The Representation of Materialist Consumerism in Film

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Summary:

People are constantly bombarded with the latest technology, the latest fashion, the latest ‘must have’ item. We are encouraged to buy things that promise to change our lives and give us satisfaction or even create happiness. Interestingly we often succumb to the temptation of these material things, which is not always a negative reaction; however it does become negative when our lives are controlled by material possessions and we give up certain aspects of who we are to enable us to obtain these possessions. Furthermore it becomes problematic when we start to rely on material possessions to define us in terms of our identity or to help us fit into particular groups within society. With the media playing such a large role in societies at present it is almost inevitable that the phenomenon of materialist consumerism will make its way into the media. The media however holds control, to an extent, over whether or not materialist consumerism is viewed in a negative or affirmative light.

An analysis of the representation of materialist consumerism in selected instances of mainstream cinema will be the aim of my proposed study. The study will look at the representation of materialist consumerism in so far as it offers viewers a place to ‘fit’ into a particular group within society. The group I am referring to can be categorised as the upper-middle class of contemporary western society. I have thus selected films that represent this group specifically. For the purpose of the treatise ‘materialist consumerism’ is understood as a way of life, or alternatively, an ideology, which assumes that the accumulation of material wealth through consumption imparts meaning to human lives.

The treatise will analyse both sides of the coin, or in other words films that support or promote materialist consumerism and those that either revolt against or criticise this form of consumerism. The study will explore different aspects of consumerism in so far as these are represented in the films, with an identifiable axiological bias.

Key words:
Materialist Consumerism; Representation; Image Identification; Ideology; Capitalism; Globalization; Signifying-Chain.
Chapter One:

1.1 Introduction:
Few people would doubt that we live in an age of technology and information and the media in general play a large role when it comes to informing the public. It is interesting that we read and view the world through the information that we gather, and the media thus to a large extent serve as a representative of the information that makes up the world we live in. ‘Fictional’ media also play a role in disseminating information and one of the widespread sources of ‘fictional’ media is cinema, especially popular or mainstream cinema. Through the art of film, film-makers are able to represent their views of certain issues, beliefs, and systems and this could be done as an affirmation of the issue, beliefs or system or as a critique of it.

One of the dominant systems of our contemporary world is the economic one of Capitalism within which the consumer and more specifically in my argument the materialist consumer functions as an indispensable part. This has also become one of the areas of representation in mainstream cinema and it is interesting to examine whether one can see a balance or a bias in the representation of materialist consumerism in film. As I have mentioned in the summary my intention is to look at both sides of the coin. This requires that ‘materialist consumerism’ will have to be understood as a way of life, or alternatively, an ideology, which assumes that the accumulation of material wealth through consumption imparts meaning to human lives. It is important to include a detailed discussion of the context as well as the significance of the research at this point. The importance of the context is not only to keep my argument focussed, but also to show the viewpoint from which the argument is formed. This will become clearer with the explanation and discussion of my research methodology later on in this chapter.

1.2 The Context and Significance of the Research:
The research will be based on Joel Kovel’s notion that: “The culture of advanced capital aims to turn society into addicts of commodity consumption…” (Kovel 2002:66). Such consumption is not limited to ‘products’ such as motorcars, mobile phones, cigarettes and the like; it includes the
‘consumption’ of ‘products’ which justify and legitimise consumer capitalism as a way of living. In order to do so consumer society understandably has to be represented in a favourable light, or, alternatively in a negative light if the cultural products concerned happen to adopt a critical stance towards consumer society. I will thus be analysing how selected films represent consumerism as a type of addiction that can somehow satisfy the craving to find a place within a certain group of society. Another interesting point that Kovel makes is that capital is constantly creating a certain craving that can never quite be satisfied and thus becomes a circular desire that can never quite be fulfilled (2002:52). This form of desire can also be explained through Lacan’s theory of desire which explains why individuals are never quite satisfied with what they have, especially when more and better things are constantly being offered to them (Bowie:1991). Capitalism thrives on this un-satisfiable desire and through my research I would like to show how this is being represented in mainstream cinema along with the un-satisfiable desire to find a place within society, that is represented in David Fincher’s Fight Club (1999) and Mary Harron's American Psycho (2000).

Kovel argues that Capitalism creates the idea that spaces such as shopping malls become very ‘natural’ settings for society. (2002:53). It can then be argued that capitalism shows materialist consumerism as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ or even ‘desirable’ behaviour. This is especially evident in Amy Heckerling’s 1995 film Clueless, when the central character, Cher (Alicia Silverstone), talks about their lives looking like Infomercials, but for her it is actually “way normal”. (1995).

This example illustrates well what Fourie means when he says: “The media provide us with structured interpretations and views of reality.” (Fourie.2001: 470). From the example it is further apparent that, in so far as Cher’s self-understanding provides a ‘structured interpretation’ of social reality, it is also normal. The study will thus show that there is a link between western society and the media, in so far as the latter represents society in normative ways.

This helps to describe my motivation for the study and why it is, in my opinion, significant. We currently live in a post-modern, globalized society where it is often difficult to find a specific place where one can ‘fit in’. The
globalization of cultural and individual identity can often cause confusion, which is why people turn to ‘universal’ identities and societies that are represented by the media. In other words it is important to see how the media represents consumerism as a ‘universal’ or globally valorized mode of socio-economic behaviour- one that plays an already large and growing role in our everyday lives and our society.

I have specifically chosen film as a medium, because it works with the power of images and meaning-production through images. Unlike advertising as a form of media, that plays a large role in explicitly promoting consumerism, film allows for the opportunity to explore both negative and affirmative representations of materialist consumerism. I have chosen four films to work with:

- Gary Marshall’s *Pretty Woman* (1990)
- Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1995)
- David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999)

1.3 The Aims of the Research:

**Main Research Question:**
How (in terms of value) is contemporary western society represented in the four selected films, particularly regarding its character as a consumer society?

**Secondary Research Questions:**
What is representation?
What is materialist consumerism?
How is materialist consumerism represented?
Is there a balance in the representation in terms of negative and positive representation?
What are the links between the representation in film and western society?

Through the research I attempt to answer the above questions, which create a context for the treatise and should also give an indication of the angle and perspective from which the research will be conducted.
1.4 Research Methodology:

1.4.1 Hermeneutics:

I shall take the approach embodied in the model of Participatory Hermeneutics as explained by Andrea Hurst in *The Sciences, The Humanities, Research and Hermeneutics* (2004). The following extract encompasses a description of the presuppositions of my method underpinning interpretation of the data collected through the research phase (Hurst 2004:49):

1. Social or human ‘reality’ is not accessible in an ‘objective’ manner.
2. People construct meaningful realities together by participating in common ‘lifeworlds’.
3. As a result of our common humanity it is possible to come to an empathetic understanding of another’s ‘reality’ or lifeworld.
4. That ‘reality’ is not static but is appropriated anew by the participants in meaningful encounters.

This model allows for a critical and thematic analysis of the information collected via literary sources and cinematic reviews as well as from the four selected films. This particular research methodology is relevant to my study as it is based on the assumption that knowledge of social reality is analogous to the interpretation of text. Furthermore it offers the explanation that because we have certain common ideas and values within specific cultures and systems, the interpretation of any ‘text’ or social situation can never be completely objective and cannot be completely abstracted from the context of the interpreter.

However, it does show that there are certain systems of interpretation and that one should keep this in mind to allow for some form of agreement and universality within the interpretations of the ‘text’ by different interpreters. This is what Gadamer describes as ‘the fusion of horizons’, where ‘horizons’ refer to the interpretive frameworks that different interpreters have as their points of departure (1998). This is particularly relevant to my study and my argument as it pertains to my interpretation of the various texts within the
specific context that I have indicated. My approach will be substantiated by theorists and critical writers who share a common model of interpretation and who show a similar understanding of the research field in question.

The interpretation and analysis of the selected texts will in fact form the very foundation of my argument and it thus becomes obvious why hermeneutics as a research methodology is important. After all hermeneutics as a discipline is concerned with the conditions that make interpretation possible. In this regard it is interesting to see what Gadamer notes about text-interpretation:

Consequently, by text-interpretation is implied the totality of our orientation of ourselves in the world, together with the assumption that deciphering and understanding a text is very much like encountering reality. (Ricoeur and Gadamer, 1982:300).

This could be problematic if it is understood to mean that when one interprets a text one will interpret it solely in terms of one’s own experience of reality and one’s own idea of reality. This may seem somewhat relativistic as every person would experience their own form of ‘reality’ in the context of their own life- and worldview. If this was solely the case it may be impossible to reach any kind of consensus and every person would be able to come to their own theory of the nature of ‘reality’ based on their individual beliefs and interpretive constructions. However at this point it is important to look at Hurst’s explanation as discussed earlier, as she indicates that there are certain commonalities among people participating within a certain context, which allows us to come to common understanding.

There are certain arguments against the use of hermeneutics as a research method. Gadamer states that “…meaning can be experienced even where it was not the conscious intention of its author.” (quoted in Mueller-Vollmer, 1986:283). This question has often been asked about the interpretation of texts in all forms. The reader or interpreter may look for certain meanings within a text to justify or strengthen his or her own argument. In this case the text may be misinterpreted whether it is due to the person’s own view of reality being imposed on it, or even to suit a certain purpose and justify a certain argument. This is unfortunately the case for some researchers as the text is taken out of context and interpreted to suit their own context
when the author of the text never intended this meaning or for that matter any specific meaning at all. It could also be possible that the reader or interpreter of the text does not have sufficient information or knowledge of the framework of the text to be able to ascertain whether there is something that it has in common with one’s own viewpoint or the context in which it was written or for that matter the viewpoint from which it was written. This can happen unintentionally, especially if one is working with older texts where the author did not specifically comment by way of clarification on their own work, or where one only has the explanation of the text from a secondary interpreter with their own context and view or interpretation of reality framing the primary text.

Ricoeur gives an important explanation of the situation of hermeneutics and specifically the importance of the “…recognition of the objective meaning of the text as distinct from the subjective intention of the author.” (Ricoeur, 1977:319). This is something that people often question when it comes to the interpretation and analysis of certain texts, as we wonder how certain a person can be that their interpretation of the text is what the author had intended when he/she produced the text. Ricoeur goes on to explain: “This objective meaning is not something hidden behind the text. Rather it is a requirement addressed to the reader. The interpretation accordingly is a kind of obedience to this injunction starting from the text.” (1977:319).

The interpreter thus has a certain responsibility to research the issue at hand thoroughly so that they can gain a clear understanding of the context of the text before finally interpreting it. It is also at this point important to collect a substantial amount of relevant information to ensure that one has a large enough, yet focused, framework from which to start interpreting the various texts at hand. I should also mention that the interpretation of texts pertains to a large and diversified category, especially when we talk about the various kinds of texts. Through my research I encounter various kinds of texts in the form of literature, Internet sources, and then of course the four films I have selected for interpretation. It is important to make a distinction between the various kinds of texts when we talk about their interpretation, even when they all share the basic attribute of being interpretable.
The written texts, and more specifically in the form of literature and journals, comprise written language that needs to be interpreted. The Internet sources also use written language, but the difference is that often Internet writing or Internet film reviews are not written in terminologically consistent academic language and are often opinionated. They still carry importance in the sense that these are relevant reviews from Viewcrest within their specific context and understanding of reality. In this sense it displays a resemblance to the academic sources in so far as neither can be taken out of their contexts. The films also remain within a certain context, and I specifically avoid the word genre in this case, as it is important to understand that there is a difference between the context and the genre. In addition the films make use of dialogue as well as images that are interpreted in a certain way by the viewer.

These aspects of hermeneutic conditions of interpretation are important to take into consideration when one interprets the texts. However, participatory hermeneutics enables one to do this within a common understanding. The texts may be said to participate in to a greater or lesser extent, depending on whether the ‘same issues’ can be identified in them. This is why I feel it is important to use specifically participatory hermeneutics as my methodology. In other words whether I focus on articles published in accredited journals, Internet sites, books, or films, it is what they have in common as 'texts' that matters.

Hermeneutics helps to give a frame from which one can find a ‘universal’ context through which to interpret certain texts, however one can amplify this research method with the use of the semiotic model. I shall make use of the semiotic model for the interpretation of the various texts and especially for the film analysis as semiotics go hand-in-hand with the theory of representation. I shall briefly explain how semiotics work and why it is a relevant research model for my specific study, specifically focussing on using Lacan’s metaphor of the “signifying chain”.

Fourie gives a very basic description of semiotics in terms of meaning production when he says: “With the use of signs and codes we convey meanings. Semiotics is thus the science of signs and codes and the meaning they convey” (2001:327). In other words semiotics deals with meaning
production and thus how we derive certain meanings from various signs. The
three components of semiotics are the sign, the signifier, and the signified.
Before I explain how semiotics will serve as part of my research methodology
I shall briefly discuss these three components. Semiotics can work through
both written language as well as images, in this case I shall apply it to both as
I will be interpreting texts that include visual, written, and dialogue language,
however when illustrating or discussing the three components I may only use
one form of language to serve as an example.

Very briefly and basically the sign is something that refers to reality;
however it is not reality, but rather a representation of what the viewer of this
sign would deem as reality. The sign is thus representative of something else.
The signifier on the other hand is the physical quality of the sign according to
Fourie (2001) and the signified is the meaning attached to the signifier by the
recipient. This is the Saussurean explanation of semiotics; however there is a
slight difference in the way in which some post-structuralist thinkers such as
Lacan and Derrida view the signifier and the signified.

For Saussure, words are signs, combinations of signifiers and
signified. For Lacan, however, signifiers are contrasted with
signs. While signs refer to absent objects, signifiers do not refer
to objects but to a chain of language. They do refer, but to other
signifiers. When the signified seems finally to be within reach, it
dissolves into yet more signifiers. Lacan often uses the
metaphor of the ‘signifying chain’; the chain is what limits the
speaker’s freedom. Yet the chain is mobile; any one of its links
can provide a point of attachment to other chains. The signifying
chain of speech comprises the ‘rings of a necklace that is a ring
in another necklace made of rings’ (Sarup 1992:47).

One can see from this extract that for Lacan there is no ‘end’ to signifiers in
the form of a signified. What is meant by this is that often one would find
meaning in one word through the meaning of other words. Perhaps one
should say one would find a certain meaning in one signifier through other
signifiers. It is important to see that Lacan does not dismiss Saussure, but
rather differs from some of the points; however Lacan has used several of
Saussure’s theories in his model of the signifying chain. According to Sarup,
Lacan gives ‘primacy’ to the signifier where Saussure on the other hand sees a ‘co-presence’ of the signifier and the signified. “He [Lacan] stresses the point that the signifier has an active, colonising power over the signified. It ‘anticipates’ the signified” (1992:47).

Now that I have given a very brief description of how Lacan views the signifier I would like to move on to show how this model will be used as a research method for my specific study. Before I do I should also mention that this will be my main methodology for my research and that I have explained hermeneutics earlier as the signifying chain also stems from the hermeneutic approach. The hermeneutics above has thus simply formed a basis from which I can now explain the signifying chain as a research model and apply it throughout my interpretation and analysis of the various texts, as I have discussed under hermeneutics, that I shall use in this treatise.

The signifying chain can be linked with hermeneutics through the context that I discussed earlier in this chapter. This is relevant to my study in the sense that it takes place in such a specific framework which is that of western society as well as the various contexts of the films and that the texts will be interpreted and analysed within the context of materialist consumerism. It is important that I clarify how and why meaning can change within different contexts to show how it applies to the study. Bert Olivier explains:

…all the links and lengths of the chain that comprise language are interconnected and pre-exist individual subjects- there is no link or length of the chain that can be said to be “unconnected”, and the subject acquires the ability to speak or write by “entering” language…Moreover, links or lengths of the chain can be detached from specific points and re-attached elsewhere. The human subject, who occupies a “position” in the signifying chain, is capable of situating him- or herself differently within language from time to time (2005:75).

One would have the ability to take certain signifiers and “attach” it to a different part of the chain which would have the result of a different context. For example if one had to think of a cat in terms of Garfield, the orange cat in
the comic strip, one would think of him as a comical character who cleans out
the fridge and causes havoc for his owner. On the other hand if one had to
think of a cat in terms of ancient Egypt one would think of it as a sacred
animal to the ancient Egyptians. The association of the cat has changed and
the ‘meaning’ has shifted when it was attached in a different context, however
the importance here, as Olivier also explains in his article, is that the original
meaning of cat, in terms of a four legged, fury animal, is still there. The
original meaning is very important in the signifying chain as it shows that
although meaning can change within various contexts the sign must still keep
its original meaning in order to acquire additional meaning within the context.
It is this very idea that the original meaning can be attached elsewhere in the
chain to acquire additional meaning that brings us to the idea of meaning
‘changing’ within various contexts. Olivier goes on to say:

I want to argue here that every distinguishable length of
the signifying chain may be compared with what is today
commonly referred to as a “context”, and that one may
also think of it as a “frame of reference”, in Heideggerian
(1978:116) terms as a (relational) “totality of involvement”,
or in Einstein (or Galileian) terms as an “inertial frame” (of
reference) relative to which pertinent judgements
regarding motion can be made (Coles 2000:10-2; Shlain

The signifying chain thus works well for the interpretation of text within
a specific context or frame of reference. For my specific study I shall use it to
interprete selected texts within the context and from the view point of
materialist consumerism specifically within western society and within the
framework of capitalism being a dominant ideology. I shall show in chapter
two how well the signifying chain works as a model to interprete certain texts
as it goes hand-in-hand with representation and forms part of the theories of
representation discussed in chapter two. Furthermore the signifying chain
would be particularly relevant for the analysis of the selected films as they use
various signs in the form of both the images as well as the dialogue to convey
certain meanings within the context of both the film and my specific field of
study. The various analyses will show how meaning within a context is being
represented; the backgrounds of the characters play a role etc. For instance if Vivienne in *Pretty Woman* (1990) was not a prostitute then Edward's actions would convey a totally different meaning, but because his actions have been attached to this specific context one interprets it to convey a specific meaning. Olivier explains:

Lacan's metaphor of the “signifying chain” provides one with a model that resists charges or suspicions of unavoidable epistemological and semiotic relativism, while simultaneously illuminating the ineluctable relativity (contextuality, relationality) of meaning and of knowledge-claims. (2005: 77).

If one takes Olivier's statement into consideration, one can see that the model that would be appropriate to use as a method of interpretation and analysis and specifically within the study field of this treatise.
Chapter Two:

2.1 Materialist Consumerism:

The concept, ‘materialist consumerism’ may seem simple in the sense that it can be explained as the consumption or purchasing of material goods. However, it is important to understand that materialist consumerism stems from capitalism, and in order to understand fully why consumers often become ‘materialistic’ – in the sense of valuing material possessions above all else – it is essential to investigate capitalism as an ideology or perhaps a lifestyle. It is thus important that I clearly define what I mean by materialist consumerism or consumers, and why this is of importance in our current post-modern and globalized societies. I need to not only explain what a consumer is, but why people are consumers, and how ‘materialist consumerism’ has become a part of our everyday lives. Furthermore, it needs to be looked at and discussed in relation to contemporary western society, as the films I intend to discuss will be based within the context of contemporary western society, one could say that contemporary western society is the target audience for the films I intend to analyse. This will be done in the context of contemporary western society and with the use of Lacan’s metaphor of the ‘signifying chain’ as a research tool I will be able to clarify the terms within the specific context of the treatise. Furthermore for both Chapters Three and Four the ‘signifying chain’ will be used, although not necessarily referred to all the time, to show how signs could be interpreted and could acquire an additional meaning to its ‘original’ meaning within the specific context of this treatise.

Capitalism is constantly developing and is growing in the world. Often people focus on the profitability of this economic system as a positive attribute, and those who are against the system often talk about the destructive forces of capitalism through development in terms of its effect on nature. What I find very interesting is that sometimes (if not mostly) we are unaware of how we are directly affected by the system of capitalism through our everyday lives and through the purchasing of goods. One may argue that it is impossible not to purchase anything, which is true, but how necessary are all the material things that we purchase on a daily basis and what are the reasons or justifications behind these purchases?
According to Steven Miles consumerism has become a way of life (1998).
He states that:

Consumerism appears to have become part and parcel of the very fabric of modern life. Areas of social life that were previously free of the demands of the marketplace...have had to adapt to a world were the needs and desires of the consumer are apparently paramount. How we consume, why we consume and the parameters laid down for us within which we consume have become increasingly significant influences on how we construct our everyday lives. (1998:1)

If consumerism has become such an integrated part of our lives as it is now, according to Miles, affecting our lives fundamentally, it is important that we understand why we have allowed it to play such a large role in our lives in the first place. First, however, we have to understand that in this case consumerism is looked at in terms of materialism. There is a difference between purchasing food, necessary clothing to keep warm, places to stay, etc., and purchasing things we do not need, but rather want or perhaps think we want and need. Although one is to an extent unavoidably supporting capitalism when purchasing basic necessities, my argument is not against that. It is necessary for one to do so in the existing economic system, and by buying basic necessities you are also helping the store owner and the workers to earn a living under these conditions. It is important for me to I clarify that the argument is by no means an attack on all aspects of capitalism, as it has both positive and negative attributes; it is rather a discussion of specifically materialism as something that is connected with capitalism, and the reasons for the phenomenon. It is in fact impossible (as I will discuss later through the analysis of David Fincher's Fight Club of 1998) to escape capitalism completely. Olivier explains this through Kovel in his article Nature, capitalism, and the future of humankind:

There is more than this to the shaping effects of capital, of course. Once introduced into a society, capital functions like a
virus, transforming it systematically into what is known as ‘capitalist’ society and manifesting itself at three levels, namely the existential, the temporal and the institutional (Kovel 2002: 52). In other words, increasingly, people’s lives are lived on capital’s terms – what Hardt and Negri (2001: 22-41; 364-365) call ‘biopower’ and ‘biopolitical production’, that is, the fundamental construction of human life under certain (capitalistically) predetermined social, economic and political conditions. Moreover, the temporal rate at which they live continually accelerates, and their world is structured by interconnected institutions which ceaselessly secure and extend the domain of capital (2005: 130).

This can be tied to Kovel’s notion that capitalism constantly creates a craving within society that could only be satisfied temporarily and thus becomes an unfulfilled circular desire (2002:52). I have also mentioned in Chapter One that this ties into Lacan’s theory that this type of desire can not be fulfilled especially when new and ‘better’ things are constantly on offer (Bowie. 1991:80).

However, what I would like to draw attention to is the degree to which one subscribes to it. It is also necessary to understand (as I shall show later in this study) that materialism can be negative within this context, when it controls the decisions one makes in terms of who you are going to be. It becomes a ‘crisis’ when one looses a sense of one’s humanity (and that of others) for the sake of material things.

2.1.1 Capitalism as an ideology:
In order to understand why consumerism has become such an integral part of our lives, we need to understand how ideology works and why capitalism can be seen as an ideology in itself. However, ideology is a very broad and complex concept, and I will simply touch on it in order to clarify its importance for understanding materialist consumerism.

Ideology is a complex concept that can not be summarised into one definition. This is also due to the fact that there are so many different theories
on ideology. I shall only discuss a few critical theories of ideology to give a better understanding of this complex theory from which I can then draw a broad working definition.

Sonderling shows that ideology is made up from the two words, ‘idea’ and ‘logy’ which also means science. (2001:314). One of the critical theories of ideology is Marx's realist theory of ideology. “Marx suggested that…in every society the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominant classes. Because the dominant class has power, owns the means of production...and controls the economy in society and profits from it…such material or economic reality determines the consciousness of the people. (2001: 314-315). The dominant culture will have authority over many aspects especially economical aspects in society; this will enable them to practice dominance over other cultures in terms of their own way of life. The dominant ideas will often oppress the subordinate ideas and ideals and these ideas will thus never have a chance to be expanded on or realised. This means that the dominated culture will thus never be able to fully practise their own culture without the imposing ideology of another culture. According to Sonderling (2001) Marx defines the dominated groups or cultures as having a false consciousness where the ideology of the dominant culture is concerned. Sonderling shows that if this is the case, it also means that there is a true consciousness. This means that we can view ‘reality’ objectively. This is however not possible as the culture and meaning will influence human consciousness and one will understand ‘reality’ in terms of one’s language as well as the meanings one acquires from one’s society. (2001:316).

The second critical theory we shall discuss is the Neo-Marxist critical theories of ideology. This theory is a revised theory of Marx's ideas of ideology by the French philosopher Louis Althusser. Althusser however rejected some of Marx's ideas on ideology and explains that there “…need not be such a direct and determining connection between the material conditions and the ideas and beliefs people have.” (2001:316). This could be quite relevant in the society that we currently live in. Even though we live in a capitalist society where materials in terms of financial wealth plays a large role in how people think and what they believe, we also live in a society with a very diverse cultural system. What I mean by this is that people are starting to
embrace culture more in the search for identity; these people will thus be more influenced by culture or the lifestyle or identity obtained through certain materials rather than materialistic things as such.

Althusser suggested that ideology was produced by institutions such as family, schools, churches, politics, language and mass media. These are all the elements that make up the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA’s). “For Althusser, ideology is the system of representation in which people live their imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence. (2001:316-317). In other words Althusser shows that it is virtually impossible for a person to step out side of some kind of ideology. This means that a person will behave within a certain ideology, whether or not it is to the dominant ideology. This is however not necessarily just negative as Antonio Gramsci showed that ideology has the capacity to inspire people to take action. (1971). From this we can assume that many theorists have moved away from Marx’s theory of false consciousness. We shall discuss ideology later on in this essay especially in terms of ideology as a system of representation.

I can now say that Ideology can be broadly defined as a general system of beliefs held by a specific social group (one can already start to make the connection between ideology and culture here). These beliefs can, however, in certain cases be a set of false beliefs, which could be called the negative side of ideology. Ideology is also very closely related to language and is a system in which meaning production takes place in order to support social domination of one group or culture over another. Marx uses the notion of ‘false consciousness’ in his theories on ideology (Hall, 1996:17), however Althusser challenges this notion as Hall explains:

The second target of Althusser’s criticism is the notion of ‘false consciousness’ which, he argues, assumes that there is one true ascribed ideology per class, and then explains its failure to manifest itself in terms of a screen which falls between subjects and the real relations in which subjects are placed, preventing them from recognizing they ideas which they ought to have. That notion of ‘false consciousness’ is founded on an empiricist relationship to knowledge. It assumes that social relations give
their own, unambiguous knowledge to perceiving, thinking subjects; that there is a transparent relationship between the situations in which subjects are placed and how subjects come to recognize and know about them (1996: 17).

The problem is thus that if the dominant ideology had the power to remove the individual’s ability to think critically about the belief system it would mean that it would become impossible for people to ever really have any of their own beliefs. Furthermore it could be argued that it is impossible to completely escape ideology, although one may not subscribe to a specific dominant ideology, one would still have one’s own set of beliefs and values which would stem from your own ‘world view’. Hall goes on to explain:

Consequently, true knowledge must be subject to a sort of masking, the source of which is very difficult to identify, but which prevents people from ‘recognizing the real’. In this conception, it is always other people, never ourselves, who are in false consciousness, who are bewitched by the dominant ideology, who are the dupes of history (1996: 17).

Thus from Hall’s explanation one could see that it may not necessarily be that people are unaware of the ‘ruling power’ of a dominant ideology, however it could be that one would not see the ideology you subscribe to as being the ‘wrong’ ideology. Furthermore one would not overtly notice the various ways in which ideology presents itself as it would have become such an integral part of our lives. It infiltrates into our everyday lives or as Kovel calls it our ‘human lifeworlds’ (2002).

The ‘catch’, so to speak, of ideology is the fact that although it may surreptitiously ‘force’ a person to be in a certain societal position by privileging certain conventional beliefs and actions or behaviour, this can only be seen or recognised by the dominated person or group if one interrogates it critically. If the person is unaware that they are subordinated to a set of false beliefs that has been imposed upon them through unquestioned convention, it is not that easy, if not impossible for the person to escape from this domination. This in
part links to the neo-Marxist perspective on ideology as I have discussed briefly earlier in this section.

Another relevant point concerning ideology is the fact that, according to Stefan Sonderling, “Ideology refers to the way in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of power and domination” (2001:320). This shows that ideology is structured in such a way that it uses specific meaning in order to justify the dominant culture’s power over the dominated or subordinate culture/s. This will also be relevant when I discuss representation later on, as meaning production is vital in representation and often an ideology can be represented via, for example, film (specifically as will be argued in my discussion of selected films).

One may feel that capitalism does not necessarily link to ideology, as it is not normally seen as including a political programme, like ‘communism’, or ‘liberalism’ does, for example. However it is important to realise that capitalism has become one of the most influential sources of social and (broadly speaking) cultural behaviour in the world, as no one can be entirely free from it due to our basic needs and dependence on a wide array of necessities, as I explained earlier.

In Western developed societies culture is profoundly connected to and dependant upon consumption. Without consumer goods, modern, developed societies would lose key instruments for the reproduction, representation, and manipulation of their culture…the meaning of consumer goods and the meaning creation accomplished by consumer processes are important parts of the scaffolding of our present realities. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and the collective definition in this culture would be impossible. (McCracken, 1990:xii).

This statement is almost frightening in the sense that our consumer behaviour appears to have reached the point of no return, where our entire culture and our sense of being a self, rely on the products we consume. The question is,
However, whether or not we buy what we buy because of who we are, or whether we are who we are because of what we buy.

This brings me to my next point, of how capitalism as an ideology can encourage people to purchase certain goods in order to be a certain person or project (‘fit into’) a certain image. I shall explain this in terms of ideology, but will turn to it again at a later stage, when I discuss the power of images and image identification (along with Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage), as this also plays an important part in the ‘encouragement’ of materialist consumerism. However, for now I shall focus on how capitalist ideology and culture, in specifically a globalized society, can enhance or encourage materialist consumerism. In this regard Lynd says:

In every age men ask in some form the questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? The degree of awareness and the kind of emphasis with which these questions are asked vary at different periods. Times of swift change and social dislocation bring them to fore, against the background of whatever personal hopes and social harmonies an earlier period has cultivated (1961:13).

This statement by Lynd can once again be applied in the age of globalisation that we currently live in. Although it may seem that more cultures are being accepted and embraced in our postmodern society, the questions, ‘who am I’ and ‘where do I belong?’ are all the more relevant to this era. The fact that globalisation is leading to cosmopolitan cultures means that a person may no longer be sure of how she or he fits into society, as the cultural lines have now been blurred. This is not necessarily negative, as it gives the opportunity for hybrid cultures to emerge. However, this could lead to a sense of confusion for individuals, especially if they had not yet established a secure sense of identity for themselves.

Furthermore we can see that a rapid change could lead to confusion, and the world is certainly changing rapidly in many respects due to globalisation. When realising this, people may find that today is completely different from yesterday and they may thus not be able to adjust to the changes of society at the same pace that these are occurring. This means that individuals may feel
lost, in the sense that they are not able to adapt and identify with the constantly changing environment. A person may thus turn to something that is largely accepted by society as being 'normal', and is represented by an 'institution' as being the way to 'fit' in, but still supposedly remain an 'individual'. This is the very essence of the way ideology shapes people’s beliefs and behaviour: they see it as the 'right' way and the way to be accepted by the dominant culture. As I have mentioned, often we are unaware of the dominant ideology as it has become an everyday function in our lives, and the same thing has happened with consumerism. Miles explains that “Because we accept the routine of the consuming experience as legitimate, powerful ideological elements of that experience go largely unnoticed” (1998:5). This is usually how ideology operates, as it convinces society that the dominant culture is legitimate, and as soon as it can be justified in this way, society tends to stop questioning the values of the dominant ideology and accepts it as the ‘correct way of life’.

### 2.2 Representation:
Now that I have explained materialist consumerism, ideology, and the search for identity in a globalised world in brief, I can move on to explaining representation. First I need to define clearly what is meant by representation and how it links to ideology. I also have to explain how these concepts all fit together with materialist consumerism, its importance and why people become materialistic in the first place. However all of this will, as I have done above, be discussed in brief as these concepts will be explained and illustrated further in the course of the film analysis in Chapters Three and Four.

In a text by Stuart Hall, entitled *Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates*, he explains that “Systems of representation are the systems of meaning through which we represent the world to ourselves and one another.” (1996:23). This definition shows that systems of representation work through meaning production and therefore allow us to explain certain experiences and concepts to ourselves and to one another. One of the systems of representation is cinema, which is why I will use films to illustrate how systems of representation work.
Meaning production, however, takes place within specific contexts and understandings of reality. It is thus usually linked to a person or society’s specific culture, through which she or he would derive a specific meaning in an identifiable context. Meaning production works through certain signs in the form of visual signifiers as well as language. These signs usually have a conventional meaning within a society, and a person would thus recognise the sign and what it represents within their culture. One could even say that their specific ideology allows them to derive meaning from the sign (or strictly speaking, from the signifier, where the ‘meaning’ is the ‘signified’). Note however that the ideology that allows them to make a certain connection or identify a specific meaning, may in fact be the dominant ideology, as we will see later on.

Hall discusses the importance of meaning production through signs, which can only have a specific meaning within a specific context. “Signs communicate meaning because the way they are internally organized together within a specific language system or set of codes, articulates the way things are related together in the objective social world” (1977:328). Signs can thus only be interpreted with a specific framework in mind, even if the interpreter is mostly not explicitly conscious of the (cultural or ideological) framework underpinning her or his interpretation. If we look at film as an example of a system of representation, it would thus appeal in a specific way (that is, generate a specific meaning) to a specific audience with a specific culture and ideology, for example contemporary western society. In this case the system of representation could either be used to represent society (or a specific ideology) in an affirmative or in a negative way, depending on the ideology embodied in the sign-structure of the film (usually shaped by the film director’s implicit ideological attachments).

One can now understand the importance of my choice of Lacan’s ‘signifying chain’, as it works hand-in-hand with representation – which therefore means: the way that visual as well as linguistic signifiers and signifieds are connected to produce specific meanings. It allows one to represent a certain meaning and convey a certain message through signs within a specific context. The signifying chain allows for meaning to be created through the internal linkages of signs (that is, signifiers and
signifieds), and as we see through the various characters and narrative events in the films I analyse, these meanings can vary within the context they are used in, even if they can be shown to be underpinned by an identifiable ideological framework.

However, it is important to remember that systems of representation can only really acquire meaning in a cultural situation if the viewer or audience sees a certain meaning within it – the interpreter is as important as the text or film which is the ‘bearer’ of certain meanings. Although the creator of a particular sign-system would have a specific intention with their film for example, it can only acquire a certain meaning for the audience if they interpret it, whether it is done according to the creator's ‘intentions’, or whether it follows the signifiers in a slightly different direction. Systems of representation can thus not stand alone as they need the audience to make sense of their specific meanings.

A film, for example, is usually created with a specific audience in mind, an audience that would share a culture and an ideology; in other words they would share certain beliefs, values, and meanings. (This leads to the example of the cat I used in Chapter One). In this way the message of the film in question would be interpreted by the audience through the shared meaning of the audience and the director: “...meaning is not in the object or person or thing, nor is it in the word. It is we who fix meanings so firmly, that after a while, it comes to seem natural and inevitable. The meanings are constructed by the system of representation” (Hall, 1997:21). This explains why a person could watch a film and find a certain meaning within the film, without being fully aware of the fact that they have found this meaning due to their cultural context and the ideology embodied in the sign-structure of the film, as they are so used to these forms of representation and this specific message as part of their everyday lives, that it operates in the background, so to speak.

To explain this we can once again look at the way in which Hall thinks of representation, in terms of systems that are closely linked to ideology. He argues that, as I have mentioned, we represent the world to others and to ourselves through systems of meaning, or in other words systems of representation. Furthermore Hall states that “…ideological knowledge is the result of specific practices – the practices involved in the production of
meaning” (1996:23). If we see capitalism as an ideology we can now see that capitalism can be represented through various systems of representation and can communicate itself as a specific ideology through meaning production. Film in this case can be used as one of the systems of representation for a capitalistic ideology. This is the case with ‘mainstream cinema’ of especially the Hollywood variety, although there are also those instances of cinema that are critical of the dominant ideology of capitalism.

2.3 Representation, the Consumer, and a Search for Social Identity:
I have now briefly explained the meaning of the consumer, capitalism as an ideology, and the link between ideology and representation. I have also briefly touched on the idea of finding a social identity in a post-modern globalised world and why it has become so important and yet so difficult to establish this social identity in a way that would give the individual a sense of being a unique person among culturally similar people. This needs to be elaborated on, so that we can move to how film as a system of representation for or against capitalistic ideology can encourage consumers to purchase material things, due to the power of images and image identification.

I would like to pick up where I left off on my previous explanation of the search for a social identity. As I have mentioned, the world is becoming more cosmopolitan and we find ourselves in almost a mix-and-match situation where culture is concerned. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as we have the opportunity to enhance our experience by experiencing a vast range of cultures and by being able to decide which cultures we want to subscribe to. One must remember that this can cause confusion in terms of where the individual belongs and which culture, set of beliefs, and values they should subscribe to.

The media, and more specifically film, have also become more globalised. The majority of the films people view all over the world belong to Hollywood mainstream cinema. In South Africa, for example, although there are signs that our film industry is growing (the recent success of Gavin Hood’s *Tsotsi* being a symptomatic of this), we rely mainly on imported American cinema and are thus exposed to Hollywood culture. Individuals are now being exposed to various cultures through the mass media, including film, and at the
same time they are under the impression that we all belong to one uniform world. Thus although people are exposed to various cultures via the media, the mainstream culture would remain dominant and would enjoy more exposure than sub-ordinate cultures. Olivier explains:

Some theorists insist that ‘an increasingly homogenized popular culture’ is emerging, one that is fired by the western, mainly American, ‘culture industry’- so much so that the process of culture colonization of the globe is also nicknamed ‘Americanization of the world’, hinting at the vulnerability of less powerful cultures (2007:2-3).

This indicates that somewhere within all these various cultures the individual has to ‘fit’ in order to belong to the ‘united world’ of globalisation. In order to belong and be ‘normal’ in this postmodern globalised society, individuals in diverse cultures will experience pressure to subscribe to the mass culture or mass ideology generally reflected in the media. The reason, according to Hall, is that although the media strive to be independent of the dominant powers and do not necessarily bend certain accounts to suit a dominant party or ideology, they “…must be sensitive to, and can only survive legitimately by operating within the general boundaries or framework of ‘what everyone agrees’ to: the consensus” (1982:87). This shows that although the media may, in principle, have the freedom not to conform to the dominant ideology, they often do as this caters for the mass audience needed for their economic survival. Film may be even more ‘free’ from the dominant ideology in terms of economics and ownership, but for similar reasons they would often still cater for the masses by supporting the dominant ideology.

Viewers are thus mainly exposed to the dominant ideology via mainstream film which, in essence, is created for the masses. This means that the individual may tend to subscribe to the dominant ideology for reasons that will be addressed in the next section (on viewer identification). Through doing so individuals will follow uniform trends and thus lose a part of their individuality. One may ask why a person would give up their individuality for the sake of trend and unification. The answer is simple: unification and the
following of trends are perceived as ‘normal’. In order to belong in the social world and be seen as part of the ‘in crowd’ (and this is the irony), as an ‘individual’ a person will conform to certain trends and ‘buy into’ certain identities portrayed by society as being ‘cool’ on which to base their own identities. This leads us to the next section of this treatise: why people identify with what they see in the media, and more specifically in film.

2.3.1 Lacan's theory of image identification and the ‘mirror stage’:
According to Jacques Lacan, an infant starts to identify with an image other than that of the mother when they see their own reflection in the mirror. This is usually the first recognition of the self-image. Once the infant has seen this image two emotions occur: admiration and envy or rivalry. Olivier interprets Lacan’s theory of the ‘mirror stage’ by saying:

Lacan detects an ambivalence in the child regarding its own iconic counterpart: it loves it, even as it enters into a rivalry with it- a rivalry that expresses itself as primitive aggressivity. Lacan’s explanation of this phenomena is persuasive: when one identifies with someone- especially beyond the mirror stage when the originary act of identification is transferred to the social sphere of interaction with others such as siblings and friends- it implies the desired assumption of all the attributes on the part of the person with whom one identifies: her or his desires too, become one’s own, hence the ensuing rivalry (2006:19).

“The mirror stage was viewed by Lacan as a formative event in the development of the subject, and occurs roughly between the age of six and eighteen months when the infant begins to recognise his image in the mirror.” (Benvenuto & Kennedy. 1986:52). The child is thus now aware of images, although at this stage he or she may not yet be able to articulate them. In other words the child identifies with images, including (and most importantly for developing a sense of self or an identity) his or her own, before she/he learns to understand or identify with language. Images thus play a vital
foundational role in the forming of identity, which means throughout our lives we will identify with various images. Olivier states:

Lacan reminds one that the mirror image itself (one's own image) elicits rivalry and aggression on the part of the subject towards it, given the comparative unity and wholeness that it displays. This reinforces the aggressivity and rivalry that, for the rest of the subject’s life, she or he will display towards others. The role of the media in promoting such rivalry, and commonality, consumer spending, in relation to the ubiquitous iconic representation of celebrities (with which consumers identify in ‘wannabe’-fashion), should be obvious here (2007:9).

Returning to the idea of admiration (narcissism) and envy or rivalry we can now look at what effect image-identification might have. Lacan points out that the infant admires its own image because it displays the unity and ‘wholeness’ that the infant him- or herself still lacks at this stage, and this sets in motion the competition or rivalry with the image that simultaneously ‘is’, and ‘is not’ the infant. All subsequent rivalry with others represented in the form of images is based on this primary experience. Bowie explains:

The imaginary is the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities. It is the dimension of experience in which the individual seeks not simply to placate the Other but to dissolve his otherness by becoming his counterpart. By way of the Imaginary, the original identificatory procedures which brought the ego into being are repeated and reinforced by the individual in his relationship with the external world of people and things. The imaginary is the scene of a desperate delusional attempt to be and to remain ‘what one is’ by gathering oneself ever more instances of sameness, resemblance, and self-replication; it is the birthplace of the narcissistic ‘ideal ego’ (1991:92).

When looking at an image of someone else (in a film, for example) one may see a quality or characteristic of oneself reflected in the image. The person
looking at the image will thus like the image for sharing similar characteristics, as all human beings are narcissistic, according to Freud (Bowie 1991:33). From this we can gather that the person would thus ‘identify’ with this image and even try to accentuate the quality he or she already possesses. Bowie shows that the mirror stage (which is linked to the Imaginary) is a consolation for people through identifying with what he calls ‘chosen fragments of the world’ in order to find an ‘imagined wholeness of the ego reflected in the seeming wholeness of the perceived thing’ (1991:11).

On the other hand one may look at an image and see certain characteristics in the image that one does not have, or in other words lack. If this is the case the person looking at the image might envy that characteristic and thus enter into rivalry with the image in order to obtain the relevant quality or characteristic, in order to be closer to the ideal of being ‘whole’ as a person (this also ties with Bowie’s statement above).

The importance of Lacan’s theory is summed up as follows by Benvenuto and Kennedy: “The mirror stage inaugurates an identification with other human images and with the world the subject shares with them. The primary conflict between identification with, and primordial rivalry with, the other’s image, begins a dialectical process that links the ego to more complex social situations” (1986:58). This extract reflects and supports what I have discussed thus far on Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’; however, it also adds that through identifying with images around us we are opening ourselves to more complex issues. The infant is therefore no longer simply occupied with its own image, and as we move to adulthood we may become more and more intrigued and influenced by the images around us rather than the image of ourselves.

We can now move on to what Lacan calls the register of the imaginary. A cautionary note is called for here, however: it is important to understand that Lacan’s theories are complex and are not discussed in full in this treatise. I simply try to form a basic understanding of what is needed for us to move to the following sections of this treatise. Bowie says: “The Imaginary is the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities” (1991:92). We can therefore see that when we talk about image-identification (from the mirror stage on) we are in fact dealing with the Imaginary (as opposed to the registers of the Symbolic and the Real). According to Bowie
(1991) the Imaginary is the way in which the original identificatory procedures can be reinforced and repeated. He also explains that it works in relation to the individual's external environment of different people and different things. This yields the basic insight, that due to the Imaginary an individual will identify, as the infant does during the mirror stage, with different images in her or his surroundings.

From this we can now move on to how this image-identification will become a reinforcer for capitalism. To be able to do this, I would like to show how Lacan's mirror stage relates directly to his metaphor of the 'signifying chain' and how this could translate into my analysis of the four chosen films in Chapter Three and Chapter Four. This can be explained through Sarup's observation:

Lacan takes the mirror stage as the model of the ego function itself, the category which enables the subject to operate as 'I'. He supports his argument from linguistics, which designates the pronoun as a 'shifter'. The 'I' with which we speak stands for our identity as subjects in language, but it is the least stable entity in language, since its meaning is purely a function of the moment of utterance. The 'I' can shift and change places because it only ever refers to whoever happens to be using it at the time (1992:53).

Even our identities are formed within a specific context and this is crucial for our 'understanding' of who we are. In other words one could say that the images around us and the language we hear unavoidably play a part in the shaping of our identity through, for example, the mirror stage. Even so the signs, in the form of language and images, would have different effects on people with different signifying or meaning-contexts, who would attach different links of the chains to the meanings to arrive at their own interpretation of the images we see and the language we hear or read.
2.4 Bringing it together:

I have briefly defined the various concepts needed for the film analysis later on in the treatise, during which the concepts will be illustrated and explained in further detail. However, it is important to show how all these concepts and ideas work together to ‘form’ the materialist consumer. It is also necessary to understand why film as a medium could specifically work for or against a capitalistic ideology. The media as a broad concept plays a part in representation and is in itself a system of representation. Although I have specifically chosen to analyse film as a medium, I may refer to the media as a whole, which may seem as a large generalisation, however there are certain similarities within the various forms of media. The question of bringing the various concepts together and linking them to the media always brings the question of whether or not the media is a mirror for society or whether society is influenced by the media. This question may never fully be answered as media effects are much more complex than a simple yes-no answer. Furthermore I would not attempt to answer this question as various cases of media effects show that there are different situations and people are affected in different ways, if at all. However I would like to attempt to establish a link between the media, or more specifically film in this case, and society.

I have explained that according to Stuart Hall the media strive to be independent and how they often simply cater for the masses that are in turn usually the dominant culture or believe in the dominant ideology. From this argument one can draw the assumption that the media is to an extent affected by the dominant culture and their ideology. The reason for this is that in order for the media to have the maximum consumers they need to satisfy the masses. Quite often the majority of a society will be under the domination of the dominant or ruling culture which means in order to satisfy these consumers the media will take on the dominant culture’s ideology.

Others may argue that the media should rather be seen as definers of social reality. The problem that needs to be dealt with is people’s distinction between social reality and the representation of social reality. This is often where people make the mistake of assuming that the media is reality in which case the media will determine how these people live their day-to-day lives and in which case life will in fact imitate art or reality will imitate the media. “The
ideological meanings that are represented in mass media are only potential meanings as they can only become meaningful to particular readers who interpret and mediate such meanings through their own knowledge, experiences and views.” (2001:322). When we look at this argument made by Sonderling we can see that the media can only present reality in a dominant ideology successfully if the reader/viewer/listener subscribes to this ideology and thus finds their ideological meaning within the media’s signifiers. The audience is thus always left with the choice of embracing the media and the reality the media represent as the ‘truth’ or simply accepting the media as being secondary derived from reality. Although this ties in with the effects of the media one can also connect a person’s reaction to the media to their cultural background. The reason for this is that due to cultural differences one event can be perceived in various different ways. In other words one culture may connect a different meaning to the signs produced by the media as opposed to another culture. The problem here is that often the media’s signs may be misinterpret due to the specific ideology of the viewer. In a sense we can then say that the media is not so much influenced by the dominant culture’s ideology as the viewer is. The viewer may be dominated by this ideology and will thus read certain meanings in the media which may not have been intentional on the part of the media. Another problem could be that the viewer is aware of the dominant ideology in society and because this ideology is against their own beliefs, they become paranoid with it. What I mean by this is that the subordinate culture will feel threatened by the dominant ideology and will thus always be on the ‘lookout’ for its influences and often incorrectly and suspiciously find unintended traces of this ideology. The influence of a dominant ideology on the mass media is partly imagined and paranoid.

In the above paragraph I use the word partly, because as I have explained earlier it is often very difficult to rid oneself entirely of ideology. I have also mentioned that ideological control so to speak has to do with power as well as the fact that the media may project the views of the dominant ideology simply to satisfy the majority of the audience. This is however not always the case and that is why it is so difficult to find one unconflicting uncontradicting answer to the question of ideological influence.
If a person is under the ‘influence’ of a capitalistic ideology, they are likely to relate to systems of representations that convey affirmative messages, through various signs, of that specific ideology. Along with image identification and an iconic investment, the viewer may identify or come into competition with the image on screen, in film, and thus strive to be like that image. Another point is that the world is steering to more visually inclined generations and the image maybe taking the place of language in the sense of the written word. The actual use of language in the form of written words has thus lost its effectiveness to a sense as younger generations prefer images as means of information and entertainment. Through constantly seeing images of wealth, love and belonging people will start to desire the lifestyle portrayed and signified by these signs and will thus not only identify with these images, but also strive to be like these images. However before we can simply assume that people will inevitable react to the media and consume we need to explain that this support of Capitalism through the media works in conjunction with image identification. A person would identify with a certain image in the media, whether it is a person or a lifestyle, this image would signify a certain feeling that would be admirable to the person or would reflect something of their own. This argument can be supported by Jacques Lacan’s theory on image identification as I have already explained. “...images in capitalist-consumer space comprise metonymic site-chains for consumers (including cinema-audiences) to invest with their own desires—desires which are, to a large extent, cultivated and elicited in the first place by other, capitalist-engineered iconic sites of investment and identification.” (Olivier 2004: 2).

From image identification we can see that more and more people are relying on images to create meaning in their lives. With the confusion of reality and the representation of reality some people will believe that they will be able to have the same type of lifestyle as the characters they see through the images. If these images are influenced by a dominant ideology, in this case it would be the ideology of capitalism in advertising, the audience will inevitably identify or desire the lifestyle portrayed by the dominant ideology through advertising. This becomes hegemony of capitalism as no one is being forced to buy any of the products seen in the media, whether it is through
advertising specifically or not, however the media is creating a temptation to insure that these products become desirable. “...it is along this cycle of iconic investment and consumer behaviour that the almost incomprehensible power of capital as a process of colonizing every area of human experience by turning it into profitability, and of capitalism as an ideology or mode of being, is established and continually reinforced.” (Olivier. 2004: 2).

The media and especially film as a form of entertainment has become such an intricate part of our lives due to the fact that written language has started to take a back seat. It has become almost impossible to escape images and if these images reinforce the dominant ideology, then it becomes even more difficult to escape these ideologies, because of iconic investment. Although the media try to keep their independence, the knowledge of iconic investment can often be used to the benefit of the ideology, however it must be noted that it can also be used to the benefit of an opposing ideology. The target market so to speak, for a capitalistic ideology is the consumer. In order for capitalism to flourish the consumers need to be convinced that the more products they buy and the more things they have the happier they will be. “The class who is the ruling material force is at the same time its ruling intellectual force...” (Hall. 1977: 321). In other words capitalists would have the power of ruling ideas and thus convincing people through advertising to fall under their ideological structures. Consumers will thus believe that the more money they make the more they can buy and the happier they will be. However in actual fact the more they buy the less money they will have and the happier capitalists will be.

In his treatise entitled *Capitalism and Development in Global Perspective*, Leslie Sklair talks about the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’ in terms of development and its effects especially in First World countries.

The effect of the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’ is to increase the range of consumption expectations and aspirations without necessarily ensuring the income to buy. At its present stage of ‘development’, capitalism is built on the promise that a more direct integration of local with global capitalism will lead to a better life for everyone. (1994:178).
It is interesting that the idea of consumption is linked with the idea of a better, happier life. It becomes clear how this promise along with iconic investment can lead to consumerism. If the answer to fitting into society is portrayed as material possessions, it would only be logical that people would become mass materialist consumers. The problem with this is that the satisfaction of material happiness is only temporary and will be replaced with another desire, this desire will thus be temporarily fulfilled with another material object and the cycle will continue. This is a dangerous situation as not everybody, in fact very few people, can afford the elaborate material lifestyle shown to us in film etc. There is already financial and especially credit crisis around the world and although consumers need to start saving, material goods are still shown as a means to happiness. This is perhaps why Sklair states that:

Even more challenging is the enigma of why poor people, in poor and rich countries, apparently defy economic rationality by purchasing relatively expensive global in order to forge some sense of identity with what we can only call in a rather crude sense 'symbols of modernity' (1994:179).

Although there may be various explanations and issues involved with this phenomena that people spend money they do not have on things they can not afford (something very well stated in Fincher’s *Fight Club*, that I shall analyse later on). We can perhaps look at one explanation for this in the sense that capitalism creates through the help of the media certain false realities which will motivate consumers to continue supporting the capitalist ideals by continually consuming. All of this is achieved through image identification through signs and meanings.”…capitalism systematically promotes artificial needs and wants, leaving consumers craving more and more of what is ironically projected as being desirable to the point being supposedly indispensable for the buyer.” (2004:12). Capitalism will thus stay in its present hegemonic state if the audience or consumers of media can not or do not find another means in which to find identification.
The fact that it is not overtly obvious that images can create a certain desire that, if satisfied, becomes beneficial to the dominant ideology, could also be a reason why people spend money they do not have. It has become a natural way of life to spend money on things we do not need, as I have mentioned. Miles explains: “Consumer capitalism is able to exploit a situation where the symbolic value of consumer goods was endowed with an increased social significance. It is in this sense that the ideological impact of consumerism became increasingly subtle in nature” (1998:7). It is the very idea of social significance that encourages materialist consumerism. It is no longer only about what the object you purchase can do, but also what it means to own that specific object in terms of social status. The representation that sells the object in the first place is often represented as the lifestyle you will get from the object and the status you will obtain instead of the function of the object in question.

Through analysing the films in my following chapters, I hope to illustrate what I have explained above, but I also attempt to show that there can be an alternative form of film and thus a balance in the representation of materialist consumerism. Furthermore what one should understand from the above chapter is that this is not the final say when it comes to the issues discussed. I will attempt through the film analysis to show that the power of the dominant ideology can be challenged and that representation and systems of representation can only work if the audience interpret it without critical thinking and without question.
Chapter Three: The Affirmative Representation of Materialist Consumerism:

3.1 The Affirmative Representation of Materialist Consumerism in Gary Marshall’s Pretty Woman (1990):

Pretty Woman (1990) starring Julia Roberts as Vivien Ward and Richard Gere as Edward Lewis is a very typical ‘rags to riches fairy tale’. It does however come with a modern twist, which makes it an interesting study in terms of how a familiar story has been adapted to represent a contemporary culture and society. I shall reconstruct the narrative in a fair amount of detail, to be able to analyse it convincingly (partly in the course of reconstructing it) in terms of the ‘signifying chain’ of language (and image). In accordance with the broad hermeneutical research methodology framework underpinning this study, namely participatory hermeneutics, my analysis of this (and other) films rests on the assumption that humans share a certain ‘world’ of meaning(s), and that, through language, mutual understanding is possible. As explained before, Lacan’s model of the ‘signifying chain’, consisting of signs (signifiers and signifieds or meanings) is used as an elaboration on the model of participatory hermeneutics, which enables me to analyse the dialogue and image-sequences of these films by interpreting words and images with regard to their meanings as representations of a certain way of life – in this case what I have referred to as ‘materialist consumer culture’.

Pretty Woman tells the story of Vivien, a prostitute, who meets Edward, a big-shot businessman, on Hollywood Boulevard one night when Edward is trying to get directions to his hotel. He offers Vivien three thousand dollars to stay with him for the week and accompany him to the events that he needs to attend during his stay in Los Angeles. She has to undertake a makeover in order to ‘fit’ into his world and he gets to learn about Vivien’s view on life. The ending is true to the sugar-coated romance genre, as they fall in love, predictably, and it is suggested that they ‘live happily ever after’. This simply being a very brief summary of the film, it is in fact filled with various interesting meanings in the context of consumer culture, and has almost reached the status of a cult film.
We are introduced to Edward in such a fashion as to show that he is the stereotype of an upper-class businessman, at a friend’s cocktail party. Given the image-sequence by which the camera shows him moving among the other guests, especially the women, and the telephone conversation he has with someone who promptly becomes his ex-girlfriend, we also immediately realise that he is the most eligible bachelor there. When we are introduced to Vivien on the other hand, there is a distinct separation in class, or as Roy Ashbury describes the distinction of class in the first scenes, “…a world of sharp polarities…” (2005:128). She works as a prostitute and is clearly not doing well financially. This is made visible by her boots that close with a safety pin and keep their colour with a permanent marker. Furthermore she has not paid her rent, and uses the fire escape to avoid her landlord.

From the very beginning, therefore, the film shows a class distinction and draws our attention to the idea of having money, or not having money, and how people handle this in their lifestyles (or, in Vivien’s case, her way of life). Even the idea of spending money on things you cannot afford comes to life when Vivien’s roommate, Kit De Luca (Laura San Giacomo), spends their rent money on drugs.

From the word go, however, they (Vivien and Edward) have one thing in common: the importance of money. This becomes clear when Edward asks Vivien what girls like her charge for the evening and Vivien informs him that they ask a hundred dollars an hour. Shocked by the price, Edward exclaims: “You must be joking”.

Vivien replies: “I never joke about money”, and Edward explains that he doesn’t either. Through this exchange it shows that no matter where you are or who you are, or how much money you have (or in this case don’t have), in a capitalist economy money remains important for everyone; it is a kind of common denominator. However, the moment when they start talking about the car, the class distinction is back. Vivien lived with people who fixed cars and Edward’s first car was a limousine.

When they finally get to the hotel room it becomes evident that Edward spends money not because it is necessary, but because he has it to spend. He rents the penthouse, but never steps out on the balcony, because he is afraid of heights. Vivien is surprised by this and cannot understand why
anyone would rent the penthouse if not for the view. Edward simply replies: “it’s the best”. He only rents the penthouse, because it is seen to be the best. In other words Edward is, as far as we can see, not aware of the fact that he has been drawn into spending money on something, that he would not even get the full enjoyment of, just because of the status symbolism it carries.

Although the film is mainly affirmative in terms of materialist consumerism (as we will see more explicitly later on), in the ‘next morning’ scene we see some subtle criticisms of the way in which people acquire material wealth. This is evident in Vivien’s comment on what Edward does for a living. He explains that when a company is in financial trouble, he buys it, breaks it up into pieces, and then sells the company. The dialogue clearly shows that she is comparing his work to a criminal act:

Vivien: “So it’s sort of like stealing cars and selling the parts”
Edward: “Sort of, but legal”.

Her comparison is ironic considering that she is a prostitute, which is illegal in most countries. However, her comment in this scene shows that her job, for the sake of survival and getting to a better place in life, seems more dignified than Edward’s high-powered job for the sake of more capital gain. Later on this leads to Edward taking her statement into consideration and restoring a company rather than breaking it into pieces and selling it, despite the fact that this would have been more profitable for him financially.

Regardless of these moments of implicit criticism of some aspects of capitalism, the film is predominantly affirmative in terms of materialist consumerism. It is also interesting to note that when Edward explains what he does and mentions that he is buying a company for a billion dollars, Vivien immediately replies:

“Wow, you must be really smart, I only made it to ninth grade in school, what grade did you make it to?”

Edward: “I went all the way”
This moment represents the idea that money equals education, which could in some sense be regarded as being true, as education is expensive. She uses the word ‘smart’, so in Vivien’s mind she assumes that one has to be smart (clever) to have money. She thinks, stereotypically, that only smart, people can have money, and that education in some way is another ‘perk’ to being rich. Thus to strive for education, and then in turn for more money, you must be smart.

Although it may sound far-fetched, one can see that the class distinction, that is often looked at as being confined to the past, is still at hand. Those reinforcing a capitalist ideology will be those who firstly have a capital advantage, and secondly strive to have more money. If they have the capital advantage, according to Vivien, they would be educated. Hall explains (1977:332) that hegemony takes place when a ruling class is able not only to ‘force a subordinate class to conform to it’s interests, but exerts a ‘total social authority’ over those classes’. This is often the case and when one talks about a ruling class, their ‘power’ to rule could include education. That could be why these people could keep their ideology dominant, as people with a high-level education are usually seen to know better, or rather know ‘smarter’.

The moment that sets Vivien’s change from rags to riches in motion is when Edward asks her to stay for the week. This is negotiated like a business deal, even though Vivien hardly moves in the kind of circles where Edward does business; Edward negotiates her payment as if she were a company that he was purchasing. He even tells her that he wants to hire her as an employee. He sets her value at three thousand dollars and the sheer excitement displayed by Vivien at the idea of receiving that amount of money proves not only that she is in desperate need of the money, but she is willing to stay with a stranger for a week and be at his beck and call for it. When she asks him why a rich, attractive man like himself doesn’t get a girlfriend, he simply explains that he wants no romantic complications.

As he leaves the room Vivien says: “I would have stayed for two”.

He smiles and replies: “I would have paid four”.

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It is interesting that Edward stays in the penthouse, not for its view, but because it is the best, yet he negotiates a lower price with a person. She is so excited that she immediately calls Kit, who speculates that, for Edward to spend that amount of money, he must be either twisted or ugly. For Vivien and Kit the three thousand dollars is an extreme amount of money, but for Edward it is the equivalent of a disposable pleasure.

Vivien now has to undertake a makeover in order to fit into Edward’s world, and this is where we can actually start to see various aspects of ‘Cinderella’ – probably the oldest and most familiar rags to riches story – come into play. Firstly, however, I need to note that the scene change-over from the hotel room to Vivien’s shopping is done in a montage of brand names and shop fronts. We also see designer labels, and Vivien is mesmerised to say the least. It shows that if you want to be a ‘princess’ in an upper-class society you have to wear labels and not just any brand – designer brands. When Vivien goes into a shop to buy an evening dress, the two saleswomen refuse to help her because of how she is dressed. Assuming she has no money, and that they have nothing that would suit her, they ask her, not so politely, to leave the store. These two can be compared to the stepsisters in Cinderella who do not want her to attend the ball.

The sad tone of the music that plays while Vivien walks back to the hotel shows that she is hurt by the fact that she does not fit into the upper-class society and is not accepted by them, because of her appearance. This scene seems to be quite shallow in the sense that in a world where consumerism is important (the boutique) judgement is made only on your material appearance. Vivien’s reaction, however, is the interesting point of representation. Although she is tough enough to work as a prostitute on the streets where bodies are found in garbage cans, she cannot bounce back as quickly from social rejection. She is seen to be happier on the streets where she is socially accepted than in the upper-class neighbourhood where she is rejected.

This scene represents the idea that to ‘fit’ into society is very important to any particular person, and the magic wand for getting Cinderella to her prince and her place in society is now a credit card. Steven Miles explains
how the consumer goods have an effect on where we place ourselves in society:

Consumer goods and services potentially play an important role in who we are and how we construct our social lives, in terms of how we use such goods and services and how we relate to other people through such goods and services. (1998: 3).

Miles uses the word ‘potentially’ in order not to give the consumer goods all the power. This is not necessarily the case, because the individual still has the power not to let consumer goods or material objects define their lives. Vivien has fallen prey to this temptation, however, as she does change how she dresses to ‘fit’ into the upper-class, even though she previously describes what Edward calls elegant and conservative as boring. This shows that no matter what your personal opinions may be, according to a consumer ideology you need material goods to ‘fit’ into and be accepted by the upper-class.

With the money and the new dress comes a certain behaviour expectation. The hotel manager (a very interesting character whom I would like to discuss in detail later) teaches Vivien the table manners that are expected when you join the upper-class society. This scene has a My Fair Lady feel to it, but the difference between Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn) and Vivien is that Vivien needs clothing and accessories to fit into society, while Eliza on the other hand needed eloquence. Language, a magic wand, and education have all been replaced by Edward’s money. Even though Vivien struggles in the restaurant and sends escargot flying towards a waiter, she still manages to pull the evening off in her elegant, lacy black cocktail dress so perfectly suited for the occasion and the company. Bert Olivier explains the similarities and differences between Pretty Woman and My Fair Lady in his article, Pretty Woman – The politics of a Hollywood Fairytale:

In both films a transformation takes place, but with a difference. Eliza’s transformation is a Bildung effected through language which has (understandably) for centuries been the measure of civilization. In My
*Fair Lady*, Professor Higgins’s linguistic knowledge does not merely refine Eliza’s pronunciation; the civilizing effect of the speech that she laboriously acquires is such that she becomes a lady. In *Pretty Woman*, Vivien is also transformed, but one can hardly call it a Bildung, with its connotations of civilizing enlightenment through experience articulated in language. The transformation is effected almost solely and indispensably by means of the buying power of money, with the result that Vivien acquires (only) the appearance… (1992:35).

It is often the conversations between Vivien and Edward that are so telling; they show the elements of capitalism so well and often, as if ‘mistakenly’ in terms of the rest of the film, we get ‘unintended’ moments of critique on the ideology of capitalism. One of these moments is when they talk on the balcony after they have just attended a business dinner. Vivien explains that Edward’s problem with his current business deal is that he has invested too much emotion in the deal. He likes Mr Morse, whose company he is about to take over, and it becomes clear to the viewer that you ‘are not allowed to like’ a person in business, but instead you must be ruthless and in a sense heartless to make the most profit in business. She compares her work to his in the sense that she remains emotionless when she is with a customer. To this Edward replies:

“Vivien, you and I are very similar creatures. We both screw people for money”.

This is one point where Edward and Vivien both “…recognise that their respective worlds are both based on monetary exchange” (Ashbury, 2005:130). This brief moment gives us a small, implicit critique of the economic system in which they live, but the film stays true to its mode of representation (valorizing capitalism) and goes right back to the boutique where Vivien now has to fill an entire wardrobe for all the various social events she will be escorting Edward to.

On their way to the shop Edward says:

“Shops are never nice to people, they are nice to credit cards”.

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In other words, you will not be treated well unless you look as though you belong in the shop by wearing expensive clothing, or in Vivien’s case by being in the company of a man with money. Accordingly, the manager of the shop is very different from the two shop assistants that Vivien encountered earlier and she gets treated well. Ashbury makes a very interesting point about this particular scene and how it is so important in the film in terms of materialist consumer representation.

Dissing materialism is undermined by the film’s masturbatory enthusiasm for shopping as nirvana; Edward takes Vivien into a fashion shop and reduces the manager to an obsequious jelly by saying that he is going to spend a ‘really obscene’ amount of money. To the sound of Roy Orbison’s upbeat ‘Pretty Woman’ song, a fast-paced montage delights us with Vivien’s ‘fashion show’, and any ‘sisterhood’ with ‘Skinny Marie’ (the girl in the dumpster) dissolves in an acid of designer labels. (2005:131).

The manager loses his dignity to a certain extent and almost begs for the money thrown in front of him by Edward. Vivien is treated like royalty and the moment she is presented with material goods her other problems seem to float away. On the one hand we can say that this scene shows how we ignore the serious things in life, such as the death of a young woman due to drug abuse as an example in the film. On the other hand, and I think this is more accurate in terms of this specific film, *Pretty Woman* shows that material things will help you escape your problems and forget about the bad past. The phrase ‘retail therapy’ comes to mind, where material consumerism not only offers a way into a ‘better’ life through the acceptance by upper-class society, but also an escape from the bad or (in this case) the poor life. Perhaps this could partly answer the question I spoke of in Chapter Two, namely why people spend money they do not have on things they do not need. I will refer to this again later on in the analysis of *Pretty Woman*, as it is a very interesting question that is answered through specific representations in the film.
Once she has finished her, we can almost say, extreme shopping, Vivien is ready to take on the world. The previous looks of disgust she received from people on the streets and the two sales ladies who did not want to serve her are now replaced by looks of admiration. She takes revenge, as it were, in a materialistic way. Vivien walks into the shop and declines their offer of service. She informs them that they would not help her and then asks them whether they work on commission. When they answer yes, she holds up all her shopping bags and says: “Big mistake, huge”. The sales ladies are evidently upset by the fact that they have missed out on some extra money, which shows (significantly in terms of the theme of this study) that it is quite important to them. The real interest, however, is the fact that once Vivien is dressed in the ‘signs’ of materialism – the images of the way she is dressed after the shopping spree differ significantly from those signifying her former ‘hooker’ status – she has the power to stand up to the sales ladies. This scene thus represents the power that comes with money, or at least the power that the capitalist ideology would like you to believe you attain through owning material things.

There are certain moments in the film where Vivien is expected to show some form of ‘culture’ in a way similar to Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*. However, these moments are small and overridden by the presence of material objects. To illustrate this, there are two scenes I would like to refer to. First there is the Polo game, a game which has always been characterised as a royalty sport. Vivien attends the game and we realise that she seems to enjoy it. However, it is more important that she looks the part, because this is what Edward calls ‘business mingling’. This scene specifically relates to *My Fair Lady*, as Olivier explains: “Eliza Doolittle’s exuberant *faux pas* at the Ascot Races is matched by Vivien Ward’s incongruous physical exuberance at the polo game: both behaviours draw glances of surprise or indignation.” (1992:35). The difference, as I have mentioned, remains materialistic in nature. “…Vivien acquires (only) the appearance, the look of a lady, as Edward’s assurance when they go to the polo game indicates: “You look like a lady”. (1992:35). In the world of materialism it is what you see that counts, and on the outside Vivien *has* to look like a lady.
The second relevant scene is the trip to the opera. “One of the most crucial tests occurs when Edward takes Vivien to the opera: will she love it and reveal her spiritual depth? She cries in all the right places.” (Ashbury, 2005:130). This scene is overpowered by images of the striking red dress, the diamond necklace (worth a quarter of a million dollars) that Edward loaned and the private plane they take to the venue in San Francisco – all of them images that signify the power of money, that is, materialistic values. Vivien may seem to have understood the culture of the opera, even though she could not understand the language. The fact remains that Vivien would not have made it to the opera in her short dress, blonde wig, and safety pin boots; before she could be accepted into a certain culture and through that enrich her life with ‘high culture’, she had to obtain certain material objects. It thus shows that you should not merely want the red dress and diamond necklace; in fact you need it to fit into society through these, and thus enrich your life with culture. If you do not have the dress to wear you cannot enjoy the pleasures and the beauty of the opera.

The question is whether or not the story would have worked without the glorification of money. The answer is yes and no. The story of Eliza Doolittle worked without money, and so did the magic of Cinderella; however, what needs to be considered is that these stories took place in very different time frames (one that of Victorian London, and the other the ‘no time’ typical of fairy tales). The dominant ideology of today includes the idea that money and materialist things are of great importance. Edward may not have found Vivien so refreshing if she had come from the world of money, and Vivien would not have had the opportunities ‘to improve herself’ if it weren’t for Edward’s money.

Edward is transformed by Vivien’s influence from a ‘workaholic’ financial predator into a ‘caring capitalist’...Vivien on the other hand, is empowered by Edward’s money to become the person she already was, but disguised by cheap clothes and a wig. (Ashbury, 2005:129-130).
The class difference between Edward and Vivien is what sets the story in motion. If Vivien can only become the person she is supposed to be through Edward’s money, then it means that you cannot be who you truly are unless you have material things to get you there. In terms of materialist values, Vivien’s potential as a person was hidden under cheap clothes and could only be brought to life by designer labels. Fashion in fact plays a large role in materialist consumerism and this is illustrated in all the films analysed in this study. Clothing nowadays is no longer used simply to cover our bodies and keep them warm, but instead it is seen as a way for people to express themselves, and more importantly to express themselves as individuals. Fashion promises a contradiction that is very alluring to the consumer of today, in terms of consumers striving to find their individual identities in a globalised world, on the one hand, but also longing for a feeling of belonging amongst the confusion and homogenisation of globalisation.

At an individual level, fashion offers social obedience alongside individual differentiation, while from a broader perspective it reflects the underlying workings of a mobile society. In this respect, the needs of the individual and society are meshed. The individual can get from fashion what he or she pleases – a sense of individuality alongside a feeling of belonging – while society itself can reap the concurrent economic benefits (Miles. 1998:91).

Vivien finds her place in society with Edward through her change of clothes (and arguably what goes hand in hand with this, such as learning to use cutlery ‘correctly’). She hangs her blonde wig and boots up and exchanges them for the chic appearance of designer labels. In one scene she asks him why he dressed her up if he was going to tell everyone that she is a hooker. He replies:

“It was appropriate”.

He found the clothing appropriate for the place that they were going to and the polo game they were attending. She had to be dressed up in order to fit the
criteria of Edward Lewis’ girlfriend as his friends would expect her to be. (The idea of fashion will be discussed in relation to the other three films too. This is one of the main things that link the four films in terms of how they represent materialist consumerism.)

Coming back to the Cinderella analogy I mentioned earlier, the idea of the fairytale becomes even more prominent towards the end of the film. When Edward has to go home, Vivien is unsure of whether or not she can take up his offer to stay in a place paid for by him. She is upset by this as she feels for the first time he is treating her like a prostitute. She explains to him how, when she was little, she used to wish that a prince on a white horse would rescue her. She never thought that this would be replaced by: “Come on baby, I’ll put you up in a great condo”. This comment shows that money has replaced romance to a significant extent, as instead of being swept of her feet by Edward’s charms, she has the opportunity to be a ‘kept woman’ through Edward’s money and his offer to give her a place to stay. She tells him that she wants more; that she wants ‘the fairytale’. He replies:

“I know all about wanting more, I invented the concept.”

With this he gives her the money he owes her, and that in some sense replaces the fairytale she hoped for.

She asks Kit for advice and when Kit remarks how well Vivien ‘has cleaned up’, Vivien answers:

“Well it’s easy to clean up when you’ve got money”.

If you have money you can buy nice clothes and move from all the bad things in your past to all the bright things in your future, or so the film would have us believe. Vivien has not yet lost her realistic approach to life completely; she asks Kit to mention one person for whom things worked out. Kit’s reply is hilarious, but makes a very clear comment when she says:

“A name? You want a name? Cinde-fuckin-rella.”
The magic has been replaced by money and the prince has been replaced by a millionaire who, although he is changing his ways, has not always acquired his money in the most honourable way.

It is in the final scene of the film where we find the analogy (business tycoon/prince) most prominent. Edward does not show up on a white horse, but rather in a stretched white limousine. The romance appears to be ‘intact’, as Ashbury describes: “…she gets the fairy tale, to the sounds of La Traviata. Edward overcomes his fear of heights and a bouquet of flowers in hand, climbs the fire escape to her ‘tower’ to rescue her.” (2005:130). The difference between a fairy tale and Vivien’s version is that she is not rescued from a witch or evil stepsisters, but instead she is being rescued from poverty and her unenviable situation. One may even go as far as saying Edward and his money is saving her from a life as a lower-class citizen (economically speaking).

There are two characters in the film that should not be overlooked, as they represent very important characteristics of contemporary society. The first character is Philip (Jason Alexander), Edward’s lawyer. He is the typical money-hungry capitalist who is willing to do anything to be rich. He is the man who throws elaborate parties and drives the Lotus Espri. He is also the only one who finds out that Vivien is a prostitute, and when he does, he treats her like an object by not only asking her to ‘get together’ with him when Edward leaves, but going to her hotel room and resorting to physical violence. Edward tells him that they only break companies ‘into pieces’, which he realised from his time spent with Vivien.

Edward: “We don’t build anything and we don’t make anything”
Phil: “We make money”

Phil is not a likeable character and throughout the film he is represented as a greedy, heartless man. This character representation of Phil creates what may be seen as another instance of implicit critique. Here, the film represents the capital-hungry, ruthless businessman who lives for money, which is why Edward had to change his ways a little to ensure that he remains the film’s hero. According to Ashbury, “Capitalism becomes humane…” in Pretty
Woman. This is a ‘good’ or affirmative representation, as that is what a society should arguably strive for – either an alternative system to capitalism, or capitalism in a less ruthless form. However, make no mistake, Edward may have found himself in ‘unfamiliar territory’ when he decided to give up excessive profit and help Mr Morse instead, but he has definitely not lost his love for the ‘good’ things in life. Even towards the end, when we have already seen Edward changing, he still gets the balcony seats at the opera, despite his fear of heights, because ‘it’s the best’.

The second character that makes an impression as being relevant to my theme is Bernard (Hector Elizondo), or as Vivien calls him, Barney, the hotel manager. He has what almost amounts to double standards when he first meets Vivien. On the one hand he wants her out of the hotel to keep his name intact, but he also has to please Edward, as Edward brings a lot of money to the hotel. On the other hand there is almost a sense of camaraderie between him and Vivien when he tries to help her. Although there is no specific evidence for this, one senses the possibility that he has come from the same background and had to undertake the same ‘make-over’ to fit into a ‘respectable’ place in consumer society. He is somewhat desperate to introduce himself and give his business card to Edward, who walks away before Bernard really has a chance to do so. He is not in the same class as Edward, but he is somehow desperately trying to get there, which could be why he helps Vivien so much.

In a sense Bernard is what keeps the plot moving. He helps Vivien to buy her first dress and he teaches her proper table manners. He is also the one who draws Edward’s attention to the fact that he is losing something ‘beautiful’ and precious if he let’s Vivien go, although he does this in a very subtle manner. Bernard’s character is somewhat in conflict with the rest of the film. On the one hand he encourages the belief that you can fit into society only if you have acquired the material goods and the correct clothing to get there. It is clear from his dress sense and his stature that he believes he has moved away from Vivien’s class into a higher class through obeying the principles of materialism. On the other hand his material objects do not get him the attention he seeks from Edward, which shows that maybe his acquired material goods are not what it takes to get a certain respect in a
high-class materialistic society. Then again he has the ability to get a shop assistant to serve Vivien, where she could not because of the way she looks.

Although the film has brief moments of critique regarding capitalism and materialism, it is predominantly affirmative towards this ideology. The film is sugar-coated in the sense that it never gets too serious and it never fully addresses the serious issue of the situation in terms of values. Vivien is swiftly removed from her bad circumstances and there is not a lot of reflection, on the film’s part, concerning the people who do not end up in a penthouse in Beverly Hills. “Needless to say, the film quickly forgets about the body in the dumpster – too much reality would seriously derail the film’s ideological project” (Ashbury, 2005:129). The film was originally titled 3000, which was to take a more serious look at the idea of prostitution. “Disney, owners of Touchstone, deemed 3000 uncommercial, and Gary Marshall was employed ‘to lighten it up’” (2005:127). This is somewhat problematic, as it could have been changed to suit audiences, or it could have been changed to suit an ideology. Whichever reason it was, the film remains predominantly affirmative in terms of the representation of materialist consumerism.

The film demonstrates how contemporary Hollywood negotiates social change in a profitable way by invoking troubling issues but then re-signifying them in enjoyable, more interesting ways. Pretty Woman is ‘mythic’ in anthropologist Levi Strauss’s terms, as it works on social contradictions and magically resolves them. (2005: 128).

3.2 The Affirmative Representation of Materialist Consumerism in Amy Heckerling’s Clueless (1995):
We are introduced to Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone) a fifteen year-old beautiful, popular blonde, in a montage of teenagers having fun at their mansion swimming pools, driving their Jeeps, and drinking lattés at a coffee bar. In a voiceover Cher says:

“You must be thinking, is this like an Oxema commercial or what? But actually I live a way normal life for a schoolgirl”.

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She goes on to explaining her morning routine, which includes picking out her school clothes, which is done by a computer. The viewer is immediately made aware of the fact that Cher is used to a life of luxury and views this lifestyle as normal. For a girl like Cher having a computer help her pick out her school clothes may seem ‘way normal’, but for the average viewer this is a luxury only the ‘way rich’ will know.

The interesting and (dare I say) honest part of the film is that it is not pretentious, not even for a moment. The shallowness of the film’s characters can also be linked to postmodernism, especially in terms of surfaces or the characters’ ‘inability’ or ‘unwillingness’ to look beyond the surface of things and people. Olivier argues that one of the structural features of postmodernism is its ‘preoccupation with surfaces’ (2002:111-126). From the word go we are aware of the fact that we are entering the lives of Beverly Hills’s hippest, richest, and shallowest teenagers. They love to shop and it is what they own, drive, and how they dress that counts, not who they are. Viewers know that they have left their average lifestyle behind and are about to enter into Cher’s world where everything is as superficial as it seems.

Cher and her best friend Dionne (Stacey Dash) are friends for two reasons: one, because they are both ‘named after great singers of the past who now do infomercials; and two, because they both know what it is like for people to be jealous of them. The very fact that this is their basis for being friends, and that this is what they have in common, shows that these two girls may be the epitome of shallowness, and in no way are they trying to hide it. They do not need to hide it, as people already accept them for who they are: beautiful and rich. I am by no means suggesting that if you do not possess a lot of material goods you should pretend to be someone you are not. However, film often portrays people who are rich to have the luxury of not caring what others think, as well as being shallow and even rude, and still being adored by many. Is this because the many I refer to are shallow enough to like rich people, no matter what, just because they are rich? If this is indeed the case, it bears witness to the triumph of materialist values.

Even Cher’s high school is quite different from any other school we see in films, or any other school we know of in our everyday lives. At this
school people walk around talking on cell phones, compare political issues to dinner parties in debate class, and walk around with faces recovering from plastic surgery operations. Another inclination of the shallowness and the ‘uneducated’ or uninformed idea that there is only a ‘here and now’ contemporary lifestyle, is through Cher’s remark that Dionne’s house dates all the way back to ‘1972’, which according to Cher, makes it a ‘classic’.

Her attitude towards her mother’s death is one of nonchalance, and the fact that it happened in a ‘fluke accident during a routine liposuction’ makes no difference to her. (Perhaps one could perceive an implicit criticism of the indifference that materialism gives rise to on the part of individuals here.) The viewer should be mortified by the fact that a person died for the sake of looking good, but as in the rest of the film, it is likely that Cher’s sunny disposition and her shallowness actually cause the audience to be equally shallow through being distracted by Cher’s elaborate and often comical lifestyle as a teenage girl. She watches cartoons and finds it in no way amusing when her ex-stepbrother Josh (Paul Rudd) mentions that:

“Maybe not in contempo-casual but in other parts it’s actually considered cool to know what’s going on in the real world”.

The real world here refers to the news, but, as we see in Pretty Woman, when you live in the materialist world you no longer have to deal with the issues of the ‘real world’; owning luxuries apparently earns you the right to be unfazed by the issues in the world, or even the death of your mother or a ‘Skinny Marie’. (In both films the traumatic events are ‘ignored’ creating in a sense shallowness, but also a ‘utopia’, if you will, in which trauma can simply be dusted aside and life can go on to be problem free thanks to the material possessions that ‘supply happiness’).

Cher has the ability to ‘negotiate’ her grades and get teachers to change her grades from, say, a C to an A-. Unfortunately Mr Hall (Wallace Shawn), the debate teacher, is not so easy to sway. After begging him to change her grade, with no success, she stands outside his classroom leaning against the door and it is clear that the wind has been taken out of her sails. In a voiceover she says:
“I felt impotent and out of control, I needed to find sanctuary in a place where I could gather my thoughts and regain my strength”.

This thought is followed by a full shot of the mall entrance. The mall not only offers you goods to purchase, but through buying these goods you may expect to find a form of therapy – ‘retail therapy’, as we saw in *Pretty Woman*. In this scene we once again see how ‘carefree’ these teenagers’ world is. Cher still seems somewhat upset and Dionne asks:

“What’s wrong? Are you suffering from buyer’s remorse or something?”

Cher answers: “Oh God no, nothing like that”.

Their lives have become so materialistic that one of the worst problems they could experience is regretting a purchase. This may seem incredibly shallow, but in all honesty, it could be appealing to have such a carefree lifestyle and this draws viewers; as long as you are willing to give up some sense of your ‘depth’ as a person (that is, the knowledge that there is more to a person than what she or he owns) to acquire this lifestyle. However, this is not how it is portrayed to the viewer; although *Clueless* is blatantly shallow, the viewer may still feel that you could only have this ‘carefree’ lifestyle if you have money, keeping in mind that the target audience for this film would be teenagers. Teenagers may be seen as having the luxury of carefree lifestyles, but this is the time in one’s life when fitting in and being popular are probably the most important things for them, and Cher gives them a way to fit in: material goods.

When Cher cannot get Mr Hall to give her higher grades, she concocts a plan to make Mr Hall happy by helping him to find love. The object of his affection is the shy, somewhat awkward Ms Geist (Twink Caplan) the guidance counsellor, who also happens to be an environmentalist. It is interesting that, although Ms Geist is constantly trying to get the students involved in environmental activities, and although she is one of the few characters in the film that cares for something other than material goods, she too must be pulled into materialism to ‘fit’. She is seen as a complete misfit by
Cher, because she has runs in her stockings and wears strange clothes. In Cher's words:

“This woman is screaming for a makeover”.

The message is: Ms Geist cannot find love unless she dresses more fashionably. Although she doesn’t undergo a complete makeover in terms of her dressing, by the end of the film when she and Mr Hall get married, Ms Geist has lost almost all awkwardness in her beautiful white wedding dress, and the wedding is elaborate enough to illustrate (the film’s ideological claim) that with materialist consumerism come happiness and everlasting love.

Helping two lonely teachers find love is not the only ‘charity’ that Cher is involved in as she has also donated many of her outfits to Lucy, the housekeeper, and then there is of course poor clueless Tai (Brittany Murphy). When Tai ends up in Beverly Hills High, she is dressed in a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and an over-shirt. The welcoming remark from Amber (Elisa Donovan), a rich, bitchy, ‘plastic’ girl is:

“She could be a farmer in those clothes”.

She is immediately judged and alienated because of the way she dresses. Again, as with *Pretty Woman*, we see the large role that fashion plays in materialism and how fashion is a ticket to ‘fitting in’.

Luckily for Tai, Cher and Dionne are there to help her by giving her a makeover in terms of fashion, hair, and makeup. According to Dionne, a makeover gives Cher a ‘sense of control in a world full of chaos’. It is interesting that by helping someone else become materialistic (and later on we see that this makeover changes Tai from a sweet kind girl to a rude, spoilt brat), Cher feels she has a sense of control. Purchasing things are thus compared to having control, even if your idea of chaos is something as small as an extra piece of liquorice eaten at lunch. Before Tai undergoes the makeover, she must meet the people in her new world, and therefore Cher points out who’s who as they walk to lunch together. (In passing, it is interesting to note how you need something specific to fit in with each group,
for example one group is exclusively open to people who own a BMW. This is illustrated in one of the most explicit scenes in the film, in terms of conveying the message that you will find a place in society if you consume the right material goods.)

The makeover takes place in a very similar manner to the makeover scene in *Pretty Woman*, except when you already have an entire boutique in your rotating closet as Cher does, there is no need for the makeover to take place outside your bedroom. The scene is a montage of hair-styling, makeup application and, of course, the choice of clothing, set to an upbeat song. The lyrics that stand out are: “I’m gonna be a supermodel and everyone would wanna dress like me, wait and see when I’m a supermodel”. One can conclude that, according to the film, materialism not only helps you to ‘fit’, but it also makes you the envy of all. It is being the envy of all as a so-called ‘individual’ that helps you fit in with other people, like Dionne and Cher, who are also the envy of all. This scene also shows the importance of fashion, as I have mentioned before. However, it is not the only scene in the film that links fashion to both fitting in and standing out.

In another scene Cher is very upset when she sees Amber wearing a dress exactly like the one she had worn a few days before. This is due to the fact that she wore that dress with the specific reason of ‘standing out’ and being ‘individual’ and now that Amber has worn the dress, Cher is no longer the ‘individual fashion icon’ that she is known to be. This scene is presently followed by a scene where Travis spills beer on her shoes. She is immediately in a spin, and hours later she is held at gunpoint and told to lie on the ground with her designer dress. These scenes all connect the importance of fashion for Cher and the influence it has on her life. She easily disregards her mother’s death, but when there is a fashion faux pass so to speak, she gets upset quite quickly. (Once again showing the importance of material things for Cher as well as the shallowness it creates). When she is told to lie on the ground and count to a hundred, she replies:

“This is an Alyia”
Robber: “An a whatta?”
Cher: “It’s like a totally important designer.”
Robber: “And I will totally shoot you in the head.”

It is only when her life is threatened that she is willing to ruin her dress, and when she phones Josh to come and fetch her, she is more distressed by the fact that her dress was ruined than by the trauma of being held at gunpoint.

Cher’s love for fashion even finds its way into her relationships, and when she is rejected by Christian she immediately feels that there must have been something wrong with her appearance. She asks Dionne:

“Did I stumble into some bad lighting?”

When she has no specific reason for him not being interested in her she utters:

“He does dress better than me, what would I bring to the relationship”.

She does not have much to offer, except her sense of fashion; according to her, if a person has a low self-esteem, the answer to ‘bringing something to the table’ is fashion. The real reason why Christian was not attracted to her was due to his sexual preferences, as we later find out that he is in fact homosexual.

The reason why fashion is often used as a way to ‘fit’ and stand out at the same time is explained by Klapp:

There is in fashion a tendency to extremes that cannot be explained by the desire to identify oneself with an ‘in’ set or even to achieve an interesting look….There is in fashion a demand for attention too strong to be explained as desire for approval. It might be called ego-screaming (“look at me!”); it has a ‘shock value.’ (Klapp. 1969:80).

This statement is very relevant in Clueless, because what you wear gets you noticed, and getting noticed for good fashion helps you not only to fit in with the ‘cool crowd’, but it helps you to stand out as the popular girl or boy – it is
important to remember that men’s fashion, as we will see in Chapter Four, has become just as important as women’s. Cher’s relation to her material objects, and especially her fashion, is usually the highlight of her day. When asked by her father what she has done at school that day Cher replies:

“Well, I broke in my purple clogs”.

The film constantly reinforces the importance of material goods in a young life. There is a brief moment in the film, though, where we are led to believe that Cher may move away from her materialist attitude, but the moment is short-lived. She decides to see the important things in life and she finally agrees to help Ms Geist by donating items to victims of a natural disaster. However, she donates things like red caviar and athletic equipment as these are the things that are important in her life. Furthermore, when she has a fight with Tai and starts to reflect on the things that have gone wrong in her life, her thoughts are interrupted by a dress in a boutique window.

The film has been compared to Jane Austin’s Emma, as it shares a similar story-line, with similar themes: “Through her film "Clueless," Amy Heckerling successfully transformed the story in Jane Austen's novel Emma to apply to the popular high school culture of 1990s Beverly Hills. Parallels between "Clueless" and Emma exist with regard to character, themes, and plotline; but Heckerling replaced values of class, propriety, and social etiquette with those of materialism, consumerism, and the importance of self-image.” (www.bookrags.com). This does not come through strongly enough, however, as nothing changes toward the end of the film in terms of how the characters view their material possession or in terms of finding a balance in a world that is dominated by materialist consumerism. Although the film may comment on the society of the 1990’s, it never takes the situation too seriously, and the shallowness of the film – although it may have been intended to represent contemporary society – is done in such a way that it makes shallowness seem lighthearted and somewhat appealing. The problem is also that we never really feel that Cher has learnt a specific lesson. As I have mentioned earlier, her attempts to change are short-lived, and the moral lesson that may have been attempted on a small scale are lost in the
film’s glitz and glamour. Consequently, it does not achieve the same results as *Emma*, and this is similar to the way in which *Pretty Woman* fails to achieve the results of *My Fair Lady*.

The film ends with Cher falling in love with Josh, Tai finding happiness with Travis, Dionne and Murray still being as in love as ever, and Ms Geist and Mr Hall getting married. It is a typical ‘happily ever after’, sugar-coated Hollywood ending. Instead of anyone giving up any material goods most of them have gained these goods, and that has catapulted them into love, happiness and a place in society. Even Travis, who throughout the film has been the least materialistic, has changed his baggy clothes for a tailored suit. The film thus ends with the clear message that money can in fact buy happiness, friendships, and love.

### 3.3 Similarities and common themes in *Pretty Woman* and *Clueless*:

Although I have already drawn certain similarities between the two films, it is important to emphasise them in order to see how the reinforcement of ideology – as ‘meaning in the service of power’ (Thompson 1990:7) – follows a pattern. The reason for this is that if an ideology is to be dominant, it constantly needs to be reinforced in a non-contradictory way.

Both films elaborate on the theme of ‘from rags to riches’ through the characters of Vivien in *Pretty Woman* and Tai (as well as Ms Geist, to an extent) in *Clueless*. These characters are presented as needing to undergo a transformation in physical appearance. This idea brings two other similarities to mind: Firstly the idea that you can only find happiness through material consumption, especially in the form of fashion. Secondly it shows the shallowness of society, as it shows that people can (and should) only be judged by their physical appearance – both of these representing a clear ideological position.

Both films also embrace the idea of romance, but once again romance can only be attained if you change your appearance for the object of your affection. The idea of romance is also important once we start comparing the affirmative representation to the negative representation of materialist consumerism. The films play on the emotional needs of the audience, in other words on the need for a person to be loved, and the yearning to belong and
find happiness in a specific place in society. These films show that such emotional needs can be satisfied through materialist consumerism, as even intimate friendships can be linked to what you own. The friendships in the films are very interesting to compare.

Dionne and Cher (in *Clueless*) are friends because of what they own, while Vivien and Kit (in *Pretty Woman*) on the other hand, start their friendship because of what they do not own. Although we feel that there is more of an emotional connection between Vivien and Kit, it is somewhat short-lived. Vivien helps Kit by giving her money to do a beauty course, and Kit encourages Vivien to have a relationship with Edward. They also have a bond, as we see in the beginning of the film where the hug and say to each other: “Take care of you”. However, towards the end of the film we see Kit approaching a new girl to come and share the apartment with her, as Vivien is about to leave. One also gets the feeling that once Vivien has left with Edward, her friendship with Kit will fade, as they no longer belong to the same class.

Furthermore, although I have not described *Clueless* as a fairytale, as I have *Pretty Woman*, there are certain unmistakable similarities between both films and the fairytale of Cinderella. The idea of a Prince Charming features in both films; however, there is also the feature of the fairy godmother. For Vivien the fairy godmother is embodied in both Edward and in Bernard, for Tai the fairy godmother is embodied in Cher. Olivier gives a very interesting analysis of the fairytale theme, especially in terms of representation of contemporary time.

*...Pretty Woman* parades as a fairytale, but – unlike authentic fairytales – mixes the real and the fantasy world in an aesthetic manner, causing it to have the opposite effect to that of a fairytale...fairytales are usually set in a spatiotemporally unspecified zone, as “Once upon a time in a distant land” and “They lived happily ever after” indicate. But *Pretty Woman* is set in a familiar, really existing place at a specific time...As Bettelheim points out...: “no normal child takes these stories (fairytales) as true to external reality”...The danger with *Pretty
*Woman* is that it conflates the real world and the world of fantasy in such a way that the audience, who gets lost in it because of the power and concomitant pleasure of its representation, is persuaded that there is no difference, ultimately, between the two worlds. (1992:42).

This could in fact be applied to *Clueless* as well, in the sense that its action also takes place in a real place and a real timeframe. Furthermore, we can see why it is important, as the viewer is now led to believe that a happy ending is realistically acquirable through materialist consumerism. The difference between the fairytale and reality is blurred and the viewer may easily be swept up by the wonder and beauty of the indicated possibility.

Lastly, one needs to ask whether the brief moments of critique in the two films could be seen as a contradiction in terms of the goals of the films. Olivier answers this for *Pretty Woman*, but if we look at his argument it could easily apply to *Clueless*.

Firstly, because the change in Vivien’s (and Edward’s) fortune (as well as Kit’s when Vivien gives her some of her $3000 to do a beautician course that she – Kit – had always wanted to do) is not accompanied by any fundamental change in the socio-economic and -political framework within which the narrative is situated, but in fact presupposes it, the dominant discourse of money/power/good remains in place. Within this discursive formation a more human approach is possible, as Edward learns, but the ideology that money is “good” because it gives us access to the “best”, i.e. that it is indispensable for happiness, is never seriously questioned. (Olivier, 1992: 41-42).
Chapter Four: The Negative Representation of Materialist Consumerism:

4.1 The Negative Representation of Materialist Consumerism in Mary Harron’s American Psycho (2000):

In the following analysis and interpretation of the films, American Psycho and Fight Club, I shall follow the same approach as in the previous chapter, as indicated by the ‘participatory’ hermeneutic research methodology, extended by the semiotic model of signification (as I have explained), which provides the framework for my study. Here, too, I accept that people or viewers who share the cultural world of cinema, would understand how I arrive at my interpretation on the basis of an analysis of the image-sequences and dialogue of the films concerned.

Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) is a young, attractive, Wall Street banker. He lives for material objects and is constantly trying to be better than the rest of his colleagues. Although he is trying to stand out, and fails to do so, he is also trying hard to fit into a specific class in society. However Patrick has a dark side, which no one can see or even attempts to see, beneath the glossy exterior that is Patrick Bateman. By day he is a Wall Street banker, but by night he is a psycho serial murderer.

We are introduced to Patrick and his colleagues in a smart restaurant where it is made clear from the dialogue and the clothes they wear that they are young, upcoming professionals, and from the way all four of them put their platinum credit cards on the table to pay, we immediately know that these men have money to spend. It is however the next morning that we are properly introduced to Patrick through a monologue voiceover to his specific routine. He is perfect in terms of a body image and he believes in taking care of himself. He uses various products to keep his skin perfect and youthful and he does a thousand stomach crunches as part of his rigorous exercise routine to keep his body in shape. It is in this moment while reflecting in a mirror and applying a mask to keep his skin intact, that we are introduced to the somewhat chilling side of Patrick in a monologue that states: “There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me,
only an entity, something illusory and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can sense that our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there”. This is the basis of the film, and the theme that materialism creates a shallow, hollow person is developed throughout the film.

The relationships in the film are completely empty and meaningless. Patrick is engaged to Evelyn (Reese Whitherspoon), but there is almost no connection between them. Evelyn is planning the wedding while Patrick is trying to listen to a tape on his walkman (his interest in music or rather in a sense his lack of interest is something that will be discussed in depth later on). Patrick is not willing to take off from work to get married, as he makes no time for anything that cannot in some way push him further in his materialist and somewhat self-obsessed and selfish quest, except of course for his bloodthirsty killings. She doesn’t seem to be too upset by this; however, when she asks him why he doesn’t quit the job if he hates it, he answers in a voice with some desperation and some determination: “Because I want to fit in”. He is not willing to take time off from a job he hates to get married, but he is willing to stay in this job because of what it means in terms of how much money he makes and where this sets him in society.

Patrick believes that his friend and colleague Timothy is having an affair with Evelyn, while Patrick is in fact having an affair with Courtney, who is not only engaged to one of Patrick’s colleagues (who later turns out to be homosexual), but she is also Evelyn’s best friend. There is thus no real value in the relationships, as Patrick is not even mildly upset by the fact that his friend and fiancée may be having an affair. Furthermore their lack of communication is emphasised much later in the film, when Patrick is telling Evelyn that he is a psychotic serial killer, but Evelyn hardly notices as she is too busy looking at another customer’s bracelet. She does not even see how he is drawing one of his murders on the paper table cloth. Throughout the film it is interesting that Patrick often confesses his killings, but people either laugh it off or simply do not even listen properly to what he says. The film shows how all the people caught up in materialist consumer behaviour can no longer even listen to one another’s conversation.
In one scene Patrick meets a model and when asked what he does for a living he replies: “I’m into murders and execution”. She has already decided his reply in a sense and she asks: “Do you enjoy it? I’ve met a lot of people who are into mergers and acquisitions”. Not only did she not listen to what he said, but she also immediately imagined that he would have a job in the financial world. The film cleverly shows how Bateman can get away with his murders and even tell people that he is completely psychotic and bloodthirsty, and no one even takes this remotely seriously, as Patrick does not look like a psycho killer. In one of his monologues he explains: “I have all the characteristics of a human being: flesh, blood, skin, hair, but not one single clear identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust”. It is greed that keeps him going in his quest for money and more material wealth, but it is interesting and chilling to see that, because Patrick looks human and is seen by others as ‘normal’ (because of the way that he, like everyone else, conforms to the materialism of the time), no-one ever notices his insane killing monster inside. Harron describes as her central thesis: “The society is so obsessed with surface, that as long as Patrick obeys all these rules about wearing the right suit and going to the right restaurant and being seen with the right women, no one is going to look any further.” (www.brightlightsfilm.com)

Patrick’s inhuman nature is brought to life in his gruesome killings. He shows no remorse for the people he kills and he is more worried about his sheets getting ruined by their blood than by the fact that he took a human life. His choice of victims seems somewhat random; however, it is interesting that he often kills people who have more than he has, or those who have much less, such as beggars and prostitutes. The first murder we witness, although it is not the first that Patrick commits in the film, is that of his colleague, Paul Allan (Jared Leto). Paul is just as materialistic as Patrick and he does not really even bother to see the difference between people. Paul confuses Patrick with another colleague due to the fact that they share a similar taste for clothes and a barber. After brutally murdering Paul, Patrick cuts him into pieces and puts him in an overnight bag, but not just any overnight bag, a Jean Paul Gaultier. The idea of the designer brands in the film is very telling if we consider it, like Sonia Baelo Allue does, in terms of Karl Marx’s distinction between ‘use’ and ‘exchange value’:
His obsession with the exchange value of things also explains his fixation on designer goods, whose use value alone cannot account for their elevated price; Bateman is eager to use them because of the message they provide, what they say about his lifestyle and his identity.

Once he gets to Paul’s apartment his monologue says: “There is a moment of sheer panic when I realise that Paul’s apartment overlooks the park, and is obviously more expensive than mine.” This moment links with the monologue when Patrick and Evelyn enter a restaurant: “I am on the verge of tears for the fear of not having a decent table, but we do and relief washes over me in an awesome wave”. Clearly, the only things that can get Patrick in a state of panic and upset are materialistic in nature, in so far as they denote social status. On the one hand, this could be seen as a form of dark comedy, but on the other hand it is so extremely shocking and inhuman that one can almost not believe the intensity of the situation. This, however, is one of the most important elements of the film, as it represents, through the character of Patrick Bateman and his lifestyle, the inhumanity of materialism as well as ridiculing it. Furthermore it shows how materialist consumerism, contrary to the claims put forward in the likes of *Pretty Woman* and *Clueless*, robs you of an identity and does not give you a sense of belonging, but instead alienates you through conformity.

Aside from the fact that Patrick is indistinguishable from his colleagues in terms of looks and tastes, he also has no idea of how to have an opinion of his own or any idea of what his likes and dislikes really are. He buys certain things simply because everybody else has it, but it is his ‘music reviews’, done in the course of his killings that are very telling. Every time Patrick is preparing to kill someone he gives them a review of a piece of popular music. It is interesting that the language he uses gives you the idea that he is simply reciting a newspaper review of the music. He does not have his own opinion on the music; however, he can memorise what is good and not so good according to music critics. Interestingly Allue notes: “The critical intention... is
underlined by juxtaposing superficial comments about music with an appalling murder.” (dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/fichero_articulo?codigo). This shows, once again, how little the murders affect Patrick.

I would like to go back to the idea of Patrick not being able to form an opinion on something and simply following the reviews that he sees in the media. There is a specific scene in the film where Patrick and his ‘friends’ are gathered around a table in a restaurant, and this is the one scene when they talk about issues that seem more serious than usual. Patrick talks about the importance of moral values and standards and how this seems to be getting lost in their society, and how people should be helping the sick, the poor, and the homeless. He goes on to say: “we should promote general social concern and less materialism in young people”. The irony of this moment is almost unbearable, as we realise that Patrick is doing nothing of what he is preaching, and his friends laugh off his comment. However, this is in fact what the film is representing by showing the viewer an exaggerated form of the inhuman nature of materialist consumerism.

The scene cannot, however, simply be left at that as the interesting question is whether perhaps, if Patrick had not been so obsessed with materialism, he may have actually tried to do the things he mentions. This could, on the one hand, be a brief moment in the film where Patrick’s deeply buried humanity comes to life, but as we have seen from the music reviews, this could also possibly just be a hot topic that he’d read about. This is more likely, as his friends introduce their own topics, which they have found in the media, to converse over. In a sense the film is also criticising the media, as it shows that the media may not necessarily help you form an opinion of current affairs and the current ideology, but instead it would simply be your opinion, without question, if you use it as a way to ‘agree’ with the rest of society. There is a complete absence of critical thinking in the film, except when Patrick’s monologues reveal his thoughts, which often allows him to criticise his own lack of human emotion without doing so directly. The ‘conversations’ in the film often pass each other by, and in the scene explained above the conversation is only used as a competition to see who is the most up to date with current affairs.
Competition plays a major role in the film, in the sense that Patrick often measures his success against that of his colleagues and if they have something better that is out of his reach, he kills them. Perfection is not enough for Patrick, as he has to be the only perfect human being. One of the things that sets him off to kill Paul Allan is the fact that Paul has his own tanning bed at home and does not need to visit a salon, like Patrick. Another important scene in the film is when the men compare their business cards. Patrick, who is usually able to hide his psychotic behaviour, is so infuriated by the fact that his brand new business card is not as good as the others’ that he starts to sweat. He is even more upset that Timothy Bryce (his so-called best friend) prefers Mc Dermott’s (Josh Lucas) business card over his.

The business card rivalry is repeated in the scene where Luis Carruthers (Matt Ross), a man that Patrick despises and deems an idiot, shows his business card and it is better than the rest. Patrick is so infuriated that he immediately wants to strangle Luis in the bathroom; however, he is stopped by the fact that Luis thinks Patrick is coming on to him. It turns out that Luis is homosexual and that he is interested in Patrick. This scene shows two things about the society these two characters live in. Firstly, it shows that Patrick is so obsessed with having the best that he is willing to kill someone for having a better business card. On the other hand it shows how important appearance is – although Luis is homosexual he is still engaged to Courtney (Samantha Mathis), and although Patrick is engaged Luis assumes that he is also homosexual. In other words the society they live in may not accept Luis as a homosexual, which is why he needs to pretend with Courtney in order to fit. This also goes back to the idea of miscommunication and the shallowness of the relationships in the film. Courtney is having an affair with Patrick, and her fiancé is in actual fact homosexual (suggesting that she is not even aware of this).

The importance of appearance in American Psycho is constantly being emphasised. This is to show that appearance is the only thing that matters in a materialist society where people are judged by what they wear, rather than by who they are. A relevant scene in this regard is where Patrick comments on his secretary’s clothing, telling her to wear a dress or a skirt and high
heels, because he likes that. He also asks the escort agency to send him a blonde girl and he cannot "stress enough" that she should be blonde.

Going back to Patrick’s secretary, Jean (Chloe Sevigny), we find a very interesting spin on the story and a very important comment. The character of Jean stands in complete contrast to the rest of the female (and really for that matter male) characters in the film. She has a sweet innocence about her and she is the only person who does not seem to be too affected by materialism. Unlike the rest of the female characters in the film, Jean does not conform to the materialist society that she finds herself in. It is interesting to note that Jean has a certain sense of ‘purity’ and naivety about her and when Patrick invites her to dinner and is about to kill her, he asks her to leave, because he does not really want to kill her. This is after she has told him how she believes that there is something more out there and that she is planning to grow in life. She thus represents a balanced position concerning working and earning money; she is not materialistic, however she strives for something instead of begging on the streets. In this brief moment Patrick becomes human to the extent of recognising that she is different from the other people in his life and ‘allowing’ her to live. She is also the only person to see Patrick for who he is – although the detective (Willem Dafoe) comes close – as she discovers his diary and sees all the horrifying pictures he has drawn in it. Jean thus loses some of her naivety, but she needs to see the effects of materialism and the lifestyle in order to maintain her form of balance in the midst of such a life. One may see her character as a representation with which the audience may identify, in so far as it stands in stark contrast with the materialistic lifestyle of the others.

In the above paragraph I mention the rest of the female cast; I am specifically referring to three characters: Evelyn, Courtney, and Christi (Cara Seymour). Both Evelyn and Courtney are extremely materialistic; they have relationships with men who have no real interest in them, but they stay with them because of the status. Courtney is constantly abusing prescription medication and antidepressants, and while on a high Patrick phones to take her out to dinner. His reason for having the affair with her is that she is ‘almost perfect looking’. Although she declines at first, she soon changes her mind when she hears that he is taking her to the best restaurant in town, a
restaurant that Patrick is actually dying to get into, but cannot. The restaurant
is often mentioned and getting reservation is almost impossible, which means
that those who do get in, like Paul Allan, become Patrick’s enemies, or worse:
his next victim.

Christi on the other hand is the prostitute that Patrick hires and films his
sexual activities with. He tries to change her from a street prostitute to a
higher-class woman when she is with him. This is the completely opposite
transformation to what we see in *Pretty Woman*, as it is temporary and
restricted to the night that she is with him. He asks her to bathe herself and he
gives her a nice bathrobe to wear; furthermore he gives her a glass of wine,
which is drugged of course, and comments:

“You know, Christi, that is a very fine Chardonnay you are drinking.”

Even when he is in the company of prostitutes who do not know who he is
and will probably not judge him either, Patrick remains the icy materialist. He
asks Christi and the girl from the escort agency whether they are interested in
what he does for a living and they both reply no. His relationship with Christi is
somewhat contradictory in a certain sense – although he is willing to have sex
with her and videotape it, she is not allowed to touch his wrist watch. It shows
that to Patrick the wrist watch is worth much more than the person he is about
to sleep with. It also highlights how he sees sex as a disposable pleasure, as
with his other relationships; he shows no emotion or sign of valuing it.

Christi proves to be just as hungry for money, but in her own way. Patrick
approaches her a second time and she seems to be quite afraid of
him, but as soon as he starts to wave money at her she gets into the car with
him. Although she tells him that he hurt her so much the previous time that
she had to go to the emergency room, she goes home with him after he offers
her more money. This leads to her death, and it is somewhat tragic that she
was willing to go with him for the sake of more money, knowing that he had
physically hurt her enough to end up in the emergency room.

There is another interesting theme in the film that functions as a
constant metaphor, and that is the idea of reflection, mainly represented by
the mirror. One example of this is when Patrick is going through his morning
routine and he is applying his ‘mask’ (which is itself a powerful metaphor for the fact that he is only ‘appearance’ with no human substance). This is when he informs the audience, through a monologue, that there is no Patrick Bateman. He is reflected in the mirror as if to show that there is no inside, there is simply a reflection of a human being, but it is one-dimensional. On the other hand the mirror also represents a sense of narcissism, as Patrick often looks at himself in the mirror with adoration. This can be seen when he is making the pornographic film with Christi and the escort. He does not simply glance at the mirror, but instead he looks himself in the eye and pulls his arm into a muscle. It shows that Patrick has become completely narcissistic and only cares about himself and what he looks like. The mirror could also be linked to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage as Patrick competes with his mirror image constantly to better himself, but on the other hand he falls in love with his own image and feels that he has the perfect exterior. Furthermore the mirror serves to represent what the film may be attempting to do. This means that Patrick is a mirror of the appearance-obsessed society that he lives in, and perhaps the film could be seen as a mirror for the society that the audience lives in – not merely in the sense that our society is one of superficial narcissism, but related to this: “…Bateman’s never-ending serial killings mirror our own never-ending consumerism…”

(Dialnet.Unirioja.es/servlet/fichero_articulo?codigo).

Patrick finally reaches a breaking point and he confesses all his killings to his lawyer, who doesn’t believe him, through his answering machine. It is quite significant that he reaches this frenzied breaking point while drawing money at an ATM; it shows that the source of what has caused his psychotic behaviour is what eventually also pushes him over the edge. It could be argued that the film eventually fails, in the sense that it shows the audience that the killings took place only in his mind, as it would perhaps make it less shocking and more bearable. However, this also gives the film the opportunity to show that consumerist society does give rise to ‘sick’ minds, as Patrick still remains the icy materialist. There is no indication that he undergoes any significant change, but the scene that shows ‘Yuppie’ written on the apartment wall in blood, may be interpreted as a sign that Patrick is desperate to escape this lifestyle. On the other hand Patrick goes back to join his old familiar crowd
at the table – a sign that he cannot escape from the ‘prison’ of consumerism and its trappings.

The very last monologue of the film rounds it off well as a way to show that not much may change in his life, and perhaps commenting that even after one has seen the effects of materialist consumerism (although some may see it as grossly exaggerated), people will still continue with their lifestyles in the same manner. The monologue is as follows:

Coming face to face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself; no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant nothing.

4.2 The negative representation of materialist consumerism in David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999):

*Fight Club* stars Edward Norton (the narrator, or as some film reviewers have referred to him, Jack) as a recall coordinator for a car manufacturer, with a taste for designer clothing and catalogue furniture, but with a sleep disorder. His life seems somewhat empty and his cure for insomnia is visiting support groups for cancer, tuberculoses and other illnesses. This is until Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) starts to go to the same support groups for her own reasons, and he can no longer cry “when there is another faker in the room”. Jack meets Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), a soap maker, on an airplane. When he gets home to find his condo has burnt down he phones his new friend Tyler, and suddenly Jack’s life takes a drastic turn.

Like *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* is hard to reconstruct in a chronological form and will thus be analysed in terms of various themes that occur in the film. Furthermore I shall refer to the narrator (Edward Norton) as Jack as it allows for easier reading. However, the importance of the character’s anonymity will be highlighted later on, and should not be lost or misunderstood by the fact that this study and many other critics refer to him as Jack. It is also important to understand that, as with the other three films, there are different angles from which the film can be interpreted. In *Fight Club* one of the main issues is masculinity, and although I will refer to this to show
how it is linked to materialist consumerism, I will not specifically focus on this angle, important as it may be.

The film portrays Jack to be obsessed with materialism, as can be seen in the fact that he is constantly buying new furniture. In one of the earlier scenes of the film Jack is shown ordering furniture from a catalogue. The film shows Jack walking around his apartment while on the telephone, ordering new things to fill his apartment (known as a condo). As he walks through the condo it starts to fill up with items from the catalogue; each item has a price tag and a short description, as if his condo is the catalogue itself. Jack clearly has no taste of his own, but simply orders what is shown to be this week’s latest ‘in’ item.

*Fight Club* often uses voiceover monologues to tell the audience what Jack is thinking. His monologue in this particular scene represents the importance of material items to a person’s identity and lifestyle, according to a materialist consumer ideology. The monologue I am referring to is as follows:

> Like so many others I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct…when I saw something clever like a coffee table in the shape of a yin-yang I had to have it…lamps of environmentally friendly unbleached paper; I’d flip through catalogues and wonder what dining set defines me as a person. I had it all. Even the glass dishes with tiny bubbles and imperfections; proof that they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working, indigenous peoples of wherever.

This monologue firstly shows that we are ‘slaves’ to consumerism, in other words we blindly obey the urge to consume material goods, but at the same time we are really not the ones benefiting from these goods. It is quite relevant that Jack likes something ‘clever like a coffee table in the shape of a yin-yang’. The yin-yang represents balance, something Jack is clearly lacking in his life, and it is the yin-yang table that we see smouldering and half burnt after Jack’s condo had been blown to pieces. This becomes a turning point for Jack, and [perhaps] while the yin-yang table indicates that the character is really trying to reach a balance in his life, its destruction may be understood
as a sign that any such ‘balance’ is unattainable in the sphere of consumerism (thus far he has experienced no meaning in his life other than the pseudo-meaning of purchasing more goods for his condo). Furthermore he describes the purchasing through a catalogue (if he thinks something is ‘clever) as an instinct to consume. This means that materialist consumerism has become such an intricate part of our lives that it is considered to be something natural, and that the wanting of goods has become an instinct to buy.

His description of the things in his condo is also quite telling, as they are things that are being sold because of the fact that they are created ‘naturally’, like the lamps that are environmentally friendly and the imperfect dishes that are made by indigenous people. Although Jack doesn’t even know where these people live, he still buys their products because the imperfections supposedly serve as proof that, whoever made them, are hard-working and honest individuals. The audience may realise that this could just serve as a selling point for the exporter and the supplier and not for the actual honest, hardworking people that may or may not have made these dishes. The monologue also shows that, in consumer society, one has to rely on consumer goods to define you as a person, thus showing that consumerism implicitly robs you of your identity, and thus one would constantly have to define an identity through the things you purchase.

What I have just mentioned links to Jack’s lack of identity, and this is a theme that is not only explored throughout the film, but is a very important part of the entire plot as well as an important comment on or criticism of materialist consumerism. Although I refer to the narrator as Jack, the audience never finds out what his name is, because in a capitalist system you have no individual identity and you are simply a number or statistic, one of many consumers. Even when he goes to the various support groups he uses a different name each night to remain anonymous, in this way confirming the theme that he does not consist of an individual identity. What is more striking about his lack of a name (and thus his lack of identity) is that his name does not even appear on the business card that he gives to Marla. This is quite unusual, as a business card supposedly always contains the name of the person it belongs to. In Jack’s case, however, there is no name, in this way showing that when working long hours (as he shows us in the ‘travelling’
scene which I will explain later on), you are simply there as an agent to make money.

As far as the theme of loss of identity is concerned, it is important to note why the central character (and narrator) is referred to as Jack. In one scene he finds old magazines with a serial health story episodically titled, for example: “I am Jack’s medulla oblongata”. The narrator often uses it in connection with an emotion. When his boss wants to fire him, for example, he says: “I am Jack’s complete lack of surprise”. In other words, the narrator is constantly using another person through which to express himself; when he is not using Tyler he is using a fictional ‘Jack’.

The lack of identity is emphasised even more – one could almost say embodied – in Tyler Durden, Jack’s alter ego (who appears explicitly as such only near the end of the film), as Nelmes explains:

The crisis in identity exemplified by Jack’s split personality is alluded to throughout the film, although not revealed until near the end. Tyler is Jack’s physically perfect alter ego and also his dark side…(2003:273)

Tyler is everything that Jack desires to be (something I will discuss in detail). One of the things that Jack lacks, and Tyler has, is an identity. Tyler is always sure of who he is and why he is that person, he knows what he stands for and he doesn’t change that, and more importantly Tyler has a name, which soon ‘travels’ and makes him a very prominent individual. Jack has to use a ‘fantasy’ character, although he is not aware of this until much later, to do the things and be the person that he longs to be in a society where this person would be seen as a ‘misfit’. Tyler is Jack’s complete opposite, and this again goes back to the idea of balance, as we later see that Tyler is too extreme an opposite to create a balance in Jack’s life.

The lack of identity shows up again later in the film when ‘Project Mayhem’ is created. The people involved in the project, which is run like an army, do not have names or individual identities, and their hair is shaven not only to represent the military ritual, but also to make them ‘identical’. When Bob (Meat Loaf) is killed during an act of vandalism, they remind Jack that he
has no name and that he should simply be buried in the backyard seeing that he is ‘evidence’. Jack on the other hand, knowing full well what it feels like not to have an identity, is against this idea and immediately says:

“This was a man and his name was Robert Paulson!” To which the entire ‘army’ of Project Mayhem start to chant:

“His name was Robert Paulson”.

Significantly, in death, when he is freed from the society we live in, Robert regains his name and thus his identity. It seems contradictory that Tyler, who is Jack’s alter ego, would start an ‘army’ and enforce rules that rob people of their individual identity. This could be for two reasons: firstly, due to the fact that Tyler’s individual identity is emphasised even more when no one else has an identity. (This striving for complete individualism and control, comes from Jack’s desire to have an identity, of course.) Secondly, it could be an indication that Tyler represents Jack’s binary opposite, instead of a balanced alternative to his ‘old’ life. This ‘balance’ only starts to surface towards the end of the film and suggests that Jack will finally find his yin-yang in life.

Another theme that runs throughout *Fight Club* is the idea of freedom, and how to gain this freedom in terms of being free from the dominant ideology; thus being free from materialist consumerism and a life without meaning. The answer that is initially provided by Tyler – and, as one learns later, is really in Jack’s mind all the time – is that you have to lose everything first in order to see things clearly, and thus you have to lose everything in order to gain freedom. This is evident in the fact that Jack finds another addiction, in the form of going to support groups, to replace his addiction to materialism. In one of the support groups they use guided meditation to help the patients ease the pain. Jack imagines his ‘cave’ as a frosted arctic cave, and his power animal as an animated penguin that says to him in a childish voice: “Slide”. At first this may not make sense to Jack and it doesn’t really make sense to the audience. However, later on in the film it ties directly to a scene where Tyler threatens to kill a young man working in a convenience store, unless he goes back to university and studies to be a veterinarian,
something that he had previously started and subsequently dropped. Jack’s monologue to this scene follows:

“No fear. No distractions. The ability to let that which does not matter truly slide”.

Tyler believes in his philosophy, that one can only gain freedom through losing everything else. They manufacture soap (ironically, from people’s medically discarded fat) that they sell at department stores, and one night while making the soap, Tyler pours lye on Jack’s hand and forces him to endure the burning pain. Tyler says:

“Without pain, without sacrifice we would have nothing”. It’s only after we have lost everything that we are free to do anything”.

This philosophy appears to ring true in the context of the film’s ‘world of meaning’, as Jack has to lose everything before he is able to see how to find a balance in a society obsessed with materialism. However, it must be noted that this is a grossly exaggerated example of what Julia Kristeva calls ‘revolt’, a concept that will be discussed briefly in Chapter Five. Although Jack gives up all his material possessions, he still does not find the answer to living in this society and making a difference without destruction and violence. In other words the film does not show violence as an answer, and hence it seems to follow that the audience should not conclude that one can stand up to a consumer ideology by blowing up the buildings that house credit card companies (as it happens at the end of the film), unless this act of destruction is itself regarded as being part of ‘losing everything’. *Fight Club* may therefore be criticised for the fact that it shows violence as a means to revolt against a dominant system or to fight a dehumanising system in the literal sense of the word. On the other hand some may feel that the film fails in the sense that Jack no longer wants to be part of Tyler’s form of revolt and eventually ‘degenerates’ into a mainstream ‘happy ending’. This is not the case however, as the credit card company-buildings still blow up, but Jack realises that this is not the answer either and that he needs to find the balance.
It is interesting in the sense of giving everything up that Jack chooses a particular time to do so. (It is only when he is starting to lose himself completely in his material possessions and he is pushed to a point where he can not even sleep any longer that he decides to give up his material possessions). This is why the ‘travelling’ scene I referred to earlier is so important. We see Jack travelling from one place to another and he is clearly never in one place long enough to establish a relationship with any of the people he meets:

“We have our time between take-off and landing, but that's all we get”.

He even compares these people to the single-serving food and shampoo that he gets on the plane and at the hotel, and he refers to them as ‘single-serving friends’. He talks about how life passes you by when all you do is travel for work, and basically you are wasting your life by only working to be able to purchase more consumer goods:

“You lose an hour, you gain an hour. This is your life and it is ending one minute at a time.”

The idea that you only work to consume more goods and to have a certain lifestyle also comes through in one of Tyler’s speeches later on in the film when he says:

“Advertising has got us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so that we can buy shit we don’t need”.

*Fight Club* openly shows how consumerism creates a need that used to be a want and how people spend money on things they do not need and often can’t really afford, as they may have to work long hours in thankless jobs to be able to purchase them in the first place.

Returning to the travelling scene-sequence there is once again an indication of an identity crisis when Jack asks:
“If you wake up in a different time, in a different place, could you wake up as a different person?”

This is also when he meets Tyler, which shows that, in the course of waking up in a different time and place his identity was split into two different persons and thus if you suffer from an identity crisis you could easily change from one person to the next. Furthermore the scene shows that his life is so meaningless to him that he is willing or even eager to die.

“Every time the plane banked too sharply at take-off or landing, I prayed for a crash or a mid-air collision. Anything. Life insurance pays out triple if you die on a business trip”.

Jack is desperate for something exciting or traumatic to happen in his life, and the fact that he talks about life insurance is somewhat ironic as he has no one to pay the life insurance to and obviously he would have no use for it. This also links to why the men in the film engage in fist fights. In a world that seems so empty they are desperately seeking to feel something, anything, just to feel ‘alive’, even if it is through trauma. They are looking for something that feels real in contrast to the materialist world they find themselves in. Jack even says that after a night of ‘Fight Club’ they all felt ‘saved’. This proves not to be the answer in the end, however.

This scene-sequence virtually sets the film in motion, as he firstly loses his luggage at the airport. He is quite upset by this because his suitcase contained his ‘CK shirts and his DKNY shoes’. These are not just clothing, but designer clothing, which shows that he uses designer brands to have a certain status in life. When he gets home his condo had been blown to pieces and we later find out that he (or perhaps his alter ego) blew the condo up himself. Jack has no real relationships and thus no one to call, which explains why he turns to Tyler, a stranger that he met on a plane. Tyler is thus not only Jack’s alter ego who opens him up to having a dark side, but Tyler also becomes an imaginary friend in whom Jack finds companionship and comfort, and whose approval Jack is constantly seeking, as if he has taken over the role of the father Jack used to have or the society Jack used to fit in. This is
yet another sign that Jack does not fully escape his circumstances through
the creation of Tyler in his mind, as he has not yet reached a balance. The
idea of approval from Tyler is represented from a different angle when Tyler
gives his ‘approval’ to Angel Face (Jared Leto) a young, beautiful man, while
the narrator stands in the background with his monologue voiceover:

"I am Jack's inflamed sense of rejection".

After this he destroys Angel Face’s face and when asked why, he simply says:

“T I felt likedestroying something beautiful”.

The audience knows that it is out of a sense of jealousy and we later find to
our shock that the ‘approval’ actually came from Jack himself, as he ‘is’ Tyler
Durdon.

The scene that follows the explosion in Jack’s condo shows how Tyler
views life, and although Tyler’s reaction to Jack destructed condo is not
necessarily the right one (as with various of Tyler’s reactions to things that
take place within the film), we should not disregard this, as he makes a very
valid comment on society and materialist consumerism. His speech is as
follows:

“You are by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these
things don’t concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines,
television with 500 channels, some guy’s name on my underwear”.

He goes on to say that maybe this is just his opinion and maybe the explosion
is a big tragedy to which Jack replies:

“It’s just stuff, it’s not a tragedy”.

Tyler: “You did lose a lot of versatile solutions for modern living. The things
you own end up owning you”.
This scene is important in the film as it is exactly what has happened to Jack and it is exactly what he is trying to revolt against. He has become a byproduct and the things he owned had become an intricate part of his life, as materialist consumerism has started to define him. This creates such an intense need for something ‘real’ that he starts ‘Fight Club’. Again we can link this to a balance: it is only when Jack has had everything and then lost everything that he realises he needs to find balance, where previously he went from one ‘addiction’ or obsession to another in an attempt to find something real and to gain some sort of freedom. His first obsession is, of course, the materialist consumerism to which he has become a slave; this is what he is trying to escape from. Secondly, he starts going to the support groups which become another obsession. During these support group-meetings he gets to unleash some form of emotion through crying. He was feeling something, and this enabled him to sleep. The reason why he became so addicted was that he thought he had found freedom. While crying in Bob’s arms, he says:

“I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom”.

This works for him until Marla shows up. In a sense she is the femme fatale of the film (I will discuss her role later). He can no longer cry as there is someone else in the room that is a ‘faker’ too, and as he says, it no longer felt real:

“Her lie reflected mine”.

From this he turns to Fight Club.

*Fight Club* shows that the answer to lack of meaning does no lie in the various addictions that are offered to us in disguise almost on a daily basis – things that show us how to ‘improve’ our lives. It actually depends on our humanity, and the way we feel something is through having an identity. Furthermore it is significant that Jack’s addictions are often fuelled by an urge to find approval and an urge to belong. It is in some form of group activities that he finds
comfort and that he feels something ‘real’. In this way the film is showing the importance of human relationships, which often fall away in materialist consumerism as we have more of a relationship with our goods than with the people around us. Jack, who is a slave to consumerism, is trying to find some form of human connection and is trying to find some alternative way to ‘fit’ – one that contrasts with what it means to ‘fit’ in Clueless (discussed earlier). It is only later on that he discovers that he has followed the wrong route and why he had found a companion in an alter ego.

Project Mayhem also plays an essential part in terms of belonging and in terms of wanting to find meaning and wanting to do something meaningful with your life; just to feel some form of ‘life’. Jack does not feel very involved in the project, but for the rest of the men it is a way to belong. In the scene where Jack asks Tyler about Project Mayhem, while driving in a car, Tyler tells him not to want so much control over life and to let go (to let ‘slide’). Tyler starts letting go of the steering wheel and asks the two men in the back of the car what they would have wished they’d done if they were about to die. The first man replies:

“Paint a self-portrait”.

The other quickly follows: “Build a house”.

Jack on the other hand, has nothing to say and he has thus not found anything meaningful to him yet. However, he is starting to realise that what he is currently doing is not the answer. The car finally crashes and rolls down a hill. They all survive the crash and once they are out of the car Tyler laughs and says:

“We just had a near-life experience”.

It is obvious that this links to the extreme yearning to ‘feel alive’ through something real, like a traumatic experience. This will again be seen at the end of the film and I shall refer to this idea in my discussion of the ending.
Project Mayhem also has a link to the imperfect glass plates made by the ‘indigenous peoples of wherever’, in the sense that it takes the average worker (or as described, the ‘simple, hard-working people’) to work on this project. There is a scene that is somewhat alarming in so far as they are seen as being people who work among everyone else, and yet they are being compared to a group of terrorists. Tyler says to the police commissioner:

“The people you are after are the people you depend on. We cook your meals. We haul your trash. We connect your calls. We drive your ambulances. We guard you while you sleep. Do not fuck with us”.

It is alarming in the sense that he has built an army from these people. On the other hand it makes a lot of sense as the film shows that the dominant class depends on the labour of the working class. In other words the working class has a lot of power, although it may not be the same as the economic power of the ruling class, to stand up against the economic ideology of the higher class. The problem is that Tyler is doing this through destruction, which is not the answer. I shall later show how ‘revolt’ in Kristeva’s terms differs from what Tyler does in *Fight Club*.

*Fight Club* often has the feel of a dark comedy, as the protagonists often mock materialist consumers into seeming quite ridiculous, even through the character of Jack. There are many instances in the film where this takes place; I shall only mention a few to illustrate what I mean. After Jack’s condo has been blown to pieces he meets Tyler for a beer and talks about how much everything in the condo meant to him. He talks about how much he loved his sofa and says:

“That’s the last sofa I’ll need. Whatever else happens, I’ve got that sofa problem handled. I had it all; I was close to being complete”.

The film shows how shallow consumerism can make a person and how wrapped up one can get in your own world of materialism. For Jack the biggest problem is to have the right sofa and even if something else happens he’ll be able to focus on that and handle it, because he has already handled
the sofa problem. Furthermore it shows how people depend on material things to ‘complete them’ and to satisfy them, even if the satisfaction is temporary. Although Jack has the sofa problem handled, he will soon desire another object to fill the hole in his life that cannot be filled with material things.

*Fight Club* also mocks the people that are part of Jack’s consumerist world, like the people he works with. For example, one of his colleagues makes a presentation and while doing so the boss is simply worried about the colour of the icon used in the presentation. He says:

“Can we get that icon in cornflower blue”.

This reflects on the colour of his favourite tie that we see earlier on. He wants an icon in the same colour as his favourite fashion accessory. The gentleman doing the presentation says:

“Efficiency is priority number one, waste is a thief. I showed this to my man here and he liked it, didn’t you?” (to Jack).

Jack opens his mouth almost in a smile to show his blood covered teeth. Not only does Jack mock him in doing so, but his statement implies that if you are inefficient you are ‘stealing’ money from the company, where in actual fact, as Jack has shown us through the ‘travelling’ scene-sequence, the company is ‘stealing’ your life one minute at a time. Further, the way that advertising and designer brands create an idea and a stereotype of what a person should look like, is significant. In a monologue Jack says:

“I felt sorry for those guys cramped into gyms to try and look like what Tommy Hilfigher and Calvin Klein says they should.”

Referring to the billboard he says to Tyler: “Is that what a man looks like?”

Another form of mockery in the film is probably a line that most viewers remember. Jack and Tyler make and sell soap, what Tyler calls “The yardstick of civilisation”. This links to Jack’s monologue in the very beginning of the film
when Tyler is holding a gun in Jack’s mouth and Jack forgets about everything for a moment, wondering how clean the gun is. The two men use human fat, which they steal from a liposuction clinic, to make the soap and then sell it to department stores, with added profit, for twenty dollars a bar, making this very expensive soap. Jack smirks and says:

“It was beautiful, we were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them”.

This mockingly shows two things about the consumer society: the striving for being young, thin, and beautiful through the use of certain products and plastic surgery. Secondly, it shows how people will buy anything, disgustingly even their own fat, without asking questions, as long as you package and market it correctly.

Before I discuss the film’s conclusion, it is important to look at the character of Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) and the role that she plays in the film. Right at the beginning of the film Jack says that everything started with Marla, so in other words we could say that she is in a way the *femme fatale* of the film, as I have mentioned earlier. She is a binary opposite to the condo life that Jack lives, because she is poor. She goes to support groups as a way of entertainment as she says:

“It’s cheaper than a movie and there’s free coffee”.

Marla also steals clothes from the laundromat and sells them to second-hand stores. Furthermore she collects food for the elderly who are in fact already deceased and then keeps it for herself.

Marla seems at first to be the character that is most out of touch with reality, and her philosophy in life is:

“That you can die at any moment; the tragedy is that you don’t”.

She crosses streets without looking and takes bottles full of anti-depressants. In other words, like the rest of the characters in the film Marla proves to be in
desperate search for something to happen in her life – anything, even if it is her own death. Although she ‘sets the plot in motion’, she also brings Jack back in the sense that she is perhaps the one reason for him not to blow up the credit card companies, and she is the one thing that he cares about. This means that, through the character of Marla, even though she is somewhat strange or rather perhaps because of her strangeness, he finds a human that he can relate to.

Jack finds a relationship that brings meaning to his life and although this may sound somewhat Hollywood-sugary, it is clear that their relationship is not necessarily the kind of pseudo-fairytales, like Vivien and Richard’s in Pretty Woman. In fact, the gender roles in Fight Club are very interesting compared to Pretty Woman and Clueless, as Marla saves Jack from himself in a certain sense. The film does not use the relationship as a happily-ever-after scenario, but rather as a way to show that he has found acceptance and belonging and he has done this without materialism. It is important to understand that I am not saying that one can find all these things in another person; however, through their relationship the film illustrates that there are more important things in life than the accumulation of material goods, and that you do not need violence to feel alive.

The film ends where Jack realises that Tyler is an alter ego, and that what he has done so far is not the answer to escaping materialist consumerism and to finding meaning in his life. When Tyler holds a gun in Jack’s mouth and asks him what he would say before he dies, Jack replies: “I still can’t think of anything”, which shows that Jack may not yet have found or done something that makes his life worthwhile to him. The film concludes with one last fight between Tyler and Jack, which is symbolic of the inner struggle between being completely against the material world and yet being a slave to it. Nevertheless, Jack realises the need to find a balance in the last moments and although he has not yet found the answer, right before he shoots himself in order to kill Tyler he does say:

“My eyes are open”.

Jack knows what he is supposed to do and he realises that Project Mayhem and Fight Club has had the same effect as materialist consumerism in the sense that they have brainwashed people, forced them into conformity and thus robbed them of their individualism, and paradoxically they have created a purpose that remains meaningless. Project Mayhem has not left them with any control or freedom in their own lives as they have all, including Jack, been dominated and controlled by Tyler. “In Tyler we trusted”.

Although Jack does not stop all the credit card company buildings from exploding, he does come to the realisation that this form of revolt is not the answer. The credit card companies' destruction is obviously symbolic of the destruction of capitalism and capitalist power. The very last moment of the film shows Marla and Jack holding hands watching as the buildings explode. The film does not give a happy ending in the sense that all’s well that ends well, but it does give a certain sense of hope to Marla and Jack, and it does show the audience that a sense of balance is important and can be restored. *Fight Club* gives a very powerful commentary in the sense that it shows two extremes and thus the importance of balance. One may say that *Fight Club* shows what not to do instead of perhaps having a more positive message of how one should find a balance. The reason for this may be a type of warning: the film shows how dangerous both sides for the coin can be and how important it is to be aware of this so that you can avoid the trap of falling into consumerism.

**4.3 Similarities and themes in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*:**
There are various similarities in the two films and the first one that we can look at is the violence in the film. Both use violence as a form of revolt and as a way to feel something. Although Patrick’s violence (in *American Psycho*) is only towards other people, and Jack’s violence often includes himself as a ‘victim’, the theme is still strong in both films. The violence in these two films could be understood as a reaction to a meaningless life caused by materialist consumerism. Both characters live the ‘condo life’, where what they wear and how their apartments look are very important. Fashion, especially designer labels, is something that plays a conspicuous role in the men’s lives. Furthermore physical appearance is important to both men; one may ask how
this is possible when Patrick has an almost perfect body whereas Jack has a slightly thin, lanky body. The answer lies in Tyler’s body (that is, his body-image), in the sense that when Jack creates his alter ego he creates him to be everything that he (Jack) is not, but longs to be. One of these things includes a perfect physique similar to what Patrick strives for through his rigorous exercise routines. (Note the relevance of Lacan’s mirror stage here: from the age of infants human beings identify with body-images that are desired because they seem to promise a kind of perfection that individuals lack.) Both films thus show that in a world of consumerism and materialism you are judged solely on your appearance. This links to the same way in which *Pretty Woman* and *Clueless* show the importance of appearance; however, the difference is that, in contrast to these two films, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* evaluate appearance in negative terms.

Another important theme that runs throughout both films is the idea of an identity crisis. Even though the films portray it in different ways, it is still evident in both and there is a similarity in the form of revolting. Patrick, on the one hand, finds that his psychotic killings all took place in his mind, while Jack, on the other, realises that Tyler is his alter ego and thus only a figment of his imagination. Both films show that somehow the characters find an escape from ‘reality’ by employing their imagination (albeit in a pathological manner). They are trying to find a way to deal with their circumstances, and this is done through the imagination in a way that they cannot control. It also shows that neither one of them has found who they really are, and the promise that materialist goods will give you a sense of identity and a sense of belonging is in fact not true. On the contrary: both characters suffer from an identity crisis to one extent or another, and both feel alienated due to materialist consumerism.

Both films use satire and create dark comedy, along with a certain shock value. Although the comedy remains dark, it keeps the films from becoming too shocking and unbearable to the audience. Some may feel that the films should be outright shocking to show the negative side of materialist consumerism, but against this one could argue that they should serve as a criticism without alienating the viewer. The films do share a shock value in the form of the images of (sometimes extreme) violence that are shown; however,
this is countered in the sense that Patrick’s violence is only in his mind, while Jack tries to stop the violence towards the end. On the other hand, this has shock value of its own, as it shows psychological disturbances (in the context of consumerism) more clearly. The relief of knowing that none of the killings were real, or that Jack is changing his violent ways, could be seen as a failure of the films, in so far as it gives mainstream audiences a kind of ‘happy’ ending, but it also allows for the films to be looked at for more than their shock value. Something that is too shocking may be forgotten by audiences as quickly as possible, as they would probably experience it negatively, rather than affirmatively as enlightenment.
Chapter Five:

5.1: A Balance or Bias in the Representation of Materialist Consumerism in the Discussed Instances of Cinema:

The media represent various things in so far as these things pertain to groups, ideologies, cultures, and so on in various ways. The question is always whether or not there is a balance or a bias in terms of negative and affirmative representations of these things in the media. I cannot answer this question across a broad, fully representative spectrum, as one would have to study and analyse every single form of media and every single representation of contemporary culture in various cultures, from the perspective of different ideologies, genders and more. This may be almost impossible; however, one can see within the context of my specific, selective study whether there is a bias or a balance.

Through the four films that I have analysed and discussed one can see that, to some extent, there is a balance; but there are also certain questions around this balance. All the films appeared within a frame of ten years and all within the category of mainstream cinema. By this I mean that the films were created for mass audiences and they draw such audiences through the use of popular actors. Although Christian Bale (Patrick Bateman) and Edward Norton (Jack/ Narrator) were perhaps not as ‘mainstream’ or popular yet when the films were released, the films were made mainstream by the popularity of actors like Reese Whitherspoon (Evelyn in American Psycho) and Brad Pitt (Tyler Durden in Fight Club). The films also use certain marketing strategies and selling points to draw the mass audience.

Mainstream cinema is usually aimed at making a largest profit by drawing the largest possible audience. This is problematic when we think about the negative representation of materialist consumerism, in the sense that the films concerned (American Psycho and Fight Club) would seem to be somewhat hypocritical. They seem to take a stand against a capitalist ideology, and yet they employ mainstream techniques which bring in the maximum amount of profit. This is not straightforwardly the case, however: it
may seem at first that the films contradict themselves by being mainstream (especially *Fight Club*, as it is almost more mainstream orientated that *American Psycho*); however, there are certain explanations and reasons for being mainstream aside from financial profit.

These two films do make a profit through being positioned as mainstream, but they also attract the largest audience, which means their message or criticism of materialist consumerism reaches the largest audience possible. The films that often render criticism of the social status quo are sometimes referred to as ‘art’ films; however, these films will only reach a specific, select audience who may already agree with the criticism embodied in the film. Furthermore the two films do not disguise their criticism, in the sense that there is no sugar-coated ending, and they do not offer the escapism often provided through mainstream cinema. Instead, due to various elements within the films, such as narration, shock tactics, and no specific chronological order, the audience is not given time to switch off and relax, but instead they are ‘forced’ to stare the criticism in the face.

It must also be said that, although films are made within a certain context and with a certain effect in mind, this may not always be achieved as the power of the film would still depend on the power that each individual ‘gives’ to it – for various reasons (such as being badly informed); some people are just not as receptive as others to critical perspectives on society. There are also other factors that play a role, such as Lacan’s theory of image-identification and the idea of iconic investment. However, depending on their context of interpretation, this may differ from person to person. Although *Pretty Woman* and *Clueless* may encourage the audience to buy specific material goods, it does not mean that every viewer will leave the cinema with the urge to purchase a new dress. The same can be said of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, as their criticism may not be taken into account by every member of the audience.

No film-maker can, by his own individual efforts, change the economic relations governing the manufacture and distributions of his film. It cannot be pointed out too often that even film-makers who set out to be ‘revolutionary’ on the level of message and form cannot effect any swift or radical change in the
economic system – deform it, yes, deflate it, but not negotiate it or seriously upset its structure. (Comolli & Narboni, 1993:45).

Another problem in terms of the balance and bias regarding the representation of materialist consumerism arises in respect of the various genres of the films. Both *Pretty Woman* and *Clueless* could loosely be classified as Romantic Comedies, whereas *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* would rather fall into a Dark Comedy/ Drama category. The problem is that the balance would be found only if there were both negative and positive representation in the same genre, that caters for a similar audience and represents the same topic (thus if the elements of the films were similar, but one represents affirmatively and the other negatively). Within my context of analysis one would probably find that audiences viewing the ‘affirmative representation films’ would differ greatly from audiences viewing the ‘negative representation films’. It must thus be accepted that in order to find a specific balance, one should either look at a specific audience and a specific genre, and then compare the various genres to see whether there is a balance for every single audience. Nevertheless, that would only cover cinema, let alone any other forms of media. It is easy to say at face value that there is a balance in representation, as two of the films I analysed are affirmative and two are negative. However, this would be constructing an answer pre-emptively as I chose these films simply to illustrate differently orientated representation.

The question of balance and bias thus remains somewhat inconclusive. Although it may not always be fully possible in all fields of the media, the medium of film does offer an option, though. By this I mean that film has the potential to create a balance, and this is important in the sense that film offers the (arguably unavoidable) option of being for or against an ideology by the very way in which people, society and nature are represented. Film often gives the film-maker the choice of representation, and it gives the viewer signs which are susceptible to interpretation. Cinema could thus be seen to be able to have a certain balance; however, it would be interesting to see more films that already show a balance in the mode of representation of materialist consumerism, thus not being fully affirmative or fully negative.
5.2 Conclusion:
The four films I have discussed show the two extreme sides of materialist consumerism, and although the instances of negative representation show a form of revolting against this ideology, they also imply that this is not necessarily the way in which one should revolt. There are other, more authentic ways of revolting, as Julia Kristeva indicates:

…when we speak of revolt today we first understand a protest against already established norms, values, and powers. For more than two centuries, political revolt has represented the secular version of this negativity that characterizes the life of consciousness when it attempts to remain faithful to its profound logic. A synonym of dignity, revolt is our mysticism. (Kristeva. 2002:3-4).

This quote from Kristeva’s work captures the very essence of her notion of revolt and gives us an explanation of the fact that revolt is something that is always against certain norms, values, and practices that are already established, that is, conventional. In other words revolt takes into consideration that these norms, values, and powers are already in use and are no longer at a stage where prevention can take place. This is perhaps an explanation as to why revolt is in no way a simple, uncomplicated act. Once something has been established to the point of being pervasive, it is often very difficult to change it as it would have to entail a complete transformation, which means great effort and often great sacrifices. We can almost use the old saying that prevention is better than cure, to be quite accurate in this situation, if one can see revolt as something that could cure or help fix what has been ill or broken. The problem here is firstly realising that there is a need for drastic change in the current situation, and secondly accepting the fact that revolt often comes with a price. This is shown in Fight Club, but it is shown quite negatively and it is arguably only towards the end of the film that Jack realises the mistake he has made.

I have not gone into specific detail about the notion of revolt; however, it is important to refer to it, as American Psycho and Fight Club may not show how to revolt, but they do show that there is a specific need for revolt in order
to get a certain sense of balance. I have spoken about this balance on a few occasions, but it is important to understand what I mean by ‘balance’ in a specific context. Perhaps I should have shown from the beginning what the intended criticism holds in terms of the representation of materialist consumerism and how revolt can take place. The problem is not with specifically material goods or services in themselves, but rather with what we do to get these things, and even more importantly why we purchase certain things and how they affect us.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to buy something because you like it; the problem is if you cannot distinguish between wanting it and needing it. If a person cannot afford something, but feels she or he needs it, they may either buy it on credit, causing them to have debt, or they may spend their lives working to get it and then miss out on the other important things in life. Furthermore, one should not purchase things with the hope that it will define you as a person, as no material object can provide a person with a definitive identity – the person concerned would always be linked with something alien and alienating. There are other ways through which one should find meaning in one’s life, as a material object or possession will only supply you with a temporary satisfaction, and thus once you start craving for something the cycle will repeat itself. Furthermore one should never purchase goods with the idea that they will give you a sense of belonging or that they will give you a ‘place’ in society. No commodity can take the place of personal ability and achievement.

Before I move on to show how one could possibly find a balance, it is important to provide a reason why people should teach themselves to think critically about the things that they see in their everyday lives, including cinema.

…the media tell the man in the mass who he is – they give him identity; they tell him what he wants to be – they give him aspirations; they tell him how to get that way – they give him technique; and they tell him how to feel that way even when he is not – they give him escape. (Mills, 1978:311).
This is a constant possibility in the media, which is why one should learn to think critically about the things we do or perceive, in order not to fall into a trap where the media or other bearers of ideologies tell us who we should or shouldn’t be. Although it may be somewhat naïve on my part, I do think that a person still holds power and control over who she or he is and who they want to be. The problem is that we are often unaware of the influences from outside sources, and more often we are not taught to, or capable of recognising when we are acting according to what something or someone else tells us to be.

The question now remains, how one could find a way to escape the dominant ideology, which really means how one could escape the capitalist system. The answer in my opinion is that currently you cannot, and capitalism like many other things has both positive and negative traits. Until there is another solution or an alternative economic system that operates better than capitalism, one can never fully escape it – which does not mean that one cannot contribute to changing it. However, the films I have discussed were purposely chosen because they represent binary opposites, once again to show a certain balance. There is an opportunity to show revolt against the dominant system through films, as one example, or to criticise the negative aspects of the status quo in order to make people aware of its negative traits. The film industry does in a way offer this opportunity, and although the negative representations have not given an alternative, they do give a valuable representation in terms of the meaning I have attempted to draw from their use of images and dialogue, including valuable commentary through their criticism.

Having said all this, however, it is very important that viewers should constantly be aware of the fact of representation (how things are represented via images and language). Although a film may seem close to the society and the situation that the viewer finds him- or herself in, one must remember that a film is never reality, but simply a representation of it. It is therefore important to remember that one does not necessarily have to give up all your possessions in order to revolt against the system, but one should look at it critically and decide how beneficial it really is to you and to society in general. Furthermore, as Fight Club suggests, one should find meaning in something that surpasses the importance of the décor in your condo, and search for your
identity within yourself and your relations with others. As I have said, it may seem somewhat naïve, but an individual still has the power to control the extent to which they support a dominant ideology.
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