Lost in Space: Displacement of the American Male in Urban Spaces

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Abstract:

This article will discuss the interrelations of spatial reorganization of everyday life and gender constructions in American culture, especially the changing images of masculinity because the urban question is a question of subjectivity and authenticity. As space, with all its personal, social and mythical connotations, is being erased by the hyperreal and depthless spatial experiences of late capitalist culture, it becomes more vital as a site of resistance and hegemony. The taken for granted mobility and physical dominance of men over space appear to have been castrated by a world defined by the constrained pleasure and restricted freedom. Contemporary American culture and literature have often reflected "the contemporary crisis of urbanity as a crisis of white male authority and selfhood" in which "white men conduct their highly individualized dramas of masculine authority, existential doubt and moral responsibility". This paper, therefore, will discuss such moments of spatial crisis of masculinity in the examples of transgressive fiction such as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho,* Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club, Non-Fiction and Choke* and Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* affirming the decentred and deterritorialized male identity as the insecure core of the American culture.

 Keywords: *Contemporary American literature, masculinity, space, transgressive fiction*

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Mekanda Kaybolanlar: Amerikan Erkeğinin Şehir Mekanlarında Zeminini Yitirişi

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Özet:

Bu makale, Amerikan kültüründe gündelik yaşamda mekanın yeniden düzenlenmesi ve mekana bağlı toplumsal cinsiyet inşaları arasındaki ilişkiyi, özellikle de şehir kültürünün bir öznellik ve hakikilik meselesi olduğunu aklında tutarak erilliğin değişen imgelerini tartışacaktır. Zira mekan, tüm kişisel, toplumsal ve mitik anlamları ile birlikte, toptan bir biçimde geç capitalist kültürün hipergerçek ve derinliksiz mekan deneyimleri tarafından yok edildikçe, bir direniş ve hegemonya alanı olarak daha da hayati bir konuma gelmiştir. Erkeklerin, mekan üzerindeki kıymeti kendinden menkul hareketliliği ve fiziksel hakimiyeti, sınırlanmış zevk ve özgürlük algısı ile tanımlaman bir dünyada hadım edilmiştir. Çağdaş Amerikan kültürü ve edebiyatı çoğu zaman "beyaz erkeğin son derece bireyselleşmiş dramlarını, varoluşsal şüphelerini ve ahlaki sorumluluklarını sergilediği" "çağdaş şehirleşme krizini bir beyaz erkek egemenliğinin ve benliğinin krizi" olarak sunmuştur. Bu makale, bu kuramsal kapsam ışığında Bret Easton Ellis'in *Amerikan Sapığı*, Chuck Palahniuk'un *Dövüş Kulübü, Kurgu-dışı, ve Tıkanma*, ve Douglas Couplan'dın *X Kuşağı* gibi *transgressive* edebiyat örnekleri üzerinden erilliğin mekansal kriz anlarını tartışacak ve merkezsizleşmiş ve mekansızlaşmış erkek kimliğini Amerikan kültürünün güvenliğini yitirmiş özü olarak ele alacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Çağdaş Amerikan Edebiyatı, erillik, mekan, transgressive edebiyat*

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Introduction

> *"Nazis…baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis… and the joke is, the punch line is, it's all in this city – nowhere else, just here, it sucks, whoa wait, more Nazis, gridlock, gridlock, baby-sellers, black-market babies, AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, maniac baby, gridlock, bridge collapses". (Ellis, 4)*

T his is how the city of New York is depicted in *American Psycho*, the scandalous novel by Bret Easton Ellis, and shocking as it may be, this image as the paradoxical and chaotic city which offers nothing but "*the trash, the garbage, the disease* (4)" has been diffused into the apocalyptic culture of late capitalism, which seemingly substituted order with chaos, construction with dissolution and production with consumption. For about 50 years now, we have been talking about the crisis of urban culture, the end of history and ideology, vanishing of the boundaries of gender roles, and crisis of masculinity in particular, and the identity crisis and dislocation of individuals. Despite their seemingly relative irrelevance, these distinct crises, each and every one of them, are evidently different implications of a more significant crisis of late capitalist culture. What lies at the heart of this crisis network is reorganization and reproduction of everyday life practices in accordance with the dominant capitalist ideology, which will inevitably lead to the criticism of class structure (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 226).

This article will discuss the interrelations of spatial reorganization of everyday life and gender constructions in American culture, especially the changing images of masculinity because the urban question, doubtless to say, is above all a question of subjectivity and

authenticity. Industrial revolution and postindustrial revolution were indeed, and before all, a spatial revolution. Considering the temporal-spatial foundations of the identity construction, it may be argued that the dislocation of the spatial identity will certainly mark the displacement of individuals (Kale, 2002, p.19). As space, with all its personal, social and mythical connotations, is being erased by the hyperreal and depthless spatial experiences of late capitalist culture (Kennedy, 2000, p.6), it becomes more vital as a site of resistance and hegemony.

The taken for granted mobility and physical dominance of men over space appear to have been castrated by a world defined by the constrained pleasure and restricted freedom. Contemporary American culture and literature have often reflected "the contemporary crisis of urbanity as a crisis of white male authority and selfhood" in which "white men conduct their highly individualized dramas of masculine authority, existential doubt and moral responsibility" (Kennedy, 2000, p.119), which is, for instance, illustrated in the examples of transgressive fiction such as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho,* Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club, Non-Fiction and Choke* and Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* affirming the decentred and deterritorialized male identity as the insecure core of the American culture which will be used to exemplify the points of discussion in this paper.

Displacement of American Male

T he condition of masculinity, or *the masculine mystique*, has always been one of the prominent issues in American culture for several reasons and always instantly echoed in fiction. First of all, a history of masculinity is a history of the struggle to tame and control the space around. The dominant meanings of masculinity in American culture have been about producing space(s) as instruments to men's wills. However, masculine ideology hasn't been only concerned with a space of his own but much more interested in other spaces in search of a territorialization of his power. Therefore, through ages, America has remained to be a land of men and manly ideals of expansion, conquest

and possession. The very first examples of American literature, sermons, journals and the religious teachings, burdened the American male with a historical and biblical role of leading the expatriates into the Promised Land. Written by and for men, these texts opened up new realms of responsibility and manly duties like building up a nation and preserving it, a novelty for the age of aristocracy and feudal monarchies. The texts of the time mirrored the crisis of a replacement of masculine roles and created the myth of pioneerhood, redefining the roles and responsibilities of men. What Natty Bummpo and Captain Ahab pursued at the heart of wilderness was the originality of this idea, which was apparently lost in the newly urbanizing America. Like the heroes of American romanticism, Nick Carraway, and later on Dean Moriarty, as the puzzled successors of Ahab, pursued the originality of American manhood in a struggle not only against a culture of conspicuous consumption but also against themselves, yet this time sailing into the wilderness of modern American cities and interstate roads. In modern American fiction, the Kafkaesque search of meaning and authenticity of male heroes evidently ended up with the wasteland of masculinity (Erbora, 2000, p.12). Deprived of its traditional meaning as the land of promise, American cities, especially in the postwar era, were transformed from a meeting place where people from different cultures and histories formed up a new city culture to a place with which people couldn't identify themselves, ending up with a total alienation. Therefore, contrary to previous masculinity crises, the postmodern crisis of masculinity brings out a displacement of masculine roles offering no substitute for the so called masculine power and authority.

Postmodern theory of space seems to be related to the displacement of masculinity, an uncertainty about manhood, a loss of faith in patriarchal authority (Moore, 1996, p.281). Retrospectively, with the post-Fordist reorganization of workplaces and hierarchies in 1950's, middle class men began to experience a relative loss in their social prestige and economic status. Clearly defined jobs and careers with which men were once identified were being transformed into contingent flexible roles loosely defined. With the constant loss of power in the

social hierarchy, men apparently could not succeed in keeping up with the increasing demands of the ethic of success and had to face the possibility that they might be too far away from fulfilling the expectations of masculinity based on self-control, hard work and material progress. As a result, while domesticated workplace of the service industry castrated men's power, American males, "the middle children of history with no special place and attention" (Palahniuk, Fight Club, 166), became more and more involved in complex social relations and became isolated and inward looking. The transition of urban spaces from an open air public sphere to the hinterland of closed and climate controlled shopping malls also denoted the displacement of masculine subjectivity in American culture. Once the land of immigrants and existential nomads, American land now offers only a "desubjectified, motionless voyage" (Deleuze, 1987, p.159) and the only immigrants of new American cities happen to be the customers strolling around the market stalls. The narrator of *Fight Club*, for instance, wakes up at a different time and at a different airport during his never-ending flights. In each journey, he consumes single-serving foods, single-serving hotel rooms and single-serving friends. He realizes that it doesn't really matter who you are and where you are while traveling (Palahniuk, Fight Club, 29). Different identities you have adopted and the places you have been to all become disposable after a while.

In a Lacanian sense, if the chief signifier of difference in American culture, the phallus, doesn't exist anymore, then the postmodern individual's misrecognition of himself leads to creating a decentred subject, the subject-in-process as a site of contradictions yet never complete and contented. Thus postmodern males are seemingly urged to construct false relations with the space surrounding them, resulting in a kind of fetishism of space (Moore, 1996, p.172). Postmodern spatial self is a passive fabricated self, an alienated spectator of social activities. He is the "invisible man" of the 1990's whose only chance to become visible again is, as Chuck Palahniuk writes in *Choke*, to "*get caught, exposed and revealed enough, then you'd never be able to hide again. There would be no difference between your public and your private lives* (38)". For Palahniuk,

"*to be Whitie is to be wallpaper. You don't draw attention, good or bad. Still, what would it be like*", he asks "*to live with attention?*" (Palahniuk, Non-Fiction, 56).

The infamous feminization of postmodern masculinity corresponds to the process of becoming a consumer rather than a producer of the spatial organizations as well as social relationships constructed through space. In postmodern space, the old boundaries between the private and the public, the functional and the aesthetic, originality and artificiality and pastiche have broken down to the point that it becomes virtually hallusinogenic and hyperreal totally being composed of images and simulated signifiers. The only possible socialization occurs in shopping malls or theme parks where people enjoy a simulated historicity and authenticity, and in the realms of virtual reality such as television shows, video games or internet, which marks the death of space and the emergence of schizophrenic, dislocated and depthless identity constructions (Crang, 2000, p.9). The dislocated masculine seems to be trapped in a vicious circle of the pursuit of spatial meaning which coincides with the *desert of the real*; the cognitive perfect map, representing the space, not only masks and perverts the basic reality but also marks the absence of the territory/reality. In postmodern culture, the masculine identity is based on the absence of space and the temporality of spatial constructions so much so that it has been displaced so as not to be replaced any more.

The masculine reaction to the symbolic absence of space, then, comes to the surface in symbolic ways. The blatant violence of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, for instance, may be interpreted as a claim to possess and control his surrounding with an animal instinct when he deeply feels that, among all the luxurious furniture and expensive restaurants, he is deprived of the power to exert control over the social relations created by and within space. Tim Edwards (2004) suggests that violence is seen as a key part not only of men's maintenance of power over women but rather more in terms of men's power over the entire planet (51). As Jeff Hearn (1998) similarly stated in his *The Violences of Men,* Bateman's violent acts are indeed "impersonal and structural" (12)

and necessarily "organized and individualized" (35) and therefore can't be considered separately from one's symbolic expression of masculinity which reinforces and, in turn, is reinforced by other forms of symbolic violence. Moreover, the narrator in *Fight Club* explodes his own condomi(ni)um (condom-like condos), "*a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals*" he defines (41), in order to deliver himself from his "*slavery to his nesting instinct (43)*". American men, for the narrator, "*used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue (43)*". Considering the symbolic violence impoverishing men and alienating him to his space, Tyler Durden's anarchist raids of the modern art museums, liposuction clinics, rich hotel restaurants and credit card buildings justify themselves in an attempt to respond the violence in the same symbolic way. Furthermore, in *Choke*, Denny, a helpless sexaholic, "*finds rocks, washes them, hauls them home. It's how his recovery is going to be about doing something big and good instead of just not doing little bad shit (139-140)*". He mounts a wall in the middle of the city out of the rocks, the debris of the city symbolizing his own manhood. (219) Palahniuk tells us the stories of a couple of men who are building castles in cities as the phallic monuments just as Denny's wall in his collection of interviews and short essays, *Non-fiction*,

> *So whether building a castle is a statement or a mission, a nesting instinct or a penis extension (63). Whether castle building is a bid for immortality or a hobby – a fun way to kill time- whether it is a gift to the future or a memorial to the past…. Their own confession in stone. Their memoir (91).*

Urban Space

The United States is a vast country recreated from half remembered fragments of the memories of Puritan forefathers, Irish vagabonds, French aristocrats and Hungarian villagers. Fragmentality and inconsistency has thus always lain at the heart of American cities. Consequently, there have been two oppositional views of the city and

urban spaces in American culture. On one side, the dark aspects of the city, city as "a storm center" full of "menace", the morally threatening enemy of pious Christians and good Americans have remained as a persistent theme in American collective unconscious, which can be traced back to John Winthrop, Thomas Jefferson, Edgar Allan Poe and Josiah Strong. In this sense, the city is the Other, alien and mysteriously dangerous, an unreadable text and somehow always beyond final comprehension (Campbell and Kean, 1997, p.170). On the contrary, the American city can also be read from the perspective of Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams or Paul Auster who suggest an image of the city, sophisticated, chaotic but again promising a journey into the self. In this respect, the city is a gathering of meanings in which people invest their interpretations and seek to create their own histories and therefore resembles a text, it is "an inscription of man in space" (162). The relationship of the flaneur to the city is a narrative relation regarding the city as a text that can be encoded and decoded (Savage, 2000, p.49). The discussion of the textuality of space will inevitably lead us to discuss its intertextuality considering the spatial constructions and the network of social relations produced by these constructions. Space becomes redescribed not as a dead, inert thing or object but as organic and fluid; it flows and collides with other spaces (Merryfield, 2000, p.171). Moreover, the textual construction of the urban spaces enables us to see the linguistic attributions of the city. The meaning in the city is always deferred and one can never attain the ultimate meaning. And space, like language, is fragmented and compartmentalized. Gilles Deleuze (1987) states that "*dwelling, getting around, working, playing: life is spatially and socially segmented. The house is segmented according to its rooms' assigned purposes; streets, according to the order of the city* (208). As Henry Lefebvre sees it, "*spatial fragmentation and conceptual dislocation serves distinctively to ideological purposes. Separation ensures consent, perpetuates misunderstanding and it reproduces the status quo*" (qtd in Merryfield, 2000, p.171). Therefore, the production and consumption of space will certainly give away the discursive practices and the dominant

ideology, which are definitely effective in building up the city and its culture.

Hence, understanding the construction of urban spaces in America necessitates considering the mechanisms of industrialism and capitalism. Once established nearby the factories and railroads, the cities in America provided many immigrants with an opportunity to produce not only material goods but also their individual spaces. The streets, buildings, bridges, squares and monuments were designed to commemorate a special historical or a cultural characteristic of the urban people. Nevertheless, postwar American cities were built around consumption and urban spaces were an active agent in the expansion and reproduction of capitalism (Merryfield, 2000, p.173). Where people met, celebrated or protested has now become where they consume. Today's American cities are the consumption hinterlands of the shopping malls and far from their historicity or authenticity, the shopping malls characterize the cultural universe of American urbanity. Jean Baudrillard (1994), in his Simulacra and Simulations, resembles shopping malls to "*a giant montage factory*", which "*cannot be separated from the … whole town as a total functional screen of activities… The hypermarket is already beyond the factory and traditional institutions of capital, the model of all future forms of controlled socialization…The hypermarket is the expression of a whole lifestyle in which not only the country but the town as well have disappeared to make room for "the metro area" – a completely delimited functional urban zoning… But the role of the hypermarket goes far beyond "consumption," and the objects no longer have a specific reality there: what is primary is their serial, circular, spectacular arrangement - the future model of social relations*" (77).

Chris Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (2003) argue that social changes over the course of centuries "gave rise to gendered spatial divisions between domestic and public spheres. The gendered nature of small scale domestic units of production that characterized early industrialization gave way to a redefinition of men's and women's relationship to the public and the private" (21). Tim Edwards (2004) further argues that "at the heart of the crisis in masculinity is a problem

with the reconciliation of the private and the public, the intimate and the impersonal, the emotional and the rational" (17). The mall, as the chief signifier of late capitalist consumer culture, has been dispersed into the other urban spaces diminishing all worn out boundaries between the public and the private realms. Working places, for example, where men used to find the ultimate meaning of their existence have become standardized and commodified already. Working places in the U.S., particularly office spaces, have substantiated the men's imprisonment in their new submissive roles let alone celebrating their liberation through labor. The narrator's office in *Fight Club* proves to be a perfect example of cubicle islands of postmodern offices:

> "*It is not like I have a window at work. All the outside walls are floor to ceiling glass. Everything where I work is floor to ceiling glass. Everything is vertical blinds. Everything is industrial low pile gray carpet spotted with little tombstone monuments where the PCs plug into the network. Everything is a maze of cubicles boxed in with fences of upholstered plywoods*" (137).

The men's escape into television, sports and recreational weekends, then, may be interpreted as a way "*to die and to be reborn, to be destroyed and be saved*" (Palahniuk, Non-fiction, 40). Nevertheless, standardization and commodification of working places are completed with the same organizational philosophy dominating the living places. Cut off from the real productive activities, men in the U.S. were urged to compensate their relatively powerless positions in the outside world with the DIY chores at home. What they accomplished as a result was the ikeanization of their homes, turning their living places into the microcosms of consumption heavens. In *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland resembles shopping malls to houses, or vice versa:

> "*It happened this way: he was driving home in California on Interstate 10 and passing by a shopping mall outside of Phoenix. He was thinking about the vast, arrogant block forms of shopping mall architecture and how they make as*

little visual sense in the landscape as nuclear cooling towers. He then drove past a yuppie housing development – one of those new strange developments with hundreds of blockish, equally senseless and enormous coral pink houses, all of them with an inch of space in between and located about three feet from the highway. And Otis got to thinking: Hey these are not houses at all, these are malls in disguise" (71).

Confused by the omnipresence of the depthless and catastrophic consumer culture, like the other lost generations preceding them, the members of the Generation X are forced to escape into spacelessnes and meaninglessness, into the desert of the real.

"We live small lives on the periphery: we are marginalized and there is a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now… Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines. Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper, the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video on Saturday night was enough. But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, much better now" (11).

Conclusion

The opening sentence of *American Psycho* greets the reader with a quotation from Dante's <u>Divine Comedy</u> "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" and the closing remark is far more puzzling "This is no exit". The city in the millennial American culture has been often pictured in similar ways both in popular culture and contemporary literature. The city image in American culture has changed a great deal in accordance with the changing structure of capitalist mode of productions and the social relations constructed with and by the spatial

organizations. Alienation of man to his space and environment could only be a part of a larger alienation which is inherent in capitalist society and in man's exploitation of man (Lefebvrei 2002, p.232). The culture of capitalism had created fixed space-dependent subject positions and gender roles. However, in the late capitalist culture, space and gender are not produced but simulated on flexible, contingent, unstable and anonymous subject positions (Diken, Laustsen, Nefes, 2003, p.267). The operations of power are especially evident in gendered spaces which are inherently hierarchical and encode both freedoms and restrictions in the city (Kennedy, 2000, p.11). Therefore, gender roles, and masculinity in particular, in late capitalist culture merge chaos with order and excessive consumption with restrictive production. In this respect, construction of masculinity and its relation to space have never been neutral but they always have political and ideological entailments which necessarily produce implosive violence and inequality that primarily affect and damage men and their relations with other gendered identities

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