicates a desire for some sense of authenticity amongst her fellow authors, perhaps a nostalgia for the reality/ appearance divide. Unable to "believe" in traditional literary conventions based on these outmoded distinctions, Smith claims that the cry, "Just one second of unmediated thought please", has become "the West's new literary pastoral prose" (xvi). The desire for an artistic moment of pure, untainted, original thought invokes the possible reality of an epiphany in an age of artificial copies claiming to be "real". The paradigm of higher "authentic" knowledge becomes a merely nostalgic notion amidst the world of depthless postmodern surfaces.

The postmodern critique that challenges this notion of pure, authentic insight into reality aims to expose the metaphysical underpinnings of a supposedly secular concept. Like Paul Maltby, Arthur M. Saltzman argues that the epiphany has lost its relevance in postmodern fiction because, "If epiphany is a focused, stabilized locus of meaning, contemporary reality...is decentered, multivalent, unsystematic, even nonsensical" (11).

The clarity of epiphany is based in some deeper understanding of order, sense and meaning that resounds more with the notion of faith in the divinely ordained structure of reality than with the vision of destabilized postmodern “reality”. Maltby claims that the resources of a postmodern critique of epiphany “serve in the name of a countervailing epistemology whose strategies aim for demystification and disenchantment” (9). In contrast with this blanket claim that postmodern critique has “demystification and disenchantment” as its main goal, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that postmodernity provides a new opportunity for what he deems “re-enchantment”:

Post-modernity brings re-enchantment of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to disenchant it. The post-modern world is one in which mystery is no more a barely tolerated alien awaiting a deportation order. (*Postmodern Ethics* 33)

Bauman indicates that after the de-mystifying project of modernity, in which an over-reliance on reason, manifest in the tools of technology, attempted to make an autonomous heaven on earth, the postmodern provides a space for mystery and wonder. The depthless hyperreal landscape is a leftover residue of modernity; rather, the new open spaces of postmodernity allow for speculation about the possibility of a reality beyond the tangible, manufactured world of our own making. Bauman clearly argues that modernity’s project failed to completely disenchant the world, and that the most viable postmodern alternative is to explore the mysterious open spaces left behind after

the dethroning of reason. This, I want to suggest, is the landscape of most of Coupland's fiction.

Morris Beja claims that in Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, Stephen's choice of the term "epiphany" utilizes "a new name for an old experience" (13). Douglas Coupland uses the term, both in his interviews and in his fiction, as an "*old* name for an old experience." He re-invests the secular epiphany with the mysterious echoes of its Judeo-Christian origins, thus rewriting it for a postmodern age that has the possibility of engaging with a sense of "re-enchantment". Although Coupland's characters often experience the revelation of a divine reality, Coupland also emphasizes their immediate reality, both the frequently neglected natural world and the media constructed hyperreal that has become the postmodern "norm". Coupland's characters are often genuinely surprised by their epiphanies, but frequently, the epiphany is sought out. Unlike Zadie Smith, Coupland does not completely demonize the comforts of the advertising world that have nurtured his characters and played a formative part in the development of their identities. He does, however, indicate the difficulty of navigating through the non-reality to find a piece of truth and experience mystery. In Coupland's world, there is not a distinct sacred/secular divide and the most mundane, or even artificial, things can instigate a deeper understanding of reality through a brush with transcendence.

Coupland's fifth novel *Miss Wyoming*, for example, focuses on the desire that burned out TV star Susan Colgate and high flying producer John Johnson both have to find a higher plan of existence, one in which they surpass the celluloid reality of their past lives and touch the real. Like many of Coupland's protagonists, both have an aching



need to be transformed, and in this transformation, to find a “pure” place within themselves—something unmediated and untainted by the media world that has so defined their identities thus far. Coupland delves below the surface to expose the fragile interior lives of these cogs of the Hollywood machine, thus humanizing them in the process. Ex-beauty queen Susan, now estranged from the mother that pressured her into pageantry, reflects on the amoral family structure that taught her to value appearance above substance. Coupland writes, “Hers was a beautiful looking family, but one with a hellish ugly core, no morals, too many guns, no God to fear...” (279). In the centre of this family, as with many of Coupland’s other fictional, post-Christian families, is an amoral vacuum which, in this case, has corroded into a “hellish ugly core” (279). The lone survivor of a plane crash, Susan hides out in covert, Midwestern neighborhoods, allowing the media and her family to believe that she is also dead. This indicates her desire for a new life, to find her real self—someone vastly different from the Hollywood generated superficial construction of self that has housed her dwindling soul for most of her life. Susan admits that her life has, thus far, been a “plastic strand of failed identities” (16); this “fuzziness of identity” (73) leaves her feeling “rudderless” (242) as she ultimately searches for herself.

In the same novel, John Johnson, famous producer of cheap, violent action flicks, also goes on a quest to find both himself and some source of higher truth and peace. His desert trek, an obvious spiritual convention, is a concrete picture of a search for meaning in the wasteland of his life. John, a notorious, extravagantly rich playboy claims to “want a clean slate” (30) because “inside he felt congealed and infected. He felt as if he

were soiling whatever he touched, leaving a black stain that not even a fire could remove” (212). John is ultimately looking for purification, redemption and transformation, but first, however, he feels the need to “erase myself. I’m going to stop being me” (48). Disgusted with the soiled emptiness of his own life, he explains what he hopes to happen during his trek:

Truth be told...the one thing in this world I want more than anything else is a great big crowbar, to jimmy myself open and take whatever creature that’s sitting inside and shake it clean like a rug and then rinse it in a cold, clear lake like up in Oregon, and then I want to put it under the sun to let it heal and dry and grow and sit and come to consciousness again with a clear and quiet mind. (47)

The cleansing power of both water and sun echo the quasi-baptismal forest waters that Scout emerges himself in at the end of *Life After God*, directly before experiencing the powerful, transformative epiphany/revelation that closes the short story collection. This cold water is painful, just as John imagines his purification or rebirth process to also be painful: “He’d wanted those rocks and highways and clouds and strip malls to scrape him clean” (211). But unlike Scout from *Life After God*, Johnson does not experience a profound, cleansing, enlightening moment of epiphany at the end of his travels. John may have hoped that the road would cure him, but it just makes him recognize more deeply his inability to cure himself (103).

This disappointment also parallels John's realization that a supposedly other-worldly "vision" he has in the hospital, is only another of the virtual images that are the familiar, numbing wallpaper of his life. After a night in the hospital because of a near-death experience following an overdose, he wakes up in a hazy stupor and sees the angelic, innocent, welcoming face of Susan Colgate. John tells himself that in the midst of his depravity, "there had to be hope—and there was" (53). This hope manifests itself in a very particular way:

He remembered the woman in his hospital vision had made him feel that somewhere on the alien Death Star of his heart lay a small, vulnerable entry point into which he could deploy a rocket, blow himself up and rebuild from the shards that remained. (53)

This vision, and the accompanying desire to be reborn or rebuilt after being both "blown up" and washed clean, is what initially leads him on his road pilgrimage. Months later, John finally realizes that the supposed "vision" had been nothing but a rerun of the old sitcom *Meet the Blooms* and that the face was that of actress Susan Colgate. This feigned "epiphany" purposefully exposes Coupland's grappling with the development of an "authentic" epiphany in the commodified landscape of the postmodern novel. How can one find "truth" and have an earnest search for the now sentimentalized concepts of "higher purpose" and "identity", when "reality" has been defined in virtual terms? At the end of his anti-climactic pilgrimage, the realization of this "superficial" spirituality and all of its implications for John's hopes to be reborn is too much for him:



Then he tilted his head back and looked at the stars, and he began to cry because it had all been a waste and because the voice of Susan was only a sound buried under a laugh track he's heard only by accident in a white stale room. (175)

John's vision is instantly de-encharnted, indicating only another layer of simulacra rather than a "metaphysical bridge" to some higher truth. The distinction between appearance and reality has eroded, leaving John with disappointment rather than fulfilment.

But when John and Susan "accidentally" meet on the street, John begins once again to believe in the power of his vision. Although the immediate source of the vision may have been an earthly, familiar, artificial source, he begins to wonder if it does actually indicate a larger plan. This realization of a profound truth, but only after recalling the original event, is what Beja calls a retrospective epiphany (15) and something that Coupland uses infrequently. It is appropriate here as the "truth" is larger than the immediate circumstance and can be recognized only in retrospect— when John is able to see what now appears to be even more than a vision, but a purposeful "plan".

Coupland's curious mixture of one-dimensional materialism and authentic multi-dimensional spirituality indicates that any tools can be used to instigate an epiphany and perpetuate a transformation; even superficial means can bring about a redemptive end. At the end of the novel, when Susan Colgate is re-united with her estranged, now penitent mother, Coupland mixes this pure joy and peace with a reminder of the immediate atmosphere that fostered both the origins and resolution of the pain. As John,

Susan, mother Marilyn and several other close friends drive away, reunited, it is not “into the sunset” but “past a thousand KFC’s, past four hundred Gaps, two hundred Subways” (260). In this new community of renewed self and supportive family, John finally feels that he has received “a new battery inside” (304). Ironically, Coupland uses the language of technology to indicate a spiritual transformation, further emphasizing a possible connection between the two. This complex connection is further explored in the final paragraph of the novel:

John felt that he and everybody in the New World was a part of a mixed curse and blessing from God, that they were a race of strangers, perpetually casting themselves into new fires, yearning to burn, yearning to rise from the charcoal, always newer and more wonderful, always thirsty, always starving, always believing that whatever came to them next would mercifully erase the creatures they’d already become as they crawled along the plastic radiant way. (311)

This “New World”, the privileged, commercialized West, consists of alienated “strangers” who form a community in their common goal of refining themselves through the painful process of burning. This vision possibly alludes to both the biblical concept of “refiner’s fire” from Zechariah 13:9 and Revelation 3:18, as well as the mythological concept of the phoenix rising from the flames. The most boldly miraculous part of this future vision is the indication that these inhabitants of the new world *know* that they are thirsty and starving; they have the ability to show need rather than a complete self-sufficiency or state of numbness. The desire for newness, for a merciful change does not

take place in heaven, or some idyllic earthly setting, but as they “crawled along the plastic radiant way” (311). Coupland again mixes the artificial, the “plastic” with the supernaturally infused, “radiant” real, thus indicating the possibility of epiphany in the most unexpected of postmodern spaces.

This preoccupation with the possibility of a re-sacralized epiphany in a post-Christian, postmodern spiritual climate is the central exploration of most of Coupland’s fiction. *Generation X* and *Shampoo Planet*, two of Coupland’s earliest novels, have epiphanies that somewhat resemble Joycean epiphanies, moments of illumination that are instigated by mundane, “normal” circumstances, people or objects. Their protagonists experience moments of truth and reality, yet do not immediately attribute this imparted knowledge to a divine source. In both novels, the narrator does, however, rely on either religious language or biblical allusion, thus infusing the “trivial” with a sacramental quality. Each novel’s protagonist ultimately feels a sense of solidarity with other humans, a stronger sense of self, and a unity between self and natural environment when the truth breaks through. Coupland’s collection of short stories, *Life After God*, and the more recent novel *Hey Nostradamus!* both end with what seem more like gradual conversion stories than momentary epiphanies. Yet, the moment of profound understanding inscribes a communion between the self and God and the dismantling of a false understanding of reality. These moments of life-giving revelation change each protagonist’s perspective on life, self and God. Unlike Joyce’s epiphany, this is not a fragment, but the beginning of what Coupland calls “a story”—it is the missing piece that has been found to make the protagonists whole. Like a modernist epiphany, this



experience bestows “new vision upon recipients” (Beja 25), but, in Coupland’s “new” version, the mystery of the ultimate, transcendent source of this new vision is more fascinating than the epiphany itself. Unlike Joycean epiphanies, the environments and immediate circumstances preceding the epiphanies in Coupland’s novels are charged with symbolism and usually directly related to the new truth experienced in the moment, thus indicating a shadowy correlation between divinity, nature and humanity. In Coupland’s fictional world, in contrast with those of so many of his contemporaries, the ability to acknowledge the need for a long forgotten God is often the crowning epiphany, the revelation that redefines reality.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Contrasting Epiphanies: *Less Than Zero*; *Bright Lights, Big City*;**

#### *Shampoo Planet*

In order to understand Coupland's unique postmodern engagement with epiphany, it is helpful to contrast his work with that of his fictional predecessors, Brett Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney. Ellis and McInerney, whose novels *Less Than Zero* and *Bright Lights, Big City* initiated the new literary convention "blank fiction" that, through minimalist, smooth prose, reflected the thoroughly commercialized landscape and spiritual disintegration of their young, male protagonists. Ellis and McInerney, part of the 1980's literary "bratpack", were both loved and hated by the media, as their flamboyant, decadent lifestyles reflected the bleak realities chronicled on the pages of their novels. Douglas Coupland, who is sometimes included in the "blank fiction" category, writes about the same secular, materialistic cityscapes as do his "bratpack" predecessors.

I have chosen to contrast Ellis's *Less Than Zero* and McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* with Coupland's *Shampoo Planet* as all three are variations of the traditional initiation story; the young, male protagonist of each novel is stuck in a desperate, dead-end situation, and needs some form of redemption to transcend his current state of indifference. From Ellis, to McInerney to Coupland we see a progression towards a

more open, hopeful concept of spiritual possibilities, even amidst a sea of artificiality. The initiation story traditionally revolves around a moment of insight, an epiphany, so clearly present in narratives such as James Joyce's *Araby* and John Updike's *A&P*. Ellis's *Less Than Zero* is what Saltzman would label a novel of anti-epiphany, exposing the irrelevance of the moment of clarity or spiritual regeneration in a depthless, fragmented Hollywood society; Ellis's protagonist is incapable of even recognizing his own decaying spirituality and loss of self. Just as *Less Than Zero* can be called a novel of anti-epiphany, it can also be seen as a novel of anti-initiation, in which the young male protagonist never transforms or moves to a higher, more mature state. McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* has an unnamed protagonist all too aware that he must change, that he must move out of the glare of the "bright lights" into the darkness of reality. He is a divided self, desperate to transform, become real, to seek a "normal" life and find the source of supernatural reality that sustains everything, but his fear and lack of guidance leave him utterly confused and alone. His final "epiphany" is ambiguous; like the novel's anti-hero, we are unable to tell if it is a moment of clarity or just another illusion. Coupland's *Shampoo Planet* is about a young Yuppie want-to-be whose dream would be to experience the kind of comfortable, glossy lifestyle that the protagonists of *Less Than Zero* and *Bright Lights, Big City* have. Coupland's protagonist, Tyler, constantly revels in the joys of the "New World" and the hope the promise of a commercialized future could provide him. Only when he has a dramatic turn of life events, does he recognize the deeper questions about his own origins, as well as his own "badness", and desire an understanding of truth and an experience of redemption. Unlike Ellis and McInerney, Coupland interjects transformative epiphanies



in the most unexpected of places, pointing to the hope of a larger, more life-affirming spiritual reality.

The three novels each focus on the loss of identity, unawareness of spiritual death and fragmentation of community, yet Coupland's novel is the only one which re-invests the sickening pleasures of the "New World" with a real opportunity for newness and rebirth; therefore, I want to argue that Coupland's novel is the only genuine initiation story. Ellis's novel of anti-epiphanic indifference, McInerney's novel of an overt awareness, but overwhelming entrapment of spiritual paralysis, and Coupland's novel of spiritual re-awakening are all negotiating the relevance of the epiphany in the postmodern world. But only Coupland ultimately pinpoints the relevance of spirituality in the commodified landscape with the presence of his rewritten epiphany.

Brett Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* chronicles the lifestyle of flashy American West Coast elite youth culture of the 1980's, a collective of beautiful, yet seemingly identical teenagers who run amuck in the X-Rated hyperreal themepark that is L.A. These tinsel town offspring are saturated to the point of emptiness; they have been given any and all the material goods and pleasurable experiences that they have desired, yet they are incurably bored and empty. Ellis's teenage subjects live out the age old cliché of a "sex, drugs and rock n'roll" lifestyle, but not for the same reasons as their predecessors; whereas their parents clung to decadence as a means of rebellion or escapism, this debauched collective employ the toys of affluent LA youth culture as a means of endurance. The novel's narrator, Clay, and his "friends" (or fellow clones) seek pleasure, not for fulfilment, but to alleviate boredom and fill their days with something,

anything, to do. They are drowning in their heritage of prosperity, miserable without having enough of a defined sense of identity to enable them to recognize their own misery. Elizabeth Young notes that: "They are all at the mercy of consumer capitalism, stunned by a storm of signs, codes and simulations emanating from advertising and television and all hopelessly alienated from any understanding of their predicament" (24). In this environment of extreme excess, where having everything means knowing and feeling nothing, they are numb to any awareness of their own loss.

In the novel, Clay, an extremely affluent college freshman, returns to his home in L.A. while on Spring break from his East Coast Ivy League university and observes "the moral and spiritual disintegration of his friends" (Young 23). At first, Clay's "story" seems to be a "coming of age" narrative; we hope for an exciting, fast-paced joyride through the clubs, streets and drug parties of L.A. where Clay will soon burn out, experience a moment of clarity and vision and eventually see the error of his ignorant, youthful ways so that a rebirth of lost identity will take place. The reader is tempted to long for some sort of transformative epiphany, showing these misguided children the errors of their ways, the depths of their own emptiness, and their desire for something true or real. Interestingly, the above description is an adequate summary of the Hollywood film version of the novel, a clear example of the general movie-going public's desire to watch a morality tale with a neat ending that provides both justice and redemption. But the reader seeking this type of initiation story will soon become disappointed with *Less Than Zero*, the novel, which can be read as more of an anti-initiation story. By observing Clay's thirteen and fourteen year old sisters who watch

pornography, listen to flippantly obscene music and steal their older brother's cocaine, we perhaps gain an insight into his past, a past that looks no different than his present. There is no clear sense that Clay has been initiated from innocence to experience, as his life has been one continual string of extreme experiences that don't connect to one another; there is no character transformation, and thus, no story in the traditional sense. He has been exhausted from over-exposure to "experience" most of his life.

One of the earliest recurring images in the novel is of Clay lying on his bed, exhausted, stoned and watching MTV. Above his head there is an Elvis Costello poster that says "TRUST" in large letters; Clay is bothered by the fact that Costello's eyes "look past him" (3). He wants to move near the window so he can meet the iconic Costello's glare, or at least become its target, but he is "too tired to get up and stand by the window" (3). This desire to meet the gaze of an image is perhaps reflective of a repressed desire to communicate, especially in a world where image and reality have become one and the same. Elizabeth Young notes that Elvis Costello, whose name invokes the presence of the greatest rock icon, is also the songwriter who penned the lyric "Everything is less than zero":

Thus both the book's title and its singer are second-hand, and revealing of the way in which Ellis's teenagers feel themselves to be at the *end* of things. Excess, experience—the previous generations have run through it all and everything is now worn, second-hand. (22)

Young's take on the characters' inability to escape that which is worn, second-hand points to the novel's post-apocalyptic despair that can only be expressed through exhaustion, fear and boredom. Clay is past the point of caring about what is real, what is



true, what is original; these words appear to have no meaning, and no possibility of a revelatory disclosure in an LA built completely on commodities where “anything goes”. The continual, yet non-verbalized despair and collective exhaustion that accompanies them permeate the novel. Clay’s inability to stand up and meet his poster’s gaze is representative of this perpetual exhaustion and inability to act that rob him and his teenage friends from having an emotional or spiritual identity. In this opening picture, Clay is suffering from travel exhaustion, that very particular type of exhaustion one gets from sitting for hours doing nothing—a feeling of numbness or perhaps a slight surreal buzz. But this particular type of exhaustion continues throughout the entire novel as Clay is constantly travelling, but ultimately never truly moving, progressing, or leaving the same old empty space of recycled attempts at pleasure fulfilment. His movement is futile and cyclical; he ultimately arrives nowhere. If the exhaustion ever begins to leave, it is quickly doused with a healthy dose of drugs, alcohol or sex to ensure that any sort of real feeling or desire will not seep through.

The exhaustion produced by this endless, spontaneous, and episodic pursuit of pleasure as a remedy for boredom robs Ellis’s subjects of the emotional energy to develop any sort of personality or humanity. At a later point in the novel, Clay, stoned and watching MTV as usual, talks to his friend Daniel on the phone and learns that Daniel has been avoiding one of his recent one night stands who has just found out that she is pregnant. Clay somehow wants to care enough to convince his friend to talk to the girl, but half-heartedly fights his own exhaustion and encroaching indifference. He admits that “I’m surprised at how much strength it takes to care enough to urge him to do so” (57). Clay is also too bored and exhausted to develop his own relationships.

When he shares memories of a past holiday with his girlfriend, Blair, it is clear that their only goal is the pursuit of spontaneous, boredom-reducing pleasure. As this is their overriding and only goal, they make no efforts to connect the dots between the disjointed moments of “relationship” such as having sex or walking on the beach together; these are isolated events that simply “kill time”. Their coupling never develops into a relationship, as no interior life is ever exposed and communication never takes place. Blair and Clay’s “relationship”, just like Ellis’s novel, never develops into a story with progression in character and new depths of understanding. Although Blair and Clay go on holiday to half-heartedly play “couple”, they are soon isolated from one another in their individual pleasure pursuits, mesmerised by his or her drug of choice:

By the end of the week, all we did was watch television, even though the reception wasn’t too good, and drink bourbon, and Blair would arrange shells into circular patterns on the floor of the living room. (50)

These cyclical arrangements of empty shells on the living room floor seem to represent the random, empty shells of L.A.’s youth. The episodes within their lives have no teleological pattern, as they are constantly chasing the tail end of a circle of hedonism.

Similar to Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, *Less than Zero* resonates with the echoes of the ancient declaration that after having, “denied myself nothing my eyes desired” the conclusion is that ultimately, “everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11). The “teacher” narrating Ecclesiastes refers to the emptiness of a life in which pleasure and self-achievement are the primary focus in life, the chief end of existence. He advocates that the only true source of fulfilment in life is

in acknowledging and obeying God, yet the fictional universe of *Less Than Zero* appears godless, with no ultimate reference point to enable these teenagers to escape the cycle of pointless hedonism and find fulfilment. In their empty attempts to experience pleasure, Blair, Clay and their fellow stragglers find no central nexus of meaning, creating a dismal pattern of simply, “chasing after the wind”. These walking dead are always merely spectators, watching and never interacting, reacting and communicating. There is no self-realization, thus the self is dead. There is no interpersonal communication, thus relationships are dead.

This uniform pursuit of image and pleasure robs Ellis’s characters of individual identity. Young claims that “contemporary America promises personality and personal liberation to individuals as part of the cornucopia of consumer choice” (29) but these are ultimately empty, false promises. This “cornucopia of consumer choice” is the source of both fleeting pleasure and more enduring spiritual paralysis. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard concludes that the “realism of ‘anything goes’ is in fact that of money” (76). Lyotard is referring to the supposed “eclecticism” which is the “degree zero” of contemporary culture:

One listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and ‘retro’ clothes in Hong Kong. (76)

Referring specifically to the art world, Lyotard argues that the appearance of liberation in the absence of aesthetic criteria or objective rules is deceptive; the “value of work” is truly assessed by “the profit they yield” (76). This indictment of false freedom, value and eclecticism from the art world is clearly analogous with the unspoken code of living



among *Less Than Zero*'s privileged youth, the very social set who could afford to "buy into" the multinational eclecticism of Lyotard's vivid example. Although these "free" socialites clearly have a decadent, "anything goes" lifestyle, their identity defining pleasure pursuits are uniform to the point of rendering them interchangeable, vacuous mannequins. Their unspoken code is that money is the only creator of boundaries, values and relationships. The "cornucopia of consumer choice" which is initially perceived as a symbol of freedom, ultimately has a totalitarian stronghold on the lives of those who live by its rules.

Echoing this allegiance to the unspoken rules of contemporary, affluent America, one of Clay's friends tells him that he must read fashion magazine *The Face* or "you'll get bored" (86). Clay and friends look to the world of images in order to distract and recreate themselves, but to do this, they must first kill any sense of the individual self. *The Face*, pinnacle of the celluloid cannon, is the L.A. Bible, providing guidance and assurance of salvation from boredom in exchange for a new kind of vapid self-less identity. Cheryl, a character in Ellis's 1994 *The Informers*, clarifies the power the media has over her individual development (or lack thereof) as her eyes, "skim pages of advertisements that show me the best way to live" (81). These magazines, postmodern guides for living, create a new generation of chic socialites who dress to impress in clubs across L.A. where they look, not dazzling and exciting, but "indifferent and bored" (*Less Than Zero* 166). As their individual life stories have no grounding in a unifying master narrative, Ellis's characters inhabit a world in which television, media, internet and advertisements have become the only major reference points to form a sense of fragmented, haphazard postmodern community.

In his first novel, *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland defines the appeal to TV nostalgia as a replacement for religious instruction or belief as **“Teleparablizing: Morals used in everyday life that derive from TV sitcom plots: ‘That’s just like the episode where Jan lost her glasses!’”** (120). The virtual metanarrative of television past and present provide both Coupland’s and Ellis’s characters with shared media memories that mould their personalities and partially define interpretations of their individual life stories; the past is a nostalgic television event. The reproduced image is ever-present and grounded in nothing but itself; this is the “definitive immanence of the image, without any possible transcendent meaning, without any possible dialectic of history” (Baudrillard, *Evil Demon of Images* 195). It is the world of Baudrillard’s “simulacra” (197), the image, originating only in itself, that reiterates alienation from the “real”. The image, divorced from and failing to represent an unknowable reality, has become, as Jameson notes, “the final form of commodity reification” (*Postmodernism* 18). Clay, his elite friends, and the other inhabitants of Ellis’s constructed universe share a tendency to be both ironic and defensive as the depthlessness of their culture teaches them that the only reality is a glossy surface. Both religious and consumer choices are equally random and meaningless because “as the line between reality and image seems to implode, one comes to believe that everything and everyone is a fake - a simulation”; this crisis is “therefore best served by an attitude of ‘aggressive indifference’, an ironic detachment from any sort of commitment” (Moore 254). This “aggressive indifference” is clearly the most pervasive attitude within the novel.

As Clay jumps from party to party, club to club, he notes that his friends all look and act frighteningly similar with “thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the

blue eyes, same empty toneless voice” (140). Ellis’s “characters” are interchangeable; it is quite hard to distinguish one from another. According to Young, Ellis has the ability to reflect the “homogeneity of the modern world” in which people are reduced to “characterless ciphers” and “passive consumers” defined by boredom and “apathetic dissatisfaction”. This lack of character in the midst of the controlling, chaotic flux of consumerism, renders them both frustrated and powerless (33). The choice of sexual partners are as passive and insignificant as clothing choices. When propositioned by Griffin, a new acquaintance, at the end of the evening, who asks, “Hey, you wanna go to my house? Parents are in Rome for Christmas”, Clay tells us that “I sigh and look at the glass of champagne he’s holding, then finish my glass fast and say sure, why not” (29). Clay’s sense of self has no clearly defining boundaries; thus, his most frequent answer to anything is “Why not?” He has no interests or allegiances, and nothing is sacred, as nothing in his world is set apart or indistinguishable from the glittery nothingness of the drugs, clubs and random sex acts that populate his day to day life. Ellis’s brutal portrayal of the devastating affects of over-consumption leading to apathy invokes a repulsed response in the reader, probing her to question the significance of an existence with no spirituality or moral boundaries.

Although Clay abandons any notion of moral boundaries, the novel does contain a few fleeting moments when he perhaps experiences recognitions of a critical core of self, in the form of a shadow conscience, which frightens him. Elizabeth Young observes that, “One of the central issues in Ellis’s novel is how the self-indulgent paradise of California teen-hood is simultaneously the Gothic hell that Clay observes” (25). Clay is trapped in the absurd hell of his friends’ insatiable cruelty, while at the



same time, haunted by a numbed, yet continually present, fear of his own “psychic extinction” (40). The indication of a sense of horror presupposes the notions of both individual conscience and judgement. Quite early in the novel Clay sees a billboard that reminds him of this particular fear:

I turn the radio up, loud. The streets are totally empty and I drive fast. I come to a red light, tempted to go through it, then stop once I see a billboard that I don't remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an add for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light. I put my sunglasses on even though it's still pretty dark and I keep looking into the rear-view mirror, getting this strange feeling that someone's following me. (31)

The phrase “disappear here” is spoken to a self who must first exist in order to disappear. Perhaps Clay is “freaked out” as this billboard reminds him that there is someone, a self below the smart clothes, random acts of pleasure fulfilment and hallucinogenic lifestyle. The billboard offers the opportunity to disappear amidst a world of pleasure in a vacation resort. Does Clay's fear come from the brief flicker of realization that his life is a continual disappearance because of its deceptive “freedom” and “pleasure” that has become uniform and oppressive? If everything in his life is about excess and escape, the fantasy ultimately becomes a living nightmare as there is no harsh reality with which to contrast it. Perhaps this billboard that promises “la dolce vita” reminds Clay that too much of the sweet life becomes unbearable. As he desperately puts his extraneous sunglasses on in the dark, he appears to be hiding from these realizations, to disguise the self behind a shield of image. He becomes

increasingly paranoid, fearing that someone is following him; this inexpressible and blankly stated fear continues to manifest itself in various ways throughout the novel. Clay is ultimately being followed by himself and the shades are a thin tool for repression and denial. He appears to be terrified of developing a self, having feelings and “waking” up to realize the nightmare of his vacant reality.

Clay battles to repress this same “predatory” moral core during another, earlier, driving experience. He recalls an occasion a few years back when he was learning to drive and had taken his two sisters for a trip in the desert. He sees a Toyota parked and on fire at the side of the road; a crying Mexican woman and two or three small children sat next to the car, helpless. His sisters begged him to slow down so that they “could watch”, but he doesn’t:

I had an urge to stop, but I didn’t. I slowed down, and then drove quickly away and pushed back in the tape my sisters had taken out when they first saw the flames, and turned it up, loud, and drove through every red light until I got back to our house. (67)

Here Clay has an opportunity to connect with other human beings, those who are vastly below his elite class and are in desperate need of his help—but he does not. Clay’s refusal to stop and deny his “urge” initially appears to be, not the same callous voyeuristic sport that his sisters desire, but a different, deeper type of desensitization. But Clay continues to write about the aftermath of the event, confessing that afterwards he was haunted by recurrent “visions of a child, not yet dead, lying across the flames, burning” (67). He fixates on the obsessive fear that a child was “burning, melting” on the engine; when he asks his sisters if they saw a

burnt child they simply respond, “No, Did you? Neato.” This recurring vision is perhaps a manifestation of guilt, a consequence of Clay’s continual repression and fear of any sort of moral core or conscience. His action immediately after he passes by the scene, the simple act of playing a tape and driving off quickly, echoes his acts of putting sunglasses on his face and speeding off after being confronted with the “Disappear Here” billboard. Both the sunglasses and the music are attempts to mask a dying soul that is being momentarily exposed. Just as the sunglasses represent the world of images that have flattened, reduced and commodified his identity, the music represents a media-created soundtrack that serves as a surrogate for an almost non-existent interior world.

After the highway incident, Clay begins collecting newspaper clippings that describe unusual acts of violence and tragedy, reinforcing a media constructed framework, yet continually reminding him of the darkness lurking below the surfaces. Clay does not explain or justify his gruesome collection but simply says, “I collected a lot of clippings during that time because, I guess, there were a lot to be collected” (68). Clay’s large group of interchangeable “friends” find pleasure in fixating on others’ pain; it is the last stage of voyeurism after everything else has been used up. As they watch snuff films and even re-enact some of the depicted acts on other human beings, they seek just a few moments of gratification that enable them to escape the boredom. This prompts a number of questions: Does Clay’s collection of newspaper clippings also provide him with mere entertainment value? Or is this collection a reminder of the flicker of humanity he has seen within himself—something he has feared but also desired? Is this a desire to be connected



with something real, something authentic, that establishes the boundaries that tell him who he is and how he should act morally in desperate situations?

Clay's paranoid fears seem to intensify as his friends tell him of the possibility of werewolves roaming the valley and killing animals. Model Trent smiles a plastic smile as he tells Clay about the "body of a mutilated dog" that has been found (69). Clay explains that the "story makes me uneasy". Later that night, he believes that he hears screams of someone outside his window, but chooses to ignore them, and closes his window. (69) His fear of confronting the obviously fictional werewolf is reflective of his fear of confronting the monster that he himself has become. Young comments that, "Fear is one of the keynotes of the book, a formless, amorphous fear fed by ominous portents and rumours—dead animals, screams in the night, newspaper clippings of atrocities" (27). While surrounded by this "amorphous" fear that permeates his environment, he must also confront the deeper, more focused fear of acknowledging the self if he is to make any sort of "moral" choices. When he is confronted with the decision to make an ethical or un-ethical choice, he must confront himself and admit the amorality and emptiness of his life before he can do something "right". Later, when Clay and Blair are driving and hit and kill a coyote, Clay almost cries, but "it passes" (85). Instead of acknowledging that this act of unintended slaughter disturbs him, thus indicating a sense of conscience, he chooses to go home with Blair and sedate himself with drugs and MTV (131). Although he does not allow himself to react by crying at the "right" moments, he recalls three or four instances when he just cries for no immediately obvious reasons at all—in a bathroom stall, in front of someone's door, in a psychiatrist's office (109). He never explains the source of tears, but just recalls, in the

same blank prose, that he would “cry for about five minutes” (109). Clay’s crying is as random and spontaneous as his other activities; it fills a few moments and then is over. The reader is left to speculate if this is the misplaced fear for the horror he is witnessed, or a brief stint of mourning for a soul that is slowly extinguishing within.

Clay’s recollections of his past experiences constantly include descriptions of the wind, mixed with a sense of fear and mystery. The wind is a central and ominous metaphor, something that is associated with chaos and dismay. After Clay sees the burning car and abandons the needy woman and children, he goes home but “the power is out due to the wind” (68). The wind is like one of the rootless subjects of the novel, constantly moving, never at rest. One of Clay’s few substantial family memories is spent with his grandparents at “Rancho Mirage” where Clay falls asleep “listening to the strange desert wind moan outside my window” (127). Clay’s grandfather, like his father, is extremely wealthy and owns the suitably named “Ranch of the False Image”. The moaning wind signifies ominous emptiness and painful non-direction. Most nights as he falls asleep, Clay focuses on the ominous sound of the wind, an unpredictable life force that is ironically reflective of his predictable, lifeless, and rootless existence. Clay’s rootlessness does not have the freedom or control of the wind; he continues to move about, yet remains stagnant. Ellis’s use of the wind as a metaphor for emptiness is somewhat reflective of the wind’s role in indicating “meaninglessness” in Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 1:2 says, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”, yet the Hebrew word “hebel” that has been translated as “meaningless” is not an adjective, but a concrete noun, the word for “wind” or “breath”. The use of “wind” is a dominant metaphor in the book, an image of emptiness, instability; this is

not the life giving wind of the Holy Spirit spoken of in John 3, but the wind of restlessness and despair, the same type of “wind” that blows throughout Ellis’s corrosive vision of L.A.

In the novel, the wind metaphor is often closely associated with an image of the pool in Clay’s backyard; Ellis ends many sections with comments about the blowing wind that washes over the surface of the pool. The pool is one of the novel’s most dominant surfaces, representative of leisure and wealth. Like the wind, the water in the pool can be seen as a symbol of both life and destruction. The water moves around, yet is stagnant within its contained space; it often becomes the object of Clay’s gaze. This glossy surface is indicative of a depthless world of surfaces that continually reflects the artificial light from one another in a dismal circle of repetition. In this sense, the constant presence of the pool image is reminiscent of Mike Nichols’ film *The Graduate* in which college graduate, Benjamin, constantly dives in the contained waters to escape. Rather than escaping, he appears to be suffocating in this bath of stagnant, non-cleansing waters. Benjamin also often floats lifelessly on the surface of the water with his sunglasses on, avoiding the glare of the sun as well as the pang of his conscience. In *Less than Zero*, Clay has nightmare visions of his house sinking into the mud, leaving him to suffocate and slip away from reality. These dreams are manifestations of a fear of suffocation in the dark, murky mud. Although Clay’s pool is deceptively glossy and clear, it is also representative of a deeper knowledge of suffocation that is already taking place. The spiritual paralysis of suburban culture is drowning Clay, ironically, in a sea of depthlessness. Immediately following Clay’s description of the mud slide, he writes “One of my sisters buys a fish and puts it in a Jacuzzi and the heat and chlorine kill it”



(104). Any life force placed within a hot, stagnant pool of such extreme artificiality must ultimately die.

In the one-dimensional world of *Less Than Zero*, spirituality is simply another altered surface, an option that Ellis's vacant teenagers overlook as if a new pair of sunglasses or an outdated video on MTV. When Blair and Clay take a trip together to the beach club, Clair comes across a church that she "took pictures of but didn't go in" (51). Rather than exploring or investigating the church, Blair converts it into an image, adapting it to a world of surfaces. On three different occasions, Clay mentions television evangelists that he stumbles across while flipping the channels to and from MTV. The gospel has become a media image, and is propelled at a dazed and confused Clay who wonders about what alternative it might provide. The description of the televangelist sounds not dissimilar to images of used car salesmen, or any other small time businessman peddling a product that sounds too good to be true. Clay explains that "The man who's talking has grey hair, pink-tinted sunglasses and very wide lapels on his jacket and he's holding a microphone. A neon-lit Christ stands forlornly in the background" (139). After listing a string of spiritual symptoms, the preacher promises a cure-all with language alarmingly similar to descriptions of housing cleaners or supersonic hoovers. He promises that, "Jesus will come. He will come through the eye of that television screen" (139). The minister lists "real" symptoms of brokenness and depravity, such as "confusion", "hopelessness" and "helplessness", that Clay actually recognizes in himself. But the proposed remedy, in the form of an evangelistic infomercial, is a commodified version of Jesus that must be filtered through the artificial

world of media experience. This depiction of Christ does not indicate a sense of some sort of “real” reality that defines human existence, but reduces Him to a “neon-lit Christ”, a product to be bought and sold, used as an aspirin to remedy spiritual ailments. The TV preacher finally leads the home audience through a prayer, and Clay says that “I wait for something to happen. I sit there for close to an hour. Nothing does” (129). When the drug of commodified religion fails, Clay turns to his usual drug of choice, cocaine, and does a few lines. Later, he recalls that “I was going to call one of the numbers that flashed on the bottom of the screen. But I realized that I didn’t know what to say” (129). This experience highlights not only the disempowered version of virtual salvation but Clay’s inability, once again, to act. He waits to be acted upon, even though he recognizes himself in the preacher’s words. The seven words that actually etch themselves into Clay’s memory are, “Let this be a Night of Deliverance” (129). Clay desires an escape from his vacant reality, but quickly numbs this desire with yet another drug. But the only spiritual alternative that promises to give him life, depth and escape is peddled through the eye of the television as another fantasy world that avoids, rather than embraces, reality.

In *Less Than Zero*’s depiction of the soured fulfilment of the American dream, boredom is the only sin. There is no objective reality to define and enforce boundaries; the only faint flickers of “pleasure” come from pushing the boundaries that have been constructed by societal discourse. Nothing is right or wrong; the suburban landscape is a playground, designed to entertain as entertainment holds the only “reality” of these teenagers’ lives. Ellis’s most recent novel, *Lunar Park* (2006), tells the story of a fictional Bret Easton Ellis, whose identity is based on fame and wealth, and because of

this, his world “was quickly becoming a place with no boundaries” (14). When money is the bottom line, freedom from boundaries is something that is bought on a moment’s whim. If boundaries are merely social constructions, and wealth is the great alpha and omega of a consumer society, then one can either buy or abandon his or her own morality; it is just another option, not an obligation. In *Less Than Zero*, a clear desensitization to any sense of moral obligation is apparent when Clay’s friend Alana laughs about getting an abortion and then recognizes that “I think we have lost some sense of feeling” (78). In this land of excess, everything is a toy, merely disposable for another’s pleasures, including the lives of other human beings. The kids with the most money to buy the most toys are able to write the rules. As Clay continually wonders if people that he meets are “for sale”, it becomes clear that everything has its price. In Clay’s world, desires do not go away when temporarily fulfilled—they merely become more violent, decadent and inhuman. Guy, another of Clay’s wealthy friends, determines that the voyeuristic pleasure of watching a an adolescent boy castrated and a preteen girl raped and dismembered is worth fifteen thousand dollars, the price he pays for the snuff film that has captured these acts. He and his friends gather around the television, laughing sadistically, as they eventually become aroused. Clay, possibly clinging to the remnant of an idea that human life is not just a commodity, leaves the room and has to “calm down” (142). Clay’s friends are saturated with whatever toys they need to get them through the boredom of a typical day. These “fake” toys are no longer satisfying; they long for something real, yet, at the same time, deny the distinction between the real and the virtual by valuing both as the same. Clay’s response



indicates a clear distinction between the real and the virtual in his mind; he has not completely abandoned the “real”, yet is still afraid to confront it within himself.

Clay’s allegiance to this distinction, however, is wavering. When he finds out that his friend, Julian, who is indebted to a dealer that forces him to hustle, is literally “for sale”, he recognizes that his curiosity can sometime overshadow his feeble inclination towards morality. On finding out about Julian’s new “profession”, Clay initially acts shocked. Julian asks, “Who cares? Do you? Do you really care?” (160). We are then told that, “I don’t say anything and I realize that I don’t really care” (160). Julian, one of Clay’s privileged set of friends, has literally become a commodity now that he has lost the money that bought him his previous identity. Clay decides to go along with Julian as he meets one of his clients, simply because he recognizes that, at his imploding core, he must admit that, “All I want to see is the worst” (160). Julian’s suffering becomes spectacle in Clay’s eyes, and Clay becomes a voyeur, gaining some sort of hollow pleasure by pushing the boundaries to satisfy his own curiosity. Clay is suddenly empty again; his once struggling moral core has caved in on itself, as “The need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly” (163). Julian’s client tells Clay that, “Yes, you are a very beautiful boy...and here that is all that matters” (163). This statement re-enforces what appears to be Clay’s total conversion to the world of image. As the phrase “Wonder if he’s for sale” runs through Clay’s mind, he remembers the billboard that had once haunted him, a reminder of his fear of self, and thinks, “You can disappear here without knowing it” (165). Clay recognizes that he has disappeared; the fears of self-annihilation have proven true. Now, he is simply “a very beautiful boy”(163), a hollow image without a centre.

But the death of Clay's self is not complete; he finds it impossible to completely buy into this depthless mentality that accompanies a complete detachment from any "reality" outside of the world of sun-soaked image. When Rip and some of Clay's other friends tie up and gang rape a twelve year old girl, Clay leaves the room, refusing to take part. Once again, he overcomes his ever-present exhaustion and his sense of identity is reawakened. As Rip laughs at the young girl he has tied up for his own pleasure, Clay asks him, "Why?" and adds that "It's...I don't think it's right"(176). Rip responds by saying, "What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it" (176). While turning Clay's favourite phrase, "Why not?", back on him, Rip's philosophy points out the holes in Clay's false conversion to the religion of hyperreality. If there is no external source of morality and justice that structures the universe and names things as right and wrong, then these "values" are of our own making—our "rights" are "for sale". Rip recognizes that his subjective freedom to create the rules is greatly inflated because he has money, power and influence—only the strongest, richest and most beautiful survive in this self-created world of image. If one is to deny any objective standard for morality, sense, or purpose, then "anything goes". If Clay completely subscribes to this same pleasure-seeking "anything goes" philosophy, then where does he get the "moral" standards that he uses in his appeal? He is a hypocrite. In Clay's confusion, his desire to play in the amoral playground but only believe in some of the rules, he acts against what he sees as injustice and disturbing cruelty, but does not completely disconnect himself from those who hold the views that this is not right or wrong, but merely "fun".

Clay does make a stand by walking out of the room, while questioning and refusing to participate in the gang rape. But although he is repelled by these acts, perhaps because of a repressed sense of injustice and morality, he is unable to completely stand apart and separate himself from those who see cruelty as a type of amusement for those in control. Clay's walking out appears to be only an isolated incident—as his refusal to watch the snuff film is. Although moments of some sort of instinctive moral clarity do occur, they are not epiphanies. Clay makes no great self-realization in these moments; they are more like a painful reflex reaction to putting one's hand on a hot stovetop. Clay's character shows no distinct movement away from his friends' lifestyle and worldview as he never overcomes his exhaustion and apathy enough to make a clean break from them. He does not have the tools or energy to critique, and therefore, reject the terrifying and monstrous hollowness of his completely self-absorbed friends. But he is continually haunted by a repressed knowledge of its gruesome presence. He believes that when he leaves L.A. to return to the East Coast, things will be better. This theory, obviously a form of exhaustion and apathy-induced denial, will be disproved in Ellis's next book *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), a narrative that documents the equally empty and amoral world of Clay's university friends.

In the last few pages of *Less Than Zero*, Blair confronts Clay and asks him, Clay, did you ever love me" (191). Clay pretends not to hear her question as he focuses on staring at a billboard. Soon after this question has been asked, he appears to finally connect with his inner self, providing a glimpse of the interior world that readers have been waiting for. Clay tells us that, "On the terrace the sun bursts into my eyes and for one blinding moment I see myself clearly" (191). The epiphanic language Ellis uses here



implies a moment of clarity, using the ancient motif of blindness that enables one to clearly see. The conversation continues, and Clay eventually responds to Blair's persistent question: "'No, I never did' I almost shout. 'I never did.' I almost start to laugh" (191). Clay's callous statement and cruel desire to laugh indicates that his "new vision" is not a transformation from apathy to moral sensitivity, or even a final desire to destroy the indifferent "monster" that he has become. Clay's realization is not a redemptive epiphany, but what Maltby calls a "catastrophic epiphany", a moment in which one's ultimate spiritual devastation is exposed (19). Clay clearly sees what he becomes...and embraces it; in this sense, the novel provides a sort of anti-epiphany, indicating the impossibility of redemption or transformation in Clay's one-dimensional universe. Clay proceeds to ask Blair the same question, to which she responds, "I thought about it and yeah, I did once. I mean I really did. Everything was all right for a while. You were kind...but it was like you weren't there..." (191-2). Clay stares at her, and then is once again entranced by the billboard, remembering the slogan "Disappear Here". Blair continues her assessment of their pseudo-relationship:

I don't know if any other person I've been with has been really there, either...but at least they tried...You never did. Other people made an effort and you just...It was just beyond you...you were never there. I felt sorry for you for a little while, but then I found it hard to. You're a beautiful boy, Clay, but that's about it (192).

Blair's recognition that Clay is *only* a "beautiful boy" echoes an earlier description given by the client of Julian, Clay's rent boy friend, who says, "Yes, you're a very beautiful boy...and here, that's all that matters" (163). In his moment of clarity, self-insight and

recognition, Clay discovers that he has become both an image and a commodity, an interchangeable “beautiful boy” whose worth only lies in the surfaces of plasticized, transient and cloned L.A. beauty.

When recognizing that his status as a “beautiful boy” is “all that matters”, Clay’s blinding flash exposes a belief that nothing ultimately matters, as all value is based on superficiality. When Blair asks him, “What do you care about? What makes you happy?”, Clay replies, “Nothing. Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing” (192). But is this sullen nihilism Clay’s real feeling, or another protective image, a shield from the self, like his designer sunglasses? When Blair asks, “Did you ever care about me”?, He admits, “I don’t want to care. If I care about things, it’ll be worse, it’ll just be another thing to worry about. It’s less painful if I don’t care” (192). Clay’s shield of “nihilism” is ultimately a stoic defence mechanism to protect himself from any sort of attachments that will inevitably cause him pain. Clay ultimately fears any sort of sensitivity and conscience, for these take him past the safe, superficial world of image where “everything goes” and thus “nothing matters”.

Although Clay has brief moments of self awareness in which he senses the horror lurking below his seemingly depthless exterior, these realizations never manifest themselves into a substantial change. In the absence of any truly transformative epiphanies, Ellis’s novel rejects any sort of teleological development. The eschatological structure of a “traditional” novel implies a sense of purpose, deeper understanding and, ultimately, change; Ellis’s protagonists never truly encounter change and remain unaware of any sense of purpose other than surviving and slightly alleviating the boredom and perceived meaninglessness of an affluent existence. The ultimate horror of

Ellis's novel, the spectre of reality that haunts Clay throughout his "story", is the realization that this monotony of everyday life never culminates in some sort of profound change indicating a sense of purpose or meaning. In *The Promised End* Fiddes notes that twentieth century writers have a tendency to "portray human life in a perpetual state of transition, crying out for an apocalypse that never comes" (5). The moment of apocalypse, or dramatic revelation (resolution), that could indicate Clay's purpose and significance is absent from Ellis's story. In "Hystericizing the Millennium" Jean Baudrillard discusses this age of "anti-apocalypse", a time when we "have to get used to the idea that there is no longer any end, there will no longer be any end and that history itself has become interminable" (3). Baudrillard sees this desire for closure, this eschatological longing, as parallel to the desire for origin; the end and the beginning are "the only two interesting moments" (2), but both are, according to Baudrillard, projections of the same desires for revelation as we try to "rediscover the real and the point of reference" (4). These utopian wishes entice us to move blindly forward with a sense of false hope as we "sink ourselves into a simulation that has now become shameful and utterly hopeless" (4). Clay's vague sense of nihilistic despair indicates a sense of hopelessness as he can never move forward; his piques of self-realization or awareness of injustice and cruelty are only fleeting, disconnected moments that do not result in a transformation, but form an exhausting cycle that never moves above the surface of deceptive simulacra. He has lost hope of discovering "the real and the point of reference" (Baudrillard 4) as he believes that these are not objective truths, but constructions based on wealth and privilege. He is his own authority, his own reference point—and this is the greatest horror of the novel.



Elizabeth Young argues that *Less Than Zero* is ultimately a very moral novel, and that “Ellis’s own response to their [his characters’] behaviour...is essentially one of puritan disgust” (26). Ellis’s cold presentation of his lifeless characters does not provide any moral guidance or insight, but contemptuously exposes their cruel actions, hiding nothing. We do not feel sympathy or compassion for these characters; we are disgusted and horrified by them, as Young implies Ellis is. Young continues her critique of Ellis: “He, apparently, can perceive the possibility of a better, more authentic morality lurking beyond the Disneyfication of daily life” (26). Although Ellis’s harsh presentation of the cruel, empty truth of his characters’ lives does imply a great loss of identity, morality and meaning, he gives us no clear indication that there is a solid, attainable source of “authentic morality” to be found. His characters are too exhausted to search for something more; world-weary apathy is all they know. Ellis obviously recognizes the horror of the novel, which he states is an “indictment of a way of life I was familiar with...and of Western civilization at the present moment” (*Lunar Park* 6), but provides no alternative. It is clear that he is horrified, disgusted, perhaps even afraid of the extreme violation of boundaries or standards in this wasteland of artificiality, but what are these standards? Ellis appears to be one step ahead of his characters as he can clearly point to their perversion, cruelty and lostness. But he fails to create any embodiment of the very standards that have been violated, thus indicating the reality of their existence. He is an expert satirist, satirizing the despair and purposelessness of his culture’s own creation, but even the use of a satire to critique and confront implies the existence of some sort of violated standards. There are no exits, no alternative paths from the

cyclical, dead-end world of Ellis's novel; this hell of ultimate luxury and pleasure has robbed any sense of the protagonist's self or hope of salvation.

Unlike Clay, the protagonist in *Less Than Zero*, the anonymous narrator of Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) is acutely and persistently aware of his dwindling sense of self as he questions what is "real" and what is fiction. Although he is absorbed into New York nightlife, complete with disposable one night stands, mounds of "Bolivian Marching Powder" (1) and wayfarer sunglasses, he recognizes that all of this is an illusory world, and he wants to escape. Ironically, although unnamed, the novel's protagonist has a central consciousness defined by a constant feeling of doubt and regret that is documented in his writing, a log of his interior world's ongoing struggle with identity that is much more self-aware than any of Ellis's named "subjects". Although named, the privileged teenagers that populate Ellis's fiction are "near indistinguishable from each other" (Young 24); characters with token yuppie names such as Clay, Blair and Rip are "ciphers...flickers on a screen" (29) in the land of image. McInerney's narrator is at a different place in life than *Less than Zero's* Clay; he has recently graduated from college, been married and separated, and is working in his first "real" job, yet he still seems "lost". Although he is older than Clay, both novels follow the identity struggles of young men trapped in microcosmic illusory societies.

Dissatisfied with what he sees as a shallow world of shifting, unstable shadows, the novel's narrator, who continually refers to himself only as "you", continually fantasizes about his other, "normal" self. As he looks back at his life, his desire to marry a model and move to the big city, he remembers the moment when the "dream" he now lives began: "Getting out of the taxi next to the famous fountain, you seemed to be

arriving at the premiere of the movie which was to be your life...you cannot believe your dreams were so shallow" (151). He discovers that the fairy tale images that fuelled his desire to live a fast-paced life in the big city are as unreal and insubstantial as the virtual world of film, yet the romantic notion of Hollywood glamour is the paradigm that produced his desires. A moment is captured in all its glamour and beauty... then quickly fades. As he remembers his initial "conversion" to the illusory world of New York status, beauty and society, he can clearly distinguish between the previously deceptive image of dream life that now contrasts with a cruel reality, the painful underbelly of his dream world.

He learns these bitter lessons only after experiencing the abuse of abandonment and divorce, a visible reminder of the temporal nature of promised "stability" in the world of illusions. The protagonist's wife, Amanda, is a seemingly naïve country girl, someone who looks like a model yet doesn't even know it (69). Soon after moving to a new life in the glamorous Upper East Side, the couple receive a letter that advises them to buy insurance for Amanda's face. Amanda's up and coming modelling career has turned her body into a commodity and her newlywed husband into a disposable asset. Soon after they are separated, Amanda's estranged husband sees a mannequin in a store window, moulded after Amanda's image, and asks himself, "When did she become a mannequin?" (78). As he realizes that his "natural" wife has finally fulfilled her desire to become completely artificial, his best friend, Tad, assures him that this desire was what drove Amanda to marry him in the first place. According to Tad, Amanda used her fiancée for a chance in the "Bright Lights Big City, where skin deep is the mode" and "your traditional domestic values are not going to take root and flourish" (116). These



statements enable the disgruntled protagonist to realize that he does have “traditional domestic values”, and that he longs for both normalcy and stability, two things that aren’t products of his glittering world of make-believe.

Best “friend” Tad’s character is both a foil to and a replication of the narrator’s obscured identity. Tad is the novel’s classic hedonist, an entirely selfish individual whose “mission in life is to have more fun than anyone else in New York City” (2). Tad, unlike the contemplative narrator, never feels unfulfilled when things don’t last or fail to develop into something “meaningful”; he lives for the moment and revels in its temporal manifestation. Indicating the battle between the worlds of “normalcy” and “fantasy” in the mind of the protagonist, McInerney writes, “You are awed by his [Tad’s] strict refusal to acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure. You want to be like that. You also think he is shallow and dangerous” (3). Unlike *Less Than Zero*’s Clay, MacInerney’s narrator clearly recognizes that his friend’s immersion in the city’s nightlife is based only on “the pursuit of pleasure”. This is something he both desires, because of its single-minded focus, and despises, because of its artificiality and temporality. Ellis’s Clay does not have any sense of “normalcy” with which to develop a contrast; a life built on seeking pleasure to alleviate boredom is all he has ever known. *Bright Light*’s Tad, is always moving, always looking for something better, more exciting, more gratifying; he is a perfect consumer, never satisfied and always chasing his desires behind the trail of vaporizing illusions of momentary pleasure. When Tad confronts his best friend over Amanda’s disappearance, McInerney writes, “For Tad, Amanda’s departure was not only surprising, but inevitable. It confirmed his world view. Your heart-break is just another version of the same old story” (116). Tad’s world

view is based on formulaic Hollywood film plots and he knows that Amanda, like himself, is the all absorbing centre of her own fairy tale. Like Tad, Amanda pursues a life of pure pleasure and self-advancement. In this world of malleable image, there are no solid guidelines that tell her that anything is wrong, cruel or unfair; the only criterion is that she must be satisfied for the moment, but her desires are continually changing to keep up with the flashing lights of society.

The novel's narrator persistently compares himself not only to Tad, but also to his own fictional ideas of himself. He is disappointed in his current "superficial" lifestyle, feeling that he must really, deep down, be someone else, someone much more content, happy and well adjusted than the victims of New York nightlife that populate his nocturnal wanderings. The novel's first words are "You are not the type of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning" (1). McInerney places his "hero" in the wrong place at the wrong time, ironically emphasizing the fact that every monotonous night is spent in this wrong place at this wrong time. During the early hours of the morning, the narrator recognizes that "Tad is the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning—he is either your best or your worst self" (2). Although Tad's complete hedonism is both repulsive and frightening, our narrator admires and even envies Tad's single-mindedness, as he himself is always of a double mind, always stuck in the same routine yet yearning for more. Is this a blessing or a curse? He is one step past *Less Than Zero's* Clay in his sense of self-awareness, yet are his relentless struggles and continual pangs of regret and longing really any better than Clay's apathetic stupor?

Our hero continually refers to “the problem”—a dream turned sour, based on ultimately unsatisfying temporal pleasures. But, not knowing how to actually turn from his current self into the self of his dreams, he is stuck in a bar at 4 a.m., hoping to meet a girl that will momentarily satisfy his cravings, who is “the sexual equivalent of fast food” (6). As he lingers and lurks in the corners of the dark Manhattan bar, he is propositioned by a bald woman, a typical club-type looking for some action in the desperate hours of the morning. As he watches her, the narrator reflects on the sad symbolism of the situation, the fact that “the bald girl is emblematic of the problem” (3). His “problem” is that he will never meet the “right” kind of girl, someone who wants to commit to a stable relationship and create his romantic vision of a stable home with him, in the “wrong” kind of place like this. But he is continually in this “wrong” kind of place, carousing for someone to help him forget what he doesn’t have; she is a spiritual surrogate in the form of a seductress, who he deems “the last chance for earthly salvation” (8). McInerney’s protagonist has much in common with the romantic, autobiographical anti-heroes of Jack Kerouac’s fiction. They live wild, hard, fast-paced lives, soaked with whiskey and littered with one night stands, but all of these things are sad attempts to deal with the fact that they have lost their emotional and spiritual homes, that sense of warmth, protection, love and stability. Like Kerouac’s *On The Road*, *Bright Lights, Big City* appears to have been, according to the author, largely misread:

I *thought* I was writing a book about someone coming to terms with failure, but it seems that the novel’s been taken up by people whose religion is success. They see *Bright Lights, Big City* as a guidebook to the world of fashion,...New York City’s nightlife, to the pursuit of



glamour...Again, I *thought* I was doing something else...advancing a modest critique of an age in which an actor is the President, in which fashion models are asked for their opinions, in which getting *into* a nightclub is seen as a significant human achievement. (Girard 173)

This portrayal of a divided self, what McInerney sees as a picture of failure and loss, has ironically been heralded as a new scriptural model for the “religion of success”.

McInerney’s “failed” protagonist never feels “at home” and fears for others to have a glimpse into his dysfunctional world: “Your soul is as dishevelled as your apartment, and until you clean it up a little, you don’t want to invite anyone inside” (32). He has always felt “misplaced, wondering if others felt this way, always trying to catch up” (167). This desire to “catch up” is also a desire to uncover his real self, the self that has been concealed in this superficial world of New York glitz and white powder. He wants the “normal” self to emerge, after all, “You see yourself as the kind of guy who appreciates a quiet night at home with a good book. A little Mozart on the speakers, a cup of cocoa on the arm of the chair, slippers on the feet” (36). Stephanie Girard argues that the narrator’s practice of speaking of himself in the second person, “is evidence of his split consciousness, of his inability or unwillingness to locate himself within an identity” (169). This inability to choose also reflects another form of what Girard calls “betweenness” (169); this unnamed narrator is a twenty four year old with a “real” job, yet he still continually reverts to an adolescent mindset and lifestyle, always in between both worlds. His fantasy vision of another life, an “adult” world, a life that might, ironically, sound boring to any of his nightlife friends, seems within reach but always unattainable. The “dull” vision of a normal life is a striking contrast to the fictive world

of Manhattan clubs and Hollywood film premieres. Perhaps Amanda sensed the desired “normality” at the bottom of her husband’s heart and fled; like Bret Easton Ellis’s protagonists, she is terrified of boredom.

McInerney continually reminds us of the part fiction plays in his narrator’s life, both literally and figuratively. The narrator’s typical and ambitious first “yuppie” job is working in the “Department of Factual Verification” for a sophisticated, reputable magazine. He spends all day sorting “real” facts from the taint of fiction, yet he desires to be a fiction writer and hopes to just use this job as an entryway into the world of publishing and writing. His desired career choice is not greeted with approval in his department: “The people in the Verification Department tend to look down on fiction, in which words masquerade as flesh without the backbone of fact. There is a general sense that if fiction isn’t dead, it is at least beside the point” (22). His desire to be a fiction writer, to document his innermost thoughts and transform them into an illusory world, is ironic. His current life, one of glamour, semi-prestige and pursuit of immediate pleasure, is his reality, whereas his continual dream fictions are of a “normal” life. He persistently constructs a fictive self, an always developing foil to the lost self that spirals downward into a bed of white powder and casual sex. The narrator rarely speaks specifically of fiction he has read, yet he has a lovely collection of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and others that lines the shelves in his apartment and furnish his dream of the new, normal self. His real fiction of choice, his most regular and desired guilty pleasure, is the *Post*, a tabloid crammed with titillating tales of coma babies and alien abductions. His continual reference to the post, almost like a daily dose of media scripture, forms a framework of sorts in the novel. The *Post* is the most disreputable

type of fiction, the type that claims to be fact. Perhaps this obsession with the tabloids is reflective of the narrator's own self-denial, his continual illusion that a new life is "out there" waiting for him, just as soon as he decides to sit down, listen to some classical music, and read a good book. He believes that this fictional self can be found deep inside, rather than recognizing that this is a construction based on feelings of loss and hopelessness.

Yet our narrator continues to believe that his "real self" is within, just waiting to be discovered and unleashed. He is torn between the progressive pursuit of this "real self" and his chasing of some temporary "fixes" that provide momentary relief, distraction and surrogate salvation. Caught in between these two competing desires, he creates flexible, yet constantly referenced, standards for himself. He draws a line in his mind and tells himself that he must not move past a certain point or he has gone "too far", wandering into a desolate space where he forsakes his real self and will ultimately lose sense of any standards in general. The narrator's obsessive desire with creating regret-inducing moral standards that are continually broken is a direct contrast to *Less Than Zero's* Clay who admits that "all I want to see is the worst" (160) as he actively seeks the opportunity to break any sort of conventional or existential standards. As McInerney's narrator waits, apparently for nothing, in a dark and emptying bar, he keeps telling himself that he must leave before a certain time, or he will become the sordid, rootless self and deny his real "normal" self. He justifies his presence in the bar at all by thinking that, "Your presence here is only a matter of conducting an experiment in limits, reminding yourself of what you aren't" (4). The post-midnight world of this bar, a world that has become his "normal" world, is supposedly just a reminder of what he is



not. His self-deceptive exercise in contrast is reminiscent of Baudrillard's theory about the same sort of self-deception practiced by American tourists when they step inside Disneyland. Like this nightclub, Disneyland is a world of illusion and fantasy, a continual reminder that this world of endless pleasure and make-believe can exist because outside of the doors of the "Magic Kingdom" there is a real world that legislates the pleasure through creating a contrast (*Simulacra* 12). Like these fantasy-loving Americans, McInerney's hero is deceiving himself into believing that the world outside his land of illusion is solid, stable and "real". Both the novel's narrator and Baudrillard's tourists are pining after the "real" and find a nostalgic refuge in places that produce an apparent contrast. The narrator's illusion is not an objective reality as much as a nostalgia and desire for a stable sense of the real self. He, like Ellis's subjects, is living in an illusory world, but his illusion is not completely media induced; rather, it is greatly self-induced. Unlike Clay and his friends, he continually acknowledges his dissatisfaction with the boredom/ pleasure cycle and looks for something more. But his delusions of self, his sentimentality for a "real" identity connected with a "real" home, keep him paralyzed in a world of dreams that he soon hopes to passively absorb.

This sentiment for reclaiming and becoming his real self has roots in both a spiritual yearning and what he calls a "creeping sense of morality" (4). The narrator tells us that he must pick up a girl in the bar to give him a last chance for "earthly salvation" as well as to "stave off" any sense of morality. Interestingly, he sees "earthly salvation" as a practice in hedonistic pleasure fulfilment, a stark contrast to the "morality" produced when focusing on a more transcendent source of "salvation". The act of picking up a girl indicates some sense of longing, a desire to connect with

someone or something outside of his “dishevelled soul” to remind him that he is real, that he feels, and that there is something better. When contemplating his bar-room strategies, he reminds himself that, “The touch of flesh, the sound of another human voice” is a temporary escape that brings him back to the overt truth of who he really is, someone who desires a connection with stability and reality (5). He is terrified to step outside of the club in the early hours of the morning as the new light will expose what he has become: “You know there is a special purgatory waiting for you out there in the dawn’s surly light, a desperate half sleep which is like a grease fire in the brainpan” (8). If he leaves with a convenient and temporary date, he can once again escape the reality of the situation for a few more hours, becoming distracted with empty pleasure that is a counterfeit of affection, “the touch of flesh, the sound of another human voice”. The use of the religious term “purgatory” paints a visual image of both a cloudy, in-between place that occupies the space between his two selves, indicating a sense of spiritual lostness and confused identity, and a need for cleansing, purging. When he writes of stepping out into the “dawn’s surly light”, McInerney is making an ironic allusion to the American national anthem that begins “Oh say can you see, by the dawn’s early light”, a declaration of pure vision, independence, strength and freedom. Although our hero has no “ties” to anything or anyone—his mother has recently died and his wife has recently filed for divorce—he is not free, but trapped in an endless cycle of denial and delusion. His ultimate “freedom” is yet another cruel reminder of his lack of connection to others and his inner instability. His vision is also not pure, yet an idealism tainted by his own confusion and inability to choose between his two selves. He is painfully aware of his own paralysis, yet unable to escape it.

Our narrator is longing for intimacy, particularly manifested in the form of one night stands, in an attempt to suppress his fears about mortality. Unlike Ellis's protagonists, this one has an emotional centre, albeit fractured and raw, that needs some sense of connection and approval. Well into the novel, we realize that the narrator's mother has recently died; this, combined with his pain and disappointment over Amanda's rejection, provides the novel with an emotional centre. At the beginning of the novel when our narrator steps out from the club, his seedy world of temporary fixes, he is bathed in light that shames him, as the "glare is like a mother's reproach" (8). His perpetual sense of shame and spiritual desolation clearly relates to the image of his mother, a representative of stability and protection, who has now vanished. His romanticized idea of home also relates to another learned association with the absent framework that religion provides. In the club, as he realizes that it is actually Sunday morning, he says to himself:

Repent. Your body is the temple of the Lord and you have defiled it. It is, after all, Sunday morning and as long as you have any brain cells left there will be a resonant patriarchal basso echoing down the marble vaults of your churchgoing childhood to remind you that this is the Lord's Day.

(6)

This reminder of a distant paradigm, providing answers to the questions of identity and purpose through the remnants of Sunday schools past, is something that he longs to drown out, which he literally does with a fresh drink (6).

This double-minded protagonist continues to reluctantly join Tad in the pursuit of pleasure, feeling always dissatisfied with these pursuits because they are not



symptomatic of his “real” identity. At times, he is frustrated with his desire for more—what seems to be a spiritual longing for there to be a reality and purpose beyond his casual leisure and career pursuits. He often tried to repress it, and wishes he could be as utterly narcissistic and superficial as Tad; it just seems easier:

You keep thinking that with practice you will eventually get the knack of enjoying superficial encounters, that you will stop looking for the *universal solvent*, stop grieving. You will learn to compound happiness out of small increments of mindless pleasure. (52, emphasis mine)

Although he fights these desires to seek the “universal solvent”, some external agent that explains the nature of life and death and upholds justice, he cannot deny these urges that seem to define his thought world. He hopes that his episodic pleasure could construct a sense of meaning and provide an escape from the grieving he still experiences over the loss of both his mother and his wife. Does this utterance of a candid, raw emotional and spiritual hunger indicate the emergence of a third and actual self? Our hero is clearly not a pure hedonist or a “normal” guy; his real self is composed of these deep-seated fears and desires that he continually tries to repress. The excessive and unfulfilling excursions with Tad are not examples of his own lust, but a desperate attempt to drown the raw, frightened, grieving self that could emerge if he let go. Like *Less Than Zero*’s Clay, McInerney’s hero is terrified of who he might really be—and resists the painful process of attempting to face these questions of identity. This third self not only recognizes its own weakness and pain, but also acknowledges the need for a “universal solvent”, someone or something that provides all the answers to “the problem”.

McInerney re-emphasizes the absence of a paradigm provided by a “universal solvent” in a poignant scene on the New York subway. Our protagonist sits next to a Hasidic Jew who peacefully reads the Talmud while he ritualistically reads the *Post*, following the “Coma Baby” storyline. He stops for a moment and notices that this man has no interest in his *Post*, but looks to be purposefully reading his Talmud, as if there was really something important to find within it. He thinks:

This man has a God and a History, a Community. He has a perfect economy of belief in which pain and loss are explained in terms of a transcendental balance sheet, in which everything works out in the end and death is not really death. Wearing black wool all summer must seem like a small price to pay. He believes he is one of God’s chosen, whereas you feel like an integer in a random series of numbers. Still, what a fucking haircut. (57)

In spite of the self-mocking deflection of seriousness in this final phrase, this is a pivotal moment within the novel. The protagonist clearly vocalizes the philosophical and spiritual reasons behind his wandering. He notes that for the Jew, everything is explained—justice is real and dependable within a morally structured universe. There is a transcendent judge who ultimately determines human destiny. He also recognizes that, for the Jew, mortality is not the same kind of “problem” as it is in his world, but just a transition from one world to the next. In this faith, there is a sense of purpose, of chosen-ness, of meaning; our hero finally recognizes his fear and pain in feeling random, disconnected. As the Jew reads the Talmud, rabbinic interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, he reads the *Post*, a fictionalized and sensationalized account of the random

“stuff” of reality. This publication is his only scripture, the only book that he continually draws from in a ritualistic fashion, yet is as random and purposeless as his own life appears to be. Feeling incredibly disheartened, he thinks “Sometimes you feel like the only man in the city without group affiliation...You could start your own group—the Brotherhood of Unfulfilled Early Promise” and notes that the *Post* is full of stories that “confirm your sense of impending disaster” (57).

This contrast between the Jew’s metanarrative, as represented in the Talmud, and our protagonist’s sense of directionlessness, also relates to his desire to become a fiction writer. He is not interested in disconnected, yet verifiable, facts, yet longs for the events, whether facts or not, to be connected and join into a structured and purposeful story. The story structure is inherently dependent on a sense of direction, anticipation, purpose and resolution. As he knows that he is ultimately not in control of his reality and cannot trace his storyline, he longs to create one himself. This desire for a structure that includes purpose and closure is closely related to his pain over Amanda, for he “wanted an explanation, an ending that would assign blame and dish up justice” (127). Blame and justice are well beyond his control and he knows this; his desire for these things is perhaps an admission that he needs a transcendent reality to give direction to this story. The Jew’s faith, based on trust in the source of a “transcendental balance sheet” would ultimately find vindication for this devastation, whereas our narrator only finds an unravelled, unresolved fantasy.

Towards the end of the novel, this repressed hunger for a sense of purpose, a “universal solvent” and desire to fulfil an unutterable goal that is beyond any temporary “fix”, returns amid a cloudy bout of drug induced denial. McInerney emphasizes the



convoluted nature of what appears to be a pseudo-epiphany, yet also uses religious language to emphasize its spiritual significance:

Your head is pounding with voices of confession and revelation. You followed the rails of white powder...in pursuit of a point of convergence where everything was cross referenced according to a master code....coke runs out...goal is receding. Whatever it was. You can't get everything straight in one night. (170)

The battle between denial and confrontation, clouded by drug induced delirium, keeps our hero in the purgatory between selves, away from seeking the “master code” that would provide him with the key to “the problem”. His painful longing for a seemingly absent but greatly desired “master code” and ultimate “goal” are numbed, once again, by his pursuit of temporal pleasure. Unlike the spiritually bankrupt youth of Ellis’s novels, McInerney’s protagonist senses some sort of metaphysical framework, and desires to “confess”, understand its “revelation” and connect with it in order to obtain the allusive “goal” of reality. This spiritual yearning, however, is clouded out by the immediate “solution” of a deceitful and empty ecstasy.

The very last scene of the novel could be read as either another manifestation of delusion and denial or as a life-affirming epiphany. After our protagonist stumbles out of a club, having just seen his ex-wife, he encounters the blinding sunlight and smells a revitalizing scent—freshly baked bread. As he smells this freshness, he fantasizes about a different world, the world of “the righteous people who sleep at night and eat eggs for breakfast” (181). McInerney writes that “Tears come to your eyes, and you feel such a rush of tenderness and pity that you stop beside a lamppost and hang on for support”

(181). As he breathes in the smell of a world for those who are righteous and not random, he longs to be included in their number. The uncontrollable wave of tenderness provides him with a new kind of drunkenness. The baker, standing outside with the fresh bread, will not let him taste the bread as he has no money. He immediately offers to trade his expensive Rayban sunglasses for a bag of fresh rolls. Does this trade off signify a transition from the world of image and illusion to the world of reality, stability? Is it an epiphany that opens up a new life of introspection and self-definition or does it just reinforce his false and unattainable ideas of a “normal” life that awaits him as he turns the corner? Soon, he is “Down on your knees” tearing open the bag to devour the fresh, warm comforting bread. McInerney writes, “The smell of warm dough envelops you. The first bite sticks in your throat and you almost gag. You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again” (182). As the protagonist kneels, he is in a position of surrender, supplication—ready to devour the wholesome, fulfilling, real bread. The last words of the novel, “You will have to learn everything all over again” suggest a rebirth of sorts. A new self will emerge from this symbolic trade-off; the knelt prayer and sacramental enjoyment of this bread, the bread of a new life, indicate either a radical change towards reality and stability, or the birth of a new, and even more deceptive, illusion. Is this a real, transformative epiphany; or is this a counterfeit, like the final “epiphany” of *Less than Zero*, that sardonically feigns escape from an inescapable pattern?

Stephanie Girard notes that the novel’s narrator has not eaten since Friday night, and emerges from the “tomb” of the nightclub on Sunday morning to meet the sunlight, and finally eat something in the form of fresh bread. Asserting that this is clearly an

epiphany, grounded in the language of a religious framework, she writes: "The use of future tense and the Friday-to-Sunday chronology are obvious signals of resurrection/redemption in progress; in some future space our hero will surely exchange the impoverished values of the yuppies for the truths of fresh bread" (179). Yet Girard also notes that this "eucharistic ending has as much to do with Carver as Christianity" as it clearly alludes to the ending of Raymond Carver's short story, "A Small Good Thing" in which a baker and a grieving family eat the literal fresh bread of symbolic community as a way to confront grief and experience life. Carver, who was McInerney's teacher in his M.F.A. programme, ends his story with an epiphany that embraces the immanent truth of the moment, the wholeness of the bread symbolizing the flavour of life, a means to initiate community and healing. According to this reading, McInerney's epiphany is both Joycean and Freudian in nature, focusing both on the "whatness of the thing" and how it symbolizes a healing of his multiple, scarred selves. Elizabeth Young, relying completely on a Freudian reading of a splintered self, dismisses this event's power as an epiphany, and reduces it to mere sentimental longing for the past, a reminiscence of the smell of bread baking in our hero's childhood kitchen. He is, according to Young, falling back into another constructed self based on his inescapable and painful personal history (54). Yet the strong use of religious language, coupled with the hero's inconsistent, but earnest desire for a spiritual reality in the form of an "universal solvent" or "master code" indicate that he has moved beyond the multiple, competing constructions of self for a brief moment to taste something true and whole. Like Ellis, McInerney does not provide a clear alternative to his protagonist's lost confusion, yet does suggest a longing for something more that is almost completely absent in Ellis's



novel. The questions surrounding the validity of this final moment, this possible “epiphany” reflect the difficulties of placing a moment of clarity and redemption amidst a world where reality is bought and sold and “religion is success” (qtd. In Girard 173).

Douglas Coupland’s second novel, *Shampoo Planet*, is a more “traditional” initiation story than Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* and McInerney’s *Bright Lights Big City* but still focuses on the same questions of identity, fragmentation, consumerism and the seeming absence of a spiritual life in postmodern community. Although Ellis appears to emphasize the absence of spiritual desire while McInerney indicates a yearning for, but fear of, spiritual reality, Coupland brings questions of spiritual identity to the foreground of most of his novels. In his fiction as well as his interviews, Coupland often emphasizes that he, along with his characters, is a member of “the first generation raised without religion” (*Life After God* 129), a disenchanted consumer collective nursed on advertising slogans rather than Sunday school parables. Coupland’s fiction is internally conflicted as his characters long to transcend their materialist climate to reach for “moments of transcendence and epiphany” (Draper 5), searching for what they believe to be both transcendent and immanent truth, while at the same time relying on the commodified tools they have inherited to sustain their daily existence. These are the same tools with which *Shampoo Planet*’s protagonist, Tyler Johnson, tries to forge an identity; like Clay from *Less Than Zero* and the anonymous narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City* he is left ultimately unfulfilled as he turns to consumer choice as a surrogate for relationships and spirituality. Unlike Ellis and McInerney, however, Coupland both emphasizes this lack of fulfilment *and* attempts to propose an alternative, an overriding desire for spirituality that becomes more apparent as Tyler experiences a series of

epiphanies that respond to his deepest questions about his own instability. This desire ultimately suggests that Tyler's identity cannot be built around his false notions of consumer freedom, but only on a knowledge that there must be something more, something transcendent that defines both his core self and his connection to reality.

The members of Coupland's generation, Generation X, are not only "the first generation raised without religion", but the very generation to pick up and question the pieces of shattered idealism left over from their parents' generation. The hippy generation, as specifically portrayed in *Shampoo Planet*, embraced a sometimes vaguely spiritual but mostly secular vision of peace, love, wholeness and community, still appealing to a grand narrative of human emancipation. Generation X recognizes that this idealistic vision is empty as it has no objective or spiritual grounding; this empty idealism teaches them to suspect any sort of sincerity as "sappy" and perhaps dishonest for it is grounded in nothing "real". Coupland's generation was taught about peace, love and solidarity without any transcendent originating source. Although the parents in Ellis's novel are Hollywood elite, and McInerney's parental characters are "normal" Midwestern suburbanites that dream of the "real" life in the big city, both families share a secular view of reality with the hippy parents in Coupland's *Shampoo Planet*. Coupland specifically illustrates an interesting and complex transgenerational relationship by emphasizing the extreme ideological contrast between flighty hippy mom, Jasmine, and her son, Tyler. Tyler, an aspiring yuppie, whose dream life would be that of McInerney's nameless socialite, explains that "My memories begin with Ronald Reagan" (132) and refers to the earthy realism of his upbringing in a commune as "the dark ages" (132). He finds things Jasmine and other hippies see as real, simple

and from the earth, like the vegetables in his family's kitchen, "depressing" (260) and would much rather partake in a shiny, happy and artificial consumer world surrounded by items like those in his room's own minicool, items that are "safe and heavily advertised" (258).

Tyler's world is saturated in modern "stuff"; his chief interests are progress, capital and newness. Tyler readily admits that for him, "reality" is defined by commodity and media endorsement. If a product is not advertised enough, it is "hence suspect" (124) and could be a remedial leftover from the "dark ages". Even descriptions of nature are only "real" and meaningful if described in reference to manmade commodities: "The Pacific Sunset is utterly unused and orange and clean, like shrink wrapped exotic vegetables" (5). Unlike most of Coupland's other characters, Tyler revels in the joys of late capitalism and the "freedom" they provide for rich people. He longs for the life of leisure and affluence as depicted in *Less Than Zero* and the glamour of the fast-paced city life similar to that in *Bright Lights, Big City*. Ironically, he is trapped within quite a rural Great Plains community, "far away as possible from anywhere meaningful or fun" (9). According to Tyler, "meaning" is only something that can be manufactured by an exchange of media information and endorsed by a multinational company. Baudrillard highlights this type of contemporary thinking about the deification of media information in "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" where he points out that the "passionate idealism of meaning and of communication" is a myth perpetuated by a continual supply of information passively accepted by and even fed upon by the masses. He claims that:



Everywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning...Information is thought to create communication...We are all complicitous in this myth. It is the alpha and omega of our modernity, without which the credibility of our social organization would collapse.”  
(80)

The source of information production, the media, has seemingly replaced God as the ultimate reference point, the final nexus of meaning, in the mind of contemporary culture. Baudrillard emphasizes this complete dependence on the media for any notions of community or meaning, for it is perceived as the beginning and end of our contemporary societal framework.

Tyler appears to grasp his almost religious reverence for the myth of the media’s “alpha and omega” stronghold over the conception of meaning and purpose. Baudrillard continues to highlight the illusory quality of this new information encoded paradigm and how it ultimately causes an implosion of both meaning and the social which he believes are ultimately collapsing for a very specific reason: “Because where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs. Information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social” (80). Nature paralyzes Tyler; “fun” and “meaning” are things that must be bought and sold. Thankfully, Tyler does find a few beacons of capitalistic hope in the middle of his boring “nowhere”:

I pulled into a Circle-K grocery to buy a nostalgic bag of Cheezie Nuggies and a ginger ale, feeling a twinge of pride in belonging to a society that can maintain a beacon of light and technology like this

Circle-K out in the middle of nowhere. Convenience stores: the economic engine of the New Order. (Coupland 193)

As he revels in the amazing progress that he is privileged to both benefit from and contribute to, he is deathly afraid of being poor as this might land him in the “dark ages”. Tyler’s insatiable desire for wealth and progress are an obvious foil to Jasmine’s earthy idealism. Tyler and his siblings grew up in a hippy commune, a community based on shared utopian ideals rather than visions of material progress.

The years in the commune represent the ultimate “dark ages” for Tyler; he finally found his own “reality” and thus his home when he stepped into the modern world of his family’s new house:

Let me tell you of the house that became our new home and the new wonders inside: switches, lights, grills; immediacy, shocks and crispness. I remember jumping up and down on the novel smooth floor and yelling, “Hardness! Hardness!” I remember TV, stereos, and reliability—lights that would never fail. I was home. (19)

Tyler obviously defines “home” and “reality” in accordance with very superficial and transient factors, the power the “New World Order” has to create immediate pleasure and comfort. But is Jasmine’s definition of a “spiritual” reality based on ideas of love, peace and organic foods any more “real”?

Although Tyler was brought up by Jasmine who writes him letters warning him about “the blackness inside us all” and explaining the need we have to forgive one another, because without forgiveness “we are just animals” (246-7), she provides no explanations, produces no paradigm. She begs her son to “stand in the light” (247) but

fails to identify the source of light or any reason for trusting it. Tyler, like many other children of his generation, is told to be good, fair and just with no real reason that is grounded in something outside of what seems merely to be his own, his parents' or society's whims. Like the burnouts he observes at his local mall, he was not given the tools of belief through which to interpret the world—he was given the freedom of choice to make sense of his environment himself, a freedom of existential choice echoed in the freedom of consumer choices he is given every time he goes shopping or watches television. Although Jasmine taught her children to “be good to one another”, she did not offer a satisfactory reason why they should behave this way. Thus, Tyler and his “global teen” friends are looking for something more, looking to redefine “real”. In the face of fuzzy idealism and absence of a solid paradigm, Tyler looks for something that he thinks will be more lasting and appealing in his immediate environment. At one point he states that, “TV is here for ten thousand years, I say. It will never leave”(176). For Tyler, who was raised without any religion or pictures of eternity, TV has become an eternity on earth. Believing that the human desire for progress, propelled by a deeper desire to make money, will last forever, he clings to it for assurance in his own identity.

This desire for a productive future produces a vision of a purposeful and fulfilled life; in the absence of a religious or political grand narrative to provide direction and meaning, the new capitalist telos becomes an end in itself. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Coupland frequently draws attention to the distinctions between the “future” and “eternity”: the “future” is a modern, capitalist vision of progress in the form of more highly advanced technological developments, whereas “eternity” is a vision of the afterworld that transcends the limited capitalist idea of



“reality” (Ashbrook). Both Jasmine’s vision of a peaceful earthly community and Tyler’s fantasies of a progressive future ignore any supernatural reality and long for some sense of fulfilment in an earthly utopia. Perhaps Tyler is, in a sense, mixing both Coupland’s ideas of the “future” and “eternity” together in his belief that progress, malls and televisions are the manifestations of the desired ultimate “end” to life and will themselves live forever. His fixation on progress is symptomatic of his desire to touch something that will always be new and last forever, thus a vision of earthly, technologically engineered paradise. Jean Baudrillard suggests that “the heavens have come down to earth” in the affluent, secular West, yet he also notes that this “taste of material paradise” is “fatal” (“Anorexic Ruins” 34). The death-inducing “sweetness” in the contemporary “land of milk and honey” (“Consumer Society” 33) is the dark subject of *Less Than Zero*, as Ellis’s satiated characters fail to recognize their own spiritual deaths, masking them in the false promises of luxury. Masking this underlying desire for touching a spiritual reality, Tyler also replaces a forgotten metaphysical metanarrative with a material one; he is in danger of the same “death” that Ellis’s protagonists mistake for life.

Early in the novel, Tyler makes it clear that he equates mental, spiritual and emotional health with material prosperity and media endorsement:

I love the mall. I always have. The health of your mall is important. At the mall people are interested only in staying as modern as possible, continually forgetting the past while envisaging a shinier more fabulous future... We are so lucky to be living in the times we do. (132)

The mall is a model of progress, a “real” geographical space that corresponds with television’s virtual space and supplies millions of consumers with guidance for achieving a healthy, wealthy and “happy” life. G.P. Lainsbury notes that in postmodern youth culture “the mall is the television version of place – it represents the victory of commerce over utopian ideology. Everywhere is now a mall” (236). Tyler’s dependence on this nexus of commercial information exchange to validate his inclusion in a “modern” community echoes Baudrillard’s analysis of the media’s effect on socialization: “Everywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages. Whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial” (*Simulacra* 80). For Tyler, anyone outside of the fluorescent light of the mall’s information rays is an outsider, someone unlucky, a victim of the “dark ages”. Sadly, Tyler’s mother, Jasmine, is one of these “desocialized” individuals, continuing to embrace what Tyler sees as a now defunct romantic idealism. But Tyler’s love for a mythic commercial reality, the alpha and omega of his constructed value system, is also a blind idealism. A fantasy vision of a completely commodified utopia is the always unattainable focal point of Tyler’s desire in the novel; Tyler fantasizes of being immersed in the artificial reality that is everyday life for the apathetic ciphers of *Less Than Zero*. In commenting on the late capitalist world of the Ellis novel, Elizabeth Young describes a uniform, synthetic society that would make Tyler’s mouth water:

Commodity relations had come to permeate every aspect of life; social life, erotic life, knowledge and culture, and this process inevitably alienated us from our own lives. The capitalist spectacle...was seductive.

It promised to satisfy all desires, relieve all burdens, fulfil every dream—  
but one could only achieve this nirvana through consumption. (32)

Tyler, not recognizing the alienating effects of this desired form of postmodern nirvana, continues to trust in a messianic vision of capitalism's ultimate offerings. His identity is validated only when in strong connection with the virtual community of fluid information exchange and acquisition of ever-changing "new" designer goods.

As he reflects on this all important association, he constructs a poignant picture of the environment that attracted and entranced him most as an adolescent:

The Ridgecrest mall was where my friends and I, all of us hyper from sugar and too many video games, feeling fizzy and unreal—like products without advertising--shunted about in our packs: skatepunks, deathcookies, jocks, pseudos, Euros, and geeks, all of us feeling like the man who was hypnotized onstage by the circus magician and who could never wake up from his trance. (131)

Tyler and his mallmates were entranced by the seductive glossiness of the mall's microcosmic world of image. This vision of a completely commodified landscape is symptomatic of the certain depthlessness of postmodern culture, a picture of contemporary culture that Zygmunt Bauman sees as partially defined by:

A shopping mall overflowing with goods whose major use is the joy of purchasing them; and existence that feels like a life-long confinement to the shopping mall. It means that exhilarating freedom to pursue anything and the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what one should pursue it. (*Liquid Modernity* vii)



This is a freedom that Coupland's characters both appreciate and resent as it is a freedom that synonymously liberates and paralyzes. Although Tyler and his friends are free to choose what they want, both products and religions, they have not been given guidance in their choices, and are quickly lulled into a zombie like state by the very cultural products that have nurtured them from their childhood; this freedom from a traditional paradigm, is the life-long "confinement" to another. This entrapment, so vividly represented as the individual hell of each beautiful, affluent character in *Less Than Zero*, is unrecognized by an initially carefree Tyler. The only twinge of foreshadowed horror in Tyler's world is in a frightening vision of a "postshopping world of frozen escalators and nothing for sale" (132).

Tyler's fascination with capitalism and progress is clearly linked to a desire to continually reinvent himself, not just in a business sense, but also in a relational and quasi-spiritual sense. The novel continually contrasts the "Old World" of Europe with the "New World" of the U.S.A., a place where, "You are allowed to redo history—erase your tapes and start over again; make a first impression twice" (159). According to Tyler, in the "New World" you don't have to be reminded of the "Dark Ages" of the past, as history can be completely rewritten. He sees that in the United States, the individual can construct his own identity based on his drive to achieve. Tyler's vision of America is ultimately as idealistic as Jasmine's love for commune life; he truly believes in the transformative power of the "American Dream" where an individual can "pull himself up by his own bootstraps", leaving behind the darkness of poverty for the bright light of the future. He believes that history equals past mistakes and baggage, rather than important stages of development that can be instructive to the contemporary

generation. The past is something we need to “get over” so we can move forward and progress.

On his trip to Europe, he is annoyed by the old world inconveniences, a clinging to historical nostalgia (as he sees it) that prevents Europeans from ever becoming truly modern. In a conversation between Tyler and his friends before his trip to Europe, Coupland emphasizes the surplus nature of history and other traditional subjects in the New World of information overload via technology. Anna Louise says, “Fair’s fair. I mean if we are supposed to learn all of the new information people are inventing, we have to throw old information out to make way for the new stuff” (58). Then Tyler begins to wonder about her comments in relation to the lifestyle of all his friends:

I guess history and geography are what’s being thrown away. But what is history or geography to Harmony or Pony or Davidson, who speak to people all over the planet every day all at once on their computer nets and modems? Or what is history to Me-Lin or Gaia, who receive seventy-five channels on their families’ dish TV systems? My friends are better prepared mentally than anybody else for the future that is actually going to arrive. (58)

Tyler and his friends’ complete dependence on “new information” disables them from acknowledging the dialectical process of history. A linear idea of historical development is replaced by what they regard as a new, improved, yet detached phase of utopian life that has completely overwritten the concept of “history”. Later in the novel, Tyler emphasizes this by exclaiming, “History’s dead, but right now is alive” (228). This

sentiment provides yet another generational contrast when, later in the novel, Tyler's grandmother expresses her fears of technology erasing the past. She claims that she is:

frightened by how heavily influenced she is by the most recent things she encounters: TV shows, magazines, conversations...the new things just seem to erase the old things the way new scenery erases old scenery when you're driving down the highway. (58)

Unlike his grandmother, Tyler does not fear the power "information" has to erase the past, but depends on it entirely to build a new future. Tyler's only initial and superficial interest in history is in using it to encourage and perpetuate progress through making lots of money. He does this by sending a letter to his favourite CEO proposing a History World theme-park where those who have a weakness for "history" can indulge themselves by digging up historical artefacts in landfills.

Tyler's views on history don't just apply to the American national collective history, but to his personal history as well. History is simply baggage that prevents progress, both as a businessman and as an independent American forging out an identity. His vision for the happily hyper-capitalist future of his country also guarantees his own freedom to reinvent himself. Tyler is training to be an executive in the hotel industry and relates this to his theories concerning history, progress and individual identity:

I think hotel/motels are a career with a future. I like hotels because in a hotel room you have no history, you only have an essence. You feel like you're all potential, waiting to be rewritten, like a crisp, blank sheet of 8 ½ by 11 inch white bond paper. There is no past. (28)



According to Tyler's theories, capitalism can buy everyone a blank slate, or two, or ten. We can buy whatever we want, and our identity development depends on this. Perhaps this desire to reinvent the self through capitalist achievements masks a deeper spiritual desire for rebirth that is present in many of Coupland's novels. Ironically, *Miss Wyoming*'s John Johnson desperately tries to untangle himself from the strings of progress in order to find redemption and identity; Tyler longs to become entangled. In the above quotation, Tyler does not wish to annihilate the self, for he acknowledges a core "essence", but desires to "rewrite" his identity, gain a second chance to be clean and new through the "purifying" power of capital.

As Tyler leaves the "new world" and travels to the "old world" of Europe, he seems to treat it almost as a trip to Disney's Epcot centre where history has been replaced by kitsch nostalgia. He holds no esteem for the factual reality of history's remnants but sees them as mere leftovers that need to be cleared away if Europe is ever to experience progress. Like Tyler, the continent of Europe needs to rewrite its identity. Ironically, Tyler's excursion into the "old world" gives him the opportunity to recreate himself as he moves from city to city, continually making interchangeable travel "friendships":

We had the absolution of youth, which bubbled over our brief but ultra-intense travellers' friendships—brief friendships allowing us complete license to reinvent ourselves and our personal histories sans reprisal or exposure. (97)

Amidst the excitement of continually rewriting his identity as he moves from hostel to hostel, Tyler begins to sense his own rootlessness, admitting that he "felt homeless, like

a snail without a shell" (104). Suddenly, the "new world" of the USA, land of re-invention, becomes a vision of stability, commitment, family and relationships. This idealized longing for "home", a nexus of interpersonal connections, introduces an underlying desire for a stable, fixed reality that appears to be a contrast with Tyler's capitalist rebirth fantasies.

Although Tyler's loneliness does cause a bit of self-reflection, this doesn't last for long. Soon after lamenting that he has had "too many experiences but no relationships" (105), he meets Stephanie, an exciting, seductive and unpredictable French girl who makes him forget about his homesick longings. Although Stephanie is part of the "old world", her fiery attitude, flippancy towards commitment and unpredictability are enticing and alluring "new world" qualities that cause Tyler to forget all about his girlfriend Anna Louise and the conversely American "old world" connotations of stability, home and commitment that she represents. Unlike Anna Louise, Stephanie is not interested in a developing relationship, but in fun, adventure and continual re-invention of the self for the sake of shirking any sense of responsibility. Tyler tells us, "My time with Stephanie was not a story. I never went from A to B, or anywhere else. Rather, Stephanie offered the promise of pleasure to come" (104). Tyler and Stephanie's affair in Paris appears to be short lived...until she pays him a surprise visit in the States. Stephanie, the paradoxical seductress from the "old world" who most embodies the "new world", lures Tyler away from his family and girlfriend on a quest to move to Los Angeles, a place that represents the malleability of a life built on image rather than commitment or relationship. As Tyler leaves his home, he says "My past lies behind me like a bonfire of anchors and I am freed from the trappings of identity" (175).

Tyler is no longer interested in any of his previous attachments that remind him of the “essence” of his self; rewriting the self is not enough—he wants a complete new self, based on the ever changing pursuit of pleasure embodied by Stephanie. The notion of home is stagnant and stifling, whereas the excitement of continual travel and episodic pleasures with Stephanie by his side initially appears to offer life and freedom.

Once again, however, Tyler begins to realize that stability and commitment are what he desires as Stephanie all but abandons him in LA as she networks with the rich and famous in pursuit of a career. When she finally confronts Tyler about the fact that she has a new boyfriend, a glamorous media gangster type called Firooz, and no longer has any use for him, we are reminded of an earlier departure when she exclaims, “You will always recover. You are the New World!”(108). Their affair ends as quickly and as dramatically as it began. After eating in an expensive restaurant together, she tells him, “Sor-ree, Tyler. We had fun. It’s over. Firooz’s friends have moved my things for me tonight while we ate. Good-bye” (234). Tyler’s romance with spontaneity and the exciting fast paced, non-committal lifestyle Stephanie represents finally sours as “A deft thug fist contracted on my neck....and I saw the glint of the gun as the door shut” (234). This brief scene exposes the dark heart of an L.A. fantasy world in which identity is bought and sold, a world so horrifically represented in *Less Than Zero*, but only hinted at in Coupland’s novel. Suddenly, Tyler realizes that Stephanie’s exciting lifestyle full of the “promise of pleasure to come”, is ultimately at odds with his deeper desires for stability and relationship. Earlier in the novel, Stephanie asks Tyler about his continual desire for “newness” in both products and relationships: “Do you not see anything wrong with this constant change?” (223). Tyler replies, “Should there be? I think it’s



great I'm allowed to reinvent myself every week" (223). In an ironic twist, Tyler recognizes that Stephanie's ever-changing sense of identity based on temporal passions is not as appealing as he had imagined. The romantic lore of reinventing the self is not as appealing when his partner also partakes in this "liberating" activity, and therefore, dumps him. Unlike Clay from *Less Than Zero*, Tyler ultimately realizes that he is not satisfied with disconnected episodes that provide momentary and transient pleasures; he wants these episodes to connect together and move forward as a relationship develops. He is ultimately unsatisfied as he and Stephanie's affair never becomes a story, and longs for the ultimate and fulfilling purpose that a story arc reveals. Like the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City*, Tyler longs for the sense of justice and resolution that a traditional story provides.

Tyler's dissatisfaction with transient, pseudo-relationships based on pleasure rather than communication is perhaps analogous to his growing suspicion of the very capitalistic goals and glossy popular culture that he credits with nurturing him and providing "meaning" for his life. Gordon Lynch notes that Coupland's characters are frequently "drop outs" that exist on the edge of a consumer culture, trying to find a different source of "meaning" for their lives (92). Alternatively, and thus neglected in Lynch's description, Tyler initially appears to be a non-critical product of his consumer culture, looking towards capitalism as a non-mystical heaven on earth, a ticket for a new, forever exciting and luxurious identity. Lynch argues that a:

Generation X view of the world is a product of western culture in which capitalism and the free market have emerged as fixed points of social organisation whilst personal meaning is fluid and unclear. (31)

Tyler, who has had a lifelong reverence for the “fixed points” of capitalism and the free market, begins to question their ability to provide meaning for his life. As a “global teen”, Tyler’s deepest desires initially appear to be merely for wealth and a luxurious lifestyle based on the foundation of a power position in a multinational company. After his devastating rejection by Stephanie, he begins to think more introspectively, asking whether the “things” that he calls “home” are really the answer to his life’s longings. Lynch refers to a fluid sense of identity and lack of clarity in a personal search for meaning; these are the exact issues that become quite evident as Tyler becomes more and more disillusioned by the answers that the unstable paradigm of pop culture supposedly provides for him. He experiences a poignant realization after meeting with his grandfather, a relentless entrepreneur still searching for the “things” that will make him happy. Tyler finally concludes that “Grandpa’s getting old: aging with nothing to show for it except a heap of consumer durables” (57). As he reflects on his grandfather’s cyclical life pattern, littered with the soon outdated products that are attempts to quench unmet desires, he envisions the same empty pattern for his own future:

Work and money: money and work—strange but true. Fifty years of this stuff ahead of me—it’s a wonder I don’t just hurl myself off the bridge in the centre of town right away. How did we let the world arrive at his state? I mean, is this it? And where, exactly, is the relief from this creepy cycle supposed to be? Has anybody thought of this? Am I mad?

(65)

Tyler questions the ultimate purpose of a life in which a relentless cycle of endless consumerism supplies its only framework. Zygmunt Bauman comments on the

emptiness of this cycle as he points out that consumer objects are only attractive as long as desire is left ungratified. The major power players in a consumer society actually master the art of producing desire itself in order to keep the consumer masses unsatisfied. In a capitalist society, we work to make money and buy things in a futile attempt to quench this thirst of consumer desire, the very thirst that is born out of our endless need to feed it ("Consumer Society"). Tyler concludes that a life built on these shaky, and ultimately unfulfilling, foundations—the same "foundations" that he used to cling to for existential "meaning", is not a life worth living. Thus, the only "fixed point" of capitalism's social organization is a collectively shared, continually unsatisfied desire to construct identity and find meaning and purpose through acquiring things.

Tyler's progressive distrust in the ability of his capitalist fantasies to provide meaning for his life also exposes a more spiritual longing for a transcendent "fixed point" that can provide him with answers about his own identity. Questioning what he initially perceived as the closed material universe of image and commodity, Tyler longs for some sense of mystery and magic to unlock the secrets of both his identity and any meaning within the universe that relates to him. After watching a scientific documentary that advocates atheistic materialism, he comments that the concept that the universe is both "unforgiving and cold" is something that he doesn't want to believe (118). Examining his own desire to understand his identity, and how his personal origin relates to the possible objective origins of the universe, Tyler recognizes that he wants "to know the software secrets encoded deep within my cells" (Coupland 175). Rejecting the notion that his primary identity lies in his roles as both consumer and entrepreneur, Tyler wonders who has created these secret, mysterious codes that define his desires, his



personality, his essence as a human being. Tyler acknowledges that there is something mysteriously, intrinsically “human” within him, and longs to unlock the keys to self-knowledge.

Tyler wants to understand how his personality connects with a universe he refuses to see as empty and meaningless. Coupland questions the connection between a possibly empty, impersonal materialist universe and individual identity; how can individual human personality arise from an impersonal universe? Christian theologian Francis Schaeffer addresses the same questions as he asserts that:

The assumption of an impersonal beginning cannot adequately explain the personal beings we see around us; and when men try to explain man on the basis of an original impersonal, man soon disappears. In short, an impersonal beginning explains neither the form of the universe nor the personality of man. Hence it gives no basis for understanding human relationships, building just societies, or engaging in any kind of cultural effort. (10)

Schaeffer argues that the universe and its inhabitants do have a sense of personality as they are reflections of a personal creator. Struggling with questions similar to those raised by Schaeffer’s comments about “personality” or identity, Tyler wonders who or what has implemented the code that creates the software of the self? Is his identity based on the plan, strategy and arrangement of some sort of divine coder—or do his own actions create the code as he makes choices in his life? Although Tyler is initially a teenager with clearly superficial concerns about gaining wealth and status and having fun, he does increasingly divulge a sense of spiritual longing and wonder early on, a

fragile yet ever-present undertow that permeates the central questions and actions of the novel. Immediately before confessing his affair (to his readers, not to his girlfriend), he invites us to:

Imagine you are sitting down in a chair and on a screen before you are shown a bloody, ripping film of yourself undergoing surgery.

The surgery saved your life. It was pivotal in making you *you*. But you don't remember it. Or do you? Do we understand the events that make us who we are? Do we ever understand the factors that make us do the things we do? When we sleep at night—when we walk across a field and see a tree full of sleeping birds—when we tell small lies to our friends—when we make love—what acts of surgery are happening to our souls?

(32)

Tyler is clearly questioning how the events/choices of his own life help to create his identity, while clearly acknowledging that there is a core “soul” that can change. With every action, emotion, relationship, he senses that we can never understand “what acts of surgery are happening to our souls” (32). What truly shapes and forms our identities and how this happens, remains a mystery. Tyler is questioning “the events that make us who we are” as well as the ultimate origins of both these events and his identity. In noticing that “The surgery saved your life. It was pivotal in making you *you*. But you don't remember it” (32) he admits his own lack of control in defining his identity. The same young man who continually prides himself on re-inventing himself in the image of the latest desirable commodity ultimately admits that he cannot identify where his soul comes from or what happens to it on a day to day basis. Just as his desire “to know the

software secrets encoded deep within my cells” introduces the possibility of a transcendent source of the codes, this vivid surgery image ponders the existence of a surgeon who has forged Tyler’s existence through mysterious acts of spiritual “surgery”.

Only after Tyler has been rejected by his idealized fling, Stephanie, and deeply hurt his girlfriend, Anna Louise, by cheating on and leaving her, does he begin to more actively question the larger purpose of his life and look beyond himself, his new car and his vast array of hair care products for answers. After finally landing his dream job with a Fortune 500 company, Tyler, the prodigal, takes the bus from California to Washington to reunite with his mother and estranged ex-girlfriend. In this most mundane of places, a Greyhound bus, he experiences an epiphany that brings him a sense of new life and hope. In an almost farcical, yet bizarrely tender scene, the old woman sleeping in the bus seat across the aisle from him loses her dentures in his lap; he reaches across the aisle and gently places them back in her withered hands. As he experiences a moment of his own kindness that no one else witnesses, he begins to weep:

I cry because the future has once again found its sparkle and grown a million times larger. And I cry because I am ashamed of how badly I have treated the people I love—of how badly I behaved during my own personal dark ages—back before I had a future and someone who cared for me from above. It is like today the sky opened up and only now am I allowed to enter. (253)

In this epiphanic moment, as he witnesses a forgotten capacity for tenderness and kindness, he instantly and finally realizes that he is ashamed of his past attitude and



behaviour. This epiphany reveals a deeper understanding of the self as he recognizes that “the dark ages” are a part of his personal past, not because of the hippy environment of his youth, but because of the darkness that is inside. The layers of self-deception are peeled back to indicate a deeper truth about the nature of his soul.

Not long before the bus journey, Tyler receives a letter from Jasmine that tells him that:

Shortly, if not already, you will begin to notice the blackness inside us all. You will develop black secrets and commit black actions. You will be shocked at the insensitivities and transgressions you are capable of, yet you will be unable to stop them. (246)

After years of mocking those who have less material wealth, drive for ambition and commercial success than he does, he recognizes that the “dark ages” are not the effect of material deprivation, but an inherent existential state that becomes even darker when ignored. Only now, as he sees himself showing kindness to someone who, because of age and economic status, appears to be below him, in the “dark ages” herself, is he finally shocked by his amazing insensitivity towards those who love him. This is the type of epiphany, an exposure of past callousness, that *Less Than Zero*’s Clay missed when he failed to stop his car and help the poor Mexican woman and three children stranded by the side of the road. A bit later in *Shampoo Planet*, while reflecting on his stepfather’s cruel treatment of his mother, Tyler comments that, “And I am fuelled by the awareness of all the badness in this world—badness I have tolerated because I had never chosen to see it for what it was” (274). Tyler is experiencing several pivotal, identity defining moments at each of these points, as he recognizes that the concepts of

“good” and “bad” are not constructs based on perceptions, but realities that do not go away when ignored. He had never “chosen to see” what he admits to be “all the badness in this world”; this indicates that “badness” is something that exists whether he chooses to acknowledge its presence or not. To ignore it, therefore, perpetuates its cancerous growth. Again unlike Ellis’s Clay, Tyler’s epiphany has enabled him to acknowledge the presence of boundaries and standards beyond those of his own making. Rather than redefining his identity based on his own terms, Tyler is discovering a network of personal and universal moral guidelines that have been violated, both in the external world and in his own interior world.

After confronting and labelling the “badness” that he claims is inside of him, Tyler tells us that “something inside me is exhausted and worn out and stops spinning and I break down and cry” (257). Tyler’s poignant moment of exhaustion, followed by his outburst of tears, is cathartic and cleansing, a vivid contrast to the continual, unfulfilling exhaustion that marks every day life for *Less Than Zero*’s characters. Knowing that he needs some sort of redemption from his own actions that are a result of an internal “darkness”, Tyler now has an enlightened vantage point from which he can see the depthlessness and shadowy nature of his past, “back before I had a future and someone who cared for me from above” (258). This epiphany engenders not only a sense of shame and recognition of a need for repentance, but an attitude of gratefulness for receiving yet another, more exciting chance with his family, as well as for commercial success. When Tyler expresses gratitude for his new life, a life that is different than the one which was “back before I had a future and someone who cared for me from above” (258), the meaning of the second half of his exclamatory realization is

somewhat ambiguous. Who exactly is this “someone” from above that has given him a second chance, a future? This question is particularly relevant when we remember Coupland’s clear distinctions between the modern concept of a “future”, an earthly accomplishment built on utopian ideals of progress, and the vastly different spiritual concept of “eternity” that indicates a “real” reality that is beyond the material world. Tyler’s sentence, a strange mix of capitalist dream myth and desire for transcendence, could indicate either a spiritual rebirth or a new allegiance to capitalist ideals of material salvation. Is his saviour God...or Frank E. Miller, his idol and CEO of the Bechtol Corporation who has recently offered him such a promising job? This overarching figure who has provided him with security for purpose and meaning in life could be either...or a confused mix of both.

In many of his novels, Coupland emphasizes his post-Christian generation’s inability to form spiritual pictures of eternity, or to even speculate on any sense of meaning beyond what is offered in the material world, as they have received no religious training to guide them in these metaphysical explorations. Although Jasmine, Tyler’s mother, has warned him of his “darkness”, she has not pointed him towards any remedy, provided no answers for his desire to become clean. Any reference point for Tyler’s obvious desire for spirituality has been obscured by a lifelong lack of spiritual guidance that has been replaced by his strongest “moral” and “spiritual” guides, the media. In the midst of such a seemingly cleansing confession, perhaps Tyler only knows how to revert back to his old patterns as he projects his desire for meaning and salvation onto his earthly idol. Perhaps Miller, the beneficent capitalist, is the only messiah he has ever been able to envision. Does this confusing confession indicate a life-transforming



epiphany or is Coupland, once again, merely satirizing the spiritual vacuity of his generation? Like the final “epiphany” of *Brights Light, Big City* and the “false” vision of Susan Colgate in Coupland’s *Miss Wyoming*, this epiphany exposes the complexities of experiencing a moment of true enlightenment and spiritual awakening in a contemporary culture so polluted with synthetic replications of “truth”. Although Coupland does not discredit the epiphany, as it clearly changes Tyler’s entire perspective on his identity, he nevertheless, indicates the blurred relationship between authentic spirituality and the promised heaven of a consumer culture.

Some significant episodes in the last few pages of the novel again invoke the above questions about the nature of Tyler’s transformation; is he merely entering a more advanced phase of commodity induced fantasy, or has he recognized his longing for something “real” that is beyond a successful commercial future and cannot be orchestrated by any earthly agent, even the CEO of a multinational corporation? Although Tyler’s bus “epiphany” does birth some realizations about the darkness of human nature and his place in that collective depravity, his vision of a solution for rebirth appears hopeful, yet confused. His love of material wealth, and his attempts to base his sense of value and meaning on its ability to construct an identity for him, is obviously unfulfilling; yet he does not know where else to look for answers about the “secrets” of his mysterious soul, its desire for a spiritual reality, and his need to override his admitted “darkness”.

In the last pages of the novel, Tyler visits Anna Louise, his ex-girlfriend and most deeply injured victim of his episodic soiree with Stephanie, in an attempt to restore their deeply fractured relationship. Anna Louise allows him to stay the night in her

apartment, but he must sleep on the floor. Previously elated by his promising job offer, he now lies awake and ponders what he initially thought were earnest realizations about his life, wondering if he just might have missed something:

Lying here on the floor, sipping a cola, I make a tally in my head, I make a sum—credits and debits—a balance of accounts. What secrets have I traded these past months for other secrets? What sweetness for corruption? Light for darkness? Lies for truths? Curiosities satisfied in return for anxieties? Overall there appears to be a net loss. I feel there has yet to be one more revelation coming my way, because I think there's some insight I've just plain missed. (281)

Tyler is awake, on the floor, tallying his “bad” versus his “good” behaviour, thoughts, and secrets; although he has made attempts to erase his past “dark” actions, he can't deny that “Overall there appears to be a net loss” (281). His questions about an eternal balance sheet and both a fear of and need for justice echo the same questions the narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City* raises when he sees a Hasidic Jew on the subway. Although more transformed than McInerney's protagonist, Tyler indicates that the epiphany on the bus appears to still have only taken him only halfway to salvation from the darkness within him that injures both himself and others. He ultimately recognizes that he needs a new “revelation” to take him all the way.

Tyler's hope for a “revelation” employs religious language, yet does not assign the word “revelation” a large “R”. Once again, Coupland indicates a desire for transcendence, a need for someone or something outside of the commodified system to break through and reveal truth. Unlike Ellis, Coupland creates characters who are not so

paralyzed by their entrapment in consumer culture that they can't begin to search for something more. This desire to search for truth and clarity is still seen on the level of the human, the mundane as Tyler uses the terms "revelation" and "insight" almost interchangeably. "Insight" implies the ability of the *self* to dissolve the murkiness of previous ideas, whereas "revelation" indicates the need for an *outside agent* to provide clarity and disclose truth to the self. Joyce's original epiphanies, spiritual manifestations in the midst of everyday trivialities, do not seem to function satisfactorily in Tyler's world, where the trivial flux of everyday life is no longer dependant on nature and relationships, but the constructed values and social systems of commodification. Tyler, like Ellis's Clay and McInerney's anonymous anti-hero, cannot distinguish between the "real" natural world and the "illusory" world that has been built around them. These protagonists are blinded by artificiality that is a counterfeit for identity, relationships and spirituality. Tyler needs a dramatic revelation to point him towards something that is not a product of the very system he wants to escape. This pattern is present in many of Coupland's novels; minor epiphanies are drowned out by the promise of a newer, better earthly paradise, a commodified "future" that numbs any desires to look beyond the constructed system. The ending of *Shampoo Planet*, Tyler's final revelation, does not take on the clearly supernatural manifestations of *Girlfriend in a Coma* or *Eleanor Rigby*—Tyler does not experience apocalyptic visions or welcome an angel's visitation. But, in the midst of a very "normal" social situation, Coupland employs overt biblical imagery that introduces, once again, questions of origin, salvation and meaning.

In this completely unexpected and farcically dramatic final episode, Coupland drafts a vision of a fractured, makeshift, yet hopeful Eden. Tyler, having, finally fallen



asleep on the floor after a night of continual self-reflection, is awakened by drops of water splashing on his body and a puppy licking his face. The floor of the flat above has crashed in on the couple, bringing with it a deluge of pond water and animals who are “adorning all surfaces of the room...flowing downward into our lives” (282). As Tyler looks around he notices that “All of the technology in the room is wrecked, but it seems beside the point” (282). This puzzling statement implies an immediate paradigm shift as Tyler labels the tangible reminders of his comfortable commercial world as “beside the point”. These ruined products are representative of what had previously formed the nexus of a consumer culture that manufactured desire, values and meaning for Tyler’s life. Suddenly, they are not a part of his new focus, but what is his new “point”? He is confronted head on with what he used to label as the “depressing” natural world; the shiny new objects of his safe, manufactured world are destroyed and, rediscovering a sort of lost innocence, he exclaims to Anna-Louise “Wake up—*the world is alive!*” (282). The technology that once created the defining arc of his sense of life and purpose, is now considered irrelevant. This messy, natural Eden invades the organised, artificial world of his past life; as it is destroyed, the world becomes “alive”. After accepting this intrusive lack of control, Tyler also experiences a kind of new life, once again connecting his genuine identity with some sort of life force in the universe. Tyler, now having sight of “someone...from above” (258) must revisit Eden, where he is given a chance to discover the real world, reclaiming the sense of identity and purpose that he has lost.

The development of the central protagonist’s emotional and spiritual identity is impaired in *Less Than Zero*, *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and *Shampoo Planet*. All three

novels illustrate the soured dreams of an idealized “future” in which identity is defined by the acquisition of wealth, glamour and success. These superficial obsessions dominate the minds, dreams and relationships of Clay, Tyler and McInerney’s unnamed protagonist. Clay’s identity is the most “anonymous” in its decentred apathy, while the narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City* is a splintered consciousness, desperate to find the formula for a domestic, “righteous” normality. The presence of crippling wealth and privilege and the absence of any sort of alternative, metaphysical paradigm through which to read reality provide these two young men with no clear sense of identity. Only Coupland’s Tyler, initially embracing the gospel of capitalism with great fervour and a hope for “salvation” from the “darkness” of the normal, real world, ultimately rejects this false gospel, reclaiming his identity. Unlike an almost completely indifferent Clay, both Tyler and the anti-hero of McInerney’s novel long for a sense of justice and purpose in reality, and realize that they must access this “code” or discover the “universal solvent” in order to find themselves. But the protagonist of *Bright Light, Big City* is unable to discern the difference between reality and appearance, a distinction he wants to have faith in, but can never completely trust. Clay, on the other hand, is too numbed to even remember that there is such a concept as the distinction between “real” and superficial; Ellis truly depicts a one-dimensional city full of equally one-dimensional characters. Only Coupland very clearly portrays a defined distinction between Tyler’s media-generated idealism and a spiritual dimension that is not just another commodified alternative, but the most important reality. Through a series of epiphanies, and a final “revelation”, Tyler experiences a rebirth, an escape from the

confinements of a purely material world that opens up a space for an entirely new set of questions about the nature of reality itself.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **Transcending Irony: *Generation X*, *Life After God*, *Hey Nostradamus!***

The defining desire to discover the possibilities of faith and wonder in a post-religious culture is evident in all of Coupland's writing. Andrew Tate comments that the postmodern space of Coupland's fiction is also a "space of religious possibility. The uncertainties of the postmodern world have inspired him to negotiate the possibilities of finding truth, rather than reject it as an obsolete quest" (337). Tate's stance echoes the notion that Zygmunt Bauman re-emphasizes in *Intimations of Postmodernity* that postmodernity allows room for a "re-enchantment" following the dismantling of modernity's "legislating reason" (x). Although Coupland's protagonists are, in a sense, products of their own zombie culture, a culture "preoccupied with violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism and commerce" (Annesley 1), they are also acutely aware of the devastating effects of this culture. Fredric Jameson notes that the postmodern subject suffers from fragmentation and a "waning of affect" (10), incapable of expressing angst and alienation. These splintered, seemingly indolent and apathetic subjects, are frequently the subjects of much postmodern fiction, particularly the new breed of Generation X minimalism, what James Annesley labels "blank fiction" (Annesley 2). Despite Jameson's claims, Coupland's protagonists are severely *affected*, uncomfortable and dissatisfied with their own use of what Coupland calls "knee jerk irony" (*Generation X* 150), cynicism and passivity to address problems. Coupland's *Generation X*, a novel, and *Life After God*, a collection of short stories, explore the difficulties of experiencing epiphany in the post-religious contemporary culture. These

books both indicate two prerequisites for the manifestation of a postmodern, re-sacralized epiphany: the presence of a narrative template in the lives of the protagonists and a clear moment of escape from postmodern irony and cynicism. His characters long to understand life not as an unrelated sequence of events, but as a purposeful story. Although they, in many cases, initially respond to their world through ironic, cynical gestures, as if irony were a natural, inherited reflex, they also wish to transcend irony's protective, elitist shell and question the emptiness of an existence superficially defined by image and commodity.

Although *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* was commissioned to be a non-fiction cultural critique, Coupland chose, instead, to create his first piece of fiction. Why did he choose *fictional* "tales" over "*factual*" accounts and statistics? In an interview with *New York Times* journalist Steve Lohr, Coupland states:

I'm interested in people my age and younger who have no narrative structure to their lives. The big structure used to be the job, the career arc, and that's no longer there. Neither is family or religion. All these narrative templates have eroded.

This lack of "narrative templates" in the form of structural work ambitions or metaphysical paradigms produces, in Coupland's world, a generation adrift. The individual story of each life has no larger, all encompassing narrative to locate its own echoes and make sense of itself. Although Coupland's text indicates a deep desire for each individual life to become a "story" and for this story to fit into a larger, meaningful structure, his protagonists do not trust the media, big business CEO's, and any others who, having access to the most advanced technological tools, want to create this

structure for them. The three central characters of *Generation X*, Dag, Andy and Claire, have all seemingly escaped the corporate world of middle-class America to reside in the desert, which they refer to as a “quiet sanctuary” (4) and tell stories to one another while voluntarily working in low-pay dead-end occupations that Coupland labels as “McJobs”(5). By physically moving across country, and accepting jobs that squander their high levels of education and thwart the ‘American Dream’ of wealth as progress, they refuse to allow the corporate world to absorb and manipulate their individual stories. Coupland comically labels this moving, not as an individualistic, nonconformist and liberating act, but as part of a trend of “Emallgration: migration toward lower-tech, lower-information environments containing a lessened emphasis on consumerism” (173). Although his protagonists flee from an engrossing consumer culture, they are still dependant on “Mcjobs”. Coupland’s use of humorous irony in labelling his “free thinkers” as practitioners of a new convention, does not completely undercut their real desire to re-navigate their lives, abandoning modernity’s map.

Dag, Andy and Claire’s attempts to actively reject a technologically constructed overarching narrative reflects Lyotard’s claims that in a postmodern society, “the grand narrative has lost its credibility” (*Postmodern Condition* 14). Lyotard’s indictment of the grand narrative is a response to “Modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology” (*The Inhuman* 34). Although, as Westphal notes, the, “premodern world legitimated its cognitive practices with either mythological or religious narratives” (“Heidegger & Lyotard”), the modern world no longer uniformly consults these narratives. In the absence of these mythological/ religious narratives, the grand unifying force in



modernity is supposedly all-powerful reason. Through science leading to technology, modernity could become its own god, demystifying the universe and finding all the “right” answers and material facts through experimentation and research. Lyotard’s critique is a particular indictment of the scientific, modern age that re-invents narratives to legitimate itself, after hypocritically having rejected the mythological narratives of premodernity (Smith 360). By an “appeal to universal Reason”, perhaps a myth in itself, modernity has created a new story that feigns global unity and human omniscience. The modern narrative of progress based on technology, the pinnacle of scientific reason’s achievements, has lost its appeal to the refugees from modernity in Coupland’s *Generation X*.

When the stronghold of reason loses supreme authority, there is space for mystery and “re-enchantment”. Coupland’s abandonment of his original assignment to create a collection of statistics, interviews and other “facts” is, in a sense, an attempt to move past propositional truths, facts and figures and return to the sense of mystery that can only be approached through narrative. Kelly James Clark notes that the “story”, more reliant on imagination than reason, is more apt to challenge us to question our beliefs and presuppositions, to convince us of some sense of truth through imaginary identification with the other (15). He claims that “Literature forces the good reader to experience the universally human through the particulars of another”, thus transcending a universality based strictly on reason (15). Coupland’s chief pursuit is, again, to encounter “moments of transcendence and epiphany” (Draper 5), and for this, he must move past data and statistics. Although narrative calls for imagination, it also implies a sense of structure, organization and purpose. Coupland is clearly interested in exposing

the initial spiritual lack of his characters, as well as exploring their transformations; this can only be portrayed in a story that enables the reader a bird's eye view of the narrative arc moving towards a sense of fulfilment and purpose. The use of narrative also enables the exploration of a spiritual reality, a reality that cannot be measured, organized or reduced to statistics. As Coupland's protagonists struggle along a "deep, abstract search for meaning in a very material world" (Chidley), the sense of confusion, yearning, mystery and wonder are best expressed through poetic language rather than the "factual" words and figures of modernity.

Coupland's desert searchers want to achieve freedom by disentangling themselves from the structures of a modern metanarrative, yet they have no other defined source of structure or direction to govern their lives and relationships; the fragmentation that comes from this process leads to a state of alienation. Although the world has opened up to them through technology's ability to erase the wide expanses of space while seemingly shrinking time, they feel increasingly estranged from the ever-growing "system" that has been imposed upon them. *Generation X's* most disgruntled rebel, Dag, explains the root of his frustration: "The world has gotten too big—way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we're stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers" (5). The dismantled system leaves them with only soundbites, "blips and chunks"; this lack of cohesion and wholeness opens up space for freedom and exploration, but simultaneously exposes a vacuum. How do they make sense of their lives without the rules of "the system" to tell them who they are? Like most of Coupland's protagonists, these "nonconformists" have had little exposure to

religious paradigms to provide any sense of structure once the modern comforts of a capitalist metanarrative have dissipated.

In an attempt to regain the sense of connection and purpose that narrative provides, the group ritualize storytelling into a communal, almost sacred event. When they tell their seemingly cathartic “bed-time stories” to one another, no one can interrupt or criticize (14). Dissatisfied with seeing her life as a sequence of meaningless events, Claire admits that “it’s not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments. Either our lives become stories, or there’s just no way to get through them” (8). In this context, narrative implies direction and purpose for an individual life, but the individual must draw on the outside perspective of the community to legitimate her stories. Andy tells us that the group came to the desert “to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process” (8). They are desperate to locate their stories within the framework of a larger, legitimating one that would “subordinate, organize and account for” (Connor 30) their narratives; they attempt to achieve this goal through their intimate confessional storytelling community. This desire for sharing stories to create connections and community is comparable to the compulsive longings of Tyler Durden, the protagonist of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. Tyler frequents support groups for terminally ill people, a “faker” addicted to a search for authenticity and community to escape from his sterile, Ikea furnished existence. Just as Claire, Dag and Andy transform the stories of their own lives into metaphysical fairytales, Tyler Durden clothes the stories of pain and alienation from his own life within tales of prostate cancer and brain parasites. Both Tyler and the desert pilgrims long to see that the “reality” of their isolated existences have connections with something larger than themselves. Only



narrative can connect the seemingly random scribbles of their individual stories to create both existential and collective meaning. Through ritualistic storytelling, they attempt to see a sense of purpose, pattern and meaning in their individual lives. This migrant storytelling practice is an attempt to reach something authentic through the creation of narrative community, a “slacker” attempt to turn their backs on a society that has “retired to live inside our own advertisements” (Zizek 14). The abundance of images in the form of television shows, websites and advertising, have “murdered the real” (Baudrillard, “Evil Demon” 196). The members of postmodern society are, as Slavoj Zizek notes, consumed with a passion for the real that has been lost (9). This desire for the real and the need for the authentic to wake a sleeping urban consumer community can sometimes be expressed through “a violent intervention to shake them out of their ideological numbness, their hypnotic consumerist state” (Zizek 9). *Fight Club’s* Tyler Durden resorts to nihilistic violence in an attempt to dismantle the artificialities of corporate America and touch the real. Coupland’s Gen X’ers also express this frustration with the numbing effects of late capitalism but the results are not so extreme—their most sinister attempts are when the group hothead, Dag, simply vandalizes an expensive car with a yuppie bumper sticker on it. Rather than resorting to violence, they attempt to create their own authentic community in which to explore the differences between the authentic and the corporately generated through the telling of fables.

The storytelling process also serves a secondary purpose of constructing a form of unconventional spirituality in the form of personal mythology. These “bedtimes stories” frequently feature thinly cloaked caricatures of their authors, and relay fictional

attempts to find love or spiritual enlightenment. One of the most poignant tales is Claire's story about Linda, a Western "poor little rich girl" who tries to find truth and enlightenment through practicing Eastern rituals of isolation and meditation. Like many of Coupland's characters, including Scout from *Life After God* and Linus from *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Linda wants to understand more of the nature and purpose for her existence, find the real "pinpoint of light trapped within her flesh capsule" (124). Imitating a group of Buddhist monks and nuns she encounters in the Himalayas, Linda vows to deprive herself of any worldly pleasures and meditate for "seven years, seven months, seven days and seven hours" in order to find a truth and "Higher contact" which promise an ecstasy greater than the pain of any physical deprivation (120). At the end of the story, this previously privileged disciple of Eastern thought finds out that she has misunderstood the formula for enlightenment and spiritual peace. The period of meditation was practiced for seven years too long, as Linda was following the Western, rather than this particular Eastern, calendar. Although her body withers away and her skull caves in after her self-imposed trial, Linda has a "supernatural conversion" and "the piece of light that was truly Linda vacated her old vessel, then flitted heavenward, where it went to sit—like a small yellow bird that can sing all songs—on the right hand of her god" (128).

This story, a fable of the earnest attempts of a very privileged, previously nonreligious young woman trying to find truth through constructing "her god" is reflective of Coupland's pilgrims' attempts to find something authentic, real and enlightening well beyond the monotonous production lines of consumer society. But like Linda, these seekers have had no instructions in learning how to navigate the wide

open space left from the dismantling of their former materialist belief system. As Claire tells her story, Coupland defines her particular as well as her generation's collective search as:

**Me-ism:** A search by an individual, in the absence of training in traditional religious tenets, to formulate a personally tailored religion by himself. Most frequently a mishmash of reincarnation, personal dialogue with a nebulously defined god figure, naturalism, and karmic eye for eye attitudes. (126)

In the absence of any guiding spiritual principles or norms, the self is left to construct a spirituality from this "mishmash" of rituals from different faiths, without pledging allegiance to the overarching government of any. This process is ultimately unsatisfying as it is completely self-generated. Although the self can provide insight, these sojourners are longing for epiphany that enables a connection with transcendence.

A clear desire to experience epiphany as a sign of the authentic, to bridge a gap between the immanent truth of the experienced moment and a possible infinite reality beyond it, is pervasive in the final chapters of *Generation X*. When Andy goes home to visit his family for Christmas, the same family that never valued Christmas as anything but a secular commercial event, a time to buy presents and stuff themselves with excessive amounts of food, he creatively attempts to infuse the family's secular Christmas routine with a sense of awe through ritual, but reverts to spectacle. In an attempt to construct a spiritual experience, he buys "massive quantities of candles...votive candles, birthday candles, emergency candles, dinner candles, Jewish candles, Christmas candles, and candles from the Hindu bookstore bearing peoploid



cartoons of saints” (141). This pluralistic collection of candles reflects a cafeteria style aspect of religious choice in the postmodern age—Andy mixes candles for all uses, both sacred and secular, together in an attempt to “resacralise Christmas” (Tate 332) through his abundant consumer choices. These are the commodified tools of a new pluralism, a vague but earnest attempt to create something real and beautiful to enable a sense of community within the family and connect them with something larger than themselves. When the family views Andy’s display, “a dazzling, fleeting empire of ideal light” they are “instantaneously disembodied from the vulgarities of gravity” (Coupland 146), but the candles burn out too soon and “normal morning life resumes” (147) ; they quickly lose their sense of other-worldly amazement.

Andy attributes his family’s inability to retain this sense of awe to the fact that “our emotions, while wonderful, are transpiring in a vacuum” so that “small moments of intense, flaring beauty such as this morning’s will be utterly forgotten, dissolved by time like a super-8 film left out in the rain” (147). Although the candles remind them of a deep desire for something sublime, transcendent and supernaturally *real*, they are incapable of connecting these mysterious longings with any sort of belief; these feelings are alien within a sterile, middle-class vacuum. After the abandonment of over-arching religious narratives and the rejection of a modern metanarrative, there is now simply a vacuum in which Andy attempts to construct a sense of sanctity for the unknown. But is Andy ultimately satisfied with constructing his own spirituality, or does he have deeper longings to base this spirituality on an already existing, yet mystical, structure? As he collects and assembles this suburban shrine, is it a celebration

of human autonomous creativity or a search to find something that lies beyond and animates our creative urges?

Andy does not merely experience a vague, new age euphoria by lighting his pluralistic collection of candles. Instead, he becomes acutely aware of his dissatisfaction with what Coupland defines as “Me-ism”. Like the characters of the desert group’s bedtime stories, Andy has constructed a “mishmash” of rituals in a convoluted attempt to simultaneously find and construct “truth”. We are reminded of Andy and his brother, Tyler’s, “secular upbringing” (141) when Tyler asks Andy what votive candles are used for and Andy replies, “You light them when you say a prayer. All the churches in Europe have them” (141). As Andy refers to this ancient old world ritual, we are all too aware that when the family views the spectacle of hundreds of burning candles, their emotions and longings won’t be directed toward any deity in prayer, but will simply transpire in a new world “vacuum” of secular postmodern space. Although Andy is a practitioner of “Me-ism”, the lyrical resonances of the chapter pay a sort of respect for his unaffected devotions, however misguided. The emptiness that Andy is left with after the end of the quasi-spiritual “happening” is not a result of any pretension or artificiality, but a sort of spiritual illiteracy. This chapter contains no sardonic labels, cartoons or slogans in the margins, thus leading the reader to experience this directly, without any sort of ironic filtering. The pervading sense of sadness, emptiness and disillusion that hovers in this middle class vacuum is often the subject of Coupland’s ridicule, but Andy’s experience is crafted with a sense of empathy and tenderness.

Most of the characters in Coupland's fiction are products of the same middle-class, secular environment; his privileged members of society are spoilt for choice and continually feel the pangs of loss for having no guidance to make these choices.

This middle-class status raises many of the central ironies within both *Generation X* and the entire body of Coupland's fiction. He sees his privileged characters as a set of marginalized and lost individuals, a set ignored by history as "history will never champion your causes and never feel sorry for you. It is the price paid for day-to day comfort and silence" (147). Beneath this veneer of material "comfort and silence" lies a deep discomfort and emptiness, a desire to find meaning beyond the world of supermarket checkout lines, mall shops and pop icons. The Generation X slacker culture "both revels in the matrix of the popular and, at the same time, tries to distance itself from it" (Annesley 27). Andy, Dag and Claire choose to escape to the desert and take low paying jobs below their educational training, but the luxury of this choice re-emphasizes their privileged position in the middle-class. "Slacking as a lifestyle is a choice...a range of options that define them as privileged despite their apparent contempt for privilege and their seemingly low-rent lifestyle" (Annesley 123). Coupland is acutely aware of this irony and continually draws our attention to it through the use of definitions, located within the margins of his novel, that tend to undermine the seemingly worthy efforts of his characters. He is the ironic metanarrator of this text and "the reader is aware at all times of being inside a constructed thing rather than the capitalistic dreamspace of contemporary realism, where the experience of fictional others is offered up as yet another mode of consumption" (Lainsbury 20). As Andy,



Dag and Claire tell each other “bedtime stories”, Coupland frames the overarching narrative of their “pilgrimage” with ironic distance through the use of labels.

As we are told about Dag and Claire’s instant relocation to Mexico in the hopes of finding something “authentic”, Coupland provides us with a definition of their characteristic “type” of movement in the margin of the page:

**Terminal wanderlust:** A condition common to people of transient middle-class upbringings. Unable to feel rooted in any one environment, they move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location. (171)

These marginal comments tend mockingly to diffuse any strong sense of sincerity or development of pathos in the narratives of the characters’ lives. But is the supposedly bohemian lifestyle constructed in the novel just a parody of a desperate “type” that Coupland mocks as just another consumer product in a depthless culture? David Foster Wallace argues that, “Irony-exploiting gaps between what’s said and what’s meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are—is the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy” (65). Coupland is using irony as a tool to expose the hypocrisy of his characters, to show the gap between what they preach and how they live, but this exposure is not mean-spirited or condemnatory. His ironic narrative tricks actually label him as a member of “Generation X” as well. Like his characters, Coupland deliberately falls prey to the use of what he defines as “knee jerk irony: the tendency to make flippant ironic comments as a reflexive matter of course in everyday conversation” (150). Coupland and his characters have inherited a tendency to shrink back from *sincerity*; the author cannot condemn the characters as he is just as

much victim or villain as they are. Just as his characters distance themselves from and playfully evaluate their culture through the use of irony, so does their author. The hypocrisy of young privileged idealists who have turned their backs on the totalizing stronghold of corporate America, yet have “Mcjobs”, is the same hypocrisy as that of an author who uses irony to critique the ironic lifestyle choices of his characters.

*Generation X*'s narrator, Andy, has absorbed the ironic distance of his generation, but wants to move beyond it to touch something real. G.P.Lainsbury commends Coupland's clever use of irony and pastiche, calling him a “good bricoleur” who assembles a fictional construct from Generation X's fragmentary experiences (237). He then tells us not to forget that, “this is a work created in the spirit of play—irony is the dominant mode” (237). He seems to have overlooked the fact that in the last chapter of *Generation X* the margins are left blank, perhaps signifying the absence of irony in order to make space for epiphany. As Coupland recounts Andy's ambiguous and vaguely mystical final epiphany, he offers no witty, ironic definition to undercut its authenticity. The only other chapter in the novel that boasts blank margins, encouraging us to read the text at face value, is the previously discussed “Transform”. In that chapter, Andy's attempt to create a spiritual moment that ultimately becomes transient spectacle does not “transform” in an overt way, yet point towards the final, actualized and transformative epiphany of this final chapter. Lainsbury clearly overlooks the almost reverent treatment of these two delicate, awkward moments: the first, a manifestation of spiritual desire; the second, an unexpected fulfilment of this desire.

On the way to join his friends in Mexico, Andy stops to watch an egret circling in the air. Birds are important to Andy; they seem to bridge the gulf between the

temporal world of his society and the mystery that is “out there”. Andy, like the narrator of the short story “Things That Fly” in *Life After God*, would “sacrifice anything” (173) to become a part of the almost mystical bird community. Andy soon notices that he is not alone in his observation; a group of mentally retarded teenagers is also watching the egret, and as he swoops over all of them, Andy remembers that “We felt chosen” (178). The bird soon touches down on Andy’s head, cutting him in the process with its claws. As soon as this happens, he is bleeding and the concerned community of disabled teenagers seeks to embrace him with enthusiastic and heartfelt compassion. He kneels down before them, allowing one girl to inspect his cut, savouring “the faith-healing gesture of a child consoling a doll that has been dropped” (179). Soon he is “dog-piled...crushed” (179) by all of them, experiencing a “crush of love” unlike anything I had ever known” (179). Andy finds a sense of transcendence and the experience of real community in a completely unexpected place. As he is sacrificially marked by the egret, a creature that connects heaven and earth, he is “crushed” by a love that transcends Coupland’s ironic labels. Lainsbury fails to sense Coupland’s interest in epiphany that is only possible when moving beyond irony’s thin coating; ignoring the religious language and almost sacred tone of the final pages, he simply dismisses the ending as one in which “Andrew is touched by the forces of randomness” (231). The lack of marginalia indicates a clear connection between the events of “Transform” and the final chapter. The first event is a pictorial, non-vocalized or perhaps even non-cognizant prayer; the second reads like a dramatic performance implemented from beyond.

Lainsbury is correct in targeting Coupland’s use of irony as a tool in *Generation X*, yet he fails to recognize that it is being explored and used as a tenuous means of



exposing inconsistencies and dissatisfactions with both media manufactured and pseudo-bohemian idealism, rather than advocated as a constructive, hopeful world view. The two most significant “spiritual” experiences in the novel are devoid of irony, thus indicating Coupland’s complex and, at times, uncomfortable relationship with irony. In a 1998 interview from *Macleans* magazine, Coupland admits that, “Irony has its limits. You can go to really interesting places with it, but you can’t go to the best place with it” (Chidley). Irony thwarts an unguarded search for reality, thus preventing epiphany, but what or where exactly is this “best place” that Coupland can go if he abandons irony? Coupland examines irony’s limitations, while still employing its comic, satirical and dramatic power in his later novels, particularly *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!* This ironic critique of irony itself is coupled with an overarching goal of finding the “best place” that both the authors and characters can go after shedding their ironic skin.

Coupland’s play with irony, particularly in the earlier novels, is quite curious as he tends to focus on the uber-cool members of various subcultures. The almost unbearably witty repertoire of these characters sees the cultural products of its collective past as personal linguistic amusement parks. Although many of them are consumed with the “heroic” goal of liberating themselves from the homogeneous, depthless bonds of consumer culture, their speech is almost completely composed with continual ironic and nostalgic references to the products of the late capitalist culture that they call home. Although these linguistic nods to the products of their culture are an attempt ironically to distance themselves from any dependence on them, they are nonetheless constantly talking about them. Their particular use of irony is as much a cultural artefact, a product

of their particular generation and subculture, as are the Rubik's cube and Atari. Yet, this scathing linguistic tool is not just a passing fad, but a deeply ingrained trend that has been strengthened through the tools of pop culture: television, pop music and advertisements. In his poignant essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", David Foster Wallace notes that television, the subject of many "high-brow" ironic jokes, is actually a purveyor of some of the most acute ironic representations itself. Postmodern irony, which was once an erudite means of critiquing the culture, has become absorbed in the "low brow" products of that culture. Wallace explains that:

For the last ten years now, television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of the low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative. (52)

Readers are well aware that Coupland's protagonists, entranced by what Wallace calls "T.V.'s ironic aura" (55) blur the lines between a distanced critique and a continual participation in the lifestyle they claim to critique; *Generation X*'s margin definitions are an overt allusion to this complex relationship between irony, idealism and pop culture. Coupland's protagonists are smart enough to joke about the trivial worthlessness of sitcom values, expensive gadgets and fruit roll ups, but by doing this, they inflate these products' worth, exposing the items' place as the defining colour of their existence. The central characters of *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet*, *Microserfs* and most of Coupland's other fiction are members of ironically subcultural "in groups"; their choices to live on the outside of the mainstream have given them the power to stand outside of it and knowingly critique it through the use of humour, cynicism and

sarcasm. Whether Gen X bohemians or self-labelled “geeks” at Microsoft, they are proud of their outsider status; even insiders such as yuppie Tyler in *Shampoo Planet* are smart enough to ironize the problematic relationships with their beloved possessions.

Irony is a tool to protect Coupland’s characters as they wittily use it to fight against absorption into the terrifying system of multinational capitalism, while employing the very irony that has become a marketed product of “Generation X” itself. Coupland demonstrates the same protective tendency as author, proving to his readers that he doesn’t “buy” the privileged bohemianism of his characters. We know he is not absorbed in this idealist escapism as he ironically undercuts the lifestyle choices of his characters by sarcastically creating comic definitions for them within the page margins of *Generation X*. Just as his characters attempt to knowingly stand on the outside of their capitalist cultures sarcastically laughing, the privileged author ultimately stands on the outside of their story having what appears to be the last laugh. Yet this laugh is not final, as he ultimately discards postmodern irony in order to create an open space for his characters to search for “the best place”.

Perhaps Coupland realizes, as Linda Hutcheon notes, that irony implies an “assumption of superiority and sophistication on the part of both the ironist and the intended...interpreter” (*Irony’s Edge* 11) that advocates an exclusionary rather than inclusionary view. Although pleas for tolerance, breaking down boundaries and cultural inclusion are central to many strands of postmodern thought, the use of irony alienates and recreates hierarchies between those who are “in the know” and those who aren’t. This use of irony both critiques the binary distinction of high/low culture and enforces it. Although much postmodern theory, and specifically Richard Rorty’s “liberal ironist”



stance, refutes models of interpretation and advocates the use of irony to indicate contingency, irony is itself evaluative, creating elitism because “the scene of irony involves relations of power based on relations of communication” (Hutcheon 2). As the members of Coupland’s bohemian subgroups distance themselves from their commodified past by turning its products into nostalgia and pastiche, they are acknowledging the fact that they can see the difference between the real world of their making and the virtual world provided for them by the media. This type of “ironic” protection separates them not only from the rest of their culture but also from each other.

This focus of irony as a double edged sword is a central concern of Coupland’s third work of fiction, a collection of short stories called *Life After God*. In these stories, and particularly in the title narrative, the protective shell of irony distances its users from any unaffected acceptance of either spirituality or human relationships. In the story “In the Desert”, Coupland’s unnamed narrator muses on the fact that his only true “home” is “a shared electronic dream of cartoon memories, half-hour sitcoms and national tragedies” (140). Coupland’s spiritually orphaned postmodern subject wanders through a desert story that begins with the cross-shaped epigraph (129):

You are  
The first generation  
raised  
without  
religion

Driving through the Mojave Desert, the narrator recognizes that he is numbed to its peculiar beauty, unable to respond appropriately to this awe-inspiring amount of barren

space. As he focuses only on the “nothingness” that surrounds him, he wonders if “feeling nothing is the inevitable end result of believing in nothing?” (143). Coupland explores this question throughout the text of *Life After God*, and directly relates this loss of feeling and belief to his generation’s anti-creed of pervasive irony.

Coupland’s ironists appear terrified of belief, trust and commitment as they have no vision of a reality past the contingent world of the suburban dreamscape. Although their middle class lives are “comfortable”, this comfort is deceptive and suffocating as it continually distracts them from acknowledging a sense of emptiness and purposelessness in their lives. Scout, the narrator of the story “1,000 Years: Life After God” feels the damaging effects of his own use of irony as a reflexive defence mechanism. Irony has replaced and prevented any sort of reliance on faith, either relational or spiritual, for this generation “raised without religion”.

When we first meet Scout and the friends he refers to as “my fellow fetuses” (225), they are leisurely floating in a pool the temperature of blood (219) or perhaps amniotic fluid. This brief reference to his friends as “fetuses” possibly alludes to a purely materialist perception of personhood; Scout has no concept of transcendence to give his friends’ lives sacred meaning beyond their roles as scientific products of the natural universe. Scout tells us that as they float in the pool, unable to differentiate between their own bodies and the water, they listen to cliché love songs, the music of manufactured emotion and commercial replication. Although these songs repeatedly sing about “love” based on formulaic pop conventions, Scout admits that he and his friends do not believe their message (220). Although they are the children of an artificial, earthly “paradise” that has no grounding in transcendent truth, this false

paradise lulls them into believing it is so safe, real and sufficient that it “rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless” (220). Thus Scout’s generation has suffered from an acute blurring of dream life and real life; as they grow up they experience a disillusioned “expulsion from Eden,” (229) discovering that their paradise was generated from images rather than engaged with truth. Perhaps Scout now understands that this Edenic dream does not provide them with an ability to love because they have no paradigm of what “love” is within themselves or their materialistic culture; their Eden contains no God to redeem them and teach them to love and forgive. Scout laments their naïve dependence on “earthly salvation on the edge of heaven” (220). These children of privilege, experiencing “life after God” (220), developed no overt yearnings for a reality beyond their making, their own heaven on earth. Narrator Scout contemplates this comfortable, yet unsatisfying trade-off, wondering what they have gained in the absence of faith in anything beyond themselves: “I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God” (221). Scout directly links the inability to love with a golden life that discourages him and his friends from even conceiving of the possibility of a reality beyond their own making, a source of “authentic” love outside of the saccharin tinged artificiality of pop song romance. Instead of inheriting a sense of wonder, a desire to seek for the source of any such “love”, they have inherited a numbing, defensive irony that “scorched everything it touched” and became “the price we paid for the loss of God” (221).

This irony is not only a defensive means of protection, but an aggressive act, one that “scorches” the notions of faith and relationship. David Foster Wallace voices a



cautionary view of irony that echoes both Scout's and Coupland's own trepidations; he admits that when reading postmodern novels, littered with flippancy and irony, he "ends up feeling not only empty but somehow...oppressed" (67) because in fiction, as well as in wider culture:

irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing...But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks. (67)

After irony's "ground-clearing", a reactive act that denies any connection between language and external reality, the only "reality" left to fill the vacuum is irony itself. Although it exposes what is perceived hypocrisy and totalizing hegemony, it ultimately becomes its own absolute, a norm that, according to Wallace, "tyrannizes us"(67). Irony as a "cultural norm" or world view is counter-productive, "based on an implicit 'I don't really mean what I'm saying'...'it's impossible to mean what you say'" (67). Wallace sees this ironic stance, when treated as an acerbic worldview rather than occasional tool, as elitist and condescending (67). Coupland himself argues that the cynicism inherent in an ironic worldview is "lazy thinking posing as depth and coolness" ( Butler 4). This type of thinking encourages both artificiality and a lack of substance as "there's no nutrition in cynicism" (4).

In direct contrast to both Coupland and Wallace, Richard Rorty, central proponent of what he terms a "liberal ironist" perspective on (anti-) reality, envisions "the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal" (xv). Rorty's ideal liberal ironist would argue that there is no intrinsic nature

within human beings or “out there” in the world itself, and there is certainly no transcendent God figure to inscribe this nature within humanity or nature in order for the self, world and divine to have points of connection. A liberal ironist is:

the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer to something beyond the reach of time and chance. (xv)

The self is merely “a tissue of contingencies” and there is “no central faculty, no central self”, whether it be reason or the concept of *Imago Dei*. Thirdly, as there is no direct “correspondence” between the contingency of self and the universe itself, there is no ultimate true or false; only contingent, constructed descriptions can be true or false, not based on a universal standard of correlation, but on a subjective, metaphorical construct (4). Rorty’s unique interpretation of a sort of Nietzschean perspectivalism ultimately advocates irony as an individual worldview, but admits that it is “if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive” and, therefore, is not a means for constructing a “public rhetoric” (87). Although Rorty advocates this intellectual perspective for individuals, it is not useful for constructing collective, public concepts of justice and morality.

Coupland’s abandonment of irony in his fiction when addressing questions about the nature of the self and the possibility of transcendence that culminate in epiphany proves that he belongs to Richard Rorty’s category of “a theologian or metaphysician” because he “believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities” (xv). Rorty’s affirmation of liberal irony is distinctly different from Coupland’s

criticism of irony as dangerous and, in some cases, destructive. Rorty advocates human freedom and autonomy rather than “a convergence toward an already existing truth” (xvi), whereas Coupland’s protagonists often experience this type of freedom, unfettered by any sort of metaphysical grounding, as paralysis and a sense of lostness. The “liberal ironist” worldview has no conception of a “higher order of knowledge” (Maltby 5), no belief in “truth” and, therefore, no space for epiphany. The search for “an already existing truth” (Rorty xvi), I want to suggest, dominates the lives of Scout and many of Coupland’s central characters.

Scout, a corporate player searching for something real and enduring beyond a fortuitous capitalist dreamtime, mourns the lack of a religious upbringing and admits that he, like everyone else, has “religious impulses,” something that he confesses thinking about every day (221). Rather than cynically dismissing this longing for faith, he embraces it wholeheartedly, confessing that “Sometimes I think it is the only thing I should be thinking about” (221). This conviction intensifies as Scout reflects on the somewhat glamorous environs of post-religious suburbia, recognizing the desperation in the eyes of his now adult friends. The protective shell of ironic adolescence has worn thin as they have moved beyond the cynicism of their halcyon days to disconnected moments of burnt out fear and empty exhaustion. One of Scout’s most harrowing descriptions is of friend Dana who has turned his back on the lucrative porn industry and attempted to erase his past by secretly and mysteriously becoming a fundamentalist religious zealot with a new “normal” and wholesome family, a family ignorant of his soiled past. The reformed Dana calls Scout to tell him that “God is descending in the suburbs”, describing a violent and destructive apocalyptic moment in which “your



dream life and your real life will fuse” (241). The didacticism of the message and frenetic nature of its delivery causes Scout to hang up the phone, but his words ironically reflect Scout’s own deepest fears and convictions about the true nature of reality.

Another of Scout’s childhood friends, now divorced “Malibu Barbie” Stacey, fuels her desperation with alcohol as she and Scout lament schoolmate Mark’s recent discovery that he has AIDS. Irony and cynicism cannot protect them from the deep pain and mystery of life as they hit rock bottom, but they have not been given the tools to know how to cope through love, authentic relationships or beliefs. The bubble of their glossy, yet empty suburban childhoods has finally burst and there is nothing for them to cling to. Todd, the friend that Scout tells us has changed the least, continues to smoke pot, live in a shared bohemian bachelor pad and plant trees for a living, just as he did ten years ago. Amidst his seemingly regressive patterns, he retains a sense of child-like wonder that surpasses the cynicism of his past life. He admits to Scout that:

I think about how hard it is—even with the desire, and even with the will and the time—I think of how hard it is to reach that spot inside us that remains pure that we never manage to touch but which we know exists—and I try to touch that spot. (245)

In direct contrast to Rorty’s ironist, Todd’s theories about the self imply a core, something that is intrinsic to all human beings—perhaps a spark of the divine that has been obscured by the taint of earthly preoccupations. Todd continues expanding on his theories of the self by differentiating between “this meat thing” he calls “your corpse” and what he simply calls “*You*” (246). He then asks Scout:

What is *you*, Scout? What is the *you* of *you*? What is the link? Where do *you* begin and end? This *you* thing—is it an invisible silk woven from your memories? Is it a spirit? Is it electric? What exactly is it? (246)

These questions of identity presuppose the notion that there is a “self” but admit to not understanding what this self is actually made of—a conglomeration of experiences and memories, a purely material (electric) being, or a soul, perhaps even with a supernatural origin. These questions of self are pervasive throughout the story, foreshadowing the final epiphanic moments when Scout achieves a sense of communion between the self, God, and the natural world, a new and authentic spirituality.

As we meet another of Scout’s friends, “normal” housewife Julie, Coupland emphasizes that the lost children of suburbia do not necessarily have to develop fatal diseases or bottomless addictions to finally face their emptiness and dissatisfaction with the lost paradise of their youth. Julie has two kids, a “nice-guy” husband with a sensible and secure job and lives in a neighbourhood that is “about as suburban as suburban gets” (231). But she ultimately expresses a desire for something more than the “comforting” virtual world of suburbia: “You know-I’m trying to escape from ironic hell: cynicism into faith; randomness into clarity; worry into devotion” (231). Coupland’s placement of religious language in the mouths of supposedly post-religious suburbanites is telling; “faith” and “devotion” are words that indicate a sort of vulnerable hope or belief in something beyond the material world. The words that Julie uses to relate her experiences and desires, what Rorty calls a “final vocabulary” (73) indicate that she also is a “theologian at heart” (73). Rorty claims that all humans “carry a set of words which...tell the story of our lives” and express their deepest needs (73). He argues that

final vocabularies that include concepts of transcendence, faith and belief are a “result of a metaphysical upbringing” (94). Interestingly, Julie, Scout, and Coupland himself, have not had what Rorty calls a “metaphysical upbringing” (94). Actually, Coupland continually laments his characters’ lack of a metaphysical upbringing, and it is apparent that these characters’ own final vocabularies express a desire to find a truth beyond their own linguistic constructions. They don’t believe, as Rorty does, that we can only describe the world; they want to experience a truth that is both in the world and beyond it. Julie and Scout are motivated by a strong desire to submit and discover truth rather than merely create it.

Since Scout and Julie have been expelled from the false Eden of their youth, they have become trapped in an “ironic hell”. Irony’s Teflon coating has protected Julie from the fear of commitment and sincerity, but she is trapped within the flames of its deathly protection. No one can come near without getting burnt and the flames extinguish all attempts to reach upwards and see past their haze to something larger than her artificial world. With the destruction of ironic hell, Julie would gain *clarity* and guidance to point her towards *faith*, and the strength of a *devotion* to sustain that faith. But as Julie looks at her immediate cultural and familial surroundings, she finds no alternatives to a faithless, ironic existence. She claims that she tries “to be sincere about life and then I turn on a TV and I see a game show host and I have to throw up my hands and give up” (231). These fake replications of manufactured sincerity, the ecstatic game show hosts and saccharin induced pop songs of her world, force her back into ironic hell. She must distinguish herself from the feigned sincerity of “cheesy celebrities” (231), emphasizing this distinction with a self-aware irony that prevents absorption into the system. This is



analogous to the scene in *Less Than Zero* when Clay watches a glittering televangelist who uses some of the same tricks as these “cheesy celebrities” to “sell” the gospel; even faith is flattened, packaged and sold as a product in the world that both Julie and Clay inhabit. Although Julie, unlike Clay, knows she is trapped, she sees no means of escape since the *truth* is blurred and appears to disintegrate as the television world of counterfeit truth dreams is switched on.

Scout has also struggled against emotional and devotional sincerity as he has frequently consumed anti-depressants “to effectively flatten out my moods” (222). These mood altering drugs have enabled him to flinch away from his own feelings of pain and loss, creating for him a deceptively beneficial “cosmetic surgery of the brain” (223). These pills, another form of protection from the painful real, create a different type of numbing dream world for Scout, a dream world he knows he must escape if he is to find any sort of meaning in life and connections with others. Scout’s life-altering addiction to antidepressants in order to “get by” parallels his friends’ coping mechanisms/addictions: Stacy’s alcoholism, Dana’s fear-based fundamentalism, Todd’s pervasive post-juvenile slackerdom, Kirsty’s recreational sex with “challenging” married men, and Julie’s suburban “normality”. The story is written in a confessional mode as Scout continually tells his readers that what he is saying is hard for him, emphasizing that he is a child of irony and cynicism. But it is his “real”, an authentic internal burning and aching to connect, a longing so strong that it eats through the lining of protective irony as well as the coating of mind numbing pills. He has finally arrived at a point where “sincerity ceases to feel pornographic” because of an insistent need that “burns inside us to share with others what we are feeling” (226). Scout, desperate for an

authentic connection with some “other”, decides to leave his corporate job and trash his anti-depressants. After a business trip to New York, he catches an Amtrak train to Washington DC to watch the presidential inauguration rather than take his scheduled return flight to Vancouver.

Having finally done something sporadic and real, differentiating himself from the mere cogs in the corporate system, he comments that “I was beginning to feel like a person inside a story for the first time in years” (259). Like the pilgrims of *Generation X*, he is drawn towards a sense of community, an event, in order to begin defining his individual story. Unlike Dag, Andy and Claire, Scout’s “event” involvement does not rely on small group intimacy to form this bond, but a large, patriotic spectacle. Ironically, Coupland uses the experience of attending a presidential inauguration, a ceremony that could be seen as the pinnacle of “system” enforcement, to liberate Scout from the realm of the artificial. As he feeds off the communal vibes, he notes that:

Suddenly I realized that I was feeling-well, that I was actually *feeling*. My old personality was, after months of pills and pleasant nothingness, returning. Just the littlest bit—for I had only stopped taking my little yellow pills the day before- but my essence was already asserting itself, however weakly at that point. I felt a lump in my throat, and I spent the rest of the day walking around this strange and beautiful city, remembering myself, what it used to feel like to be me, before I switched myself off, before I stopped listening to my inner voices. (263)

Scout’s liberation from a blurry vision of reality to the clarity of a distinction between self, world and others is comparable to a similar liberation experienced by Andrew

Largeman, central protagonist of Zach Braff's recent film *Garden State* (2004). Both Andrew and Scout have accepted a "cosmetic surgery of the brain" that, although freeing them from the pain of their past, also disables them from engaging from their present sense of self. Having relied on pills to provide him with a surrogate "happiness", Andrew throws away his pills, admitting that he would give up his illusions of happiness if it would just "be okay to feel something again, even if it's pain". In *Garden State*, love and pain co-exist as part of the real; Andrew's new girlfriend, Sam, responds to the pain he feels once he discards his pills: "That's life. It hurts. That's all we have". Scout also rediscovers a piece of himself as he experiences a sort of euphoria from liberation from the drugs, but now he must return to his "normal" life and face the knowing sense of emptiness, the numbed pain that originally caused his dependency.

Having tasted the real, Scout returns home, unable to force himself back into the corporate world and the job he refers to as "the evil empire" (275). Once again, Coupland uses irony as a tool to expose Scout's muddled ideas of liberation. He has been freed while attending a U.S. presidential inauguration, but calls his real world job "the evil empire", without a hint of cynicism about the possible connections between his corporate nightmare and a sense of US government as "evil empire". He simply explains to his colleague and friend Kirsty that now he can "see life differently" (277) and he can't push this discovery under the rug and become a robot programmed by companies or pills again. He also explains that he went to the inauguration because there was "something there I needed to see - evidence of a person or a thing larger than a human being" (273). This ambiguous comment sounds as if Scout recounts what he has seen almost as the divine right of presidential inauguration, that there is some large and



benevolent controlling force behind the ceremony and its attendants. He obviously longs for something that transcends the singular human experience, but perhaps he misplaces or confuses his longings, as does Tyler of *Shampoo Planet*. Tyler longs to connect with someone or something to give him a destiny, yet he is unclear whether this person is God or a shrewd CEO. Likewise, Scout longs for a sense of wonder and majesty that indicates a reality larger than himself, but looks towards a large gathering focusing on a perhaps deified political “saviour” rather than a supernatural deity. Both young men have received no religious training and lived, up to this point, with the corporate and media worlds somehow governing their direction and focus in life. The question they now face is how they begin to look outside of the only reference points they have known.

Scout’s quest for something larger than both himself and a closed, deceptive capitalist system continues as he leaves the city for the forest, searching for “purity” and “sanctity” (279). He must physically escape the visible embodiments of his emotional and philosophical routines. In the wilderness, Scout finds freedom and sanctity while “preparing my story” (283). But once he moves away from the city, he also appears to recognize that there is some life giving, omnipresent source that has written his story for him already; and he knows that he must connect with that source. Having abandoned the protection of irony and pills and the delusions of his artificial Eden, he anticipates that “this is the end of some aspect of my life, but also a beginning – the beginning of some unknown secret that will reveal itself to me soon. All I need to do is ask and pray” (284). Scout admits that in order to truly answer Todd’s questions about the nature of self, and answer his own questions about his destiny, that he must *search* for a particular

truth rather than attempt to construct it for himself. He recognizes that there is a marred correlation between himself and the universe, and that he must ask God, the author of these correlations, to reveal these truths to him. Coupland, like his character, completely sheds his ironic skin; there are no witty commercial references or cultural labels to distract us from Scout's raw sincerity and burning confession. This confession is written alongside lush, dewy descriptions of the revitalizing natural world, a vision much closer to the biblical Eden than to the false paradise of suburban youth. Scout, still in his business suit, huddles next to a soaked tent, drinking running water from a deep pool. This water, unlike the tepid, stagnant water of the manmade pool in the story's opening, appears to be the living water of his new life. Just as the warm amniotic pool water was an incubator for him and his "fellow fetuses", this water promises a cleansing and renewing second birth.

After drinking from the cool, clean water of the natural pool, Scout begins to notice the intense rays of the purifying sun. He realizes the sun as a constant:

This is the same sun – the same burning orb of flame that shone over my youth – over swimming pools and Lego and Kraft dinner and malls and suburbia and TV and books about Andy Warhol. (287)

The sun is something undeniably real and unchanging; it covers and affects everything and everyone, a "ball of fire that now shines on Mark, that burns his skin, that triggers cancer. This is the fire that shines on Stacey, that overheats her and makes her crave a drink" (287). This sun repeatedly rises and sets on the lives of the good and the bad, the lost, the despairing and the reborn alike. Perhaps this sun, a large and powerful constant source of life, points toward the ultimate constant source, something or someone larger

than the natural world and all its inhabitants. But this sun is also a source of pain and suffering. This juxtaposition introduces a tension central to much of Coupland's work: can an omniscient and benevolent God be sovereign over a world that includes evil, pain and suffering? Here, as in other texts such as *Hey Nostradamus!* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*, he chooses to introduce the question and not attempt to answer it, but allow the tension to exist.

Toasted by the intense sun, Scout peels off his clothes and immerses himself in the water. The last few pages of *Life After God* read almost like a Psalm, the heartfelt reflections of a despairing, wandering man who has found his way home. Scout suddenly hears an amazing, unifying sound that overpowers yet connects everything:

And the water from the stream above me roars. Oh does it roar! Like the voice that knows only one message, one truth – never-ending, like the clapping of hands and the cheers of the citizens upon the coronation of the king, the crowds of the inauguration, cheering for hope and for that one voice that will speak to them. (288)

This jubilant exclamation focuses on revelation rather than tension; Scout is overpowered by a sense of unity, truthfulness, reality in nature. But strangely, his most immediate point of reference for the unity contained within nature's clapping hands is the clapping hands of the inauguration. Once again, Coupland mixes pieces of Scout's past metanarrative with a hint of the divine, perhaps even a direct biblical allusion. The focus on transcendent unity within nature and the sound of clapping of hands seems to echo the powerful, joy-filled words of Isaiah 55: 12:

You will go out in joy



And be led forth in peace;  
 The mountain and hills  
 Will burst into song before you,  
 And all the trees of the field  
 Will clap their hands.

The clapping of hands in the natural world provides a picture of reality charged with the life of God. This vision is a promise to those who are thirsty and seek a fulfilling drink. The invitation at the beginning of Isaiah 55 is to one who is thirsty for something that can't be bought and exhausted from unsatisfying work that ultimately earns nothing meaningful. It is also an invitation to listen to prophetic voice in order to receive life and reality:

Come, all you who are thirsty,  
 Come to the waters;  
 ...Come, buy wine and milk  
 without money and without cost.  
 Why spend money on what is not bread,  
 And your labor on what does not satisfy?  
 Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
 And your soul will delight in the richest of fare.  
 Give ear and come to me;  
 Hear me, that your soul may live. (Isaiah 55: 1-3)

All of these components parallel Scout's own desperation and desire for new life.

His thirst has never been quenched by the chlorinated pool water of a “comfortable” middle-class life; he thirsts for something real and clean. The unsatisfactory futility of Scout’s labour in the world’s current “system” yields no meaningful rewards, only money to buy more things. He must submit or “give ear” to someone larger than this system so that his soul “may live”; he admits this method to fulfil his core need as he tells us that “All I need to do is ask and pray” (284).

After praying, waiting and experiencing the thundering voice through nature, Scout finally confesses his deepest understanding of truth, a confession so far from irony that its sincerity is tender, yet startling and raw:

Now here is my secret:

I tell you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me to give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me to love, as I seem beyond able to love. (289)

This is the revelation that Scout previously prayed for, the climactic point of his story—the truth that actually moulds his collection of experiences into a story. According to this revelatory assessment, Scout’s previous life as a fully autonomous individual, seemingly *beyond God*, was crippling. He claims to have a “sickness” that cripples his ability to be loving, kind or generous. Although Coupland deliberately chooses not to employ theological language, terms such as “original sin” or “total depravity”, to label this sickness, it is clear that this “sickness” comes from a lack of connection with God, the

source of these three attributes. Coupland's wording is far more biblical than theological, as he uses a concrete metaphor of sickness in order to indicate an abstract spiritual state. According to the gospel of Luke, Christ Himself claims that, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Luke 5:31). Scout's acknowledgement of his own spiritual need, his request for healing and wholeness, is the transformative "sickness" that Christ claims leads to healing. Only after an act of supplication, thus acknowledging his own sickness, can Scout be healed.

According to Scout's wilderness revelation, a culture beyond God is also beyond love, kindness, and generosity. Scout and his "fellow fetuses" have no guiding concept that teaches them that love, kindness and generosity are real; they are trapped within the cycle of the most central human "sickness"—complete self-interest. This epiphany indicates a human inability to truly care for one another without an intrinsic connection to one another moulded by a creator that Scout directly acknowledges as "God". Richard Rorty argues that a liberal ironist can develop generosity, kindness, or love for another simply by imagining the pain of others and identifying with them. Scout claims that we are unable to even care enough to imagine this unless we are given that power and desire from the ultimate source of love, kindness and generosity. Rorty's formula of projected empathetic imagination does not work in Coupland's fictional world; his characters admit that they do not have the tools to truly love and that their desire to learn how must take them to a source outside of their own making.

Scout must actively admit his weakness, shed his ironic coating and expose the raw nerve of a desperately needy existence. As he reflects upon this painful, yet exhilarating confession, he walks deeper into the "rushing water" (290). The roar and



clapping of hands grows louder and louder and Scout allows himself to finally be holistically absorbed into a new understanding of reality that transcends all others and reflects a pattern of truth, wholeness and purity. The clapping hands “heal” and “hold”; they are “the hands we desire because they are better than desire” (290). Perhaps these hands are not just the joyous euphony of nature’s response to God, but also an image of the moulding force of the creator. Scout’s final words connect God’s hands with the hands of those created in His image: “These hands – the hands that care, the hands that mold; the hands that touch the lips, the lips that speak the words – the words that tell us we are whole” (290). The emphasis on hands and lips are central to the connection between the self and God. The creating hands of God have touched the lips of Scout, the storyteller, and his ability to speak with his mouth and act with his hands reflects a creative nature that demonstrates a possible image of God’s reality. Scout is finally whole, part of a larger story, wholly dependent upon the divine narrator who is beyond the constricting lines of irony.

In his article “Douglas Coupland: In and Out of Irony Hell”, Mark Forshaw admits that he, along with Coupland’s other “less transcendental, more materialist readers” feels uncomfortable and somewhat disappointed with both *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*’s surprising vision of “a spectral other-wordliness” (Forshaw 40). Coupland chooses to transcend irony and embrace spiritual longing and desire for fulfilment, a desire that, particularly in “1,000 Years: Life After God” is met with an acknowledgement of God as the ultimate source of life. This turn, although fictional, is literally “located in the realm of metaphysics” (Rorty 40) that makes some postmodern literary critics like Forshaw squirm with discomfort. Although Forshaw rightfully

admits that the central characters in both *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* have a “lack of faith” that “drives them to a private crisis” (48), he sees these crises as destructive rather than regenerative. Forshaw reads the redemptive experience at the end of *Life After God* as a fatal ending to a man who remains “very much caught in atomised and unalleviated despair” (48). Rather than acknowledging Scout’s baptism in the waters of new life, Forshaw chooses to debate about whether or not Scout has drowned himself (48). Forshaw and the “less transcendental, more materialist” readers he refers to appear to still adhere to an ironic worldview that Coupland’s characters wish to leave behind (48). Incapable of reading the direct, devout nature of Scout’s search for hope, they must dismiss the crux of the story by reading an ironic, fatal slant into the ending. Forshaw chooses to ignore the overt biblical language and religious symbolism of the ending of *Life After God*, just as Lainsbury does with the ending of *Generation X*. These are clearly texts that cause discomfort as they challenge the central “truth claims” of a totalizing belief in the absence of truth.

Rorty’s utopian view of supposedly constructive irony embraces the act of being ironic as liberating and imaginative, not insecure and protective. Rorty’s liberal ironists use irony to acknowledge the fact that their ideas about reality are merely constructions; Coupland is dissatisfied with this desire for a “postmetaphysical” and “postreligious culture” (xvi) that acknowledges no objective reference points beyond their own linguistic constructions. According to Coupland, irony indicates wit but also weakness, a shrouded fear to face painful reality. Irony pushes his characters to the limits of self delusion but they must inevitably break through its entrapments if they are to pursue truth and experience epiphany. The calm, lyrical epiphanies of *Generation X* become

the revolutionary, confrontational, perhaps even subversive, truth claims of *Life After God*.

Douglas Coupland's eighth novel, *Hey Nostradamus!*, is an examination and interrogation of the tension between the author's perceived darkness of human nature and the possibility of transcendence and redemption. The dramatic ending of *Life After God*, envisioning a moment of clarity and redemption more similar to a conversion than a momentary epiphany, is echoed in the multiple biblical themes and even more dramatic ending of *Hey Nostradamus!*. The novel's depictions of grace and redemption are life-affirming and, at the same time, subversive in a contemporary post-religious culture. Unlike in *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet* and *Life After God*, Coupland chooses to minimize his use of postmodern irony as a tool, while also abandoning it as a subject in this novel; his focus is even more on the transformation of characters than a critique of trends and collective behaviours. The ironic hipster lingo that was used as a tool in *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet*, *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* appears almost completely absent from the pages of *Hey Nostradamus!*. *The Guardian*'s Alfred Hickling claims that Coupland "has toned down all the arch, ironic posturing and compulsive slew of pop-cultural references, allowing a newly meditative, moral tone to emerge". In order to enable this "meditative, moral tone" to emerge, *Hey Nostradamus!*'s characters do not have the exciting and encyclopedic pop culture knowledge or pseudo-bohemian lifestyles of the protagonists from *Generation X* or even *Microserfs*. *Hey Nostradamus!* shows a different side of Coupland, as its narrative focuses on character development much more than the sardonic cultural critique that



plays such an important part in novels such as *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet* and *Miss Wyoming*.

Hickling's glowing review continues to note and applaud Coupland's apparent change in direction: "*Hey Nostradamus!* is Coupland's first novel to feature a full complement of three-dimensional characters rather than a swarm of exaggerated cartoons. He seems to have reached a new plane of philosophical awareness." This "new plane of philosophical awareness" is Coupland's grappling with large theological questions while, at the same time, achieving a profound sense of humanness in the midst and aftermath of crisis. The very human, tender and dramatic *Hey Nostradamus!* relies, not on a now discarded "knee jerk irony", but on a traditional use of dramatic irony to illustrate the novel's final climactic extended epiphany, a beautiful portrait of grace and brokenness in the most unexpected of characters. Throughout the novel, Coupland enables us to see how each of four characters respond and develop in the aftermath of a central tragedy as they search for some sense of divine logic, truth and transcendence in the midst of such seemingly random and unjust violence. The novel is divided into four parts with each part narrated by one of four distinct narrators including: Cheryl, the last victim of a brutal school shooting who speaks to us from an unidentified semi-purgatorial place she can only label as "the stillness" ; Jason, the boy who was secretly married to Cheryl in high school and has passed many years fuelled by bitterness, anger, doubt and alcohol; Heather, Jason's first girlfriend since the tragedy that happened 11 years ago; and Reg, Jason's legalistic, cruel father who Cheryl characterizes as a "mean dried out old fart who defied charity and used religion as a foil to justify his undesirable character traits" (28). These characters, unlike the protagonists of *Generation X* or

*Shampoo Planet*, do not even initially define themselves in relationship to their adherence to or resistance of an absorbing consumer culture; they are in the process of defining themselves based on their existential struggles with religious scepticism, grief, doubt, resentment, and ultimately, redemption.

As Coupland's readers looking for his comfortable, characteristic, yet always double-edged, use of quirky irony, perhaps we automatically assume that we have found it when reading the novel's opening epigraph. Coupland's novel about the trauma of a random, senseless school shooting opens with words of hope from the Bible; is this an ironic stab at the frailty of faith in the midst of painful reality? Or does it set the novel's meditative tone with an initial focus on the possibility of hope and redemption? The chosen passage from 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 is both beautiful and, in its seemingly awkward context, disconcerting :

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

The Apostle Paul's joyful, solid and bright promise of a transformation and resurrection of the dead upon Christ's return could be initially read as Coupland's cynical foil to the novel's dark opening words. Speaking from the unnamed space between physical death and eternity, and reflecting on the massacre that took her earthly life, Cheryl says:

I believe that what separates humanity from everything in this world—spaghetti, binder paper, deep-sea creatures, edelweiss and Mount McKinley—is that humanity alone has the capacity at any given moment to

commit all possible sins. Even those of us who try to live a good and true life remain as far away from grace as the Hillside Strangler or any demon who ever tried to poison the village well. What happened that morning only confirms this. (3)

Cheryl emphasizes what she sees as the darkness or depravity in human nature, an equalizing depravity that finds someone like Cheryl, one of “those of us who try to live good and true lives,” just as “far away from grace” as her murderers. Cheryl’s understanding of the democratizing reality of sin is similar to the orthodox Christian recognition of the presence of evil in all human beings, as espoused, for example, by Bishop N.T. Wright:

The line between good and evil does not lie between “us” and “them”, between the West and the rest, between left and right, between rich and poor. That fateful line runs down the middle of each of us, every human society, every individual. This is not to say that all humans, and all societies, are equally good or bad; far from it. Merely that we are all infected and that all easy attempts to see the problem in terms of “us” and “them” are fatally flawed. (“God, 9/11, the Tsunami” 3)

Wright’s statement is a response to questions about the biblical analysis of evil in response to the tragedy of September 11. Coupland’s novel is also, according to the author, an exploration of similar themes after both September 11 and the Columbine massacre (Ashbrook). Wright, like Cheryl, emphasizes that each human being has the “fateful line” of evil or “sin”, as Cheryl calls it, running right through the middle of himself or herself. Cheryl personalizes these claims, indicating that both she and her



murderers, as representative of humanity itself, have the consistent capacity to commit evil; both Wright and Scout from *Life After God* use the metaphor of sickness or infection to indicate the pervasive, contaminating presence of sin. Cheryl also sees that this infection is universal, thus convincing her to not see even her tragic situation as a case of “us” and “them”. But how does this dark view of human nature relate to Coupland’s chosen epigraph about the promise of both physical and spiritual transformation and rebirth?

Speaking with radio interviewer Tom Ashbrook, Coupland explains that his selected I Corinthians passage was written on the tombstone of one of the victims of the Columbine massacre. He also explains that he deliberately placed these two passages side by side, not to emphasize darkness or be ironic, but to highlight the drama that is created from the struggling relationship between the two polarities. Rather than attempting to expose inconsistencies, Coupland is exploring the tension of the seemingly paradoxical co-existence of hope and evil, embracing the concept of “mystery” as spoken of in I Corinthians. According to Coupland, this biblical passage indicates that “at any moment something wonderful and magical could transport us away” (Ashbrook). The transformative power described in this passage of scripture is, Coupland implies, supernatural and complete, but this supernatural power also indicates an unpredictable timeframe. The Apostle Paul himself admits that this vision of a future reality, although a certain event, is still a “mystery”. Although the I Corinthians verse describes the promised resurrection of those who have already experienced a physical death but are bodily resurrected and living eternally, Coupland also reads the Christian concept of an un-merited spiritual transformation during earthly life into the passage. In an interview

with Tony Watkins, Coupland refers to the famous Andy Warhol quotation, “Heaven and Hell are just one breath away” to indicate the always unexpected supernatural transformation that comes with what he calls a “visitation from beyond”. He comments again on his initial response to the I Corinthians passage:

I read that passage, and it just-wow! What it’s saying, I think, is that heaven and hell are just a breath away, but at any moment something startling could happen to you, something amazingly, suddenly—no matter what you’re feeling, the world would become charged with meaning and the feeling of something better.... (Watkins)

Coupland appears enthused by this promise of unexpected, redemptive change, while at the same time his protagonist acknowledges that, “just by being alive, we could all do all sins” (Watkins). Cheryl’s statement about each of us being equally as “far away from grace” resonates with Coupland’s interpretation that the Corinthians passage promises a transformation “no matter what you are feeling”. Both Coupland and Cheryl grasp hold of the Pauline concept that spiritual transformation is not based on an individual’s merit or feeling, but on an objective spiritual reality outside of them. The earthly entrapments of sin, evil and death— all so vividly realized in this novel—can only be redeemed, transformed and given life by a visit “from beyond”. But, this “beyond”, this spiritual reality, is a mystery that cannot be controlled by human efforts or fully understood by the human mind. In the above quotation, describing a world that is, because of divine intervention, “charged with meaning”, Coupland sounds more like an impassioned Gerard Manley Hopkins who sees the world “charged with the grandeur of God” than an apathetic, pop culture saturated Gen X’er. Coupland’s novel is an exploration of the two

extremes of sin and grace, while emphasizing the biblical principle that the darkness of sin ultimately emphasizes the fulfilling and pure glare of grace.

What Coupland calls a “drama” between these two spiritual polarities is also a continual theme throughout 1 Corinthians 15, the biblical chapter of Coupland’s chosen epigraph. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, a church who was confronted with the heretical teaching that there is no bodily resurrection from the dead, thus nullifying the resurrection of Christ and the concept of eternity. In an earlier part of the chapter, the Apostle Paul writes:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins....If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Corinthians 15: 16,17,19)

This passage again highlights the relationship between spiritual death through sin as a contrast to spiritual (and bodily) resurrection. According to Paul, the only hope for a transformative eternity, a freedom from the spiritual devastation of sin, is a hope in Christ’s resurrection from the dead that He promises His followers the next world. The Apostle’s vision of eternity is one based on what he claims is the reality of an afterlife. Again, Coupland’s frequent distinction between the future and an afterlife (eternity) is helpful. He claims that we can only *really* believe in one of the two: the future, a modernist vision of human progress based on an attempt to perfect our lives through science, or eternity: hope that lies in the assurance of an afterlife (Ashbrook).

The Apostle Paul continues to stress the dichotomy between sin and renewal as his letter continues: “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead



also comes through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (I Corinthians 15: 21-22). Just as the capability to commit all possible sins through the birth of the sinful nature came through one man, so the capability of a rebirth that ultimately transforms the sinful nature and promises eternity, comes through another. Immediately following Coupland's chosen passage, Paul speaks about the lost power of earthly death through the "victory" provided through Christ's redemption. Alluding to Isaiah 25:8, he proclaims that, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (I Corinthians 54). He then quotes Hosea 13:14 which asks: "Where, Oh death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). But, has death lost its sting in the fictional world of *Hey Nostradamus!*, a world that revolves around the devastating after-effects of a senseless, brutal slaying of children? Where or what is the victory in the midst of such gratuitous, cruel carnage?

Coupland's vision of eternity is by no means as comforting, assuring or defined as that of Paul. Although Cheryl, the devout Christian member of the legalistic Christian youth organization "Youth Alive!," speaks to us from "the other side", she is unsure of exactly what this "other side" is. She is in a completely still place, left alone with her own thoughts. The only other sounds she can hear are "prayers and curses" as "they're the only sounds with power enough to cross over to where I am" (9). Interestingly, this appears to indicate that the only speech and action that has an eternal presence is that which is directly acknowledging God, whether in requests, praise, or curses. These prayers reflect the anguish, confusion, devotion, anger, faith and faithlessness that are generated from asking serious questions about the "meaning" of such a horrific and cruel slaying. Cheryl hears the prayers of those questioning the

presence (or absence) of a good God during such an event: “Dear God, I’m prayed out, and yet here I am, still knocking on Your door, but I think this could be the last time” (31). Although Cheryl, the victim of the crime, hears cries of pain and doubt from those who are still living, she does not experience doubt herself. She understands that the world of her previous earthly life is a broken, dark world:

To acknowledge God is to fully accept the sorrow of the human condition. And I believe I accepted God, and I fully accepted this sorrow, even though until the events in the cafeteria, there hadn’t been too much of it in my life. I may have looked like just another stupid teenage girl, but it was all there—God, sorrow and its acceptance. (41)

To “acknowledge God” means, for Cheryl, to acknowledge the collective condition of “sorrow” in all human beings as all are “equally far away from grace”. Even though Cheryl has not experienced much pain or sorrow in her own life until the slayings, she has accepted that pain and sorrow are results of the human condition and indicate a need for God. Unlike those who are still living and grieving her death, she does not appear angry, but sure that what she has accepted is true. She is not fearful of the future as she knows it will be spent in eternity, but she is left with what seems like an endless amount of time to simply think about her life.

With admirable and endearing candour, she admits that, “I had, and continue to have, a nagging suspicion that I used the system simply to get what I wanted. Religion included. Does that cancel out whatever goodness I might have inside me?” (7). Before her true conversion, Cheryl used religion as a system, a means of manipulation to gain control of a relationship—thus initially ignoring any sense of mystery or power that

emanates from any source but herself. Her initial “conversion” was a ploy to attract Jason, the boy who would eventually become her husband. She does, however, admit that in the midst of all this acting and manipulation, she did surprisingly have an authentic conversion experience. Through the telling of her story, we find out that Cheryl, like Coupland himself, comes from a non-religious family who was “not so much anti-God as it was pro the world” (13). Like the suburbanites featured in most of Coupland’s other fiction, Cheryl’s parents are not deliberately anti-God, but decidedly “comfortable” in a deflated domestic “universe”, believing they controlled it by themselves. In this contemporary suburban world, God is seen as irrelevant—a distant, perhaps even nonexistent, nebulous force to be ignored. Following in her parents’ footsteps, Cheryl initially believed that she was in control of this “force”, using it for her own elaborate purposes. But she was surprised when she ultimately discovered that God was not a system, but a reality.

Cheryl initially stands out as the only earnest convert in the novel, yet directly before her death, she doodles the phrases, “GOD IS NOWHERE; GOD IS NOW HERE” over and over again on her notebook, emphasizing the ever-present paradox at the centre of this novel. This paradox is clearly a reflection of the dramatic tension between sin and transcendence that Coupland claims is the crux of the novel. Coupland also uses this ambiguous scribbling to expose Cheryl’s “Youth Alive!” group’s one dimensional oversimplification of the complex issues Cheryl’s play on words explores. Both the youth group and the local media ignore the “God is Nowhere” part of the scribbling, but turn the latter, “God is Now Here” into a faith-filled “slogan” that brings inspiration to the evening news. Jason, the young husband Cheryl left behind, comments



on this highly selective representation of Cheryl's faith and the last moments before her death:

They keep referring to Cheryl and her notebook with GOD IS NOW HERE as some sort of miracle, and this I can't understand. It's like a twelve-year-old girl plucking daisy petals. *He loves me, he loves me not.*  
(111)

A respectable, religious appearance is of the utmost importance to these "good" Christians; the pressure to "perform" as "good Christians" dominates the youth group. In this sense, there are certain questions and struggles that are off-limits. No one openly asks if the paradoxical graffiti on Cheryl's folder indicated her doubts or questions about the co-existence of God's perfect goodness and the evil that possibly causes one to question His presence. They certainly do not admit to having any such questions themselves. We are left to wonder if the individuals who claim Cheryl's statement "God is Now Here" as a confident, definitive battle cry of faith in the face of adversity, are not the same individuals who utter the angry, doubtful, bitter prayers that become the soundtrack to Cheryl's post-death experience. These are prayers of brutal honesty, full of despairing questions asked in secret, such as:

Dear God,

I'm going to stop believing in you unless you can tell me what possible good could have come from the bloodshed. I can't see any meaning or evidence of divine logic. (14)

This search for evidence of "divine logic" or merely divine presence during the massacre continues in prayers such as:

Dear Lord,

If you organized a massacre to make people have doubts, then maybe  
 You ought to consider other ways of doing things. A high school  
 massacre? Kids with pimento loaf sandwiches and cans of Orange  
 Crush? I don't think You would orchestrate something like this. A  
 massacre in a high school cafeteria can only indicate Your absence—that  
 for some reason, in some manner, You chose to absent Yourself from the  
 room. Forsake it, actually. Cheryl-the pretty girl who was the last one to  
 be shot. She wrote that on her binder, didn't she? "God is nowhere."

Maybe she was right. (25)

In letters such as this one, Coupland confronts the problem of evil, as these anonymous prayers secretly ask how a good, omnipotent, sovereign and perfect God could be present in the midst of such obvious evil.

Age old questions about the co-existence of God's goodness in the midst of suffering arise in the pained cries of these letters. Each letter echoes questions that are present within the entire subtext of the book, questions that were famously introduced for theological debate in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Speaking of the God of the Bible, Hume asks:

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? (qtd in Plantinga 88)

Hume raises important, complex and difficult theological questions, but Coupland's novel is neither an apologetic for natural atheology, nor is it an attempt at theodicy.

These questions are raised, but not dealt with as philosophical quandaries. Rather, Coupland emphasizes the humanity of those asking these questions, those traumatized from witnessing the massacre, experiencing varying levels of anger, doubt and serious searching faith at the same time. These questions are prayers, not theological treatises or impassioned arguments between human beings.

Coupland makes no direct effort to answer these questions about the character of God, yet the novel indicates that both God and eternity are not concepts, but realities. Cheryl, the ultimate victim, does not voice these doubts from her place of ambiguous rest; she has a sure, peaceful knowledge that both God and life after death exist. While acknowledging God's existence, a mysterious reality distinct from the false piety of many of the novel's characters, Coupland chooses to allow the tension and mystery to permeate the novel's questions rather than to reduce them to some sort of all assuming theological system. He uses this fictional tragedy, and the questions raised by it, as a context in which to explore human faith and hypocrisy, as well as the possibility of divine grace and redemption.

The hardback cover of *Hey Nostradamus!* is clearly a pictorial depiction of the same tensions and ambiguities that are scribbled on Cheryl's notebook, as well as woven thematically throughout the entire novel. On this cover, a generic cartoon figure kneels forward, head bowed, in supplication--but is it a willing act of prayer or a forced act of execution? This image, taken from one of Coupland's sculpture installations, clearly reflects a wavering between despair and assurance that is similar to another of Coupland's installations entitled "Tropical Birds". In this installation, Coupland has constructed a model of a post-massacre school lunchroom, complete with spilled food



and drink, melted plastic chairs, and all kinds of post-trauma debris. The installation's most important components are its stunning, eerie, initially unidentifiable sound effects. This powerful visual image is, in reality, accompanied by a chorus of different mobile phone ringtones and pager alerts that, on first listen, sound like exotic birds. Coupland created this installation and named it "Tropical Birds" after reading the following newspaper account from Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*:

Moments earlier, (ATF) agent Marcus Motte had gone inside the school with bomb technicians. He was peering into the flooded (Columbine) cafeteria, looking at hundreds of backpacks left behind 11 hours earlier by panicked students. Some floated in water covering the floor. Others sat on top of tables. The instant the fire alarm went dead, Motte heard a strange, almost surreal sound welling up faintly from inside, like birds chirping. Across the cafeteria, telephone pagers in the abandoned backpacks were going off, unanswered calls from desperate parents.

("Inside the Columbine Investigation")

Coupland reconstructs this profoundly disturbing scene to reflect on some of the same questions as the authors of *Hey Nostradamus!*'s anonymous prayers, questions about the co-existence of ultimate good (in the form of God) and a seemingly irredeemable evil. But in the midst of such a bleak, tragic and depraved event, Coupland attempts, not to indicate the absence of God, but the presence of hope. On his homepage, he claims that, "This installation was an attempt to isolate something holy and transcendent within a landscape seemingly beyond redemption". In the midst of such senseless destruction,

Coupland attempts to find fragments of beauty and hope, however broken, “isolated” flecks reflecting the still present reality of God.

Perhaps this notion of hope is again related to Cheryl’s idea that “To acknowledge God is to fully accept the sorrow of the human condition” (41). Interestingly, Coupland continually turns the meaning of Cheryl’s above statement on its head throughout the course of the novel by indicating that the first step to acknowledging God is to recognize the “sorrow of the human condition” and, thus, the need for a God to rescue us from it. This movement towards redemption by recognition of spiritual desperation is most poignant in Reg’s case, but also somewhat indicated in one of the prayers of the grieving:

...the school massacre could mean that You don’t exist just as much—if not more—than it could mean that You do. If I was trying to recruit followers, a school massacre isn’t the way I’d go about doing it. But then it got me here right now praying, didn’t it? (32)

But the above prayer, unlike Cheryl’s claims, indicates that perhaps God is a part of the suffering and pain, using it deliberately to recruit followers rather than, in sovereignty, allowing it to happen as a result of an “infected” world. This prayer again revisits the problem of evil, but admits that these frightening questions cannot prove or disprove God’s existence.

Some of these prayers could have easily come from the mind and heart of Jason, Cheryl’s high school husband, who held her in his arms as she died. Jason, the son of tyrannical fanatic Reg, vehemently turns his back on his father’s indoctrination, but comes to understand that this ironclad, hypocritical code of living is vastly different than

Cheryl's faith, an honest faith that admits struggles and questions, recognizing that perhaps they are a part of faith itself. Even Reg admits that Cheryl has a "pure heart", indicating trust and honest faith, rather than sinlessness (240). Jason's last words in his section of the novel echo Cheryl's Calvinist understanding of original sin as they implicate an admittance of inner darkness and a need for redemption, two of Coupland's seemingly favorite themes:

We're all born lost, aren't we? We're all born separated from God—over and over life makes sure to inform us of this—and yet we're all real: we have names, we have lives. We mean something. We must. My heart is so cold. And I feel so lost. I shed my block of hate but what if nothing emerges to fill in the hole it left? The universe is so large, and the world is so glorious, but here I am on a sunny August morning with chilled black ink pumping through my veins and I feel like the unholyest thing on earth. (146)

Although he has no way of knowing it, his last written words also echo the last words we read from Cheryl, speaking from the beyond:

...the sun may burn brightly, and the faces of children may be plump and achingly sweet, but in the air we breathe, in the water we drink and food we share, there will always be darkness in this world. (42)

Cheryl continually emphasizes what she sees as the dark, fallen and depraved nature of both the natural and human world; her belief in this collective fallenness is a democratizing force in which all people, whether they appear to be good or bad, are ultimately in need of redemption and "far away from grace." This universal depravity, however, is coupled with a sense of life and delicate beauty; once again, Coupland



emphasizes the tension between two co-existing polarities. Jason's understanding of reality also includes a sense of collective lostness, but is embittered by a belief that "Redemption exists, but only for others" (135). Although his reflections confess a belief in God, a standard of holiness and human significance, as we "must mean something", Jason does not have the hope of ever redeeming this "meaning" in his own life—he is obsessed with his "unholiness". Jason's idea that he is beyond redemption is a direct result of his father, Reg, who is the face of heartless, legalistic "religion" to him, continually telling him that he is nothing, a "zero"(77). As he tries to convince himself that "we must mean something" because there ultimately is a God, he never feels that this God will extend the gift of redemption to him. In Jason's mind, God's love, like his father's, is based on his own behaviour rather than unconditional grace and love, and he has given up the will to try and earn it. Although he understands depravity in a similar way to Cheryl, he is continually blinded to an understanding of the free nature of grace, whether from his father or from God.

Although Jason was raised in a conservative religious family, he has no understanding of the Christian concepts of grace and redemption. In an article on ritual and epiphany in Douglas Coupland's fiction, Andrew Tate observes that, "The absence of a cohesive established religion in Western life and lack of residual religious memories becomes a defining trauma in Coupland's fiction" (327). Coupland's early novels do examine the effects of this "trauma" of secularism in western, industrial societies. This is the first novel in which Coupland closely explores a "religious" lifestyle. In this novel, both religious upbringings and immersion in a religious subculture are defining traumas of their own, traumas whose effects parallel the effects of the novel's central

tragedy. *Hey Nostradamus!* does, in a limited sense, follow in a long line of subcultural critique; just as Coupland defines deadheads, yuppies, microserfs and trust fund hippies by their own pop culture contributions, so he defines the religious by their exclusive youth group meetings singing “Kumbayah”, cookouts that end with chastity talks, and fish bumper stickers.

Both Cheryl and Jason are active members of a Christian youth group called “Youth Alive!” that seems to pay more allegiance to its insulated church culture than love, forgiveness or graciousness. Cheryl’s closest girl friends frequently eat lunch together off campus, thus starting their own clique called the “Out to Lunch Bunch”. Their friendships, just as their religion, appear to be superficial and contrived, as they force each other to confess sins to one another at the beginning of each lunch meeting. Cheryl’s memories of the group expose the fact that their religion is a pop culture, commodified product that relies more on saccharin rituals than devotion and faith:

The Out to Lunch Bunch talked about going to heaven in the same breath as they discussed hair color. Leading a holy life inside a burgundy-colored VW Cabrio seems like a spiritual contradiction. Jason once joked that if you read Revelations closely, you could see where it says that Dee Carswell counting the calories in a packet of Italian dressing is a sign of imminent apocalypse. (33)

This parody of the wearing of religion as an exclusive, seasonal fashion indicates that the “faithful” are not communing with the real, but conforming themselves to consumer artificiality and blinding themselves with a contrived, insincere faith based on superficial group dynamics rather than sojourning. This portrait of a religious “type” has its roots

in some of Coupland's own high school experiences. Coupland explains the "fantastically hierarchical" structure of North American high schools to Tony Watkins from *Damaris.org*, recalling them as educational institutions in which the student body elects yearbook "superlatives" based on beauty, popularity, and coquettishness. Coupland goes on to say that "every high school has the good-looking girl gang" and that the lives of these cliques have a certain "tabloid" quality in the high school community. He continues by mentioning that the members of the "good looking girl gang" frequently "became evangelical" (Watkins). In both the aforementioned interviews with Brian Draper and Tony Watkins, Coupland speaks candidly of his painful experiences with an exclusive Christian youth group like Youth Alive! in his own high school. He explains that this group put up posters around the school inviting students to a youth group barbecue. Coupland claims that when he asked to join them, he was told not to come—on more than one occasion. It became clear to him that the members of the group had talked about him and made a collective decision to reject him. For Coupland, a young teenager "raised without religion", this was a first exposure of the religious subculture, a subculture that initially appeared to be self-righteous, judgemental, and exclusive to the point of cruelty. When explaining this to Watkins, Coupland ends by saying that perhaps his life would have been different if "they'd have, like, just invited me to a barbecue or something...". But when Watkins tells Coupland that *The Observer's* review of *Hey Nostradamus!* claims that it was "an attack on religion", Coupland responds, "Oh, no, no. I don't think so at all. I would never do that....it's a non-censorious critique". As the novel develops, it is clear that Coupland's



critique is not of Christianity, or even honest faith, but of the self-righteousness and hypocrisy of those who wear religion as a status symbol or medal of self-achievement.

One clear indication of this is how the false friendship between the “Youth Alive!” group and Jason disintegrates soon after the massacre. Jason, who kills one of the murderers in an attempt to save Cheryl, is rumoured to have possibly masterminded the massacre; the “Youth Alive!” group instantly buys into the crowd mentality and abandons him as they condemn him. Jason comments that “My many friends from Youth Alive! set the tone, gleefully providing police with a McCarthy-era dossier on Cheryl and me—a diary of the time we spent together...” (88). The vicious crowd mentality of the youth group exposes their desire, not to find the truth, but to affirm their unfounded suspicions, and to judge and condemn. Once again, this is a picture of those who use religion to impose their own agenda and form their own in-group, rather than as an earnest search for truth.

This betrayal, however, is not as damaging as the betrayal of Jason’s own father, Reg. Although Jason’s killing of one of the gunmen probably saved dozens of lives, including his own, Reg’s only response to his son and the investigating police is, “What I understand is that my son experienced murder in his heart and chose not to rise above that impulse. I understand that my son is a murderer” (77). Reg’s hate-fuelled condemnation of Jason’s actions is the final breaking point in their relationship. Although Jason has virtually no contact with his father after this point, he spends a good deal of his life thereafter trying to redeem himself in his father’s, and possibly God’s, eyes. Later in his life, Jason is kidnapped by an organized crime thug named Yorgo and taken out to a forest where he is to be killed. Jason is able to ultimately outwit Yorgo

and eventually has him at his mercy. As Jason recognizes that he, once again, has a criminal's life in his hands, he tells us that:

I lunged for a river rock and then—time folded over in a Moebius strip—  
I was once again in the school cafeteria, and there was Mitchell's head,  
but it was now Yorgo's head, and in my hand was a rock and—suddenly I  
had the option of murdering again. (125)

Jason decides not to kill Yorgo, even though this “murder” would have been self-defence. Instead, he leaves Yorgo injured, yet alive, lying in the woods and goes to call for help. As he reflects on this moment in a letter, he writes, “And then I felt the chunk of concrete hate fall from my chest. A part of my life was over, I realized. I was now in some new hate-free part, and I began to hear the highway's pale drone” (130). Although through this action Jason has, in a strange sense, “redeemed himself” from the “murder” he has been unjustly accused of, he still feels beyond redemption. Reg's harsh legalism has taught him that he must earn approval, and Jason knows that nothing he could ever do would be good enough. As Jason makes a frail, human attempt to pay a penance, he is continually confronted with his inability to redeem himself. In his father's world, there is no room for grace, only punishment.

Reg's cruel, hateful, self-righteous behaviour towards his own son again brings to mind the dichotomy of sin versus grace through redemption and, ultimately, resurrection. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:56 that “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.” This complex verse indicates that a lack of repentance brings death through sin, and that humanity knows what sin is by looking at the law, God's perfect standard that is ultimately broken. In the book of Romans, Paul

indicates that the purpose of the law is to show humanity the perfect standard we have fallen short of, thus showing the need for redemption and salvation. Jason, keenly aware that he has fallen short of a standard, has been taught by his father that although he needs salvation, he must earn it himself. Reg's character is a portrait of a man whose religion is propelled by a desire to perfect himself, to keep his own law, in a desire to belittle others; this corrosive self-righteousness taints his son's understanding of both himself and God. Reg's religiosity has blinded him from understanding his need for grace or redemption; he is set on saving himself. Coupland's critique of Reg, therefore, is not ironic, but biblical. The gospels emphasize that Christ himself was enraged when speaking with the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day, a group of men who often, like Reg, focused on how good they thought they could make themselves by upholding the law. The Pharisees, like both Reg and the "Out to Lunch Bunch", trusted in their own "goodness" and lorded it over everyone else in a cruel and ruthless lust for self-glory. A similar blatant hypocrisy and self-righteousness were the targets of some of Christ's most angry words in the New Testament. Jesus' words to the Pharisees in Mathew 23:27 could have just as easily been said to Reg or the Youth Alive! members:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

The Pharisees, like Reg and the members of the high school youth group, appear to be "good" and "holy", but are rotten inside, consumed with pride and self-righteousness. In



the gospel of Matthew, Christ not only exposes this hypocrisy, but pronounces a judgement upon the religious hypocrites when he exclaims: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”. These Pharisees, frauds and masters of religious performance, appear to be far away from grace, blinded by their own claims of goodness. In *Hey Nostradamus!* this character trait is most prevalent in the merciless Reg who extends no grace, nor recognizes its need in his life.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this novel is that Coupland chooses to give Reg, a hateful, religious hypocrite, the last words. Reg is the narrator in the last section of the novel, which is actually a letter composed to his missing (and presumably, dead) son, Jason. Although this is a novel that explores the tension between the existence of God and the presence of evil, the central manifestation of evil—the cafeteria murders—is not the focal point of Coupland’s exploration. Instead, Coupland chooses to explore a much more subtle, “acceptable”, yet paralyzing evil, the evil of lifeless, graceless and cruel “religion” used to serve man rather than God. In the final section, Reg, like Scout at the end of *Life After God*, writes a confession. As Reg becomes vulnerable by exposing his interior brokenness in a letter that his son will probably never see, he is transformed from a monster into a human being, a person who, as Jason has previously said, has a name, has a life, and means something. In this confession, Reg admits that he “rejected his son” for selfish reasons, because he could see that God gave his son, rather than him, an important mission (235). In the space of a fourteen page letter typewritten on a rented computer in a Kinko’s copy shop, Reg bares his desperate, dead soul and admits that because of “pride and vanity” he had become a “religious fraud” and a “hypocrite” (237). When Reg recalls his most recent girlfriend telling him that he was

“harder to please than God” and his realization that he was “further away from the gates” (240) we are reminded of Jesus’ rebuking of the Pharisees, who, because of their self righteousness and hypocrisy, recognize no need for forgiveness and redemption, becoming their own feeble saviours who will be ultimately condemned to Hell.

Reg sees that writing his letter has “emptied” him of “lies and weaknesses” and that, “as with recovering from a poisoning...I felt mended again” (241). Reg’s recognition of the “poison” that has been his life (or death) force for all of his adulthood sounds quite similar to Jason’s mention of the “chilled black ink pumping through my veins”. Although Jason recognized the darkness inside himself, his bitterness towards the man who forced him to drink the poison of false religion prevented him from ever “mending again”. Ironically, Jason, who has been honest about his own depravity and need for redemption for many years, has seemingly died, panged with guilt and unsure of redemption. Towards the end of his life, Reg finds redemption at the cost of his son’s disappearance and possible death. Reg’s confession indicates a wearied, defeated, yet open heart, now asking questions and seeking truth rather than proclaiming his own righteousness and delusional omnipotence. Only in the face of unbearable loss and pain can Reg face the truth about himself, his son and God. This realization is epiphanic, but it is not a momentary flash of revelation or truth; rather, this transformation indicates something closer to a conversion. This dramatic irony develops even further as Reg ends the novel with words taken directly from Christ’s parable of the prodigal son from the Gospel of Luke:

Awake! Everyone listen, there has been a miracle—my son who was once dead is now alive. Rejoice! All of you! Rejoice! You must! My son is coming home! (244)

The parable of the prodigal son is a story used to pictorially illustrate the concept of grace. The father in the story gives his son his inheritance, which he ultimately “squandered in wild living”. He soon finds himself destitute, longing to eat even pig’s food, which forces him to have to return home and beg his father to hire him as a servant. On seeing his returned son, his father races towards him with open arms, embracing him, placing the best robe on him, and planning a celebration for his return. The prodigal’s jealous brother, who has worked so hard to be good and please his father, is obviously angry over this treatment of his undeserving brother. But his father simply responds, “But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” The prodigal son is completely undeserving of his father’s love, yet he admits his great need for it, and it is ultimately given to him.

Although Jason is literally the “lost son” of the parable, Reg is initially the symbolic “older brother” in this story, and then is transformed into the prodigal son himself as he admits his own failings. Reg is deeply bitter, angry and jealous that his own son Jason, someone he categorizes as a “sinner” who is “worth nothing” and lives irresponsibly, denying his father, was given a mission from God, thus indicating God’s love and acceptance. In this case, Jason is like the “younger brother” to Reg’s “older brother”; the older brother of the parable is so full of hatred and resentment that he refuses to go in his father’s house and celebrate his younger brother’s homecoming and acceptance from the father. The attitude expressed in his response to the father is the



same attitude of Reg, the religious zealot, who thinks that he has earned God's approval through his own works. The older brother exclaims:

Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders...But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! (Luke 14:28-30).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells this story to the Pharisees, basically holding a mirror to their loveless self-righteous legalism. Only when Reg is writing a letter to Jason, the son he has both emotionally and physically lost, does he recount the words of this powerful story and experience a moment of grace, an extended epiphany, in which the mirror is held up to reflect the myriad evils within his own heart. For once, Reg is humbled, as he realizes, like Cheryl, that even after all of the religious ritual and rule following, he is as "far away from grace" as everyone else.

The vision of grace in the prodigal son narrative is a striking contrast to the type of relationship that developed between Jason and Reg. Reg, a man who did not understand grace as he never recognized his own neediness, is now the prodigal son. He is spiritually on his knees and begging for grace as he finally recognizes the ugliness of his sin. Although he has pointed the finger and yelled "Sinner!" to all those around, he has ignored his own cruelty and hatred. Jason, whose life has most probably been lost, is not the final recipient of undeserved grace. Reg, the vile, loveless character that Coupland calls "a nasty piece of work" (Watkins) is the most undeserving and unlikely vessel for grace, yet seems to understand it the most profoundly, even more profoundly

than Cheryl did, when he is faced with the devastating effects of his own poison.

Coupland explains his choice to give Reg the final words of the novel:

And then there's this coda at the end, which is Reg, and he's a miserable bastard you hate, hate, hate and who must die, die, die-and yet he's the one who actually ends up being humanized...not in a humanism sense, but he becomes...the moment he dropped all his....he had to lose everything—all his valuables in this world, sort of like Job, and like, the moment he lost everything, the moment he shatters a legalistic doctrinaire thinking and actually began questioning things for himself, suddenly he became real. (Watkins)

Reg has worn doctrine as cosmetics for his soul, providing him with an appearance, in his mind's eye, of goodness. He continually kept up this pretence although everyone around him could see that there was no love behind his self-sculpted “religion”, only a false god crafted in the image of Reg. Only in losing his life, in the sense of losing any semblance of normality and security and the “appearance” of goodness, is he able to find out who he really is and humble himself with a desire to change. Only through finally asking questions, rather than proclaiming his own truth as gospel, does he become “real” through the acknowledgement of his need for grace.

The tragic, moving ending of the novel, in which Reg finishes this letter and plans to make hundreds of copies and post them on all the trees in the forest where his son might be lost, is ultimately not a personal tragedy for Reg, but a rebirth. The devastating effects of both the massacre and an abusive father have destroyed Jason, yet his father, who was once dead, is now alive. Coupland ends this novel with a vision of

hope and redemption as we witness the beginning of transformation in the life of a man who seems the most unworthy of all. Coupland comments that, "...in the end there has to be hope, there just has to be hope. And I think in this case, giving hope to the one who seems beyond it is not meant as an intentional shocker, but it is meant to say that there is hope"(Watkins). Reg's unlikely "conversion" from false religiosity to reality resonates with another of the Apostle Paul's indications of the complex relationship between sin and grace: "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20). Coupland's choosing of Reg, a cruel man who seems beyond hope, for redemption, indicates a hope that transcends even the worst of sins.

Reg has not earned this hope; his single-minded desire to keep the "law" and perfect himself only pushed hope out of his life---now he recognizes that he needs it more desperately than anyone. Coupland uses Reg's surprising transformation to remind us once again of his opening epigraph from I Corinthians:

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (I Corinthians 15:51-52)

In this passage, Paul is talking about "sleep" as a physical death which leads not to spiritual death, but to both a bodily and spiritual resurrection, a vision of eternal life. Coupland obviously relates this to the afterlife of those slaughtered in the massacre as he has chosen this from a Colombine gravestone. But he also shows us that redemption, earthly spiritual transformation, can happen instantaneously. It also is a mystery as it happens, according to Coupland, "no matter what you're feeling"; it is not based on an



individual's emotions or merit, but on "a visitation from beyond" (Watkins). Reg was sleeping in his own self-righteous delusion; it took a manifestation of grace to wake him up so he could be "changed".

The final irony of this novel is less like the "knee jerk irony" that was used as a tool to critique itself in Coupland's earlier work, and more like dramatic irony or even biblical paradox that leads to complete, fulfilling transformation rather than a negative "ground clearing" (Wallace 67). The brief epiphanies of *Generation X* and the extended and confessional "visionary moments" of *Life After God* have culminated in *Hey Nostradamus!*'s unexpected portrait of redemption. David Malone argues that with *Hey Nostradamus!* Coupland refuses to "settle for an easy irony or an equally easy credulity" yet "tries to press through irony to see what lies on the other side" (9). Coupland's attention to I Corinthians 15 is not an ironic dismissal of faith in the face of tragedy and suffering, but an acknowledgement of hope through the possibility of spiritual transformation. Although he clearly raises the complex questions concerning the co-existence of God and evil, he spends little time developing these theological and philosophical questions about the nature of evil and the character of God. Instead, he chooses to paint a narrative, parabolic picture of a possible answer to the "problem of evil" itself—a picture of honest self-questioning that leads to humility and an openness towards divine grace.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Postmodernising Apocalypse: *White Noise*

The small, yet defining epiphanies of *Generation X* and *Shampoo Planet* and the quasi-conversion moments of *Life After God* and *Hey Nostradamus!* ultimately become apocalyptic visions of truth and revelation in the novels *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Eleanor Rigby*. Coupland rewrites the secular understanding of apocalypse for these novels, investing it with a sense of sacred wonder and truth, just as he does with the epiphany in his earlier novels. Yet Coupland also investigates the doomsday fear of postmodern apocalypse in *Generation X* and *Life After God* and examines the relationship between technology and apocalypse in *Microserfs*. His idiosyncratic visions of apocalypse are subversive, resisting the general spirit of the times. In order to clearly see the subversive, countercultural nature of Coupland's understanding of apocalypse, it is helpful to explore the relationship between the traditional Judeo-Christian ideas of apocalypse, the contemporary, secular understanding of the term, and the postmodern notion of anti-apocalypse.

According to Paul Maltby, the presence of what he calls a "redemptive" epiphany, a clear indicator that there is a defined self and a higher order of truth imbedded in an external reality, is dwindling in most postmodern fiction (19). This raises an interesting question: in the absence of both illumination and resolution in much postmodern fiction, will anything now replace the epiphany as a moment of clarity and transformation? The presence of self-referential, knowing playfulness and fragmentation proclaim the inability to achieve clarity, enlightenment, resolution, but is this enough?

The modernist epiphany, a tool for specific secular revelation or humanistic “conversion narratives,” is a result of speculation on external sources of existential enlightenment that transform an interior reality. Has this modernist vision of self-enlightenment been replaced with another, darker sense of closure in the form of apocalyptic destruction--a movement from secular spiritual affirmation to a fascination with a hopeless vision of either cosmic or existential “end times” that ultimately leave no room for transformation? Is the only absolute moment of clarity the moment of recognizing one’s hopelessness in the face of death? Whether watching Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, reading Chuck Palahniuk’s cult novel *Fight Club* or watching sinister depictions of end-time events in music videos and art installations, we cannot deny the reality of Lois Parkinson Zamora’s statement that “Apocalypse is in vogue” (1). Perhaps the contemporary appeal of the apocalyptic narrative lies in its thrilling fear factor as we realize that we have the tools and perhaps the drive to destroy ourselves. But the realization that we have the tools to “end it all” is obviously not a new one (the nuclear age is no longer in its infancy); so the question remains, why is there such an intense, almost obsessive, contemporary fascination with these dismal views of the apocalypse?

Perhaps the near disappearance of epiphany in many postmodern narratives been replaced with a hunger for “apocalyptic” disaster. This is quite puzzling as frequent contemporary usages of the term “apocalypse” often completely ignore its original meaning as “disclosure, unveiling” and become a general catch-all phrase for discussion of a sinister eschatology, a focus on “last things” that implies destruction without any sense of illumination, transformation or redemption. This movement away from the idea



of revelation or epiphany is quite an ironic turn when recognizing that apocalypse, in its original form, is a powerful form of *divine epiphany*. James Annesley notes that in most postmodern apocalyptic narratives “there is no relief, no real revelation or redemption, only a profoundly depressing sense of impending destruction” (108). Although Annesley claims that the “blank fiction” narratives are “apocalyptic”, he clearly indicates that “revelation” and “redemption” are lost amidst a sea of postmodern apathy, of hopeless, unenlightened subjects waiting for unavoidable doom. The miserable waiting itself, rather than any sense of change or renewal, has become the new focus. Although Annesley here alludes to the abandonment of apocalypse’s religious roots by employing the concepts of *revelation* and *redemption*, he fails, as many critics of postmodern fiction do, to adequately question the complete secularisation of the apocalyptic narrative in contemporary fiction. “Apocalypse” has simply become a bad (yet irresistibly enticing) word—a reference to slasher films and frenzied brutality, a picture of godless chaos.

Unlike Annesley’s *Blank Fictions*, Zamora’s study highlights the almost complete postmodern decontextualization of the term “apocalypse” by emphasizing its abandoned Judeo-Christian origins:

Apocalypse is not merely a synonym for disaster or cataclysm or chaos. It is, in fact, a synonym for ‘revelation’, and if the Judeo-Christian revelation of the end of history includes disasters...it also envisions a millennial order.... (10)

The early Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature was culturally subversive in its demonstration of the two-fold nature of divine judgement and redemption: ultimate and

final collective regeneration would follow a judgement that used crisis, disaster and violence to separate the chosen from the lost. As noted in Harper's Bible Dictionary, "apocalypse" clearly indicates a revelation that leads to both transformation and judgement (Achtemeier 35). But the biblical "apocalyptic" is not limited to visions of the "end times"; it is a series of specific revelations, either alluding to or proclaimed by Christ, the manifestation of God among humanity. N.T. Wright focuses on the subversive nature of biblical apocalypse that initiates the kingdom of God on earth:

First-century Jewish apocalyptic is not the same as 'end-of-the-world'. Instead it invests major events within history with their theological significance...Apocalyptic is the symbolic and richly-charged language of protest, affirming that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven—not in some imagined heavenly realm to be created after the present world has been destroyed. In particular, apocalyptic is the language of revolution: not that YHWH will destroy that world, but that he will act dramatically within it to bring Israel's long night of suffering to an end, to usher in a new day in which peace and justice will reign. ("The Historical Jesus and Christian Theology" 1)

These revelatory, "apocalyptic," moments have significance because of their placement in the divine Creation/Fall/Redemption structure; they reveal the devastation of the Fall, yet point towards the hope of the New Heavens and New Earth through the redemption provided in Christ.

The derivation of the English word *apocalypse* is from the Greek root *apokalypsis* that means to "uncover, reveal, disclose" (Zamora 10). This original

understanding of apocalypse was of a stripping away of the false layers of status quo “reality” as “the divine word becomes historical fact” and “a luminous vision of the fulfilment of God’s promise of justice and communal salvation” (2). Traditional apocalyptic patterns stem from the conviction that “most persons and institutions are irredeemably corrupt” (Jeffrey 46). The spiritual climate of a culture in need of apocalypse is beyond mere “reform” and must be completely transformed and replaced with a new creation, both through immediate redemption and eternal transformation. This is clear in the narrative patterns of biblical apocalypse, from the Genesis flood narrative, to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, to the revelation of the final judgement and New Jerusalem. The flood and judgement day narratives both include visions of the wicked being punished for their sins, justice being done, and a new birth rising out of the destruction. The narrative of Christ’s death and resurrection introduces the notion of justice coupled with grace, as Christ the innocent and perfect ruler takes the punishment and dies for the wicked, conquering death by rising back to life and providing all humanity with a new, transforming rebirth through this process. Thus Christ’s proclamation and promise at the end of St. John’s letter of Apocalypse that, “I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:5). James Berger notes that the “apocalyptic end, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (5). Only through an apocalypse, what Berger calls “the definitive catastrophe,” which is “not only final and complete but absolutely clarifying”(8) can individuals be thoroughly purged, transformed and brought to a moment of life-shattering clarity. This apocalyptic moment provides order and structure as it separates good from evil, thus assuring those



witnessing it of the eternal truth that both individually and collectively transforms while assuring them that their ultimate destiny is being shaped by someone outside of the “system”.

The fact that biblical apocalyptic narratives usually incorporate the role of prophecy reflects the idea that the final biblical apocalypse, the vision of the end of the old order subjected to the reign of a returned Christ, is not just “an end” but *the ultimate* “end”. This *end* provides meaning for the multiple other revelations leading up to this point, as well as justifying human existence and exposing the divine plan that gives sense and structure to reality. The existing of an overarching external plan ignites the glimmer of specific, personal revelations. All revelations point towards the ultimate, final judgement that purifies, divides and renews. David Jeffrey argues that:

Apocalyptic texts usually proceed by means of a series of visions which foretell God’s destruction of social, political, and cosmic order as we know it, the punishment of the wicked, and the inauguration of a holy kingdom ruled by the righteous or directly by God himself. (46)

The biblical apocalypse initiates a time of final judgement when all are brought to justice; in this salvific framework, all answers and decisions are presented as *absolute* as they are the perfect judgements provided by the creator of absolutes.

This traditional reliance on an omniscient creator who provides a definitive “beginning, middle, end” structure to reality, based on the death, resurrection, and return of Christ as judge and king rests uneasily within a postmodern culture that no longer sees “reality” defined by this structure. There is no clear conception of a divine, objective structure that connects a now decentred self with the mere “traces” of external

“reality”. Because of this, the transformational aspect of “apocalypse” is clearly absent from the majority of postmodern fiction; the central protagonists in novels such as DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* experience only “catastrophic epiphanies” that are self-induced and non-transformative, and thus not true revelations. They only *recognize* the truth that they have a need to destroy themselves and either revel in this or allow the fear of it to paralyze their lives; if this is a transformation, then it is only a movement to a deeper ring of earthly hell, rather than a hope for and fulfilment of redemption. Bret Easton Ellis’s protagonists in *Less than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction* and *The Informers* and the anti-heroes of Palahnuik’s *Fight Club* and *Survivor* have experienced even lesser “revelations” than those from the above mentioned novels. They are miserable, yet so depthless that they don’t even care that they are miserable; their apathy prevents them from recognizing their state long enough to either revel in it or fear it. True apocalypse, in its original form, implies a definite and transformative ending, a paradoxical sense of closure and rebirth. Many contemporary novels, including those previously mentioned, are not about closure or rebirth, but simply about the process of waiting for an undefined and unrealized “end”. It is helpful here to recall Paul Fiddes’s observation that twentieth century writers, both modern and postmodern, “portray human life in a perpetual state of transition, crying out for an apocalypse that never comes” (11). This is an obvious reflection of a collective culture that has lost faith in the promise of any sort of structured, definitive, or hopeful end. Fiddes notes that “we demand some kind of ending to a story”, and then asks the very relevant question: “why does an ending seem more difficult today than ever?” (5). Fiddes notes that the original apocalyptic literature has “a strong momentum towards the

organization and unification of history from the perspective of the end” (24). Thus, the lack of an “ending” in contemporary fiction clearly reflects the rejection of existence of an *ultimate* end that both transcends and works within human time to generate a sense of meaning and purpose.

But perhaps the contemporary fascination with apocalypse masks a collective desire for this missing structure that provides meaning. This longing for a closure that provides some sense of understanding through revelation is reflected in the basic narrative pattern that governs all communication, a pattern that Fiddes sees as “eschatological” (5). He continues by explaining that “traditional” narrative, “provides ‘paradigms of concord’ overcoming discord, meeting a basic human need for resolution” (9), thus echoing the paradigm provided by the Judeo-Christian narrative structure. Thus, the desire for “concord,” for sense to be made out of the dissonant ebb and flow of existence, is, according to Fiddes, “a basic human need” (9). But this “basic human need” is left unfulfilled, and even denied, in much postmodern fiction, thus implying that this “need” is based on constructed desire rather than a correlation with a divinely ordained structure to be “found” in reality and reflected in fiction. Nevertheless, there is still a longing for an end that organizes and unifies the whole, a desire to seek patterns and connections amidst the fragments. The presence of chaos and fragmentation in texts only has meaning when a deviation from the norm is recognized. Even contemporary readers frequently long for an illuminating end which gives us the ability to look back and unify, categorize, and find the causes of the effects..

Fiddes’s focus on the eschatological structure of narrative alludes to the manifestation of this “apocalyptic” desire in the creative drive of the individual. As we



both create and read textual narratives, we long to connect the dots between cause and effect. Only after we have made it to the end of a narrative, can we make a judgement and piece things together in order to make sense of it all. Only after viewing the past, present and future contained in the narrative, can we properly assess it. The text needs an outside perspective that can see past, present and future simultaneously to piece these strands of time together and unite them into a purpose. Very similarly, the ultimate and final biblical apocalypse, John's book of prophetic visions, continually emphasizes that Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the origin and the ultimate end, the only one who can see past, present and future simultaneously as He is outside of, while still having created, human time. This story of the divine author and creator is told in a narrative form that obviously follows the most literal eschatological pattern. Only when we, as readers, see the ultimate fulfilment of prophecy and resolution within this text, the complete story of the crucified, risen and glorified Christ, can the moments leading up to this final "revelation" give complete purpose and meaning to the moments and events leading up to it. Fiddes elaborates on this with a helpful discussion of the Greek time models of *chronos* and *kairos*:

The sense that the story is working towards an ending turns mere *chronos* (the 'tick-tock' of the clock) into moments of *kairos*, points of time filled with the significance of being part of a larger fulfilment. (9)

The ultimate end, the all encompassing revelation of the apocalypse, interprets all of the narrative events leading up to it, giving purpose, significance and shape.

The contemporary obsession with end time disasters clearly tends to ignore the "revelation" aspect of the term "apocalypse". Having collectively learned how to bring

ultimate death (both spiritual and physical) and disasters upon ourselves, we fear the sinister “control” we have gained through this, but there is also an abandonment of any hope for escape, understanding, and revelation from anything or anyone outside the self-destructive box. The postmodern notion of “apocalypse” does not achieve the positive fulfilment of its sacred literary origins; it is a dead-end desacralized anti-epiphany, a moment of recognition and realization (if even that) with no room to change, nowhere to go. The moment of revelatory disclosure indicates hopelessness, despair and finality without sight of any redemption or regeneration. Krishan Kumar argues that the postmodern apocalypse “...comes not with a bang but a whimper. It is a version of the apocalypse that dwells obsessively on the end, without any expectation of a new beginning” (Kumar 207). He goes on to argue that “what we seem to have today is the apocalyptic imagination without hope” (205). This hope, in the form of divine revelation or even secular epiphany, seems to have disappeared from the contemporary imagination. Has the epiphany, a sobering revelation from the “outside” that clarifies the “inside”, become *completely* unattainable and irrelevant in the postmodern world of one-dimensional surfaces? How can we experience an “unveiling” when everything is merely a surface? How can an individual receive a revelation when the traditional binary opposition of “outside” transcendence or “inside” personal identity have been deconstructed? When there is no outside to provide revelation, the postmodern spiritual landscape becomes a place of impending doom where extreme cultural introspection has been focused only in a perfection of self destruction. There is no “outside” perspective from which we can see ourselves more clearly; does this mean there is no room for revelation in postmodern virtual spaces? Just as the *real* has been absorbed in media

saturated airwaves, soundbites and invisible internet wires, has the desire for transcendence and enlightenment to provide answers and instigate change been replaced with a passive click of the of the mouse or remote control?

In Zadie Smith's Introduction to *The Burned Children of America*, she questions the bleak, self-destructive focus of so much contemporary western literature whose authors and readers are seemingly comfortable, well educated and middle class:

Why are these writers burned, what is the originating trauma exactly?

Two things seem prominent: fear of death and advertising. The two, of course, are intimately connected. There is no death in advertising, as an industry it is the league of anti-death, and this generation has seen advertising grow to inhabit the very fabric of their lives. Meanwhile death reveals itself as the nasty sting they never imagined at the end of the tale. (xv)

This fear of death is ever-present in apocalyptic fiction narratives, but these death visions are typically framed by mainstream media culture as mere cathartic fantasy. After sitting in a cinema watching a film about nuclear annihilation cosily nestled between car and beer advertisements, we walk into the light of day to face the "real" media controlled world of diversion and distraction, of ever-regenerated images that never die. Why is our culture drawn to fantasies of death and destruction which typically provide no ultimate redemption or regeneration? Perhaps we collectively know that, as Paul Fiddes notes, "death gives horizon to life" (6). The promise of death at least gives some sense of closure, but do death and destruction without any transformation or regeneration really supply structure, purpose and unity? The cocooned postmodern



subject has no illuminated perspective from which to assess his or her own life's purpose.

Perhaps Smith's clever coupling of "fear of death" with "advertising" speaks to these questions. The eternally recycled images and slogans in our collective pop-consciousness create an undying world of simulation that distracts us from the reality and finality of death. If we can create fantasies about death, transforming it into a spectacle sponsored by Coke, then we are protected from its sting. This death distraction methodology is similar to Jack Gladney's attempt to avoid the horror of death in *White Noise* by turning it into a "safe" academic subject; the most alarming, horrific stain of evil on the twentieth century historical map becomes simply "Hitler Studies". In "No Apocalypse, Not Now" Derrida argues that the discourse of nuclear holocaust has itself become an artefact, a continual waiting for a non-event. He sees that, "The growing multiplication of the discourse—indeed, of the literature—on this subject may constitute a process of fearful domestication, the anticipatory assimilation of the unanticipatable entirely-other" (23). Death, the "unanticipatable entirely other" is tamed by being reduced to a "safe" common discourse and "softened into symbolism so that it loses its impact of otherness" (Fiddes 37).

Smith continues her analysis by emphasizing that being reminded of death both annoys and frightens us as our insulated, "safe" culture realizes that "it is not simply happening over there where they are poor and brown and mad about God, but over here where we are rich and have no God to protect us" (xv). Smith points out the presence of privilege and comfort in the West is closely related to the "death of God" in Western culture. Apocalyptic visions of utter destruction absorb the vacant infrastructure of a

generation that believes it has “no God to protect us” (Smith xv). These violent pictures of irredeemable doom that end a leisurely life of “earthly paradise” replace the pictures supplied by a Judeo-Christian dichotomy of heaven and hell. The typically western consensus that a past belief in God was merely a construct that is now dead, irrelevant and unrelated to any “reality” offers no hope of escaping death, the only postmodern absolute. Postmodern subjects are living in the era of Baudrillardian simulation where the virtual world of TV, advertising and internet become their metanarrative, the only “real” they can readily access at the push of a button. In “The Illusion of the End” Baudrillard emphasizes that the distinction between the actual real and the virtual real have collapsed and that “meaning” is just another commodified media product:

Simulation is precisely the irresistible unfolding, the sequencing of things as though they had meaning, when they are governed only by artificial montage and non-meaning. (255)

We have been fooled into thinking that we can read significance and purpose into events and “history” but both of these things have been flattened out and recycled in an endless chain of media images that lull us into the false comfort of a profound sense of “meaning” as we hope for some sort of absolute truth and source of order. In Baudrillard’s vision of our perceived, and seemingly false, notions of a “reality” inscribed with meaning, Fiddes’s notion of traditional narrative concord is obviously scrutinized. Fiddes acknowledges that there is a debate as to whether “concord” is *projected upon* or *discovered within* narratives (9). The notion that concord, structure and purpose is found inherently within the narrative form is dependent upon the notion that there is, philosophically, an overarching “grand narrative” which ultimately unifies

and legitimizes all smaller narratives. The “end” of the narrative ultimately explains and validates both its origins and its cumulative events, thus acknowledging a *discovered*, solid network of events that are governed by its creator. The possibility of this discovery, a life defining epiphany when one finally begins to see the patterns formed from a higher source of knowledge, provides a sense of hope for both earthly future and supernatural eternity.

Baudrillard confronts what he sees as the irrelevance and emptiness of this hope as he makes an absolute statement about the absence of any absolutes, what he calls the “overwhelming, destructive truth...that ultimately there is no God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has and only ever has been his own simulacrum” (“Simulacra and Simulation” 172). If this is so, then God is also just a manufactured product of a synthetic system, not the creator of a natural one. There is no divine source of protection, sense and significance; is this generation “burned” because they must face the realization that death is the only absolute reality they will experience completely unmediated through a virtual lens? In his essay, “Hystericizing the Millennium”, Baudrillard discusses the frenzied contemporary desire for “the end” and connects this apocalyptic desire to a simultaneous desire, the desire for origin. He claims that “A spasmodic enjoyment of the end” is ultimately an attempt to “compensate for not having had the chance to revere the beginning” (1). The yearning for origins and ends is ultimately a yearning for a grand narrative, for structure, for purpose; without these historical and philosophical “bookmarks”, how can we interpret the significance of any of life’s events? According to Baudrillard, we ultimately can’t, and this is exactly why we try to manufacture meaning through the artificial world of simulacra whose only



grounding absolute is not some solid “yardstick measure” of truth/ falsehood and right/ wrong, but the fluid nature of capital.

“Hystericizing the Millennium” continues by painting a nightmare vision of anti-apocalypse that denies the cathartic destruction of most end time fantasies. This age of apathy, exhaustion and monotonous continuity longs for the relief, not of redemption, but of any change, even the change that death and destruction will bring. Baudrillard speculates that “The worst indeed is that there is no end to anything and that everything will continue to take place in a slow, fastidious, recurring and all encompassing hysterical manner—like nails continue to grow after death”(1). Baudrillard’s prophecy establishes his belief that there is not and will never be a “real” apocalypse, for it is impossible to have a “disclosure” in a world of surfaces, devoid of any certain origin or end. Both the Christian idea of apocalypse as revelation and redemption and the postmodern notion of apocalypse as self-inflicted doom are equally fictitious, merely products of the desire for origin: “The desire for the end is the desire for the beginning” (3). Instead, Baudrillard sees apocalyptic yearning as an almost utopian fantasy, a desire to find multiple dimensions that lead to one correct interpretation, in what we only know as a one-dimensional, endlessly interpreted “reality”.

Baudrillard calls this desire for the end a “messianic hope” that was founded on “the reality of apocalypse” but has lost its relevance:

Today, this has no more substantive reality than the original Big Bang. We will no longer have a right to this dramatic illumination. Even the idea of putting an end to our planet via an atomic clash has become

barren and superfluous—if this no longer holds any meaning for anybody, not even God, what good is it for? (3)

Apparently, it is only good to perpetuate an escapist fantasy that will project a certain depth onto a clearly depthless society. But this is a false projection as “Apocalypse is not real, it is virtual...neither does it belong to the future, it is in the here and now” (Baudrillard 3). Baudrillardian postmodern apocalypse, as defined here, is not the life-altering revelation of St. John or even a Hollywood vision of end time catastrophe, but another simulation without any origins in any “real” *reality*, simply another of the myriad of constructions. This contemporary anti-apocalyptic torture, what Andrew McMurry calls the “protracted apocalypse” (2), is the torture of waiting, a continual, endless, unfulfilled desire for an end that will never come to interpret the events leading up to it, “for there is no teleology at work here, let alone eschatology, a dialectic, or even simple logic” (8). Baudrillard’s vision of apocalyptic “catastrophe” and the “trauma” caused by it lies in pinpointing the delusional false hope, the unquenched desire for origins, absolutes and reality that the apocalyptic fantasy perpetuates. As James Berger notes, “In Baudrillard, the catastrophe is the end of the whole apocalyptic hermeneutic itself”(8). The apocalypse can no longer be used as a fantastic metaphysical tool to structure, interpret and legitimate; it is, according to Baudrillard, a weightless simulacrum of itself, a construction, like the “God” construct, that provides a counterfeit ideal of truth and meaning. McMurry notes that this period of waiting, this endless state of contemporary apocalypse, gains power as it grows in anticipation:

In truth, apocalypticism depends on the asymptomatic inability of the world to ever reach conclusion; the perpetual pregnancy of the apocalyptic moment is what keeps its metaphorical appeal so strong. (20)

The growth of secular apocalypticism follows the pattern of consumption; desire grows as its fulfilment is withheld.

Baudrillard's postmodern subjects fantasize about an apocalypse as it is a break from the meaningless routine of consumption that governs their lives. This idea of cultural saturation relates to Zadie Smith's questions about the connection between being "comfortable, white and American" and still being burned by the fear of death. In this media and wealth saturated culture, the monotony of a comfortable or even extravagant lifestyle can be paralyzing, exhausting. When everything, even manufactured relationships and emotions, can be bought or sold, one "desirable" break from the monotony comes from an obsession with the violent, the catastrophic and the spectacle. In this sense, the purpose of the Hollywood vision of "apocalypse" is two fold: it provides a "shock" that enables a brief release from a predictable, apathetic, and commodified lifestyle whilst also creating a false sense of security and protection from death by transforming it into mere fictional spectacle. Ironically, the "release" from media and commodity induced apathy is itself a commodity, a distractive entertainment that shocks its viewers into a brief moment of "pleasure".

These burned postmodern subjects, continually and apathetically waiting for nothing, are vividly represented in Bret Easton Ellis's novels; they are the extreme "victims" of Baudrillard's anti-apocalyptic catastrophe. Ellis's characters, devoid of emotion or any sense of identity, are analogous to Eliot's "Hollow Men" who ask to be



remembered: “Not as lost/ Violent souls, but only/ As the hollow men/ The stuffed men” (Eliot 77, lines 15-18). Violence is desired here as it is at least “something” that connects one back to the real, transforming the subject back into a human being rather than merely a “stuffed” man without any desire to act, think or feel. The modern narrator of Eliot’s poem has a central consciousness, is able to utter his specific desires; Ellis’s postmodern, decentred subjects cannot. In Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* the central characters tend to find “release” only in watching ultra-violent snuff films as all of their other “pleasures”—having promiscuous sex, doing cocaine, buying cars—have become “boring”. The (lack of) narrative in these characters’ lives have clearly deviated from Fiddes’s paradigm of the eschatological nature of the text. They have no desire for the knowledge of the beginning or an end; they merely exist. Ellis’s nihilistic narrative form reflects Baudrillard’s catastrophe of apathy derived from replacing any “real” with the “simulacra”. His subjects have forgotten any sense of the “real” world outside their constructions. Baudrillard’s description of these anti-apocalyptic times is a perfect match for the world of Ellis’s novels:

We have arrived at a point where there are no longer any causes, all we are left with are effects. The world presents itself to us, effectively.

There is no longer any reason for it, and God is dead. (“Hystericizing” 2)

In this same apparently hopeless cultural climate, Clay, the central protagonist of *Less Than Zero* reflects upon the violent lyrics of a pop song as the novel closes:

The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from

the asphalt and being blinded by the sun. These images stayed with me even after I left the city. Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards. After I left. (195)

In a world devoid of any legitimizing apocalypse, no revelations that point individuals towards an objective reference point, these violent images from a manufactured pop song have become Clay's main "point of reference". The constructed reality of pop music has become an anti-revelation, a vision of doom, violence and destruction that completely replaces any direct association with "reality". Clay is one of these "hungry" and "unfulfilled" individuals, so sedated by his excessive culture that he cannot recognize the source or goal of his own hunger. This violent, disturbing image is the novel's key anti-epiphany, a vivid realization about the utter hopelessness of Clay's spiritual paralysis. Elizabeth Young asks, "Why, here in consumer heaven, in the ultimate high-tech playpen, are these people so wretched, so twisted?" (26). Her question provides its own answer; any "heaven" built on consumer ideals is merely a product of its own endlessly carnivorous system, rather than a transcendent alternative. This is a picture of "satiation that is disastrous for it simultaneously leads to lockjaw and inertia" (Baudrillard, "Anorexic Ruins" 30) This "consumer heaven" is merely a glossy façade for the hell of complete self-indulgence that is the bottom line of these characters' empty lives.

Contemporary consumer reality, a "high-tech playpen" in which decentred youth have been "nurtured by the amniotic fluid of popular culture" (Beaudoin 3) is also the focus of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. DeLillo's apocalyptic narrative depicts the family

and social lives of those who look to the media “as a primary source of meaning” (Beaudoin 3), emphasizing the almost complete commodification of both personal and public spheres. Unlike Ellis, Delillo’s “subjects” are humanized by their longings for transcendence and mystery, a longing that is long extinguished in the fading, or perhaps non-existent, souls of Ellis’s victims of indifferent anti-apocalypse. The spiritual longings in *White Noise* are poignantly represented as a paralyzing fear of death, and a hope that the secular, modern apocalypse is not the only “end”. Like Coupland’s spiritual sojourners and, in direct contrast to Ellis’s ciphers, Delillo’s Gladney family sense that there is some pattern and sense in the universe. Delillo’s searching family, having rejected institutionalized religion, turn towards the alternative institution of collective consumption which is rich in codes and data that are waiting to be interpreted. Delillo’s exploration of the “religious underside of American consumerism” (Phillips) is a predecessor to Coupland’s revivification of the spiritual in his fictional representations of postmodern life. Both Coupland and Delillo develop characters that search for order, structure, meaning and ultimately, transcendence in a consumer society. Delillo’s protagonists, so desperate to worship *something*, turn their affection primarily to their immediate commodified reality, whereas Coupland’s protagonists push beyond the artificial in an attempt to redefine “real”.

Don Delillo’s 1984 novel *White Noise* is the seminal precursor to the current deluge of apocalyptic novels; the intrinsic connection between death and advertising in postmodern America is the disturbing core of the novel. This novel can also be read as a backdrop of sorts to many of Coupland’s novels. The effects of a postreligious childhood, and parents who advocated secular freedom and progress rather than



traditional Christian faith, play a large part in forming Coupland's characters, but we rarely see extended pictures of his characters' childhood or early home life. *White Noise* is the story of the Gladney family, held together through both a collective fear of death and the hope of refuge through consumerism. This family, so similar to the many completely "secular" households that raised Coupland's "burned" protagonists, tries to find patterns of meaning and order—a glimpse of hope beyond the frightening reality of death—in the comforting, connecting realm of the reality-defining structures of corporate America. In *White Noise*, Delillo explores the spiritual overtones of product codes, television airwaves and pseudo-liturgical product jingles, the sacred scriptures of a contemporary family desperate for the hope of eternity in the midst of consumer paradise.

Jack Gladney, husband to fourth wife Babette and professor of Hitler studies in small town America, is terrified of facing his own mortality. Jack's story, an exploration of both the family and academic spheres of his world, is haunted by his fear of death. Jack and Babette frequently ask each other, in both verbal and nonverbal ways, "Who will die first?" (15). In her desperate search to escape mortality, Babette agrees to sleep with Willie Mink, a pharmaceutical developer, as an exchange for sampling his anti-drug pill, Dylar. Jack also tries to escape death's terrifying and unknown "otherness" by facing its historically physical manifestation head on; by choosing Adolf Hitler as his academic focal point, he is confronting - and thus attempting to tame - the twentieth century's archetypal face of death. Neither of these approaches provide them comfort or tools to cope with the unknown, the devastating "other" of death..

Although Jack and Babette cannot deny the unpredictable, yet solid presence of death in their lives, they seek no refuge in traditional, religious narratives that provide structure, explaining the nature and meaning of death. The only pseudo-comforts left in the hyperreal postmodern world are in familiarity and security, not from relationships (between each other or between humanity and God), but from the face of television personalities and “reliable” products. Like Tyler from Coupland’s *Shampoo Planet*, the Gladneys have learned to trust the promises of dependable products, products that provide structure built on the selling patterns of the all-powerful manufacturers and personalized buying patterns of the consumers. This practice creates a synthetic “god” to trust for important purchases and a contingent sense of self built upon “personalized” shopping choices. When Jack and Babette go shopping together, they are also assembling their familial relationships and gaining security via trustworthy product choices:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (20)

Jack and Babette's entire notion of "replenishment...security and contentment" is based on the continually unfulfilled needs both created and fed by consumerism. Just as Coupland's Tyler only feels at home among products that are "safe and heavily advertised" (*Shampoo Planet* 260), Jack and Babette's family trust the media to tell them what is wholesome and good as they search for "familiar, life enhancing labels" (Delillo 119). The "snug home in their souls" that apparently desires some sort of stability, refreshment and unchanging security apparently gains this, not from seeking a transcendent being, but from seeking an array of "reliable" products that are designed to temporarily pacify their unfulfilled desires.

Within the Gladney family, however, there is a continual, dark, unuttered awareness that once these seemingly insatiable desires are met there will not be just contentment, but death; to Jack and Babette, the desire for things is a sign of life, a welcomed restlessness. Having abandoned the security and consistency of traditional religious faith, the postreligious Western culture of Delillo's novel turns to the seemingly omnipotent and omnipresent forces of multinational corporations who provide streamlined, consumer friendly relics of a newfound faith of consumerism. In the absence of divinely ordained absolutes, manufacturers rely on the age-old constancy of material desire to draw consumers into a relationship with products that provide a "new" source of meaning and authority by producing momentary comfort, familiarity and the illusion of security. The corporation becomes, in eyes of the consumers, a new secure "father figure" that knows what is "good for us". The simple, natural life, the life of others who "need less, expect less" and are content with both the non-communal and non-artificial nature of "lonely walks in the evening" is a life that still appeals to some;



this slight remnant still cling to a nearly forgotten unreal notion of “reality” that appears irrelevant when contrasted with the new standards of and sources for meaning. Their search for a simple content “reality” deprives them of the “fullness of being” that consumerism’s continual sense of newness and “replenishment” provides the Gladney family.

There is an obvious, acute irony in Jack Gladney’s dependence and trust in the invisible, yet iconic producers of the products that furnish his family’s lives with a sense of manufactured warmth and security. As educated consumers, the novel’s readers know that these “dependable” products have the capacity to change at any moment; their sense of endurance and dependability is always and only based on the ebb and flow of the production of capital, the ultimate source of all temporal hyperreal that gives the appearance of “security”. Just as a product can be taken from the public market, it can also stay in and change its image, packaging and appeal according to its intended target market. This security in consumerism is really a security in the virtual image of “home” that companies have cleverly peddled to needy “target markets”. The reality of the product is transient, but its appeal and image is fixed in the mind of consumers as an enduring hope of a happy, comfortable and better life. This secure image is also a type of secular, temporal salvation from the lingering dread of death. No longer relying on divine revelation for a source of guidance, knowledge and morality, the Gladneys turn to the supermarket, another of Bauman’s temples of consumption, a place that Jack Gladney claims *must* be good because “Supermarkets this large and clean and modern are a revelation to me” (38). For Jack’s friend and visiting pop culture professor,

Murray, this virtual world of consumer “revelation” holds the key to understanding profound “truths” about its patrons’ spiritual state. Murray explains that:

This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it’s a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It’s full of psychic data...Everything is concealed by symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. (37)

The great “mystery” of traditional faiths, once proclaimed and explored in church buildings, has been replaced with an enigmatic combination of both manmade and “psychic” data that lies deeply coded within products that are readily available at the local twenty four hour supermarket “temple” of choice.

In the absence of the transcendent, glossy supermarket rows impose a sense of order and structure upon the chaotic nature of postmodern life. Like Claire from Coupland’s *Generation X*, Gladney is unsatisfied with the notion of living life as a series of disconnected fragments—he longs for shape and order to the flux of reality. Jack recognizes that “As we surge up into the world, we try to devise a shape, a plan...your whole life is a ...scheme, a diagram” (291). Rather than searching for this structure through communal storytelling like Coupland’s Gen X’ers who have rejected the oppressive structures of a corporate metanarrative, he seeks instructions on how to develop a life scheme in the ingenious layout of the supermarket, the apex of manmade organizational skills. Jack continues to reflect on this desire for some sort of plan and link it to a deeper longing for an unchanging, hopeful “foundation”:

But the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us.

Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip. (170)

The “well stocked, musical and bright” world of the supermarket is a vision of order and well-being, a superficial sense of eternal life that only gets better. This tempting world of colour, entertainment and distraction provides a vision of comfort and sustainability that keeps Jack and Babette’s minds off death, even if for just a few fleeting moments. The world of advertising, a “league of anti-death” (Smith xv) provides the illusions that momentarily calm Jack and Babette’s fears. Not only does this world of products and advertising supply the image-based promises of a “better” future, they generate the desire for more that is evidence of a life drive of sorts. The uninterrupted chain of unfulfilled consumer longings constructs a “hopeful” narrative of desire. Once again, religious or political metanarratives are replaced with a capitalist success story, a promise of buying the way to comfort, happiness and a white picket fence. According to Murray, the pathways to these dreams of domesticity, security and salvation from the fear of death can be found, easily enough, in our local supermarkets.

Murray recognizes that continual desire for things is a desire for sustainability; when we are finally content, saturated and fulfilled, we have no more to look forward to and life, as we know it, is over. He muses on the connections between the lack of desire and the finality of death as he tells Jack, “Tibetans try to see death for what it is. It is the end of the attachment to things” (38) He explains the Tibetan practice of artful death, in which a priest engages in “chants, numerology, horoscopes, recitations” to indicate a passing into another, pure space, a freedom from the constraints of commodities; the complete abandonment of material things indicates the dominance of the spirit, an



enlightened state. This is a contrast to the capitalist West in which dying is not seen as a creative art, a transference into a purer state, but a loss of earthly reality that is devastating as it is the only reality that is known and believed in. Like the Tibetans, post-religious Westerners see an attachment to things as defining the condition of earthly life, but with no promise of an afterlife, the acquisition of things to create the illusion of avoiding death, becomes the central creative endeavour. Murray explains that, “Here we don’t die, we shop...” (38). This act of shopping nurtures the “attachment to things” that signifies the continuance of life itself; the creative act of sustaining the self through shopping is an art form that enables us to create the illusion of evading death. Once the narrative of desire has reached its resolution, the plot will end in facing the great mystery beyond the layers of shiny supermarket data. Jack voices this realization as he tells Murray, “All plots move deathward. This is the nature of plots... We edge nearer to death every time we plot” (26). Jack’s fear of “plotting” invests his dependence on shopping with an almost religious, life-affirming symbolism. Although he desires structure and direction in his life, he fears the finality that this will bring, thus choosing the arbitrary “rules” of the supermarket shelves is much less frightening. The constant promise of new and better products provides comfort of a new and better life in the face of death’s absolute structure.

The movement of a more “stable” plot in the form of a metanarrative is always towards closure, ending, resolution—it attempts to impose finality and erase endless possibilities that represent the continuation of earthly, knowable life. This desire for the end is, as Baudrillard notes, also the desire for an origin—an attempt to find purpose and meaning from a structure that has been planned, recognized and brought to its

conclusion. Gladney's comment about the "deathward" direction of plots echoes Derrida's crucial question in *Writing and Difference*: "Is not the center, the absence of play and difference, another name for death?" (297) Derrida also sees that the nostalgic longing for an origin, a centre and an end as the glue that assures a singular meaning and finally closes "the book". The transcendental signified provides the overarching stability, closure and fixed meaning to the signifiers that point towards it, giving authority to a plot, or a structure that imposes a sense of meaning or purpose on the subject of the "story". According to Derrida, this fixed place of origin, this centre, kills the freedom of undecidability in a language with no fixed origin or referent. In Gladney's commercial world too, the ever-changing products and continual desire to shop is a manifestation of "play"; the death of this desire and clinging to a "true" stability, in the form of a divinely originated plan or structure, is the end of his desire, his affirming randomness and his choice.

Babette and Jack are not the only Gladneys to cling to the "trustworthy" world of consumerism for security and hope. The Gladney family has four children living with them, all from different marriages, and the parents of this patchwork family commune with their children in the most typical of postmodern spaces, the mall and the couch in front of the television. Although the Gladney children are not old enough to understand the fear of death that drives their parents into relationship with the virtual reality of organized shopping spaces and media, they have inherited the same relationship in an even more primal way. The lure of shopping "for its own sake" (84) is a constant thrill that fuels their young, uninhibited desires. One of the most "intimate" of family bonding moments in *White Noise* is when Jack agrees to go shopping at the local mall

with the entire family: "My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last" (83). Jack is baptized into the cult of shopping; this gluttonous shopping spree is a vision of consumer paradise, a synthetic freedom with no (immediate) consequences. Jack revels in this newfound method of binging as he says, "When I could not decide between two shirts, they encouraged me to buy both...I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it" (83-84). As children are typically the best, most excitable and open consumers - the prime target market - Jack enjoys experiencing the "joys" of shopping from their perspective, a perspective that is paradoxically weathered and "wise" in this consumer context for the very reason that it is naïve and open to all suggestions.

The parent/ child roles reverse as Jack enters the world of the mall, a haven of pure unadulterated buying frenzy, a world where his children are now the seasoned experts and become, "my guides to endless well-being" (83). Although Jack has formerly found security in both the necessity and appeal of the supermarket layout, the microcosmic world of the mall taps into an even more basic instinct of raw desire, a "sense of fulfilment" that Thomas J. Ferraro argues, "seems to lie in the spending of money, not the actual acquisition of goods" (21). Jack's child guides know "what is good for him" in this context; having been nurtured by the postmodern world of marketing and media as its very prime target, they know that almost anything, including a "relationship" with their father, can be bought. Zygmunt Bauman notes that "children are trained to treat all relationships in market terms" ("Consumerist Syndrome") and this training seeps even into the sphere of parent/ child relationships. When Jack finally enters the child's temple of product, image and desire worship, then, Ferraro argues, "the



structure of the family is regrounded in the actual business of consumption" (22). Jack seems to experience a beatific, quasi-spiritual and communal connection with his family as he enters their sacred place of worship. Delillo's mall descriptions evoke images of the mysterious and sacred:

Voices rose ten stories from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, missing with noises from the tiers, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction. (84)

This world of transactions, where temporary "salvation" and "fulfilment" can be bought and sold, transforms the Gladneys into a happy family unit, if even for the few hours that the mall's fluorescent lights transfix this moment of gluttony into a shared sacrament.

After this intense postmodern bonding experience, the Gladneys drive home in silence, so "full" that they cannot speak, after gorging themselves with the mall's delicious offerings. On arrival home, each walks separately and silently into his or her own room. Once out of the path of the fluorescent mall lights, the family unit de-unifies and Jack becomes again an outsider as he watches daughter Steffie sitting in front of the TV set where "she moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken" (84). Steffie perches herself in front of her most respected teacher as she mimics the words of media-generated wisdom that will momentarily seep their way into her subconscious. In *White Noise* the role of the television is paradoxical; it both isolates family members from one another and instigates "community". Although all of the Gladneys have private moments in front of the television, they are all receiving the same

training that creates a shared frame of reference. The new “reality” of TV land is more than just entertainment; it is the fabric of the family’s very subconscious. Delillo emphasizes television’s omnipresence and subliminal influence as, frequently during pauses in character’s conversations or silent moments, he tells us what words are being spoken on television. The television, which is always on somewhere in the house, is personified, the living source of endless knowledge for the family. This continual “white noise” affects every part of his children’s interpretations of reality: as Steffie sleeps she mutters, not childlike fantasies, but product names: “*Toyota Celica*” (154). When Jack’s visiting daughter Bee witnesses the victims of a plane crash attempting to recover she asks her father, “Where is the media?”. When told that there is no available media she comments that, “They went through all that for nothing?” (92). Something does not become an event, is not “real” and important, unless recorded by media.

Babette is quite wary of television’s “narcotic undertow” (16) that attempts to calmly and individually drown each of her children. To try and demystify the lure of the television world, she calls for a mandatory family supper/ TV night every Friday night. By enforcing a shared viewing experience, she hopes to “de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it a wholesome domestic sport” (16). The family awkwardly bonds while watching both sitcoms and real disaster footage. Although Babette’s intention is to make TV mundane and boring, stripping it of all of its mystery, she is conversely sanctioning its reality and importance by having the family rally around it to generate together time during their only significant, organized event. Jack’s colleague Murray sees the world of television just as he does the world of the supermarket-- charged with a quasi-religious appeal that provides both excitement and familiar comfort:

Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. (51)

In the absence of traditional creeds, familiar media mantras such as Nike's "Just Do It" provide some sense of stability and shared community agreement. Product names and advertising mantras have become the doctrinal creed and the liturgy of a new generation.

Ironically, the same companies that produce "divine" logos and reliable products have also produced what becomes known as an "airborne toxic event" and forces the Gladneys to leave their home and relocate in a communal fallout shelter. On their first night in the shelter, Jack watches his children sleep; he sees this as a highly spiritual experience as "It is the closest I come to God" (147). These little consumers, previously Jack's all knowing guides in a spending frenzy, now appear to have surrendered all control and don relaxed faces that reflect complete peace and trust. Their state of complete surrender suggests their communion with some sort of transcendence; this apparent connection appeals to Jack's deepest desires for the hopefully unchanging truth of something beyond the world of consumer surfaces:

There must be something, somewhere, large and grand and redoubtable enough to justify this shining and implicit belief. A feeling of desperate piety swept over me. It was cosmic in nature, full of yearnings and reachings. (154)

According to Paul Maltby, this idealistic vision of childhood communion with transcendence reflects a romantic yearning for metaphysics that has been dismissed in



the postmodern spiritual climate (73). Jack has a flash of hope that he might also enter the secret and sacred space between child and God when he struggles to hear what Steffie is uttering in her sleep. It was “a language not of this world”...that he “struggled to understand” as “I was convinced that she was saying something, fitting together units of *stable meaning*” (154 italics mine). Then she finally utters two clear words, words that Jack hungrily grasp as they “seem to have ritual meaning, (are) part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant: ‘*Toyota Celica*’” (155). The child’s dream world, that intimate inner place that Jack relies upon for some connection to “stable meaning” appears to connect, not with God, but with the white noise and replication of the TV reality that has trained it. This does not discourage Jack; although he recognizes that these “supranational names, computer generated, more or less universally pronounceable” are “part of every child’s brain noise” he still testifies that “the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence” (155). This tender, sincere, almost sacred moment is also infused with deep, perhaps even tragic, irony. As Jack searches for transcendence, meaning and impenetrable mystery through the eyes of his child, he only finds traces of the capitalistic postmodern sublime that seeps its way into the subconscious of even the youngest consumer. Maltby may be correct in recognizing the romantic nature of Jack’s longing for salvation through childhood innocence, but he fails to recognize that Delillo’s vision of childhood is quite sceptical of this romantic allure. Delillo paints quite a sympathetic picture of Gladney, a man paralyzed by his fear of death, looking to his children for the secrets to eternal life; the only answer he receives is temporal, not supernatural, and just as perishable as human life itself.

The after-effects of the airborne toxic event include stunningly beautiful sunsets that cause Jack to once again seek something beyond the visible, temporal world. Jack's death fears have multiplied as he has been exposed to toxic chemicals; there is now solid statistical data on his impending death. As he looks to the sunset, a beautiful spawn of the same chemicals that solidified his toxic death sentence, he wonders who or what is behind the sky: "Don't let us die, I want to cry out to that fifth century sky ablaze with mystery and spiral light... Who decides these things? What is out there? Who are you?" (103) Knowing that he ultimately has no control over the course of his life and timing of his death, Jack asks the questions that he has been avoiding for so long. The threat and finality of death cause Jack to get "closer to things we haven't learned about ourselves" (151); in his desperate fear, he discovers that he has no control and longs for someone or something bigger than himself to make sense of the senselessness of the seemingly hopeless situation. Jack recognizes that in a postmodern culture of distraction and undecideability, death is the only solid reality that no one can deny. Entertainment and reliable weekly grocery lists are "secure" facades obscuring any ability to contemplate the solid foundations of death. Jack longs for death to also be a façade, a surface, a depthless and transient cultural product: "If only one could see death as just another *surface* one inhabits for a time. Another facet of cosmic reason. A zoom down bright angel trail" (243, italics mine). Death is not just a trend, phase, or expendable shopping item, and Jack's pleas to some force beyond the skies indicates his recognition that death itself points to a possible, non-material alternative that he cannot access.

When Jack confronts a Jehovah's Witness who believes that eternal life is a solid reality, a sure alternative to death, he is struck by the man's confidence. He comments that:

I wondered about his eerie self-assurance, his freedom from doubt. Is this the point of Armageddon? No ambiguity, no more doubt. He was ready to run into the next world. He was forcing the next world to seep into my consciousness. (137)

Although Jack finds this assurance in the reality of the next world "eerie" he begins to wonder if there truly is a "next world" that could provide an answer, and possibly an escape, for him. In indicating that the "point of Armageddon" is possibly the absence of ambiguity and the end of doubt, he also implies that the revelation of "Armageddon" is the appearance of an absolute truth that shatters all contingencies. This line of thought, scepticism mixed with a small sense of admiration and perhaps even jealousy, parallels the thinking of the nameless narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City* when he encounters the Orthodox Jew on the Subway. Both men long to know if there is any "universal solvent" that controls their individual fates and determines their sense of purpose and morality.

Babette's fears are as strong and compulsive as Jack's, so obsessive that she takes an experimental drug, Dylar, to try to ward off the paralyzing fear of death. Once Jack learns of Dylar's existence, he is desperate to try some as well. He never succeeds in taking Dylar, but, instead, creates a career around another figurative death immunity "pill" that he can swallow to sooth the fear of the end. Jack Gladney, the world's expert in "Hitler studies", spends most of his waking hours fixated on the horrors of senseless



death. Ironically, Jack and his associates talk about Hitler as if he were just another historical figure or even celebrity; they spend hours theorizing about his “great achievements” as well as the mundane details of his life, such as his great love for his dog. Paul Cantor notes that “In a world where truth is generally thought to be relative, Hitler often seems to stand as the lone remaining absolute” (39). Jack longs for some sense of absolutes with which he can structure his life and derive a sense of morality. Although this pervasive longing for absolutes somewhat indicates their always already presence, their source is a clouded mystery. Jack is greatly disturbed by the conception of world without these standards. When his son, Heinrich, admits that he agrees with a materialist view of the world, that “we are the sum of chemical impulses”, Jack is deeply uncomfortable about the logical conclusions to this position. He asks:

What happens to good and evil in this system? Passion, envy and hate? Do they become a tangle of neurons? Are you telling me that a whole tradition of human failings is now at an end, that cowardice, sadism, molestation are meaningless terms?...What about murderous rage?...What happens when we reduce it to cells and molecules? (200)

Although living in a postmodern fog of shifting truth claims, Jack still longs for some sort of absolutes to assign meaning to human life and action. The above statements are ironic as Jack, Hitler professor, has reduced the visible presence of absolute death to a safe academic subject that can be tamed through discussion. Cantor rightfully observes that Jack and his colleagues “risk draining the horror by assimilating it into familiar categories” (39). Knowing that Hitler is the undeniable reminder of the totalizing nature of death, Gladney attempts to domesticate the reality of evil and mystery of death by

turning their chief twentieth century representative into an academic trend. In Jack's university environment, no one academic subject is privileged above another; therefore, there is no hierarchy between "high" and "low" subjects. Ironically, the same Jack who longs for some sense of absolute truth, draws comfort from this eradication of ranking, as it supports his fantasy notion of the erasure of absolute death.

Jack's struggle with questions of spirituality and the presence/ absence of absolutes continues near the end of the novel as he attempts to kill his wife's Dylar supplier, Willie Mink. In a black comic moment, Jack finds Mink in a deserted, dingy hotel in "Germantown", shoots him, but does not manage to kill him. He then decides to drive Mink to the nearby hospital, a desolate structure adorned with only a neon cross and populated with a few elderly German-speaking nuns and doctors. While waiting, Jack admires a painting that depicts JFK and the Pope shaking hands in heaven. He first finds this humorous, then surrenders his cynicism and wonders longingly:

Why shouldn't it be true? Why shouldn't they meet somewhere, advanced in time, against a layer of fluffy cumulus, to clasp hands? Why shouldn't we all meet, as in some soft epic of protean gods and ordinary people, aloft, well-formed, shining? (317)

The realization that someone still believes in an afterlife, and the presence of this pictorial depiction of heaven is comforting, so comforting that he decides to ask one of the nuns, "What does the Church say about heaven today? Is it still the same old heaven, like that, in the sky?" (317). She immediately turns to him and sharply says "Do you think we are stupid?" (317). Jack, shocked by this response, begins to asked about heaven being the home of God, angels and those whose souls have been "saved"; the

nun replies "Saved? What is saved? This is a dumb head, who would come in here and talk about angels. Show me an angel. Please. I want to see" (317). Jack is confused, shocked, disappointed by this response as he recognizes that this nun's materialism is perhaps even more entrenched than his own.

He continues to question the nun about church doctrines and biblical narratives; each question is met with the same type of shocking reply: "You would come in bleeding from the street and tell me six days it took to make a universe" (318). When Jack asks if "your dedication is a pretense?", she replies "Our pretense is a dedication" (319), explaining that she and her sisters must keep the illusion of belief as a comfort for all of those who don't believe: "We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible" (319). Jack, now both angry and increasingly more desperate asks, "And nothing survives? Death is the end?" (319). Although Jack has chosen to live a life without faith, the presence of those with faith has given him the shadow of a comfort that maybe there was something more after this life. The nun's response devastates him; when she begins to answer the death questions he says, "I don't want to hear this. This is terrible...You're a nun. Act like one" (320). He continues to explain to her that there are many great thinkers throughout history who debated theology and that, surely, some of them must have believed. The nun begins speaking in German, just to irritate him, and then Jack finally leaves, distraught, confused, with the same dread of death resurfacing, heavier than before. Jack, a man who longs for "an order at some deeper level", imagined that he could perhaps comprehend more of this order in the presence of someone with great faith. In this devastating interaction, Jack learns that these "experts" in faith have no access to a higher level of order or deeper level of truth, but merely



possess a great gift for acting. This nun's false belief is a dramatic contrast to the Jehovah's Witness robotic faith, posing the question of which worldview is more honest, closer to a sense of truth, order and reality.

Delillo does not answer these questions; the last few pages of the novel are again reminders of the new religion of consumerism that is both a blessing and curse in Jack's life. We are reminded that the corporations whose nuclear pollution has brought on Jack's terminal status also provide the objects of his sense of worship, order and awe. As the Gladney family watches the amazing, exotic sunset, a sunset that has become much more beautiful ever since the "airborne toxic event", they are overwhelmed with a sense of awe that "transcends previous categories of awe" (324). He does not know if they are watching "in wonder or in dread" (324), but they are certainly confronted with the sublime, an overpowering, unrepresentable beauty that cannot be processed or re-articulated. This, a truly religious experience, points to the mysterious force behind the sky, the possibility of both a supernatural and a technological creator.

The final paragraph of the novel begins with a sentence indicating disorder, confusion, perhaps even crisis: "The supermarket shelves have been rearranged" (325). Delillo's comic, yet harrowing and poetic description of "panic" and "agitation" in the aisles as the shoppers walk in a "fragmented trance", is a foreshadowing of postmodern apocalypse as the sense of order and religious reverence is stripped away. Having adhered to the myth of capitalist progress's narrative arc for hope, structure, and meaning, they now scurry around the supermarket "trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they'd seen the cream of wheat" (325). Delillo's ingenious, darkly comic and ironic description reads like a scene from a

disaster film, a crisis of epic proportions. This dramatic language, juxtaposed with such a common scene and seemingly trivial life change, indicates a loss of faith, perhaps paralleling Jack's encounter with the nuns just a few pages earlier. Towards the end of the lengthy paragraph, Delillo infuses a ray of sinister "hope" as the consumers realize that the machines, not the products, are now completely in control, thus imposing a greater sense of order. Although the shoppers are initially distressed, trying to reorder the apparent chaos:

In the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves of radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stacked with brightly colored goods.  
(326)

A greater, more unified, comprehensive sense of order is introduced with the presence of the scanners, the supermarket's "infallible" interpreters. Omniscient within the walls of the supermarket, they decode the language of the product barcodes, a language that takes on metaphysical dimensions in this paragraph as it enables the dead to "speak to the living" (326).

Delillo's last paragraph does not mention any characters' names; the central narrative voice has become a collective, anonymous "we". No longer an individual, Gladney is one of the shoppers, his baptism into consumer reality is also indicative of a death of identity. Just as radiation has guaranteed the absolute finality of Jack's physical death, this cheerful, suburban "radiation" feeds the desire to shop, the ability to forget

about death by becoming one of the many in the checkout line. As “we” move towards the infinite light of the almighty scanner, there is time to “glance at the tabloids in the racks” because:

Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead. (326)

The tabloids, purveyors of “fiction” disguised as “fact”, provide the mythology needed to sustain the shoppers when they crave something beyond the world of machines. The mystical language of their products has now been decoded, but the stories of the “supernatural” and the “cults of the famous and the dead” provide enough archaic faith, repackaged as novelty, to satisfy. Like the unnamed narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City*, the now nameless narrator of *White Noise* regards these tabloids as scripture, providing a small sense of hope in the form of an absurd, trivial, contemporary “faith”.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Re-divinizing Apocalypse: *Microserfs*, *Eleanor Rigby*

In contrast to the dark world of Ellis's anti-apocalyptic fiction, devoid of the desire or ability to receive revelation, and to Delillo's *White Noise*, which portrays an impotent search for spirituality amidst supermarket aisles and waves of fatal radiation, Coupland's work is rife with both apocalyptic imagery and manifest revelations that warn, judge and bring new spiritual life to his characters, thus breaking through what Elizabeth Young calls the uniform "Disneyfication of daily life" (26). Coupland uses many different "enlightenment" techniques within his fiction, including everything from the inclusion of simple parables, to the revelatory jolts of the epiphanic moment, to the blatant presence of ghosts and other supernatural messengers from the "other side". These different narrative techniques serve to provide an "outside" voice that offers both a critique and alternative to the postmodern malaise. He attempts to look to the obscured, yet underlying, spiritual dimension for answers provided to Zadie Smith's questions concerning "the originating trauma" of privileged, white, Western society. The first two Coupland pieces to be discussed in this chapter, a short story from *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996) called "How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven?" and the novel *Microserfs* both attempt to diagnose the postmodern "problem" of anti-apocalypticism, exposing the root causes for the apathy and spiritual restlessness present in affluent North American society. The third piece, his 2004 novel *Eleanor Rigby*, incorporates an engagement with either divine intervention or insanity in the form of prophetic visions of the end times. Regardless of the cause of these visions, their presence has a

redeeming effect on the novel's main characters. These pictures of the afterlife echo the reality of devastating supernatural apocalypse so poignantly and fully represented in the novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, which will be discussed in the final chapter. Coupland's work examines both the secular fear of hopeless apocalyptic destruction and the faith-based hope of another, purposeful form of divine revelation that both ends and defines human destiny.

In the short story, "How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven?" from *Polaroids from the Dead*, Deadhead Columbia tells a regular bedtime story to her children that doubles as a parabolic response to Zadie Smith's question concerning the spiritual and psychological trauma of the contemporary age. Columbia lulls baby Logan to sleep by telling him of "an enchanted city next to the ocean whose citizens, favored by God, lived with great abundance, and were blessed with lights and bridges and spires and horses that never grew tired" (57). This picture of affluence and supposed enchantment, a city that is both "blessed" with continual wealth and stability as it is "favored by God" is an obvious reflection of the West, particularly America, which has often traditionally referred to itself as "God's Country". The residents of this privileged city are soon concerned about their survival as they experience a drought, but they receive a visitor who explains their predicament to them. This visitor, a walking, talking skeleton, tells them that, "I am the skeleton that lies inside you all" (59). Although the citizens have prayed and prayed for rain, they don't receive any, and begin to fear that they are cursed. The skeleton assures them that they are not cursed, but that they need to know "a fact":

While you live in mortal splendour—with glass elevators and silk shirts and grapes in December—the price you pay for your comfort is a

collapsed vision of heaven—the loss of ability to see pictures in your heads of an afterlife. You pray for rain, but you are also praying for pictures in your heads that will renew your faith in an afterlife. (59)

The inhabitants of this “enchanted” city have settled, in their “mortal splendour” for a kind of heaven on earth, a false utopia of material wealth that erases their visions of eternity and darkens their understandings of their own deepest needs. The more they indulge their inexhaustible desires for wealth, comfort and pleasure, the more their understanding of their deepest needs is numbed. As they pray for practical things, they are unable to articulate their deepest desires, which include an assurance that there is purpose and a structure provided by the existence of a reality that transcends their pseudo-heaven of earthly things.

The skeleton in Columbia’s story, as well as his message, are quickly rejected by the inhabitants of the privileged city. As the story continues, the beautiful city itself begins to crumble as “glass elevators crack”, bridges fall down and all the awe-inspiring buildings are destroyed, one by one. In between each bout of decay and destruction, the skeleton returns and re-emphasizes his revelatory words. Only after the city is almost completely levelled in a fire, do the city’s king and his hard-hearted subjects finally listen to the skeleton’s words. These increasingly devastating periods of material destruction are, like the biblical plagues in Egypt, emblems of judgement and a severe demand for change that ultimately leads to liberation. The residents of this fairy tale city, like the population of the affluent Western world, are in a slavery of their own making as they worship the gods of capitalism and luxury. Unlike the biblical Exodus narrative, the judgement of this story falls upon those who are chosen, “favored by god”



(as it does in many other Old Testament narratives). The “plagues” in Columbia’s story are indications of a severe mercy, a means to unplug the ears and open the eyes of those who have unknowingly become blind and deaf to spiritual realities because of their own over-indulgence in worldly pleasures. They have learned to trust only in the things that they, themselves, can produce, and perhaps assign a godlike quality to those who can produce the most goods and the best quality, reaping the greatest material rewards from these. When the king and citizens of the kingdom finally surrender their pride and listen to the skeleton, they admit, “We are losing our soul. We realize now that our city’s splendour tricked us into forgetting about death and the afterlife...” (60). These comments are reminiscent of Zadie Smith’s claim that advertising is the “league of anti-death” that distracts us from focusing on anything but our immediate, carnal desires. Just as the deepest spiritual desires of these fairy-tale residents are masked under their prayers for immediate physical needs, any desire to ponder significant questions about origin, death, or the possibility of reality beyond the material world of postmodern comfort, are safely masked under prayers to the gods of advertising and entertainment who will provide temporary moments of pleasure and distraction. The discussion of questions concerning spirituality and the possibility of transcendence are perceived “irrelevant”.

While speaking with interviewer Tony Watkins, Coupland divulges his own struggles as he recognizes the extreme discomfort that others in contemporary Western culture experience when forced to discuss anything to do with God or the afterlife:

So here I am, there's this huge elephant which I'm always thinking about, grabbing this pizza-pie slice of my day, and no one's talking about it...I

used to think that the easiest way to clear out a room was to say, 'Hey, let's talk about being lonely,' but I think that's wrong, I think the first easiest way to clear out a room is to say, 'Hey, let's talk about religion and God,' and everyone flees. And why is that? And how did it become so stigmatised? Or, why won't people discuss it?

One answer to Coupland's question is provided in this story, an insightful critique of the lack of spirituality in contemporary society in the guise of a child's story. Perhaps one reason contemporary Westerners are hesitant to discuss God or heaven as possibilities is because they have supposedly been replaced with a reliance on our ability to build a heaven on earth. In the opening pages of *Generation X*, Andy, one of the members of the "poverty jet set" recognizes that we were "all promised heaven in our lifetimes" (7). Because this promise has never been fulfilled for Andy, and he senses a non-stop, self-annihilating cycle of desire and consumption, he chooses to move away from the nexus of commercial "heaven" into the desert, a blank space in which to hope for enlightenment.

Logan's bedtime story in "How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven" ends with the skeleton telling the citizens, "Accept the fact that as we live, we are also dead and all of your other prayers will be answered" (61). Here Coupland introduces the distinction between spiritual and physical death that is also so clearly present in the overtly apocalyptic *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The citizens have a sense of assurance in immortality based on a false confidence in their ability to control destiny and create a future for themselves; they have missed the possibility of eternity by limiting themselves, only focusing on "the future". As they can only see and perceive their earthly bodies and the

riches of their own immediate workmanship, they tend to fixate on this as the only reality, thus cutting off the spiritual realm and suffering intensely from this amputation. Although they confidently parade their accomplishments, taking pride in their wealth, they are walking skeletons, both denying and unaware of the spiritual death which is the root of their longings. The title of one of *Generation X*'s chapters, "Dead at 30, Buried at 70" indicates that spiritual death, not physical death is the core problem at the heart of contemporary urban trauma. The citizens of the fairytale's magical city finally surrender their pride and control, falling to their knees and expressing thankfulness as the city is rebuilt and the rains begin to fall. This sort of supplication is a desperate response to the power of a divine message, an admission that there is a reality beyond their own material constructions.

The contemporary "collapsed vision of heaven" spoken of in this children's story is again a central subject in Coupland's *Microserfs*, a novel about computer geek subculture. The novel explores the lives of those working within the computer industry, themselves creators of this paradise on earth that erases any need for pictures of the afterlife. Throughout all of his fiction, Coupland continually explores the coping methods of postreligious Western society when faced with death, a foreign and often ignored reality. How does one deal with death, the greatest mystery of life, when contemporary society often refuses to explore the possibility of the mysterious "other", denying the possibility of an afterlife? In *Microserfs*, the central protagonist, Dan, faces the reality of death at an early age when he loses his brother, Jed, in a tragic accident. The fictional citizens in "How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven?" receive a warning because they have a "collapsed vision of heaven", but *Microserfs*' Dan and his friends



have *no* vision of heaven. Like the characters of *Life After God*, Dan is also a member of the first generation raised without any religious beliefs:

I'd like to hope Jed is happy in the afterworld, but because I was raised without any beliefs, I have no pictures of an afterworld for myself. In the past I have tried to convince myself that there is no life after death, but I have found myself unable to do this, so I guess intuitively I feel there is something. But I just don't know how to begin figuring out what these pictures are. (15)

Dan's vague notion of undefined pictures suggests murky middle-ground, an inability to imagine both life after death as well as death with no afterlife; he has been given no tools to help develop and refine these pictures, as the secular nature of his upbringing has only provided him with a "collapsed picture" of an earthly heaven. Troubled by what he now senses as a lack, he looks to his colleagues at Microsoft to see if they share his cloudy vision: "Over the last few weeks I have been oh-so-casually asking people I know about their pictures of the afterworld. I can't simply come right out and ask directly because...you just don't discuss death at Microsoft" (15). Coupland is pinpointing Microsoft, the multinational pinnacle of postmodern replication, as a member of the "league of anti-death" (Smith xv). The employees at Microsoft, while working to create code that simulates a non-ending world of virtual reality, repress the idea that death could ever break that continually replicated code. Microsofters are known for "major death denial" that perhaps causes them to project their camouflaged questions and fears about God or the afterlife onto the rituals of daily life at Microsoft. Dan speculates that Microsoft's corporate zest for recycling aluminium, plastic and paper is

perhaps a sublimation of the staff's "hidden desire for immortality" (16). Interestingly, those who produce quality tools for the marketing of products are experiencing the "sense of replenishment" and "well being" that Jack Gladney, chief consumer in *White Noise* experiences when going shopping; both the production and consumption of material goods feign an eternal life-cycle that is comforting for those with no pictures of an afterlife.

Dan also wonders if "this whole Bill thing is actually the subconscious manufacture of God" (16). The novel suggests the idea that Bill Gates, faceless and seemingly all powerful, is more of an entity than a human being; he is the unreachable force that gives shape to his employees' destinies and provides security for their futures. Dan frequently notes that his "Geek" friends show little evidence of an "interior life" that indicates questions about spiritual concerns such as the origin of life or the finality of death. In this absence, they depend on a figurehead like Bill to tell them what to aspire to, how to live, after all, "Bill is wise. Bill is kind. Bill is benevolent" (1). Dan also notes that the mist floating above the "lego-pad" style grass on the Microsoft campus reminds him of how, "the presence of Bill floats about the campus, semi-visible, at all times...Bill is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that molds. A force with thick, thick glasses" (3). Dan's playful scepticism towards what he later calls the "cult of Bill" (35) humorously indicates Bill's (geeky) humanness; he is a moral force, a presence, a visionary, but his sight—both literally and figuratively-- is greatly impaired. Nevertheless, Dan and his techie friends long for the structure and guidance that a "Bill" provides; "Bill is the object of both reverence and awe" (Heffernan 95). When they move to Silicon Valley in search of creative

independence in order to start their own company, they initially feel lost without a Bill to guide them. Their less adventurous friend, Abe, who decides to stay with Microsoft, writes and asks “Who’s your Bill?”(111). When touring the Apple campus in California, Dan explains that Apple is “depressing” but that they must “Keep the Faith”, even in a place where there are “No Bills” (108). Dan is disappointed by the “bland anarchy he finds” there because “Nobody rules here in the valley” (108). Ironically, the “freedom” that is sought by Dan and his computer geek cohorts is initially unsatisfactory and they desire the sort of structure that Bill provides. Dan’s new friend and business partner, Ethan, recognizes that Silicon Valley is “a kingdom of a thousand princes but no kings” and blames this for the lack of a “centre” in valley life. Things, jobs, people in the valley are “pretty” but “it’s a vacuum”; he blames this overly democratic “vacuum” for “the centerless boredom of Valley life” (136). This desire for autonomy but fear of true “freedom” reflect the rejection of any supernatural reality or God figure in these characters’ lives; the quest continues, nevertheless, to find patterns and a structure that could possibly provide meaning. After their conversation about the “centerless boredom” of Valley life, Dan muses that there must have been “A collective decision to disfavour a Godhead. It’s not despair; they just want the Real Thing” (136). Although Dan is clearly referring to the lack of visionary guidance by a Godlike CEO figure, this is reflective of many of the novel’s central questions about the desire to “manufacture God”. Clearly, the modern religion of seemingly infinite technological power, with figures like Bill as the Godhead, cloaks a sort of quasi-spirituality within the novel. The act of coding itself is a way to hope and “achieve transcendence through computation”



(61), a safe, human way to either *find* or *create* some sort of pattern that provides meaning.

*Microserfs* consistently questions the relationships between machines and humanity in a modern technocracy, and how this relates to ideas about the absence of spirituality in this particular subculture. Dan and girlfriend Karla speculate about the “future” a time when humanity will finally create an “entity” that has “its own intelligence” (35). Dan wonders if these visions of a science fiction future indicate a deeper sort of religious longing, a desire for the keys to deeper knowledge about life and a possible afterlife. He writes:

Perhaps the Entity is what people without any visions of an afterworld secretly yearn to build—an intelligence that will supply them with specific details—supply pictures. (35)

Dan again feels the need to have a supply of “pictures” of a possible reality beyond the material world, a reality that holds the answers about life in this reality. The hope for an entity that transcends human intelligence veils this desire, but also raises questions about technology’s complete dependence on humanity for creation in contrast to its seemingly autonomous ability to go beyond and destroy humanity. Dan again connects yearning for an all knowing “Entity” with Bill’s godlike status:

Maybe we like to believe that Bill knows what the entity will be. It makes us feel as though there’s a moral force holding the reins of technological progress. Maybe he does know. (35)

This quasi-religious vision places Bill as a God the Father figure, the only one who knows when the revelation of his messiah “Entity” will be unveiled.

In this depiction of a completely secularized world in which the one who holds the keys to technological knowledge has usurped the place of God, paving the way for a new reality in the form of a computerized saviour, what role does the “normal” “non-Bill” human being play? The mind reigns supreme in Microsoft office spaces; a sort of modern Gnosticism is practiced as human reason is developed as the key to technology and, therefore, progress, but the body is neglected. Dan wonders if humans and machines are actually intrinsically connected, as machines are the mechanical manifestations of our collective subconscious (228). Karla explains that although it is a “silly thing” for a “logical person like me” to believe that human beings have spirits or souls, she thinks that perhaps she does believe this (33). Dan also agrees; when he types “random” thoughts into his computer, he is using it to enable a concrete picture of his subconscious. When these ideas are actualized into building a piece of technology, he believes that our human essence is stamped upon the machine, allowing them to become “windows into our souls” (228). This assigning of a sort of revelatory capacity to a manmade product is ironic in that it indicates that we can only truly “know ourselves” once we have an artificial replication of our otherwise covert interior lives. According to Dan, technology has not only given us the ability to try and know ourselves, but it has supplied us with the ability to change ourselves. He argues that computers have erased “history” as an institution, converting it into a more flexible, externalized “memory” (253):

Memory has replaced history—and this is not bad news. On the contrary, it’s excellent news because it means we’re no longer doomed to repeat our mistakes; we can edit ourselves as we go along. (253)

In Dan's romanticized vision of technology's capabilities, the machine, our own creation, ultimately allows us to make ourselves perfect. Dan's idealism echoes the mythological story of modernity that promises a better future, in which both human and technology progress and perfect themselves side by side.

As Dan focuses on his personal definition of "progress", he concludes that perhaps the future does not promise excitement, but endless repetition:

I thought about the word "machine". Funny, but the word itself seems almost quaint, now. Say it over a few times: *machine, machine, machine*—it's so...so...ten-years-ago. Obsolete. Replaced by post-machines. A good piece of technology dreams of the day when it will be replaced by a newer piece of technology. This is one definition of progress. (179)

The illusive "life" of this constant change numbs, perhaps even erases the expressed desires for structure, pattern and stability. According to Dan's friend, Michael, "our desire for meaning" is in the midst of this relentless transitional period (203), yet the market-governed change of technology cannot produce "meaning" itself. After finally beginning to search for the source of life's meaning in relationships rather than machines, Dan recognizes that at the "core" of the "nerd dream", "the core of the power and money that lies at the centre of the storm of technology" there is no emotion or passion because, "emotion can't be converted into lines of code" (355). In this sense, the "storm of technology" is based on the constant, unstable and highly impersonal move of capital, and will never ultimately satisfy. When Dan's company *Oop!* finally makes a profit, and he and his friends are living comfortable Valley lives, the dream of



progress does not meet his deepest needs; he has misread his desires: “I thought the money would mean something, but it doesn’t. It’s there, but it’s not emotional. It’s simply *there*” (358).

Dan had envisioned a modern, earthly paradise built from technological “stuff”, but the impersonality of both the “stuff” and the money that buys it causes him to realize that heaven is not built on concrete dreams of monetary progress. Although not an aspiring yuppie like *Shampoo Planet*’s Tyler, he had, like Tyler, trusted the promises of orthodox capitalism for security in the future. In the midst of a very fast-paced, highly pressurized environment, and a continual pressure to move forward, Dan slows down for long enough to realize that heaven is not something that can be built, but can only be found in the context of a relationship. Towards the end of the novel, Dan writes that “Heaven is being in love, and the love never stops. And the feeling of intimacy never stops. Heaven means feeling intimate forever” (335). Although this phrase initially reads like a greeting card cliché, its particular placement in the text is very poignant. The sharp contrast between the personal nature of intimacy within a relationship and the cold, impersonal world of technology is telling. Although the novel emphasizes the computer’s role as an image-bearer of humanity, it also exposes the incapacity of the machine to become human itself in order to build an earthly heaven that genuinely meets the deepest human needs for intimacy and love.

The future vision of a surrogate earthly paradise, in which “meaning” is not found but manufactured, is not a paradigm of progress, but a nightmare. In the middle of the novel, Dan has an apocalyptic daydream of a “future” in which greed was the only determinant for manufacturing the “meaning” of consumption:

I saw venture capitalists with their eyes burned out in their sockets by visions of money, crashing their Nissans on the 101—past the big blue cube of NASA's Onizuka Air Force Base, their windows spurting fluorescent orange blood. (192)

This frightening image of the future reads like a prophetic vision, the missing “pictures” that Dan continues to speak of. There is no afterlife, only an earthly hell of self-propelled destruction. This destructive picture of the future, perhaps even the end times, reveals how an overpowering lust for money blinds “venture capitalists” to the point that they ultimately destroy themselves. This vision again introduces the question of death into the text; although these capitalists have built their individual heavens with machines made in their image, they still die gruesome, inescapable deaths. Ironically, these blinded entrepreneurs drive past NASA, but even the earth's most advanced technology cannot help them now.

In the last pages of the novel, the possibility of death in Dan's immediate family makes a powerful, real entrance as Dan finds out that his mother has suffered a stroke. When visiting her in the hospital, Dan watches the images of the after-effect of a devastating earthquake in Japan on TV, commenting that “At least Japan can be rebuilt” (364). Dan ultimately recognizes that “progress” can do nothing in the face of death; the envisioned “Entity” is no messiah. Yes, Japan can be rebuilt with the marvellous tools of technology, but how long can these tools truly sustain or attempt to “rebuild” his now paralyzed mother. When Dan first learns about his mother's stroke, he is with his friend Todd, and Todd's very religious parents, in Las Vegas. These parents, previously

dismissed as fanatics, play an important part in changing the tone of Dan's thinking as well as the tone of the novel itself. Coupland writes:

Right there and then, Todd and his parents fell down on their knees and prayed on the Strip, and I wondered if they had scraped their knees in their fall, and I wondered what it was to pray, because it was something I have never learned to do, and all I remember is falling, something I have talked about, and something I was now doing. (360)

As Dan falls to his knees to pray for the first time, he indicates his own powerlessness in the face of death. This very lyrical passage is placed directly across from a page that has the phrase "The New World Dream" printed in big, bold, black letters. This ironic juxtaposition uncovers a deeper contrast—a modern faith in the life-giving tools of technology and a premodern faith in a reality that transcends the realm of the manmade, a reality that perhaps contains the ultimate knowledge about the nature of life and death. Does the "New World" really symbolize human progress? Or does it provide only a "collapsed" vision of reality?

In characteristic Coupland fashion, the novel ends without answering these questions directly. After having exposed the limitations of technology and the need for a spiritual truth that cannot be built, Coupland finishes the novel with a picture of Dan's revitalized mother who is now "part woman/part machine, emanating blue Macintosh light" (369). Dan's mother, previously unable to communicate, makes a break through by typing on a Mac Classic. This machine does not heal her, but enables her to communicate, and in the midst, somehow becomes part of her. Although this is a novel about technology, the final words of the novel focus more on the power of community



and faith in something beyond a mechanical entity. Dan, perhaps remembering the prayer that he said with Todd on hearing of his mother's condition, comments that:

I remembered a friend of Mom's once told me that when you pray, and you pray honestly, you send a beam of light out into the skies as clear and as powerful as a sunbeam that breaks through the clouds at the end of a rainy day; like the lights on the sidewalk outside the academy awards.  
(371)

Although the tone of this statement is hopeful, the origin of this hope is ambiguous. The "beam of light" is not a representation of God's presence or response to the prayer, but of the focused devotion of the one praying. Thinking about this statement, Dan decides that "You know, it's true" (371). Dan then explains another "picture" he has of the future, not for venture capitalists, but for him and his friends:

And then I thought about us...these children who fell down life's cartoon holes...dreamless children, alive but not living—we emerged on the other side of the cartoon holes fully awake and discovered we were whole.  
(371)

Coupland again emphasizes the postmodern plight of being "alive but not living"; Dan is set apart in his recognition of this spiritual paralysis, and envisions an almost whimsical image of rebirth, of coming out of "the other side" of childhood's cartoon holes to find a new sense of wholeness. Dan's prayer enables him to more clearly see a picture, not of the afterlife, but of his own humanity, a humanity defined by a need for community and longing for transcendence.

Coupland incorporates both the contemporary popular culture and the ancient Judeo-Christian understandings of the apocalyptic in his novels and short stories, showing how both provide different sorts of “pictures” about notions of death, life and the afterlife. Coupland indicates that the current popular understanding of apocalypse as destructive, purposeless annihilation is fear-generated, a particularly Western response to the encroaching consumerism that numbs a spiritual vacuum. This type of apocalypse is seen as both a self-produced and self-fulfilling secular prophecy. The Judeo-Christian concept of apocalypse is not generated by the self, but mysteriously imposes upon the human sphere from the “outside”; this brush with an only partially discerned transcendence cannot be prevented as the individual/society has no control when overtaken by this manifestation of possible divinity.

Coupland introduces a strange mix of nostalgia and fear in the short story “The Wrong Sun” from *Life After God*, a chronicle of the narrator’s earliest memories of nuclear threat as well as a collection of nuclear annihilation fantasies. In the story, Coupland, with concerns about death-denial similar to those of Zadie Smith, theorizes that “in modern middle-class culture, the absence of death in most people’s early years creates a psychic vacuum of sorts” (85). The story’s narrator, a privileged suburbanite whose life has been “protected” from coming face to face with the harsh questions an exposure to death provokes, shares his first “pictures” of the idea of death. These pictures do not focus on notions of the afterlife, but on the pervasive, nauseating presence of a lingering nuclear threat. Coupland continues on the same theme, mentioning that the Generation X fascination with nuclear apocalypse is perhaps a result of these images of “nuclear confrontation” being our earliest and perhaps only “true

brush with non-existence” (85). He also implies that these pictures are secular attempts to fill in the “psychic vacuum”, to confront the fear of death through fantasies of cinematic destruction. Ironically, the culture’s deep-seated fear of confronting or discussing death has converted it into an ever-present, air brushed spectacle.

Paul Fiddes comments on the extent to which we minimize the stench of death’s reality, both literally and figuratively:

Ours is a society that evades death, by shutting it away in elaborate funeral arrangements, by not allowing space to grieve, by pretending age does not happen through the use of cosmetics and surgery; even the constant display of death on our television screens, whether in news programmes or violent films, evades the face of death. Death has been packaged as virtual reality, as a media event. (12-13)

Converted into faceless, nameless virtual images, death is devalued and becomes fantasy. “Safe”, insulated middle-class society has the luxury of fantasizing about death and disaster, and Hollywood profits greatly from this covert form of escapism. Slavoj Zizek notes that the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center are often mentioned alongside “Hollywood disaster fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about and that was the biggest surprise” (16). The tragedy of September 11 violated and exposed the security and luxury of a culture whose only reference point for this type of disaster was Hollywood disaster films. In “The Wrong Sun”, the narrator emphasizes the part 1970’s Hollywood disaster movies played in the formation of his subconscious, as he notes that these are, “films nobody makes anymore because they are all projecting so vividly inside our heads” (80). The particular genre of disaster film



such as *Towering Inferno* and *Poseidon Adventure* are now rarely made, as we now all have residual pictures in our minds, fantasies of being, “amongst the last people inhabiting worlds that have vanished, ignited, collapsed and depopulated” (80). Interestingly, although Coupland does not mention this himself, this doomsday genre has been resurrected in the more specific form of apocalyptic disaster film. Michael Bay’s 1998 film *Armageddon* contains a patriotic, highly romantic speech given by the American President in which the crowd, awaiting a completely destructive apocalypse, is told that because of “all of our combined technologies and imaginations”, this is “the first time in the history of the planet, a species has the technology to prevent its own extinction”. This modern reliance on the power of human reason, coupled with science, to create a technology that both destroys and preserves, is also the faith in a perceived human ability to thwart death and disaster that Coupland repeatedly critiques in his fiction. The narrator of “The Wrong Sun” does not focus on these supposedly salvific qualities of technology, but uncovers bleak visions of its ability for destruction. He explains that the early pictures of bright flashes and melting plastic, pictures of a Hollywood version of nuclear surrender, are “pictures in my head that will not go away” (85). These filmic visions of the end times are, in a sense, the collapsed “vision of heaven” mentioned in *Polaroids from the Dead*. In the absence of pictures of eternity provided by faith in something beyond our immediate commercially dominated “reality”, these images have become the only future “hope” that is consumed by a mass audience.

The pictures of the “end times” in the first half of Coupland’s “The Wrong Sun”, like the aforementioned disaster films, do not include any reference to the

afterlife, but are largely populated with consumer logos such as McDonalds and Jiffy Pop. The narrator will never forget his first visit to a McDonald's restaurant as it is synonymous with "the date and time of the Cannikin nuclear test" (73). The prevalence of regenerated media icons aid in the creation of a culture of anti-death distraction—they are emblematic of a metanarrative built on ideas of capitalist hopes and promise. Yet Coupland couples these icons with a haunting fear that "Technology does not always equal progress" (75). The ability to build a safe, bright, clean future, free from death and suffering, is illusory; this same ability, joined together with the desire to be the *most* safe, bright, clean and rich, has the ability to produce the tools to destroy ourselves. "The Wrong Sun"'s commentary on deep-seated apocalyptic fear is a two-fold critique of human nature: it highlights the fact that the innate selfish desire for progress can lead to destruction and that we need these "progressive" images to enable us to forget that we have the ability to do this to ourselves. This thwarts any serious questions about the darkness of human nature or what happens to our humanity once it meets the "face of death" (Fiddes 13) that it has avoided for so long.

There is an overtly apocalyptic strand to most of Coupland's novels, either in the form of a character unhealthily obsessed with nuclear obliteration, like Dag in *Generation X* or the nameless narrator of "The Wrong Sun", or a character with a prophetic gift to foresee the end times like Jeremy in *Eleanor Rigby* or Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The above examples obviously indicate two very different types of apocalypse, the secular and the sacred, although Coupland frequently couples the two. Sometimes media-generated fantasies and prophetic images are mistaken for one another, as when John Johntson, coming out of a drug induced stupor, claims that he has

seen his fate in an angelic vision of Susan Colgate. Johnson's vision ends up being a rerun of a second rate sitcom made fuzzy around the edges by some vestigial drugs. Coupland emphasizes that many discussions of the "end times" mask a deeper fear of death and dissatisfaction with life, particularly when these end-time fears envision an apocalypse with no reference to the possibility of God or the afterlife.

In *Generation X*, Claire, who is about to attend an "end of the world" party, wonders if, "when they start talking like that—you know all of this sex gossip and end of the world nonsense, I wonder if they're only really confessing something else to each other" (37). In a postreligious society, it seems, these dark apocalyptic obsessions become a pictorial form of confession of guilt, fear and disappointment. Claire continues her theorizing about:

how scared and sick they all are. I mean, when people start talking seriously about hoarding cases of Beef-a-Roni in the garage and get all misty-eyed about the Last Days, then it's about as striking a confession as you're ever likely to get of how upset they are that life isn't working out how they thought it would. (37)

Claire's theories about apocalyptic obsession imply that these visuals are a manifestation of some sort of internal denial and confession. Unlike *Life After God's* Scout, who has the nervous bravery to directly confess his deepest needs and fears in writing, Claire's friends are so deeply burned by irony that they are terrified of this kind of directness and use apocalyptic language as a code to express deeper fears. *Generation X*'s strongest example of this is Dag, whose deep-rooted fear of D-day stumps his ability to function "normally"; his close friend Andy even labels him a "fin de siècle existentialist poseur"



(85). *Generation X*'s narrator, Andy, also comments that "the end of the world is a recurring motif in Dag's bedtime stories, eschatological You-Are-There accounts of what it's like to be Bombed" (62). Dag's stories are often set in supermarkets or malls, the places where, according to the narrator of "The Wrong Sun", most people envision complete meltdown. These superficial focal points of postmodern community are both the origin and targets of "progress".

Although the above examples focus on secular, earthly pictures of the end times, Coupland tends to spend more time examining "pictures" that indicate the presence of a certain afterlife. The second half of "The Wrong Sun", titled "The Dead Speak", is a montage of short accounts of the moment of death from nuclear holocaust. Again, Coupland does not focus primarily on pictures of the afterlife, but on pictures of earthly destruction. The title of the section, however, as well as the first person narrative accounts, imply that these victims of earthly harm have passed from life to death to some sort of afterlife. The narrator(s) simply say that, "We are no longer a part of the living" (99). Although most of its images are bleak, this last account, a collective narration, provides a sense of hope in both closure and new beginning: "We are no longer with you...And we are changed souls; we don't look at things the same way anymore" (99). This one picture of the afterlife indicates that these survivors do not need air, light, water or time, but are in a place with plants, birds and "all of God's fine animals" (99). This vision of an alternate reality, one in which God is known as creator, seems almost alien juxtaposed with the cold, godless flashes of calculated human elimination. These humans are not "living", but "changed", and they assure us that, after this event, "they will never be surprised again" (99). Although the details of this

new “home” are ambiguous, the certainty of an afterlife offers a glint of hope in the midst of such horrific bodily death.

*Eleanor Rigby*, Coupland’s 2004 novel about a lonely, isolated spinster named Liz Dunn, also focuses on how pictures of death and afterlife mould a sense of present reality. Liz has morbid obsessions with death, including her daily morning ritual of counting “the number of days until I die based on government statistics” (130). This cool fixation on death as an objective, clinical event masks her deep fears of what she sees as a purposeless life. Like many of Coupland’s protagonists, she “wanted to find out if my life was ever going to make sense, or maybe even feel like a story” (3). Early in the novel, and with the arrival of the Hale Bopp comet, she has what appears to be an epiphany, as she finds a quick sense of comfort in realizing that she doesn’t need to seek purpose or meaning in her life, just endurance: “If I could just keep things going on their current even keel for a few more decades, the coroner could dump me into a peat bog without my ever having once gone full crazy” (3). She realizes that in the past she had “demanded certainty from life” but now she just “wanted peace” (4). This “epiphany”, converse to many of Coupland’s other epiphanies, is a fully human realization, not the product of some sort of divine intervention or an awareness of the divine. Liz must no longer search for the narrative arc that governs her life and provides significance and purpose; she tells herself that just enduring each uneventful day as it comes, with no fuller understanding of any overarching connectedness, is good enough for her. We later realize that this “epiphany” indicates another layer of denial rather than a deeper understanding of “reality”.

This new resignation to peaceful monotony in the form of a self-generated, counterfeit “epiphany” is soon overturned as a clouded event from Liz’s distant past revisits her in the form of a long lost son, an event that she sees like “the fulfilment of a prophecy” (31). When Liz first meets her estranged son Jeremy, a terminally ill, recovering drug addict who has visions from beyond, her ‘peaceful’ life becomes more chaotic, yet fuller than she could have ever imagined, injecting a stream of colour into her monochromatic existence. Jeremy’s surprise entry into her contained, orderly life provides her with someone to care for and to love. But the disorder of this new situation has a wider scope; Jeremy is a prophetic figure who receives “pictures” that challenge Liz’s nice, orderly and tame disbelief. She first meets him in the hospital as he recovers from a drug overdose; he has been following her and observing her daily routine for several years and takes this opportunity to give the hospital her phone number as his emergency contact. Liz is immediately taken by his sweetness and charm, but soon after, taken aback by his disturbing religious ramblings. Apparently, Jeremy was technically dead upon arrival at the hospital, when he experienced the “classic” vision of darkness and light as he struggled to come back to earthly life. But the vision frightens him as he tells Liz that “I was being pulled down to the earth. I wasn’t going up into any light. There was no light for *me*” (32).

The pictures provided for Jeremy, like the fairytale in “How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven?” and Karen’s visions of the future in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, are warnings about the future. Jeremy’s “warning” is, in particular, a vision of a fatal “afterlife” that is not a vision of light and life, but darkness and death. Traces of Jeremy’s past in foster homes with religious parents provide biblical categories through which he interprets the



hospital vision as he cries, "My name is not written in the Book of Life...when they paddled me back here, I was already falling on my way to hell" (39). Jeremy's fear of eternal damnation based on the absence of his name written in the "Book of Life" is a direct allusion to St. John's apocalyptic vision in the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

Although Jeremy's vision does not include a "lake of fire", he interprets his movement away from the light as a movement towards the biblical Hades. Jeremy finally admits to his frazzled mother that he will sometimes "get hijacked by pictures" that enable him to see "Omens...things we see when we're near the end times" (42). When Jeremy uses the word "hijacked" to describe the nature of his visions, he implies that his visions are something independent from his own will; he is "captured" by them and has no ultimate control over them. This could either imply supernatural intervention or a type of psychosis; Coupland is never forthright in naming the visions as one or the other.

Jeremy does make an effort to explain to his mother that these are “visions”, not “dreams” (91). He also claims that when he sees something, he is really *there*, a form of time travel that enables him to transcend the limitations of what his mother calls “time sickness” (12). Jeremy, a victim of multiple sclerosis, is nearing death and must take a great deal of medication to decrease his pain, but the medication robs him of his visions. Ironically, these “visions” provide a direct contrast to drug-induced hallucinations. Jeremy’s most frequent, recurrent visions take place on the Prairies, and contain a group of farmers who have abandoned their work to stare up towards the sun. These farmers are looking up to receive instructions about the end times, which they firmly believe in; their beliefs are so solid that they stop planting and ploughing and throw away all their stored foods. These farmers have received a specific message that has caused them to turn away from any worldly concerns:

They were told the world is a place filled only with sorrow, and that people have no idea where it is we’re destined for. Disaster is inevitable, whether it be your own doing or as an act of God. That’s why they shouldn’t be afraid—because the end is going to happen no matter what.  
(92)

Although implying the presence of God and an eternal plan, Jeremy’s vision paints a picture of a sorrowful, deterministic universe, full of fear and anxiety. The vision also incorporates the two different types of apocalypse—divine and secular—indicating that both have the same dire consequences. These farmers are still trusting and eager to please their God as they have been promised a special “surprise” (92). In a later description of his vision, Jeremy indicates that the farmers finally hear a woman’s voice

that tells them that they were, “unable to tell the difference between being awake and being asleep” (99). This “condition” parallels the spiritual state of the “sleep plague” victims in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and the residents of the fairytale kingdom in *Polaroids from the Dead* who are unable to tell that they are spiritually dead, although physically alive. Perhaps these farmers, like the other characters, have brought this inevitable destruction upon themselves as a judgement for losing both the passion to search for reality and the humility to change when they discover new pieces of truth. The woman’s voice in Jeremy’s vision finally tells the farmers that they “had lost their belief in the possibility of changing the world” and that “death without changing world was the same as a life that never was” (99). These farmers, like so many of Coupland’s other characters, are in a coma of mediocrity, devoid of passion and curiosity. They are complacent with their lack of knowledge and understanding—and it has paralyzed them. The farmers are finally told that they are “sick in their own way” and won’t be receiving the gift that they had been promised; therefore, they are in danger of starving through the winter (99).

Liz reveals the final glimpse into Jeremy’s eerie “prophecies” after his death as she reunites with his estranged father, Klaus. She explains that the farmers were finally forsaken by God, and they knew this very clearly when a skeleton on a string descended from heaven (245). Coupland writes that after being forsaken, they were “in the wilderness”, an odd word-choice as these farmers lived on the populated Prairie. Perhaps Coupland’s wording is an allusion to Numbers 14, where Yahweh tells Moses that, because of his people’s grumbling, sin and refusal to believe, in spite of the many “miraculous signs” provided, the Israelites must wander in the wilderness for forty



years. Although the children of Israel have not been forsaken, they will feel that they have been. Jeremy's vision ends with the farmers understanding that "Their only salvation lay in placing faith in the very entity who had forsaken them" (246). Does this statement indicate the presence of a malevolent God who abandons those he has created, or the lack of faith and passion in the farmers? The content of this vision brings up the very question that Jeremy has scribbled on a piece of paper: "What if God does exists but he doesn't really like people very much?" (138). This question echoes, almost exactly, the answer that Coupland himself gives when asked "What is your greatest fear?" by interviewer Jon Butler. These visions raise questions about God's character, but provide answers—in the form of judgements—only about the nature of human beings.

But Jeremy believes in his visions, and this very devout, yet open faith challenges Liz's dogmatic atheism. The novel opens with Liz's questions about blindness and sight; she wonders if a blind person receives sight, will he or she react positively, or if they will be devastated (1). The novel raises the same questions as we see Liz's closed eyes now open to love, experience and faith. When Liz first meets Jeremy in the hospital and experiences the aftershock of a vision with him, she nervously tells him, "I'm not a religious person, Jeremy" (41). Fearing that her son is delusional, perhaps irreversibly scarred from his time in "religious" foster homes, she listens to him describe his visions, but remains a complete sceptic. After spending further time with Jeremy, however, she is no longer satisfied with the closed, uneventful and orderly world of her atheism; faith, like Jeremy, now represents possibilities. Liz claims, "I'd never thought much about belief one way or another until Jeremy entered

my life”, but, “His visions marked the first signs of an awakening within myself” (139). Liz’s interest in the visions increase; she loves his visions because they allow her entrance into her son’s interior world. But the visions ultimately do more than even this, as she admits that Jeremy’s gift “makes me doubt my doubt” (117). And she realizes that these “pictures” have huge implications for her life, for “If you don’t believe in anything, then where do his visions come from” (117). Gradually, Liz begins to gain faith in the poetic, dark beauty of these visions, even to hunger for them.

Liz’s newfound “faith” soon diminishes as she watches her son suffer until his early death. Even though she has believed in the pictures, and in their mysterious source, her recent “awakening” falls numb because “I could see no message from God there—no mercy, no higher logic or moral sense to describe the sight of him on my couch, as...he finally lost his winning smile” (219). As in *Hey Nostradamus!*, Coupland is again reintroducing difficult questions concerning the problem of evil, not in a theological textbook fashion but in the context of someone’s personal pain and suffering. How could her recently found son, the “chosen” recipient of this mysterious gift from beyond, wither away before her very eyes? Where was God in this?

Yet, Liz cannot deny the reality of these visions for too much longer as, after Jeremy’s death, she begins having the visions herself. Liz also realizes that her son’s role is a prophetic one. He is able to transcend time, be cured of “time sickness” as he can rise above the entrapment of the moment to see a bird’s eye view of past, present and future; his visions indicate a story, provide a plot that indicates a reality beyond a temporal experience of immediate time. Liz speculates on the idea that in order to even have a concept of the earthly “future”:

There had to be somebody out there who made a radical leap—someone who told the others that there existed this place beyond us that was different than anything we'd known, namely future. And because of this future, all human lives became different. (223)

But this picture of the future is not the most important “vision” as it is only based on a desire to better ourselves to achieve a sort of earthly progress. Liz continues by explaining that next, someone came along and told us that “not only was there life and death, but there was also life after death” (223). She proudly realizes that Jeremy is one of these chosen few, a visionary whose job is to be a “teller”, and that “he'd decided to pass on that job to me” (223). Jeremy's apocalyptic visions are revelations that have transformative power to enable others to begin seeing life a new, “real” way in order to “change the earth”. His visions indicate a reality that is not dependent on human time or rationalism, a reality that initiates a spiritual awakening in Liz Dunn's life even in the unwavering face of her son's death. These visions indicate the possibility of a world that transcends the limitations of human time and materiality that moulds the purposeful story of Coupland's protagonists' lives.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Surviving Apocalypse: *London Fields*, *Survivor*, *Girlfriend in a Coma*

Although Douglas Coupland sometimes focuses on the secularized disaster notions of apocalypse, as in *Generation X* and “The Wrong Sun” from *Life After God*, these fears are often overshadowed by an engagement with a re-divinized vision of apocalypse, such as in *Eleanor Rigby* and “How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven?” from *Polaroids from the Dead*, which both involve purpose, judgement, purification and renewal. Coupland’s most overt, radical return to the Judeo-Christian notion of apocalypse is *Girlfriend in a Coma*, a novel that boldly endorses an apocalyptic narrative which involves a manifestation of transcendent truth. In order to examine the novel’s subversive nature, it is first helpful to contrast it by discussing the key issues raised in two other contemporary “apocalyptic” novels. Martin Amis’s *London Fields* (1989) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Survivor* (1999) explore an apocalypse defined chiefly as manmade destruction—Amis’s dystopian vision of London’s downward spiral into “Horror Day” and Palahniuk’s individual portrait of a character driven by a desire for self-extermination, both reveal a contemporary physical and spiritual state of despair, but do not look beyond the purveyors of this despair, humanity itself, for answers. Malcolm Bull rightly claims that this type of “popular secular apocalyptic” is “almost an inversion of high-religious eschatology, a rhetoric in which the damned seem to be celebrating their damnation” (Bull 6). Rather than coping with apocalyptic death threats through fear, as *White Noise*’s Jack Gladney does, or through a sincere bout of

questioning, as Coupland's protagonists do, the central figures of *London Fields* and *Survivor* embrace and morosely obsess over death as the only fixed reality of life. Although Amis's and Palahniuk's novels create a vision of a universe empty of any divine source of guidance or justice, they share the figure of the supernatural seer, in the form of a central prophetess, with Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma*. In what follows, I want to explore whether these are merely anachronistic narrative devices, or if they raise important questions, similar to Coupland's, about the origin and end of life, a longing for spirituality, love and community.

The physically scorched cityscape of Martin Amis's *London Fields* is reflective of an ironic "scorching" similar to that described by Coupland in *Life After God*; the city of London is now a bunker for Amis's extreme ironists, Nicola, Keith and Sam, that unabashedly use irony to protect themselves from earnestness in communication, love and human connection. The central figure of the novel, Nicola Six, a manipulative, all-consuming "black hole" of a seductress continually ruminates on what she sees as "the death of love". Like Coupland's Scout, Amis's Nicola has "come to the end of love" (Deidrick 148). Death is the only limitation on Nicola's undefined existential freedom. Unlike Scout, who sees this realization as an epiphany to instigate a new beginning by embracing a higher source of love, Nicola concedes that the death of love is final and "means the end of everything" (148). The impending nuclear fallout of the novel is analogous with the ticking timebombs of its characters' egomaniacal personalities. Nicola, this postmodern murder mystery's "murderess" and a prophetess of doom, foresees that she will soon be murdered by either of two men: Keith Talent, a thug whose identity is solely built around darts, pornography, adultery and domestic abuse, or

Guy Clinch, a naïve idealist who still believes in the insipid, romantic, fairy tale concept of “love” as he cheats on his wife with the irresistible Nicola Six. Guy’s childlike faith in Nicola’s feigned goodness and parodic ability to “love” are crushed in Amis’s fictional wasteland of postmodern ironists. With the help of Nicola, narrator Samson Young is the author of this simultaneously constructed and discovered murder narrative that he hopes will be a “fictional” best seller. Collaborating with Nicola, who gains a perverse pleasure from allowing him to “plagiarize” the plot of her foreseen death, Samson compiles information for his potboiler as he watches the story unfold before his own eyes.

Nicola Six, a post-Nietzschean femme fatale, is a master of human consumption who embraces the complete “freedom” of a depthless universe with no transcendent standards. She is the extreme cynic who used to believe that “even she might have been saved by love” but now admits the fatalism of a life in which “she couldn’t generate it, she couldn’t send love out” (Amis 298). Nicola revels in the sinister “pleasures” of a world in which she replaces the absence of love and intimacy with playful control and manipulation, the extreme fulfilment of a life built around an ironic joke. Through the use of both physical and virtual seduction, she gains ultimate control over the hearts, minds and genitals of Guy, Keith and Sam. Nicola’s actions of moral abandonment and sinister domination reflect her belief that in her universe, she is her own god. In the chapter “Going Out With God” Nicola explains her personal theology in a fantasy tale of her relationship with God, who she sees as a jealous boyfriend that she ultimately tells to “Fuck off” (133). Although Nicola appears to believe in an external God, he is really a fictional victim of her own creation who is temperamental, moody, jealous and weaker



than she is. She ultimately rejects this God because “to my everything, He is *nothing*. What I am I wish to be, and what I wish to be I am. I am beyond God. I am the motionless Cause” (133). Rather than appealing to the standards of a God that she believes to be too weak-willed to enforce them, she chooses to create her own universe of standards completely built on self-satisfaction. Her disgust for the “concept” of an insipid creator, and the existential freedom she claims she has to assert her will and construct her reality, echoes Nietzsche’s criticisms against the “pitiful” nature of the Christian God. In Nicola’s “free” universe, with the absence of any absolutes, the only rule is play and the only “sin” is boredom (125). In order to satiate her longings and quench boredom, she must rely on the creation of her own extreme alternate reality: “Cross that firebreak, and then cross that one. Go too far in all directions. Extremity upon extremity, and then more extremity, and then more” (133). This fixation on “the extreme” indicates Nicola’s utter boredom with her life of supposedly complete existential “freedom”. Perhaps Nicola is a more sophisticated, older version of Bret Easton Ellis’s hedonistic teenagers, bored with the synthetic universe of their creation, relying on the extreme to alleviate their boredom. Nicola’s key differences from Ellis’s lost youth are her extreme passion for the finality of death, her energy for manipulation and the deepest desire to be her own god.

Although Nicola claims her own malicious divinity, she cannot deny or escape the absolute power of death. The lifelong knowledge that she is powerless in the face of death has prevented her from generating any “real” emotions such as love or hate or developing any intimacy with others that she know will ultimately die:

About her parents she had no feelings one way or the other: this was her silent, inner secret. They both died, anyway, together, as she had always known they would. So why hate them? So why love them? (16)

Nicola's utterly self-absorbed character is, in a sense, the logical outcome of the godless world of *London Fields*; its subjects, particularly Nicola and Keith, seek no transcendent or objective reality to validate their actions or emotions. They ultimately become their own gods, creating their own "entertainment" through sex and control rather than creating relationships based on the nonexistent realities of trust and love. But all of the novel's characters, including its author-narrator figure, who has a fatal disease brought on by nuclear exposure, are powerless in the face of the last absolute, death. They can deny and abandon all the others, but the persistent presence of death is a constant reminder that their "god" status only goes so far.

In this world of postmodern play, Nicola acknowledges that the one "fixed" or secured, uncontrollable aspect of her life is the death that she knows she will soon experience. Narrator Sam writes quite early in the novel that "It was fixed. It was written" (18), thus emphasizing this one fixed unavoidable "plan" as the focal point of the novel. It is the predicted anti-epiphany, the paralyzed turning point of a deterministic narrative that feigns its characters' freedoms. Nicola, utterly alone in her cold manipulation, personifies death, seeking it as her companion. She must have an absolute to enable her to connect with others and as she finds no external sources to provide love, she clings to death as the one connection point between herself and the universe:

She welcomed and applauded the death of just about anything. It was company.

It meant you weren't quite alone. A dead flower, the disobliging turbidity of

dead water...a dead car...a dead cloud. The Death of the Novel...the Death of the Argument from Design...the Death of the Planet. The Death of God. The death of love. It was company. (296)

Nicola frequents funerals as she meditates on her one and only true companionship. The world of her own creation is moulded around this singular obsession.

Keith Talent, an individual who also runs his own life only in accordance with his own impulsive pleasure seeking, borrows a paradigm from a likely postmodern source, television. Amis emphasizes that television, a demigod to Keith's individual egoistic deity of self, is the main source outside of himself to provide him with a picture of "reality" as "it was the world of TV that told him what the world was...an exemplary real" (55). TV also provides him with an insatiable desire, fuels his passions:

And television was about everything he did not have and was full of all the people he did not know and could never be. Television was the great shopfront, lightly electrified, up against which Keith crushed his nose. (8)

Keith's most specific video obsession is pornography, which crafty Nicola uses to lure him into her web. Although Nicola and Keith are spiritual casualties of the diseased postmodern city, Nicola is clever enough to embrace death, the one absolute that she knows ultimately has control over her. Keith, incapable of this poignant acknowledgement, chooses to live a life of unaware entertainment, watching darts games and pornography while filtering out news reports. Both deny any positive transcendent absolutes while clinging to a single absolute of their choice (be it virtual or fatal). In caricaturing Keith's television obsession, Amis highlights the destructive effects of a depthless culture. He tells us that, "that tube burnt him, nuked him, its cathodes cackling



like cancer...." (55). Keith, like the burned children of Zadie Smith's *America* and the victims of ironic scorching in Coupland's fiction, has been burned, destroyed, desensitized--without even realizing it. He has no opposite standard to appeal to, thus he floats along the reality that is bought, sold and manipulated over the airwaves.

The four central characters of the novel, the four points of what Sam calls a "Black Cross" all must respond to the perpetual nuclear death threat because "at the moment of full eclipse on November 5...two very big and very dirty nuclear weapons would be detonated, one over the palace of culture in Warsaw, one over Marble arch" (394). The impending chaos and despair of Amis's fictional landscape runs parallel to the chaos and despair of his characters' interior lives. As the external world will explode into disorder, the internal world is continually imploding, collapsing upon itself. Sam and Nicola both knowingly await their deaths while Keith and Guy attempt to escape through either virtual reality or the idealistic notions of romantic love. All four, as well as the rest of the city, are the walking dead. James Diedrick notes that Amis exposes the "spiritual bankruptcy" of the contemporary western world in a novel that is an "apocalyptic jeremiad about the world's decadence and exhaustion at the end of the century" (157). This vision of urban decay is perhaps a lament for a culture in which each individual "did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25), building their own private hells of denial, which ultimately becomes a collective, fatal earthly hell in the form of the purely destructive apocalypse. The novel's hopeless apocalypse is the logical end to the spiritual decay of its characters.

As the novel (and its world) ends, its supposedly omniscient author, Sam, is the victim who experiences the sharpest burns. Although he has closely observed and

recorded the perverse relational interactions of murderess Nicola and her supposed “murderers” Guy and Keith, Sam is unknowingly Nicola’s murderer. Nicola has once again sought to prove that she controls her own life story, especially when it is in the hands of this weak, sickly god-author figure. The day of Nicola’s staged death will also be what Sam calls “Horrorday”, the day of nuclear apocalypse. Nicola, the all-consuming pseudo-goddess, is disturbed, not because of rampant death and destruction, but because the spectacle of her own death might be ignored:

Without question it would be disagreeable, at this late date, to be upstaged by a holocaust. If history, if current affairs were to reach climax on November 5 during the full eclipse, then her own little drama, scheduled for the early minutes of the following day, would have no bite, no content....And no audience. No undivided attention. (395-396)

For Nicola, the only meaning or depth in life is provided by death, and even death is utterly depthless in its representation as spectacle. Rejecting the belief in any supernatural “life” power that contrasts death and give it meaning, Nicola can only grasp death’s significance (as she sees it) by turning it into a performance.

In the flattened non-reality of the contemporary West, a prevailing way of conflating the sense of self and domesticating the mystery of death is through the achievement of celebrity through performance and spectacle. Nicola, appealing to no outside source to give her self-worth, must rely on her fame and notoriety as she faces the absolute death. Tender Branson, the central protagonist of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Survivor*, also succumbs to the desire for fame to assign his sense of identity. Tender is the lone survivor of a religious suicide cult called the Creedish church that he escaped

when he turned eighteen. Since his departure from the cult compound, he has, like Nicola Six, been obsessed with the totalizing power of death. He has been exposed to discussions of death all his life in the Creedish church and remembers the command that “when the apocalypse was imminent, celebrate, and all Creedish must deliver themselves to God, amen” (229). After making the transition to the “real” world outside of the commune, he notices that this world relies on representations of unreality, desperately working to avoid the reality of death. He begins to play a game with death, giving himself the ability to control the death of others by displaying his number in public places as a fake suicide hotline number. When the distressed callers ring and ask for advice and support, he tells them to kill themselves and gains satisfaction by listening to them do it.

Tender plays this depraved death game because he is angry and frustrated by what he sees as death’s irresistible authority over human life. Death always has the last word:

Think of this as on the job training. Think of your life as a sick joke.

What do you call a caseworker who hates her job and loses every client?

Dead.

What do you call the police worker zipping her into a big rubber bag?

Dead.

What do you call the television anchor on camera in the front yard?

Dead.

It does not matter. The joke is that we all have the same punchline.

(162)



Nothing has meaning or value in a world where everyone, no matter what they have achieved in life, will end in the same manner. No matter what achievements are gained or delusions are held, death is ultimately the great equalizer. Because Tender can't escape this oppressive punchline, he decides to "play" within the system, using the supreme and singular rule of death to entertain himself. He sees no positive absolutes in a media saturated culture of non-reality, so he, like Nicola Six, becomes obsessed with courting death, the only "fixed" aspect of life as he sees it. Death is the only lifelong constant in Tender's existence; he laments that the rules for everything else, including relationships, constantly change. In this era of "liquid modernity", as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, constant flux and change lead to existential instability in this epoch of "disengagement, elusiveness, facile escape and hopeless chase" (*Liquid* 120). Fertility Hollis, Tender's mysterious girlfriend of sorts, shares his views on death's "secure" appeal as she says "Since change is constant, you wonder if people crave death because it's the only way they can get anything really finished" (150). Like Nicola Six, Tender is unable to produce love or affection because he finds no solid standard on which to base relationships which are ultimately unpredictable, frightening and fragile. And like *White Noise*'s Jack Gladney, Tender constantly looks outside of himself to find some sense of order, a plan for which to run his life, give him identity and provide structure to "hold off the chaos" (263).

Having rejected any ultimate transcendent authority, he both plays God by orchestrating the "suicide hotline" deaths of others and becomes dependent on many surrogate gods, authority figures in his life (employers, case workers) to provide him with the "plan for running his day to day life" (263). Throughout the course of the

novel, Tender goes from ingesting the Creedish doctrine and its subjective interpretations of the Bible as his only authority, to spewing these doctrines out and following the “inspired scriptures” of his daily planner. His employers, who, like God, he has never had actual face to face contact with, leave him a list of minute by minute cleaning instructions that Tender builds his life around. Jesse Kavadlo notes that:

Tender believes more strongly in a universal order, a scheme of unchanging grand narratives, than he had as a cult member. He is the opposite of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*: weak willed, weak minded, controlled mentally, emotionally, physically. (15)

Tender has also been assigned a caseworker to prevent him from committing suicide as the rest of his family and childhood community has; the caseworker uses her text of mental disorders to diagnose Tender with a different mental illness every week. He openly accepts and conforms to these diagnoses, another set of rules that tell him how to exist, until the caseworker is murdered and her textbook publishes a new edition in which the rules are changed. Tender’s anxiety over these changed rules is similar to Jack Gladney’s anxiety over the rearranged supermarket shopping aisles at the end of *White Noise*. Both men have trusted in the mass produced products of a corporate-driven and scientifically dependant society to become their religious scriptures, tell them how to structure and retain meaning in their lives. But these societally constructed “rules” constantly change; the supermarket peddles bigger and better products in order to gain more capital, and the rules of medicine change when new discoveries are made and older “truths” are proved invalid.

Although Tender rejects the demented fundamentalism of the community he grew up in, he can't tune out the "background noise" of randomly decontextualized pieces of scripture that constantly interrupt his thinking. The constant interjections of misplaced Bible passages in the text are reminiscent of the "TV speaks" passages of *White Noise*. When Jack Gladney and his family interact in their home, their conversations are constantly being filtered through excerpts of TV advertisements promoting health, wealth and happiness mixed with news snippets foreseeing doom. The collective subconscious of postmodern culture, television, has moulded the minds and actions of the Gladney family just as the Creedish adapted scriptures have infiltrated Tender Branson's every thought and action. Both Jack Gladney and Tender Branson are reacting to a specific paradigm that has been provided for them by the only overarching structure dominant in their lives.

Tender ultimately rejects the scriptures that haunt him, recognizing that the structure they provide is an extreme alternate reality, a contrast to the "real" world he now inhabits. Tender replaces the cult's unsound metanarrative for an equally false, manipulative one as he succumbs to a media agent's persistent offers to make him a celebrity. Tender, searching once again for a sense of order in his life, attempts to buy into the world of the hyperreal, allowing his agent to write his rules for him. The only doctrine of multinational capitalism, which Tender now embraces as a new postmodern sublime, is capital. Tender, the "survivor", is hailed by the public as a new messiah; he is a media-hyped religious leader that guides the false hopes of his audience while squandering their money. Eduardo Mendieta sees the exchange of one false paradigm for another: "From the religion of the eschaton, he moves on to the religion of the



fabricated star, the manicured and made up prophet" (397). In Palahnuik's novel, religion is just another commodity, like "celebrity", used to manipulate mass audiences. Although Tender steals the spotlight, drawing thousands into a frenzy of celebrity worship, he is only a puppet on a string, once again appealing to some malignant authority figure for the "plan" of his life. Girlfriend Felicity, an aggressive psychic, has a daily planner full of disasters that she knows will happen in the near future; Tender uses this information to deliver predictions, prophecies and wonders to his adoring audiences. Tender's nameless agent, a conglomerate figure exuding the stench of bottomless consumer capitalism, is at least honest about the depthless, amorality of his business and his audiences. In the commercial world he inhabits, he sees no distinctions between good and bad, life and death, sacred and profane—the only dividing line is the line of capital. In the recent documentary *The Corporation*, Noam Chomsky argues that the corporate world is "tyrannical and inherently monstrous" because corporations are entities that are accountable to no one and have "no soul to save, no body to incarcerate". There are no values or principles, only a desire to both consume and exhibit wealth through the creation of celebrity.

The agent doesn't just see this as his exclusive code of living; he observes that in a society with no transcendent norms to create value, the masses look for a figurehead to create their spiritual and cultural paradigms. As the doctrine of this world is commodity, its high priest, a physical representation of the unrealizable "other" of capital, is the celebrity. The agent holds the same beliefs as the public; however, they are in denial of their own superficiality while he diabolically makes it work for himself. Like Nicola Six, the agent is a black hole of consumption, a self-made god that manipulates others

into believing an idealistic lie they readily cling to in order to escape the realities of death and decay that permeate all their lives. In the agent's world, "The key to salvation is how much attention you get. How high a profile you get. Your audience share. Your exposure. Your name recognition. Your press following. The buzz" (152). Although the audience feigns religious devotion and a desire for sanctified guidance, "According to the agent, the biggest factor that makes you a saint is the amount of press coverage you get" (152).

This is the dogma that has also indoctrinated Tyler in Coupland's *Shampoo Planet*, the young people in Delillo's *White Noise* and the numbed teenagers in Ellis's *Less Than Zero*; sainthood is bestowed on those who are in the most magazines and on television the most frequently. The public looks for superficial beauty and depthless rhetoric rather than substance; Tender reemphasizes this point by noting that the Christ figure on most crucifixes looks more like a Calvin Klein waif model than a divine sacrifice (151). Tender, exercising on a stairmaster in order to conform his image to those archetypal figures from television, comments that "These days. People aren't going to fill stadiums to get preached at by someone who isn't beautiful" (153). Even "evangelists" and other religious figures disclose the one-dimensional "meaning" based on image that dominates the culture. As Tender exercises on what he calls his "stairmaster to heaven", its constant illusory movement that feigns climbing becomes symbolic for the promises of the progressive "religion" of secular modernity. Tender says that "You are going up and up and up and you are not getting anywhere. It's the illusion of progress. What you want to think is your salvation" (153). This "illusion of progress" is one dimension of a modern metanarrative in which "progress", the new

religion or “salvation” is defined by external, material factors such as beauty and wealth. Tender explains that as he climbs, “paradigms are dissolving left and right” to make room for his new faith in the production of artificial meaning and beauty. The agent, who is responsible for Tender’s “trip” on the stairmaster, recognizes that reality has been absorbed by television to the extent that, “If you’re not on videotape, or better yet, live on satellite hook-up in front of the whole world watching, you don’t exist” (150). The public are so consumed with superficial spectacle that they deny truth and reality by assigning ultimate value to pure entertainment. This is also the “reality” of DeLillo and Ellis’s fictional worlds, and their protagonists have no outside source to enable them to critique and reject this. Like Rorty’s liberal ironists, they have collapsed the distinctions between appearance and reality, yet Coupland’s characters, also inhabitants of this virtual “reality” sense a distinction and seek to embrace it. Palahniuk echoes Coupland’s definition of “teleparablism” from *Generation X* as he writes that “We remember almost none of our real childhoods, but we remember everything that happened to sitcom families. We have the same basic goals. We all have the same fears” (110). Tender notes, like Dan from *Microserfs*, that machines, in this case television, enable us to share a collective “artificial memory” (Palahniuk 111). Television has, however, *created* these memories, erased our presence in the creative process, so now everything is just “more of the same...Reruns” (111). Tender envisions a future in which we will “all have the same thoughts at the same time. We will be in perfect unison. Synchronized. United. Exact” until we become “the way ants are” (110). Palahniuk emphasizes how media-generated “collective memory” is erasing individuality, encouraging bland homogeneity. In this “vanilla” vision of the future, everything will become “a reference



to a reference to a reference" (110); human memory has been replaced by virtual text, which is impossible to transcend. In this world of identical simulacra, the source of "meaning" also shifts so that "The big question people ask isn't 'What's the nature of existence'...The big question people ask is '*What's that from?*'" (110). The "reality" of a constructed virtual world has encroached upon and recreated a value system, in which entertainment provides both the questions and answers that define existence. These now "sacred" texts create a microcosmic "value" network from which it is impossible to untangle an unmediated "truth". The extent of which media entertainment has become the dominant defining factor of "reality" is clearly seen in *Survivor* when Fertility and Tender predict the result of the Superbowl. Previously, they had predicted life threatening disasters and are completely ignored; but when they foresee the Superbowl outcome, this is considered a sacrilege. Tender is attacked by an angry mob for destroying the mystery of the worshipping congregation's sacred entertainment.

Although Tender is a celebrity success, he is still quite miserable. The artificial world of stardom can do nothing to ward off the pull towards absolute death that tortures him. The liquid "values" of his material world do nothing but further his spiritual decay, setting fire to his own internal apocalypse. Jesse Kavadlo notes that Palahniuk's novels hinge upon "metaphysical destruction—which, when enacted, becomes self-destruction" (12). Like the residents of Amis's London, Tender's fate is that he implodes at full force. Before hurling his own body from heaven to earth, he records his confessions in the plane's cockpit. His final act of life is once again, a recorded performance. Tender is a victim of a reprobate society, the walking dead of the postmodern malaise. Tender's "suicide" is analogous to the equally dramatic and ambiguous "suicide" of Tyler

Durden, the protagonist of Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Tyler, angry at the false world of corporate America, quits his job and starts a "fight club", an underground meeting where men abuse each other in order to get back in touch with the "real". Like Tender, he soon becomes a celebrity, and his alter ego urges him that his last great feat is in the form of death spectacle: "The last thing we have to do is your martyrdom thing. Your big death thing" (203). After Tyler shoots himself and dies, we travel with him to "heaven" where he sees "God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong" (207). In the end of life, Tyler Durden finds no answers—only a feeble deity taking notes on the lives of others.

Although Tender Branson plunges into death's mysterious arms, he is unsure of what will be waiting for him at the other end. He is dissatisfied with a hedonistic, materialistic life ending with meaningless death. He longs to find some sort of meaning in death itself and, in the early parts of the novel, frequents mausoleums in hopes of meeting supernatural beings who could prove to him that there is a reality beyond this virtual world. He puts his ear to the crypts in a mad desire to hear some sign of life:

Not that I'm crazy or anything. I just want some proof that death isn't the end. Even if crazed zombies grabbed me in some dark hall one night, even if they tore me apart, at least that wouldn't be the absolute end. There would be some comfort in that. (255)

When he first spots Fertility Hollis, he is disappointed that she is a human being. Like Coupland's protagonists, he longs for pictures, some kind of evidence of afterlife, even if they are frightening. He was hoping that Fertility would be a ghost so he could be "hugged in her cold, dead arms and told that life has no absolute end"(251). He also

wants to be reassured that his life is not “some Funeral Grade bit of compost that will rot tomorrow and be outlived by my name in an obituary” (251). But in these mausoleum scenes Palahniuk also reminds us of the death of God, and therefore, impossibility of afterlife, as Fertility and Tender admire the different artistic representations of Christ. They notice that each depiction of Jesus, from different time periods and cultures, is moulded in the image of contemporary social concerns and fashions: “In the wing built in the 1930s, Jesus is a Socialist Realist with huge superhero muscles” (244). Palahniuk suggests that Christ is created in the image of man, not vice versa. He writes, “In the eighties wing, there’s no Jesus, just the same secular green polished marble and brass you would find in a department store” (244). The image of God as supernatural redeemer is absent, replaced by a uniform piece of bland “department store” marble and brass, indicating the initiation of a new, “free” secular religion in which Tender, ironically, becomes a new, unredeemed and hopeless, messiah. The reality of a world in which “everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist” leads Tender, not to freedom, but to “Sartre’s state of anguish, abandonment and despair” (Casado de Rocha 156).

Tender is disappointed to find that Fertility is merely human, but she does still have a supernatural gift as a prophetess. But this gift, although supernatural, appears more as a glitch in a closed, mechanistic system than a window to another, spiritual reality. Tender’s search for patterns and order culminates in Fertility’s disclosure of the nature of the universe, in which “There are only patterns, patterns on top of patterns, patterns that affect other patterns” (118). These patterns do not reveal the presence of a designer, but the irreversibility of a deterministic system. In this system “there is no free



will” and “the bad news is we don’t have any control” (118). Although God is absent from the world of this novel, this does not indicate an opportunity for human creativity and freedom, but the cold, relentless impersonality of fate. As in *London Fields*, life is discernible as a narrative structure, but the author is dead.

In the cold, deterministic universes represented in both *London Fields* and *Survivor*, the central certainty is that life moves towards death. As God is perceived dead in the world of these two novels, death does not indicate entry to a higher plane of existence, but simply becomes the cruel “punchline” to the bad joke of life. Both Amis’s Nicola Six and Palahniuk’s Tender Branson develop insufficient methods for coping with the finality of death in a godless universe: Nicola deifies herself, as she passionately and artfully controls others, whereas Tender relinquishes all control, deifying anyone who is willing to regiment his existence. In both of these novels, the apocalypse represents the inevitableness of both spiritual and physical death, inescapable realities that provide no hope or purpose for fleeting human existence.

Douglas Coupland’s exploration of Generation X’s neo-eschatological desire in his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* reintroduces the original use of the term “apocalypse” by creating a parabolic vision of divine revelation’s devastating encounter with postmodern society. Coupland’s novel, in contrast to the quasi-apocalyptic narratives of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Survivor*, and Martin Amis’s *London Fields*, abandons nihilistic end-time fears and recognizes the potential apocalyptic horror has to reveal truth and unlock transcendence. Although *Girlfriend in a Coma*, like *London Fields* and *Survivor*, has a prophetess as a central figure, Coupland’s prophetess carries “messages” from God, whereas the female seers of the other two novels merely clarify

the hopeless nature of a godless, deterministic universal structure. All three novels are about the far-reaching presence of spiritual death in the postmodern age. In *London Fields* and *Survivor* this spiritual death is a natural result, and evidence for, the death of God; however, the metaphysical paralysis of Coupland's protagonists are symptomatic of a human rejection of an existing God. Coupland's characters, like those in Amis's and Palahniuk's novels, have given up the desire to ask questions and search for truth. Although truth, like God, is extinct in *London Fields* and *Survivor*, it is alive and well, yet vehemently ignored, in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Only the brutal mercy of a divine apocalypse can re-instigate a desire to seek truth and reclaim meaning.

The opening words of *Girlfriend in a Coma*: "I'm Jared, a ghost" (3) immediately force the contemporary reader into somewhat uncomfortable, supernatural territory. We are then told by Jared, our ghost guide, that the narrative will be told mostly from his living friend Richard's perspective but that he will narrate the last section as "Richard's story only takes us so far. The story gets bigger than him" (5). The story we are about to read is not only too large and disruptive to be told from merely one narrative perspective, but also cannot be contained in or limited to mere human perspective. Unlike the self-created apocalyptic disasters of nuclear fallout, mass suicide, and chemical clouds in *London Fields*, *Survivor* and *White Noise*, *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s central disaster, a plague of death-inducing sleep, is a direct result of divine intervention. *Girlfriend*'s disasters come from outside the postmodern virtual box as a tool to both judge and renew as the sleep/ death plague reflects the inevitable outcome of the spiritual zombification postmodern culture has already chosen for itself. The apocalypse breaks through the mesmerized consumer masses to reveal their interior

stagnation and deterioration while also choosing six “survivors” to spread the revelation to what will soon become a regenerated earth. Coupland’s apocalypse presents violence and destruction not as a means to ultimate doom, but as a pathway to purification, rebirth and enlightenment.

Karen, the “chosen” coma victim in Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the human vessel through which divine revelation and earthly zombification (quite literally) meet. Karen, a modern day prophetess, has a frightening vision of the future briefly before she lapses into a coma for seventeen years. Her vision is a devastating montage of images that “wasn’t like a dream at all, more like movie clips—like a TV ad for movie clips...” (9). The supernatural source of this prophetic vision of doom for a postmodern world is represented in its own native language of commodified image, layer upon layer of simulacra. This “omnipotence of simulacra” in contemporary culture is, according to Baudrillard, a reminder that there is no transcendent figure, external to this world of synthetic copies, to differentiate between the real and the copies (*Simulacra* 4). There is no real/ copy dichotomy because everything, especially and including the concept of God itself, is a manmade copy, an illusion that tries to distract our attention away from the “destructive, annihilating truth...that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was his own simulacrum” (4). The concept of God as a transforming source that gives shape and meaning to reality is absent in Baudrillard’s vision of contemporary culture; God can provide no shape and meaning because He is a concept equally as flat and depthless as the cultural products that we manufacture to try and create an illusion of meaning and reality. This aggressive



denial of the reality of truth, authored by God himself, is the poison that has infected the victims of spiritual comas in *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

It is helpful here to revisit Baudrillard's key arguments about the production of synthetic, rather than actual, meaning in "The Implosion of Meaning in Media" that were discussed in Chapter One. Baudrillard continues to show how postmodern society perpetuates the myth of meaning (and thus, God) by generating an excessive amount of information in the form of media messages. These media messages form the unravelling fabric, the unstable "foundation" of society as one becomes "socialized" only after intense and plentiful exposure to media messages (80). In a post-religious society, the media has become the new "alpha and omega" (80) a multifaceted network of simulations that we project salvific qualities upon, including the ability to generate meaning and structure society and, ultimately, reality. This hope that "information" will provide shape, support and meaning to sustain society and keep it from collapsing is an empty and false hope because "the fact is that it is collapsing, and for this very reason: because where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs. Information devours its own content" (80). Karen's interpretation of her end-time visions responds directly to the issues raised in Baudrillard's comments about the numbing effects of these virtual productions of synthetic "meaning":

There's a darkness to the future...The future's not a good place...we were still active and all...older...middle age or something but... meaning had vanished. And yet we didn't know it. (10)

Karen's vision reveals the lack of meaning in a society that has no belief in an absolute source of meaning other than a transient, media generated one. But more importantly, it reveals the apathetic numbness at the heart of the same society.

Karen's friends, inhabitants of the same type of "future" Coupland is often wary of in both his fiction and personal interviews, all fall prey to the seductive depthlessness surrounding them without even recognizing it. The binary oppositions of real/ virtual and inside/ outside have collapsed so that:

Technologies, marketing and consumption have created a new, unidimensional universe from which there is no escape and inside which no critical position is possible. There is no outside, no space from which to mount a critical perspective. We inhabit, on this account, a world where the television screen has become the only reality. (Kaplan 5)

E. Ann Kaplan, echoing Fredric Jameson's well-known argument, emphasizes the inability of postmodern consumers to distinguish between the real and the unreal, and to recognize that there might be any difference. Jameson himself explains that postmodernism "replicates or reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism" and questions its ability to "resist that logic" ("Postmodernism" 29). Like Ellis, McInerney, Amis, Delillo and Palahniuk, Coupland indicates that his fictional postmodern subjects are powerless in the monolithic face of the new secular sublime, omnipresent consumer capitalism. But unlike these authors, he envisions a way for his protagonists to ultimately "escape" the system. Karen, the central chosen one, can only escape and critique this "unidimensional" universe because the "critical perspective" she

receives is from outside of the universe itself; the divine act of *revelation* or *apocalypse* is the only vehicle through which the critique can be delivered to a world “retired to live in our own advertisements” (Zizek 14).

Coupland’s apocalypse relies on the original Judeo-Christian understanding of the word, which means to uncover or disclose. Only a quite shocking, extreme and transforming act of divine intervention can lift the synthetic veil of projected images, fluorescent light, and temporal satisfactions from the eyes of unaware, apathetic consumers. Karen, the tool of divine choice and the only living human who is spiritually aware enough to see and deliver “the truth”, must sacrifice her life to a literal coma that symbolically reflects the spiritual coma of her culture. One of Karen’s friends, Linus, comments that her physical condition is actually a product of modern technology:

Comas are a rare phenomena...they’re a by product of modern living, with almost no known coma patients existing prior to World War II. People simply died. Comas are as modern as polyester, jet travel, and microchips. (62)

Referring to the contemporary dependence on internet, e-mail and television, Karen tells her friends that she is “scared of all these machines” (153). Coupland ironically introduces the tension between our enrichment and enslavement to technology as we realize that Karen, having only recently woken up from her coma, has been saved by the very thing she fears. Her life support system is a visible reminder of the very machines that both create and sustain postmodern spiritual comas, providing a surrogate life force that the body and mind accepts as reality. Veronica Hollinger observes that, “the sign of her body’s failure is its now utter dependence upon technology” (168). This technology



indicates Karen's physical weakness while actively becoming her physical salvation. According to Karen's visions, technology, the futuristic manifestation of progress, will persistently drain the meaning from human existence, inducing spiritual death even in the midst of physical well being and material prosperity. Coupland is again reminding us that "technology does not always equal progress". Richard understands this dark contrast when he comments that:

People are always showing Karen new electronic doodads. They talk about their machines as though they possess a charmed religious quality—as if these machines are supposed to compensate for their own inner failings. (142)

Karen's bodily dependence on a machine is clearly analogous with contemporary culture's dependence on machines to generate "meaning" as it defines the self and any sense of purpose. Karen, after waking from her coma, sarcastically asks Hamilton if he is "new and improved and faster and better..." as a result of the machines that have clearly defined so much of his reality (142). He then tells her that she will also get used to "them", claiming that "It's not up for debate. We lost. Machines won" (142). Karen, armed with a vision that transcends the limits of this technological "heaven on earth" challenges the machines' ability to generate purpose and meaning, recognizing them as a synthetic counterfeit of a more stable, dynamic reality.

Just as Karen fears the "unreal" world created and sustained by what she calls "machines", her friends fear "real" reality, that unknown, unsafe realm far beyond their comfortable world. After Karen initially drifts into her coma and is taken to the hospital, Richard remembers Jared, the last person that he and his friends had taken to the

hospital. He died of leukaemia. On remembering that terrifying event, Richard exclaims “Jared. Oh God. This could be forever. This could go well beyond *real*” (22). Richard insightfully recognizes that the “real” he has known is counterfeit; only in meeting the absolute truth of death would he be confronted with the “really real” that “could go well beyond” his anaemic understanding of it. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žizek concludes that the defining feature of the twentieth century is both its passion for and fear of the “real”. Although we have a strong repressed desire to find the real reality, we fear it because “truth” must be something extreme, violent, and brutal if it is to expose us and shake us out of our “hypnotic consumer state” (9). The hypnotism in Karen, Richard and Linus’s world turns fatal as reality breaks through and overwhelms it with the literal sleep of death. Although this death plague is destructive and fatal, it is not the sort of violence traditionally associated with the modern concept of apocalypse.

Žizek argues that the “passion for the real” typically induces a bizarre paradox: “it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle*” (9). In order to generate meaning and purpose, an effort is undertaken to “stage” a significant event. In a desire to break through the constructed, the artificial and touch the real, frustrated individuals sometimes resort to violence, the ultimate “staged” experience, which is “perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity” (5). In this attempt to touch the real, they destabilize the status quo and draw attention to their actions that are then catalogued as a media event and, ironically, referred to as a reference point for “real” experience. Having both predicted and experienced the apocalypse, Karen elaborates on society’s limited, perverse, sensationalist understanding of the “end” as a dramatic, violent spectacle, represented in disaster films:

The world was never meant to end like in a Hollywood motion picture—you know: a chain of explosions and stars having sex amid the fire and teeth and blood and rubies. That's all fake shit.

(205)

Although Coupland's sleep plague both destabilizes and judges, the very nature of the death curse emphasizes apathy rather than passion. The virtual dream world of fragmented postmodern community has met the reality of death on the terms it chose for itself. Like Karen's sacrificial, representative coma, the sleep plague emphasizes an in-between state, the chosen curse of a people who have lost the passion to ask questions that lead them back to reality.

Karen's revelatory visions of the future are completely out of her control, just as her coma was. When interviewed by a visiting American television production crew some time after waking up from her coma, she is an instrument used to share specific revelation with an unreceptive audience on a quest for spectacle rather than truth. Although contemporary audiences are obsessed with spectacle, Baudrillard argues that we are no longer in Debord's "society of the spectacle" as this would indicate a clear distinction between spectacle and "reality" ("Consumer" 34), a distinction which, if it exists at all, is completely indiscernible. Coupland, denying Baudrillard's nihilism, repeatedly indicates a clear distinction between the spectacle and the "real" throughout the novel, but Baudrillard's comments are still helpful in emphasizing much of contemporary society's inability to distinguish between the two. Karen's postmodern television audience and producers, searching for a glossy dramatic surface rather than the unveiling of reality, are disappointed when Karen doesn't shed tears over her



dehumanising physical state. Gloria, the famous presenter who interviews Karen, is a perfect example of a glossy media product herself once the cameras start to role: “Gloria turns to ‘Gloria’ instantly, like a plugged in appliance” (Coupland 166). Gloria probes Karen for personal information about her relationship with fiancé Richard and daughter, Megan, who was born nine months into her coma. Frustrated that she can’t strain even a bit of TV emotion out of Karen, Gloria then asks how she feels about her situation waking up in a virtually new world. Karen responds that when she thinks “about all the bad stuff that’s about to happen ...I feel sad for the world because it’s nearly over” (166). Gloria immediately yells “Cut!”; this morose confrontation with reality does not make for good primetime viewing! Karen, unaware that she is transmitting messages from the outside, keeps her cool and once again announces the inevitable end. When revelation almost violently forces its way into the reality of TV land, it is rejected, ignored or even laughed at.

Coupland purposefully emphasizes how revelation violently imposes itself upon and transforms the two most crucial communal focal points of postmodern fragmented community, TV airwaves and shopping spaces. Karen’s prophetic transmissions horribly thwart Gloria’s plans to construct “her story” into a commodity to be sold for the coveted nine p.m. television slot. After Karen’s visions become a reality and the world has ended, she and the other six survivors, unchanged, still cling to the comfortable patterns of their past “meaningless” lives. Jared, their hidden cosmic observer, emphasizes his disappointment in their insipid reactions to the revelation they were chosen to receive:

And take a look at them now, will you—one year later: useless sacks

of dung they are, slumped around Karen's fireplace watching an endless string of videos, the floor clogged with Kleenex boxes and margarine tubs overflowing with diamonds and emeralds, rings and gold bullion—a parody of wealth. (209)

The commodified products of their past lives have been completely stripped of both use and exchange value, yet this shadow value is the only “truth” they have known. Having no point of reference outside of society's deflated, commodified constructions to turn to, they resort to pathetic cyclical patterns of useless consumption.

Coupland exposes the hollow “values” of a consumption-based society as his seven survivors go “shopping”. Standing in front of the ironically named “Save-On” supermarket, Jared asks Karen, “What is the main thing you noticed—the major difference between the world you left and the world you woke up to?” (213).

Karen answers, “A lack...a lack of convictions—of beliefs, of wisdom, or even of good old badness. No sorrow; no nothing. People—the people I knew—when I came back they only, well, existed...” (213). As in *Life After God* and *Generation X*, Coupland suggests that this “lack” of beliefs and convictions often surfaces as postmodern irony or cynicism. Hamilton, one of the chosen survivors, is the novel's most devout ironist; friend Linus tells him that “You talk in little TV bits. You're never sincere” (82). When Karen tries to explain the end of the world to her friends they are clearly “masking their fear with funeral giggles—a protective, iron coating” (197). This lack of sincerity, a defence mechanism to camouflage fear is, according to Hamilton, “called irony these days” (179). Coupland again exposes the destructive “lack” of a dominating irony that

thwarts honest community and hope for supernatural reality. David Foster Wallace's critique of the "dangers" of a hegemonic ironic stance are again helpful:

And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the question without attending to its subject is, when exercised, tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself. (68)

The "institutionalized irony" of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, a world dominated by machines that also foster notions of plasticity rather than reality, enables its residents simply and consistently to avoid any sort of frightening questions that might scrape the surface of truth. Rather than espousing the all-too-common modern truism that a belief in truth or possession of faith are crutches, Coupland indicates that cynicism is the largest, most deceptive crutch; it prevents the ironist from engaging in the hard work of change by putting up a wall between himself and the truth. Angel Jared exposes the weakness of Hamilton, the ironist rebel's, cynicism when he says, "Haven't you always known that, Hamilton? At the base of all your cynicism across the years, haven't you always known that one day it was going to boil down into hard work?" (197). As Hamilton and the others are relentlessly confronted with the reality of death and decay and the manifestation of a supernatural presence in the form of an angelic messenger, the ironic coating begins to melt.

After a further discussion on the "blank" nature of modern life, Karen and her friends move out of the shadow of the Save-On into its dark interior. This pinnacle of postmodern spaces, the mall, which James Annesley defines as "the television version of place" (236) has been invaded by the uncomfortable real—strewn with rotting corpses,



overrun with dangerous wildlife, covered in mould. The holiness of what Zygmunt Bauman calls “the temple of consumption” (98) has been soiled, profaned; its sacred illusory power is shattered. In *Liquid Modernity* Bauman emphasizes the extreme regimentation and purification of shopping spaces:

The well supervised, properly surveilled and guarded temple of consumption is an island of order...a purified space...unlike differences outside, is tamed, sanitized, guaranteed to come free of dangerous ingredients—and so be unthreatening. It can be enjoyed without fear. (98-99)

The natural world has brought fear, chaos, and danger into this previously “sanitized” space as the artificial inside world is completely consumed by the ominous outside world.

Although the friends are in the midst of “shit of all types...feathers, fur, bones, and soil” (218), they do not heed the warnings of this devastation, yet head towards the shop’s pharmacy to stock up on any available Vicodins. Once into their shopping excursion, something finally happens that forces them to re-evaluate the impact of their surroundings:

The lights in the ceiling pulse into operation, scorching brighter than daylight—the light all the more painful for its unexpectedness, illuminating the store and causing all of the wildlife into shrieks of panic, revealing the extent of devastation. (219)

The novel takes an almost surreal turn as the group look up to locate the bizarre source of the light--their dead friend, Jared, floating among the rafters. The somewhat cloudy,

mystical visions given to Karen had not been enough to enlighten her friends. Even the fearful plague only caused them to briefly ask “why?”, then shrug their shoulders and slip deeper into their own individual comas, be they heroin addiction, endless video watching, or useless shopping. This is the third occasion that the surviving group are given the gift of special, redemptive revelation, this time in the form of a messenger directly from the “other side”. Jared literally sheds divine light on the darkness of their hidden world, exposing its physical and spiritual corrosion. Only after this intervention does Richard realize that:

Our lives remained static even after we’ve lost everything in the world-shit: the world itself. Isn’t that sick? All that we’ve seen and been and we watch videos, eat junk food, pop pills and blow things up. (256)

Seeing the severity of their spiritual vacancy through new eyes, Richard finally feels ashamed. Finally, only after *three* direct encounters with the supernatural, he has begun a perpetual journey of self-discovery as he moves on the outside of his darkened world to finally recognize his lack of action within it.

Thus far, Coupland’s fantastic narrative of the apocalypse has continually drawn our attention to the fact that these remaining few are not chosen for any merit of their own, but have been predestined, become elect for no apparent reason. Coupland does not use these specifically theological terms, but clearly implies them as we are repeatedly told that his community of survivors has been chosen to fulfil a divine, pre-ordained plan. As a result of cultural mesmerism, the indolence of his chosen few only seems to worsen once culture has been destroyed and they must feed off of its last remaining videotaped artefacts to survive. Jared informs them that they have been

chosen to see “what you would be like in the absence of the world” (253). This “great but confusing gift” (253) perhaps suggests that the six survivors’ “real” problem is not rooted merely in social constructions, but in some sort of essentially flawed human nature. This nature is the author and creator of depthless society and continues to recreate this same hollow model, even in the absence of the world itself. Coupland does not, however, indicate that the survivors have experienced a particular moment akin to a “Fall”, but that they have gradually lost their identity and desire for truth and “reality” because they have become so gradually absorbed in a virtual world that coats these distinctions with a veil of illusion. In this text, Coupland does not employ traditional theological terms such as “fallen”, “sinful” or even “evil”, but alludes to their pseudo “fallen” status merely as a “lack”. After Jared introduces the notion of their “awful” gift of “election”, Pam can only recall the fragmented artefacts of the world’s lost culture to try and make sense of it: “This is like the Christmas movie...the one they used to play too many times each December” (253). Still unable to clearly distinguish between media and reality, Pam and the others miss the point of the initial revelations and can only attempt to interpret them via pre-ordained media paradigms. The scripture of *It’s a Wonderful Life* is one of the few remaining “sacred” texts from the cult of celluloid reality.

As these characters continue to degenerate, they need more and more dramatic and specific revelations to cause them to finally question their own broken state of mind. Even Karen, the most enlightened human on earth, loses the desire to understand her visions and question her limited, yet illuminated understanding of “real” reality. These chosen few are selected as part of a larger plan that follows a divine logic that is not



subservient to human logic—it is greatly beyond their realm and, therefore, terrifying. Like the biblical figure of Jonah, as well as the entire nation of Israel itself, these six are chosen although they sometimes resist this anointing and reject the revealed messages by resorting back to their self-created patterns of rebellion. Jared emphasizes the group's integral part of the plan as he tells them, "You count; you were meant to exist" (241). Their completely undeserved gift of survival and rebirth is a picture of grace, but grace also entails sacrifice. Karen, the central messianic figure, must follow "the plan" most specifically by enduring the self-inflicted punishment of the old world--the punishment that it deserves--an eternal life of numbed mind and body, an existence of irredeemable apathy. If the world is to wake up from its plague of sleep and become new, she must go back into her coma, sacrificing her life as she takes on the transgressions of those who have chosen this as their fate and suffers in their place. Like Christ, the ultimate innocent who had to ultimately "be sin" (II Corinthians 5:21) in order to become an intercessor for all of sinful humanity, Karen becomes an eternal zombie in the place of a society who has fatally chosen to be zombies themselves. Unlike Christ, Karen is not completely innocent; the only thing that sets her apart from her group of friends is her special gift of vision and prophecy. Although she was also culturally absorbed, she did choose to listen to the "voices"—but did she ever have a choice? Karen's security in this plan partially rests in the fact that "this was decided a long, long, time ago" (168).

Although Karen has security in the slightly obscured but profoundly felt knowledge that her sacrificial role has been predestined to fulfil a divine plan, she still has questions about her own suffering. She brings these questions to Jared, a

representative of the world that stretches beyond the capacities of mere human knowledge. Karen refers to her “monstrous” condition and asks Jared why she must suffer and give up her body “just so I could learn that the modern world was becoming sort of pointless and empty?”(215). Karen knows that her physicality has been a “trade off” for some sort of enlightenment, but she is dissatisfied with the seemingly tame “revelation” of human emptiness. This appears to be merely a catastrophic, rather than redemptive, epiphany (Maltby 16). This unveiling of knowledge about the human condition that is obvious (and thus tame) to Karen, is not obvious to her friends who have lived through the gradual changes in the spiritual and political climate without even recognizing any sort of change. Unable to differentiate between the past and present, themselves and the external world and reality from the virtual world, they are victims of what Jameson refers to as the postmodern phenomena of “waning of affect” (*Postmodernism* 10). Karen’s friends have been completely absorbed in a virtual “system” that continually generates unfulfilled surface desires that can be temporarily and deceptively fulfilled through consumerism. The defining “lack” (213) of Karen’s generation reflects a sort of decentring, instability or contingency, as fixed values and convictions have been replaced with acquisition of comfort and amusement.

Karen is alarmed by her observations that there is “No center. It doesn’t exist. All of us-look at our lives: We have an acceptable level of affluence. We have entertainment. We have a relative freedom from fear. But there’s nothing else” (94). Karen is dissatisfied with the world of postmodern surfaces and recognizes that a “comfortable” middle class lifestyle deifies entertainment as a means to distract suburbanites from asking any sort of “meaningful” questions about the nature of reality.

Likewise, Karen's longing for a centre is a longing for origin, stability, and a fixed truth on which to base her identity. This lack of the human centre parallels the perceived absence of a transcendent "centre" or point of origin which gives purpose and significance to the ebb and flow of human existence. Karen, however, does not bemoan the fact that the transcendent centre is absent, but that the characters' existential "centres" have become decentred as they have lost sight of the fixed truth. In the world of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, decentring is not a result of the death of God or of truth, but of postmodern culture's inability to acknowledge these realities. Floating on the temporal and deceitful sense of stability provided by efficiency, entertainment and wealth, individuals have gained neither death nor life, but an indifferent, deteriorating coma. This coma is, in a sense, a spiritual death; Coupland sees decentring not as liberation from rules and structure, but as a quasi-biblical vision of a lost generation whose formlessness ultimately paralyzes. As Paul Virilio argues in *Speed and Politics*, "...the more speed increases, the faster freedom decreases" (142). The efficiency of the modern world robs both personal and political freedom as the postmodern subject relies on convenience and entertainment rather than the possibility of a truth that offers a glimpse of a more stable reality. Karen's longing for the centre is an act of life, a sign of re-awakening, a recognition of her own identity and its connection with an ultimate external source. Ironically, the centre is regained through a sacrificial death that gives rebirth.

Karen's chosen role as both human and quasi-supernatural sacrifice is necessary as the contrast she sees in the world of her youth and the contemporary world reintroduces an inside/outside dichotomy that had been previously levelled in the



postmodern secular landscape. Jared convinces her that she would not have so poignantly recognized the “emptiness in the world” if she had “eased into the world slowly, buying into its principles one crumb at a time the way our friends did” (215). Karen’s rude awakening to the contemporary “empty” world that is, according to Jared, on the verge of a crisis, is a striking contrast to the desensitisation of her friends. This lack of spiritual or ethical sensitivity, a product of perpetual cultural absorption and integration, is replaced with a focus on acceleration and “efficiency” (214). Karen notes that when she first woke up, her friends were bragging about the “efficiency” of the world; she responds by asking, “I mean, what’s the point of being efficient if you’re leading an efficiently blank life”? (214). Karen’s friends have built a worldview around a reliance on efficiency and speed which “guarantee” visions of a highly evolved, comfortable, quasi-heavenly future on earth. Paul Virilio also questions this type of “precarious fiction”, the rhetoric of cultural acceleration, in which speed, “would suddenly become a destiny, a force of progress, in other words a ‘civilization’ in which each speed would be something of a ‘religion’ in time” (141). This new religion of uniform speed has robbed the age of speed’s inhabitants of both passion and individuality, morphing them from unique individuals to “blank” ciphers.

This loss of identity coincides with the flattening of reality. Jared re-emphasizes the dire need of an inside/ outside dichotomy as he answers Karen’s questions:

You woke up from your coma because you’d be able to see the present through the eyes of the past. Without you there’d be no one to see the world as it turned out in contrast to your expectations. Your testimony was needed. Your testament. (212)

Coupland's use of religious language here attaches a supernatural, predestined significance to Karen's role. The role of prophetess is not an uncommon one in apocalyptic fiction, as evidenced in both *London Fields* and *Survivor*. But Nicola Six of *London Fields* and Fertility Hollis of *Survivor* foresee death and destruction that is irredeemable and pointless, and they have both learned how to use their "gifts" to sadistically indulge themselves at others' expense. Although both Amis and Palahniuk cast a vague supernatural shadow over their texts, they never clarify the origin of the supernatural gifting, leaving the endings both more ambiguous and nihilistic than Coupland does. Unlike Nicola and Fertility, Karen is both prophetess and messiah at the same time; she sees the problematic future and diagnoses the spiritual problems of the present, while also being a tool to administer a divine remedy to others. Karen's experience as a prophetess and substitutionary figure expands the inside/ outside dichotomy into a within (the world)/ above (the heavens) dichotomy. Her understanding of the developments in the social/ cultural/ spiritual history of her generation is not simply a personal, subjective "testimony" about her own experiences. Jared, the being with the most enlightened perspective, gives Karen's testimony the status of inspired "testament".

Although the small group of survivors eventually believe Jared's claims that they have been "chosen" to fulfil a special plan, they still don't understand what their "Jimmy Stewartesque crisis" is (264). Richard defensively denies the group's ability to do anything different than the way it has been done and facetiously asks if they were to "...start a new race of human beings? A new civilization? Assemble some Noah's ark?" (254). Richard's faulty, self-serving interpretation of this biblical allusion indicates that

his enlightenment is still a work in progress. His defensiveness also reflects a denial of fault and lack of submission, rather than an act of repentance. The sleep plague is obviously analogous with the biblical flood as they are both overwhelming manifestations of God's judgement and a demand for some sort of life altering transformation. In the case of the flood, humanity had fallen short of Yahweh's ultimate standard of perfection and holiness; rather than being set apart, the Jews had been absorbed into and corrupted by the godless culture around them. Coupland's sleep plague also chastises those who have resisted being set apart, becoming so absorbed into their culture that their own lives have become nothing short of depthless commodities. The biblical Noah was one of the few who had strived to be set apart, holy, untainted by his culture in his desire to seek and follow truth. His repentant, submissive attitude is an obvious contrast to that of Richard, a man whose self induced "coma" appeared to be no better or worse than that of those who contracted the sleep plague. Only later, when his beloved Karen is sacrificed, does Richard realize that he does not deserve a sheltering ark, but punishment. The realization that she will ultimately take his place for punishment enables him to finally acknowledge his own seemingly irreversible brokenness.

Linus, the eccentric, slightly nomadic science geek of the group, is the only one of its members who had previously sensed that there is something deeply wrong with their lives: "We really didn't have any values, any absolutes. We've always manoeuvred our lives to suit our immediate purposes. There's nothing large in our lives" (255). Linus recognizes that their secret spiritual vacancy stems from a lack of recognizing the presence of absolutes, yet a deep dissatisfaction with contingency. Like



*Generation X's* pilgrims, these survivors can find no legitimising, all-encompassing narrative to connect the dots of their stories and make sense of their individual existences. According to Linus's description, his group of friends have become their own self-absorbed mini-deities as they orchestrate their lives to serve only their self satisfying purposes. Richard eventually reiterates this sentiment when he admits that "'I think we have always wanted something noble or holy in our lives, but only on *our own terms*" (256, italics mine). Holiness indicates a state of being "set apart" but these spiritually paralysed individuals have been completely integrated into what Coupland deems a highly ignoble culture. With a theology constructed on circumstance rather than divine absolutes, they have all continued to sink deeper and deeper into their own individual comas. Richard continues his self-indictment by listing the group's only heartfelt "convictions": "*The World Wide Web is a bore. There's nothing on TV. That videotape is a drag...I need to express the me inside*" (256). The shallow enjoyment of the self and the avoidance of boredom at all costs alienate each of the characters from one another. This deification of self in the absence of any acknowledgement of or even desire for objective, connecting reality seems to characterize the existential postmodern condition, not only in the scorched landscape of Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma*, but also in Amis' *London Fields* and Palahnuik's *Survivor*. Both Nicola Six and Tender Branson ultimately worship the self. Although constructing a self-made religion, Nicola, Tender and Coupland's chosen group all must face the inescapable, totalising power of death; Nicola and Tender embrace it, fixating on what they see as dark, terrifying beauty, whereas, ironically, the Vancouver remnant do everything possible to ignore it or trivialize it. Unlike Nicola and Tender's sinister modes of coping with death, the

group react more like *White Noise*'s Jack Gladney whose obsessive fear of death propels him to turn "Hitler Studies" into a safe, theoretical university subject. The *Girlfriend in a Coma* survivors, literally surrounded by death and decay (including endless amounts of decaying bodies they callously refer to as "leakers"), become more desensitised to its reality and plunge themselves into meaningless distractions such as taking drugs and watching videos. Unlike Gladney, this group continually meet the physical reality of death face to face on a daily basis, yet remain unchanged. Their previous jobs on an *X-Files* style television programme in which they designed gruesome makeup and costumes to follow macabre storylines is an ironic foreshadowing of the rotting reality that surrounds them now. This nostalgic television reality has become their present, actual reality and they are still unable to recognize if there ever is, or was, any difference.

Richard's insight into the crises of his and his friend's static lifestyles deepens as he realizes that their desire for a certain sort of "freedom" in the form of distracting entertainment and progress is not only *their* particular problem, but a general societal flaw: "The nodule of freedom we all shared—it was a fine idea. It was, in its unglamorous way, the goal of history" (264). Ultimately, this freedom, unsupported by some sort of "higher purpose" (256), is simply raw selfishness endorsed and commodified by the "system". Although rejecting the postmodernist notions of anti-essentialist "freedom", Richard and company also do not draw any hope from the modern residue of promises of "progress". Coupland's choice to include this comment in an apocalyptic novel is quite poignant as Malcolm Bull notes that Christian millennialism was historically replaced, during the modernist period, with a secular faith

in progress (Bull 8). This insipid belief in the salvific qualities of progress and efficiency hold no attraction for Richard, but the complete self-reliance on contingent postmodern “play” and “freedom” is also an empty hope. Drawing again on Judeo-Christian terminology, Richard admits that “instead of serving a higher purpose we’ve always been more concerned with developing our personalities and with being free” (256). This complex statement seems to expose the inherent self-serving nature of a consuming individualism that leads to a false sense of freedom. Richard thwarts the notion that once an individual is “free” of all the trappings of an external set of objectives and a divine plan, he or she will be free to truly be themselves. Richard (and perhaps Coupland) seems to suggest that the self cannot be discovered unless it receives its identity from a higher source (the transcendent Other), something outside of it that, by contrast, solidifies its very individuality. This need for the transcendent Other in order to begin to understand the self and relate the others is also the central revelation of *Life After God*. Without this “higher purpose” the friends were merely “free” to conform to each other and “enjoy” random acts of nothingness.

The complete integration of the “free” postmodern subject into his or her environment collapses any boundaries that truly define the self by contrasting it to the external world. Richard laments that:

We gave no evidence of an interior life. Acts of kindness, evidence of contemplation, devotion, sacrifice. All these things that indicate a world inside us. Instead we set up a demolition derby in the Eaton’s parking lot , ransacked the Virgin Superstore and torched the Home Depot. (256-57)



This reflection on lost “interior life” recalls Karen’s longing for a centre of identity that had disappeared. Jameson notes that in postmodern culture, this “decentering of that formerly centered subject” indicates “the end of the bourgeois ego...no doubt that brings with it the psychopathologies of that ego” (*Postmodern* 15). The death of the concept of the unified individual “self” or “identity” indicates the end of any sort of personal style, uniqueness, or even reactionary feeling. If there is no absolute reality, truth or standard that is completely separate from the individual identity, then what is there to react against? The disappearance of any absolutes precedes the disappearance of the defined, separate identity, thus the loss of any “interior life” (15). Coupland’s portrayal of a mourning, repentant Richard does not tend to present this loss of interiority as an affirmation of postmodern freedom. Coupland’s vision of postmodern “zombified” culture, suffering from a loss of solid identity is again reflective of Jameson’s description of the “waning of effect”:

As for expressions and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. (15)

When Richard awakens from his sleep of past indifference and becomes *affected*, he can finally see the collapsed boundaries between self and society that had lulled him to sleep so long ago.

Paralyzed by the empty and alienating monotony of their particular sort of freedom, the friends turn to acts of destruction and violence for entertainment. Perhaps

this reaction reflects a frustration with what Krishan Kumar sees as the empty promises of postmodern freedom:

Here too we are told of ‘the death of grand narratives’, an end to any possible belief in Truth, History, Progress, Reason or Revolution (still less Revelation). That sounds final enough. And in its way, it is meant to be liberating. But again there is no sense of a new departure, a new freedom now that the scales of illusion have fallen from our eyes. Instead, we are invited to take a purely pragmatic or ironic stance towards the world...and to devote ourselves to purely private purposes and private life. (207).

Kumar’s extreme indictment of postmodernism’s supposed abandonment of truth is perhaps a bit too all-inclusive, but he later makes it clear that he is specifically responding to the constructivist strands of postmodern thought, and more specifically, to Richard Rorty’s liberal ironist stance. It is helpful to again look at Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* in which he criticizes what he sees as the intellectual naiveté of one who “believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities” (xv). In the surreal world of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, both Jared and Karen appear to have direct contact with this mysterious source of “order beyond space and time”. The character of Jared establishes a “hierarchy of responsibility” (Rorty xv) when he tells the group that they have failed some sort of cosmic test because of their inability to ask “a million questions about why the world became the way it did” (257). Their materialist apathy has condemned them and caused Jared to implement “Plan B”: the world will again wake up

and go back to “normal”, and the chosen few are “called” to become seekers and aggressively convert others into seeking. They are commanded to ask questions about everything and everyone they come into contact with, as well as about the nature of their own lives.

Jared’s inspired command that instructs the group to “question everything” at first seems to both defy modernity’s singular rationalism and embrace postmodern scepticism. But these seekers have been told that they are on a quest with a definite and predestined “end” in sight, a promise of absolute security in the knowledge of a great truth. They are encouraged to reject a modern claim that secular rationalism will provide them with all the answers they need and enable them to enjoy progress and an eventual heaven on earth. But this does not indicate the abandonment of truth itself, just an acknowledgement of a more “true” truth, a truth that transcends the constructions of our minds. This is a truth that must be sought relentlessly, that will be revealed only after the seekers have both faith and devotion enough to acknowledge their incapability to construct all the answers for themselves. Jared explains this to Richard by asking him a question about his secret thirst for truth: “And Richard, haven’t you always felt that you live forever on the brink of knowing a great truth? Well that feeling is true. There is the truth. It does exist” (268). Jared challenges them to live every day for the rest of their lives, making others aware of this need to search and find this source of truth. Jared then informs his disciples of “the need to probe and drill and examine and locate the words that take us beyond ourselves” (269). This loaded statement implies that words provide not only communal connections, but have their origins in some source of transcendence that unifies individuals with a divine cause. Human thoughts, desires and language are



perhaps some sort of limited reflection of a divine reality. The chosen group must also, like Karen, concretize their inspired questions and mould newly discovered words into testimonies: “Even if it means barking on street corners, that’s what you must do, each time baying louder than before. You must testify. There is no other choice” (270). Coupland’s seekers are called to be metaphysicians, not ironists, searching for truth rather than balancing contingencies. *Girlfriend in a Coma*’s new converts are to gain their self-worth and confidence through the knowledge that they are working towards some fixed point, the origin of meaning, the transcendent signified that is “beyond the reach of time and chance” (Rorty xv).

Jared continues to define the group’s mission by commanding them to combat apathy, the source of their initial paralysis: “Ask whatever challenges dead and thoughtless beliefs” (269). The seekers are to search for truth at all costs, even if that means dismantling venerable traditions based on historical observations. If tradition obscures truth, then they are to “reject and destroy the remains of history—kill the past” (271). This subversive apocalyptic rhetoric indicates that the power and mystery of “truth” has been diluted through our reductive use of language and tradition: “There aren’t enough words for transform. You’ll invent more” (270). This is not a recommendation of relativism, but an admission of the unfathomableness of transcendence and the unrelenting creativity of the transformation process. In Coupland’s fictional world, words are somehow connected to a true understanding of the self, society and the transcendent—they are a vehicle used to communicate and touch truth, but the words themselves are still arbitrary although the truth they refer to is not. Each individual has the power to “testify” in a unique and creative way; the means of

communicating truth changes according to each person, although there is no indication that the truth itself changes. There is a supreme transcendent signified that gives significance and meaning to language, but there is obviously an amount of creative freedom present within this system. In an even more complex and revolutionary proclamation, Jared tells Megan that, while dismantling the fragments of history, “rules have to be made up as you go along” (272). Is Coupland denying the presence of absolutes or simply questioning the method of finding these absolutes? There is no indication that truth itself is contingent, but that the method of finding these truths, the diverse styles of seeking, enable those seeking to be creative as they develop and adapt ways to search and “testify”. Although the practice of seeking truth encourages unity, it is not a uniform practice; Jared does not advocate formulas or rules, as these are too human and thus, confined, to begin even to scratch the surface of such a great and powerful mystery.

The focus of the next section, Karen’s self-sacrifice, re-emphasizes some of these same issues. Karen is the embodiment of the preordained “Plan B” as she sacrifices her life to enable the rebirth of the world. Coupland makes it clear that there are some “rules” or absolutes in place and, because of this, there must be a trade off. Richard tries to look for alternate plans; drawing on any biblical knowledge he might have gleaned from Sunday school and, again missing the point a bit, he suggests that “We could build a new society—the planet could be our ark” (274). Karen calmly assures him that she is willing to sacrifice herself to fulfil the divine plan. Richard’s plan would not work as the world needs some sort of cosmic atonement to enable its inhabitants to live, feel and question again. If they simply built a new earth of their own, they wouldn’t have the

spiritual tools to change anything; change must come from outside of this hopelessly corroded system.

The decidedly didactic, yet surprisingly revolutionary tone of the novel intensifies in the last chapter as Coupland alludes to both Marxist and Christian grand narratives when Richard tries to convince himself of his calling: “*Focus ahead, Richard: jettison everything. Leap forward. You have a mission*” (279). His mission is to thwart the “excitement and glamour and seduction of progress” (280) by continually questioning its eternal worth and encouraging others to do the same. This overt return to metaphysics in what Rorty deems a “postmetaphysical society” is quite disconcerting to some contemporary critics, like Mark Forshaw, who argue that Coupland’s allegiance to the quest for an unchanging, universal truth in this novel is dangerous: “Hierarchical, hegemonic notions of Truth, of the logos were not interrogated and deconstructed with good reason: *they are deeply conservative and deeply oppressive*” (Forshaw 56). These accusations of the “oppressive” nature of “hegemonic truth” are interesting when contrasted with Coupland’s comments about the closed, singular, “religious fervour” of a belief “in nothing” (Todd 89). Coupland sees complete secularity as its own hegemonic truth claim, oppressive in its refusal to even consider the possibility of any truth besides its own. In the novel, the presence of a universal truth in the form of an omniscient God does not suggest oppressive closure, but the source of variety and creativity that encourages humanity to search. Coupland emphasizes that the asking of questions is an act of a continually changing faith, an admission of limited knowledge, rather than a claim to have all the answers. He also claims that his generation “just stopped being curious”; the mourning over the death of curiosity is clearly a central



theme of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, as Coupland himself admits that “I can’t imagine life without being curious” (Todd 88). Perhaps this death of curiosity is a result of the perceived “death of God” and the unwavering claims of absolute secularization that followed. *Girlfriend in a Coma* illustrates that the anti-essentialist idea of freedom is oppressive, and that “freedom” actually comes from interrogating false, dead beliefs in the self-serving ideals of modern progress with the knowledge that there is a truth to be found. Forshaw continually questions the “literalness” of the last section of Coupland’s book, hunting for some sign of irony or mere rhetorical device--he doesn’t find them. Coupland’s use of straightforward apocalyptic rhetoric that acknowledges a supernatural presence, without a hint of irony, is deeply subversive in the postreligious world of most of his readers. As he reacts against the dominant truth claims of secularity, his bold proclamation of truth is countercultural, reinvesting apocalyptic rhetoric with its delegitimizing power that causes strong, yet predictable, reactions.

The last words of the novel, a “creed” recited by Richard, emphasizes that although Coupland shares a learned insider’s view of postmodern culture, he sees that there is something absolute and definite worth finding beyond the liquid boundaries of the virtual world:

You’ll soon be walking down your street, our backs held proud, our eyes dilated with truth and power. We might look like you, but you should know better. We’ll draw our line in the sand and force the world to cross our line. Every cell in our body explodes with truth.

We will be kneeling in front of the Safeway, atop out-of-date textbooks whose pages we have chewed out. We’ll be begging passers by to see

the need to question and question and question and never stop  
questioning until the world stops spinning. We'll be adults who  
smash the tired, exhausted system. We'll crawl and chew and dig our  
way into a radical new world. We will change minds and souls from  
stone and plastic into linen and gold—that's what I believe. That's what  
I know. (281)

After recognition of the presence of truth, and repentance for not seeking it earlier, Richard delivers this vision of the future to an ambiguous “you” that must indicate his readership, members of the decaying culture that he will soon be confronting. His chosen group will be infused with a knowledge of unshakeable, insatiable truth that provides “power”. This concept of power seems to deviate significantly from a Nietzschean concept of power—these are not the *Übermensch* following their own wills in order to construct their own truths, but a collection of seemingly sordid “saints” who are empowered from serving and seeking a higher source, something or someone outside and above themselves. Their methods of voracious questioning are not to deconstruct or destroy, but to discover. They will not be satisfied with undecidability, but only with an unwavering truth that is the source of life. Although the truth is secure, fixed and stable, the journey there is an ever-changing, all-demanding process. These new seekers and “evangelists” will stop short of nothing but the total transformation of the “minds and souls” of an entire generation. The last sentences are rife with biblical rhetoric and imagery as Richard envisions hearts and souls that change from “stone and plastic to linen and gold”. The final sentences of this apocalyptic novel envision a judgement and

transformation similar to one within the *Book of Revelation*, the final and ultimate collection of apocalyptic visions in the Bible:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. <sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. <sup>18</sup>I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. <sup>19</sup>Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. (Revelation 3: 14-19)

Coupland's apocalyptic vision, like John's, is speaking to a generation who are "neither hot nor cold" but apathetic or indifferent, who did not realize that they were "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked". According to Richard's vision, they will be refined, their hearts transformed to gold and linen. Unlike the biblical text, Coupland's final prophecy of transformation attributes the regenerative work almost solely to the power of his new "saints". This new religiosity is a testament to something that still moves beyond a merely relativistic belief to the highest form of epiphany, an ability to truly "know" (281).



## CONCLUSION

Douglas Coupland's fiction, as I have attempted to demonstrate, depicts a privileged subset of middle-class society who already lives in the "future", a place that is "spare, secular, coherent and rational" (Coupland, *Polaroids* 50). This description of order and rationality exposes a reality that is cold and lifeless, devoid of passion or a connection to any sustaining life-force. In an essay from his collection *Polaroids from the Dead*, Coupland explains that "The West has already seen a world of desire based purely on consumption—and they know the hollowness lying at its core" (93). This "hollowness" of misplaced over-indulgence is the spiritual death so vividly represented in Coupland's fiction, as well as in the novels discussed in this thesis by Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Don DeLillo, Martin Amis and Chuck Palahniuk. One of the differences between Coupland and these other popular writers, however, is that he proceeds to ask, "What is it we can now desire now that things, objects-*stuff*-has failed us?" (93). The material comforts of the "future" have been realized, yet found to be insufficient for the cultivation of a postmodern spirituality. In the same essay, Coupland later explains that we have lost any sense of what we want, only knowing that we always want more (93).

In the novels of Ellis, McInerney, DeLillo, Amis and Palahniuk discussed in this thesis, both the origin and end of postmodern existence have been shown to be blurred, indiscernible, perhaps non-existent; because of this perceived loss of purpose and structure, "meaning" is something only manufactured by the media, sold in the supermarkets and endlessly replicated on the internet. The spiritual "hollowness" of the

characters in Ellis's *Less than Zero* is a result of misplaced, mechanistic desires that can only speak the language of commodity; Ellis's "hollow men" are the walking dead, unable to recognize any sense of "authentic" desire that humanizes them. Equally fatal, the misplaced desires of Palahniuk's *Survivor* implode in a lust for self destruction, whereas desire is repackaged as ruthless control and manipulation in Amis's *London Fields*. The spiritual impulses of all of these characters have long been numbed, flattened, and ultimately disposed of by the seduction of complete materiality.

The protagonists of McInerney's *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and Delillo's *White Noise*, as I have shown, are both aware of a flickering soul, the home of recognized, but misinterpreted spiritual desires. Both the nameless narrator of *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and Jack Gladney from *White Noise* desire a knowledge of the ultimate source of order, structure, justice and purpose in the universe; these desires have almost become obsessions, misdirected and projected back upon the same material comforts that have fostered their initial sense of lostness. Although they are both equally desperate to establish a connection between themselves and the life-giving nexus of reality, and consistently "driven by homeless spiritual impulses" (McClure 142), they find it almost impossible to think outside of completely material categories. Any sense of spiritual imagination has been crippled by affluence and comfort, disabling their abilities to discern a spiritual reality beyond the man-made world of temporal pleasure and comfort.

The protagonists of Coupland's body of fiction, with the possible exception of Cheryl from *Hey Nostradamus!* are also disabled by their limited imagination, anaesthetized curiosity and inability to think outside of an inherited modern paradigm of material progress. Coupland recognizes the severity of this "hollowness" and misplaced

desire in the lives of his characters, clearly indicating a gap between their limited categories of reality and the sense of mystery and magic that actually structures the universe. For Coupland's fictional universe is not godless, but displaying at least a shadow of the divine. The stories of his characters' lives are structured around the salvational moments of epiphany, when these refugees from a material world experience a brief glimpse of the divine. Some of his protagonists, like *Generation X*'s Andy and *Miss Wyoming*'s John Johnson are seekers, but many are so lulled by the hymns of a consumer religiosity that they have lost the ability to seek. They are still captives of what Naomi Klein sees as "the straitjackets of irony and technology" (qtd. in Hicklin 25). For these dulled victims of over-satiation, Coupland imposes a divine, apocalyptic intervention that forces them to restructure their perceived categories of "reality".

The point of this thesis has been to demonstrate the effect to which Coupland invokes the original sacred associations of the concepts of "epiphany" and "apocalypse" in an attempt to open up a window of connection between the material and spiritual worlds, exposing the reality of an inherent connection between the two. The appearance of both epiphany and apocalypse rewrite the connection between a long-forgotten spiritual desire and its other-worldly origins and source of fulfilment. Dissatisfied with the artificial, transient framework of modernity, Coupland restructures fragments of the Judeo-Christian tradition to indicate the reality of a spiritual dimension and the human need for change. This is not, of course, to claim that Coupland or his fictional "converts" are partakers in an orthodox, institutionalized Christianity, but still newly enlightened individuals, recognizing their own need for larger categories of understanding. Coupland's novels frequently end with dramatic epiphanies or



apocalyptic intervention; we rarely see the results of the initial transformation after it has occurred, thus leaving both knowledge of the divine agent and the authenticity of the perceived “salvation” a mystery.

The presence of this mystery encourages Coupland’s readers to question and rework their own personal theologies, actively imagining a universe teeming with spiritual possibility. Coupland’s fiction is, as he has said many times, a concrete depiction of a spiritual hope: “There needs to be hope” (qtd. in Ashbrook). This “hope” can only be perceived if both curiosity and the imagination are re-awakened, in a relentless, questioning search for truth. This search for hope and truth, both subversive concepts in a “material” world, is the defining feature in Coupland’s fictional universe.

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