



Introduction

1

In the famous “Kitchen Debate” with Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, the then Vice President of the United States Richard Nixon triumphantly offered the American standard of living with a string of figures: 44 million families in America own 56 million cars, 50 million television sets, 143 million radio sets, and... 31 million of those families own their own homes (Nixon 280). Nixon, in fact, was not the first to capitalize on consumption to prove the superiority of the West. Two decades earlier, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt had also said something to the effect that if he were to give one book to the Soviets to tell them about the West, it would be the *Sears Catalog* (Glickman 8). In every sense it is indisputable that the United States of America emerged from World War II not only as a military superpower but as a nation of unparalleled affluence. As Howard Temperley remarks, “It was not a case of guns or butter but of guns *and* butter along with nylon stockings, lipstick and other luxuries of a kind which Americans had been hard pressed to afford in the penurious Thirties” (70-71, italics mine). Though tongue in cheek, Kalle Lasn in his *Culture Jam* borrows Herbert Hoover’s 1928 Presidential campaign slogan to describe postwar material prosperity in America as a matter of fact: “This was the American dream: a sprinkler on every lawn, a car in every driveway, a chicken in every pot” (59). In *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America*, Robert Collins argues that the consumer culture “would so color American life for the remainder of the twentieth century that most Americans simply assumed that the consumer culture *was* America and vice versa” (qtd. in Cohen 440n,



2 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

italics in original). Along with the postwar economic prosperity, consumer culture begins to prevail as a powerful cultural ethos that would entail many social and cultural consequences.

The 1950s marked an important breakthrough in America's entering into a fully fledged consumer society, but it was the late 1970s and 1980s that witnessed an unprecedented swelling tide of mass consumption across the country, a tide that seems to be far from showing any sign of ebbing away as America has entered the new millennium. As Stuart Ewen observes, "From the vantage point of the 1970s, consumerism no longer represents a changing capitalist social order; it has become an idiom of daily life with a matter-of-fact status within American culture" (187). The widespread fever of consumption at the time can be recognized, for instance, in the then President Jimmy Carter's 1979 "Crisis of Confidence" speech, also famously known as the "malaise" speech. For Carter, the malaise was that too many Americans "now worship self-indulgence and consumption." Carter's moralistic concern aside, the fact of national indulgence in hedonistic consumption was evident. When Ronald Reagan came to presidency in 1980, he countered Carter's statements by declaring that he found "no national malaise" in America; he offered, instead, a vision of an America of strength and affluence. The Reagan era ushered in an economic boom that was to last for the remainder of the twentieth century and further fueled the consumption extravaganza. An example that is highly suggestive of the ethos of the consumerist America of the 1980s is Reagan's inaugural celebration which was described by reporters as "the biggest, most lavish, most expensive presidential welcome ever" and "a bacchanalia of the haves" (see Horowitz 246).

The period of the late 1970s and 1980s is particularly significant for understanding contemporary America as the most advanced modern consumer society in capitalist world. This is not just because mass consumption was taken to a new level during this period of time but more importantly, it is during this period that scholars in diverse academic disciplines, particularly those in historical, sociological, anthropological,



and cultural studies, began to consider consumption as an increasingly important area worthy of serious study, particularly in terms of theoretical elaboration and explication. French historian Fernand Braudel's *Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800* (1973), according to McCracken, is the first work of its kind that discusses the contribution of consumption to the development of the West and establishes the history of consumption as a legitimate field of study. Among the most influential writings that provide frameworks for the study of consumption are Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970), Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (1976), Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption* (1979), Chandra Mukerji's *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (1983), Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1985), Daniel Miller's *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), and Grant McCracken's *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (1988). Other important works from the same period include Eugene Linden's *Affluence and Discontent: The Anatomy of Consumer Societies* (1979), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980* (1983) edited by Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986) edited by Arjun Appadurai, William Leiss's *The Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities* (1988), and Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1989). The timing of this extensive and substantial scholarship and intellectual response suggests that Western consumer society in the late decades of the twentieth century begins to take on a decidedly new character. With the fruit of this scholarship that has been building robustly over the last two decades, it seems possible for us to



4 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

approach and try to understand contemporary Western consumer society with new perspectives and without taking it for granted.

This study is mainly concerned with exploring the character of contemporary American consumer society. Recognized as the most advanced consumer society, the United States is certainly more likely to embody most of the characteristics inherent in consumer societies in general and therefore would qualify as an apt object of study of exemplary significance. But as Glickman has pointed out, “to say America is a ‘consumer society’ is to say many things,” by which he means that consumer society is “an essentially contested concept” and consequently a wide range of issues emerge from the investigation. As he points out, there are the questions of “whether consumer society should be understood as a level of material wealth; an infrastructure (i.e., corporations, advertisers, public relations agents, department stores, mail order catalogs, and gourmet coffee bars); a mindset that includes both self-description and self-consciousness as consumers; an economy in which mass production and mass consumption predominate; a political tactic; or a national identity” (10-11). To investigate all these questions is obviously beyond the scope of the present study. I shall therefore propose a more specifically defined angle from which to approach the subject. To do so, however, it seems to me necessary to start by accounting for these frequently referred-to concepts in this area of study, such as “consumption,” “consumerism,” “consumer society,” and “consumer culture.” Although varying from each other in focus and parameters of their description, these terms are closely related to and practically inseparable from each other when it comes to actual discussion of the subject in question. By tracing their definitions in academic sources, I intend to clarify the changed meanings of these concepts in different contexts on the one hand and to explain on the other which of the definitions and perspectives my study will draw on.



2

As Raymond Williams advises, to understand the contemporary meanings of a key concept it is helpful to recover its history. In his *Keywords* (1976), Williams notes that the word “consume” dates back from the fourteenth century. Its original meaning is pejorative; it means to use up, to destroy, to devour, to waste, to exhaust. “Consumption” originally referred to any wasting disease before it was later used to describe pulmonary phthisis. The unfavorable sense of the word “consume” persisted until the late nineteenth century. It was only in mid-twentieth century that the word became neutral in its connotations and was given to general and popular use. The word “consumer” dates back from the sixteenth century, with similar pejorative connotations. From the mid-eighteenth century onward, the word “consumer” began to turn into a neutral term in descriptions of bourgeois political economy. As the market of industrial capitalism prevailed, “consumer” was increasingly seen in pairing with “producer,” as “consumption” with “production.” Raymond Williams points out that the replacement of “customer” by “consumer” is significant. Used since the fifteenth century, “customer” implies a buyer’s regular relationship with a supplier whereas “consumer” projects an abstract figure in an impersonal market. Unlike the customer whose needs are met by suppliers, the consumer inhabits a world that is saturated with modern commercial advertising that creates his needs. “Consumer as a predominant term,” Williams asserts, “was the creation of such manufacturers and their agents.” By delineating the history of the terms of “consumer” and “consumption,” Williams argues that the predominance of these terms is significant in that “it relates to a particular version of economic activity, derived from the character of a particular economic system” (Glickman 17-18). Evidently the “particularly economic system” that Williams refers to is none other than the modern consumer capitalism.

Consumerism, according to Alan Aldridge, can be defined in three broadly grouped categories. In the first category, consumerism may be defined as “a social movement” in which citizens campaign for consumer



6 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

rights. Here, consumerism is presented in a favourable sense, because it is seen as a means to empower consumers as citizens, to safeguard their rights, to protect them from abuses of power, and to provide them with objective information that will help them make rational choices. In the second category, consumerism may be defined as “a way of life.” This definition, as Aldridge points out, often implies “an excessive, even pathological preoccupation with consumption,” or in Lyon’s words which he quotes, “lifestyles geared to possession and acquisition.” The third definition is that, consumerism may be understood as “an ideology,” the purpose of which is supposed to legitimate modern capitalism (6).

Admittedly, the multiplicity of definition concerning this concept can be somewhat confusing but it is understandable. For one thing, the difference in perspective partly results from the varying concerns and inquiries of different academic disciplines. For another, it shows that this concept is by nature multi-faceted. It cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional entity. For this reason, the multiplicity of definition can be said to beg for a sort of across-the-board understanding of the concept. This being said, there is, however, a sense in which we can say that certain definitions and perspectives are more relevant and useful than the others, depending on the objectives set for a study. As far as the present study is concerned, I will choose to draw on the definitions and perspectives that are essentially sociologically and culturally based. In fact, recent scholarship on the study of consumption has shown the fruitfulness of conceiving and analyzing consumption in socio-cultural terms. Many scholars such as Alan Tomlinson, Mike Featherstone, Robert Bocoock, and Celia Lury have all argued that consumption, in the late twentieth-century form of capitalism, is not simply an economic but more of a social and cultural process. In their view, consumption now affects the ways in which people build up and maintain a sense of who they are, and of who they wish to be. Anthropologist Grant McCracken also maintains that consumption is now “less often defined as a small slice of the individual’s reality and more often approached as a range of diverse, systematic, embracing, and fully cultural phenomena,” “an entirely cultural enterprise” charged with “cultural



meaning” and serves “entirely cultural purposes” (xi-xii). When “consumption” is understood as involving the issue of the formation and maintenance of identities, for the understanding of “consumerism” I would go along with the second definition in Aldridge’s account, that is, a way of life that is obsessed with excessive consumption, because lifestyle and obsession with out-of-the-ordinary consumption has everything to do with seeking and maintaining desired identities.

As for “consumer society,” Goodwin observes in an overview essay that the prevailing definitions are represented by the cultural and sociological view. He quotes two definitions which he thinks give the general flavour. One is provided by Paul Ekins in his article entitled “A Sustainable Society: A Contradiction in Terms?” (1991): “A consumer society is one in which the possession and use of an increasing number and variety of goods and services is the principle cultural aspiration and the surest perceived route to personal happiness, social status, and national success.” The other definition comes from Jerome Segal’s article entitled “Alternatives to Mass Consumption” (1995): “A consumerist society makes the development of new consumer goods and the desire for them into a central dynamic of its socioeconomic life. An individual’s self-respect and social esteem are strongly tied to his level of consumption relative to others in the society. (Goodwin *et al* 2). In both definitions of the term, the social and cultural focus is clearly indicated by such phrases as “the principle cultural aspiration,” “a central dynamic of its socioeconomic life,” “social status,” “self-respect and social esteem.” It is in this same sense that Raymond Benton, Jr. sees consumerism as “the acceptance of consumption as the way to self-development, self-realization, and self-fulfillment” (Goodwin *et al* 3).

As frequently used as the terms introduced above is “consumer culture.” A mere glimpse of the titles of the works in this field of study would give the idea. For example, Celia Lury’s *Consumer Culture* (1996), Mike Featherstone’s *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991), Don Slater’s *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997), Martyn Lee’s *Consumer Culture Reborn* (1993), Frank Mort’s *Cultures of Consumption* (1996),



8 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

Rachel Bowlby's *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (1985). British sociologist Mike Featherstone has summarized three main perspectives on consumer culture:

First there is the view that consumer culture is premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production which has given rise to a vast accumulation of material culture in the form of consumer goods and sites for purchase and consumption. This has resulted in the growing salience of leisure and consumption activities in contemporary Western societies which, although greeted as leading to a greater egalitarianism and individual freedom by some, is regarded by others as increasing the capacity for ideological manipulation and “seductive” containment of the population from some alternative set of “better” social relations. Second, there is the more strictly sociological view that the satisfaction derived from goods relates to their socially structured access in a zero sum game in which satisfaction and status depend upon displaying and sustaining differences within conditions of inflation. The focus here is upon the different ways in which people use goods in order to create social bonds or distinctions. Third, there is the question of the emotional pleasures of consumption, the dreams and desires which become celebrated in consumer cultural imagery and particular sites of consumption, which variously generate direct bodily excitement and aesthetic pleasure. (*Consumer Culture* 13)

It is not difficult to identify in Featherstone's summary the overlapping with some of the perspectives in definitions of “consumerism” and “consumer society”. For instance, the first perspective actually covers two of the definitions of consumerism in Aldridge's summary, that is, as a way of life and as a manipulative ideology of capitalism. The second perspective in Featherstone's summary shares the same view of consumer society as is defined by Jerome Segal in that both emphasize the formation and maintenance of status through competitive consumption. The third



perspective can also be recognized in some of the cultural critics' vision of consumer society such as that of John Fiske's and of James Twitchell's. Despite the overlapping and, in some instances, the interchangeability of the use of such terms as consumerism, consumer culture and consumer society, these notions have different emphases and therefore produce nuances in meanings and implications in different contexts. In this study I shall use the term "consumer society" as a framing notion for the discourse on the grounds that the term seems to me more encompassing in perspectives and more accommodating as a site for all manner of consumption practices with their attendant ideologies. As Tim Edwards has articulated: "Consumption is clearly not simply a matter of style. It is also a matter of money and economics, social practice and social division, and political policy and political implication. In short, it is a matter of consumer *society*" (3, italics in original).

3

As has been explained above, my approach to the subject is to adopt the socio-cultural angles which necessarily emphasizes the examination of such issues as lifestyle and identity construction and maintenance in consumer society. Interestingly, the scholarly investigations along this line often result in oppositional judgments of and sometimes highly ambivalent attitudes towards consumer society. James Twitchell has ardently defended modern consumer society in a series of works on contemporary American commercial culture including *Adcult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in America* (1996), *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (1999), *Living It Up: Our Love Affair with Luxury* (2002), and *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld* (2004). Insisting that consumerism is our better judgment, he links the positive view of consumption with the meaning generated from the consumption of objects. He argues that it is often the consumer who adds some meaning to the products although the producer usually gets the credit and therefore consumption can be viewed as "an active and



10 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

creative imaginative endeavor” (*Lead Us into Temptation* 45). A somewhat different but nevertheless compatible view is advanced by Colin Campbell, who suggests that modern hedonistic consumption, which he distinguishes from traditional hedonism, stimulates imagination, dream and reverie (*The Romantic Ethic*). John Fiske also sees commodities as goods to think with and to speak with instead of just objects of economic exchange. Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s ideas on consumption regarded as a meaningful process involving creative tactics and strategies, Fiske contends that consumption has become an empowering practice for consumers to put up resistances to the power and dominant ideology of the commodity system. In a similar vein, Frank Mort argues that contemporary consumption represents for ordinary people a source of genuine pleasure and a valuable means of articulating a conception of the self and identity.

Compared with the celebratory accounts of consumption and consumer society, critiques seem to be more prominent in this area of study both in terms of the amount of literature and influence they have exerted. There is clearly an established critical tradition¹ and it can be traced back to Marx, whose discussion of commodity fetishism is seminal and extends to the work of Georg Lukacs and the Frankfurt School. The critical tradition also includes a number of influential social critics who wrote and published their works in post World War II America, such as John Kenneth Galbraith, Vance Packard, Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, Robert Bellah, and Stuart Ewen. While they may vary in some respects in their criticisms, these critics

1 Michael Schudson identifies in American social thought five critiques of consumer culture which he terms as the Puritan critique, the Quaker critique, the Republican critique, the Marxist critique, and the aristocratic critique. The Puritan critique is against investment of inappropriate amount of meaning in goods and maintains that goods should only be valued for their capacity to serve practical human needs. The Quaker critique condemns wasteful and extravagant consumption. The Republican critique is concerned with the corrupting influence on public life of a goods orientation in private life. Schudson calls these three critiques the bourgeois objections and the other two antibourgeois. The Marxist critique focuses on the exploitative nature of capitalist system of production and suggests that the point of consumer society is to distract the minds and bodies of workers. The aristocratic or elitist objection is an attack on ugliness of mass-produced goods (341-352). Given my proposed perspectives, my critique of consumer society here would necessarily leave out those less relevant strands of ideas. Hence my definition of the critical tradition here.



share the view that the rise of industrial capitalism in Western society, and along with it the rise of consumption, leads to an increasing invasion into and colonization of both social and individual realms with commodities and commodity relations. The consequential objectification and commodification of human life renders the relationship between the subjective and objective worlds more problematic. The critiques made by these thinkers and critics are generally directed at the alienating and corrupting force as well as the ideological manipulation of Western capitalism.

Apart from this critique of commodity culture that in a large part aims at exposing the systemic vices and ideology of capitalism, there is also a strand of criticism that seeks to explain the predicament of modern consumer society in relation to identity formation and the related issues. Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson are among the most influential theorists in this regard. In their critical vision of consumer society in connection with the identity issue, they recognize, among other things, that consumption today is *not* to be understood as being grounded in utility and materiality. For Bourdieu, consumption constitutes the expression of taste. For Baudrillard as well as for Jameson, consumption in late capitalism results in a society transformed into sheer images and signs, a world of hyperreality and pastiche. In my view, this strand of criticism that ties in with identity issues should appropriately be considered as beginning from Thorstein Veblen, who is the first to theorize on the symbolic aspect of consumption.

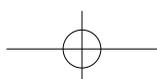
Ambivalent assessments of consumption and consumer society can be seen in the writings of such authors as Daniel Miller, Tim Edwards, Michael Schudson, and Jon Goss. The paradox for them is that consumption is experienced as both enabling and constraining. Though they can be credited for trying to offer more balanced assessments, there is a sense in which I feel that their negotiated views sometimes tend to fall short of a more forceful stance. From my socio-cultural approach to the subject, I would argue for the critical thesis.

The core argument of apologists of consumer society with regard to



12 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations
in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

identity construction can be summarized as this: consumption is a symbolic activity and therefore enables consumers to construct their identity and express their individuality by way of appropriating the meanings of the objects they consume and creating particular lifestyles that are supportive of distinctive identities. In *The Myth of Consumerism* (2002) Conrad Lodziak has convincingly analyzed the inadequacies and erroneous nature of what he calls “the latest ideology of consumerism” by carefully teasing out its many strands of ideological sources and influences. These are some of the relevant counter-arguments to the celebratory view: 1) in celebrating consumers’ freedom to choose or construct their identities apologists have transformed the concept of identity into something less substantial, less enduring, more trivial and superficial, and thus less meaningful and important; 2) apologists (like Fiske) use atypical instances of stylized consumption, as in the case of youth subcultures, to generalize and support their false assumption that consumption plays a significant role in the politics of identity, a strategy of subverting the dominant culture and its attendant ideology; 3) the thesis endorsing the aesthetic value of consumption and its close association with meaningful pleasures is but a convenient myth in that it upgrades the status of aesthetic value of consumer culture to that of art on the one hand and presumes on the other the truth of such a claim as “anything can be art and art is everywhere.” Lodziak’s critique, however, is more concerned with pointing out that apologists have ignored those sources of self-identity that are not related to consumerism. This position would mean to set identity issues within a wider context than consumption study and therefore is not to be taken by the present study given its proposed parameter of discussion. While accepting that consumption, to some extent, is a “meaning” construction activity, I would take issue against the claim that this meaning construction activity actually generates the “meaningful” (I use this word here in its normal sense of being serious and important as opposed to the usage of the word merely taken to mean having meaning). So the important question here is not so much whether consumption can be used to construct an identity but that of constructing and maintaining





a genuinely meaningful one. I take a negative view on consumption as a seriously meaningful practice for identity construction and maintenance, because in modern consumer society the processes of meaning-making with commodities are essentially controlled and manipulated by the institution of advertising that manifests and serves the cultural logic of consumer capitalism. In this study I shall seek to demonstrate that modern consumer society which is exemplified by contemporary American society is ridden with anxieties, especially the kind of anxieties most closely connected with identity construction and maintenance, in a world immersed in consumer culture.

4

As has been noted earlier, study of consumption and consumer society has become multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, covering and crossing a wide range of academic disciplines such as history, economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, ecology, literature, and cultural studies. The present study will follow this multi/inter-disciplinary model, taking a socio-cultural perspective towards the subject and examining three American novels by three different authors produced during the period that this study focuses on. While the purpose of socio-historical documentation is to situate the understanding of the character of modern consumer society in the historical and intellectually engaged contexts, the analysis of the literary texts is meant to zoom in on contemporary American consumer society on an empirically textured level. Despite their fictional character, novels abound with numerous details and facts of life that are inevitably and ultimately grounded in reality. On this ground it makes perfect sense to use literary texts for analyzing contemporary consumer society.

Since the early twentieth century, consumption or consumerism has figured as one of the major themes in American fiction. As has been noted by historians, the First World War served as a watershed between the old and the new in American culture. David M. Potter regards American society as having been reoriented from a production into a consumption culture in



14 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

the 1920s. Significant literary response to this social transformation can be seen in the fiction written in America between the wars, particularly in the works of such writers as Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913) is a novel about American marriage and courtship in which sexual desire is channeled toward the consumer goods and the purchasing power of money, and marriage is taken as a profitable investment. In *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922), Lewis presents his keen observations of consumerism in American life such as advertising, the prevalence of electrical goods, and dominance of the claims of business over everything. The latter novel, named after the protagonist George F. Babbitt, for whom "god was Modern Appliances," lays the groundwork for many other novels that portray the American businessman, for instance, John Updike's "Rabbit" series. Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) portrays the difficulty of asserting individuality in the context of unrelenting pressures of life in a consumerist urban mass society represented by the city of New York which is dedicated to a ruthless success ethic. In his ambitious *USA* trilogy (1937) comprising *The Forty-Second Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen*, and *The Big Money*, Dos Passos, conceiving of himself as a kind of historian, chronicles and comments on social changes as well as the shift of mentality in America since the turn of the century. Significantly, the main character in the trilogy is a public relations counsel, a figure typical of the new age of mass manipulation by advertising and image. In *American Tragedy* (1925), Dreiser portrays a young man caught in the contradictions of a society in which the social relation of class and emergence of a consumption ethic condition the protagonist's character and fate to a large extent. Fitzgerald responds to consumerism by centering his fiction on American *nouveaux riches*, "the beautiful and damned," a phrase he used to title his 1922 novel. In *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender Is the Night* (1934), Fitzgerald, while evoking its bewitching combination of glamour and corruption, depicts the corrosive effect of the pecuniary leisure class lifestyle upon both individuals and social values.



The Great Depression disrupted the rapid development of consumerism, but after the Second World War and through the 1950s and 1960s consumerism regained momentum and imprinted its stamp upon almost all aspects of American society. As Michael Spindler observes, “The loss of the old values and the saturation of American society by consumerism became then an assumption in American literature rather than a point of exploration, and the lifestyle of the white-collar middle class became a favorite subject” (*American Literature* 134). Kurt Vonnegut in his *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine* (1965) conveys the message that the traditional values such as self-reliance and independence and direct physical work were becoming increasingly residual and irrelevant in a world of consumer affluence. “Real people don’t make their livings that way any more,” says one of the characters in the novel. “That’s all over, men working with their hands and backs. They are not needed” (qtd. in Spindler, *American Literature* 133). Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) depicts the material America as an entropic mass consumer society in which the individuals are entrapped and in dire need of revelation. Both Vonnegut and Pynchon see capitalistic development in America as leading not to fulfillment of personal possibilities but to severe constriction of them. Joseph Heller in his *Something Happened* (1974) portrays the moral and psychological dilemmas of an “organization man” living within that culture that offers him many possessions and pleasures but at the same time denies him any sense of vital human connection. In his short-story collection *Moon Deluxe* (1983), Frederick Barthelme presents the contemporary American landscape characterized by the terrain of retail and residential sprawl associated with shopping malls, fast-food outlets, tract housing, and television. Bobbie Ann Mason’s work also expresses a painful awareness of the changing landscape of her native Kentucky where farms and fields are jostled by strip malls and condo complexes. Tom Wolfe’s 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* shows the collapse of an ethical system in the full glare of materialism and consumerism in 1980s New York.

This sketchy overview of the literary response to consumerism in



16 Consuming Anxiety: Contemporary Consumer Society and Its Representations
in the Novels of Updike, DeLillo, and Ellis

American fictions shows that consumption is a recurring theme and for that matter an important one worthy of serious attention of generations of writers. In this sense, literary works can be as significant as academic discourses in enriching our understanding of the character of consumption and modern consumer society. In fact, fruitful work has been done by scholars who take the literary approach to the subject, such as Rachel Bowlby's *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (1985), Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney's *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction* (1993), James Annesley's *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (1998), Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2000), and Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003).

The three contemporary American novels I have chosen for analysis are John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). As we can see, these novels were written and published between the late 1970s and early 1990s, and thus can serve as up-to-date cultural material through which we can scrutinize the American consumer society in a period when consumption moved centre stage and consumerism began to become the *zeitgeist*: central to American experience. Admittedly, selection of sample texts is a subjective decision, but it is above all based on the consideration of the objectives of my present study. The next thing to consider is perhaps the influence of the chosen works as well as that of their authors, i.e., whether the selected works and their authors are significant and influential enough to have the representative status as the sample. On this score, my selection of the three novels begs no question. *Rabbit Is Rich*, the third novel of Updike's famous "Rabbit" tetralogy, is the winner of all three major American literary prizes for the year of 1982, namely, the Pulitzer, the National (then called American) Book Award, and the National Critics' Circle. Having produced more than twenty novels, John Updike has been regarded as the major chronicler of the American middle class. Don DeLillo's highly