Communication in Postmodern Urban Fiction

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The Shadow of Imagination

By

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To My Mom

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: DEALING WITH THE IMAGINARY CITY

Coming through a cloud, you're looking at me from above
And I'm a revelation spreading out before your eyes
And you find me beautiful and irresistible
A giant creature that forever seems to grow in size
And you feel a strange attraction
—ABBA, "I am the City" (l. 1-5)

While imagination of violence is often linked to city narratives, it is New York that stands out. Many postmodern authors not only set their stories here but they reimagine the city itself. They present their view on the city because "[e]nvisaging the likelihood and efficacy of a politics of writing on and about New York's urbanism may deepen the insight into the different modes whereby urban landscape is being produced, reproduced, and consumed" (Neculai 63). Through literary and cinematic creations, New York City is presented as a city that perpetually writes and rewrites its own history and its own narratives anew. Pauwel notes that "cities invariably testify of past dreams and options taken which amalgamate with present projects […]. In this respect the city can be thought of as a palimpsest which is constantly rewritten, repainted, and repopulated by hurried crowds with a purpose" (Pauwels 263). New York, in particular, can be seen exemplary in this regard as it is a city that is constantly discovered, destroyed and rebuilt in the American imaginary. The time chosen for this exploration of New York City are the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s as they mark the epitome as well as a potential ending point of postmodernism. Moreover, these decades present a turning point in the ways people communicate due to the growing digitization. Through technological inventions such as the Internet or growing demands for mediating devices such as cell phones, face-to-face communication started to decrease and challenged the individual to rethink his or her position in society. In literature, this anxiety of losing the physical connection to others is often aligned with a male anxiety of emasculation, which goes hand in hand with the masculinity crisis of the 1990s, which

raised awareness to troubled notions of masculine gender performativity as men feared "being worthless, inadequate, unnecessary, and unloved" (Rainbow 110). The fear, in return, triggers violence as a reaction to the slow loss of control men experienced through the rise of female sexuality as men "need to be in control, to master and possess the other" (Clare 201) showing their male sexual dominance (Clare 202-3). The male hegemonic gender performance was particularly challenged in literature and scholarly works such as Harry Brod's edited volume *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (1987), which uses feminist rhetoric to form the basis for masculinity studies, R.W. Connell's *Masculinities* (1995), which discusses the notion of the hegemonic male in society, or Anthony Clare's *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* as well as Michael S. Kimmel's work *The History of Men: Essays in the History of American and British Masculinities* (2005), which both draw attention to the masculinity crisis of the 1990s.

This masculinity crisis was triggered by the increasing emancipation of women who questioned, criticized, and challenged the male hegemonic position in society. This power struggle men found themselves in was linked to the space of the city, which presented the playground for the display of male power in the realm of finance and Wall Street, in particular, which was a male-dominated space.[1] Women started claiming a space of their own by leaving the private sphere of the home and claiming the public sphere by making themselves heard and seen most notably encouraged through groundbreaking scholarly work in gender studies such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Because of women entering male-dominated spheres more and more, the picture of what constitutes a man slowly changed in the consumer driven society of the 1980s and 1990s. What men were left with was a shattered fantasy of masculine domination. The attempt to reclaim masculinity was thought out in literary works of the postmodern era, which present the urban male as a fragmented specter haunting the streets of the city in order to find completion of the self, but which, in turn is also haunted by the city. The male protagonists of late 20th century and early 21st century novels are on identity quests, on which they try to construct themselves and the city in order to understand their position within society and their position as human beings in the city, as individuals in an urban anonymous crowd. The postmodern characters are "characterized in Ihab Hassan's terms, by a 'self-unmaking' agenda that prefers to celebrate fluidity of identities" (Espejo 155), loosely following Judith Butler's gender

[1] La Berge outlines that "Financial masculinity organizes the idioms and logics of interpersonal violence, of white masculine anxiety in the face of a newly global and permeable economy, and of the heterosexual possibility and homosexual intrigue that seems both available and feared wherever financial transactions occur" (11).

fluidity and performance on a general level; the protagonists are on a fluid journey to the self, in which they try to experience and to perform the self on the city stage. In order to be able to construct a self that comes at least close to an ideal image of the self, though, it is the present self which has to be destroyed, opening possibilities for the aforementioned new, more ideal self to emerge from the fragments.

Reclaiming masculinity and reconnecting with the self also mean reclaiming an inter-personal way of communicating to contrast the self to others and find individuality. While literary studies have often neglected the communicative aspect in postmodern fiction, only hinting at it in terms of language exploration (e.g., Bakhtin "Dialogic Imagination;" Anderson "Telling Stories;" Chénetier "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World"), it is useful to draw on communication studies to understand the underlying communication processes and strategies that are explored in the texts that will be discussed in the course of this book. While there are manifold definitions of communication, communication in the context of this book is to be defined as a tool for interaction (Bonfadelli 76-77). Wilbur Schramm already notes in 1954, "*Communication* comes from the Latin *communis*, common. When we communicate we are trying to establish a 'commonness' with someone. That is, we are trying to share information, an idea, or attitude" (3). While many media and communication theories focus on this idea of information transmission with regard to mass communication, the aspect of establishing interaction and a connection to someone is relevant for approaching communication on an individual level. Bonfadelli therefore distinguishes between information, i.e. "the reduction of uncertainty" (78, *my translation*), communication, the verbal and non-verbal interaction between humans, and mass communication, which is dependent on technological transmission processes and networks (79). The technological transmission has led to a fluidity of boundaries between individual and mass communication due to an increasing digitalization and multimedial multidirectional participation in information exchanges (Bonfadelli 99).

I will focus primarily on the effects of these changes in communication due to technology on an individual level and not on a mass communicative one. In doing so, it is necessary to further differentiate between two major forms of individual communication, namely intra-personal and inter-personal communication. Intra-personal communication is internal, within the self and thus private (Honeycutt 324), already hinted at in its Latin prefix. Honeycutt et al. explain that there are "different forms such as self-talk, inner speech, imagined interaction, daydreaming, listening, and emotional awareness, to name a few" (323). Inter-personal communication is then an interaction between people, it is a sender-receiver

situation, which can be both one-directional or bi-directional. In this interaction "the sender plays a role in the interpretation of the receiver in the context and situation in which the communication is taking place but does not necessarily entail a conversation" (Van Ruler 370), which means that inter-personal communication can also take place on a physical level only and does not need to involve the linguistic component.

In the postmodern works that will be assessed in the course of this book, it is this inter-personal communication which remains inaccessible to the male figure who wants to demonstrate masculinity through physical dominance, often resulting in violence against others and the self. Moreover, due to the anonymous space of the city and the growing virtualization of communication processes around the millennium, inter-personal communication is further hampered. Thus, communication turns inward, into intra-personal communication, i.e. mere thought processes and fantasies. It is this intra-personal communication in relation to violence and the city space that is to be explored in this book by looking at postmodern urban novels such as Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. In these works, the city, and in particular New York City, presents an ambiguous space of communication and anonymity, of hope and delusions, of individuality and the crowd. They epitomize the anxiety of communication and the loss of the self in an anonymous, often virtualized, and by extension fictionalized postmodern city, in which everything is merely an image of an image (Taylor 2), or as the Narrator in *Fight Club* phrases it, "a copy of a copy of a copy" (Palahniuk 21). These four novels share the quest to individuation within an urban space but each of them focuses on a different strategy or method of communication. Bringing in the communicative aspect allows, then, to connect the fields of literary studies with communication studies in order to identify communicative strategies in the postmodern American imaginary.

Communicative Strategies

The aim of this exploration of the city in the American imaginary of the postmodern era is to highlight the repercussions of a digitalized society that is removed from inter-personal communication and retreats into intra-personal communication in the form of violent fantasies. This emphasis on the anxious zeitgeist of the millennium that authors like Auster or Palahniuk carve out in their fictional narratives substantiates the dangers for the isolated individual in an anonymous crowd. Since this angst of anonymity is also present in urban literature of the 19th century, Poe's "The Man of the

Crowd," even though it is set in London, presents a blueprint for the analysis of the lost individual who tries to read the city by the act of walking. The notion of the walker of the city, the Benjaminean *flâneur*, takes up a central role in this discussion since the protagonists of postmodern urban authors imitate the modern *flâneur* but with a postmodern twist of confusion and emptiness as they walk (or drive) through the city in an unstructured way, observing, exploring, mapping, and reading the city like the Poe narrator.

Literature of the postmodern period still bears significance for our society today since these works not only emphasize the fear of individuals to succumb into nothingness but they are also prophesying society's downward spiral into virtual realities that are taking over inter-personal relationships. This combination leads to a "crisis of confidence" (Taylor 1), in which reality and representation, real and fake, can no longer be distinguished:

> The current crisis of confidence is the result of […] a profound crisis of representation that is endemic to modern and postmodern society and culture. For the past two centuries, the line separating appearance and reality, truth and illusion, the material and the immaterial, the real and the virtual has been gradually eroding. (Taylor 1)

This crisis can be seen in the notion of financial communication; the language of finance consists of digits and is primarily virtual as hard cash is not necessary for transactions anymore.[2] This layering of language and impalpable quality of communication and finance, respectively is also reminiscent of the postmodern subject, "Combining Lyotard and Lewis, the postmodern subject is an unpresentable self whose identity is in flux because she is both fragmented by multifarious discourse overload and fraught with the suspicion that her life and very being are scripted in some plot. There is no authentic, essential, core self. Instead, there are layers upon layers of language" (Blazer 50). This scriptedness or fictionality and the fragmentation of language are materialized in computers, which have substituted the inter-personal exchange of money so that people merely interact with screens and vice versa. In fact, finance, information, and communication is all mediated through screens, removing the individual gradually from reality. It is exactly this removal from the actual physical contact which drives the protagonists of the novels under discussion into a

[2] Of course, even hard money can be read as an abstraction or a sign since it is based on conventions and is only worth the value society ascribes it. However, even though it is not a good, it is still material in contrast to the virtual sign system of digital transactions. (Taylor 3)

state of madness that finds its expression in violence. While this violence is presented as seemingly real by these texts, I will argue that it is a form of intra-personal communication and thus imagined. The protagonists only fantasize violence and it is rather violence against themselves than against others that is presented here. The question at hand is how the violence against others serves as a communication strategy and in which way it is successful or doomed to fail. It will be examined in how far the intra-personal battle is externalized, for example, by the imagination of doubles that have to be destroyed in order for the protagonist to live. Consequently, the destruction of the self will be explored and how this destruction serves constructive means as the protagonists try to create themselves and set themselves apart as individuals from the anonymous crowd of the city. Therefore, it will be argued that it is the city that triggers the imagination of violence in the protagonists.

In order to dovetail the imagination of violence with the exploration of communication, different aspects have to be considered to identify in which way violence is used as a communication strategy and which other strategies are used in the novels in order for the protagonists to find inter-personal connections. Key words of these strategies can be found in certain narrative devices the novels make use of. Thus, Auster uses tropes of detective fiction as an allegory for the search of language and inter-personal connections within the texts while Ellis uses Gothic elements to highlight the sublime quality of financial communication. DeLillo focuses on virtual communication and Palahniuk, finally, draws attention to a form of gendered body language. What all novels have in common is the communicative aspect in the postmodern city and its connection to violence. Therefore, these aspects have to be outlined here before discussing them in detail in the individual chapters.

New York City in the Late 20th Century

The city is a space that is, as the ABBA lyrics above suggest, irresistible in its grandiose architecture but also in its promise of success. This promise is encompassed in New York's yuppie culture of the 1980s and 1990s, i.e. in the "young professional people working in the city" (*OED* "yuppie"). The term of *yuppie* comprises not only positive attributes of success, though but bears a depreciative undertone (ibid) that hinges on the ambiguity of New York City and also the time of the 1980s and 1990s as an era of excess and despair alike. On the one hand, these decades mark a period of economic boom; on the other hand, they are often associated with drug abuse and AIDS. In cities, and New York City, in particular, these two extremes are

part of the same coin of excess. Economic rise of financiers is often achieved through the exploitation of workers or naïve investors. This is not a new phenomenon, as this could also be observed in the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and 19th century, in which the American city was redefined through capital and labor by incorporations and industrialization (Neculai 25). Here, new technology powered by the invisible force of electricity and the wireless telegraph opened up possibilities for wealth, but it also caused anxieties in terms of consequences for society, namely alienation between people and a loss of communication due to "isolating technology" (Dickson). Likewise, the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of equally invisible forces such as the Internet or cell phones. The growing need for these technologies also enabled an economic growth; yet, this growth also caused a hunger for more – especially more stocks. The consequent fall was inevitable, as was seen in the burst of the dot-com bubble in 2000/2001. This eruption of the downside of success lends itself in particular to New York literature as already the city's architecture makes a statement about the city's ambivalence. The high skyscrapers, which stand in for economic success, cast shadows on the streets below and hide what lurks underneath, namely discontent and violence. Moreover, the aforementioned economic fall can be seen as symbolically materialized in a literal fall of the city through the violent destruction of the two towers of the World Trade Center by terrorist attacks. Of course, these events are by no means correlated; yet, in hindsight, the fall of the towers is nonetheless eerily and tragically symbolic of the economic crash – as Bronfen points out, an allegorical reading of the towers is unavoidable but should also be looked at critically as it is this allegorization which negotiates and structures the reality of this traumatic pain (Bronfen, "Violence Three Ways," 119).

New York can thus be seen as a city of contradictions, of binary opposites that depend on each other; it encompasses both creation of hopes and dreams epitomized in the buildings and monuments of the city, but it is also a place of destruction and violence,[3] as can be seen especially at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century where New York was crime-ridden but also forcefully destroyed and rebuilt by the Giuliani era and finally hit by terrorists. In its dark undertones of a constant impendence of internal and external violence at the turn of the millennium that was associated with New York City, the latter can even be considered a

[3] Salmela and Ameel historicize this ambiguity of New York by explaining its "historical statuses of the city – a designated point of entry for immigrants, a business hub, and a dominant cultural center – […] explain this destructive vitality and imply that these processes are more likely to take place in New York than anywhere else" (321).

characteristically Gothic city, after all it is also known as Gotham.[4] Even though the Gothic will not be the key focus of the discussion of millennial postmodern texts, it is still a useful narrative device to present communication difficulties and it will thus serve as an adequate point of departure to understand the ambiguous nature of the city and the narrators of Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. These texts not only share the Gothic characteristics of the city shown, for example, in the sublime architecture of the city and uncanny doppelgänger encounters, but they also engage in the discourse on fragmentation of the city and the self. They all depict the use of violence as a means to express discontent and frustration over social and economic situations at the end of the 20th century and they all explore the value of communication in a city that is thoroughly anonymous. The importance of the city as a setting and as a force behind the protagonists' quest will be discussed in further detail in chapter two.

The City and the Anti-Detective

Whereas the novels I look at are not immediately associated with detective fiction, they incorporate features of the latter that reveal how the city and the detective figure engage and determine the narrative presented. In order to understand detective literature of the end of the 20th century, in particular Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* as the prime example here, parallels have to be drawn to the 19th century as an influence on the decades of postmodernism. The postmodern era can be read as a mirror image of the 19th century as both time periods show anxieties in terms of new technologies. Postmodern literature thus borrows from Gothic fiction, but it also hinges on detective fiction of the early to mid-20th century as both are concerned with unraveling mysteries and finding meaning in seemingly inexplicable situations. Postmodernism is similarly concerned with finding meaning by deconstructing the very same and often even negating it. Lyotard offers a simplified definition of the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it" (*The Postmodern Condition*, xxix). The incredulity hints at the ambiguity and

[4] It is no coincidence that the comic book series *The Batman* uses the name Gotham as it references New York City in a fictionalized form to highlight the problems with the city – it is a city that attracts crime and violence and at the same time fights it with violence. Moreover, Washington Irving coined New York City Gotham, connecting New York City and the Gothic as early as 1807. (Nigro)

unreliability of the postmodern text itself. It is the reason why the Gothic, especially in connection with the detective, plays a crucial role in determining the characteristics of urban New York fiction in the 1980s and the years following. This period displays an important turning point in urban fiction in general and detective fiction in particular as it deviates from the hardboiled American murder mystery of the noir era in its ways of experiencing the city and the self. Both are more intertwined but also more fragmented and more violent against the self. Of course, cities and violence have always been an inherent part of each other, which has been made a topic of discussion in fictional narratives over the past three centuries. Dating back as early as to Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* in the 18th century which follows the life of a female criminal living in the city of London, to Gothic detective stories such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* in the 19th century, to hard-boiled detective fiction in the first half of the 20th century, such as Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, to deconstructed narratives of crimes and violence in the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century with novels such as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* or Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, the city has always been a popular canvas for the depiction of violence.

The metaphorical view of the city as a canvas on which narratives are projected is especially fitting in terms of New York as it is a city that is constantly reimagined and fictionalized in literature. De Certeau elaborates this thought by emphasizing that "Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces" (118). The distinction between place and space is important here since while New York is a physical place, in the American imaginary it is transformed into an abstract space in which meaning is sought for and which is dependent on perceptions related to specific places (Bal 133). While 19th century detective fiction up to early 20th century noir fiction uses the city as the equivalent to a locked room, i.e. a confined space in which meaning has to be found to solve a mystery, postmodern fiction follows the idea of the claustrophobic labyrinthian city space; it fails at the essence of the locked room mystery, namely the solving of a riddle – but it does so on purpose in order to show the constructedness of the city itself. Shiloh reveals the locked room as "the first setting of the first detective story;" she explains that this setting

> yields a wealth of metaphorical interpretations which point to the basic premises and characteristic of the genre. It initially epitomizes the victory of reason, the reduction of the impossible to the possible. It marks the disparity between appearance and reality, between illusion and senselessness

> and the underlying reality of order, and in this respect this architectural paradigm shared the inherent dualism of the labyrinth. (Shiloh 157)

Postmodernism picks up this dualism but reverses the order, breaking up the binary opposition of appearance and reality and epitomizing the victory of illusion. Applied to New York City, it can then be deduced that there is no unified New York, there are only subjective versions of it.

This is highlighted by the fictionalization of the city in works by Auster or Ellis. The city is fantasized in the author's imagination showing the author's perception of New York. On the level of the diegesis, the city is presented as a spectral force, leading or rather misleading its characters. The protagonists walk through the maze of streets trying to find themselves and the city in the exploration of the urban space. This notion of discovering the city can also be seen in the figure of the detective. The detective had been introduced half a century before Conan Doyle invented the probably best-known detective, Sherlock Holmes. It was indeed Edgar Allen Poe with his "Murders in the Rue Morgue," who introduced the modern detective into fiction and thus fictionalized the city itself, making it a space of mystery and discovery. Even though the 19th century detective is widely associated with British literature, it was in fact an American author who laid the foundation of detective fiction. This is important in so far as postmodern urban narratives pick up the idea of the detective figure – even though not all of them include actual private investigators. While Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* is often considered detective or anti-detective[5] fiction since the protagonists take on the role of detectives (Blue in *Ghosts* is actually the only professional private investigator of the trilogy), Don DeLillo's Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis* can rather be described as a metaphorical detective since he is the one who travels through the city to discover the mysteries of his own psyche and position in society. The goal in both stories is, however, the same: solving the mystery of the self in relation to the protagonist's role in society by walking, reading, and interpreting the city space.

Urban fiction presents the detective as an exceptional genius, who is able to see beyond the surface and to put clues together to create a solution. If we accept this definition of the detective figure, he can be regarded as a storyteller since he constructs the story. This not only holds true for 19th century detectives but also for the 20th century. The element of

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[5] Kravitz defines the anti-detective as being "never able to unravel the conundrum, get to the bottom of the mystery, and/or establish who is responsible for the crime or crimes committed" (45). The anti-detective thus fails in the attempt to read the mystery and by extension, the city. He is rather the morally ambiguous Benjaminean *flâneur* of the postmodern city.

storytelling and creation can still be found in classic crime narratives. From Chandler's Marlowe to Hammett's Continental Op, detectives combine leads to fabricate a narrative. Similarly, postmodern protagonists gather clues and fragments to piece together the story. While classic detectives present their clues in a logical and understandable way, which the reader can follow, postmodern anti-detectives refuse to present coherence. It is their creation of imagined clues and stories that prevents their reliability and thus questions their narratives as well as sense of sanity.

The Moment of the Postmodern Urban Novel

In city fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, the detective figure is transformed into an amateur detective who is more often than not also the criminal himself, as is the case in Ellis' *American Psycho*. In postmodern fiction, boundaries between the commitment and the solution of a crime blur as there often is no solution – Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* is not brought to justice and neither Daniel Quinn in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* nor Blue in *Ghosts* have a clue what is going on around them. The protagonist is transformed into a rebel without a cause, a detective without a purpose. He walks through the city as a mere observer, a postmodern Benjaminean *flâneur* trying to grasp the city around him but not being able to do so due to the lack of distance to the city crowd, which he is part of and cannot escape from. Benjamin's *flâneur* is a concept of the modern era, describing an urban walker who detaches himself from the crowd by mere observation. In the postmodern era, this figure is taken up again but it is given a destructive quality in terms of identity formation. That means the postmodern walker detaches himself from the city crowd but he does so in order to observe himself and destroy himself to finally renew himself. This notion of the observant and isolated *flâneur* is combined with a fantastical construction of the very same city through walking as de Certeau outlines in his treatise on walking as a structuring element of the city. Walking as a practice that "affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'" (99), meaning that walking and communication of and within the city are closely related in the imagination of the city. As a consequence, in the postmodern urban novel, the *flâneuresque* detective-like protagonist imagines the city, he writes his narrative onto the city as he offers his view on the city. He thus creates an imagined reality that is fictitious on two levels. On the one hand, the narratives are imagined because they are fictionalizations, the authors' fantasized constructs that are presented on paper in the form of a novel. On the other hand, the protagonists fantasize their narratives, too, they become authors who

construct a narrative; yet, it is exactly this presentation of themselves and their story which makes them unreliable.

In this kind of postmodern urban *flâneur* fiction, truth cannot be found, a solution is lacking and the narrative is fragmented. Interestingly enough, it is this fragmentation of stories and storytelling that binds itself to the tradition of Gothic fiction as the latter also often presents a lack of coherence or reliability in terms of plot structure and protagonists – the incredibility and yet explicability of the story is what fascinates and yet frightens the reader. The latter can neither trust the narrator, who is often ill, on drugs, or otherwise mentally impaired, nor the story itself due to exaggerations or fantastic occurrences. Postmodern fiction adds another layer to this by making both story and protagonist being torn between an imitation of reality and a parody thereof in its fictional space of the novel. When Dr. Fred Richmond, who himself is, admittedly, a fictional and potentially unreliable character from Alfred Hitchcock's cinematic adaptation of Robert Block's *Psycho* (1959/1960), describes the film's protagonist and schizophrenic psychopath Norman Bates with the words, "He only half-existed to begin with. And now, the other half has taken over. Probably for all time," he could as well speak about postmodern protagonists such as Tyler Durden from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* or Patrick Bateman from Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* since these characters also lose their sense of reality. Here again, a striking resemblance can be found to Gothic fiction, in which events and characters have to be read with caution since they cannot be trusted. In fact, in both post-modernism and Gothic literature, boundaries between madness and reality blur, which again substantiates the unreliability of the character-narrators.

Gothic literature and anti-detective literature of the postmodern moment bear parallels and complement each other in the representation of the city. Indeed, in other detective fiction Gothic elements can also be found, as is the case in hard-boiled detective fiction and the time of the Film Noir era, with its play of light and shadow. However, what has not yet developed in these detective narratives of the early and mid-twentieth century is the element of space as an almost life-like protagonist. The story that comes closest to this element is probably Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* and his description of Personville, also called Poisonville by its inhabitants. Here, the question of how far the city influences the characters is hinted at but it is not fully drawn out. What happened or did not happen is questioned and even the protagonist himself is questioned. Eventually though, in the end, a solution is found and the order is, to a certain degree at least, re-established. This is not the case in postmodern city fiction, which leaves the reader in a void of fragmentation and uncertainty. Even though Gothic fiction does not

necessarily fragment its texts itself, the stories still leave the reader in the dark. Especially American Gothic fiction and thus Edgar Allen Poe as the most prominent representative of the latter, plays with the reader's expectations and more often than not, leaves them hanging. Moreover, Poe can be seen as a point of departure for postmodern fiction that blends the protagonist's psyche and the space he inhabits, a phenomenon which will be closely examined in the course of the following chapters.

Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" will be of particular interest in this regard since it can be seen as the template for postmodern city fiction, as it combines Gothic elements and fragments the city as it searches for meaning where none can be found. Like in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, in Poe's short story there is no definite crime to be solved and no criminal to be found. Yet, in both stories the narrator and the observed target that is followed through the streets of the city become indistinct. Poe's story and the stories of the 1980s to early 2000s seemingly try to construct a narrative but intentionally fail to do so, which is why the protagonists eventually imagine their own version of a narrative. While there are interesting similarities between Poe and postmodern authors, this still does not explain why the 19th century and the 1980s and 1990s happened to produce similar literature in terms of shared interests in fragmentation of the city and detection of mysteries that cannot be solved. Alison Shonkwiler draws on Vincent Mosco when she explains, "the 1990s constituted a 'strong mythic phase' of cybertechnology's existence, on a par with the early days of telegraph, radio, or television" (80). It seems that both eras mirror each other, that is to say, the post-modern era of the 1980s can be regarded as an imitation of the 19th century detective story in its unreliable protagonists, its Gothic elements, and the walking through the city. In both eras, the detective-protagonists try to impose order; however, the postmodern era does not allow order to be restored, which is why it is not only an imitation, but an intertextual rewriting of the genre. Moreover, New York of the antebellum period and the late 20th century shows similarities in its growing hegemonic role as the nation's as well as the global financial center. As Peebles points out, "New York's rise as the nation's economic and cultural capital is one of the most dramatic developments of the antebellum period" (102) – a point that still holds true in postmodern New York just on a global level. The question remains why both eras raise awareness to the self in the city and the position of the individual within the crowd. While Poe makes a general observation about the relationship between the city and its inhabitants of his own time in his "New York Correspondence" by stating, "The city is thronged with strangers […] and everything wears an aspect of intense life" (Poe, *Doings of Gotham*, 3),

Rowan Wilken offers a plausible and pragmatic explanation for this relationship highlighting the parallels of the 19th and 20th century by making a connection to technological advancements during these periods. The individual, the city, and the Gothic are thus tied together through changes in technology and more specifically communication technology. Wilken describes that "From the eighteenth century up to the present, a clear trajectory runs from the natural sublime to the 'technological' sublime […], through the 'electric sublime,' (which, among other things, conquered darkness), to the 'digital sublime,' as embodied in information and telecommunication technology […]" (192). It is this focus on the change in communication through a digitization that is of interest here since, as I attempt to show, postmodern novels revolve around this anxiety of the digital sublime.

Communication in the Digital City

The historic contexts of American fiction of the 19th and the late-20th century (including the beginning of the 21st century with works such as DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*) show some peculiar similarities, which coincide with the change in detective fiction. The 19th century saw many inventions emerging in the field of technology that had a major impact on forms of communication. The electric telegraph was invented in 1816 and the telephone was patented in 1876 and finally, the radio was introduced in 1901. These inventions were all means of information transmitters that enabled people to connect over long distances. Moreover, in 1822, Charles Babbage built the first template of a computer; of course, it was a mechanical computer and not a digital one, yet (Taylor 11). While these innovations do not necessarily play a direct role in Poe's stories and in particular in "The Man of the Crowd," it is still interesting to note that Poe often focuses on communication or the lack thereof in his stories. In "Rue Morgue," Dupin and the Narrator engage in conversations but they also remain silent, caught in their own thoughts.[6] Furthermore, in "The Man of the Crowd," the Narrator is not engaging in any kind of conversation and is merely communicating with the implied reader through his text and therefore with an imagined entity. The relationship between the reader and the city as a communicative platform is outlined by Campbell and Kean when they compare the city to a text that needs to be read and rewritten:

[6] Moreover, the story presents language as an unreliable communication tool, as the witness reports revolve around deciphering the language of the alleged murderer, who turns out to be not even human.

> The idea of discourse is used here to suggest the manner through which the city is represented to us in language and related frames of reference and definition. […] These discourses are not about the city, but they constitute us as 'readers'/ viewers. That is, they do not simply describe, but seek to form our concepts about what the city is and how it relates to life in a wider sense. (157)

Catalina Neculai then reflects on language as a means to produce and reinvent space and instill it with meaning as she focuses on the space of urban neighborhoods and connecting it to a socio-spatial system of relationships:

> If urban language is both a reflection of the production of urban space and its linguistic additive, then the accuracy of labeling the neighborhood is a matter of acknowledging the underlying forces at work in the reproduction of its socio-spatial relations. (69)

This awareness of communication and the presentation of the city as a space of unreliable voices or rather noises in terms of unreliable protagonists and subjective stories, and as an inter-personal system that finds itself void of communication due to anonymity can be seen as a concern about inventions in communication technology as these technologies promote a decrease in face-to-face communication and therefore, foster anonymity even more.

The 1980s relive the dissociating consequences of new communication devices as the technological advancements of the time start to influence not only the economic market but human communication through the digitalization of the world. In the 1980s, a similar technological revolution was taking place as in the 19th century. A new era of communication began with the introduction of the cell phone in the 1970s. Likewise, Windows and Apple Macintosh also emerged in the 1980s. However, the most revolutionary technological development followed with the expansion of the Internet. Thus, while the 19th century can be seen as the start of an age of mostly electrical technology, the 1980s represent the inception of a new digital era that like its predecessor revolutionized the way and means of inter-personal communication. It is therefore not surprising to find that fiction addressed the perils and anxieties of this new era.

It is urban literature, and New York literature in particular, that picks up on the growing anonymity and the economic excess due to New York's position as the financial center of the world. Here the digital and the financial meet and turn the city into a virtual reality in the form of numbers and cashless transactions that are merely present on screens. This virtualization is then reimagined and fictionalized in novels such as Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* or Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. In these

novels we see criticism of the superficiality and meaninglessness of the yuppie movement and the increasing digitization. These texts attempt to ascribe meaning to the virtualized digital city through their protagonists. This in itself seems ironic considering the fact that postmodernist literature usually tries to deconstruct meaning and open it up, which the implied authors achieve but their protagonists fail to do. The protagonists of these postmodern novels long for meaning and in fact, search for meaning since without it their life is obsolete and empty. They thus try to avoid the loss of the self in a society that is more concerned with profit than human value; yet, they are not always successful. The urge and failure to create meaning and the "shattering of belief" and "lack of reality" that is constituent for the postmodern condition (Lyotard, "Answering the Question," 77) is accentuated in the Nietzschean nihilism staged in various ways in novels such as Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*.

Nietzsche's theory of nihilism already makes the connection between the individual's realization of a general futility and the creation of imaginary narratives. Nietzsche outlines, "becoming has no goal and that underneath all becoming there is no grand unity in which the individual could immerse himself completely as an element of supreme value, an escape remains: to pass sentence on this whole world of becoming as a deception and to invent a world beyond it, a *true* world" (13). This 'true' world is nothing but fictional and yet, it represents a subjective view on the world that is true to the individual. In the postmodern novels to be discussed in the course of this book, this existential despair finds its outlet, as will be argued, in the imagination of violence as a response to the corruption of society, substantiating Nietzsche's theory.

A Journey through the American Imaginary City

The end of the 20th century presents a nihilistic society that is fragmented and anonymized through the changing habits of communication. Discussing the consequences of digitization for individuals in the American imaginary, postmodern novels initiate a rethinking about the individual's position in society and in the space of the city. Novels such as the *New York Trilogy*, *American Psycho*, *Cosmopolis*, and *Fight Club* send their protagonists on journeys through the city in order to redefine their individuality in an anonymized city. The works chosen for the journey through a narrativized New York City of the late 20th and early 21st century all share a reflective quality of their contemporary time on an extra-diegetic level, but they also present a nostalgic longing for the past and an imitation thereof on the

diegetic level. This imitation is presented by the performance of archaic masculine ideals and by indirect parallels to Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" and therefore, to 19th century anxieties of an anonymous society.

The following chapter will flesh out the role of the city and New York City, in particular, within the American imaginary by presenting it as an ambiguous and heterotopic space. The relationship between the individual and the crowd in a postmodern financial city will be a main focus here in order to understand the city's influence on the individual. The chapter will use Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" as a case study to apply the discussed theories to this text and to lay the basis for the following chapters where parallels will be occasionally drawn to this short story.

Chapter 3 puts the focus on Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* and the detective figure. The latter is used as an attempt to create a coherent narrative within a fragmented novel as well as a fragmented city. Auster's protagonists look for meaning and inter-personal connections but only find themselves confronted with their own doubles. They fail to communicate with anyone but their doubles; the latter cannot be clearly distinguished from them, which is why it will be argued that the protagonists are trapped in an intra-personal conversation, i.e. a dialogue with themselves. That Auster is interested in communication within the city can be seen in his language experiments within the story – in *City of Glass* Peter Stillman Jr. is not able to produce proper language and Daniel Quinn reads into the city map the Tower of Babel, in *Ghosts* the names are reduced to colors and Blue turns his reports into fictional narratives, and in *The Locked Room* the Narrator tries to hunt down Fanshawe in order to initiate a conversation. I will follow Espejo's observation on the inability to understand language in postmodern times due to a fragmented communication system that does not allow for meaning and knowledge exchange on an interpersonal level; Auster's "trilogy indeed bursts any possibility of meaning in a traditional sense, just as even postmodern science is largely about that which it cannot explain, is not fixed and stable, and brings unease and not the comfort of 'knowing'" (Espejo 147-148). The discussion of Auster's trilogy as a fictionalization of communication in an anonymous city will lead to the discussion of a fictionalization of violence in chapter 4.

Chapter 4 attempts to look at the dangers of anonymity and the failure of inter-personal communication through the lens of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Here, a narrative of violence is constructed in Patrick Bateman's mind, making the novel reminiscent of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" in highlighting Gothic qualities of the city. Moreover, the

maze[7] the city presents in these stories is substantiated in the presentation of finance in Ellis' novel as "fictitious capital" (Goddon 863), i.e. as finance that cannot be grasped in the text – it is even difficult to decipher what exactly Patrick Bateman is doing in his office when he sits at his desk, looking at the numbers on his computer screen. This illusory nature of finance is taken further and made corporeal by the spectacle of violence that seems beyond verbal communication as a response to capitalism. Elisabeth Bronfen sums up the need for the fictionalization of capitalism neatly by stating "In order to alter the economy, we must be able to imagine it differently" ("The Violence of Money," 65).[8] By adding the communicative perspective in Ellis' satirical presentation of the production of text and violence, I intend to follow and expand on Claire LaBerge's argument of Patrick Bateman's likeness to capital in his fictionality and fragmentation:

> Patrick Bateman informs the reader that he himself is an abstraction. For Ellis, the financializing environment of 1980s New York City has interpolated a masculine subject, Patrick Bateman, a financier who can recognize but cannot be recognized, who is more of a teller than a narrator, and finally, who renders finance as a series of material and textual effects but who claims that he himself is an abstraction. (145-146)

Bateman's craving for physicality and purpose in the fictionalized world of New York finance is translated into sexual encounters and violence on a double fictional level; on the one hand, Patrick Bateman, as I attempt to show, only imagines his crimes, on the other hand, he is the product of Ellis' imagination. This double-entendre of fictionalization then creates the Poesque unreliability of the novel's protagonist, who is trapped in an anonymous city of superficialities, in which the self is destroyed and rebuilt

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[7] Brandt explains that "[i]n postmodern fiction, the metaphor of the 'city as labyrinth' functions as both an iconic representation and a structuring pattern, pinpointing, in Wendy Faris's words, 'the interdependence of those two entities, the city and the text' (33). Urban visuality and cultural imagination literally interact through images of the city, creating a situation in which the two spheres become almost interchangeable" (563). Furthermore, Sarmento confirms that "[t]he labyrinth is the great central theme of postmodernism, the new setting for the novel, just as the aimless journey is the new form of travel" (95), however, it is not a new phenomenon but can already be found in 19th century literary representations of cities.

[8] In her article, "The Violence of Money," Bronfen outlines the representation of creative capitalism in Hollywood cinema through the depiction of violence, which ultimately challenges our perspectives on economics.

without any consequences, depriving the city and the individual of all meaning.

This search for meaningful inter-personal relationships is developed further in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, which is subject of discussion in chapter 5. Here, the digitalization of communication is the center of attention and the protagonist's fight against the latter. On his literal journey through the New York City, the protagonist Eric Packer finds himself on a metaphorical journey of self-destruction and self-creation in a hegemonic male city of global finance. Packer becomes the Benjaminean *flâneur* in his experience of the fragmented city, which is taken to a new level through the mediated images of the city that the screens of his limousine provide. The space of the city and placelessness of finance are juxtaposed but they find a common room in their virtualized representation. Packer tries to break out of this virtual reality by seeking inter-personal encounters in the form of sex, emotional exposure, and violence in the streets of New York City. His failure to truly connect results in an externalization of his inner struggles materialized in his double Benno Levin, who makes Packer take responsibility for his actions by making him experience the consequences for the very same and thus uncovering an exit Ellis' Patrick Bateman failed to see.

The externalization of intra-personal conflicts through the double is made even more explicit in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, which will be discussed in chapter 6. Even though written between the publications of Ellis' and DeLillo's novels, *Fight Club* aggregates the communicative processes of all three novels, *New York Trilogy*, *American Psycho*, and *Cosmopolis*, and highlights the imagination of violence in the personification of intra-personal through the Narrator's double Tyler Durden. In Palahniuk's novel the failure of inter-personal communication results in self-harm, which is triggered by the fear of emasculation through social constraints. Like in the previous novels, these social bonds are tightly linked to urban lifestyle, which prevents the protagonist from creating a free individual self. *Fight Club* concludes and epitomizes the anonymity of the city by making the city itself anonymous. It is not New York City that is the focus but an abstract concept of a city, a city which takes away the subjectivity of its inhabitants and leaves them emasculated.

What all the novels have in common is that the protagonists fail to maintain a balance between intra-personal and inter-personal communication. They do not see that meaningful relationships would offer them a way out of the void the city presents to them. Due to a growing anonymity of the city and the ways of communication, the quest to individuation is what the novels explore and which is to be analyzed in the journey of this book.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE SHADOW OF THE AMERICAN CITY: READING NEW YORK CITY THEORETICALLY

The air is vibrant and electrified
Welcome to me here I am my arms are open wide
Somewhere in the middle of the never-ending noise
There is a pulse, a steady rhythm of a heart that beats
And a million voices blend into a single voice.
—ABBA, "I am the City" (l. 6-10)

Cities can be regarded as heterotopias that cross the bridge between appealing and appalling, they are familiar and fascinating and yet, other and dangerous. In order to establish New York City in the American imaginary, it is useful to take a closer look at Foucault's theory of space in order to build a foundation for the analysis of postmodern urban literature, in particular of Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Ellis' *American Psycho*, DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, and Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Heterotopias in Michel Foucault's sense of the term, as outlined in his essay "Of Other Spaces" from 1967, are places or rather spaces that are both real and unreal. Foucault describes heterotopias as non-spaces or anti-spaces meaning that they offer a space that is set in reality and yet, subvert the very same by presenting their own set of rules. Drawing on Michel Foucault, Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean describe the city as a communal "space for self-expression and the possibility for dialogue, bringing it close to Michel Foucault's concept of the *heterotopia*, which when applied to the city suggests a place capable of juxtaposing in a single locale several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (176). Among other forms, Foucault distinguishes between crisis heterotopias and heterotopias of deviation. Examples for such heterotopic spaces would be prisons, which are part of society and yet are removed from it, graveyards, which are inhabited by dead people or the theater stage, which presents a make-believe world to a real audience.

Heterotopic spaces thus challenge the boundaries between what is real and what is unreal or at least other:

> […] real places […] which are […] a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault 3-4)

However, heterotopias do not necessarily have to be geographical spaces or rather places as such, which would be congruent to Foucault's claim that heterotopic spaces are not publicly accessible but are exclusive. Heterotopias can also be seen on a more abstract level. Thus, mirrors would be another example of a heterotopic space. In a mirror we see ourselves; yet, what we see is just a reflection and not our real self. It is a picture of us captured in the frame of the mirror. The mirror image cannot be grasped because it only represents the real without ever being the real space (Foucault 4). The concept of the mirror is of particular interest when looking at the concept of the double as here, the self is spatialized in another person. This can be seen for instance in Paul Auster's second novel of his trilogy, *Ghosts*, in which the protagonist Blue is observing his double through a window but is not able to grasp him until he eventually overwhelms him in a room that mirrors his own room. Space and the self are thus equally doubled and blurred, they are made real and unreal at the same time, challenging the binary opposition of presence and absence. A similar doubling can be seen in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* in which the Narrator constructs his double Tyler Durden by imagining him. This materialization of mental images can also be aligned to the idea of heterotopias since here, it is the mind which presents and creates this inverted space.

A city is then a heterotopia in the sense that it is constructed, imposing a seemingly homogeneous structure on a chaotic, heterogeneous natural environment. It is, however, only homogeneous in that it is planned on the level of architecture; yet, even here, the heterogeneous character is highlighted through the different buildings and neighborhoods. Nevertheless, this organized structure of planned cities in general but of US cities, in particular, is supposed to ensure security and establish order. The urban place is made into a space of emplacement. Emplacement can be understood as an organization of society by means of static, predestined hierarchical structures. Especially in medieval European cities, emplacement serves as a security system. The medieval European city was a place of familiarity and was meant to guarantee security, as can be seen by the city walls that defined the borders of the city for defense reasons in times of war (Batty and Longley 20). In this sense, the city walls ensured a protected city community. Even though crime and violence also happened within the walls of the city, the Enlightenment era of the 17th and 18th

century, beginning with Galileo Galilei's discoveries, broke with these structures of security because of industrialization, progress, and science, which destabilized the order of emplacement. The worldview as it had been known up until this point was shattered. Social structures changed and allowed fluidity between the classes meaning that the medieval social hierarchies were beginning to dissolve by the possibility of climbing the social ladder. However, even though modernization brought a superficial deconstruction of archaic social hierarchies by means of upward mobility, this rise in prospect and opportunity also entailed social insecurity. The break with traditional perceptions of society and the city by extension is epitomized in the American city. In terms of planning, the American city lost the circular star-shaped structure of many medieval European cities that were surrounded by protective walls and where communal life was taking place on the market in the city center. In fact, American cities lost this point of orientation. Of course, the loss of the city walls also had a liberating effect and symbolized perpetual growth in size and wealth but it came at the cost of a sense of community and a sense of security (Batty and Langley 22).

Historicizing New York City

The American city of the 19th century presented itself to many Europeans as the desired unknown other, a communal other that was supposed to differ from the familiar European city crowd, which seemed still to be hierarchical and oppressive, rejecting any real social change[9]. Therefore, at least on the outside through the Declaration of Independence from 1776 and the rising importance of America economically through technological advancements such as the electric telegraph that was made publicly available in 1844 (McGillem), the American city seemed to allow new and equal opportunities to everyone and a new way of living, a modern way of living that was all about individuality, progress, achievements, and making money by being assiduous. In short, America and the American city – especially New York City as the gateway to the land of the free – appeared as a place where anything was possible. Not only were American cities and most strikingly New York structured according to the Roman system of city planning in forms of a grid, indicating a Renaissance of city construction and thus a rejection of the medieval European city, they also introduced the notion of

[9] Immigrants from all across Europe came to the United States in the 19th century as social conditions were bad especially for working class people due to the Industrial Revolution, which culminated in several revolutions, such as, for example, the 1948 revolutions in Germany, France, or Ireland.