INVASIVE CULTURES:
AMERICAN CULTURE IN
BRET EASTON ELLIS' AMERICAN PSYCHO.

Steven Grivas B.A. (Hons)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne.

INVASIVE CULTURES: AMERICAN CULTURE IN BRET EASTON ELLIS' AMERICAN PSYCHO.

STEVEN GRIVAS

ABSTRACT

"Invasive Cultures: American Culture in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho" proposes that Ellis' small body of fictional works can be read as active critiques of American culture, detailing the ways in which this culture informs the current condition of American society in recent times. The larger intent of this thesis is to delineate and examine the relays between American culture, the forces of capitalism that underlie them, and their significant bearing on the social behaviour, personal expression and psychology of Ellis' characters, who often directly assimilate and embody its characteristics, whether physically or mentally. Ellis presents his characters as deeply informed by their contact with the cultural realm.

Ellis' preoccupations with popular and consumer cultures, with the increasingly invasive mass media, and with a visually oriented society obsessed with surfaces, are all examined in the light of how these cultures are radically entangled with the consciousness and behaviour of his characters. In Ellis' fiction, the banal and the sensational are lucrative fixtures of a culture that functions as a commercial industry, driven by profit like any other, that exploits the desires and expectations of its consumers. Moreover, these common representations and modes of expression are presented as contagious, seeping into personal modes of self-expression. Just as Ellis instances how culture rigorously shapes the body and lifestyle, he also demonstrates through the stylized consciousness of his characters the media's powerful influence on their subjectivity and behaviour. This thesis focuses on American Psycho (1991) but also discusses Ellis’ other novels Less Than Zero (1984), The Rules Of Attraction (1987), and The Informers (1994).
I am especially grateful to Stephanie Trigg and Garry Kinnane for their patience, support and valuable criticism. I would also like to thank the University of Melbourne School of Graduate Studies for their financial assistance, and my parents for their continual encouragement and support.
Contents

1: INTRODUCTION / 5

2: NARRATIVE ARTIFICE
   Nihilistic Narratives / 8
   Contagious Artifice / 13
   Popular Culture / 17

3: THE CULTURE INVASION
   The Culture Invasion / 20
   Mediated Realities / 26
   The Mimetic Compulsion / 30

4: THE CULTURAL MONSTER
   Monster Theory / 38
   The Serial Killer / 41
   The Serial Killer and Capitalism / 44

5: MADE IN THE U.S.A.
   Designer Consumption / 48
   Made in the U.S.A. / 53
   Corrosive Conformity / 65
   Clones / 71

6: 'HEGEMONY OF THE VISIBLE'
   The Hegemony of the Visible / 76
   Spectacular Sexism / 82
   Pornographic Knowledge / 91
   "A Revolting Development" / 96

7: CONCLUSION / 104

8: BIBLIOGRAPHY / 108
INTRODUCTION

In Fredric Jameson’s seminal study of postmodern culture and capitalism, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), the ‘postmodern’ is seen to coordinate new ‘social and mental habits . . . with the new forms of economic production thrown up by the modification of capitalism’, so that the interrelationship between culture and the economic becomes ‘not a one-way street but a continuous reciprocal interaction and feedback loop.’¹ This symbiotic relationship between culture and capitalism, and the dystopian tangle of realities that result from this collusion of forces, lie at the core of Bret Easton Ellis’ oeuvre and comprise the theoretical basis of this thesis. Ellis’ novel *American Psycho* (1991), the prime focus of this study, and his novels *Less Than Zero* (1984), *The Rules Of Attraction* (1987), and *The Informers* (1994), all designate discernible changes in the nature of consciousness through the evolution of a new, culturally immersed Subject, swamped by the proliferating agencies of mass impression. These novels all trace and reflect crucial changes and developments in American culture and society, provoking critical insights in accordance with Jameson’s perspective on the ‘postmodern.’

Ellis’ novels draw unnerving parallels between cultural decadence and social decline through blackly rendering American culture’s corrosive effect on the self. They depict mainstream American culture as a monolithic presence oppressive in nature, especially in its consumerist and cosmetic obsessions, ruled by the semantic machinations of advertising and the homogeneous discourses of the mass media. The

imposition of constraining social mores and standards, as well as culturally defined
desires and needs, through the ubiquitous force of media images and technologies,
facilitate the modification and standardization of the individual by culture. These
forces do not merely restrict and limit, but also produce and shape human beings. In
Ellis' world, this process is acutely realized yet also detrimental to the individual and
society. The postmodern mal de siècle that prevails is endemic to the national
obsession with representations, surfaces and visuality, which has engendered a
superficial society of cultural consumers who are almost exclusively visually oriented,
adept at processing and emulating images, yet intellectually, emotionally and morally
destitute.

American Psycho can be read as a polemical tirade against the excesses of
American capitalism, and more pointedly, as a fierce denunciation of its attendant
culture which reinforces the dynamics of its self-serving and destructive socio-
economic order. Ellis imparts a bleak cultural diagnosis through the schizoid reality
of his narrator Patrick Bateman, who typifies American socio-economic ideals and
personifies success. Drawn from the omnipresent 'late capitalist' cultural panorama,
Bateman is not so much a credible American psychopath as he is the literary
embodiment or personification of a kind of American cultural psychosis, a
phantasmagoric figuration of Ellis' socio-cultural anxieties and obsessions. American
Psycho mounts its scathing critique through an experience of this cultural psychosis,
expressed through the reified discourses of the mass media and consumer industries
that have become firmly implanted in Bateman's consciousness, integral to his self-
expression.

This thesis begins by examining how Ellis' impassive narrators are deeply
informed by mass-produced and mass-consumed cultural forms, and how these forms
shape their perceptions of reality, as well as rigorously determine individuality and
lifestyle. Ellis' employment of monster motifs is the subject of 'The Cultural Monster'
which explores monstrousness as a mode of embodying social 'dis-ease', exemplified
by his conflation of the serial killer with capitalism. 'Made in the U.S.A.' details the
different ways of understanding the 'manufactured' individuality and physical appearances of Ellis' pseudo-individuals through the discourses of market culture and mass consumption. The final section, 'Hegemony of the Visible', centers on the obsession with seeing and visuality, and its associations with pathological behaviour, sexism and violence, all integral components of Ellis' dark depiction of the psychotopography of American culture.
2. NARRATIVE ARTIFICE

While Ellis’ novels have been frequently dismissed as sensational reading for adolescents, on closer inspection they are artfully, sometimes intricately constructed narratives that have inaugurated a new narrative voice geared to the lifestyle and experiential reality of a particular segment of today’s young generation. The world depicted in them is a monadic, homogenizing place divested of difference. The disconcerting uniformity of Ellis’ mostly indifferent narrators diverts attention away from their internal, individuating features to focus on the external world and its events. In Ellis’ fiction, George Stade asserts, as in the fiction of most satirists, ‘the emphasis is less on what individuates his characters or on what unites them with the whole of humankind than it is on the aberrations that unite them with a milieu. We get not so much rounded characters as a group consciousness careering into dissolution.’

NIHILISTIC NARRATIVES

Ellis’ narrators are distant, opaque, incommunicative, and as one character admits, ‘located somewhere beyond communication’ (INF 152). They seem gripped by a communicative aversion that immobilises the delivery of any affective or interactive exchange: ‘neither of us talking, mutually relieved if the bar or restaurant we were at was particularly noisy’ (RULES 232). Their icy reticence signals the negation of communication and the repudiation of emotion, their silences revealing about the inexpressible absence that permeates their lives. There are no

---

3 All page references to Ellis’ novels will be cited with the following title abbreviations: Less Than Zero (ZERO); The Rules of Attraction (RULES); American Psycho (AP) and The Informers (INF).
strong or lasting connections: “People are afraid to merge” (ZERO 10). Each generation, Ellis implies, appears to lose a little more of its ability to articulate its experiences. As one character notes: ‘I keep feeling that people are becoming less human and more animalistic. They seem to think less and feel less so that everyone is operating on a very primitive level’ (INF 137). The hollow ambience, particularly of the L.A. novels - Less Than Zero and The Informers - derives from a stunted, disconnected relation with events that avoids direct signification or the development of coherent meaning. Meaning crystallizes through subtle clues, deeply felt absences and resonant silences, as much as through concrete or symbolic expression. In this sense, Ellis’ novels in some ways correspond with the traditions of postmodern narrative, and more specifically with what Arthur Saltzman typifies as their ‘designs of darkness’:

It is impossible to determine which details, if any, are significant, illustrative, or portentous, for the “unplottedness” of the novel levels everything out. Experience does not assume any hierarchy of value, nor does it conform to any causal network as the novel progresses. Without interiority, metaphysical depth, or symbolic justification - all the components of “pseudo-mystery” to which we as readers have grown slavishly accustomed - what remains is a dehumanized verbal realm whose effect is to deny our habitual strategies of constructing emotional solidarity.4

Ellis’ characters not only lack a social bond, but communication is stymied by a deep-seated entropy that averts the possibility of social interaction and the revelation of true meaning. The words on the page function mostly as rarefied sentences linked tenuously by cold descriptions of events and brand names, devoid of sentience and meaning. The visuality of language itself, what Ellis calls ‘the visual stimulus that words have on a page’, is something that he stresses in order to achieve the detached monologues and fractured dialogues that particularly distinguish Less Than Zero and The Informers. In American Psycho, Bateman’s crimes are never discovered, not so much because he eludes capture - he often recklessly commits

murders in public, is frequently surrounded by incriminating evidence and even confesses everything to his therapist - but because he is allowed to escape through openings provided by misinterpretations, misunderstandings and the illusions of appearances. This atrophy of communication is not easy to explain, but is attributed to a society of inveterate spectators thrashed into a passive, incommunicative torpor through cultural overstimulation. The mass media, cinema and television, Ellis implies, are veritable caretakers of human dialogue since they communicate way more than the characters themselves. For a media-literate breed whose generational mentality is encapsulated by the phrase ‘seeing is believing’, the illusion or semblance of communication is more important than the act, especially when it is all that can be managed:

There was a young surfer in the [telephone] booth next to mine in OP shorts and a yellow T-shirt with “MAUl” etched across it and I was pretty sure that he was waiting for the bus. I didn’t think the surfer was talking to anyone; that he was pretending to be talking and that there was no one listening on the other end and all I could keep thinking about was it is better to pretend to talk than not talk at all . . . (ZERO 200)

Simulation has become an indispensable mode of communication in this world of taciturn poseurs. Genuine personal expression is usually repressed, confined to the realm of appearance, or swallowed up by the sovereign dictates of social mores and style imperatives.

Nevertheless, there are rare instances where meaning asserts itself, albeit circuitously. In Less Than Zero, Clay is haunted by recurrent phrases and sentences that resound in his mind, providing context and significance to the recent events in his life. These repetitions accumulate through the course of the novel to culminate in a poetic cluster of phrases that form an abstract dialogue between his inner and outer world:
Disappear Here.
The syringe fills with blood.
*You’re a beautiful boy and that’s all that matters.*
Wonder if he’s for sale.
People are afraid to merge. To merge (ZERO 183).

This compound of expressions conveys the endurance of meaning within apparent meaninglessness, and the survival of innate, albeit unprocessed, reflection. Despite Clay’s attempts to evade reality through a wilful escape into oblivion, their powerful significance cannot be erased.

What further confounds the generation of coherent meaning in Ellis’ fiction is the fact that his characters, like the typical postmodern subject, make little or no reference with the past, depriving events of causal significance. The past is either forgotten in their fixation with the immediate present, mysteriously absent or repressed for reasons unknown and possibly traumatic. Moments before he murders a child at the Central Park zoo, Bateman observes: ‘Nearby a mother breast-feeds her baby, which awakens something awful in me’ (AP 297). Oedipal trauma is implicated as the catalyst for Bateman’s atrocity. Bateman harbours a pronounced aversion to the past – “The past isn’t real. It’s just a dream,” I say. “Don’t mention the past” (AP 340). Any recollection of it is vague or fleeting: ‘the Christmas Eve when I was fourteen and had raped one of our maids’ (AP 342); ‘My rages at Harvard were less violent than the ones now’ (AP 241); ‘a waitress from Abetone’s in Aspen who I raped with a can of hairspray last Christmas when I was skiing there over the holidays’ (AP 94). The reader, therefore, is provided with very little substantial evidence which could help to explain Bateman’s psychosis.

*American Psycho* avoids establishing any sense of ontological security, undermining apparent certainties to expose us to the anarchic instability of Bateman’s madness. Many of the novel’s events are mired in uncertainty, regularly alternating between fantasy, reality and psychosis, thereby compelling the reader to adopt a sceptical interpretive approach towards them. This scepticism is
affirmed when Bateman, surprised that his violent behaviour has gone unnoticed, endeavours to confirm his flimsy sense of reality:

> There has been no word of bodies discovered in any of the city's four newspapers or on the local news; no hints of even a rumour floating around. I've gone so far as to ask people - dates, business acquaintances - over dinners, in the halls of Pierce and Pierce, if anyone has heard about two mutilated prostitutes found in Paul Owen's apartment. But like in some movie, no one has heard anything, has any idea of what I'm talking about. (AP 367)

In desperation, he returns to the scene of the crime where he murdered two prostitutes 'one hundred and sixty-one days ago.' Arriving at Paul Owen's apartment building, he notices that it 'looks different', the keys he apparently stole 'won't fit properly' (AP 367). After being let in by the doorman, he looks into the apartment, remembering what he did to Christie's breasts among other gory details, when on closer inspection it was Tori and Tiffany he murdered there (p. 300 -). To further confound matters, Bateman confesses his 'private dementia' on his therapist Harold Carnes' answering machine, 'admitting everything, leaving nothing out, thirty, forty, a hundred murders' (p. 352). When Bateman encounters him in a new club called World's End, Carnes admits he found the message "hilarious" (p. 387). Dismayed, Bateman shouts that the whole message was "true", admitting "I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it." Carnes then shatters Bateman's delusions by shouting the following words over the loud music: "... I had ... dinner ... with Paul Owen ... twice ... in London ... just ten days ago" (p. 388). This realization broaches the tactical maneuvers of the novel, confirming our role as detectives lost in the chaotic vacuum of Bateman's schizophrenic reality, where differentiation between fact and fantasy has become impossible. Yet since American Psycho is narrated by a madman, and given that many of its principal ideas emanate through its ambiguous dialogue with the various references and representations that comprise Bateman's pastiche-like monologue, the question of whether the events in the novel are real or not becomes somewhat irrelevant. For it is primarily through the tensions and
discrepancies between representations and reality that many of Ellis’ themes effectively materialize.

**CONTAGIOUS ARTIFICE**

*American Psycho* is a novel so interested in its own denunciation of American culture, so steeped in its overwrought expressions that it becomes almost impossible to penetrate its one-dimensionality, to resist its relentless drone of vapidity. Inquisitiveness is impeded by depthlessness, complexity thwarted by opacity and its exasperating singlemindedness. Consequently, the critical responses it elicits are limited: they tend to be fragmentary, based around suggestion, allusion and conflation rather than through a structured engagement with the complexities and intricacies of narrative and character. Ellis urges us to go beyond seeking certainties and explanations amid the mental chaos to consider pluralism as an appropriate method for making sense of Bateman’s delusional reality, often leaving us no choice but to accept its indeterminate nature. Dining at an outdoor café with his secretary Jean, who confesses that her life “would be much emptier” without him, Bateman articulates his amorphous nature in the following unverbalized reply:

... there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I am simply not there*. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a non-contingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. (AP 376-7)

Bateman is phantom-like, a diaphanous presence barely distinguished in his environment, a cipher of mostly excruciating cultural banalities interspersed with the occasional random atrocity. There is little in his vacant monologue that convincingly amounts to a genuine human being. His illuminating admission functions as an aside
to the reader, an exposition on the conceptual framework of the novel that encapsulates its synthetic ethos.

Patrick Bateman is a polyphonic configuration of consciousness that defies traditional narrative conventions, demanding new modes of conception and interpretation. He resides within an unorthodox, ‘monstrous’ hermeneutic realm ruled by equivocation and indeterminacy.5 It is fitting, then, that in the past Ellis has described his novels as “basically conceptual.”6 Forged in the tradition of the postmodern novel, Bateman’s stream-of-consciousness ‘is not so much transmitted, as it is erected or deployed.’7 American Psycho readily conforms to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel as a ‘diversity of social speech types’ and ‘a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.’8 The ‘dialogical interaction’ of these discourses, specifically their crude incorporation into the fabric of the novel, is testament to the wholesale adoption of the generic and the (stereo)typical that stresses the dominance of cultural expression over personal expression. These conspicuous threads of discourse display their generic status in order to underline the artificial, culturally derivative quality of the monologue, whose arrangement is indicative of the postmodern sensibility. ‘The postmodernisms,’ Jameson argues, are fascinated by the ‘whole “degraded” landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the

5 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s perspective on the cultural significance of the monster is an illuminating one: ‘The horizon where the monsters dwell might be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world. In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble. The monstrous is a genus too large to be encapsulated in any conceptual system; the monster’s very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure. . . . The monster is in this way the living embodiment of the phenomenon Derrida has famously labelled the “supplement” (ce dangereux supplément): it breaks apart bifurcating, “either/or” syllogistic logic with a kind of reasoning closer to “and/or,” introducing what Barbara Johnson has called “a revolution in the very logic of meaning.”’ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), Monster Theory: Reading Culture, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 7. The relevance of the monster to American Psycho will be discussed at length in section 3 - “The Cultural Monster.”


7 Saltzman, Designs of Darkness in Contemporary Fiction, p. 98.

grade-B Hollywood film. . . materials they no longer simply “quote,” as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance.'9

American Psycho renounces its own creative spirit in giving itself so fully to dead forms of expression. Ellis composes Bateman’s stream-of-consciousness out of mass-media debris to form a kind of Frankensteinian creation. Much of his pastiche-like body of expression is derived from various magazines, as Ellis admits:

[Interviewer:] Bateman knows so much about clothing. A lot of his descriptions read like fashion credits from ‘GQ.’

[Ellis:] Many of them are. GQ was inordinately helpful in costuming the characters in the book. They should have gotten credit.

Then there are the endless specifications on his electronics, as well.

From various stereo magazines.

Bateman seems to be made from magazines.

A mixture of GQ and Stereo Review and Fangoria . . . and Vanity Fair.10

Just as his physical ‘appearance’ and self-identity is comprised of the ‘designer’ garments he wears, his interiority is greatly informed by the diversity of influential voices that define him. Bateman’s associates freely disclose this fact in regular conversation: “Girls dig Bateman.” Reeves sounds a little drunk. “He’s GQ. You’re total GQ, Bateman.”’ (AP 90); “Bateman reads these biographies all the time: Ted Bundy and Son of Sam and Fatal Vision and Charlie Manson. All of them”’ (AP 92). Early in the novel, Bateman recites a litany of liberal solutions to global and national problems, probably culled from watching CNN, which are obviously not his own. He begins:

Well, we have to end apartheid for one. And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger . . . control and find a cure for the AIDS epidemic, clean up environmental damage from toxic waste and pollution . . . We have to provide food and shelter for the homeless and oppose racial discrimination and promote civil rights while also promoting equal rights for

9 Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, p. 3.
women... Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people. (AP 15-16)

This passage addresses the fact that although he recites these solutions, they are far from his own extreme, often barbaric views. Bateman is not capable of individual expression, only posturing and slavish emulation. Like the media he assimilates, he is adept at manipulating an image and a message. This condition, which is not limited to Bateman,11 not only figures how these discourses become central to the self-expression of these characters, but also how these discourses can be deployed to the appropriator's advantage. Discussing the merits of an appetizer he quotes 'New York magazine [who] called it a "playful but mysterious little dish" and I repeat this to Patricia.' (AP 77) Bateman's derivative self further unfolds through his reading habits: 'a new best seller about office management called Why It Works to Be a Jerk'; Elegance: A Guide to Quality in Menswear; The Art of the Deal by Donald Trump; magazines like Fame and Fortune. He also expresses his understanding of his secretary Jean's personality as substantially informed by cultural artefacts when he imagines what books she would read:

What kind of books does Jean read? Titles race through my mind: How to Make a Man Fall in Love with You. How to Keep a Man in Love with You Forever. How to Close a Deal: Get Married. How to be Married One Year from Today. Supplicant. (AP 265)

By derisively anticipating the reading material suitable to Jean's interests, Bateman implies that social behaviour can be guided and maximized by social models of suitable conduct and etiquette. It is not hard to imagine the real existence of such guides. These instruction manuals for social life epitomize the 'making of the American', which will be discussed at length in the course of this study.

11 His acquaintance, Christopher Armstrong, who also works at P & P, also displays a propensity for robotic recitation when asked about his holiday in the Bahamas: 'Travellers looking for that perfect vacation this summer may do well to look south, as far south as the Bahamas and the Caribbean islands. There are at least five smart reasons for visiting the Caribbean including the weather and the festivals and events, the less crowded hotels and attractions, the price and the unique cultures... ' (p. 137.)
Since the drab, idiosyncratically bereft monologues of Ellis’ narrators often prevent the real issues of his novels from being directly expressed, the reader must proceed on mere hints, esoteric allusions and references to popular culture whose close consideration can be quite revealing. Peter Freese, in his article on *Less Than Zero*, claims that ‘the traditional literary critic has a hard time unravelling the significance of rock lyrics and behavioural or conversational gambits which do not belong to his cultural code’ and is therefore ‘too easily tempted to dismiss the laconically understated first-person narration of Ellis’ protagonist [Clay] as just another example of pervasive triviality and cultural decay.’ 12 In a society saturated with information, messages and ‘aesthetic’ experiences of all kinds, modes of reading and interpretation are constantly altered and transformed, sometimes leaving traditional modes of interpretation incompatible or even redundant in certain circumstances. Interpretation, for Jameson, is ‘essentially an allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code.’ 13 The constantly changing and sometimes esoteric nature of this ‘master code,’ which is forever in flux according to the shifting tides of youth culture, fashion, and popular culture, makes critical receptivity to certain allusions depend on the critic’s familiarity with the references that surround them. In *Less Than Zero*, a character named Benjamin warns Clay: “I bet you don’t even read *The Face*. You’ve got to.” He lights a clove cigarette. “You’ve got to... Otherwise you’ll get bored” (ZERO 96). This warning applies as much to the reader, whose appreciation of the text is significantly heightened by a familiarity with many of its popular culture references.

In *American Psycho*, meaning is dispersed throughout the novel in small,

apparently inconsequential, often random sentences, that are frequently loaded with deeper symbolic significance:

My platinum American Express card had gone through so much use that it snapped in half, self-destructed, at one of those dinners, when I took two summer associates to Restless and Young, the new Pablo Lester restaurant in midtown, but I had enough cash in my gazellskin wallet to pay for the meal. *The Patty Winters Shows* were all repeats. Life remained a blank canvas, a cliché, a soap opera. I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage. (AP 279)

Bateman’s ‘platinum’ American Express card, a universal symbol of affluence used to flaunt his elite yuppy status, by splitting and self-destructing, encapsulates the internal division and exhaustion of his psyche, as well as the burn-out of his excessive lifestyle. The seemingly incongruous amalgam of blank canvas, cliché and soap opera - precipitated by the reference to Restless and Young (a variation on long running soap opera *The Young and the Restless*) - suggests the meaningless, typical vacuity of his existence. The monotony of his strictly regimented life is mirrored in the ‘repeats’ of his favorite talk show. His struggle to contain his violent eruptions are expressed in vampiric terms (‘nightly bloodlust’), and redolent of the hypocritical double-being and psychological conflict between Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. These allusions to titles, genres and motifs of popular culture - such as the daily discussion topics on *The Patty Winters Show*14 - are woven into the fabric of Bateman’s consciousness to provide subtle significance and work to contextualize certain passages through their repetition and variation.

---

14 *The Patty Winters Show*, a fictional parody of American talk-shows, has a special significance for Bateman, an avid viewer, as much as for Ellis who uses it as a platform to ridicule the sensational, pseudo-informative talk show format. The following featured topics oscillate between the pertinent and the absurd: multiple personalities, Toddler-Murderers; Nazis; Big Breasts; Aerobic Exercise; Deformed People; Has Patrick Swayze Become Cynical or Not?; a two part ‘split’ show consisting, firstly, of an exclusive interview with Donald Trump, and secondly, ‘a report on women who’ve been tortured’; “People Who Weigh Over Seven Hundred Pounds - What Can We Do About Them?”; Home Abortion Kits; Beautiful Teenage Lesbians; a two parter on Axl Rose and Ted Bundy; Bigfoot; and culminating with the appropriately titled ‘Does Economic Success Equal Happiness?’ All are relevant compliments to Ellis’ themes, enforcing his concerns while also establishing parallels not only with Bateman’s’ existential crises, but also with the broader social and cultural malaise.
Popular song lyrics, in particular, frequently hold an uncanny resonance, providing an oblique yet valuable avenue of expression for Ellis' characters that is often their 'only point of reference' (ZERO 208). One character admits: “I'm just a million miles away,” the Plimsouls are singing on KROQ and I have to think that songs are sometimes uncannily appropriate. I really am so far away from everything' (INF 132). The prescience of pop music reaches its culmination in the closing passage of *Less Than Zero*:

There was a song I heard when I was in Los Angeles by a local group. The song was called “Los Angeles” and the words and images were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days. The images, I later found out, were personal and no one I knew shared them. The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun. These images stayed with me even after I left the city. Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards. After I left. (ZERO 207-8)

The song conjures a host of images that encapsulate Clay's sombre new vision of L.A. life, images that affirm the squalor, blindness and emptiness of urban experience and recognize its inherent psychological and physical violence. Without the discernible patterns of meaning that emerge through these random, external modes of expression, the already desolate internal world of these mostly incommunicative characters would be rendered almost unintelligible.
3. THE CULTURE INVASION

A short drive across LA can resemble a gruesome vision of the future where capitalism no longer bothers to hide its cultural hegemony, where Oprah Winfrey’s teeth, Demi Moore’s concrete tits and macabre 200ft health insurance ads are always watching you, even if you try not to watch them.

- JOHNNY CIGARETTES, “STANZA AND DELIVER”

New Musical Express. 15 June 1996.

The soulless ambience of Ellis’ world is often achieved through the presence of familiar cultural idioms, objects and images that drown out the unique and the idiosyncratic. Subliminally at least, commodities are elevated higher on the reality scale than real events because of their omnipresence in everyday life. Where, for example, Roland Barthes ascribed the extensive details of Flaubertian description as ‘totally interwoven with the imperatives of “realism”’,¹ Ellis’ details denote the ‘reality effect’ of postmodern capitalist society. Rarely does a page go by in his novels that is not accompanied by a pop song, a designer name, a TV show, a poster or a commodity.

The billboard inscribed with the ominous words ‘Disappear Here’ that appears repeatedly throughout Less Than Zero - and even makes an intertextual cameo in The Informers - beckons the viewer to retreat into the void of the image and forget the world. The billboard slogan, advertising ‘some resort’, not only sums up the cowardly retreat of Clay and his clique into the escape world of drugs and teenage debauchery, but also, as Freese notes, ‘proves a highly effective strategy of providing the understated and scarcely verbalized problems of the rather incoherent

narrator and his peers with some deeper meaning.'2 These ubiquitous signs and images, which energise the cultural landscape of Ellis’ novels, signify the hegemony of capitalism, while other messages and slogans take on ponderous significance in proclaiming the squalor and decadence at the heart of society - ‘Disappear Here’; ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE; THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. American Psycho opens with a barrage of signs that play against one another to set the intense, semiotically frenetic surroundings:

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab as it lurches forward in the traffic leaving Wall Street and just as Timothy Price notices the words a bus pulls up, the advertisement for Les Miserables on its side blocking his view... (AP 3)

The grim portent of the blood red scrawl is eclipsed by the advertisement, glossed over by its theatrical rendering as bourgeois entertainment. The competitive traffic of signs parallels the competitive traffic of automobiles. Moments later, both stare ‘at the word FEAR sprayed in red graffiti on the side of a McDonald’s on Fourth and Seventh... Like in a movie another bus appears, another poster for Les Miserables replaces the word - not the same bus because someone has written the word DYKE over Eponine’s face’ (AP 3-4). Messages compete and conflict with each other in juxtapositions imposed by the random shuffle of traffic and through the defacement of surfaces. The familiar, ‘functional’ signs of advertising are attacked by the dark

2 Freese, ‘Bret Easton Ellis, Less Than Zero: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel’?’, p. 76. This view corresponds to Adorno’s notion of mass culture as “psychoanalysis in reverse,” and parallels J. G. Ballard’s recent remarks in 21C about the cultural landscape embodying the psyche of the masses: “We live in a world of complete fiction; so much of what used to be an internalized psychological space within an individual’s head - his hopes, dreams and all the rest of it - has been transferred from inside our individual skulls into the corporate sensorium represented by the media landscape. You see people, these days, who give the impression that their minds are a complete vacuum; no dreams or hopes of any importance, even to themselves, emanate through the sutures of their skulls, as it were... the environment itself is doing the dreaming for them. The environment is the greater sensorium generating these individual hopes and ambitions, signs of the cerebral activity that has been transferred from inside the individual’s skull into the larger mental space of the planetary communications landscape. Now that’s a very dramatic shift, because it means that Freud’s distinction between the latent and manifest content of a dream has to be applied to the outside world.” Mark Dery, ‘Sex Drive: J. G. Ballard and David Cronenberg’, 21. C, Issue 24. 1997. p. 47.
realities of hopelessness, fear, sexism and homophobia that lie behind them, rupturing forth their violent, bloody recriminations in 'a kind of riot of signs.'

Ellis' diatribe on culture rapidly shifts its focus to the tabloid media. The tirade vented by Bateman's associate, Timothy Price, "about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city really is", finds its embodiment in the contents of "today's newspaper":

"In one issue - in one issue let's see here... strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis" - he flips through the pages excitedly - "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..." (AP 4)

The equation of one issue with one city, its emphasis on negative, sensational subject-matter, and the correlation of a tabloid newspaper with the reality of the city is distorted and one-sided to say the least. Price's judgments are gleaned from the media's slanted and sensational depiction of reality rather than from his own. His pleasure and excitement are made obvious, as much as his disgust, which all perversely mingle together. This induces in Price "a reaction to the times [that] is one of total and sheer acceptance, when your body has become somehow tuned into the insanity and you reach that point where it all makes sense, when it clicks" (AP 5-6). Body and mind together become attuned to the surreal, external chaos of the expansive media panorama.

If the urban landscape is a battleground for signs of various types, the interpretation of these signs presents as many obstacles and problems. American Psycho revels in the twisted ironies that transpire through any attempt to read things at face-value, to reduce the semantic possibilities of image/object to their conventional, culturally validated meaning. After taunting and sometimes violently

attacking the homeless, Bateman responds differently in a situation where he finds himself eyeing a very pretty homeless girl sitting on the steps of a brownstone on Amsterdam, a Styrofoam coffee cup resting on the step below her feet, and as if guided by radar I move toward her, smiling, fishing around in my pocket for change. Her face seems too young and fresh and tan for a homeless person's; it makes her plight all the more heartbreaking. . . . My nastiness vanishes and, wanting to offer something kind, something simple, I lean in, still staring, eyes radiating sympathy into her blank, grave face, and dropping a dollar into the Styrofoam cup I say, “Good luck.”

Her expression changes and because of this I notice the book - Sartre - in her lap and then the Columbia book bag by her side and finally the tan-colored coffee in the cup and my dollar bill floating in it and though all this happens in a matter of seconds it's played out in slow motion and she looks at me, then at the cup, and shouts, “Hey, what's your goddamn problem?” and frozen, hunched over the cup, cringing, I stutter, “I didn't ... I didn't know it was ... full,” and shaken, I walk away, hailing a taxi ... (AP 86-7)

Bateman's humanitarian reverie is shattered by his embarrassment, falling victim to his incorrigible superficiality. The outward appearance of the student for Bateman signifies nothing but privation and squalor, when internally (psychologically, intellectually and spiritually) she is probably infinitely richer. This humiliating scene, which reads like a twisted parody of a Christian television commercial, where the mask of a good Samaritan conceals sleaziness, serves its obvious satirical purpose. Yet its deeper significance is revealed in the moments following his humiliating moment, where Bateman yearns for a simpler, more natural existence, a return to a desocialized, primordial state of being.

Fleeing the scene by taxi, he 'hallucinate[s] the buildings into mountains, into volcanoes, the streets become jungles, the sky freezes into a backdrop, and before stepping out of the cab I have to cross my eyes in order to clear my vision' (AP 85). Bateman's psychosis, it seems, is the result of an acute over-socialization and acculturation that is not limited to himself. The phrase 'Silence Equals Death', worn on AIDS awareness T-shirts around New York City, is misread by his girlfriend
Evelyn as "Silkience Equals Death" (AP 331). "Are people having problems with their conditioners or something?" she asks, confused. Bateman, who misreads the slogan as "Science Equals Death", sighs in contempt of her inaccuracy and naivety rather than the profundity of the slogan. The automatic commodity association activated in Evelyn's mind demonstrates the preeminence of such signification. The real issue is obscured by deeply entrenched, habitual associations with 'the trans-regional brand-names of large companies' which, Wolfgang Fritz Haug notes, 'impose themselves on to the public's experience and virtually assume the status of natural phenomena.' Furthermore, this scenario effectively demonstrates, in Jameson's words, 'how the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity.'

Culture is so imposing in Ellis' fiction that the presence of nature becomes oddly imposing, outlandish or even misconstrued as culture itself. When Daisy, a model from the Elite agency, waits for a taxi in the drizzly night, she is adamant that the bolts of lightning that light up the sky are flashes emanating from paparazzi cameras:

"Where is the photographer? Patrick. Tell them to stop." She's confused, her head moving left, right, behind, left, right. She lowers her sunglasses.

"Oh my god," I mutter, my voice building to a shout. "It's lightning. Not a photographer. Lightning!" (AP 210)

This incident exemplifies the tendentious shift from "the natural" to "the cultural" expounded by Jameson that signifies a disturbance in the normative relations between things and their representations. In Ellis' fiction, culture has overthrown nature, yet nature still makes its estranged, ghostly presence felt, especially in the

---


5 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 49.
L.A. novels: 'There is a white VW Rabbit parked next to Danny's red Porsche in the driveway, which is parked next to a giant tumbleweed' (INF 88). Nature possesses an eerie, almost unnatural otherworldliness that is haunting, even threatening. Yet unlike the arid, wide-open landscapes of Los Angeles in *Less Than Zero* and *The Informers*, Bateman's descriptions of his habitat and rituals in *American Psycho* are devoid of the presence of nature, which has been usurped by culture. While visiting the Central Park zoo, he observes that: 'The zoo seems empty, devoid of life. The polar bears look stained and drugged. A crocodile floats morosely in an oily makeshift pond. The puffins stare sadly from their glass cage' (AP 297). The captive animals are victims of stifling enclosure, standing as moribund reproductions of Nature - nature as *nature morte*. Moments later, Bateman murders 'a child, barely five', by stabbing him in the neck (AP 298). Media accounts of such actual attacks have emphasized, as Seltzer notes, a regression into a violent primitivism: 'The notion of *wilding* governs at least the media accounts of the recent brutal attack on a woman by a "pack" of youths in that nature preserve at the heart of the city, the Central Park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted as a remedy for the "over-civilized" and degenerate urban dweller.' It is somewhat ironic that the account 'invokes the naturalist idiom of a violent primitivism and regeneration: a regeneration that takes place in the reproduction of "the natural" represented by the park or "nature museum"' The intensive acculturation of nature by culture is presented by Ellis not as a liberal utopian ideal that civilizes the savage, but as an ideal corrupted by the economic imperatives of capitalist expansion, and inherently repressive in its denial of the natural that violently resurges in a kind of Freudian 'return of the repressed'.

---

7 Seltzer, p. 217.
MEDIATED REALITIES

'If anything is to have any meaning for us it must take place in terms of the values and experiences of the media landscape.'

- J. G. BALLARD in interview (1970)

New social forms require new forms of personality, new modes of socialization, new ways of organizing experience.

- CHRISTOPHER LASCH, The Culture of Narcissism.

It has become customary to conceive of 'consciousness', in the words of Jameson, as 'a kind of construction rather than a stable substance . . . a locus of relationships rather than an ego in the older sense.' This postmodern conception of consciousness, which assumes the individual is shaped and informed by the external world, prevails in Ellis' writing, where the mass media constantly imposes itself as the filter or interface between a subject and his or her experience, grafting itself indelibly upon consciousness and its forms of expression. In modern society, the mass media holds religious significance, providing, as Jane Caputi notes, 'those repetitious pictures and stories which ritualistically demonstrate the basic order of the culture,' and therefore, like religions, 'socially construct reality, ingraining appropriate values and beliefs while simultaneously cultivating resistance to social change, a surrender to "things as they are."' Alienation is a redundant concept insofar as the subject is increasingly undifferentiated and intensively integrated into the cultural scene. The 'dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture' is, Jameson believes, to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the

8 Mark Dery, 'Sex Drive: J. G. Ballard and David Cronenberg', p. 45.
social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life - from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself - can be said to have become "cultural" in some original and yet untheorized sense."\textsuperscript{12} This dissolution means that 'distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. We are submerged . . . to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation'.\textsuperscript{13}

The firm entanglement of subjectivity and culture that distinguishes Ellis' characters is demonstrated by their tendency to conceive their experiences of reality within generic parameters. Their experiences are marked by an inability to comprehend reality on an individual, personal scale, often framed by culturally reified modes of seeing that have come to constitute a kind of hegemonic gaze. Ellis' characters are more attuned to a cinematic reality than to their own: "It's like a movie I've seen before and I know what's going to happen," I tell her. "How the whole thing's gonna end" (INF 217). Bateman's interior monologue, in particular, often serves to confirm the preeminence of an aestheticized reality that makes everything, including interior states, visible. At dinner with his secretary Jean, he experiences the following intimate moment in trite, crudely generic terms:

And though it has been in no way a romantic evening, she embraces me and this time emanates a warmth I'm not familiar with. I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost imagine hearing the swelling of an orchestra, can almost hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting in slow motion overhead, the seventy-millimeter image of her lips parting and the subsequent murmur of "I want you" in Dolby sound. But my embrace is frozen and I realize, at first distantly and then with greater clarity, that the havoc raging inside me is gradually subsiding and she is kissing me on the mouth and this jars me back into some kind of reality and I lightly push her away. (AP 265)

\textsuperscript{12} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism}, p. 48.

\textsuperscript{13} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism}, pp. 48-9.
Bateman's sensuality is moulded by the commodity aesthetics of film, television and advertising, described by Haug as 'one of the most powerful forces in capitalist societies', which in conjunction with the new media, 'is probably the dominant force in the collective imagination.' Such dreamy images and cultural ideals, which are inculcated into consciousness through the mass media, only serve to disappoint when real experience fails to live up to them. For Bateman, reality is undesirable, only the fantasy acceptable. Yet the fantasy can never live up to the reality - Bateman's existential affliction in a nutshell.

Ellis asserts the theme of imaginative degeneration in *American Psycho* through Bateman's innate appropriation of generic styles and expressions which boldly emphasise the influence of these forms as experiential matrixes that structure reality and fantasy. Bateman begins an account of sex with two prostitutes in the following terms: 'Sex happens - a hardcore montage' (AP 303). This blunt description of Bateman's sexual encounter foregrounds the artificial composition of the event, integrating the "hardcore" conventions of pornography with the flow of successive images that comprise a montage. Consciousness is framed by cinematic stylistics so that, in Adorno's words, 'representation triumphs over what is represented.' When Luis Carruthers, a closeted homosexual infatuated with Bateman, confronts him in Barney's, he conceives the moment in the following terms: 'Like a smash cut from a horror movie - a jump zoom - Luis Carruthers appears, suddenly, without warning, from behind his column, slinking and jumping at the same time, if that's possible' (AP 292). His fear of the sexually aberrant other is expressed through the hackneyed conventions of the horror film. Mass culture has overwhelmed Bateman's consciousness, crippling his imaginative capabilities.

Ellis also parodies prevalent cultural modes of expression by overloading them so that they explode under the force of their tawdry conventionality. They are laden with a familiarity, a predictability and a synthetic momentum that undermines their

The preposterous nature of Bateman’s ramblings are heightened by the shift from first to third person. Bateman becomes so engrossed in the clichéd representedness of his monologue, so immersed in this almost masturbatory frenzy of delusion that his deportment as narrator, his ‘mask of sanity’, temporarily slips, exposing him as a madman. Bateman’s fetishization of the representation - ‘an adrenaline rush causing panting’ - reaches a new level. His mind falls ‘out of sync, forgetting his destination’ (p. 351). The narrative sham ruptures to confirm our suspicions about the psychotic aesthetics at work. In Bateman, a degraded commercial idiom prevails, converted into comic parody that not only ridicules the idiom, but also its standing as ideal male fantasy of power and invincibility, echoing the ‘Real-Life Rambos’ that featured in an episode of *The Patty Winters Show* (p. 87): ‘intoxicated by the whirlwind of confusion ... now he’s jumping over an embankment, *somersaulting* over it, then he’s running like crazy, running full tilt, his brain locked into the physical exertion of utter, sheer panic’ (p. 350-1). After he crashes the hijacked cab into a Korean deli, he limps out of the store in typical action hero style, muttering the one-liner “nice going, Bateman” (p. 349). While a policeman struggles on the sidewalk trying to wrestle the magnum from his grasp, ‘Patrick keeps thinking there should be music’ to
accompany the heated moment (p. 349). This expectation is indicative of a mass media mentality that hyperbolizes everything in order to produce highly accessible levels of entertainment, but in this context ends up spoofing itself. While on the one hand these clichés propose a repressive limitation and modification of experience and reality, a restriction of the boundaries and possible forms experience may take, they also reveal an obsession with mimesis.

THE MIMETIC COMPULSION

The American mass media’s alliance with multinational corporations ensures that at a fundamental level mainstream society models itself on the images and standards set by the media and its commercial ‘sponsors’. According to Jane Caputi, the ‘persuasive power of an image, its propensity to call forth emulation, the need of an observer to translate image into act, to become the image: these principles clearly underlie and propel the modern institutions of fashion, advertising, the star system, and, of course, politics.’¹⁶ Ellis’ fiction displays a marked preoccupation with imitation, mimesis and emulation, especially in what Matthew Tyrnauer describes as its ‘production of a certain kind of jaded, MTV sensibility that seems to imitate and incorporate everything that it admires.’¹⁷ This ‘MTV sensibility’ is imbricated with the capitalist schematics of consumer culture, predicated upon the flashy promotion of musical artists, their images, and most importantly their ‘product’. While watching an afternoon television show ‘that played videos while a DJ from a local rock station introduced the clips’, Clay makes the following observation:

> There would be about a hundred teenagers dancing in front of a huge screen on which the videos were played; the images dwarfing the teenagers - and I would recognise people whom I had seen at clubs, dancing on the show,

smiling for the cameras, and then turning and looking up to the lighted, monolithic screen that was flashing the images at them. Some of them would mouth the words to the song that was being played. But I'd concentrate on the teenagers who didn't mouth the words; the teenagers who had forgotten them; the teenagers who maybe never knew them. (ZERO 194)

Evidently, this hypnotic 'flashing' of images provokes a mimetic reaction in these pliable teenagers. Clay is fascinated by the teenagers who have somehow missed or resisted the formidable lure of the 'monolithic' forces of culture.

A culture that fully embraces mimesis inevitably produces dangerously aberrant examples of it. During the 'predictable' torture of a 'nameless' girl who is made to watch a videotaped recording of a real murder, the indebtedness of Bateman's methods to generic representations of 'terror' and 'horror' is made baldly apparent. In mimicking the zombie by eating the brains of his victim onscreen and then proceeding to use the power drill a la *Body Double*, his favorite movie, he exhibits in mimetic homage his reverence for cinematic terror (AP 328). Bateman displays his venerative affinity for the representation in his blatantly emulative acts. Ellis further invests the cultural factor with central importance to *American Psycho* by linking the fictional Bateman with actual serial killers like Ted Bundy. Bateman's psychopathology, as Mim Udovitch observed in his review of *American Psycho* in the *Village Voice*, is 'cultural, not personal, as Ellis makes unsubtly plain by equipping him with external homicidal influences in the form of an affinity for the legends of Ed Gein, John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, *The Toolbox Murders, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the power drill scene from *Body Double*, and Donald Trump, rather than the internal motivations of rage, anguish, conflict and despair.'

While Bateman's actions give him a renewed sense of empowerment and certainty in the shift from his positioning as passive spectator to active participant, they also paradoxically enforce a false reality indebted to the representation. A feeling of power, possession and control provides the impetus for the individual

---

fixated on representations, argues David Michael Levin in his book *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*:

Presence must be totalized, possessed through its representation. Representation is the way subjectivity dominates its world, the way subjectivity imposes its will on all that is, all that presences. Re-presentation is therefore aggressive; but it is also a defense, and more specifically, an ego-logical defense, a defense of the ego, because it protects the ego’s prejudices, stereotypes, and delusions: it protects the ego against the need to be more open; it helps the ego to avoid authentic encounter; it blocks perception of otherness and difference.\(^\text{19}\)

Bateman’s fetishization of the representation is intimately bound up with his feelings of insecurity and lack of control which are alleviated by the malevolent power they afford him. This is demonstrated as he continues his torture of the ‘nameless’ girl:

[I] make her watch the rest of the tape and while she’s looking at the girl on the screen bleed from almost every possible orifice, I’m hoping that she realizes that this would have happened to her no matter what...this all would have happened anyway. *I would have found her.* This is the way the earth works. I decide not to bother with the camera tonight. (AP 328)

Bateman’s adamant declaration that ‘this would have happened to her no matter what’ is a fatalistic delusion of inevitability that intensifies his feelings of control, invincibility and renewed sense of self-determination. Furthermore, in forcing the victim to endure the taped murder of a different victim, and thereby multiply his terroristic presence, he seeks to enlarge and intensify this feeling of existential reaffirmation. Bateman’s excited fascination with seeing, especially spectacles of violence, reveal ‘an eroticizing of power and of the power of making-visible.’\(^\text{20}\)

It is now common in critical accounts and cultural portrayals of the serial killer to posit a connection between murder and imitation or mimesis. In positing a pathological addiction to representations as the cause of violence, Seltzer notes, such

---

accounts

implicitly understand such media representations as impinging on the subject "from the outside": the confiscation of identity and motive through a failure of distance with respect to representation, such that identification replaces identity. The addiction to representations would consist then in the contagious relation of the subject to imitation, simulation, or identification, such that identification brings the subject, and the subject's desires, into being and not the other way around.21

This tendency resides in the image of the actual sex killer who, Caputi argues, 'historically has functioned to call forth direct emulation, as demonstrated by the ubiquitous phenomenon of "copycat killings."'22 Ted Bundy, according to the writers of True Crime - Serial Killers, sometimes

used his victims to animate his sick fantasies. Given sufficient leisure, he would make them dress in certain clothes and pose in ways that re-created pornographic images that appealed to him. Many of the images came from the covers of cheap detective magazines that Bundy liked to read. Sometimes he took Polaroid snapshots of the young women during these sessions and kept them as souvenirs.23

These tendencies all betray a deadly compulsion that is fundamentally mimetic: the killer becomes an author by recreating the representations that appeal to his malignant sexuality, which imply that the killer desires integration, participation or some morbid connection with the cultural body.

This notion that the serial killer is imbricated with the cultural dynamics of representation and imitation is forcefully seized upon by Ellis. Bateman likens himself to a 'blank canvas' upon which the external, experiential reality of the media is inscribed or encoded, and which comprises and orders his internal psychotopography: '... life played out as a sitcom, a blank canvas that reconfigures itself into a soap opera' (AP 343). He exemplifies the kind of subject described

repeatedly in accounts of the serial killer, who is often defined as feeling radically determined from the outside in. As Seltzer explains, 'this amounts to an utter failure of distance or distinction between subject and scene. Which is to say that typical in these cases is the experience of a deep absorption in typicality itself: the serial killer... typifies typicality, the becoming abstract and general of the individuality of the individual.'

Bateman describes himself in the following abstract terms:

There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being - flesh, blood, skin, hair - but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel passion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. Something horrible was happening and yet I couldn’t figure out why - I couldn’t put my finger on it. (AP 282)

Bateman’s depersonalization, which has resulted from a ‘slow, purposeful erasure’, suggests a kind of reprogramming of his original self that posits his mind as a recordable tape or surface for inscription. The notion of erasure is a significant one in an age of mechanical reproduction, one that is heavily laden with Warholian connotations.

Bateman’s life and thoughts are contrivances, constructed out of popular motifs from which he cannot escape. He is convinced that something horrible is happening, but since it is impalpable, it cannot be described or located. His perceptual attunement to the visible and the material has limited his sensory capabilities, often geared almost exclusively toward the empirical. His view of his

---

25 This becomes apparent in a Newsweek review for Warhol’s book The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (1975) in which writer Jack Kroll ruminates on a quote by Warhol: ‘My Mind is like a tape recorder with one button - Erase.’ Kroll writes: ‘When you look at Warhol’s art you see how much has indeed been erased from both art and reality in modern times. Rembrandt looked at a human face and used the most exquisite skills to body forth its meaning and his compassion. Warhol looks - not at the face itself, but at the innumerable images of that face which clutter up our eyes and minds - and uses the most ‘banal’ of mechanical means to body forth its meaning - and his compassion. He has sinned; he has created chic icons for empty people to decorate their emptiness. But at his best he captures the pathos, the garish beauty, and something of the terror, of a society that lusts after such strange gauds.’ Quoted in Victor Bockris, Warhol, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990, p. 476. Withstanding compassion somewhat, Ellis’ ouevre bears many affinities with Warhol’s, which become more clearly established in the section titled ‘Clones.’
personality as an empty, fabricated 'rough resemblance' of a human being articulates his vacant typicality as well as the synthetic quality of his reality as reproducible imitation. Elsewhere he relates that 'Some kind of existential chasm opens up before me . . . and I decide this emptiness has, at least in part, . . . something to do with the tracking device on my VCR' (AP 180). This 'tracking device problem' is Bateman's restrictive, calibrated view of reality, unnaturally programmed toward a selective (mis)reading of the world.

The tragedy that lies at the hollow core of Patrick Bateman is that his fall into mimesis, rather than enriching his sense of self, only surrenders what is left of his dwindling identity to the invasive culture that created his depersonalized void from the outset. Bateman is condemned to shift terminally from one cliché or stereotype into another, as James Hisson observes:

The paradox of Bateman's elaborately cultivated "self," as he tries to play pornographer both to himself and to the reader, is the paradox of mimesis-as-power: to represent is to control but also to be delimited and controlled by the representation. If, ultimately, mimesis becomes a kind of murder, and murder, mimesis, the murderer is caught up in and murdered along with his creation.  

Bateman’s murders attempt to reinstate the separation of public and private experience, ‘to individuate the self by demarcating the divisions of inside and outside.’ Yet the genuine, interior expression of his angst and fury is moulded by exterior, artificial representations that defeat his own attempts to disincorporate himself from Culture. He vacillates furiously from one acceptable model of behaviour to an unacceptable model; he is always stuck in a mode. Bateman’s inner desolation is compounded by this inescapability of modes, symptomatic of a culture dominated by the language of the simulacrum, which in Jameson’s words, demonstrates ‘the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning

representations of our own current experience.' 28 Like the roaming multitudes of zombies which Steven Shaviro conceives as ‘overtly presented as simulacral doubles (equivalents rather than opposites) of living humans,’ 29 Bateman’s existence is a real-life simulacrum that emulates the atrocities of his horror heroes just like his overzealous attempts to conform to the norms of his yuppie peers.

It could be argued that in a postmodern world characterised by the proliferation of simulacra, and the blurring of reality and fantasy, the human mind is deficient of its own certainties and seeks to create its own. When they are not mimetic renditions of fictional atrocities, Bateman’s own, more elaborate murders are an attempt to renounce his false consciousness and connect with something uniquely real, something of his own making. Since his life is a fabrication, he possesses no authentic, recognizable reality of his own. This is made exceedingly evident in the following passage:

I spend the next fifteen minutes beside myself, pulling out a bluish rope of intestine, most of it still connected to the body, and shoving it into my mouth, choking on it, and it feels moist in my mouth and it’s filled with some kind of paste which smells bad. After an hour of digging, I detach her spinal cord and decide to Federal Express the thing without cleaning it, wrapped in tissue, under a different name, to Leona Helmsley. I want to drink this girl’s blood as though it were champagne and I plunge my face deep down into what’s left of her stomach, scratching my chomping jaw on a broken rib. The huge new television set is on in one of the rooms, first blaring out The Patty Winters Show, whose topic today is Human Dairies, then a game show, Wheel of Fortune, and the applause coming from the studio audience sounds like static each time a new letter is turned. I’m loosening the tie I’m still wearing with a blood-soaked hand, breathing in deeply. This is my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw. (AP 345)

Bateman gluttonously consumes the body in every way possible, feeling every sensation there is to feel in his shortlived burst of ‘reality.’ He loosens his tie, as though creating his own reality is hard work. These atrocities bespeak an uncontrollable craving for unique, unmediated experience, an affirmation of his own

28 Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, p. 21.
experience. The emphasis on excavation and digging posit reality as an archaeological find to be unearthed. The juxtaposition between the intrusive, ‘blaring’ television reality and the bloody reality he has just created are pitted against each other in an almost agonistic contrast. Bateman overcompensates for his superficiality and spectatorship during the days with extreme, literal invasions and excavations of the bodies of his, mostly female, victims at night. His killings are an affront to vicarious experience, to the simulation, to the flattened continuum of representations that dilute experience, depriving it of wholeness and intensity.

The ‘flow’ of second-hand experience that comprises Bateman’s stream-of-consciousness entails, like much modern theory, the death of the autonomous subject and the birth of a Nietzschean ‘subject as multiplicity’ comprised of conflicting forces and drives. While Ellis reveals through the myriad threads of generic discourses the multiplicity of voices that is the basis of Bateman’s thoughts and consciousness - the heterogeneous ‘schizophrenic’ persona of postmodernity - he implies that without an underlying unity, a permanent centre or immanent source of independent decision, he is powerless against becoming a vacant channel for the transmission of promiscuous cultural discourses.
4. THE CULTURAL MONSTER

THE MONSTER THEORY

In postmodern society, mainstream culture, despite serving to promote and uphold the machinations of the capitalist system, is also paradoxically the site upon which the corruption, greed and violence of capitalist society becomes distinctly manifest. The exploitation of culture by capitalism, like the exploitation of nature, produces monstrosities. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his preface to Monster Theory: Reading Culture, asserts that 'the monster is a problem for cultural studies, a code or a pattern or a presence or an absence that unsettles what has been constructed to be received as natural, as human.'¹ The examination of monstrousness as a mode of cultural discourse 'involves how the manifold boundaries (temporal, geographic, bodily, technological) that constitute “culture” become imbricated in the construction of the monster - a category that is itself a kind of limit case, an extreme version of marginalization, an abjecting epistemological device basic to the mechanics of deviance construction and identity formation.'² The monster's body, he explains, is a 'cultural body', for he is born

at a metaphorical crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment - of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant.³

The dark underside of the social and cultural body becomes literally, and individually

¹ Cohen, Monster Theory, p. ix.
² Cohen, Monster Theory, p. ix.
³ Cohen, Monster Theory, p. 4.
figured in Ellis’ characters: avaricious people are literally vampires; inveterate consumers are zombies or cannibals; America, embodied in the figure of Bateman, is a psychopath. In American Psycho, monster allusions - especially those of the vampire and zombie - are subsumed by Bateman’s culturally derivative persona to create a new, motley breed of killer spawned from and firmly entrenched in the social, cultural and economic bedrock of capitalism.

The nocturnal vampire is commonly associated with its modern incarnation, the serial killer. Joel Norris, in his biography Jeffrey Dahmer, described him in the following terms: ‘He was spiritually dead, but had become a vampire, a kind of walking dead who existed only to prey on his next victim. He was the closest thing to a nosferatu.’ Of his nocturnal existence, Ted Bundy once noted, “Sometimes I feel like a vampire.” These exemplars of the living dead evoke the metaphor of life-blood, which sustains the nocturnal predator and the wandering bloodthirsty corpse.

The vampire has a history of being linked to capitalism as Frank Grady observes:

In his 1982 essay “The Dialectic of Fear,” Franco Moretti makes a persuasive case for reading the vampire of Bram Stoker’s Dracula as a metaphor for capital . . . Moretti’s insight is based in part on Marx’s use of the term vampire to refer to the noxious economic activity of capitalism: “capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” Marx’s metaphor itself is a venerable one: the first recorded use of the word in English, in 1679, is quickly followed in 1688 by its metaphorical application to “the Vampires of the Publick, the Riflers of the Kingdom,” merchants who export currency.

While receiving a facial, Bateman touches his chest, ‘expecting a heart to be thumping quickly, impatiently, but there’s nothing there, not even a beat’ (AP 116). In The Informers, an obnoxious character named Jamie is a vampire who sleeps in a ‘new customized coffin’ replete with ‘FM radio, tape cassette, digital alarm clock,

---


Perry Ellis sheets, phone, small color TV with built-in VCR and cable (MTV, HBO) (INF 182). In many ways like Patrick Bateman, he also takes young women home and ‘bleeds’ them to death. Similarly, the life-in-death of the zombie, Shaviro believes, ‘is a nearly perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism, whether this be taken in the sense of the exploitation of living labour by dead labour, the deathlike regimentation of factories and other social spaces, or the artificial, externally driven stimulation of consumers.’ ‘I move like a zombie toward Bloomingdales’, Bateman notes during a Christmas shopping spree (AP 179). The figure of the zombie, like the serial killer, has firmly entrenched itself in the cultural imaginary of recent times to become what Shaviro, describing George A. Romero’s seminal ‘living dead’ film trilogy, calls ‘contagious allegories.’ The ‘sheer exorbitance’ of the zombies - especially in *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) which is set in a shopping mall - Shaviro writes,

figure a social process that no longer serves rationalized ends, but has taken on a strange and sinister life of its own . . . their destructive consumption of flesh - gleefully displayed to the audience by means of lurid special effects - immediately parallels the consumption of useless commodities by the American middle class. Commodity fetishism is a mode of desire that is not grounded in repression; rather, it is directly incited, multiplied, and affirmed by artificial means. As Meaghan Morris remarks, “A Deleuzian account of productive desire . . . is more apt for analyzing the forms of modern greed . . . than the lack based model assumed by psychoanalytic theories.” Want is a function of excess and extravagance, and not of deficiency: the more I consume, the more I demand to consume. “I shop, therefore I am” (Barbara Kruger).8

The zombies also parallel Ellis’ implicit anxieties about loss of identity, the death of the individual, and ‘the hell of the same’. ‘The dread that the zombies occasion,’ Shaviro writes, ‘is based more on a fear of infection than on one of annihilation. The living characters are concerned less about the prospect of being killed than they are

---

7 Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p. 84.
about being swept away by mimesis - of returning to existence after death, transformed into zombies themselves.' Bateman represents a new and sophisticated form of urban abomination whose cultivated animality makes the zombie and vampire seem kitsch and anachronistic next to his mongrel pedigree which comprises mammon, vampire, zombie and serial killer. 'I'm running down Broadway, then up Broadway, then down again, screaming like a banshee, my coat open, flying out behind me like some kind of cape' (AP 166).

**THE SERIAL KILLER**

The serial killer is a cultural spectre, a contemporary representation of virulent sexual desire and social transgression peculiar to post-industrial society. Mysterious and elusive, compelling and deadly, the serial killer is an aberration spawned by society in mysteriously intricate and complex ways that are at once horrific and fascinating. The serial killer has rapidly become, as Joyce Carol Oates remarks, the 'very emblem of evil, for his crimes are flagrant and self-delighting violations of taboo, so excessive as to beggar any measure of punishment.' The serial killer motif is often employed as a kind of cultural indicator that measures the anxieties, and allegorizes the atrocities of our time. This factor is perhaps what has endowed the serial killer with such fearful fascination and cultural resonance as 'our debased, condemned, yet eerily glorified Noble savage.'

Patrick Bateman is a cultural nemesis that stalks the society that nestled him, attacking and terrorising it from a privileged position within. He is a personification of social and cultural evil, a fractured personage borne out of the prestigious, avaricious world of Wall Street and mythically rooted in the dreaded, principally

---

11 Oates, 'Probing the Mind of a Serial Killer', p. 52.
American phenomenon of the serial killer. American Psycho preceded the production of a number of popular films centred on the serial killer which make direct statements about Culture. In John Waters' black comedy Serial Mom (1993), Kathleen Turner plays a freakish suburban housewife-cum-serial killer so perfectly normal that she murders those who disrupt the harmony and propriety of her white, suburban middle-class values. Films like Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers (1994) and French production Man Bites Dog (1992) have affirmed the cultural prominence of the serial killer genre, exploring the questionable relationship between the media and its audience, and between killers and the media. The killer (or killers) utilize and manipulate the media through their 'work', which is treated almost reverently as a text to be deciphered, an atrocity to be 'explained', eliciting a stern, cautionary message for society as a whole, like the parables and fables of old which yielded basic axiomatic principles - a 'moral of the story'. Many serial murders are inscribed with the killer's 'signature' or 'trademark' that identifies him with a particular type of crime and ritual. The killer's 'signature' is often revealing about his psychopathology and motivations, and suggests, according to Oates, 'a kinship, however distorted, with the artist.'

Yet, paradoxically, he is also a popular site for the collective denial or 'disavowal' of our violent society. The serial killer, writes Amy Taubin in Sight and Sound, by typifying an individualistic conception of institutionalized violence which

12 Serial murder is primarily a Western capitalist phenomenon. The United States "boasts" 74 percent of the world's serial killers, while Europe claims 19 percent. Quoted in Jane Caputi, 'American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction', Journal of American Culture, 16 (4), Winter 1993, pp. 110-11.

13 In David Fincher's Seven (1995), serial killer John Doe declares the special importance of his "work": "I'm setting an example. And what I've done is going to be puzzled over, and studied and followed . . . forever."

14 Oates, p. 56. She expands upon the expressive, aesthetic dimension existing within the psyche of the serial killer: "The psychopathic serial killer is a deep fantasist of the imagination, his fixations cruel parodies of romantic love and his bizarre, brutal acts frequently related to cruel parodies of "art." The serial killer's immersion in fantasy; his apparent helplessness in the face of his compulsion - in some cases, like "Son of Sam," the killer claims to hear demonic voices; the ritualistic and totemic elements of his grotesque "art"; the seemingly insatiable need to orchestrate, and reorchestrate, a drama of hallucinated control; the mystical-erotic "high" released by the consummation, after a lengthy period of premeditation - all suggest a kinship, however distorted, with the artist. It is as if the novelist, playwright, visual artist were incapable of translating his fantasy into words or images but was compelled, by powerful unconscious urges, to locate living individuals to perform for him, at his bequest." p. 56.
‘has no easy representation’, ‘acts as a substitute and a shield for a situation so incomprehensible and threatening it must be disavowed.’

This view is expanded by Carla Freccero:

The serial killer is a popular American figure of dementia, universally regarded as unthreatening precisely because of his singularity, the nonrationality of his pathology, and the individualized and eccentric nature of his violence. A serial killer is not the oppressed masses, and although his murders are usually lurid, his reach is limited. In this sense, the serial killer serves the function of a fetish in public culture: he is the means of the disavowal of institutionalized violence, while the “seriality” of his acts of violence marks the place of recognition in this disavowal. Through the serial killer, then, we recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction. We are thus able to locate the violence in his disorder rather than in ourselves or the social order.

Ellis brazenly combats this tendency by situating his sophisticated, flamboyant and affluent psychopath at the centre of American commerce, and by blurring ‘the boundaries between personal and national bodies.’

Ellis debases the national identity by localizing it within a microcosmic subject, personalizing the darker aspects of the American identity. By sharing common traits and psychological (dys)functions familiar to many of us - a fascination for violent entertainments, narcissism, commodity fetishism, celebrity worship - refusing the ‘violence-saturated quality of the culture’ becomes impossible. In Michel Foucault’s article, ‘The Dangerous Individual’, he notes that while ‘for a long time, the criminal had been no more than the person to whom a crime could be attributed and who could therefore be punished, today, the crime tends to be no more than the event which signals the existence of a dangerous element . . . in the social body.’

This is how Bateman is

---

16 Freccero, p. 48.
17 Cohen, Monster Theory, p. 10.
presented, not so much as a believable personage, but as a ‘dangerous element’, a menacing, hyperbolic possibility that playfully exploits the reality of serial killers. Bateman highlights ‘the social body’ and the cultural environment that fosters, or is conducive to, such a threatening ‘element’.

THE SERIAL KILLER AND CAPITALISM

Capital has implanted itself into the aesthetic and cultural realm, just as culture has become absorbed into all aspects of human existence. The polemical force of American Psycho in part derives from its anthropomorphic literalization of the symbolic practices of capitalism. Bateman is a schizoid embodiment of the American commercial machine that engenders and propels him - a stereotypical composite of thoroughbred yuppie and thoroughbred killer. The yuppie is specifically a product of ‘late capitalism’ just as the serial killer is the exemplary post-industrial American monster. Rather than forcibly combined, they are invidiously complementary, even fitting partners in symbolic terms. The equation of Wall Street broker and serial killer is not, Robert Zaller claims, as absurd as it first seems:

The idea of linking Wall Street, whose locution for success is “killing” and whose favored technique for it is the plundering and dismemberment of asset-rich corporations, with a succession of random murders and mutilations was an inspired, and in retrospect perhaps an inevitable one. Both “late” capitalism and serial murder involve extreme forms of depersonalization in which predators as well as victims are ultimately rendered faceless, action is reduced to function, and events seem randomly spewed out by a process whose design is inscrutable and whose purpose appears to be the mere reproduction of itself. Rage, violence, and repetition - this is both the automating mechanism and the sequence of action itself.19

Ellis sardonically posits serial killing as the nocturnal shadow of 'late' capitalism which descends after trading hours to continue its barbarous iniquities. This is garishly depicted when Bateman's rival on 'the Fisher account', Paul Owen, has his head split open by an axe. The predatory, survivalist impulse that underpins such competitive behaviour is not antithetical to market culture, to the 'buccaneer' capitalism of corporate raids and takeovers, and the 'head-hunting' of dwindling corporations that no longer 'make a killing'. When asked about his occupation, Bateman replies

“I'm into, oh, murders and executions mostly. It depends.” I shrug.
“Do you like it?” she asks, unfazed.
“Um... It depends. Why?” I take a bite of sorbet.
“Well, most guys I know who work in mergers and acquisitions don't really like it,” she says.
“That's not what I said,” I say, adding a forced smile, finishing my J&B.
“Oh, forget it.” (AP 206)

The parallels between such ostensibly disparate cultural phenomena provoke iconoclastic confrontations and collisions of established principles and codes of behaviour. The monster, Cohen contends, is a 'harbinger of category crisis': a dangerous form 'suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions... demanding a radical rethinking of boundary and normality.' American Psycho mordantly plays with the idea that rapacious consumption and acquisition are not, in principle, wholly anathema to ritualized killing, or the 'consumption' of human lives.

---

20 Cohen, Monster Theory, p. 6.
21 In his article 'Serial Killers (I)', Seltzer traces 'the forms of repetitive and addictive violence produced, or solicited, by the styles of production and reproduction that make up machine culture.' He states: The question of serial killing cannot be separated from the general forms of seriality, collection and counting conspicuous in consumer society and the forms of fetishism - the collecting of things and representations, persons and person-things like bodies - that traverse it... This genre of American psychosis - for example, in Bret Easton Ellis's notorious American Psycho (1991) - advertises, and trades on, the analogies, or causal relations, between these two forms of compulsive repetition, consumerism and serialized killing... it is in part this tension between analogy and cause - particularly in correlating economic and sexual motives - that is reenacted in scenarios of addictive violence.' Seltzer, 'Serial Killers (I)', p. 94.
Furthermore, capitalism, serial killing and apocalypse, it seems, are securely intertwined. The serial killer symbolically embodies an apocalyptic legacy like capitalism itself. "The mythic serial killer," Caputi asserts, "embodies not only femicidal but also ecocidal intent." The "torture, ravaging, mutilations and annihilations of individual women... by sex murderers, both factual and fictional, function as parallel rituals to the larger industrial, scientific, technological and militaristic "crimes against nature," those actions which contaminate, eviscerate and consume the planet, including deforestation, species extinctions, chemical and nuclear contamination, strip mining, etc." 22 In such instances, the economic imperatives of capitalism, and the unhinged prodigality that underlies them, are echoed and embodied in cultural phenomena in the same way that the cultural imperatives of consumption complement the economic.

Bateman's nightmares and bleak apocalyptic insights impart a terrible fear of a kind of postmodern, technological black plague: "... footage from the film in my head is endless shots of stone and any language heard is utterly foreign, the sound flickering away over the new images: blood pouring from automated tellers, women giving birth through their assholes, embryos frozen or scrambled (which is it?), nuclear warheads, billions of dollars, the total destruction of the world..." (AP 343) These paranoid visions clearly involve the intersection between the natural and cultural body, particularly the violent collisions between human bodies, machines and technologies. Jameson shares these concerns in declaring that "... this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination

22 Caputi, 'American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction', p. 104. Caputi uses the following disturbing passage to open her section on Ecocide:

Deforestation in the 1990's will claim roughly 110,000 acres per day in the tropics alone... Forest disintegration of this magnitude ripples throughout the global ecosystem. The visual metaphor that comes to mind is an earth skinned alive, its lungs ripped out...

Stephen J. Pyne, reviewing Trees of Life by Kenton Miller and Laura Tangle.
throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.'23 For a nation which rapaciously consumes 50 per cent of the world's resources with an acutely disproportionate 6 per cent of the world's population, and a murder rate that far exceeds that of all other industrialized nations,24 these visions are neither irrational nor far removed from the grim socio-economic and environmental realities that plague it.

'The monster', Cohen writes, 'notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes - as "that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis."'25 American Psycho is underscored by crisis - the crisis between subject and object, self and other, body and mind, nature and culture, inner and outer, borders which in the novel often cross and merge. It mostly eschews the staging of clearly delineable binary oppositions for an amoral discursive framework that dwells in conflation and constructs problematic analogical relations, rather than clear-cut polarities and differences. It complicates the familiar, and axiomatic, oppositions between the natural and the artifactual, matter and representation, the real and its substitutes, challenging the elementary opposition between the life process and the machine process, between bodies and technologies. It is this interchange and inversion of polarities, and their at times uncanny symbolic affinities, that ignite the polemical core of the novel.

23 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 5.
24 According to statistics cited in the documentary film *The Killing of America*, dir: Sheldon Renan, Mataichiro Yamamoto, Leonard Schrader, USA, 1981: 'America is the only industrialized nation with a higher murder rate of countries at civil war like Cambodia and Nicaragua. An attempted murder every three minutes. A murder victim every twenty minutes. Japan, England and West Germany, with a combined population equal to America have 6000 murders a year. America has 27000. In the 80 years of this century, America has had more than a million murders. More than her fatalities in all her wars.'

5. MADE IN THE U.S.A.

DESIGNER CONSUMPTION

We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life), and in a word a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales.

- ROLAND BARTHES, Mythologies.

In postmodern capitalist society, advertising is the enchanting mythology of desire that connects consumers to the whole mechanism of consumption. In the United States, which spends $160 billion on advertising compared to $130 billion on public education,2 consumption is a cultural totality into which collective dreams and desires are channelled, posing specious solutions to a myriad of modern afflictions. The omnipresence of commodities in Ellis’ writing connotes their inescapability, their chronic availability in a world where most emotional desires cannot be appeased and spiritual relief is beyond reach, indeed, beyond comprehension. His characters, if nothing else, are erudite consumers who can identify each other’s designer apparel from considerable distances, but are constantly confusing one another’s names. Their lives are ruled by a lifestyle which privileges certainty and satisfaction, while their opposites, uncertainty and dissatisfaction, are intolerable and avoided. This fetishization of the commodity is testament to the extensive conditioning and adaptation of the psyche to capitalist culture. Individuals are organized by the commercial machine just as a totalitarian state organizes its citizens; the difference

2 Quoted from the film documentary The Ad and the Ego, dir: Harold Boyne, Parallax Pictures, USA, 1997.
residing in the former subtly insinuating itself through voluntary, ‘democratic’ cultural consumption, while the latter is mandatory, overtly and violently imposed. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton asserts that the modern subject is not autonomous in his social, political and mental life, but ‘an obedient function of some deeper controlling structure, which now appears more and more to do its thinking and acting for it.’³ The ‘deeper controlling [super]structure’ is becoming increasingly invasive and imperceptible to consciousness, especially through the vast, all-encompassing field of advertising which ensures that we are mastered by its images before we can intelligibly master them.⁴ Leafing through an issue of *Vanity Fair*, a nameless character’s eyes ‘skim pages of advertisements that show me the best way to live’ (INF 81), unquestioningly convinced of the values espoused on their glossy paper.

*American Psycho* depicts the experience of a mind pathologically amenable to the forces of consumer culture. Set amid the rhapsodic materialism of the late 1980’s, it presents the operation of consumerism at its most opulent and grotesque. Bateman’s existence revolves around consumption: ‘there are too many cocktail parties in the upcoming weeks that I have to attend and my presence at them will put a crimp in my shopping schedule so it’s best if I get the shopping out of the way now’ (AP 178). Since life revolves around consumption, communication becomes a convenient adjunct, imbricated with the logic of this lifestyle. Objects of consumption function as signs, and the consumer society as a system of signs, so that consumption, in the words of Douglas Kellner, ‘is not to be interpreted primarily in relation to pleasure or the satisfaction of needs, but as a mode of social activity whereby one inserts oneself into the consumer society, conforming to socially normative behaviour and signifying that one is a member of society,’ and asserting their position within it.⁵ For Bateman, an inveterate conformist, this means the

⁴ Eagleton, p. 316.
pursuit of a pretentious, ersatz existence shaped by the culturally imposed imperatives of his chosen ‘lifestyle.’ Watching a French movie that he admittedly ‘completely did not understand’ does not perturb him since ‘it was fairly chic anyway’ (AP 200), at least fulfilling its duty to affect a cosmopolitan image. Preeminently motivated by social incentive rather than genuine interest - since social incentive is the only form of genuine interest - Bateman succumbs to a cultural ideology so pervasively ingrained that it presents itself as a natural life requirement.

The yuppie lifestyle is marked by its primarily functional, perfunctory and somewhat indifferent relationship to Culture. Bateman’s implicit attitude to the songs of the 1960’s and the 1980’s illustrate this point:

In front of Tower Records a college student with a clipboard asks me to name the saddest song I know. I tell him, without pausing, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” by the Beatles. Then he asks me to name the happiest song I know, and I say “Brilliant Disguise” by Bruce Springsteen.’ (p. 371, AP)

Although the significance of these song titles is quite self-explanatory, Bateman mistakenly accredits The Beatles when the song is by The Rolling Stones. For Thomas Irmer, this error symbolises an ‘open estrangement’ from the cultural impact and legacy of the 1960’s, a suppression of the past that coincides with the ascendance of a socially and morally deficient ‘cultural disease’ in the 1980’s, exemplified by the lifestyle of the Young Urban Professional which ‘seriously lacked a real cultural background.’ Irmer contends that this declining culture is most striking in numerous echoes of the 1960’s that Ellis brings into play in his ‘world of inhuman consumerism’, and serve to ‘highlight a deficiency in contemporary commercialism.’


7 Irmer, p. 353. He explains: ‘Many rock songs from this period ... [now] serve as atmospheric remakes in elevators, cabs and trendy restaurants. Songs of the 1960s that once stood for the longing for a new utopian community have been turned to New Age versions and muzak. ... In a whole chapter rock band Genesis is praised for having turned from avant-garde into anti-intellectual commercialism, and, most sarcastically, a concert by U2 turns out to be a front-row gathering of Wall Street giants. All these wrongly attributed allusions to the 1960s pop culture ... serve as sarcastic comment on a destructive recycling culture.’ p. 353.
television giant MTV, is a cause for concern in the United States which, Ann E. Kaplan argues, lacks a ‘genuinely oppositional youth culture.’ Unlike some European countries, America fosters a predominantly ‘uni-dimensional, commercialized and massified youth culture, not really organized by youth itself but by commercial agents, that has absorbed into itself, and trivialized, all the potentially subversive positions of earlier rock movements.’

In Ellis’ world, identity is rigorously determined by product choices. By instilling his characters with their own particular consumptive predilections, most of which converge rather than diverge, he economizes on description - ‘Descriptions bore me, I guess’ admits one character in *The Informers* - and capitalizes on associations and affiliations with the more prestigious factions of commodity culture: Calvin Klein; Giorgio Armani; Ralph Lauren; Rolex; Porsche; Cristal. Bateman’s mind is an exhaustive catalogue of such fashion designers and brand names, which he recognizes and recites with fanatical proficiency and ostensible precision. This surfeit of names and identities inflates his diminishing sense of self, serving to fill the void of his own vacuous impersonality by providing him with the warmth of surrogate identities, and a signified validation of his *savoir-vivre*. Names are slipped on the body as a kind of socially emboldening sartorial armour, or publicly flaunted as status

8 Ann E. Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 152. Kaplan expands on MTV as a consumptive phenomenon: ‘[T]he main force of MTV as a cable channel is consumption on a whole variety of levels, ranging from the literal (i.e. selling the sponsor’ goods, the rock stars’ records, and MTV itself) to the psychological (i.e. selling the image, the “look,” the style) ... the various ad­ segments, whether they be rock videos, a Levi or Cooler commercial, or promos for MTV itself, all have come to look more and more alike. It is for this reason that MTV, more than other television, may be said to be about consumption. It evokes a kind of hypnotic trance in which the spectator is suspended in a state of unsatisfied desire but forever under the illusion of imminent satisfaction through some kind of purchase. ... MTV appears symptomatic of Reagan’s America in its unquestioning materialism. Videos for the most part assume an upper-middle-class ambience (note the sleek, modern design settings, the emphasis on luxury items - big cars, fancy clothes, jewelry, contemporary furniture).’ pp. 143, 12, 30. respectively.

9 Kaplan, p. 152. This is made evident in Bateman’s appraisals of his favourite musical artists - Genesis, Whitney Houston, Huey Lewis and the News - where his vapid appreciation is expressed in the most pedestrian and mundane terms: music as “profession” rather than “art”: ‘In terms of lyrical craftsmanship and sheer songwriting skills this album hits a new peak of professionalism.’ (p. 136. AP) Rather than thoughtful critiques, these reviews are product endorsements that promote the bland, mass digestible cultural artefact. His mode of expression is conversant with the discourses of commercial culture that embrace promotion and consumption and eschew criticism and bad publicity. Bateman disapproves of confrontational lyrics or subject matter: anything, in his words, ‘too artsy, too intellectual.’ (p. 133. AP)
symbols: ‘I hope Armstrong doesn’t want to pay because I need to show the dim-witted bastard that I in fact do own a platinum American Express card.’ (p. 139. AP)

When pressed to provide details about Cheryl - who is initially described as ‘tan, streaked blond hair, thin, twentyish, a vague aspiration to be a newscaster’ - Graham’s elaboration is founded upon her habits as consumer:

Cheryl constantly, desperately reads Sydney Omarr’s *Guide to Pisces 1984*;
Cheryl loves the movie *Flashdance*, has seen it five times since last year, when it came out, and has ten ripped sweatshirts with the word MANIAC on them;
Cheryl works out to Jane Fonda tapes on the Betamax . . . Cheryl speaks highly of a book I have never heard of called *Megatrends*. (INF 77)

Cheryl epitomizes the culturally immersed subject who is the sum of her choices as consumer, just like Graham who constructs her identity through them. Consumption takes on even more drastic importance when Bateman justifies his violence and cruelty to his secretary and lover Jean by citing her upright, morally principled cinematic and musical tastes: ‘Besides, this girl’s favorite movie is *Pretty in Pink* and she thinks Sting is cool, so what is happening to her is, like, not totally undeserved and one shouldn’t feel bad for her. This is no time for the innocent’ (AP 382).

Bateman’s discrimination on grounds of personal tastes that embrace romantic idealism and optimism - *Pretty in Pink* - and the environmentally conscious - Sting - enforce not only his own prejudices, but also signal the existence of a new kind of prejudice - ‘brandism’ perhaps? - endemic to an advanced consumer society.

When fashion and consumer choices speak for themselves, any personal or idiosyncratic expression loses its importance. Herbert Marcuse argues that the extent to which modern civilization ‘transforms the object world into an extension of man’s mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable’ since consumers ‘recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in the automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.’\(^\text{10}\) This view is brutally realized when Bateman is induced to murder Bethany for mistakenly identifying his suit as a Henry

---

Stuart when it is in fact an "Armani! Giorgio Armani" (AP 247). For the pathological narcissist, mistaken designer means mistaken identity.

**MADE IN THE U.S.A.**

In the age of the ‘make-over,’ self-construction and transformation have become a pressing cultural imperative, indeed, a social and economic obligation. The traditional, typically American practice of the ‘making of the man’ is explored in *American Psycho* by tracing and coordinating the production of Patrick Bateman, a blatantly generic creature spawned from the prominent discourses of American culture. As demonstrated earlier, Bateman is a *made* subject, composed out of American cultural material: its collective beliefs, dreams, fascinations and fears, and most importantly, its popular culture. For Michel de Certeau, popular culture, ‘as well as a whole literature called ‘popular’, . . . present themselves essentially as ‘arts of making’ this or that, . . . [which] bring into play a ‘popular’ *ratio*, a way of thinking invested in a way of acting, an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from an art of using.’

In many ways, Bateman is an ideal, populist creation representing the common drives and aspirations of many mainstream Americans. He is, Caputi writes, ‘a man who epitomizes the “best” of American society. He is masculine, homophobic, white, rich, profoundly materialistic, “pornacious” (that is salaciously and insatiably interested in pornography), Harvard educated, a Wall Street broker and an unemotional man who wonders: “If I were an actual automaton what difference would there really be?”’

Yet he also embodies the abhorrent iniquities and barbarity that potentially underlie these prevailing norms and ideals, often canonized by American culture and society, but which for Ellis can become a license to entertain the sick and venal urges that reside in human nature itself.

---


In his book *Bodies and Machines*, Mark Seltzer explores how in American culture 'bodies and persons are things that can be made' and traces how 'mass-produced and mass-consumed cultural forms (literary, visual, and technological) couple the body and the machine.' 13 Bateman's whole persona and body is a construction - his personality, expression, and physical appearance are contrived to an inordinate degree. While he comes from an affluent, elite background, he also fits the mould of the 'typical American' as 'typical, standard, and reproducible.' 14 This typicality corresponds with what Seltzer calls 'the systematic making of Americans: the notion of "The American" as an artifact and product, something mass-produced and reproduced.' 15 Moreover, all of Ellis' characters appear in various ways overdetermined by their culture and society. "I guess we can't escape being a product of the times, can we?" admits a character in *The Informers* (p. 137).

The 'extreme forms of depersonalization' that Zaller identified earlier as inherent within 'late' capitalism and serial murder also exist at a fundamental, consumer level. Consumptive behaviour is organized through the patterns and codes established through the monitoring of consumer habits. 'Statistical inquiry,' de Certeau notes, 'in reorganizing the results of its analyses according to its own codes, 'finds' only the homogeneous.' 16 Indeed, as Seltzer affirms, 'the de-individualizing tendencies of statistics provide models of individualization: models for the generic, typical, or average man' that come to function as templates in 'the production of individuals as statistical persons.' 17 The serial killer exemplifies a *type* of killer while the yuppie is the exemplary by-product of a flourishing corporate capitalist world.

14 Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, p. 5.
17 Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, p. 105. He expands on this: 'the shifting measures of persons and things redefine typicality and the meaning of the standard, such that the statistical average and norm serve to correlate measure and humanity, that is measure and individuality. The correlation of persons and measures makes possible the cases and classes and sizes that, in turn, individualize individuals. This is what makes it possible for the bell-shaped curve of statistical regularities and deviations to serve as a fundamental index of identity and individuality: not the individual universal (the "type" of Lukacsian realism) but the statistical person (the American as typical). pp. 82-3.
55.

Both are advertently and inadvertently involved with the logic of statistics. Bateman is fascinated by trivial statistics which he regularly cites in his monologue or in conversation: 'By the time you finish reading this sentence, a Boeing jetliner will take off or land somewhere in the world.' (AP 275); "Seventy-five percent of all bottled water in America is actually spring water" (AP 249). A yuppie named Price complains with contempt about the number of homeless people: "That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today. I've kept count" (AP 4). In Less Than Zero, Clay notices that the 'checkout clerk is talking about murder statistics' (ZERO 74). The testing and measuring of reality through surveys, polls and statistics progressively standardizes and homogenizes our view of the world. Bateman, who thinks "Sex is mathematics" (AP 375), automatically declares the following details out of the blue, seemingly in anticipation of a survey: 'Favorite group: Talking Heads. Drink: J&B or Absolut on the rocks. TV show: Late Night with David Letterman. Soda: Diet Pepsi. Water: Evian. Sport: Baseball' (AP 395). American Psycho, according to Martin Schecter, is concerned with 'the “concretizing” of the individual from an array of data, a battery of simultaneous information,' and draws from the novel a bleak prediction: 'Soon the atom, the cell, the psyche, it will all be charted to infinity, the frontiers will all be paved and landscaped, with a 7-11 every fifteen miles. Pull in here and have your opinions polled, your personality analyzed, your sense of purpose refitted.'18

The ability to measure the typical at a glance makes it firmly intertwined with the visual, especially in the United States where the display of bodies and their accoutrements, as well as their observation as spectacle, are common practice. For Seltzer, the ‘conversion of individuals into numbers and cases and the conversion of bodies into visual displays’ correlate ‘two of the crucial control-technologies of machine culture: statistics and surveillance. Such a merger of optics and statistics posits a “remarkable parallelism between the desire to measure and the desire to

This merger is made strikingly apparent in the following passage where Bateman details his exercise regimen:

On the leg machines I do five sets of ten repetitions. For the back I also do five sets of ten repetitions. On the stomach crunch machine I've gotten so I can do six sets of fifteen and on the biceps curl machine I do seven sets of ten. Before moving to the free weights I spend twenty minutes on the exercise bike while reading the new issue of *Money* magazine. Over at the free weights I do three sets of fifteen repetitions of leg extensions, leg curls and leg presses, then three sets and twenty repetitions of barbell curls, then three sets and twenty repetitions of bent-over lateral raises for the rear deltoids and three sets and twenty repetitions of latissimus pulldowns, pulley rows, dead lifts and bent-over barbell rows. (AP 69)

The juxtaposition of body and machine, the functioning of the mind as an instrument of calculation, deepened further by its Capital reading material, and the status of the body as biological machine engaged in the production of muscle to capitalize on its appearance, all invoke the understanding of Bateman as a 'statistical person,' a product of the intercourse between the natural and the technological that makes up what Seltzer calls the 'body-machine complex.' Bateman is presented as an automatistic being that operates as a biomechanical growth industry - assisted by anabolic steroids - who intrinsically embodies the social, cultural and economic logistics of capitalism. Bateman's manufactured body, and those of the many 'hardbodied' women he encounters, fall into what Seltzer calls the 'generic model-body of the consumer, abstracted and individualized at once', that fashion 'The American' as 'something like a brand-name for the model citizen of commodity culture.' It is less an integral object than a zone of passive receptivity to all the...

19 Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, p. 100.
20 Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, p. 100. He writes: '[N]othing typifies the American sense of identity more than the love of nature (nature's nation) except perhaps its love of technology (made in America). It's this double-discourse of the natural and the technological that ... makes up the American "body-machine complex."' p. 152.
When Bateman meets Bethany, a Harvard schoolmate, he is immediately struck by her appearance: 'she looks just like a model' (AP 231). He affirms this observation moments later, stressing that she 'looks absolutely stunning, just like a model' (AP 231). Emphasis is fixed on resemblance, on the impressive emulation of the model. Beauty is measured in terms of its visual immediacy, its ability to physically 'stun' the senses, its essential objectness: self-contained, functional, manufactured, visually arresting, encased by a sleek exterior and, like the designer commodity, preferably imbued with a lustre of affluence and exclusivity. The contemporary obsession with 'supermodels', those superlative exemplars of a doll-like, almost freakish beauty, takes this concept to new extremes. Ellis persistently stresses the deindividualized nature of such terms to re-assert their place in the industrial logistics of commodity production, as well as propagating the drift towards homogeneity implied by the model. In the following passage, Ellis uses actual models to make this point:

Libby is blond and wearing black grosgrain high-heeled evening shoes with exaggeratedly pointed toes and red satin bows by Yves Saint Laurent. Daisy is blonder and wearing black satin tapered-toe pumps set off by splattered-silver sheer black stockings by Betsey Johnson. Caron is platinum blond and wearing stack-heeled leather boots with a pointed patent-leather toe and wool tweed turned-over calf by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. All three of them have on skimpy black wool-knit dresses by Giorgio di Sant’Angelo and are drinking champagne with cranberry juice and peach schnapps and smoking German cigarettes. (AP 200)

Not only are the models frighteningly similar but they are differentiated by the names of other people - fashion designers - and the varying degrees of 'blond,' 'blonder,' and 'platinum blond.' As Bateman himself admits elsewhere, 'Individuality [is] no longer an issue' (AP 375).

The processes involved in the ‘making’ of human beings, Seltzer contends, assume something like the form of a continuous ‘flow technology’ - exemplified by
drilling and training - which ‘transform interior states, such as seeing, thinking, planning, and feeling, into visible and measurable movements of the body.’

This ‘dream of directed and nonstop flow’ that forms ‘part of the psychotopography of machine culture’, manifested in everything from industrial assembly lines to the perpetual flow of television images, explains Bateman’s regular compulsion to ‘return some videotapes’ or stop at an automated teller or make a reservation or watch *The Patty Winters Show*. All of these activities are forms of psychological discipline that serve to maintain the consistently mechanical routine of mind and body, principally to avert reflection and meditation. Bateman is a methodical machine who sometimes speaks ‘mechanically’ (AP 260) and ‘robotically’ (AP 261). In a moment of physical exertion, ‘Patrick feels infected, like gasoline is coursing through his veins instead of blood...’ (AP 349).

The formidable impressive force exerted by mass culture on mass conceptions of the body constitute its manipulation and control by external forces, as Elizabeth Wilson explains:

*modernity inaugurates a multitude of practices which act upon the body - to discipline it, to make it more apt, in a ‘positive’ sense to alter and adapt it to the modern world. This discursive universe does not repress but, on the contrary, actively produces the body: drilling, eurythmics, aerobics - and of course fashion and beauty culture - may all be seen as part of this disciplinary mode, and, like dieting, exercise and dance, they have become integral to twentieth-century life. For Foucault, the very inescapability of this discursive and regimentary universe appears as some aspect of the ‘carceral’ nature of modern society.*

Eagleton concedes that a ‘recovery of the importance of the body has been one of the most precious achievements of recent radical thought’ but warns that ‘to posit the body and its pleasures as an unquestionably affirmative category is a dangerous illusion, in a social order which reifies and regulates corporeal pleasure for its own

---

22 Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, p. 166.
ends just as relentlessly as it colonizes the mind.'  

The extensive conditioning of the body is made ludicrously apparent in the following (edited) minutiae of Bateman's morning grooming regimen:

I pour some Plax antiplaque formula into a stainless-steel tumbler and swish it around my mouth for thirty seconds. Then I squeeze Rembrandt onto a faux-tortoise-shell toothbrush and start brushing my teeth (too hung over to floss properly - but maybe I flossed before bed last night?) and rinse with Listerine. Then I inspect my hands and use a nailbrush. I take the ice-pack mask off and use a deep-pore cleanser lotion, then an herb-mint facial masque which I leave on for ten minutes while I check my toenails. Then I use the Probright tooth polisher and next the Interplak tooth polisher (this in addition to the toothbrush) which has a speed of 4200 rpm and reverses direction forty-six times per second; the larger tufts clean between the teeth and massage the gums while the short ones scrub the tooth surfaces. I rinse again, with Cepacol. I wash the facial massage off with a spearmint face scrub. [...]. In the shower I use first a water-activated gel cleanser, then a honey-almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub. Vidal Sassoon shampoo is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older. (AP 26)

This rigorous beauty routine treats and conditions the body as much as the mind, which gains a sense of psychological order from physical tidiness, providing a suitable outlet for his compulsive behaviour. The time, effort and concentration afforded to this ritual attest to the radical and prodigious fashioning of the individual that precedes his outings into society. Products are utilized, under strict regulation and instruction, in the epic task of making and preparing the ultimate product, the body as asset (social, professional, sexual). The banal task is elevated into a grand narcissistic ritual, a kind of mummification of the soulless living body into desirable object-embodiment of the cultural 'body beautiful'. The subject is transformed into object, the body into an artifact and the individual compromised by the cultural

24 Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, pp. 7, 344, respectively.
imperatives of appearance. This uncertain relation between persons and things, artifacts and bodies, instances what Seltzer calls 'the problem of physical capital' which 'cannot be separated from the problem of cultural capital and, more specifically, from the hesitated relations between persons and representations, and between the natural and artifactual status of the individual.' Since consumption is often 'a matter of promoting a style' in which customers 'are buying both the styling commodities and their own saleability,' Bateman is constructing, styling and refining the packaging that is an instrument and expression of his saleability in the public sphere. His work colleague at Pierce and Pierce, Timothy Price measures his value in the mercantile terms of market culture: "In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset" (AP 3).

Market culture has attached itself indelibly to personal self-understanding and expression, primarily through advertising which, as Haug notes, 'transfers its breadth of experience and calculation to its target groups' by treating its human targets 'like commodities, to whom it offers the solution to their problem of realization.' Bateman's preparatory regimen is interspersed with the personal sales-talk of virtual advertisements: 'On weekends before a date I prefer to use the Greune Natural Revitalizing Shampoo, the conditioner and the Nutrient Complex. These are formulas that contain D-panthenol, a vitamin-B-complex factor; polysorbate 80, a cleansing agent for the scalp; and natural herbs' (AP 27). He is a veritable salesman whose endorsements not only promote the products themselves, but also perform the self-regarding promotion of himself as yuppie consumer par excellence. Like the salesperson, who 'must implant the sales function in their innermost being,' he has

---

25 Haug perceives the effects of these rituals upon the subject's relation to him or herself in the following terms: 'The doubly determined traits of commodity aesthetics, as moments in the aesthetics of cosmetic commodities as well as of the self-advertising styling of the human commodity, contain an awful role reversal. . . . By gaining this new face one simultaneously loses one's own. The body shares a similar fate; the commercialization of its surface appearance does not leave the sensual being unaffected. When capital chooses to profit from bodycare, there is no way that the existing relationship of the individual to their body can withstand this avaricious power.' Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, pp. 75-6.
26 Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, p. 63.
27 Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, p. 75.
developed ‘a cult of selling, becoming the preacher of a pure commercial fanaticism,’ an automaton of ‘selling for its own sake.’

Bateman’s public image is obviously modelled on the latest visions of the American yuppie that adorn the fashion pages of *GQ* (Gentleman Quarterly) and *Esquire*, juxtaposed with advertisements for various products like Clinique, Ralph Lauren, and Rembrandt toothpaste that compliment the image, as well as articles on social etiquette, skin care and personal grooming. These discourses indicate and reflect each other in a circular manner that assembles and valorizes a prevailing iconicity of the American ‘Gentleman’, reinforcing the logic of consumer culture by illuminating ‘a common discourse of the subject’s relation to the nation and its markets.’

‘Clothing,’ writes Elizabeth Wilson, ‘is a ‘vestimentary envelope’ that holds body and ego together. Our finished ‘appearance,’ therefore, is the end result (yet itself alterable and altering) of an often elaborate construction, both bodily and mental, of identity itself.’ This explains the deified status of fashion designers as the new gods since they literally ‘maketh the man’. Bateman’s obsession with designer clothing is not as manic as it first appears when one considers the American fixation with self-image.

In *American Psycho*, fashion and identity crisis are pitted against each other to suggest the internal division that exists within a self geared towards identity formation and transformation, and which privileges appearance at the expense of character. Bateman’s internal disarray is symptomatic of an image-obsessed culture.

---

31 Wilson, ‘Fashion and Postmodernism’, p. 408.
32 In recent times, what a Hollywood actor wears to the Oscars almost outshines the significance of their achievement, evident in the veritable ‘fashion parade’ entrance into the awards ceremony where celebrities automatically nominate their respective designer. Television’s *Entertainment Tonight* - “the most watched entertainment news program in the world” - is focusing increasingly on the style of celebrities - “ET Style” - their homes and their love life, while reports and analysis of the ‘entertainment’ itself has been relegated to minor importance or irrelevant. On the *Late Show with David Letterman*, featured celebrity guests, often present in the promotion of their film, t.v. show, tour, or book, are constantly reminded how “great” they “look” in a premeditated conversation. When one gleans the values held by such cultural institutions, and the advertisements that reinforce such attitudes, Bateman’s psychosis, his loss of self in this void of fatuous narcissism is understandable.
The office Halloween party was at the Royalton last week and I went as a mass murderer, complete with a sign painted on my back that read MASS MURDERER (which was decidedly lighter than the sandwich board I had constructed earlier that day that read DRILLER KILLER), and beneath those two words I had written in blood Yep, that’s me and the suit was also covered with blood, some of it fake, most of it real. In one fist I clenched a hank of Victoria Bell’s hair, and pinned next to my boutonniere (a small white rose) was a finger bone I’d boiled the flesh off of. As elaborate as my costume was, Craig McDermott still managed to win first place in the competition. (AP 330)

The archetypal serial killer is commonly distinguished by the paradox of his dualistic nature. His existence is characterized by a severe oscillation between a kind of external facade of pseudo-socialisation - ‘abnormal normality’ - and its deadly reversal - the sporadic eruption of a psychopathic, often sexual rage, from within. It is likely that Ellis, who in his extensive research on serial killers, deduced from their mental disposition a deep split in their compulsion, at one extreme, to emulate the prevailing norms and ideals of mainstream society, while at the other to offend and renounce them. Modern society has rendered ‘Man’ a dualistic casualty, Levin argues, locked into what he calls a world of conflicted, ‘self-defeating, virtually schizophrenic dualisms,’ separated into ‘animal-being and rationality, nature and culture, body and mind, matter and spirit, inner and outer, subject and object, ego and other, individual and society, private and public, feeling and reason.’ Bateman freely commutes between sophistication and savagery, culture and barbarism, served favourably by wealth, flamboyance and an impeccable physical appearance. Psychiatrists have concluded,’ writes James Horwitz,

that [Ted] Bundy is probably a psychopath, that his public persona - so clean cut, intelligent, attractive, charming, and normal - is, in fact, the most significant clue to the profound and disturbing abnormality beneath the surface . . . the psychopath characteristically wears a “mask of sanity” - in the words of Dr. Hervey Cleckey . . . who examined Bundy. And beneath this

These outwardly normal and inwardly insane psychological extremes are eerie in their ability to coexist. The serial killer's obsessive attention to detail and compulsiveness in the performance of daily and ritual activities are, according to David Lester, 'indicative of violence' and serve to provide 'a cushion against an uncertain world.'

Bateman is overcome by panic at the thought of his hair - "What's wrong with my hair?" In a matter of seconds my rage quadruples. "What the hell is wrong with my hair?" I touch it lightly (AP 332) - yet after murdering two prostitutes, he appears stable, even calm: 'No fear, no confusion. Unable to linger since there are things to be done today: return videotapes, work out at the gym, a new British musical on Broadway I promised Jeanette I'd take her to, a dinner reservation to be made somewhere' (AP 305). This incisive shift between normality and frenzy is a smooth transition for the serial killer bolstered by a social ego, or as Seltzer expresses it, a 'social exoskeleton'. Formed from the outside in, it is a 'social substitute skin' that assimilates external social forms and norms of behaviour, which are fused onto the individual's outward persona as a kind of synthetic social

---

36 Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime*, p. 109. The phrase "mask of sanity" is used by Norris, among others, to describe the duplicity of the serial killer. The 'mask of sanity' or 'normalcy' is a 'defense mechanism' which protects the killer from 'the turbulent and hostile violent central elements of their psyches.' But these separate identities can in some cases lead to 'gaps in reality.' Joel Norris, *Serial Killers: The Growing Menace*, Doubleday, New York, 1988, p. 220. It is highly likely that Ellis read Norris' study in his extensive research on serial killers for *American Psycho*. When Bateman finds himself pressed to contain his murderous rage he remarks: 'My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage.' (p. 279.) It is interesting to note that the two killers who, according to Norris, best personified the 'mask of sanity' were both socially active and familiar with methods of disguise. John Wayne Gacy, who was arrested for the murder of thirty-three boys, was a highly respected member of his community who owned and operated a construction and building development company in Chicago. He was active in local Democratic politics and a member of the Jay-Cees, for which he would dress himself as sad-faced Pogo the Clown and entertain young children at hospitals. Ted Bundy, who murdered at least thirty young women, was a charming and handsome law student, active in the student community and in local politics. He often lured victims by faking leg and arm injuries, with plaster casts, to appear helpless and effectively used disguises to elude capture. While imprisoned, Bundy described to an interviewer the repetition and frequency of his crimes in the following terms: "It became almost like acting a role. It wasn't difficult. The more an actor acts in a role, the better he becomes at it, the more he is apt to feel comfortable in it, to be able to do things spontaneously. And get better, as it were, in his role." Editors of *Time-Life Books*, p. 42.


38 Seltzer, 'Serial Killers (II): The Pathological Public Sphere', p. 148.
armour that protects their true identity. By functioning as a subterfuge that restrains these violent surges, the 'social substitute skin' also paradoxically structures the violence and chaos that underlies their internal existence. While the cultural dynamics of self-construction and transformation may have positive outcomes for American society, for Ellis they are a coercive, controlling force injurious to difference and individuality that effectively tightens the stranglehold of capitalism over the lives of its consumers.

CORROSIVE CONFORMITY

If such a thing as a psycho-analysis of today's prototypical culture were possible . . . such an investigation would needs show the sickness proper to the time to consist precisely in normality.

- THEODOR ADORNO Minima Moralia.39

Bateman's criminal acts, apart from making visible and drawing into relation a broad complex of concerns - sexual, socio-economic and representational or aesthetic - also, quite simply, convey the madness inherent in conformity and the volcanic rebellion that festers deep within it. Bateman's desires, as previously demonstrated, are inseparable from the models and norms of American consumer culture, just as his imagination and ideas are inseparable from the standardized genres and technologies of mass-production and mass culture. These desires are indicative of the acquiescent drift towards the homogeneous facilitated by capitalist society. His psychosis is therefore symptomatic of his fanatical adherence to social mores and values that only exacerbate his mental state, and ironically prolong his ability to continue his crimes undetected. Overcome by his compulsive drive for social acceptance, Bateman continues to endure an unsatisfying professional life:

39 Adorno, Minima Moralia, p. 58.
"Patrick," she says slowly. "If you're so uptight about work, why don't you just quit? You don't have to work."

"Because," I say, staring directly at her, "I... want... to... fit... in." (AP 237)

Nothing else matters except that his mission to conform is unhampered by the harsh realities of bad hair days and fully-booked exclusive restaurants: 'I'm almost on the verge of tears by the time we arrive at Pastels since I'm positive we won't get seated but the table is good, and relief that is almost tidal in scope washes over me in an awesome wave' (AP 39). Bateman has been conditioned to pursue that which destroys him for the paltry comforts that come from emulating his peers.

Georges Bataille, in his essay 'The Notion of Expenditure', argues that capitalist societies enforce 'a flat and untenable conception of existence' where 'any general judgment of social activity implies the principle that all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation.' Pleasure is therefore often diverted, denied or subordinated. Bataille foregrounds 'the contradiction between current social conceptions and the real needs of society' with a paternal metaphor which 'puts the father in opposition to the satisfaction of his son's needs':

This narrowness is such that it is impossible for the son to express his will.... the son does not even have the right to speak about what really gives him a fever; he is obliged to give people the impression that for him no horror can enter into consideration. In this respect, it is sad to say that conscious humanity has remained a minor; humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle nonproductive expenditure.

It is true that this exclusion is superficial and that it no more modifies practical activities than prohibitions limit the son, who indulges in his unavowed pleasures as soon as he is no longer in his father's presence. Humanity can allow itself the pleasure of expressing, in the father's interest, conceptions marked with flat paternal sufficiency and blindness. In the practice of life, however, humanity acts in a way that allows for the satisfaction of disarmingly savage needs, and it seems able to subsist only at the limits of

For Bataille, revolution is a liberation of the true nature of expenditure. Under the present conditions of capitalism, Bateman, who is a member of the ruling class, is at the same time also 'situated below' and amenable to the manipulative forces of a paternalistic consumer culture. His attenuated position as inveterate consumer in the subsumptive superstructure impels him towards insurrectionary revolt, 'to subsist only at the limits of horror.' In Bataille's theory, Allan Stoekl observes, the Marxist dialectic 'becomes a parodic dialectic, one of the history of the modes of expenditure', where the bourgeoisie controls the means of production as well as destruction, enabling them 'to destroy more than anyone else, to establish themselves above the poor, whom they have also destroyed.' One of the earliest uses of the term consume, Raymond Williams points out, meant 'to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust'. In this sense, consumption as waste, excess and spending represents, Featherstone notes, 'a paradoxical presence within the productionist emphasis of capitalist and state socialist societies which must somehow be controlled and channelled.' It is no surprise that Bateman's manic consumption of commodities reaches its nadir in the consumption of humans.

Yet Bateman's murders, in some respects, are executed in a manner, contrary to Bataille's theory, that employs an extreme, blatant form of utility, rather than a

---

41 Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', p. 117.
42 The issue of paternalism is crucial, considering Bateman's father is entirely absent from the novel, apart from his appearance in a photograph. Family matters are bureaucratic, attended to by intermediaries: "... my father's accountant, Charles Conroy, and the trustee of his estate, Nicholas Lee, both called last week and mutually suggested that it would be in everyone's best interest to use this date as an excuse to find out what Sean's doing with his life and perhaps ask a pertinent question or two." (p. 224. AP) "The collapse of paternal authority," Bratlinger states, 'automatically sets in train a search for a new father on whom to rely.' Patrick Brantlinger, Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture and Social Decay. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1983, p. 174. Bateman is essentially fathered by his culture. Famous entrepreneur Donald Trump is Bateman's veritable father figure, his guiding force Capital itself. Denied the formation of genuine familial bonds and emotional security, Bateman seeks integration into the cultural fabric that functions like a surrogate family where acceptance into it is easily, conveniently bought.
44 Featherstone, Consumer Culture and Postmodernism, p. 21.
45 Featherstone, Consumer Culture and Postmodernism, p. 21.
destructive repudiation. Tools of construction and utility - nail gun, power drill, chainsaw, jumper cables hooked up to a battery - are made egregiously useful in the subject's annihilation. In desecrating the sanctity of the commodity by using it for evil, destructive purposes, his actions entail an iconoclastic misuse of the commodity as well as a ritualistic celebration of its status as a corrupted utility. Bateman's rampages express the drastic revolt of an overcultivated, oversocialized mind and the malfunctioning of the capitalist principles of productivity and reproduction. He is a dysfunctional consumer who wrecks destruction and annihilation, a desecrator of the social who deconstructs the construction of consumer consciousness. 'Aberration', Adorno contends, 'is really only short-circuited adaptation.'

Bateman is so desperately a part of the culture and society he accedes to that he is also, conversely, a serial killer in revolt from it. He admits this to his lover Evelyn over dinner:

"My . . . my need to engage in . . . homicidal behaviour on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected," I tell her, measuring each word carefully.
"But I . . . have no other way to express my blocked . . . needs."
(AP 338)

Bateman's murders are mobilized by a criminality that thrives on a liberating defiance of civilized society. Through them he renounces his socialized origins, re-creating his behaviour and experience according to his own aberrant desires and whims. The 'abnormal normality' of his public persona is cast off with the insurgence of his private persona. This notion is congruent with Elliot Leyton's view of serial murder as a 'personalized form of social protest'. Yet this protest is never really achieved with any success. Bateman cannot resist his deep-seated compulsion to conform, even in his most heinous acts, where he is dogged by culinary correctness:

The smell of meat and blood clouds up the condo until I don't notice it anymore. And later my macabre joy sours and I'm weeping for myself,

unable to find solace in any of this, crying out, sobbing “I just want to be loved,” cursing the earth and everything I have been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer - all of it was wrong, without any final purpose. All it came down to was: adapt or die. I imagine my own vacant face, the disembodied voice coming from its mouth: These are terrible times. Maggots already writhe across the human sausage, the drool pouring from my lips dribbles over them, and I still can’t tell if I’m cooking any of this correctly, because I’m crying too hard and I have never really cooked anything before. (AP 345-6)

There is a painful absurdity in Bateman’s repeatedly futile efforts to achieve any measure of genuine satisfaction. The ‘macabre joy’ quickly sours in the pathetic realization that he has been trained only in the neglect and betrayal of his true self, that he is scarcely, tragically, incapable of happiness.

His desolation becomes profoundly clear to him when he becomes privy to the duplicity of a disillusioned, apostate yuppie like himself. He describes the event to Jean in answer to her question: “Haven’t you ever wanted to make someone happy?”

“I saw some guy in the men’s room . . . a total . . . Wall Street guy . . . wearing a one-button viscose, wool and nylon suit by . . . Luciano Soprani . . . a cotton shirt by . . . Gitman Brothers . . . a silk tie by Ermenegildo Zegna and, I mean, I recognized the guy, a broker, named Eldridge . . . I’ve seen him at Harry’s and Au Bar and DuPlex and Alex Goes to Camp . . . all the places, but . . . when I went in after him, I saw . . . he was writing . . . something on the wall above the . . . urinal he was standing at.” I pause, take a swallow of her beer. “When he saw me come in . . . he stopped writing . . . put away the Mont Blanc pen . . . he zipped up his pants . . . said Hello, Henderson to me . . . checked his hair in the mirror, coughed . . . like he was nervous or . . . something and . . . left the room.” I pause again, another swallow. “Anyway . . . I went over to use the . . . urinal and . . . I leaned over . . . to read what he . . . wrote.” Shuddering, I slowly wipe my forehead with a napkin.

“Which was?” Jean asks cautiously.

I close my eyes, three words fall from my mouth, these lips: “Kill . . . All . . . Yuppies.” (AP 374)
The illusion of the yuppie as exemplar of plenitude and fulfilment is shattered to disclose a discontented hypocrite. The broken flow of his description evokes the atrophy and disintegration of this illusion while the solemn tone indicates the synthesis of genuine, conscientious reflection. The only person Bateman has ever tried to make happy is himself and he has failed miserably. He only comes to this previously inconceivable realization when he notices that wretchedness is a possibility, indeed, an indisputable, *visible* fact. Eldridge’s quaint, graffitied dissent is the most subversive act Bateman has ever encountered, leaving him breathless at the thought of it. One cannot help but succumb to the allusion, intentional or not, to Marcel Duchamp’s Dadaist icon *Fountain* (1917), a urinal with the signature ‘R. Mutt’ painted on its side, which stresses that art, like Bateman’s predicament, instead of being ‘something new and unique, is commonplace and mass-produced.’

Bateman’s monumental realization arrives not from an intense private moment, but through the confronting, illicit public expression of graffiti. Graffiti, which Michael Warner calls a ‘counterpublicity that cuts against the self-contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere,’ has evolved to become a ubiquitous, outlawed medium of urban expression. At its core, Susan Stewart argues, the graffiti subculture redraws the link of the consumer to the cultural body, to a public sphere monopolized by the mass media, especially advertising. By inscribing this body with their own signatures and sentiments, much like the dissemination of the brand named product, the hegemony of capitalism is challenged by the superimposition of an Other public voice, somewhat anonymous and disenfranchised, that is active, rather than passive. ‘Graffiti may be a petty crime,’ Stewart concludes,

but its threat to value is an inventive one, for it forms a critique of all privatized consumption, and it carries out that threat in full view, in repetition, so that the public has nowhere to look, no place to locate an averted glance. And that critique is paradoxically mounted from a relentless individualism, an individualism which, with its perfected monogram, arose out of the paradox of

---

all commodity relations in an attempt to create a mass individual; an ideal consumer, a necessarily fading star. The independence of the graffiti writer has been shaped by a freedom both promised and denied by those relations—a freedom of choice which is a freedom among delimited and clearly unattainable goals. While that paradise of consumption promised the transference of uniqueness from the artifact to the subject, graffiti underlines again and again an imaginary uniqueness of the subject and a dissolution of artifactual status per se.\(^{50}\)

Bateman is arrested by the active underlying revolt that subsists within conformity. Inhibited private discontent is exhibited in full public view where an ‘averted glance’ becomes difficult. The seditious slogan is terrifying in its implications for change and an emancipated individualism, as well as awesome in the revelation of a ‘mass individual’ and the commonality of his or her dissent.

**C L O N E S**

Mute icons are the only kind of beauty we find acceptable today.

- MARK ROTHKO.

The advent of cloning is as significant a development for culture and society as it is for science. Ellis’ novels are pervaded by a menacing, suffocating sameness indicative of a coerced cultural unity. Their insistent homogeneity derives largely from the remarkably consistent patterns of symbolism and imagery that contribute to the overwhelming sense of dread that looms in his novels, lending them what Nicki Sahlin identifies as ‘an existential dimension that goes beyond the limits of verisimilitude.’\(^{51}\) In the L.A. novels, his characters are invariably featureless and regular, sharing an awful number of similarities in stark disproportion to their

---


differences. Devoid of distinction and identity, many of these characters can only be distinguished by name. For Clay, whose name implies his malleability, this is doubly disturbing, perhaps explaining his frequently uneasy encounters with clones and lookalikes: ‘There are mostly young boys in the house and they seem to be in every room and they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them’ (ZERO 152). In American Psycho, Bateman and his associates are regularly mistaken for other people. For Bateman, this is almost a source of reassurance:

From my POV Paul Owen sits at a table across the room with someone who looks a lot like Trent Moore, or Roger Daly, and some other guy who looks like Frederick Connell... Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam... but for some reason it doesn’t really matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the exact same thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable; it doesn’t irk me. (AP 88-9)

Ellis’ characters regularly encounter copies of themselves, and it is probable that they surround themselves with lookalikes to ensure reflections of their image emit constantly around them. These over-cultivated clones evince a kind of collective narcissism for, as Levin notes, the ‘narcissistic ego requires, and is consequently dependent upon, a continual mirroring by others... to confirm its most basic sense of reality.’

Bateman’s attention to others is categorical and reductive - hardbody, beggar, faggot - and dissective - blond (hair), tan (skin), hard (body). The face, ‘the surface upon which subjectivity is figured’ is often ignored. People are faceless, abstracted bodies which points to the depersonalization, indeed, repudiation of subjectivity. By downplaying the distinctive elements inherent in others, he augments his own dwindling sense of self. While Bateman thrives on the affirmation

of his own exclusivity and privilege - 'I'm left with one comforting thought: I am rich - millions are not' (AP 392) - he also harbours a latent obsession with the homogeneous, and a pronounced fear of difference. In the video store, he is seized by an anxiety attack when realizing that 'There are too many fucking movies to choose from', in which he proceeds to take two Valium. Overwhelmed by so many choices he reaches, as if 'programmed' for *Body Double*, a movie he has rented thirty-seven times (AP 112). It also manifests itself in his everyday routine: '[I] turn up the Walkman just as Bon Jovi cries "It's all the same, only the names have changed . . ."' and move on, stopping at an automated teller to take three hundred dollars out for no particular reason, all the bills crisp, freshly printed twenties, and delicately place them in my gazelleskin wallet so as not to wrinkle them' (AP 163). Like the 'freshly printed twenties', people are also interchangeable, evacuated of distinction and personality. They are objects evaluated in the same way as manufactured items and models, replete with tan, muscular, aerobicized hardbody and added extras like glamorous social ties, prestigious family lineage and wealth. The seemingly manufactured Aryan clones and 'hardbodies' that inhabit Ellis' world render almost inconceivable the notion that they are biologically produced, for they are conveyed almost as assembly-line people.

Cloning implies artificiality and technological reproduction since, as Baudrillard notes, it 'radically eliminates not only the mother but also the father,' thereby precluding 'the interaction between his genes and the mother's, the imbrication of the parents' differences, and above all the joint act of procreation.'\(^5\) In this context, the failure 'to merge' takes on a new biological significance, as well as suggesting that their parents are detached, not really parents in the true sense. The clones that populate Ellis' fiction also reflect not only his paranoid vision of physical and cultural homogenization, but also what he perceives as America's latent fascination with Aryan beauty. This fear is affirmed, for example, by Caputi's frightening observation that spanning over two decades 'the cover girl makeup line

---

passed from Cybil Sheppard as the premier “cover girl” right into Cheryl Tiegs and then Christie Brinkley with scarcely a perceptible blink of its blonde, blue-eyed, and obviously racist, image.’

For Baudrillard, the homogeneous, integrative tendencies inherent in postmodernity, specifically in consumer culture through advertising, the media and the ‘conspicuous consumption’ of commodities, increasingly give way to ‘the hell of the same’:

Inasmuch as the individual no longer confronts the other, he finds himself face to face with himself. On account of an aggressive backlash on the part of his immune system, a dislocation of his own code and the destruction of his own defences, the individual becomes in a sense an antibody to himself. Our society is entirely dedicated to neutralizing otherness, to destroying the other as a natural point of reference in a vast flood of aseptic communication and interaction, of illusory exchange and contact. By dint of communication, our society develops an allergy to itself. By becoming transparent in its genetic, biological and cybernetic being, the body even develops an allergy to its own shadow. Otherness denied becomes a spectre and returns in the form of a self-destructive process. . . This is our clone-ideal today: a subject purged of the other, deprived of its divided character and doomed to self-metastasis, to pure repetition. No longer the hell of other people, but the hell of the same.

Bateman’s denial of his own otherness gives rise to his destructive duality. His individuality is drowned in his muted typicality, while his personal expression is

55 Caputi, The Age Of Sex Crime, p. 175. In The Dialectic of Enlightenment (1979), Adorno and Horkheimer draw an analogy between the Nazi manipulation of mass media in Europe and the commercial manipulation of media in the United States. This viewpoint is summarized by Crook, Pakulski, and Waters: ‘In late capitalism, cultural production and consumption are absorbed into the system of capitalist production so that culture becomes ‘commodified.’ As cultural production is industrialized, the differences between cultural products become a matter of mere ‘image’ or ‘style’, no more significant than those between a Chrysler and a General Motors automobile. In this erosion of difference and triumph of style lies the convergence between the ‘culture industry’ and totalitarianism. ‘In the culture industry . . . imitation finally becomes absolute. Having ceased to be anything but style, it reveals the latter’s secret: obedience to the social hierarchy’ (1979: 131). Culture loses its capacity to function as a site at which mature individuals can critically reflect upon their society and their own lives. Drawing on Freudian themes, Adorno and Horkheimer assert that the net effect of the culture industry is a real regression of individuality. The imitative, or ‘mimetic’, attitudes and behaviours it fosters arrest individual development at a stage which is still infantile. From this darkest of perspectives, then, commodification converges with totalitarian manipulation in the destruction of all cultural value, the promotion of conformism and the retardation of individual development.’ Quoted in S. Crook, J. Pakulski, M. Waters, Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society, Sage, London, 1992, pp. 53-4.

heavily contrived and depersonalized. Before a routine evening dinner at Deck Chairs, Bateman orders his secretary to ‘research’ the restaurant ‘thoroughly’, presenting him with ‘three alternative menus of what I should order before I left the office today’ (AP 93). He also assigns her to expedite his seasons greetings: ‘I asked her to sign, stamp and mail three hundred designer Christmas cards with a Mark Kostabi print on them...’ (AP 177) The depersonalization of this festive gesture is taken to an absurd level when one considers the irony of his choice of artist in Mark Kostabi. Bateman’s expression is personalized only by his choice of card. Just as Jameson laments the passing of the individual, idiosyncratic brush stroke in Pop Art, Ellis’ work similarly mourns the growing obsolescence of genuine, personal expression in a disposable consumer culture where such expression is conveniently bought and conveniently discarded. The reductive, homogenizing tendencies inherent within mass culture are epitomized in the ‘Zero’ of Less Than Zero, which, as Freese contends, is ‘a metaphor of ultimacy indicating that the irresistible movement from distinction and differentiation to sameness and interchangeability has run its course, that an irreversible and universal ‘merging’ other than the desirable one of human interaction is about to occur, and that the energy necessary for survival is on the verge of ‘disappearing here.’”

57 A New York artist notorious for signing works painted by artists employed by him, Kostabi, according to The Face, boasted in the late 80’s that he was ‘the world’s greatest con artist, the McDonalds of the art world,’ and was known in interviews to repeat trademark epigrams or “Kostabi-isms” like ‘A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Dollars,’ ‘Most Artists Steal Their Ideas, I Pay for Mine’ and ‘When You’re Bought You’re Hot.’ Steve Beard, ‘Kostabi’, The Face Vol. 2. No. 20, May 1990, pp. 34-7.

From TV to newspapers, from advertising to all sorts of mercantile epiphanies, our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey. It is a sort of epic of the eye and of the impulse to read. The economy itself, transformed into a 'semeiocracy', encourages a hypertrophic development of reading. Thus, for the binary set production-consumption, one would substitute its more general equivalent: writing - reading. Reading (an image or a text), moreover, seems to constitute the maximal development of the passivity assumed to characterize the consumer, who is conceived of as a voyeur (whether troglodytic or itinerant) in a 'show-biz society.'


In personifying a certain myopia or blindness that results from an overriding fixation with seeing and surfaces, Ellis' characters mark an extreme progression into what a small faction of art and cultural critics call 'the hegemony of the visible'. They are exponents of a pathologically narrow mode of perception through which everything is perceptible only in its stark materiality, but not decipherable or comprehended. Nothing of any interest or import lies beyond what is seen. An incorrigible casualty of such flattened perception, Bateman admits despairingly: 'Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in . . . Reflection is useless, the world is senseless' (AP 375). This primacy of vision, which dominates the internal world of the subject, appears a direct consequence of an increasingly visual cultural landscape.

The privileging of the sense of sight in the modern era is assumed by prominent critics such as Hal Foster and Martin Jay to reside in Cartesian perspectivalism. Touted as 'the reigning visual model of modernity,' it is a conflation of 'Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of

---

1 Michel de Certeau, 'The Practice of Everyday Life', p. 482.
subjective rationality in philosophy.'

This 'modern scopic regime per se,' Martin Jay explains, has a number of implications for the order of the visual in perception, which through the course of history has fostered what he calls 'de-narrativization or de-textualization':

... the diminution of the discursive function of painting, its telling a story to the unlettered masses, in favour of its figural function, meant the increasing autonomy of the image from any extrinsic purpose, religious or otherwise. The effect of realism was consequently enhanced as canvases were filled with more and more information that seemed unrelated to any narrative or textual function. Cartesian perspectivalism was thus in league with a scientific world view that no longer hermeneutically read the world as a divine text, but rather saw it as situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher.

Ellis' disregard for conventional narrative, especially in American Psycho, which is held together by its consumer minutiae and fatuous dialogue, marks the present 'hypertrophic' degeneration of hermeneutical readings of the world, lost in the adaptive regression of 'reading' to its flattened, culturally viable, empirical mode - 'seeing.' The dilation of visual perception occurs in stark disproportion to the diminution of contemplative and analytical modes of thought which accordingly reflect the passive, uncritical stances cultivated by mass culture.

Bateman's vision exemplifies the Cartesian gaze, what Levin calls the 'technological eye.' This gaze, which prevails in today's world, has become more concealed since 'it has become so pervasive, so normative.' The technological eye views the world theoretically and instrumentally: theoretically, by seeing all things as being 'present-at-hand in their sheer exactness, present just in regard to their suchness, their substantiality, their being something,' and instrumentally, by

---

appearing ‘ready-to-hand, useful, readily available for practical application.’ Bateman’s base conception of the desirable female as ‘hardbody,’ hard in her muscular physicality, and functional, readily available to use like hardware, embodies both of these views. This gaze is inherently reductive, according to Levin, since it develops ‘only one aspect of its primordial ontological potential,’ namely ‘its detached, dispassionate, theoretically disinterested power to survey, encompass, and calculate or categorize with one sweep of a glance.’ This overriding tendency in our vision, he argues, is reflected in the history of Western metaphysics, which ‘unquestionably privileges a metaphysics of permanence, constancy, fixity, simultaneous co-presence, substance and totalization.’ Bateman is imprisoned by such rigid ideas that have become indelibly fixed in his mind: ‘I have no patience for revelations, for new beginnings, for events that take place beyond the realm of my immediate vision’ (AP 241). For Martin Heidegger, this foregrounding of the immediately visible has inaugurated what he calls a ‘frontal ontology’ in which ‘vision has degenerated into mere optics.’

Bateman’s eye is redolent of the disembodied eye of the camera, everything in his view flattened by his reductive ray of perception. Much of his experience is conceived within cinematic parameters, epitomized by his monotonous encountering of events ‘like in a movie’ and in the conflation of his own roving eye with the camera’s ‘panning’ movement. Mechanical reproduction has assumed a primary role in shaping conceptions of reality and transforming it in the process. ‘In the realm of mechanical reproduction,’ Steven Shaviro argues, the distinction between realism and illusionism is ‘a false one’ since the ‘machines used by the filmmaker can no longer be regarded as tools to manipulate reality from a distance, for there no longer

6 Levin, The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation, p. 98.
7 Levin, The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation, p. 98.
9 Ellis acknowledges his characters are ‘so obsessed with the surface of things that happen to them, that what they describe is really only action and dialogue,’ and are ‘like video cameras, who can only record what happens to them.’ Athena Thompson, “Bret Easton Ellis,” Black and White, December 1994, No. 10. p. 85.
is any distance’, and ‘fragmentation and construction are not modes of representation, but processes of the real itself.’ Similarly, Clay seems a permanently disaffected spectator whose blank, almost objective perception resembles that of the media. David Pan remarks upon the palpable links that Ellis draws between his writing and the language of visual media:

He [Clay] is less a character than a spectator of all that happens to him, passionately and indifferently accepting everything around him as if it were happening on TV. The prose style underlies Clay’s virtual lack of individual identity. Though Clay is the first person narrator throughout the novel, his consciousness is at times so inobtrusive that most passages read as if read in the third person. That the reader loses track of the first person narrator in the midst of the action does not merely demonstrate the unreflecting mentality of “Clay” who, presumably faithful to the name, compliantly accepts any situation he happens to find himself in. The indifferent flow of images and events resembles the stream of flat images seen on television. Ellis’ prose shares television’s drive to continually change the image, to relentlessly keep up the pace of the action, a drive which ultimately debases the image and trivializes the action.

Vision has become overburdened as the sole means of ascertaining any palpable certainty or knowledge about reality, symptomatic of existential insecurity and the erosion of a robust sense of reality. The spectator’s gaze, as Henri Lefebvre states, has therefore become ‘the prototype of the social act.’ Clay’s psychiatrist advises him to try to become more active in his life in the following brief episode:

The psychiatrist I see tells me that he has a new idea for a screenplay. Instead of listening, I sling a leg over the arm of a huge black leather chair in the posh office and light another cigarette, a clove. This guy goes on and on and after every couple of sentences he runs his fingers through his beard and looks at me. I have my sunglasses on and he isn’t too sure if I’m looking at him. I am. The psychiatrist talks some more and soon it really doesn’t matter what he says. He pauses and asks me if I would like to help him write it. I tell him that I’m not interested. The psychiatrist says something like, “You know, Clay, that you and I have been talking about

how you should become more active and not so passive and I think it would be a good idea if you would help me write this. At least a treatment."

I mumble something, blow some of the clove smoke toward him and look out the window. (ZERO 109)

Clay is merely intent on looking rather than listening or participating. He articulates a mumble, obscures the psychiatrist in a cloud of smoke, and proceeds to continue looking through the windows of his sunglasses outside through another window. These escapist retreats through windows conjure parallels to cinema, television and advertising screens - 'Disappear Here' - and imply a deep aversion to social interactivity, indeed, an almost pathological compulsion to remain in a transfixed, voyeuristic state. To make matters worse, becoming 'active' is merely conceived by Clay's psychiatrist as becoming part of the creative process of artifice, the creation of a spectacle - a screenplay - rather than through any connective interplay with the real world. As Dana Polan writes: 'Spectacle offers an imagistic surface of the world as a strategy of containment against any depth of involvement with that world.' 13

An extension of this strategy is also manifested in the investment and containment of one's self-identity in their image.

The Narcissus myth has a special resonance in our present historical time, given our ontological transition to a postmodern age dominated by the proliferation of technological representations in which human beings are increasingly reduced to images. According to Levin, 'this reduction of human being, and of Being as such, to its representedness, its being perceived, its being seen, is what links narcissistic epidemiology to the spread of nihilism. The narcissistic character lives out, in a mostly invisible suffering, the historical image of being nothing but an image, nothing but what can be seen, nothing but what is visible.' 14 The ontology of the image, Levin believes, leads to the destruction of character and produces human suffering which it

---

14 Levin, The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation, p. 150.
deepens ‘by framing it in an image.’ For Bateman, the more prestigious visible objects he wears and surrounds himself with, the more powerful and secure his image, and therefore his sense of self. The narcissistic ego is extremely dependent upon the feedback of others for the consolidation of its sense of identity. It thrives on this attention to confirm its most basic sense of reality. This seems to explain Ellis’ characters being constantly surrounded by mirror-images of themselves, and regularly consulting psychotherapists. The extent of Bateman’s arrant narcissism is comically overplayed:

Today I’m meeting Bethany for lunch at Vanities ... I’m still extremely nervous. The cause is hard to locate but I’ve narrowed it down to two reasons. It’s either that I’m afraid of rejection (though I can’t understand why: she called me, she wants to see me, she wants to have lunch with me, she wants to fuck me again) or, on the other hand, it could have something to do with this new Italian mousse I’m wearing, which, though it makes my hair look fuller and smells good, feels very sticky and uncomfortable ... I pass by a mirror hung over the bar as I’m led to our table and check out my reflection - the mousse looks good ... I stop tapping my foot and slowly scan the restaurant, the bistro, wondering how my hair really looks and suddenly I wish I had switched mousses because since I last saw my hair, seconds ago, it feels different, as if its shape was somehow altered on the walk from bar to table. A pang of nausea that I’m unable to stifle washes warmly over me. (AP 230-31)

Bateman’s compulsive superficiality originates in part from a fear that he himself will be subjected to the harsh scrutiny of the media eye that he assimilates and imposes on others. This superficiality can be seen as an automatic, contagious form of surveillance where ‘the external look becomes an internalized and self-regulating mechanism that extends the old religious preoccupation with the smallest detail that was still immense “in the eyes of God.”’ American culture’s obsession with personal appearance is perpetuated through advertising and the media, as Levin contends: ‘Being has been lost in its supposed (false) reflections and spurious

depictions - it has been usurped by the model, the character, the stereotype, the figure etc. Simulation is first and foremost the privileged and authentic dimension of being. The crisis of the internal self leads to an unhealthy solace in external appearances. Ellis pushes Bateman’s pathological narcissism to its grisly, lethal extreme: ‘Earlier, there was so much of Bethany’s blood on the floor that I could make out my reflection in it while I reached for one of my cordless phones, and I watched myself make a haircut appointment at Gio’s’ (AP 252).

**SPECTACULAR SEXISM**

Ellis’ novels harbour a persistent preoccupation with pornography and obscene, graphic images. While the horror and the pornography initially appear to exist purely for their sensational, visceral effects, they are of integral importance to the internal mechanics of Ellis’ characters, and more pointedly, to his overall aesthetic. In *American Psycho*, Ellis reduces sex and violence to gratuitously pornographic spectacles rendered almost solely in visible terms. While these brutal scenes have a power to disengage the reader from the action to focus on their overtly generic delivery, and are clearly a dead-pan extension of a coldly descriptive mind, they also feel forced upon the reader as pure spectacle. During a senseless act of murder, Bateman emphasises the certainty of his atrocity as a triumph on the part of realistic clarity: ‘The whirring teeth go through the skin and muscle and sinew and bone so fast that she stays alive long enough to watch me pull her legs away from her body - her actual thigs, what’s left of her mutilated vagina - and hold them up in front of me, spouting blood, like trophies almost’ (AP 329). The shifting focus moves incisively from enframing the whirring teeth of the chainsaw, to body, to victim, to victim’s point of view, to Bateman’s point of view, and finally culminates in our own terrible view of Bateman that parodically imitates the sporting winner’s victorious

---

pose. The fact that his victim witnesses her own dismemberment intensifies his feeling of triumph. While such graphic scenes function partly as senseless, redundant spectacle, they also signify the spiteful plundering of the feminine by a disgruntled, vengeful masculinity:

While Tiffany watches, finally I saw the entire head off - torrents of blood splash against the walls, even the ceiling - and holding the head up, like a prize, I take my cock, purple with stiffness, and lowering Torri’s head to my lap I push it into her bloodied mouth and start fucking it, until I come, exploding into it. Afterwards I’m so hard I can even walk around the blood-soaked room carrying the head, which feels warm and weightless, on my dick. This is amusing for a while but I need to rest so I remove the head, placing it on Paul’s oak armoire, and then I’m sitting in a chair, naked, covered with blood, watching HBO on Owen’s TV, drinking a Corona, complaining out loud, wondering why Owen doesn’t have a cinemax. (AP 304)

The ‘prize’ signifies the ultimate victory in the war between the sexes that is literalized to a physical, barbaric extreme, invoked in extremis. This outrageous ‘frenzy of the visible’ is gluttonously consumed by Bateman with a fanatical, ritual fervour. Orchestrated with a spectator in mind, these gruesome scenes are executed in a manner that would leave a horror-film fanatic giddy with excitement. The more spectacular the atrocity, the greater the thrill. The powerdrill scene in Body Double - where a female victim is murdered by a giant drill that penetrates through her body and the floor so that blood pours out of the ceiling below - which is excitedly described by Bateman as ‘the best’, and which he repeatedly watches and ‘masturbate[s] over’ (AP 113), encapsulates in one image the ethos of mechanized, phallic violation and murder. Sexual violence, Caputi believes, ‘has become inseparably blurred into the assumptions and projections of the image media. In film, fashion, pornography, advertising, television, and pornographic “art,” gynocide has become standard subject material, entertainment convention, and three-minute melodramatic cliché.’

As demonstrated earlier, Bateman’s consciousness, and his criminal behaviour, attest precisely to this raw blend of mediums that constitute a

18 Caputi, The Age of Sex Crime, p. 159.
frenzied, kaleidoscopic montage of sex, violence and desire, frequently presented as spectacles, flagrantly displayed. Sexism and sadism, misogyny and mutilation are veritable partners in crime, the latter dire extensions of the former.

These savage crimes are extreme manifestations of cultural norms and habits entrenched in the cultural sphere that stem from, Ellis implies, the objectification of women in the image media. In accordance with these cultural norms of objectification, Bateman converts female subjects into objects by recognizing them in their object-appearance. Subjects become dehumanized objects that exist as things to be utilized, abused, coveted or annihilated. They become ‘property’, ‘playthings’ at his disposal. On a deeper level, Bateman’s classification of women as ‘hardbodies’ conforms with what Seltzer describes as ‘the ways in which cultural and economic practices are physically and materially embodied, personified, and reproduced - in short, how bodies and meanings are correlated in market culture.’

The closer a woman comes to resembling the culturally manufactured ideal of the ‘hardbody’ - ‘tan and aerobicized and muscular and worked out’ (AP 101) - the more congruent with the iconic cultural ideal of self-contained beauty, and hence the more desirable. It also typifies the linguistic tendency to equate the name of an object with its function which is the inevitable outcome of an operational, ‘technological reasoning.’ Minutes after Jean confesses that she is in love with him, Bateman ponders ‘Why not end up with her?’: ‘An answer: she has a better body than most other girls I know. Another one: everyone is interchangeable anyway’ (AP 379). Bateman reduces, indeed degrades, all women to the same objectified, functional level. His view of women is so utilitarian and pathologically misogynistic that the thought of treating them as human beings is repulsive to him: ‘Though Patricia is appealing and I wouldn’t mind having sex with her body, the idea of treating her gently, of being a kind of date, of apologizing for this evening, for not being able to get into Dorsia (even though Barcadia is twice as expensive for Christ

19 Seltzer, Bodies and Machines, p. 49.
20 Marcuse, One Dimensional Man, p. 79.
85.

sakes), rubs me the wrong way' (AP 78). 'Not the least to blame for the withering of experience,' Adorno asserts, 'is the fact that things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus...' Hence, Bateman's attraction to the impersonal simplicity of pornography: 'I'm beginning to think that pornography is so much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this lack of complication, so much more pleasurable' (AP 264).

Bateman's pernicious attitudes towards women encapsulate the extreme synthesis of an objectified way of seeing, exemplified by the spectator, with the desire for acquisition and possession, exemplified by the consumer. His low conception of sexual relations is informed by the terms of market relations and the culture of consumption. This detrimental association between personal relations and market relations is underlined by Ellis when Bateman is chauffeur-driven to 'the meat-packing district . . . to look for prostitutes':

She's blond and slim and young, trashy but not an escort bimbo, and most important, she's white, which is a rarity in these parts. She's wearing tight cutoff shorts, a white T-shirt and a cheap leather jacket . . . Behind her, in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned brick warehouse, is the word MEAT and the way the letters are spaced awakens something in me . . . (AP 168)

The young woman is clearly 'meat' ready to be taken home and dissected into parts like the separated letters of the word MEAT suggest. This view of women levels the relation between persons and things, and accordingly broadens the law of consumption to all things. Indeed, the human distinction, in Bateman's eyes, is eliminated by its transformation into commodified object-form. The woman, described like a standard model - 'slim,' 'young,' 'white,' - and type - 'trashy but not an escort bimbo' - is obviously reproducible. This fashioning of the typical 'white' American prostitute, like the fashioning of typical Americans, 'foregrounds the permeability of the boundaries between persons and things and between the individual and the

21 Adorno, Minima Moralia, p. 40.
typical in commodity culture.' The 'sex-object' is the outcome of this reductive logic that combines the human body as living property and the inanimate, dead object-matter of the commodity. The problematic relation between persons and objects is suggestively underwritten and conveyed in *American Psycho* through what Seltzer perceives as a certain 'logistics of representation' that 'represents it as a problem of representation, imitation and reproduction.' The critical aspect underlying Ellis' conception of American culture is this problem of 'representation, imitation and reproduction.' He appears to treat the representation with as much contempt as the reality itself. In other words, many of the social problems depicted by Ellis are problems intimately bound up with complications stemming from representations: not so much from their content, but from the questionable calibre of representation and reception. Seltzer illustrates this problem through the figure of the prostitute. Commonly perceived as an objective embodiment of sex, as well as a representation of it in her provision of 'faceless sex', Seltzer explains the cultural significance of the prostitute as a 'scandalous' figure in the turn-of-the-century American realist novel:

The scandal of the prostitute or "painted woman" would seem to be her unnaturalness or artifactuality (the artifice that turns biology to economy). But if the painted woman would thus seem to violate the recalcitrant association of the female and the natural, she would thus seem to exemplify the equally recalcitrant, if reverse, association - the normative link between the female and the cultural, the association of "aesthetics and the feminine." Hence neither the identification of the feminine with the natural nor the identification of the feminine with the cultural but, instead, their uncertain mixture - the miscegenation of the natural and the cultural - is what incites, at once panic and interest. Another way of saying this is that what is scandalous about the figure of the prostitute, in the realist novel, is that she embodies, with a violent explicitness, the mixed logic of physical capital: utterly artifactual and utterly physical at once, capital with a human face.

---

Although these comments are specific to a particular era, they are nevertheless illuminating in regard to Bateman's psychology, explaining to some degree his violent abuse and murder of prostitutes. Prostitutes for him are merely commodities, 'M E A T', and treated as such. Not only is the prostitute 'easy prey' for the serial killer, even a convenient one, the murder of prostitutes has had a history of public indifference, which inevitably stems from social attitudes that seep into cultural circulation to become more deeply entrenched in society as a whole. The regular, systematic slaughter of the exemplary 'professional victim', the prostitute, remains 'a paradigmatic activity' for sex killers who still arouse 'apathy' from public and police authorities alike.25 The mass media regularly engages in dubious practices that are deceptive and damaging to their subjects and their audience, as well as to the causes of tolerance, compassion, equity and understanding, tending to debase and exploit rather than communicate and enlighten. In such instances, the representation is inimical to the subject represented.

The rigidly antithetical relationship that exists between male and female in American Psycho can be further traced through the sexual relations implied by, and entrenched within, dominant cultural representations, most notably pornography. Pornography is the aesthetic, commodified abstraction of sexuality which operates through a 'use-value of mere sexual illusion' that provides what Haug calls 'illusory satisfaction.'26 While pornography 'aids in concretizing and confirming fantasies through its maximalization of the visible, it is also predicated upon the impossibility

25 The murderous activity of the 'Yorkshire Ripper', Peter Sutcliffe, who murdered thirteen women - most of them prostitutes - in the late 1970's was initially apathetically received until the 'Ripper' began to attack young women who were not prostitutes. Caputi observes: 'Four years after the first mutilation/murder, West Yorkshire's Acting Assistant Police Chief Constable, Jim Hobson, issued this extraordinary statement as an “anniversary plea” to the killer: “He has made it clear that he hates prostitutes. Many people do. We, as a police force, will continue to arrest prostitutes.” Here, Hobson matter-of-factly aligns “Ripper” motives and actions to larger social interests as well as police goals.' Caputi, The Age of Sex Crime, p. 93.
26 Haug, Critique of Commodity Aesthetics, p. 55.
of the "total fulfilment" it depicts.' 27 Bateman's sexual ideal is encapsulated in one of his dreams: 'Last night I had dreams that were lit like pornography and in them I fucked girls made out of cardboard' (AP 200). The pornographic nature of his desire manifests itself as electronic image transmuted into printed form - presence remains embedded in artificial form and tied to technological representations. He fornicates with cardboard effigies - literal sex objects - that embody the flat, dehumanized images of pornography. Since his desire is informed by representations, his fantasies are realized in material representations. This surreal image makes explicit the correlation between pornography and consumer culture, a correlation that is prevalent in capitalist cultures. As Seltzer notes: 'in the turning away from nature and necessity to pseudo-needs and unnatural or artifactual wants, both the culture of consumption and pornography - and they are, for this reason, if not exactly inseparable, exactly congruent - represent a fall into representationalism that is marked, at least retroactively, not by a desire for "the thing itself" but for its representations or substitutes.' 28

Bateman neatly fits the type of subject Seltzer calls 'the commercial person'. The commercial person, he states, 'admires copies more than originals; he is fascinated by reproductions and reproduction and by representations and representation. The commercial person's identity, or self-identity, depends on representation. That identity is guaranteed by the imperative of resembling oneself, as a copy repeats its original.' 29 Ted Bundy, describing to an interviewer the multiple acts of sexual murder committed by the "entity" he believed possessed him, told of what Caputi describes as his 'gradual formative progression through the pornographic continuum.' The interviewer reported:

He told me that before there was a need to kill there were juvenile fantasies fed by photos of women in skin magazines, suntan oil advertisements, or jiggly starlets on talk shows. He was transfixed by the sight of women's

27 Jackson, 'Death Drives Across Pornotopia', p. 150.
28 Seltzer, Bodies and Machines, p. 122.
29 Seltzer, Bodies and Machines, p. 75.
bodies on provocative display. . . . Crime stories fascinated him. He read pulp detective magazines and gradually developed a store of knowledge about criminal techniques - what worked and what didn’t. That learning remained incidental to the thrill of reading about the abuse of female images, but nevertheless he was schooling himself.\textsuperscript{30}

The relays between images of women on ‘provocative display’ and the ‘abuse of female images’ that inspire violent criminal behaviour, often mimetic in nature, and perpetrated by some serial killers, notably ‘copycat killers’, is obvious. In Bundy’s own words, the insidious influence of pornography was to blame: ‘Then he [the “entity” that possessed him to commit multiple sexual murder] got sucked into the more sinister doctrines that are implicit in pornography - the use, the abuse, the possession of women as objects. . . .’\textsuperscript{31} This acquisitive desire is what Bundy alleges drove him to murder women: “. . . possessing them physically as one would possess a potted plant, a painting, or a Porsche. Owning, as it were, this individual.”\textsuperscript{32} These remarks stress the dangerous admixture comprised in the juxtapositioning of ‘provocative display’ like those contained in advertisements, and ‘the use, the abuse, [and] the possession of women as objects.’ It appears in these cases that a consumer culture constructed in and around the consumption of readily available objects, and the perception of people (mostly women) as ‘sex objects’, institutionalized in ‘meat markets’, gives rise to such a singular, anomalous mode of perception and its attendant lethal behaviour. In the mind of the serial killer, all is on offer, ready to be appropriated and violated. In this sense, Bateman’s behaviour deconstructs the tendency in commodity culture to equate the visible with the possessable, and reduce the possessable to the expendable, as well as revealing how sexism is deeply aligned with, and reinforced by, discourses of consumption and their various rituals.

It seems that the sexually motivated killer ignores, or does not acknowledge the established differences between subjects and objects: they are part of the same

\textsuperscript{30} Caputi, \textit{The Age of Sex Crime}, pp. 165-6.
\textsuperscript{31} Caputi, \textit{The Age of Sex Crime}, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{32} Caputi, \textit{The Age of Sex Crime}, p. 173.
undifferentiated flow of perception that reflects the 'flow' of representations disseminated by the mass media, especially television. This point is illustrated by Caputi's claim that the female image has been denigrated by the mass production and proliferation of 'endless identical copies' of 'interchangeable', 'clone-like' images which has resulted in 'the symbolic annihilation of genuine female presence.' This annihilation of genuine presence bears similarities with Walter Benjamin's idea of the decay or loss of the 'aura' expounded in his seminal essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. To destroy one's 'aura' through murder is to reduce the living subject into a material object commensurate with the 'universal equality of things' that governs the material world of reproductions and representations. If, as Benjamin notes, 'authenticity is not reproducible,' then Bateman, as a 'commercial person' fascinated by reproductions and representations, can be read as a killer of human beings that are authentic and irreplaceable and whose presences mock and exacerbate his own dreaded feeling of inauthenticity: '... there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory... Myself is fabricated' (AP 376-7). He annihilates that which is an affront to his own

34 The social factors involved in the contemporary decay of the aura, according to Benjamin, rest on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life: 'Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the untrained eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, Harcourt and Brace, New York, 1968, pp. 216-7.
35 Benjamin, p. 237.
artificiality, or his 'abnormal normality'.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, the relations between bodies and representations are, as Seltzer contends, more complicated than those expounded in certain film theory that 'programmatically reduces modes of seeing to a form of panoptic or voyeuristic objectification.'\textsuperscript{37} It is not so much that a clear-cut opposition exists between bodies and representations, he notes, but rather 'their radical involution: a basic entanglement of bodily processes and technologies of reproduction and visualization, reproduction and mimesis, that is not simply reducible to, or contained by, the order of representation.'\textsuperscript{38} In complicating the familiar oppositions between the natural and the artifactual, matter and representation, the real and its substitutes, \textit{American Psycho} challenges the elementary opposition between the life process and the machine process, between bodies and technologies. The natural body and the artifactual body, as explored earlier in the section ‘Made in the U.S.A.’, are in postmodern culture and society not separate entities, but inseparable formations that inform and ratify one another.

**PORNOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE**

In periods of decline such as the present, the higher truth lies in madness.

- MAX HORKHEIMER, \textit{Dawn and Decline.}

Since the boundaries between fiction and reality have blurred or been redrawn by the imposition of media technologies, these technologies must be relied upon to confirm the reality outside. Bateman’s relish of state-of-the-art audio-visual technologies betrays his desire to enlarge his overdeveloped yet myopic perception.

\textsuperscript{36} It is important to differentiate between Bateman’s murder of more seemingly “real” people-like Bethany and the child in Central park zoo - and the stereotypical, generic people he is regularly drawn to as a “commercial person” - prostitutes, models, yuppies, the homeless. It must be noted that Bateman is more predisposed to murdering these stereotypes, to eliminating human products moulded by the homogenizing forces of capitalism that have been instrumental in enlarging his own personal void and consolidating his status as a “commercial person.”

\textsuperscript{37} Seltzer, ‘Serial Killers (II): The Pathological Public Sphere’, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{38} Seltzer, ‘Serial Killers (II): The Pathological Public Sphere’, p. 130.
This desire is based on the misconception that these technologies will impart an added, fuller dimension and 'understanding', when all they do is magnify or amplify, imparting only the illusion of a pseudo-knowledge. As Bateman's sanity and sense of reality disintegrates, his appetite for state-of-the-art audio and visual equipment grows:

Included in the Sony CCD-V200 8mm camcorder is a seven-color wipe, a character generator, an edit switch that's also capable of time-lapse recording, which allows me to, say, record a decomposing body at fifteen-second intervals or tape a small dog as it lies in convulsions, poisoned. The audio has a built-in digital stereo record/playback, while the zoom lens has a four-lux minimum illumination and six variable shutter speeds. (AP 307)

The degeneration of the mind is supplanted and consoled by 'full-function' technologies. The cognitive capabilities of vision are increasingly weakened, rendered more passive, in an age where perception is so structured by technology. Horkheimer contends that 'as their telescopes and microscopes, their tapes and radios become more sensitive, individuals become blinder, more hard of hearing, less responsive, and society more opaque, more hopeless, its misdeeds . . . larger and more superhuman than before.' This pessimistic statement is confirmed by Bateman's own heinous misdeeds: 'As usual, in an attempt to understand these girls I'm filming their deaths. With Torri and Tiffany I use a Minox LX ultra-miniature camera that takes 9.5mm film, has a 15mm f/3.5 lens, an exposure meter and a built-in neutral density filter and sits on a tripod' (AP 304, emphasis added). In this instance, photographic technologies serve as a kind of prosthetic McLuhanesque extension of Bateman's ravenous perception in an outrageous, and futile, 'attempt to understand.'

Linda Williams, in her study of pornography, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, finds that all film pornography is marked by 'a “drive for knowledge” that takes place through a voyeurism structured as a cognitive urge.' This 'drive for knowledge' essentially revolves around the principle.

of maximum visibility. This principle has operated in different ways in the genre’s history ‘to privilege close-ups of body parts over other shots; to overlight easily obscured genitals; to select sexual positions that show the most of bodies and organs; and, later, to create generic conventions, such as the variety of sexual “numbers” or the externally ejaculating penis [known as the ‘Money Shot’].

Hard-core distinguishes itself from soft-core in its attempts to strip away the invisible secrets of female sexuality and reveal the visible ‘truth’ of female sexual pleasure itself. Hence, Williams explains, the ‘animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might therefore be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually this frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured.’ Williams further observes that the ‘exaggerated’ violence against women depicted in ‘slasher’ exploitation horror films achieves ‘a maximum visibility of blood and internal organs.’

Bateman’s graphic sexual exploits are driven by the pleasure of visuality rather than sensuality. They are glaring spectacles that focus on the visible display of the act, embodying the tradition in modern Western culture of constructing what Foucault calls a scientia sexualis, and parallel the demystification element inherent in Bateman’s favorite porno movies with titles like Inside Lydia’s Ass (AP 97), and Pamela’s Tight Fuckhole (AP 177). In many of the sex scenes described by Bateman, it seems that his only desire is to fulfil the physical mechanics of sexuality, to exhibit his engagement in the actual event, rendered in the masculine discursive style of pornography, that has traditionally emphasized the visuality of the act: ‘I watch as my cock moves in then out then into her vagina with long fast strokes.’

---

41 Williams, *Hard Core*, p. 49.
42 Williams, *Hard Core*, p. 50.
43 Williams elaborates: ‘In this genre, Carol J. Clover observes, “violence and sex are not concomitants but alternatives.” The human “monsters” of such films rarely rape, they more often kill; but killing is a form of rape. . . . Like pornography, the slasher film pries open the fleshy secrets of normally hidden things. As Clover notes, the genre’s obsession with maiming and dismemberment exposes “in extraordinarily credible detail” the “opened body.”’ Quoted in Williams, *Hard Core*, p. 191.
The 'juice from her cunt, glistening in the light coming from the streetlamps through the Stuart Hall venetian blinds, tastes pink and sweet' (AP 101, emphasis added).

The insatiable hunger for knowledge that has driven, indeed dogged, Western civilization for centuries has produced a multitude of grave injustices and atrocities perpetrated under the cause of 'truth'. This truth has often proved elusive, indeed chimerical, as Page du Bois writes in *Torture and Truth: The New Ancient World*:

because truth has been defined as a secret, as the thing not known, not accessible to consciousness . . . a hidden truth, one that eludes the subject, must be discovered, uncovered, unveiled, and can always be located in the dark, the irrational, in the unknown, in the other. And that truth will continue to beckon the torturer, the sexual abuser, who will find the other - slave, woman, revolutionary - silent or not, secret or not, the receding phantasm of a truth that must be hunted down, extracted, torn out in torture.44

In her book *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Elaine Showalter remarks that the murders of Jack the Ripper 'eerily echoed ... fin-de-siècle themes of the opening up, dissection, or mutilation of women,' which reflected the prevailing nineteenth-century belief that 'the best way to know women completely and to understand them completely was to dissect them.'45 This belief, she explains, is rooted in the male scientific objectification of the woman as other, who 'can be turned into a case, transformed from "she" into "it," so that her individual experience becomes impersonal and statistical.' She explains:

[Men] open up a woman as a substitute for self-knowledge, both maintaining the illusion of their own vulnerability and destroying the terrifying female reminder of their impotence and uncertainty. They gain control over an elusive and threatening femininity by turning the woman into a "case" to be opened or shut. The criminal slashes with the knife. The scientist and doctor open the woman up with the scalpel or pierce her with the stake. The artist or writer penetrates the female case with sharp-honed imagery and the phallic pen. Indeed, as Charles Bernheimer noted, the standard image of the realistic

Similarly, Walter Benjamin’s analogical conception of the camera as incisive, surgical instrument of the modern technological age, is a further expansion into new forms of cultural violation. This conception of the camera as surgical instrument is exemplified in the famous shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* which stands as ‘the classic film depiction of sex/murder.’ The futility of Bateman’s destructive desire for ‘knowledge,’ which really masks his desire to avoid confronting the terrible depths of his own tortured self, is a kind of sadistic outward expression of his inner masochism, a retreat from the inner horrors of his psyche. This becomes clear to him:

My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist. There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed. I still, though, hold onto one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed... But even after admitting this - and I have, countless times, in just about every act I’ve committed - and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant nothing...

(AP 376-7)

46 Showalter, pp. 131, 134.

47 Such an understanding finds its origins in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in 1859, described the technology of photography as a form of hunting and skinning with a camera: “Form is henceforth divorced from matter... Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt cattle in South America, for their skins and leave the carcasses as of little worth.” From this, Seltzer posits that ‘The erotics of machine culture is thus realized in the hunting and skinning of beautiful objects’, which in the light of an increasingly intrusive paparazzi, veritable bounty hunters for the media, and their role in the “murder” of Princess Diana, is not as fanciful as it sounds. Furthermore, film, Diana Fuss observes, has always been ‘a technology of dismemberment and fragmentation’: ‘Film, after all, is no more than dead matter, bits and pieces of perforated celluloid slashed, spliced, and taped together. A system of “cuts” and “sutures,” film borrows much of its technical vocabulary from the discourses of surgical medicine and pathology. Diana Fuss, ‘Monsters of Perversion’, p. 189.

48 Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime*, p. 172. The scene, which runs for only forty-five seconds, consists of over seventy separate shots, rapidly intercut, to produce a dismembered sequence, creating the impression of ‘a knife slashing, as if tearing at the very screen, ripping the film.’ Quoted in Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*, Ballantine, New York, 1983, p. 419. In *The Informers*, this scene plays ‘nonsop on the video screens above the bar’ in a club as Graham stares ‘at Janet Leigh getting stabbed over and over again.’ (p. 172.) Hitchcock described the reactions of the audience to his film as primarily ‘aroused by pure film’ - in other words, by the violence immanently encoded in the cinematic form.
Bateman’s hopeless inability to conceive of anything but his pain and abjection is an inconsolable revelation, a cruel negation of his ‘attempt to understand’. His exorbitant endeavours to go beyond the surface are unrewarded, yield ‘no new understanding’ and ‘no catharsis.’ He merely reinforces his crushing angst and desolation. Bateman’s despair reflects that of many readers of the novel in that the obscenely violent, unbridled expression of this horror yields ‘no deeper knowledge’ and ‘no new understanding’, but merely reinforces the nihilistic nature of the exercise. Yet as Carla Freccero argues, critics who denounce American Psycho’s refusal to provide an inner truth for his character’s monstrosity insist upon precisely an empirical model of truth, and its disclosure and/or recovery, that du Bois argues, produces the desperate monstrosity of the psychopath in the first place: that somehow the truth must be there, lurking beneath a surface - of skin. Indeed, this is what distinguishes the author Ellis from his serial killer protagonist, for the novel demonstrates that there is no truth to be found beneath appearances, and the accumulation of Bateman’s successful, unnoticed, and ultimately deeply unsatisfying torture-murders that do not teach him - or the rest of us - anything, proves this point.49

In order to fully grasp the implications of Freccero’s remarks, it is first necessary to consider the adverse critical reception that met the novel, especially with regard to its treatment of violence and its somewhat ambivalent stance on the culture of violence it attempts to address.

“A REVOLTING DEVELOPMENT”*

The release of American Psycho was preceded by a media furore which led to its unfair and slanted reception by critics. Its vitriolic satire was subsequently overshadowed, indeed frequently overlooked, by the media’s focus on its shocking aspects. In the midst of such hysteria, the critical establishment’s desire for a

* This is how Time magazine headlined its hysterical pre-publication story on the release of American Psycho.
justification of the novel’s merit grew in proportion to the public need to alleviate the moral outrage with an equally moral stance. Consequently, the novel was received under unfavourable conditions that guaranteed its critical condemnation. Pagan Kennedy in *The Nation* went to extreme lengths to denounce the novel, ending his review with the preposterous claim that critics were to blame for generating such an exploitative novel: ‘By lauding Bret Easton Ellis for *Less Than Zero*, the literary establishment provided the jolt of electricity that brought a Frankenstein monster of a book to life. And just as in the horror flicks, the mob, armed with pitchforks and torches, is chasing down the beast - and its presumed alter ego, Ellis - rather than its true creator.’\(^{50}\) Mim Udovitch, in his review for the *Village Voice*, which described the novel as ‘flawed, boring and so ambitious that it would have been a mammoth undertaking for a far more accomplished author than Ellis’, rightly declared that the ‘real scandal surrounding the publication of *American Psycho* . . . is that a book as obvious as this one should be so widely misunderstood.’\(^{51}\) A few years later, novelist Will Self described the controversy as ‘quite simply, pathetic.’\(^{52}\)

It is not often that a novel is subjected to the intense scrutiny that met *American Psycho*. In his extended *Vanity Fair* critique, Norman Mailer clearly adopts the concern of an alarmed public in his upright critical approach that requires coherent, legible certainties. He appears to grope a little too desperately for answers and explanations that would satisfy psychologists and criminologists. Mailer himself mentions, yet overlooks, the complex significance of the following remarks in his quest to know ‘more about extreme acts of violence’ and more ‘of the real inner life of the murderer.’ He writes:

The suspicion creeps in that much of what the author knows about violence does not come from his imagination (which in a great writer can need no

---


\(^{51}\) Udovitch, ‘Intentional Phallic’, p. 66.

more than the suspicion of real experience to give us the whole beast), but out of what he has picked up from *Son* and *Grandson of Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the rest of the filmic Jukes and Kallikaks. We are being given horror-shop plastic. We won't know anything about extreme acts of violence (which we do seek to know if for no less good reason than to explain the nature of humankind in the wake of the Holocaust) until some author makes such acts intimately believable, that is, believable not as acts of description (for that is easy enough) but as intimate personal states so intimate that we can enter them. . . . The failure of this book . . . is that by the end we know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film. 53

These criticisms, based on the assumption that Ellis aimed to explore the 'real inner life of the murderer', overlook the salient fact that American culture and society are Ellis' prime targets. Mailer neglects incisive literary analysis in bemoaning what he perceives to be the novel's stylistic, and subsequent moral failures, when the inadequacies he cites are themselves significantly revealing, albeit in more complex, oblique ways. In stating that 'We cannot go out on such a trip unless we believe we will end up knowing more about extreme acts of violence, know a little more, that is, of the real inner life of the murderer', Mailer is fixated on Bateman's psychological machinations when it is often plainly evident that Bateman is not real but an abstraction. His abiding preoccupation with the novel's violence, its 'reality,' and his desire to 'explain the nature of humankind in the wake of the Holocaust' - something that Ellis did not intend to tackle (and why should he be burdened with such a responsibility?) - and his demand for 'believable' atrocities, all lead him to underestimate the aesthetic potential of 'horror-shop plastic'. His belief that making extreme acts of violence 'intimately believable' as 'personal states so intimate that we enter them' will somehow enlighten us as to past atrocities is naive, idealistic and implicitly elevates realism as the style most capable of yielding any form of truth.

Ellis does not seek to depict a realistic, clinically accurate psychological portrait replete with explanations as to his subject’s psychotic, criminal behaviour. He excoriates the violence inherent in culture, society and the capitalist system, a violence that, as Zaller notes, is immanent and pervasive:

Bateman’s character, of course, is not the issue. He is the symbol and outcome of an historic process; the violence he embodies is the violence that process represents, with its disposable products, disposable lives, and mindless accretion of spoil. . . . His frenzy and detachment is the metaphor of contemporary capital itself, a capital grown murderous and abstract, grinding and pulping with one hand, counting with the other.54

The realities of such symbolic violence have spread from society into the cultural realm, infecting much of what we see and hear on a daily basis. Cultural violence is therefore somewhat normalized and mitigated by the myriad forms of real violence intrinsic to post-industrial society - physical, psychological, sexual, social, environmental. However, its representations are regularly sensational or exploitative, and often de-contextualized and degraded through reiteration, especially in the field of cinema.55 Violence has taken on a life of its own, frequently emerging purely for its own sake - ‘no longer a means to an end but an end in itself’.

In an article he wrote for the ‘Arts and Leisure’ section of The New York Times, entitled ‘The Twentysomethings: Adrift in a Pop Landscape’, published just months before the release of American Psycho, Ellis ruminates on the relevance of

55 In a recent issue of British movie magazine Neon focusing on violence in cinema, writer Andrew Male declared that ‘without violence, cinema would never have amounted to much at all.’ (p. 30.) This is especially true by the 1980’s: ‘By the 80’s, storylines had been stripped down to the point where they were little more than a state-of-the-art delivery system designed to take the maximum impact of excess and violence to the screen. It was cartoon violence taken into whole new areas of hyper-realism. Stallone and Schwarzenegger movies were louder, brighter, bigger and more spectacular than ever before, but at the same time more removed from reality than a Vincente Minnelli musical. Their characters were a combination of John Wayne, Luke Skywalker and the undying psycho of Halloween (1978) and Friday the 13th (1980). The action pic became two-dimensional, cartoony and absurd - a variety show where violence was no longer a means to an end but an end in itself.’ Andrew Male, ‘100 Years’ Gore’, Neon, September 1997, p. 33.
popular culture to a generation ‘wooed with visions of violence, both fictive and real, since childhood’:

Since contemporary subversiveness is all on the surface popular culture doesn’t, it can’t, jolt us in ways it did previous generations. We’re basically unshockable. And so culture doesn’t play the same role in our lives that it did for previous generations: to liberate, break boundaries, show the unshowable. If violence in films, literature and in some heavy-metal and rap music is so extreme that it verges on the baroque, it may reflect the need to be terrified in a time when the sharpness of horror-film tricks seems blunted by repetition on the nightly news.56

Rather than ‘liberate, break boundaries, show the unshowable’, popular culture in Ellis’ fiction is more inclined to do the opposite: restrict, enforce boundaries and stereotypes, and perpetuate formula and cliché to expose their dangerous shortcomings. Through its impenetrably synthetic treatment of its subject, American Psycho indicts the pivotal standing of violence in its many forms as a perennial, lucrative fixture on the cultural menu. Unlike the gratuitous violence of many contemporary films, Ellis’ violence does not have a cathartic, liberating effect. Nor does it induce any perverse thrills or pleasures often aroused by such films. Rather, it creates a shocking and stupefying effect that is brutally confronting, glaringly aware of itself and its mechanical, stultified exercises in generic subversion, in many ways the antithesis of filmic escapism. Ellis’ ultraviolence is necessary, Erica Hunter notes, because he ‘has to move beyond “real” levels of brutality in order to illuminate the problem [of violence] he sees in our lives. Without this extremism, his critique would be lost in what is now, unfortunately, the mundane.’57

Violence in post-modern society is frequently defined by, and experienced through representation. It seems somewhat logical then that its meaning and significance be sought not only within real acts themselves, but in cultural

representations, and their role in the social construction and perpetuation of physical, psychological and sexual violence. Representations of violence in mainstream culture often foster a limited understanding of violence which is bound up with the fulfilment of voyeuristic and hedonistic urges that are integral to the dynamics of consumption. There is not so much communication as a kind of blind consumption that devours without digesting. The increasing consumption of ‘effects’ movies, characterized by their ability to induce visceral sensations, enhances the physicality of the cinematic experience. Indeed, the ‘mindless’ violence contained in such films can only be enjoyed if one abandons all critical thought and credulity and submits to the thrilling flurry of images. Ellis communicates this cultural malaise, and the inimical attitudes that it cultivates, through Bateman who literally embodies this ‘mindless’ violence, as James Hisson explains:

... we are denied insight into Bateman’s “inner workings,” [Mailer in Vanity Fair] the ostensible object of any psychological novel, because Bateman, as pornographer-narrator, seeks to limit all representations, and especially those of himself, to “surface.” The sort of psychologizing implied in the title’s echo of Hitchcock’s Psycho is thereby subverted with interesting results: instead of the rather smug psychoanalytic epilogue that puts Norman Bates in his clinical place, Patrick Bateman takes us into a world that denies the psyche itself.

By abandoning us to an inchoate, dilapidated impression of Bateman’s internal machinations that confounds the novel’s psychological posturings, the cultural

58 By manipulating physical and mental states, cinema is, according to Shaviro, ‘a new mode of embodiment; it is a technology for containing and controlling bodies, but also for affirming, perpetuating, and multiplying them, by grasping them in the terrible, uncanny immediacy of their images.’ Shaviro, The Cinematic Body, pp. 256-7. Far from emancipating its public through the use of mechanically reproduced imagery, as Walter Benjamin had hoped, culture has tended to mimetically reproduce the attitude of the postwar consumer in its function as “passive receiver.”

59 Hisson, ‘This Is Not An Exit: Murder and Mimesis in Bret Ellis’ American Psycho’, p. 39. Hisson’s view of Bateman echoes Baudrillard’s view of the postmodern, culturally submerged subject. He views the postmodern subject as defined by the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence.’ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays On Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1990,
debris that litters the novel becomes our only lasting point of interpretive reference. Ellis eschews psychological depth to implicate a culture and society which promotes psychological detachment and tactile fulfilment, a culture whose rampant superficiality almost provokes violence as a way of penetrating beyond its impervious veneer.

It is strangely ironic that the passages that have provoked the most public and critical outrage in *American Psycho* are the most revealing about Ellis’ polemical and aesthetic intentions. Carla Freccero believes that many critiques of *American Psycho* revolve around ‘the notion that injury, such as the injury produced by utterances, can be in any sense simply and finally attributed to a singular subject [the author].’ However, she explains, in doing this such critiques become ‘a juridical matter of assigning blame rather than a political matter of analysis and opposition.’ The political power of such an analysis, she further argues, ‘may go a long way toward explaining the consoling fantasy of the serial killer as a condensation of the violence of American historicity into a single subject who performs discrete, singular acts.’ She elaborates:

If such is the case, and if the popularity of the vehicle of the serial killer as a sign of social dis-ease is any indication, it also illustrates the degree to which history is already censored . . . since we figure history’s violence, and the violence of the state, in the sovereign citizen-subject of the serial killer. Furthermore, as the case of *American Psycho* illustrates, the critics who respond to the violence “depicted” and - according to the censors - “enacted” within it, have also internalized the censor, internalized the law, the juridical, by assigning the blame for the harm produced to an agent, the author, and an act, the writing of a novel.

Freccero’s probing remarks posit a kind of automatic censorship underlying critical practices. They also propose a denial of such institutionalized violence so that just as the serial killer typifies an individualistic conception of violence singularly embodied and originating in the private sphere, critical practices reverse this process in

---

60 Freccero, ‘Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer’, p. 49.
individual responses that embody the ideologies of the social order. Therefore, critics, by embodying and perpetuating the ideologies of the social and political order, are facilitating a kind of mass denial on behalf of the state. Furthermore, they antagonise and invert the expressive, revelatory and dissident project set forth by Ellis, and others like him, in a censorious gesture that can be viewed as repressive, authoritarian and (pre)judicial, rather than openly critical, communicative, and discursive.
CONCLUSION

It seems that the American critical establishment, as well as the American people, have a strong tendency to vehemently denounce works that show a less than flattering reflection of their culture and society, spurred by what film director Oliver Stone - a target of such a denunciation on more than one occasion - calls its "national self-delusion." His notorious film, *Natural Born Killers* (1994), like *American Psycho*, is an outrageously lurid, anarchic fantasia of mindless murder that was controversially received by the media.1 It also appears that many American critics show a deep aversion to the recent kind of excessively brutal, in-your-face satire exemplified by these works, recoiling in the face of anything reflecting the hypocrisy, bad taste, and irresponsibility of American culture and society. In the past, Ellis reluctantly defended the graphic violence contained in *American Psycho* in terms of aesthetic consistency,2 while expressing disappointment at critics for their shallow responses to his work.3 For Georges Bataille, literature can only communicate fully by acknowledging its complicity in the knowledge of evil. In his preface to *Literature and Evil*, he writes:

1 Stone's film looks at the media's complicity and its culpability in its fascination with violence. He recently stated: 'Stylistically, the film was intended to reflect the lurid sensationalism of so much of our news coverage, the fascination of our culture with violence and sensationalism, the way killers become celebrities, commercial products. It's about violence as a commodity, a commercial industry.' Allan Jones, 'No One Gets Out Alive', *Uncut*, Issue 12, May 1998, p. 38.

2 In an age where serial killer memorabilia, like John Wayne Gacy's series of self-portraits as Pogo the Clown, fetch significant sums of money, and are bought by Hollywood celebrities like actor Johnny Depp, the mythical halo of glamour and fascination that surrounds such figures is only intensified and perpetuated.

3 In reaction to Roger Rosenblatt's 'advance negative scrutiny' in the now infamous piece in the *New York Times Book Review* titled 'Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?' Ellis retorted: 'complaining about the grammar in a book that's narrated by a madman is not only foolish, but it's irresponsible . . . I think the indignation and the hostility that the press expressed just seems far more intolerable than what this book is about.' *Love*, p. 49.
Literature is either the essential or nothing. I believe that the Evil - an acute form of Evil - which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality.' Literature is *communication*. Communication requires loyalty. A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of evil, which is the basis of intense communication. Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should declare itself so.4

It could be said that Bateman's futile pursuit of a chimerical pseudo-knowledge through violation and annihilation result from a lack of 'intense communication', from dislocated, abortive or spurious connections with the world that are facile at best. His hackneyed, (im)personal locution is a pseudo-expression derived not from the recesses of his own psyche, but from a noxious and decadent culture drenched in violence, where moribund cultural discourses give way to a moribund imagination, threatening individuality and understanding. Ellis, on the other hand, essentially delivers a moral message, deeply aware of the excesses of his world, within the framework of cultural satire. He imagines the terrible spawn engendered by such a decadent culture, expressed in the basest terms of its own derelict language: flat, unsophisticated, inflammatory, vacuous.

Ellis' characters are not active, discerning critics of mass culture, as David Pan has suggested, but vacant channels through which this cultural deluge flows in order to facilitate what Pan rightly identifies as 'an "immanent" critique of mass culture'.5 Ellis' fiction is essentially a fiction of cultural fear, anxiety and disgust. He concocts an incendiary literary cocktail in blending extremes of violence, banality, vapidity and amorality to vent his disgust at what Baudrillard calls our 'lack of disgust': 'to refuse all the gentle brainwashing, the soft-sold overfeeding, the tolerance, the pressure to embrace synergy and consensus.'6

In Ellis' world, the individual reflects and reciprocates the values and

---

5 Pan, 'Wishing For More,' p. 145.
dynamics of its culture, asserting the relationship between culture and the individual as mutually reinforcing entities. His unremittting critique of mass culture is driven by a fervent indignation towards its reckless and abusive application in American society, its integral role as a tool for determining and manipulating the consumptive behaviour of the masses, and as an effective promotional bulwark that sustains the social and economic principles underlying capitalism itself. Culture has degenerated into a lucrative 'product' like any other, made to service the mass entertainment market in the interests of a few powerful media conglomerates who largely control the output and flow of this increasingly homogenized 'product', often to the detriment of consumer intelligence and Culture generally. *American Psycho* is not a critique of cultural consumption per se, but it does question the dynamics and caliber of this consumption by depicting its adverse social and psychological outcomes.

In existing to criticise prevailing modes of cultural expression, Ellis' writing inevitably relies on those same modes of expression for their polemical clout. While these overwrought modes have been hijacked and subverted for satirical purposes, they also tread a fine line between exploitative high jinx, and functioning as a means of presenting and criticizing important cultural phenomena. Like the flamboyance and opulence of the 1980's, *American Psycho* lacks the ability to question itself. It also lacks a certain depth of vision that would enable him to more deeply examine American culture rather than simply criticise it. While it succeeds in its static conceptualization of the American cultural malaise, one cannot help but feel that his project is somewhat vitiated by its negative singlemindedness and its unrelenting pessimism. The drive for cultural transcendence for Ellis' characters is only ever seriously embarked upon through violent means, or by escaping further into unreality. No alternatives are offered, except possibly, and only by implication, a resistance to the forces of culture and capitalism; a resistance that is never really conscious or concerted, but merely instinctual and often violent. If a society exists in which humans are reduced to passive consumers, and culture exists only to
manipulate the wills of its largely obedient members, then any kind of active behaviour, even if its is directed towards violence and death, is understandable.

Although Ellis remains absorbed in an unflinchingly cold and shallow world where uniformity prevails, and where the fall into decadence and oblivion is inevitable, he nevertheless imparts trenchant and valuable observations about American social and cultural life, allowing us to vicariously inhabit the internal void of his characters. Ellis forces us to endure intolerable material on the basis that this material, forged with a dissident iconoclasm, must be insightful, no matter how disturbing or obscene. His grave earnestness is encapsulated by the confronting image that ends *American Psycho* - ‘and on one of the doors covered by red velvet drapes in Harry’s is a sign and on the sign in letters that match the drapes’ color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT’ (AP 399). This dark semiological importance ensures that we are beset by his disturbing visions long after we abandon its pages.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


109.


Hisson, James, “This Is Not An Exit: Murder and Mimesis in Bret Ellis’ *American Psycho*,” *Journal of West Virginia College English Teacher’s Association*, Bull, West Virginia, 14, Fall 1992. pp. 34-44.


112.


113.


Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
Grivas, Steven

Title:
Invasive cultures: American culture in Bret Easton Ellis' American psycho

Date:
1999

Citation:

Publication Status:
Unpublished

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/35346

File Description:
Invasive cultures: American culture in Bret Easton Ellis' American psycho

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.