Violence in American Popular Culture: The Myth of the Vigilante in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Sam Ismail’s *Mr. Robot*

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Abstract

Popular culture presents new dimensions for cultural and social studies through several artistic products. Different themes and symbols in literature and movie studies provide fresh materials for cultural studies and literary criticism. The issue of violence in American popular culture, in particular, is depicted in many artistic works of fiction. This article focuses on the depiction of violence in Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* (1996) and Sam Ismail’s television series *Mr. Robot* (2015). More specifically, it analyzes the depiction of violence in these two narratives through the myth of the vigilante, a theory developed by the American critic John Cawelti. To reach its final results, this article attempts first to investigate the reasons and origins of violence as caused by postmodern conditions. Second, it draws a conclusion on the development of violence in American popular culture by studying the evolution of the myth of the vigilante from *Fight Club* to *Mr. Robot.*

Keywords: Chuck Palahniuk, Fight Club, Mr. Robot, myth, Sam Ismail

Introduction

Popular culture is primarily defined as an alternative form of artistic and cultural expression. New mores, values, and attitudes have come to establish a modern Western culture, characterized by dominant new discourses and innovative personal skills. Popular culture emerged as a new phenomenon following the process of the industrial revolution, which makes Britain the first nation to witness its birth. However, it is in America that this phenomenon matures into a cultural and historical concept (Storey, 2009). Many historians, sociologists, and academic critics have attempted to define this dynamic phenomenon and structure it according to pragmatic theories. For instance, Raymond Williams describes it as a “social project” whereby the day-to-day life experiences, including religion, festivities, rituals, music, and literature, are combined with intellectual practices and artistic activities to give way to a genuine production of meaning (Williams, 1976). Ergo, this production of meaning would emanate as a dominant phenomenon in the arena of cultural diversification, producing as such the new discourse of popular culture.

In the case of American Culture, Cawelti, (1976) sees popular culture as an outlet for social transformation and ethnical expression. Indeed, popular culture grew as a force to fulfill the emotional and psychological needs of different and particular sub-societies. Thus, it became a manifestation of various artistic and social experiences. This manifestation has resulted in two crucial points in the field of cultural studies. First, the distinction between high culture and common culture became fiercely stressed as the former became a representation of highbrow or canonical art while the latter became identified as the voice of the ‘common’ people. Cawelti, (1976) claims that “high art is commonly treated as aesthetic structure or individual vision; the popular arts are studied as social and psychological data” (p. 258). Second, it has entailed a deficit of theoretical structures and schools of criticism that could properly frame such an exploding cultural force. Indeed, popular culture’s acceptance of all artistic expressions engendered a lack of a specific set of theories to critically assess its content. Thankfully, modern theorists and academics are innovating new ways to address popular culture materials critically.

Cawelti (1976), one of the pioneers in establishing academic respectability to the study of popular culture, approaches it through a process he calls formula. He considers this approach as a revolutionary theoretical framework, explicitly dedicated to popular culture studies. Mainly, formula is the study of different and collective literary patterns. The focus is on particular cultural imageries and symbols and the way they are fitted, conventionally, and innovatively, into various stories. In other words, the recurrence of specific cultural imageries, such as symbols and themes in different stories leads to the formation of literary patterns. Thus, the study of these literary constellations allows the interpretation of their cultural significance. Accordingly, this article analyzes the reoccurrence of violence through the myth of the vigilante in two narratives to identify its cultural significance in American popular culture. Moreover, formula entails a process of comparison between different artistic productions, which adequately fits the aim of this article in comparing the literary output of Chuck Palahniuk Fight Club (1996) and the dramatic thriller of Sam Ismail Mr. Robot (2015).

The concept of violence in American popular culture takes a greater magnitude than it has been credited in the academic field. The depiction of violence in popular cultural media has
Violence in American Popular Culture: The Myth of the Vigilante

initially treated topics such as Native American genocides, slavery, or gender violence. Moreover, Cawelti, (1975) confirms that fictional violence has wrongly been treated as a reaction to a more elaborate “moral and dramatic context” (p. 523). As a result, many scientific studies focus, almost exclusively, on the effects fictional violence has on crime and aggression rates. While this assumption could not entirely be neglected, the phenomenon of violence in fiction should also be studied as a dimension of several contextual patterns that provide “meaning and significance” to this phenomenon (Cawelti, 1974, p. 524). Accordingly, this article attempts at tracing the meaning and significance of violence from two different popular cultural artifacts. To that end, it first inquires: From what circumstances does this violence emanate and originate? Second, what does the myth of the vigilante reveal about the nature and evolution of violence in American popular culture?

Summaries

_Fight Club_ (1996), written by Chuck Palahniuk, begins its unusual tale with a nameless narrator held hostage with a gun in his mouth, at the top of a building rigged with explosives. A flashback is then needed to unfold the events. The narrator is the representation of the postmodern man, controlled by the materials he purchases and dominated by order of consumerism. Insomnia, disillusionment, powerlessness, and confusion are all part of the daily routine of the narrator. “Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 02). Indeed, the only ‘comfort’ he receives from this postmodern labyrinth is his fake testimonies at testicular cancer groups, which provide him with few moments of human contact and ‘sincere’ emotions. He eventually slips into a world of insanity and develops a mental illness named Schizophrenia. His fictional alter-ego, Tyler Durden, would now control the events that would culminate to mass destruction. Support groups would no longer be sufficient to fill the void the narrator experiences. Thus, a primitive sense of violence is needed to awaken him both figuratively and literally from his numbness. A fight club is then born to generate a real experience and allow men to touch body and soul. More importantly, a project would start taking form under the title _Project Mayhem_ which aims at reorganizing the social and economic structure in American society.

Mr. Robot is an American drama television series created by Sam Ismail and composed by Mac Quayle. A USA Network production of four seasons, it stars Rami Malek as Elliot Alderson and Christian Slater as “Mr. Robot.” The plot revolves around Elliot, a young man living in New York and a cyber security engineer at a company called Allsafe. His life is poisoned by paranoia and delusion as he continually struggles with social anxiety, identity disorder, and clinical depression. His only connection with people is established through his hacking of their personal and most intimate life details. As a result, he eventually develops schizophrenia, and unconsciously leads a double life. Elliot is then recruited by an anarchist known as “Mr. Robot,” who turns out to be his alter-ego and the ghost of his late father, to join a group of activists called “F society.” This group aims to start a revolution by destroying the financial data of E Corp, the largest conglomerate in the world.

1. The Myth of the Vigilante

Cawelti places his analysis of violence on one intriguing issue: the moral necessity of violence in American popular culture. Indeed, Americans’ obsession with violence is historical and cultural
in origin and ambiguous in nature. This obsession is mostly manifested in the public demand of books, movies, and television programs in which violence is a central theme. Cawelti, (1974) points to the “puzzling” fact that the Americans, though obsessed with violence, have always thought of themselves as a “non-violent and law-abiding people” (p.524). Indeed, it is implemented in the American mind that any use of violence could only serve the general well-being of the nation. Cawelti, (1974) confirms that to build America, “a certain degree of violence and crime was not only permissible but morally necessary” (p. 525). Thus, violence as a necessary evil is a conceptual part of a historical and cultural justification by which the nation has conducted its policies and built its aesthetic structure. To that end, Cawelti, (1974) deems necessary to study violence – as portrayed in artistic and literary formulas, not as a source of a dramatic and psychological exhibition of imitative violence, but as a reflection of “fundamental cultural attitudes” (p. 525).

Cawelti, (1974) starts his analysis in the 1960s, when the American cultural, economic, and social structures were drastically and radically changing. First, he asserts that the issue of violence and its depiction in media outlets has been “ambiguous” since the inter-war years. Thus, he attempts at finding a new approach to “gain some new insights into the significance of this complex phenomenon” (p. 523). He finally concludes his investigation by categorizing five different literary formulas in which violence plays a central theme. The five formulas are studied in the following genres: the western, the hard-boiled detective story, the gangster saga, and the police melodrama. Cawelti, (1974) claims that these genres do not represent the totality of American popular culture. However, they are the most popular genres in which violence is extensively promoted. This article extends his scope of research to include the genres of satire and television drama thrillers. Indeed, as the narrative of Fight Club is classified as a satirical novel and the television series Mr. Robot as a drama thriller, violence, and its presence as a moral necessity, is a dominant theme in these genres, which seem to be of a “compelling interest” to the audience.

Cawelti, (1974) summarizes five myths of violence in American popular culture: the myth of “Crime Does Not Pay,” the myth of “Equality through Violence,” the myth of the “Hard-boiled Hero and His Code,” the myth of the “The Vigilante, and the myth of “Regeneration through Violence.” The myth of the vigilante is of particular interest to this article. According to Cawelti, (1974) vigilantism is part of the American “moral and political tradition” (p. 523). Indeed, as part of the self-governing discourse and as a fundamental right, the American must take justice into his own hands when the official institutions fail him.

Moreover, Cawelti traces the origins of this myth to historical and social events in the nineteenth century and early twentieth-century America. Indeed, different mob actions such as mob organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or the mafia, which practiced racial and social injustices, constituted a “collective phenomenon” of violence. However, this vigilantism mainly characterizes the twentieth and twenty-first century, as Cawelti, (1974) clearly states: “in recent years, the vigilante myth has seemingly become the most pervasive pattern of the literature of violence” (p. 533). This myth is infiltrating contemporary action movies, westerns, and gangster films. Cawelti exemplifies this myth by Francis Ford Coppola’s famous The Godfather (1972) with the Corleone
family facing a corrupt American social system and taking justice into their own hands (Cawelti, 1974).

2. Sourcing Violence in American Popular Culture

In an attempt to find the source of violence as portrayed in *Fight Club* and *Mr. Robot*, this article considers the circumstances and behaviors of the protagonists in both narratives. Indeed, both the unnamed narrator and Elliot are the vigilantes that portray a new kind of violence that is continuously infiltrating the scenes of popular culture. To that end, this article explores the source of their destruction in three-dimensional sides: (1) Hyperrealism, Alienation, and Intimacy, (2) The Absent Father Complex, and (3) The Rise of the New Enemy.

2.1. Hyperrealism, Alienation, and Intimacy

The first characteristic in the myth of the vigilante is, according to Cawelti, the vigilante’s loneliness and alienation from society (Cawelti, 1974). The vigilante is so overwhelmed by the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the community’s corruption that he secludes himself in a safe space. The sense and state of social alienation is a common condition that perpetuates the plots of many popular cultural fictions. One of the main reasons behind this perpetuation is what Baudrillard calls “hyperreality” in his essay “The Ecstasy of Communication.” He describes the “obscenity” of modern times as an amalgamation of “overexposure.” Moreover, he explains how technological advancements and scientific inventions have ushered the world into a new state “hyperrealism of simulation” (Baudrillard, 1987, as cited in Foster, 1987), where every minimal human function and sensibility is exposed and trivialized.

The “overexposure” of intimacy has rendered the postmodern man confined in a secluded space. Indeed, the irony of the issue lies in the fact that many technological developments have the factual purpose of bringing people closer. Nevertheless, they only seem to draw man into isolation, alienation, and a state of utter disconnection. Baudrillard explains this even further by focusing on the psychological effects of this hyperrealism. Indeed, the loss of the private space, the estrangement from the real, and the instantaneity of information have transformed man from the player on a stage to a small screen reflecting different networks (Baudrillard, 1987, as cited in Foster, 1987). Baudrillard, (1987) describes this issue as the pathos of communication. He explains it as a “nonreflecting surface” or a “passive screen” where people no longer “project” all of their psychological dimensions with all its “jealousies, envies, fantasies, desires, loss, mourning, fear, and frustration” in their interactions (p. 127).

The plot of *Fight Club* presents a cynical narrator who suffers from a profound social alienation, which forces him into despair and loneliness. This alienation is the result of a complete invasion of the intimate and personal space. Indeed, his apartment is invaded by his consumerist habits. His home, what is supposed to be a comfortable and safe space, is overexposed to postmodern trivialities and overwhelming advertisement schemes:

And I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.
We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. Mine fell fifteen stories, burning, into a fountain. We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper. Mine are confetti. (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 23)

The narrator admits to being a “slave” to an unauthentic mass production company of furniture. This conglomerate company invades even people’s bathrooms, the most private and intimate place where people used to “project” their sexual desires in isolation. Moreover, the uniqueness of personal taste is eradicated as the same products are enforced on everyone. This invasion, among else, causes the narrator to dwell into profound insomnia.

The narrative of *Fight Club* demonstrates a resistance to the overwhelming feeling of alienation by helplessly searching a human connection. The support groups for testicular cancer the narrator attends are a clear indication of his thirst for love and belongingness. The novel depicts the narrator’s first human contact through his fake testimonies at a testicular cancer support-group. This group relies on therapeutic crying to exteriorize the hopelessness that results from this disease: “I've been coming here every week for two years, and every week Bob wraps his arms around me, and I cry” (Palahniuk 1996, p. 4). The physical contact with Bob, or Big Bob, as the narrator refers to him, represents a safe space to release the deep feelings of isolation and loneliness he experiences daily. The overwhelming sense of despair leaves the narrator stuck in a swirl of a meaningless void. This fake therapy would prove to be useless and ineffective as the only solution to break the chain of slavery would be physical violence.

*Mr. Robot* depicts the same feelings of overwhelming powerlessness in the face of postmodern hyperreality. Indeed, the severity of hyperreality is augmented compared to the narrative of *Fight Club*. As a result, the huge effect is more devastating in a more modern context. Elliot is presented as an antisocial young man who is severely depressed from his hypermodern reality. When the first season comes to an end, Elliot realizes that Mr. Robot is a creation of his mind. This situation leaves him perplexed and shocked. Moreover, this revelation, delivered by his alter ego himself, reveals the extent of his disillusionment over the perception of reality:

> Is any of it real? I mean look at this. Look at it! A world built on fantasy. Synthetic emotions in the form of pills, psychological warfare in the form of advertising, mind-altering chemicals in the form of food, brainwashing seminars in the form of media, controlled isolated bubbles in the form of social networks. Real?! You wanna talk about reality? We haven’t lived in anything remotely close to it since the turn of the century. (Ismail, 2015)

This passage demonstrates how fake reality is perpetuated in every part of the characters’ lives. From emotions, freedom of purchase, appetite, the right to information, and the right of solitude, every micro element is invaded by technological advancements and modern inventions. Thus, Elliot becomes a “non-reflecting surface,” unable to control his own decisions or choices. This overwhelming sense of powerlessness and loneliness is sedated by the use of drugs, sobs and hacking people’s personal lives.
Much like the narrator, Elliot attempts to resist this hyperreality by following intensive sessions of personal therapy. These sessions allow him to build a close bond with his therapist Krista. Though most of his thoughts remain unvoiced for a long time, he is finally able to open up to her until she diagnoses his schizophrenia in the third season. This relationship is eventually jeopardized by Elliot when he hacks her e-mails, financial records, and every personal detail in her life. He confesses to her in one of his sessions:

I sometimes watch you on your webcam. You cry sometimes, just like me, because you’re lonely. I don’t just hack you Krista, I hack everyone; my friends, coworkers. But I’ve helped a lot of people. I want a way out of loneliness, just like you” (Ismail, 2015).

This powerful passage invokes a critical point in the development of the resistance to hyperreality from the narrative Fight Club to that of Mr. Robot. Indeed, the opposing party becomes an active agent in the violation of people’s private space. Elliot, though profoundly affected by the loss of meaning due to the intrusive technological advancements, is himself a participant in the invasion of people’s intimacy, using his technical and computer skills. Finally, much like the case of the narrator in Fight Club, Elliot’s only “way out of loneliness” is resumed through creating something out of chaos.

2.2. The Absent Father Complex

Besides the psychological component of isolation and intimacy, the myth of the vigilante includes the personal side of family love and support. Cawelti, (1974) suggests that an act of injustice to a close relative might engender a violent reaction from the vigilante, a case exemplified by Mario Puzo’s The Godfather (1969). In other words, when the judicial system fails to rectify or protect this relative, the vigilante resorts to violence to become the law that avenges the wrongdoing (Cawelti, 1974). Nevertheless, the formula of this component is continuously changing in modern narratives, especially when it comes to the father and son relationship. Indeed, the vigilante’s violence is no longer restrictively activated by an injury done to his father. In a postmodern world where human emotions are synthesized and replaced by materials, most vigilantes are depicted as fatherless or suffering from an emotional void in their relationship with their father. Thus, the vigilante resorts to violence as a coping mechanism to fill this void and rectify his absence.

From a psychoanalytical approach, the father represents a “symbolic order,” and his absence causes a deficit in the progress of the child’s infantile state (Timmer, 2010). In his famous book The Culture of Narcissism, Lasch, (1979) confirms that the absence of the father has become a “crucial feature of the American family” (p. 175). Thus, he considers it to be the new typical for the American family situation. As a result, around the turn of the millennium, the theme of the absent father and its repercussions became widely prevalent in popular fiction. Timmer believes that this issue creates a “masculinity crisis” and eventually leads to severe problems in behavioral patterns and identity construction (Timmer, 2010).

The narrative of Fight Club deals with the father/son dilemma with a profound depth as the narrator suffers from a severe father complex. Fatherly figures are not portrayed in the novel. Yet,
the impact of their absence is felt on the character’s behavior. This absence creates a life-changing void. Indeed, the narrator repeatedly stresses this absence in his life:

Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise.

What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women. My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him long distance and said, now what? My dad didn't know. When I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn't know, so he said, get married. (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 29)

The narrator’s father has a six years limit to his definition of a family. His “long distance” almost meaningless phone conversations where he presents no valuable life-altering answers create an unbearable void for the narrator. The latter finally reaches the only conclusion that seems to appease his pain: “If you’re male, and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And sometimes you find your father in your career” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 122). The father is elevated to the statues of God in America, omnipotent with abstract power but absent in actual figure. As a result, his absence demeans him to a professional career. Substituting a father by profession proves necessary in a postmodern world devoid of fatherly emotions. Thus, a personal and sensible bond is replaced by a profitable exchange of service. As a result, the narrator, through his alter ego, builds a fatherly figure from his multiple small-job careers. He glorifies his acts of vandalism and violence in his working hours as a social service and revenge against the tyrants of the world. The self-congratulatory speeches he delivers in front of people are a substitution of words of encouragement provided by a proud father.

Edward Alderson was a software engineer at E Corp. He contracted leukemia while working on a project for his company, one of many employees to do so, including Angela Moss’ mother, Elliot’s childhood friend. Elliot first presents his father in a fictional story as an abusive and absent father. Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses, he begins to remember how his father was very loving and supportive. This positive memory was suppressed by the shock caused by Edwards’s death. Thus, Elliot creates a negative image to cope with his devastating loss. Therefore, the first two seasons of the series could be understood as an internal psychological battle to deal with the loss of his father.

Elliot’s relationship with the memory of his father reveals two critical points. First, Elliot exemplifies Cawelti’s retribution through violence in the myth of the vigilante. Indeed, his hatred and revenge against E Corp, or Evil Corp, as he likes to call it, could be justified by what has happened to his father. Elliot becomes a vigilante hero, starting a ‘violent’ revolution to retaliate his father’s death. Second, the absence of his father throughout his life causes a complete meltdown to his mental state. Indeed, the second season reveals that Mr. Robot, Elliot’s alter ego is, in fact, his late father. When Mr. Robot convinces him to carry on his mission at F Society, Elliot remains
reluctant but does not want to lose contact with him. The effect of this absence causes him to dwell in more violence and destruction as he attempts to keep his father present in his life.

The theme of the absent father is displayed in many popular cultural works, especially works that portray vigilantism in the postmodern world. The origins of the vigilante and the relationships that construct his identity shape his adult life and play a decisive role in the way he handles his affairs. Examples such as the Batman franchise (1989 – 2016), Spider-Man (1994 – 2019), or Dexter (2006 – 13) depict the importance of having the shadow of the father in the vigilante’s life and how his absence is an essential factor in his refuge towards violence.

2.3. The Rise of the New Enemy

Cawelti confirms that the vigilante “dwells” on the injustices and corruption of society (Cawelti, 1974, p. 455). Indeed, his use of violence is his last resort in the face of a failing legal and social process. His reaction implies the existence of an enemy that has caused this injustice and has disrupted the vigilante’s course of life. Previous narratives in popular culture have depicted the enemy as an overpowered tyrant who uses his connections to serve his interests at the expense of others. Westerns, for instance, represent a classical type of enemy (usually a Native-American) who violates the rights of a hardworking American. The latter responds aggressively only when violence becomes his last resort and solution to rectify his situation.

Nevertheless, popular cultural works are presenting a new kind of enemy, different from the classical one, though more powerful and damaging than him. Following the postmodern maze, most fictional works now depict capitalism as the new enemy the vigilante has to face. The concept of poverty in American fiction has always been a common theme whereby a poor hero overcomes his miserable conditions through hard work and becomes a model of an entrepreneur. Nevertheless, the formula of capitalism as it is portrayed in popular culture is continuously developing. Though this enemy is abstract, it has several enacting agents that concretize its evil and execute its injustices, from business tycoons and corporations to conglomerate companies that enforce a culture of consumerism. Indeed, narratives such as Erin Brockovich (2000), Everything’s Gone Green (2006), and The Pursuit of Happiness (2006) all demonstrate how the growing power of capitalism affects and shapes the protagonists lives.

*Fight Club* exposes the original façade of capitalism by portraying its dangerous effect of sedative consumerism. The narrator is presented as an alienated loner who despises his job and finds no solace in his surroundings. He attempts to fill his emotional void by uncontrollably purchasing unneeded commodities:

> You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 23)
The narrator is trapped in a modern form of slavery, whereby he is sedated from postmodern depression through materials. Moreover, the ideology of capitalism employs a strong strategy to push the postmodern human into needlessly buying more. Indeed, advertisement plays a dominant role in using and manipulating him into purchasing useless items. As Singh, (2018) puts it: “the power of advertising is such that it can create a demand where none exists, of a commodity which is not needed” (p. 206). Therefore, the narrator dwells even more into his depressive stagnation as these commodities represent only a temporary remedy to more invasive disease.

The narrative of *Fight Club* carries an anti-capitalist and an anti-consumerist agenda through its vigilante Tyler Durden. Tyler’s mission is to save the narrator from his state of slavery and begins by taking him out of his comfort zone. He makes him move out from his condo to an abandoned building with no luxurious commodities. Moreover, the experience of the fight club Tyler creates provides an opportunity of absolution for the narrator. Indeed, in a world of virtual reality, where he is desensitized from basic emotions, physical pain allows him to live a real experience. “You're not how much money you've got in the bank” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 92). Indeed, the fight club becomes a nest where men could freely expose their natural selves by breaking the chains of consumerist enslavement.

More importantly, the cinematographic adaptation of the novel realized by David Fincher in 1999 pushes the anti-capitalist agenda even further. Indeed, Tyler’s ultimate goal as a postmodern vigilante is to bring down a major credit company. He plants hand-made bombs made out of soap to achieve a perfect demolition of the building. Erasing people’s credit records could release them from the chains imposed on them and give them a new fresh start. The meaning and symbolism of his action lie in his outmost desire to cleanse the world from the evils of capitalism, a mission that could only be achieved through the use of violent chaos. Pain, fear, disruption, and loss are all emotions that should not be buried and repressed by the consumerist culture. Tyler’s purpose is to awaken the world from a comfortable illusion and make it face the reality that the end of capitalism does not necessarily mean the end of life.

*Mr. Robot* revolves around Elliot’s mission to save himself and the world from the tyrants of capitalism. The disillusionment he suffers from is partly caused by the consumerist culture he is forced to experience. Though he does not indulge in buying to ease his pain, he is, nonetheless, psychologically and emotionally affected by the outcome of this culture. When his psychiatrist asks him what is it about this society that disappoints him so much, he responds:

Oh, I don’t know. Is it that we collectively thought that Steve Jobs was a great man, even though we knew that he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it’s that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit. The world itself is just one big hoax… Or is it that we voted for this? Not with our rigged elections, but with our things, our property, our money. I’m not saying anything new. We all know why we do this, not because Hunger Games books make us happy, but because we wanna be sedated, because it’s painful not to pretend, because we’re cowards. (Ismail, 2015)
Elliot prophesizes his diagnosis of the sickening society and evokes the agencies that pass their capitalist agendas at the expense of others. He exposes the consumerist culture with all its tycoons that enact their mission to control the world by controlling people’s minds. Elliot confirms that even the political system is not maintained by the “rigged” electoral process but by the consumerist culture. Therefore, he makes it his mission to cleanse the world for the evils of consumerism and save it from pretending, cowardice, and dullness. Through his alter-ego Mr. Robot, Elliot creates and leads a cyber-terrorist group called F Society. As Elliot plans to take down E Corp, which controls almost every financial transaction and infiltrates people’s most personal details, he hopes to free the minds and give the people their lost power.

3. The Evolution of Violence in American Popular Culture

The plot of Fight Club depicts a narcissist anarchist who wants to rebuild the world through chaos and violence. Tyler is subpoenaed whenever the narrator falls asleep, and starts projecting whatever he lacks or is afraid to express. Indeed, Tyler saves the narrator from his profound alienation and amends his feelings of loss and abandonment caused by his absent father. Moreover, he awakens him from his state of complete submission to consumerism by creating a fight club, an experience that would regenerate the meaning of life for the narrator. More importantly, Tyler develops a life purpose when his fight club develops into Project Mayhem. Thus, a personal struggle becomes a vigilante mission to avenge humanity who suffers from hypermodern syndromes. The resort to violence is the ultimate solution by bombing and destroying cultural and financial records. This formula demonstrates the loss of faith in more peaceful ways to save the human condition, such as humanism or democracy.

Elliot Alderson describes himself as a regular “cyber security engineer” by day and a “vigilante hacker” by night. Indeed, Elliot executes a nightly process of hacking criminals and pedophiles to expose them to the police. He considers this at a good deed and an attempt to cleanse society from its evil waste. These good deeds, however, do not heal Elliot from his social alienation, abandonment issues, or the disconnected reality where his life is controlled by virtual illusions. Like Tyler, his alter-ego provides him a deeper purpose to give back meaning to his life. Project Mayhem in Fight Club is very similar to F Society in wanting to take down conglomerates that treat humans as disposable objects in their quest for profit. Mr. Robot’s ultimate goal is to execute the “single biggest incident in wealth redistribution in history” (Ismail, 2015) and free the human race from the crushing banality. Nevertheless, the process of demolition is different from that of Fight Club.

The evolution of the myth of vigilante from the narrative of Fight Club to that of Mr. Robot reveals a new fascination about the concept of violence. Indeed, while the similarities between the narrator and Elliot in regards to vigilantism are numerous, the difference is in the way they both carry their war against the postmodern world. Evidently, in Fight Club, physical violence seems to be the only salvaging mean to save the human race. In other words, a primitive sense of force is needed to awaken the world both figuratively and literally from its fatal numbness. As violence in America is best perceived as a “moral necessity,” American popular culture, in all its different forms, has always shown a great interest in the theme of destroying to rebuild anew. Violence is, admittedly, needed to restore the world on a fairer basis and cleanse it from the inevitable injustices...
inflicted by the rapid human progress. Examples such as *V for Vendetta* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) demonstrate how physical violence is not only seen as a moral necessity but also as the last hope to reset a corrupt world.

*Mr. Robot* presents a development in the myth of the vigilante, whereby a new frontier hero explores the mysterious world of the Web. Indeed, Elliot and his alter-ego unleash a more modern type of war and use a new kind of cyber terrorism and digital violence. This cyber revolution would result in actual physical abuse once the people are awakened. McLure, (2000) calls this millennial vigilante the “e-frontier” and states: “the e-frontier can be a harsh and even dangerous territory, a perfect breeding ground for both outlaws and vigilantes” (p. 416). Indeed, this new cyber vigilante is more up to date with the requirements of the postmodern world. His destiny is to save the world from virtual reality using the same technological and digital techniques that created it in the first place. *Mr. Robot* exemplifies the corruption of the world by mentioning real events that occur in American history such as the presidential election of Donald Trump, the Facebook scandal of leaked information, and the false privacy of social media. Moreover, Elliot’s character could have been inspired by real people who have attempted to break the domesticity of people, such as the American whistleblower Edward Snowden. Other narratives such as *The Matrix* (1999 – 2003) and *Person of Interest* (2001) demonstrate the same cyber vigilantism in an attempt to save the depressed and meaningless world.

**Conclusion**
The concept of violence in American popular culture has witnessed a development in both structure and content. This article has explored this concept through the myth of the vigilante in two selected narratives; *Fight Club* (1999) by Chuck Palahniuk and *Mr. Robot* (2015) by Sam Ismail. Though the origins of violence in American fiction are much more numerous and elaborate, this article has selected the three crucial conditions of hyperreality and alienation, the absent father, and the rise of modern consumerism as the new enemy. Moreover, the evolution of vigilantism, as depicted in both narratives, shows an interesting development in the concept of violence from physical anarchy and chaos to a more structured, up to date and elaborates cyber and digital violence.

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