

Storied Cities:  
Bret Easton Ellis  
and the  
Urban Literary Tradition

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# Abstract:

This thesis is an attempt to reassess and re-position the work of Bret Easton Ellis. It seeks to determine, through close textual analysis and with particular attention to the epigraphs and allusions he employs, whether “blank fiction” and Postmodernism adequately describe the ideological tradition of writing to which Ellis belongs. Noting the central role that urban space occupies in Ellis’s oeuvre, it asks to what extent can the disturbed minds of his protagonists be seen as resulting from the alienating city environments in which they dwell, and can we ally Ellis’s project to the classical eighteenth and nineteenth-century urban literary texts he references?

In reading against a prose style that invites its readers to skim, Ellis’s citations signal that he does not intend his novels to be merely a commentary upon adolescent apathy, 1980s capitalist greed, or 1990s celebrity obsession – the dominant critical interpretations of his key novels – but, in a vision far more closely aligned to classic urban novelists, as comments on the destructive and alienating nature of the city as a force acting upon the psyche of the individual. This thesis examines Ellis’s portrayals of the contemporary American city in order to reveal potential meaning behind what has been described as the unnecessarily graphic and sadistic levels of violence that characterise these works, and argues that Ellis occupies an uneasy position within the Postmodern era.

This thesis comprises only my own original work towards the Master of Arts degree. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of bibliographies and appendices.

For Anne, without whose support and guidance this project would  
never have been completed. Thank-you for your belief in me.

For Romana, whether in Melbourne or France, you will always  
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For Dad, for always understanding what it took.

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# Introduction: Celebrity, Controversy, Documentary. Re-classifying Bret Easton Ellis

“Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in.”<sup>1</sup>  
– *American Psycho*.

“We’ll slide down the surface of things.”<sup>2</sup>  
– *Glamorama*.

This thesis is an attempt to re-classify the work of one of the most controversial and reviled novelists of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries: Bret Easton Ellis. It centres on an investigation of the central role urban space occupies in Ellis’s oeuvre – in particular, the cities of New York and Los Angeles – and asks to what extent the disturbed minds of the protagonists can be interpreted as resulting from the alienating city environments in which they dwell, and whether we might ally Ellis’s project to the classical urban literary texts he references in epigraphs and allusions?

Analyses of Ellis’s novels have tended to cluster around three core themes, only one of which relates to their literary contexts: the celebrity status of the author himself; the controversy surrounding the publication of his novels together with the furore caused by their graphic content; and the belief that Ellis is a “period piece” writer whose works are symptomatic of the consumerist greed and apathy of 1980s, 90s and noughties America. On those occasions when the content of his oeuvre has been placed in a literary context, it is usually in relation to his contemporaries’ work; with “brat pack”,

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<sup>1</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), 360.

<sup>2</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (London: Picador, 1998), 144.

“blank fiction”, or, more broadly, Postmodernism, being the literary schools he is understood to fall within.

The aim of this thesis, focusing primarily on key texts *Less Than Zero* (1985), *American Psycho* (1991), *Glamorama* (1998), and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010), is to radically reposition his works away from “blank fiction” and Postmodernism, by arguing that to read these novels solely with contemporary American culture in mind is to overlook the significance of Ellis’s literary references, many of which belong to the urban realist or Modernist schools. Relying primarily on close textual analysis, I examine Ellis’s portrayals of the individual within the contemporary American city, in order to reveal potential meaning behind what has been described as the unnecessarily graphic and sadistic levels of violence that characterise these works. The project attempts to position the novels beyond the cultural immediacy of contemporary America, and seeks to question Postmodernism or “blank fiction” as the ideological traditions to which Ellis can be said to belong.

## I

As a literary celebrity, or enfant terrible, Bret Easton Ellis the cultural figure has been as much the focus of critical discourse as the content of his oeuvre. From the early stage of his career, Ellis’s membership of the literary “brat pack” – a group of new young authors in the 1980s comprising Ellis himself, Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz, who enjoyed huge commercial success with their first (or, in the case of Janowitz, second) books – drew widespread scorn from commentators who saw the group as something of an unholy trinity. The “brat pack’s” novels were considered to be more about media promotion than art; as R. Z. Sheppard wrote:

The success of McInerney and Ellis was a para-publishing phenomenon. Though each undoubtedly thinks of himself as a writer alone with his

thoughts and technical problems, they are literary celebrities and, from the vantage of their handlers, basic parts of an entertainment package.<sup>3</sup>

This early perception of Ellis as a literary celebrity is one that persists, and it has been the prism through which most of his writings have been critically viewed. In the sole monograph-length study of Ellis's writings, Sonia Baelo-Allué devotes an entire chapter to Ellis's celebrity, arguing, "Ellis represents a new generation of writers who are not afraid to create a celebrity status in order to make a name in literature,"<sup>4</sup> and notes that this has caused many critics to question his position as a "serious" author<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, for much of Ellis's career, newspapers and magazines have tended to reinforce this view by preferring to interview or profile the author rather than review or seriously engage with his novels, a legacy of his "brat pack" past.

James Annesley, in an essay titled "Brand Ellis", also writes of the critical hostility that Ellis's celebrity has aroused, "as a writer and as a brand."<sup>6</sup> According to Annesley, Ellis is very aware of his own "brand values" which include: "notoriety, superficiality, decadence, sleaziness, and a kind of anti-authoritarian cool."<sup>7</sup> By the time of *Lunar Park* (2005), where the protagonist is a fictionalised "Bret Easton Ellis", he had seemingly become one of the consumer products he so often references in his novels:

*Lunar Park* shows Ellis recognizing that his own name has now become a brand and circulates alongside the other commodities in his text. In these terms the increasingly self-reflexive quality of the fiction Ellis has published since *American Psycho* can be explained by understanding that Ellis is a writer who cannot now write about branding and consumption without writing about himself as well.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> R. Z. Sheppard, "Yuppie Lit: Publicize or Perish," *Time*, October 19, 1987, 77.

<sup>4</sup> Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* (London: Continuum, 2011), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> James Annesley, "Brand Ellis: Celebrity Authorship in *Lunar Park*," in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2011), 145.

<sup>7</sup> Annesley, "Brand Ellis," 154.

<sup>8</sup> Annesley, "Brand Ellis," 149.



By now, there is a perception that “Bret Easton Ellis” is just one more commodity among all the many others his writings have dealt with since *Less Than Zero*. Such a view has often stood in the way of serious interpretations of the works, as one reviewer wrote in a representative piece of criticism: “Ellis has become a sort of hip brand-name label in the publishing world, and people go in for him precisely for the reasons they might go in for a \$300 Helmut Lang plain cotton shirt: It’s so outrageous they assume there has to be something to it. But there isn’t.”<sup>9</sup>

Linked to his celebrity status, the second element in the triumvirate of interpretations of Ellis’s texts is the controversy surrounding their publication. His debut novel *Less Than Zero* received far-reaching media and critical coverage due to the particularly dark and violent subject matter: “the litany of snuff movies, gang rape, homosexual prostitution and corpse-gazing”,<sup>10</sup> all from the hand of a writer not yet out of college. Yet it was the furore generated by the graphic and sadistic content of his third novel *American Psycho* – dropped by its initial publisher “as a matter of taste”,<sup>11</sup> boycotted by feminist groups, its author receiving death threats and hate mail<sup>12</sup> – that saw this work become a totemic issue around which swirled arguments for artistic freedom, corporate censorship, even women’s rights. The novel’s own violent publication history has since been recounted endlessly in critical discourse,<sup>13</sup> and I do not seek to add to the magnitude here. It is, however, sufficient to note that the work’s reception cemented

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Mendelsohn, “Lesser Than Zero,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1999, 7/8.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Caveney, “Notes Degree Zero: Ellis Goes West,” in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American ‘Blank Generation’ Fiction*, eds. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), 128.

<sup>11</sup> David Streitfeld, “Lurid ‘Psycho’ Finds New Publisher,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1990, D1.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Cohen, “Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of ‘American Psycho’,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1991, C14.

<sup>13</sup> Julian Murphet gives perhaps the most comprehensive outline in his chapter on the reception of the work. See Julian Murphet, “The Novel’s Reception,” in *Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 65-71.

Ellis's status as a writer whose name had become "virtually synonymous with hype",<sup>14</sup> and the ongoing critical attention to elements "outside"<sup>15</sup> the texts.

Many have claimed since *American Psycho*'s publication that the controversy may have actually helped Ellis's literary career by generating publicity. As Alan Bilton writes, "a perpetual best-seller, critically acclaimed film adaptation, a prominent feature on college American Fiction courses – the idea of the *poète maudit*, starving in his garret, scorned by the prudish Philistines, just doesn't seem relevant here."<sup>16</sup> However, a lamentable result of the controversy is that it has set the pattern for responses not only to the novel itself, but to Ellis's *entire* oeuvre. One cannot write about an Ellis text without mentioning the public furore and unprecedented circumstances surrounding the publication of his third novel (this paragraph, of course, marking one further instance of the trend). Marco Abel, writing of the critical violence done to *American Psycho*, quite rightly notes,

Among the many effects this...critical judgment had, *one of the most remarkable was to have established the conditions of possibility for future responses* to Ellis's *American Psycho*...the specificities of the reception's terms constituted the discursive formation by which any articulation of future responses was bound.<sup>17</sup>

In the years since the novel's publication, the initial controversy has quietened and a greater number of considered readings have emerged; however, the novel's reception continues to languish within the terms established during its initial "birth of fire". Roger Kimball has scornfully commented, "the chief thing to understand about Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is that it counts as an incident in the annals of contemporary

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Young, "Children of the Revolution: Fiction takes to the Streets", in *Shopping in Space*, eds. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, 17.

<sup>15</sup> I use the quotation marks deliberately here, as the elements external to the texts are complicated by the later novels such as *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, which go on to incorporate these elements, as I will outline.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Bilton, *An Introduction to Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 211.

<sup>17</sup> Marco Abel, "Judgment Is Not An Exit: Toward An Affective Criticism of Violence with *American Psycho*," *Angelaki* 6.3 (2001): 141. Emphasis in original.

American publicity, not American literature.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, in a very real sense, the hysteria was such that *American Psycho* is now understood to be not simply a novel, but an “event” with Abel characterising it as “the event known as ‘American Psycho’ – that is...the novel *and* its discursive history.”<sup>19</sup> Fundamentally, as noted above, the media storm determined the conditions under which *all* of Ellis’s texts have subsequently been read. A case in point is the reception of *The Informers* (1994), the story collection published directly after *American Psycho*; Baelo-Allué writes, “In all the reviewers’ minds, *American Psycho* was still present and many of them seemed to be still punishing Ellis for its perpetration.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the reaction had been so intense and far reaching that Baelo-Allué argues, “By the time of *The Informer’s* [sic] publication, Ellis had already gained a reputation that could hardly change, whatever he published”,<sup>21</sup> and this appears to be the case for each of the works following *American Psycho*. His subsequent novels are palimpsests under which we can still detect the faint but ever-present traces of the outcry.

These external conditions and the apparent necessity of referring to them in any analysis of Ellis’s work – what we might call the focus on the stories *of* rather than *in* the books<sup>22</sup> – have reached such an extent that the narratives themselves have begun to mirror the critical situation. Ellis’s latest novel *Imperial Bedrooms*, for example, begins with a commentary on the film adaptation of his first book, “They had made a movie about us. The movie was based on a book written by someone we knew.”<sup>23</sup> While *Lunar Park* is even more explicit and self-conscious in this focus on the story *of* the books: beginning with an epigraph from Thomas McGuane’s *Panama*, “The occupational hazard of making

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<sup>18</sup> Roger Kimball, as cited in Rosa A. Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Abel, “Judgment Is Not An Exit,” 140.

<sup>20</sup> Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> In her essay on *American Psycho*, Elizabeth Young describes the situation as “the story *of* the book – its publication history, its author, its controversial aspects.” See “The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet: Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*,” in *Shopping in Space*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms* (London: Picador, 2010), 3.

a spectacle of yourself, over the long haul, is that at some point you buy a ticket too,”<sup>24</sup> and buy a ticket he does. Playing with the perception that has plagued his career since its inception that the novels are little more than thinly-veiled autobiographies, *Lunar Park* finally gives us a protagonist called “Bret Easton Ellis.” As in all critical accounts of his work since *American Psycho*, *Lunar Park* engages in the recounting of circumstances surrounding the publication of his third novel and offers an analysis of the reaction that is arguably more entertaining and accurate than most:

I was taken seriously. I was a joke. I was avant-garde. I was a traditionalist. I was underrated. I was overrated. I was innocent. I was partly guilty. I had orchestrated the controversy. I was incapable of orchestrating anything. I was considered the most misogynist American writer in existence. I was a victim of the burgeoning culture of the politically correct.<sup>25</sup>

As the above passage makes clear, the critical situation reached the point where stories *of* the books had been so powerful as to actually shape the stories *in* the books. Thus we see Ellis writing about branding and celebrity, and noting his own complicity with this industry. But while celebrity and controversy are important elements of his texts, it is worth asking whether the overwhelming attention such elements have received has meant that other thematic and even stylistic elements of the novels have gone unnoticed. With the major critical focus set squarely upon the graphic content and the controversy, comparatively few critics have attempted to come to terms with the texts’ status as serious literature. Of those who have, the vast majority interpret the works as a manifestation of the excesses of the time, seeing this as a foil to the violence; bringing us to the third of the three key elements in Ellis’s critical reception: documentary.

In an early review of Ellis’s debut, one critic claimed: “*Less Than Zero* is almost more interesting as a cultural document than as a novel”;<sup>26</sup> while Gary Shteyngart, in one

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<sup>24</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park* (London: Picador, 2005), Epigraph.

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, *Lunar Park*, 17-18.

<sup>26</sup> David Lehman, “Catch of the Season,” *Newsweek*, July 8, 1985, 70.

of the more sympathetic readings of this type, wrote that *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* “were note-perfect parodies of the ‘80s and ‘90s. His critics cried ‘Excess!’ and ‘Misogyny!’ but both novels are only as excessive and misogynistic as the decades in which they were set.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, symptoms of the faults of the age, or period pieces documenting the times are how Ellis’s works are often interpreted. More recently, we see analyses such as Theodore Martin who categorises Ellis’s works as “decade novels”:

Surpassing the traditions of literary realism that they clearly invoke, *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* – and, I argue, the decade novel generally – undertake to raise realistic details to the level of history: in Ellis’s texts, the objects of everyday life are reinterpreted as historical metonyms or allegories that transform the present, however precariously, into a self-contained period.<sup>28</sup>

While there is no doubt that Ellis’s works are of their particular era stylistically, suffused with the symbols of their period, they are also highly self-conscious and deeply critical literary works.

Those who argue that Ellis is a more self-aware author than is commonly portrayed, figure the novels as satirical comments on the consumerist greed and apathy of contemporary America. In the case of *American Psycho*, the most commonly employed technique used to defend the novel’s horrific levels of gore has been to position it as a dark satire. As Marco Abel correctly notes of the reception of *American Psycho*: “Those who are willing to entertain that the novel might have a moral purpose, attempt to rescue the novel from its detractors by making as good...a case as possible for the text’s satirical intentions and effects.”<sup>29</sup> This tendency can be seen strongly in Mary Harron’s 2000 film adaptation, which emphasised the text’s satirical elements to such an extent that most darkness was eradicated, turning what is a deeply disturbing narrative into a well dressed

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<sup>27</sup> Gary Shteyngart, “Big Book of the Month: Bret Easton Ellis,” *Esquire* 144.3 (Sept 2005). Accessed March 16, 2012 <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a2375/esq0905breteastonellis/>.

<sup>28</sup> Theodore Martin, “The Privilege of Contemporary Life: Periodization in the Bret Easton Ellis Decades,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 71.2 (Jun 2010): 157.

<sup>29</sup> Abel, “Judgment Is Not An Exit,” 141.

romp through glossy 1980s America. Whether symptom or satire, such readings have become the dominant favourable interpretations. However, they don't question Ellis's Postmodern status nor his ideological allegiance to the very things he satirises.

This thesis, by contrast, aims to move away from such readings by investigating whether Ellis's characters (and by extension Ellis himself) display a fundamental discomfort with the period in which they exist and whether this discomfort is registered not in the style of the novels so much as their ideological content. In other words, it floats the possibility that when Ellis wrote the novels he was not intending them to be wholly reflective or symptomatic of the Postmodern era, so much as a display of psychologies critical of Postmodernism. His characters are rendered as yearning to escape though remaining caught within the vortex of commodification. My project argues that Ellis's authorial vision is more critical of the societies he depicts than a surface reading would suggest, and that this is signaled by his invocation of certain literary texts.

## II

The issue of stylistic classification and literary predecessors for Ellis is something of a vexed question. As Nicki Sahlin writes, "reviewers accuse Ellis, on the one hand, of owing too large a literary debt...Or, on the other, of possessing no literary ties at all."<sup>30</sup> Although there have been many comparisons with contemporary writers such as fellow "Brat Pack" authors, or New Journalism writers including Joan Didion or Tom Wolfe, Ellis is rarely seen to have antecedents any further back than Salinger<sup>31</sup> or Fitzgerald.<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of scholarly interpretations focus on a very narrow set of literary

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<sup>30</sup> Nicki Sahlin, "'But This Road Doesn't Go Anywhere': The Existential Dilemma in *Less Than Zero*," *Critique* 33.1 (1991): 24.

<sup>31</sup> See Nicci Gerard, "Bret and the Beast in the Corner," *The Observer*, October 16, 1994, 14.

<sup>32</sup> See Young, "Children of the Revolution," in *Shopping in Space*, 17. See also, Linda S. Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys; Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998) 246.

perspectives: mid-to late-twentieth century, and always specifically American, authors. Increasingly, there *are* those who do position Ellis within older canonical traditions, such as Ruth Heyler who sets *American Psycho* within the Gothic tradition,<sup>33</sup> or recent critiques of *Lunar Park* which have focused upon the epigraph from *Hamlet* as a way into an Oedipal reading of the novel.<sup>34</sup> Yet, even when comparing to historical texts, Ellis's classification as a Postmodern author remains fixed, as Elana Gomel writes in her essay on Patrick Bateman as a dandified character, "Ellis's appropriation of the *fin-de-siècle* figure of the dandy illuminates both similarities and differences between the modernist depiction of the West End in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the postmodernist depiction of Wall Street in *American Psycho*."<sup>35</sup>

Currently, analyses of Ellis's novels operate on the assumption of their classification as Postmodern "blank fictions." In her monograph, Baelo-Allué rightly acknowledges the problematic nature of classification, saying: "Rather than help us understand the literary context out of which a writer emerges, labels can be lazy, reductive and useless."<sup>36</sup> She notes the evolution of the categories into which Ellis has been placed, and provides a comprehensive consideration of each of these schools – "brat pack," Gen X and Postmodernism – before finally settling on "blank fiction" as the most appropriate tradition in which to position his works. As she puts it, the term is "the one that I think can be most safely applied to his career and style."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Naomi Mandel, the editor of a significant collection of essays on Ellis's core works, notes in her introduction to *Less Than Zero*,

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<sup>33</sup> Ruth Heyler, "Parodied to Death: The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.3 (2000): 725-746.

<sup>34</sup> Henrik Skov Nielsen, "What's in a Name? Double Exposures in *Lunar Park*," in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel, 129-142. The Shakespeare play has been invoked for analyses of *American Psycho* too. See Alex E. Blazer, "*American Psycho*, *Hamlet*, and Existential Psychosis," in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel, 36-49.

<sup>35</sup> Elana Gomel, "'The Soul of this Man is his Clothes': Violence and Fashion in *American Psycho*," in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> See Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*, 33.

The novel's stripped-down, minimalist, and sparse style has been compared to Ernest Hemingway's, Raymond Carver's, and Joan Didion's; its iconic status has invited comparisons to J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*; its existential bleakness is reminiscent of European classics by Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. *But the novel is best understood in the context of the cultural moment in which it appeared.* Alternately claimed as the spokesperson for Generation X and the Blank Generation, Ellis's early work straddles the two and comments on each.<sup>38</sup>

The authors of the two most recent works on Ellis's oeuvre thus reinforce and strengthen this "blank" school as his final classification.

Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney first used the epithet "blank generation fiction" to describe authors such as Ellis in their study *Shopping in Space* (1992). It was James Annesley's *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (1998), a work which contained several chapters on Ellis's novels, that was the most influential in this regard, and following the publication of Annesley's work, most critics followed suit in their labeling of Ellis's writings as "blank fictions".<sup>39</sup> The term itself denotes a kind of contemporary and specifically American writing that is, according to Annesley, clustered around certain recurring themes: "violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism and commerce."<sup>40</sup> Certainly, it is the explicitness of the content that has been one of the unifying principles of such writings. Annesley observes that although "blank fiction" does not constitute "anything as substantial as a literary movement,"<sup>41</sup> there is nonetheless, "quite clearly, both a common context and a common vision and, while there is no 'blank manifesto', these affinities suggest the

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<sup>38</sup> Naomi Mandel, "Introduction: The Value and Values of Bret Easton Ellis," in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, 3. emphasis my own.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Will Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern: The (Hi)Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Michele Aaron, "(Fill-in-the) Blank Fiction: Dennis Cooper's Cinematics and the Complicitous Reader," *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.3 (2004): 115 n.1.

<sup>40</sup> James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel*. (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, 2.



existence of a ‘blank scene.’”<sup>42</sup> While the term does refer at least in part to the fiction’s dazed aesthetic, as Young and Caveney note, the word “blank” “conveys something of the flat, stunned quality of much of the writing.”<sup>43</sup> The overwhelming emphasis in analyses of “blank fictions” is upon the interaction this type of writing has with the dynamics of consumerism and contemporary capitalism. As Slocombe comments,

[B]lank fiction...is inherently connected with economics. Although Marxist critics argue that all texts exhibit economic characteristics, subsumed or otherwise, blank fiction is *overtly* concerned with the value-economy of consumption.<sup>44</sup>

The word “blank” thus refers to the moral, ideological and psychological apathy of characters in the face of the pervasive commodification of the world that this fiction portrays. Indeed, Annesley claims that it is “this emphasis on the commercial that provides the key to understanding these texts.”<sup>45</sup> Ellis’s oeuvre has been placed definitively within this tradition, and even when not mentioned in the same breath as McInerney and Janowitz as a “brat pack” author, his designation as a “blank” writer is now established. While there is certainly merit in positioning Ellis among these writers stylistically, my project seeks to locate his ideas and specifically his view of the city within a very different and far earlier ideological tradition, and in this I am guided by his constant use of reference to classical urban literary texts.

### III

Brand names, celebrities, lyrics from pop songs or their album art, and lines from literary classics, litter Ellis’s texts. Indeed, *American Psycho* is so heavily laden with citations that a

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<sup>42</sup> Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney eds., *Shopping in Space: Essays on American ‘Blank Generation’ Fiction*, vii.

<sup>44</sup> Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, 140.

legal disclaimer had to be added, stating that any references to brand names are not intended to “disparage any company’s products or services.”<sup>46</sup> The majority of scholars engaged in analysing Ellis’s references have centered on the context of pop-culture. These include comprehensive works by Young and Caveney<sup>47</sup> and Annesley<sup>48</sup> for example. Such critiques have proved vital in highlighting the significance of celebrities, luxury labels, bands, song lyrics, and television shows to Ellis’s narrative project. Yet, as mentioned earlier, his works are equally filled with allusions to such high cultural authors as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, John Fante, William Faulkner, Jean Paul Sartre, Dante Alighieri, W.B. Yeats, Victor Hugo and William Shakespeare to name just a few. As Elana Gomel notes in the context of *Glamorama*, “Like the famous rabbit-duck illusions, in which the brain switches between seeing a rabbit and a duck in the same picture, the novel forces the reader to switch between a high-culture and a pop-culture hermeneutic without being able to choose either.”<sup>49</sup> Most analyses have focused on the rabbit of pop culture, with references to the duck of high culture usually brought in as evidence of Ellis’s flouting of traditional frames of reference. Baelo-Allué is one critic who has given central attention to Ellis’s ambiguous position between high and low in her work<sup>50</sup>, however the overwhelming critical focus on the “low” cultural references has rendered this kind of reading the exception rather than the rule. It is the goal of this thesis to examine the implications of the “high” cultural citations and in particular to explore what they might mean both for the interpretation of the key texts and, by extension, the ideological positioning of Ellis’s entire oeuvre.

In the initial critical reception, his frequent use of reference was often viewed as pointless affectation. As one critic wrote of the potential meanings attached to the name

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<sup>46</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*.

<sup>47</sup> Young and Caveney eds., *Shopping in Space*.

<sup>48</sup> Annesley, *Blank Fictions*.

<sup>49</sup> Gomel, ““The Soul of this Man is his Clothes’,” 57.

<sup>50</sup> Baelo-Allué, “The High: Ellis in the Literary Field,” in *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction*, 22-25.

of *American Psycho*'s protagonist: "Patrick Bateman (Batman? Norman Bates? Who cares?)"<sup>51</sup> It has been Ellis's "high" literary references, however, that have provoked the most scorn. For example, noting the epigraph from Dostoyevsky in *American Psycho*, Roger Rosenblatt wrote, "I wondered: could this fellow really think that he, like Dostoyevsky, was being shockingly critical of the amorality of modern urban life? Why, yes! The rake."<sup>52</sup> Norman Mailer noted the reference, "Ellis believes he is close enough to Dostoyevsky's ground to quote him in the epigraph,"<sup>53</sup> and similarly dismissed the invocation: "So, the first novel to come along in years that takes on deep and Dostoyevskian themes is written by only a half-competent and narcissistic young pen."<sup>54</sup> Others were of the view that the epigraph was merely a pretentious add-on to lend weight to an otherwise disposable and meaningless text. As Caryn James witheringly put it, "*American Psycho* is both inept and pretentious, an exploitation book dressed up with an epigraph from Dostoyevsky and a title allusion to Hitchcock."<sup>55</sup> In a more considered analysis on the instability of language in the novel, Michael P. Clark notes the reference to Dante's words that open *American Psycho* and observes that, "instead of directing us to their context in Dante's work as a literary citation, here the words are plastered as graffiti on the side of Chemical Bank."<sup>56</sup> It is unclear why Clark believes their fictional positioning on a wall negates their role as a literary reference, but the implication is that because these references are never commented upon, they are consequently not made to *mean* within the context of the novel. He continues, "In this opening scene, words and images denoting fear, violence, suffering, and judgments are literally mobile, disconnected from any context, referent, or speaking subject that would lend them

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<sup>51</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?" *New York Times Book Review*, December 16, 1990, 7/3.

<sup>52</sup> Rosenblatt, "Snuff This Book!", 7/3.

<sup>53</sup> Norman Mailer, "Children of the Pied Piper: Mailer on 'American Psycho,'" *Vanity Fair*, March 1991, 220.

<sup>54</sup> Mailer, "Children of the Pied Piper," 221.

<sup>55</sup> Caryn James, "Now Starring, Killers for the Chiller 90's," *New York Times*, March 10, 1991, 2/1+.

<sup>56</sup> Michael P. Clark, "Violence, Ethics, and the Rhetoric of Decorum in *American Psycho*," in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2011), 24.

substance and immediacy.”<sup>57</sup> In all the examples just outlined, Ellis’s use of classical reference is seen merely as cultural name-dropping; in other words, to the extent that they are thought to have no meaning or consequence within the narratives, the references are deemed to carry no ideological weight.

And yet there are signs that Ellis is a more self-aware novelist than these critics have allowed. A significant element of his aesthetic that gains momentum throughout the oeuvre, mastered in *American Psycho* and reaching its climax in *Glamorama*, is the overwhelming density of detail, a kind of linguistic piling on, so minute and so “blank” in its stylistic accumulation that it seems to encourage the reader to gloss over the words. Many of the initial analyses note this phenomenon, the way in which the texts appear to encourage the reader to “skim”, as in the dazed white writing of *Less Than Zero* which Alan Bilton likens to “a petulant teenager too bored (or stoned) to communicate, blank, indifferent, apathetic. Your eyes glaze over; after a while, even skim-reading seems too much effort.”<sup>58</sup> Such a characterisation is repeated in responses to *American Psycho*: Linda S. Kauffman likens the project of this novel to a line in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, where Nick Carraway describes listening to Jay Gatsby’s story as like “skimming hastily through a dozen magazines.”<sup>59</sup> For Kauffman, “*American Psycho* merely *literalizes* that idea: reading it is like skimming *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Interview*, *Playboy*, *Hustler*, *Spy*, and *New York Magazine*, complete with music and food reviews.”<sup>60</sup>

What both Bilton and Kauffman’s analyses signal is the extent to which Ellis’s prose style appears to absorb, undigested, the pop-cultural material of its age. This idea of incorporation is echoed by Young who establishes an interesting division between writing and mere text, or what she calls “*apparent* and *actual* writing”.<sup>61</sup> As she argues of

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<sup>57</sup> Clark, “Violence, Ethics, and the Rhetoric of Decorum,” 24.

<sup>58</sup> Bilton, *An Introduction to Contemporary American Fiction*, 199.

<sup>59</sup> Fitzgerald as cited in Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys*, 246.

<sup>60</sup> Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys*, 246.

<sup>61</sup> Young, “The Beast in the Jungle,” in *Shopping in Space*, 101.

*American Psycho*, “The book is written as if to be skimmed. It is written largely in brochure-speak, ad-speak, in the mindless, soporific commentary of the catwalk or the soapy soft-sell of the market-place.”<sup>62</sup> The great irony of Ellis’s writing is that it is precisely in those parts of the texts where the prose feels most inconsequential and impenetrable that the perceptive reader finds authorial clues as to how to read the works in a way that meaning *does* emerge. For example, a line from *Imperial Bedrooms*, “This isn’t a script...Not everything’s going to come together in the third act”<sup>63</sup> is offered as a throwaway comment by character Julian in frustration, but takes on a metafictional resonance about the hopelessness and impenetrability of the age in the broader context of the work. Similarly, the tangled, unresolved mystery narrative of *Glamorama* contains in its very opening pages a forewarning: “so I don’t want a lot of description, just the story, streamlined, no frills, the lowdown: who, what, where, when and don’t leave out why, though I’m getting the distinct impression by the looks on your sorry faces that *why* won’t get answered”,<sup>64</sup> which becomes prophetic by the end of its 482 pages, the reasoning behind the attacks still opaque. In the same novel, a constant refrain by protagonist Victor is “The better you look, the more you see.”<sup>65</sup> Of course, within the context of a novel about models, it is an expression of the fact that being attractive opens doors in his vacuous and superficial world. But in the context of Ellis’s oeuvre – and the tendency for critics and reviewers, in another metafictional comment in the same novel, to “slide down the surface of things”<sup>66</sup> – it appears to be a clue or a plea by the author for critics to look closer, to read against the grain of a prose style that invites its readers to skim.

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<sup>62</sup> Young, “The Beast in the Jungle,” in *Shopping in Space*, 101.

<sup>63</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 117.

<sup>64</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 27.

<sup>66</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 144.

Thus, the frequent invocation of high cultural texts suggests an importance to Ellis's narrative project beyond mere name-dropping. Indeed, many of the allusions within the works are, quite literally, *written* on the cities, with lines taken from street art, rubbish, billboards and neon signs. The Dantesque opening lines of *American Psycho* are graffiti, "scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank",<sup>67</sup> the closing allusion to Sartre is actually a sign, "above 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",<sup>68</sup> while references to Hugo's *Les Misérables* – through the ubiquitous advertising material for Boublil and Schönberg's trendy musical adaptation – appear emblazoned upon buses and walls, or floating through the air on discarded playbills throughout the city.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in the L.A. of *Less Than Zero*, key lines that reverberate throughout the novel are inscribed as text upon the landscape. Thus, the narrator Clay says, "I come to a red light, tempted to go through it, then stop once I see a billboard that I don't remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little."<sup>70</sup> Such instances suggest that Ellis's novels are made up, quite literally, of "city writing", which in turn provokes us to ask to what extent do Ellis's citations invoke a tradition of urban writers, both classic and contemporary, who have engaged in "storying"<sup>71</sup> their cities? Indeed, Ellis appears to be deeply aware of the tradition in which he is writing and his self-conscious use of epigraph and allusion suggests that he has rather deliberately set his novels within well-established traditions of urban literature that figure the city as a destructive force exerting itself on the souls of its inhabitants.

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<sup>67</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 384.

<sup>69</sup> See Ellis, *American Psycho*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 1986), 30.

<sup>71</sup> Julie A. Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityscape* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 17.

For Fredric Jameson, the Postmodernist use of literary allusion constitutes pastiche; this is because it partakes of blank mimicry or the “wearing of a linguistic mask”<sup>72</sup> that is devoid of any of the edge, satirical impulse or conviction evident in Modernist parody. For Jameson, such “borrowings” signal that because the producers of culture are the victims of the “waning of affect”<sup>73</sup> brought about by consumerism, they have nowhere to turn but to that celebratory version of the past that is without any deep or hidden meaning, and is therefore nothing but the imitation of dead styles, or “speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.”<sup>74</sup> Yet, my analysis seeks to establish that Ellis’s “high cultural” references, far from constituting simply the “random stylistic allusion”<sup>75</sup> characteristic of pastiche, do indeed hold a very pointed critique of the societies depicted. Although Ellis stops short of providing a solution or way out of the Postmodern lifestyle, his use of quotation is far from empty or “blank” in the same way that pastiche is. Indeed, he adopts a position not that different from Jameson’s own, critiquing Postmodernism and its effects *from within*. Though he writes of and in a Postmodern era, and is certainly a Postmodernist stylistically, it is my contention that his examination of the contemporary urban environment through his protagonists is fundamentally not without affect.

Elizabeth Young gestured towards Ellis’s displeasure with his era in her early analysis of *American Psycho*, arguing that Ellis was a Postmodern author with a deeply conservative ideology; “Ellis’s vision is conformist and conventional. He is skilled at presenting disintegration within postmodernity and his energies are straightforwardly judgmental and condemnatory. He is denunciatory, a supporter of the status quo and in relation to this it is ironic to what a large extent he has been depicted as some sort of

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<sup>72</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) 17.

<sup>73</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17-18.

<sup>75</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

literary tearaway.”<sup>76</sup> Here I hope to suggest that Ellis’s criticism of America’s cities is not motivated by any conservative nostalgia, but rather by a deep sense of alienation and anxiety about the psychological effects these spaces have on their inhabitants. Young’s comments are an early recognition of Ellis’s “uneasy” positioning relative to Postmodernism, and the disjunction between the society presented and his commentary upon it. As Young’s reading implies, there is a fundamental mismatch, hitherto uninvestigated, between Ellis’s stylistics (fundamentally at home in the Postmodern) and what can be gleaned as his ideological view of the era (deeply critical of it). Such a tension is central to Modernist ideology, as highlighted in Marshall Berman’s classic essay on the movement, “The great modernists of the nineteenth century all attack this environment passionately, and strive to tear it down or explode it from within; yet all find themselves remarkably at home in it, alive to its possibilities, affirmative even in their radical negations, playful and ironic even in their moments of gravest seriousness and depth.”<sup>77</sup> Ellis’s writings are aligned to the works of those urban writers who do not simply represent their metropolises, but who also outline the effects these impersonal structures have upon individuals.

#### IV

Place is perhaps the most important and distinctive element of Ellis’s novels that is yet to be meaningfully investigated at length. Although passing mention is often given to the New York setting of *American Psycho*, and *The Rules of Attraction*’s fictional “Camden”,<sup>78</sup> for instance – these places are rarely examined for their important thematic functions within the novels. In her work *Shopping in Space*, Young noted the role of setting in her discussion of Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*. She writes: “Ellis’s three novels – *Less than Zero*, *The*

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<sup>76</sup> Young, “The Beast in the Jungle,” in *Shopping in Space*, 120.

<sup>77</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 19.



*Rules of Attraction* and *American Psycho* – are extraordinarily distinct in regard to place”,<sup>78</sup> and argues that setting is so prominent in Ellis’s works, that it has “gradually come to dictate the themes and structure of the novel, leaving emotional issues to become amorphous, to function as background.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, many of the aspects which critics saw as evidence of the works’ failure as literature – such as the “characterlessness” of the characters, or lack of plot – actually underscore the profound importance of place in the works. As Young notes, “What is uncertain now is the human element, the moral and emotional imperatives. The novel has to be grounded somewhere and place, as one of our last realities, has started to function as character.”<sup>80</sup> Young published her work when Ellis had written just three novels, but her statements about place were remarkably prescient and my analysis builds on her observations. More recently, Julian Murphet, in his work *Literature and Race in Los Angeles*,<sup>81</sup> and Alison Lutton in her article “East is (not) East: the Strange Authorial Psychogeography of Bret Easton Ellis”<sup>82</sup> are the only other critics to investigate location in Ellis in any sustained way. Murphet devotes almost an entire chapter to an examination of Ellis’s L.A. novels – *Less Than Zero* and *The Informers* (*Imperial Bedrooms* had not yet been published) – and the manner in which they “represent” the Postmodern consumerist space of L.A., while Lutton examines the psychic meaning invested in the spaces represented in Ellis’s canon, especially *Lunar Park* and *Less Than Zero*.<sup>83</sup>

Building on Young, Murphet, and Lutton’s observations, I argue that specificity of setting is one of the most palpable and important features of Ellis’s works. Every one of the narratives is set in a distinctive locale: the Los Angeles of *Less Than Zero*, *The*

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Young, “Vacant Possession: *Less Than Zero* – a Hollywood Hell,” in *Shopping in Space*, 22.

<sup>79</sup> Young, “Vacant Possession,” in *Shopping in Space*, 23.

<sup>80</sup> Young, “Vacant Possession,” in *Shopping in Space*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> Julian Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 8-9, 141.

<sup>82</sup> Alison Lutton, “East is (not) East: the Strange Authorial Psychogeography of Bret Easton Ellis,” 49<sup>th</sup> *Parallel 28* (Spring 2012): 1-30.

<sup>83</sup> Lutton, “East is (not) East,” 4.

*Informers*, and *Imperial Bedrooms*; the New York of *American Psycho* and the core of *Glamorama*; *The Rules of Attraction*'s metropolis of dorm rooms and corridors in Camden college; or the shifting and tormented house in the suburbs of "Midland" in *Lunar Park*. It is my contention, however, that it is not necessarily particular cities that are the most significant places in Ellis's oeuvre, so much as the phenomenon of the Postmodern city itself. In addition, it is worth noting that the classic pastoral debate of city versus country, where the country is conceived as its idyllic opposite, is wholly absent from Ellis's writings. In his vision of Postmodern space, there is nowhere else to go but the city. Thus, when non-urban locations are portrayed, such as the vast landscape of California – strongly present in *Less Than Zero* and *The Informers* – they are figured always as a kind of dark "other" to the known urban world, while the only work to examine the suburbs, *Lunar Park*, figures them as claustrophobic and haunted.

The chapters which follow are aimed at highlighting the significance of the city in Ellis's oeuvre and the ways in which he deploys both character and references to present his metafictional critique of this environment. Thus in Chapter One, I establish the central role of place in the New York novels *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*, and examine the "high" cultural references with which these works are laden. I argue that the literary allusions Ellis employs suggest his affinity with earlier eighteenth and nineteenth-century representations that figure the urban environment as destructive to the emotional health of inhabitants. The classical references exist, I argue, at a characterological level too, and the latter part of the chapter examines the extent to which Patrick Bateman and Victor Ward can be read as owing a literary debt to the flâneur in the dual sense of a demonic man who is able to slip unobserved into the crowd (in the case of Patrick Bateman) and the resonance with Poe's early detective figure (in the case of Victor Ward).

The focus of Chapter Two is Ellis's portrayal of Los Angeles in *Less Than Zero*, *The Informers* and *Imperial Bedrooms*. Again, I aim to establish the importance of place in the

novels, and build upon the case for the significance of his literary references with an examination of their presence in the west coast works. Julian Murphet's text *Literature and Race in Los Angeles* is central to my reading in this chapter. Murphet emphasises Ellis's depiction of L.A. as a hollow consumerist place, and he argues that Ellis focuses on five fictional elements to mount his critique: these being character, plot, space, pop-cultural icons, and an affectless prose style. I argue, however, that there is a further way Ellis signals his dissent from the Postmodern city of L.A., and it can be termed "referential" or "allusive". I argue that his invocation of what have traditionally been immigrant "anti-myths" about the city – such as the artificiality of the architecture, disaster and apocalypse narratives, and the destructive nature of the Californian landscape – both critique the Postmodern city and self consciously complicate Ellis's status as a native Angeleno author.

While the first two chapters examine the alienating effect of the urban environment upon individuals, Chapter Three highlights the mental disintegration that occurs as a result of living in a Postmodernist urban environment. Ellis's vision of the world has always been violent. His work is notorious for its brutally graphic depictions of murder and gore. In this final chapter I look at Ellis's writings as a whole and argue that his use of violence – a constant throughout his canon – constitutes a revolt against the "chilling" life-world of the city through a progression from "seeing the worst" to "doing the worst". However, I argue that the affectlessness encountered is not just physical, but also psychological, induced in particular by the meaningless, soporific world of consumerism. Ellis's characters do indeed feel alienated in the face of the concrete jungles that envelope them but they attempt to break free from the monotony of the Postmodernist lifestyle by seeking out ever-increasing levels of violence and depravity.

Indeed, his protagonists' perverse desire to see and experience "the worst"<sup>84</sup>, a quotation in the debut novel that becomes a refrain throughout the oeuvre, suggest that they have not yet been completely hollowed out and colonised by the world of commerce that governs the souls of the cities they inhabit, and that there are some remnants of the Modernist self lurking beneath the "blank" culture of the present.

## V

"Some cities are more 'storied' than others",<sup>85</sup> Julie A. Buckler writes, in a text on the representation of St Petersburg. This notion of "story-ing" a city is centrally important to this thesis and its conception of space, in the way that it signifies the generative quality of urban novels, the manner in which they shape our understanding of the city and invest it with resonances beyond that of the geographical and quotidian. Part of this tradition are such writers as Dickens or Dostoyevsky, whose respective cities have become so storied they are virtually synonymous with the authors' names. As Dickens scholar Julian Wolfreys writes, "if asked to connect 'London' and 'Literature', we tend to cite Dickens as *the* novelist of London."<sup>86</sup> Though I do not suggest Ellis is so linked in the popular imagination to his cities that his name is similarly synonymous with New York or Los Angeles – indeed, as noted above, his name would be far more likely to arise if readers were asked to connect "violence" or "celebrity" and "literature" – I argue that the representation of place is an important and distinctive part of his narrative project. This thesis examines the ways Ellis's novels are similarly engaged in "story-ing" American cities, and suggests that this might be signaled by the texts he invokes. Ellis's use of reference, allusion, epigraph and citation overlays classical stories upon the narratives of his own, and in this way, his works are indeed more "storied" than others.

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<sup>84</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 160.

<sup>85</sup> Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg*, 17.

<sup>86</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens*. vol. 1. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1998), 11.

In the years following the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922), T. S. Eliot wrote of his regret in “having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.”<sup>87</sup> Ellis’s works are no Postmodern waste land, where the references that litter the works are intentionally obscure in the same way that Eliot’s are. In what follows, I hope to show that to follow the references in his novels is not to embark on a literary goose chase, but to reveal his project of writing the city. The quotations are a profoundly important part of this reading as they function as keys to Ellis’s thinking. They serve as chords, which appear at crucial points in the works and resonate throughout, providing both tacit explanations for the protagonists’ acts of violence, and the relentless blankness of the prose. Allusions and references are important not only for noting points of comparison – a kind of academic join-the-dots project – but for the ways in which the cited texts add new resonances to the stories in which they appear. We shall see that in the case of Ellis’s New York and Los Angeles novels, those resonances include the recognition that the subject’s increasing violence stems from the widespread “waning of affect”<sup>88</sup> brought on by the ultra consumerist lifestyle that has overtaken America and the attempts to recover that affect. In a vision far more closely allied to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century city novelists he references, Ellis’s works comment on the destructive and alienating nature of the city as a force acting upon the psyche of the individual.

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<sup>87</sup> T. S. Eliot, as cited in Hugh Kenner, “Introduction,” in *T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Hugh Kenner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 9 n.9.

<sup>88</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 11.

# Chapter One:

## Epigraphs and Allusions:

### Writing New York

As I saw it, such a book should be a novel *of the city*, in the sense that Balzac and Zola had written novels *of Paris* and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels *of London*, with the city always in the foreground, exerting its relentless pressure on the souls of its inhabitants.

– Tom Wolfe “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel.”

In an essay for *Harper's Magazine* in 1989, Tom Wolfe wrote of the need for contemporary novelists to abandon the vogue for Postmodern metafictional game-playing, and return to the “big realistic novels”<sup>1</sup> of the nineteenth century. In typically provocative style, Wolfe sent out a call for a new generation of flâneurs to step forth into the “billion-footed city” and grapple with “the beast.” “At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature”, Wolfe claimed, “we need a battalion, a brigade of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hogstomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property.”<sup>2</sup> It was time for novelists to cast off the self-referentiality, intertextuality and avant-gardism, which were nothing more than a collective “averting of eyes” from the reality of urban life, and set out into the fray, notebook and pencil in hand, in order to “wrestle the beast and bring it to terms”.<sup>3</sup>

Part literary criticism, part statement of intention for his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” began its own blaze in the literary world.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wolfe, “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,” *Harper's Magazine* (Nov, 1989): 46.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfe, “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast,” 55.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfe, “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast,” 55.

Critics such as Robert Towers<sup>4</sup> and Kathleen Weatherford<sup>5</sup> wrote sneeringly of the disparity between those works Wolfe sets as literary models in the manifesto – those of Dickens, Zola, Thackeray – and his own urban novel. Yet, regardless of the success or otherwise with which Wolfe captures the realist aesthetic and sweeping vision of his professed models in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, both his novel and manifesto highlight the contemporary place of American cities alongside the great European literary capitals of the two previous centuries.

“To me,” Wolfe declared, “the idea of writing a novel about this astonishing metropolis, a big novel, cramming as much of New York City between the covers as you could, was the most tempting, the most challenging, the most obvious idea an American writer could possibly have”,<sup>6</sup> and yet, he lamented, “young people with serious literary ambitions were no longer interested in the metropolis or any other big, rich slices of contemporary life.”<sup>7</sup> At the close of the twentieth-century, however, an unlikely writer was indeed, and in a manner Wolfe may not have imagined, heeding his call. Although stylistically Ellis’s works are indeed self-referential, intertextual and guilty of all the Postmodern sins Wolfe could level at them, they are also highly suggestive of a world-view that belongs outside this space. This chapter seeks to investigate the ways in which Ellis’s major novels are fundamentally engaged in wrestling the urban beast. Through an examination of the literary allusions in Ellis’s New York texts, I will attempt to highlight the manner in which he metafictionally critiques America’s postmodern urban environment. Although he is writing of and in a Postmodern era, the allusions Ellis employs suggest his vision of Manhattan is more closely aligned ideologically to urban

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Towers, “The Flap Over Tom Wolfe: How Real is the Retreat From Realism?” *New York Times Book Review*, January 28, 1990. Accessed March 12, 2015.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/28/books/the-flap-over-tom-wolfe-how-real-is-the-retreat-from-realism.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen J. Weatherford, “Tom Wolfe’s Billion-Footed Beast,” *American Studies in Scandinavia* 22 (1990): 88.

<sup>6</sup> Weatherford, “Tom Wolfe’s Billion-Footed Beast,” 45.

<sup>7</sup> Weatherford, “Tom Wolfe’s Billion-Footed Beast,” 47.

Realist or Modernist representations. The city, I argue, is crucially important to Ellis's New York narratives both in the novels themselves and in the psychology of the protagonists, exerting, as in Wolfe's apt phrase, "its relentless pressure on the souls of its inhabitants."

## I

In the two New York novels, *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*, the city is a central feature, more foreground than background, and thoroughly implicated in the events of the narratives. The very title of *American Psycho*, in its addition to the Hitchcockian allusion, signals the importance of place to the novel, and its first lines situate it very specifically in Lower Manhattan:

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...Price calms down, continues to stare out the cab's dirty window, probably at the word FEAR sprayed in red graffiti on the side of a McDonald's on Fourth and Seventh.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the ominous warnings literally written on the city, such a passage positions the novel very precisely in the Financial District, with references to Eleventh and First, Fourth and Seventh, Wall Street and the Chemical Bank. Indeed, the portrayal of the city in both novels is so exact in its detail that the protagonists' movements through Manhattan's streets and boroughs can at any time be mapped. As in a representative line from *Glamorama*, "walking up Lafayette unable to shake off the feeling of being followed and stopping on the corner of East Fourth",<sup>9</sup> the reader is aware always of the protagonist's movements throughout the geographic reality of New York. These are novels richly aware of their setting, with place constantly and specifically emphasised.

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<sup>8</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 94.



As in *American Psycho*, the opening chapter of *Glamorama* similarly thrusts us into the chaotic reality of urban life. From the moment the protagonist Victor Ward (or Victor Johnston as he's also known) steps outside, the novel is suffused with descriptions of lower Manhattan: "zigzagging toward Chemical Bank by the new Gap it's a Wednesday but outside feels Mondayish and the city looks vaguely unreal".<sup>10</sup> There is an obvious reference here to the "unreal city"<sup>11</sup> of T.S. Eliot's high Modernist classic *The Waste Land*, yet here I wish simply to emphasise Ellis's rendering of the very texture and sounds of the city, as the passage continues: "right now at 5:30 this is Manhattan as Loud Place: jackhammers, horns, sirens, breaking glass, recycling trucks, whistles, booming bass from the new Ice Cube, unwanted sound trailing behind me as I wheel my Vespa into the bank."<sup>12</sup> Evoked clearly is the oppressive din of urban life in a city as frenetic and overpopulated as New York. Similarly, urban space is so central to *Glamorama* that the novel is divided up by setting, with each of the six sections of the work occurring in a specific location: New York – the metropolis of corridors and rooms on the QE2 – London – Paris – a return to New York – and finally Italy.

A striking aspect of the representation of the city in both novels is the concern with urban squalor. Ellis signals this in *Glamorama* with a metafictional nod through the name of a model's cosmetics. "Tammy gazes away, her mouth caked with Urban Decay lipstick."<sup>13</sup> *American Psycho* is perhaps most explicit in this critique, beginning with a tirade by Bateman's colleague Tim Price on the disease, death and poverty of the city (all complemented by the endless promotional images for *Les Misérables* that float by). "I hate to complain – I really do – about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this

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<sup>10</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," I. IV. LX. in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, 5th ed (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 1345.

<sup>12</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 316.

city really is and *you* know and *I* know that it is a *sty*.”<sup>14</sup> Launching into a monologue about Manhattan’s urban decline whilst reading the newspaper, Price protests: “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...and the joke is, the punch line is, it’s all in this city – nowhere else, just here.”<sup>15</sup> Such a vision of a squalid, alienating city continues throughout:

A torn playbill from *Les Misérables* tumbles down the cracked, urine-stained sidewalk. A streetlamp burns out. Someone in a Jean-Paul Gaultier topcoat takes a piss in an alleyway. Steam rises from below the streets, billowing up in tendrils, evaporating. Bags of frozen garbage line the curb. The moon, pale and low, hangs just above the tip of the Chrysler Building.<sup>16</sup>

The iconic Manhattan structure of the Chrysler Building towers over the descriptions in the above passage, with the specificity of the novel’s location within New York clearly emphasised. There is throughout, to return to the invocation of Eliot’s Modernist “unreal city”<sup>17</sup>, a profound sense of the artificiality of New York, as in the moon’s obstruction by the Chrysler Building, or later Bateman’s description of the zoo: “the tips of skyscrapers, apartment buildings on Fifth Avenue, the Trump Plaza, the AT&T building, surround the park which surrounds the zoo and heightens its unnaturalness.”<sup>18</sup>

Ellis self-consciously sets his tales in the contemporary reality of the metropolis. This explicit invocation of the real, external capital highlights the profound importance of the city for the works. Yet, Ellis does more than merely represent Manhattan; the city in both novels is highlighted in the characters’ psychological reactions to their environment. It looms as a space which, in a perversely literal continuation of the Eliot

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<sup>14</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Eliot, “The Waste Land,” I. IV. LX.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 285.

quotation, undoes so many<sup>19</sup>. In the next section I hope to show that Ellis's references to classical urban literary texts offers us potential insights into the tradition in which the author sets himself; one which figures the environment as having a profoundly destructive effect upon its inhabitants. It is a tradition, however, that he alters and extends for the Postmodern era.

## II

I established in my Introduction that Ellis's works are notoriously littered with references and allusions to fashion labels, brand names, celebrities, supermarket products, and song lyrics; citations which are indeed characteristic of Postmodern style. As Fredric Jameson argued in his seminal essay "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", "The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch...materials they no longer simply 'quote,' as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance."<sup>20</sup> Stylistically, Ellis's texts are clearly part of this Postmodern tradition with their incorporation of "low cultural" references. Yet, as I have noted, the works are also richly suffused with "high" cultural allusions, with Twain, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, E.M. Forster and Hugo being just some of the canonical authors whose words or works Ellis invokes throughout his narratives, and which potentially complicate his position within the "blank" or Postmodern movements.

*American Psycho*, in particular, is permeated with references to literary texts, from its Dantesque opening lines "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE",<sup>21</sup> to its closing invocation of Sartre, "This is not an exit",<sup>22</sup> and its epigraphic nod to W. B. Yeats's *The Second Coming* via a Talking Heads lyric "And as things fell apart/Nobody paid much

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<sup>19</sup> Paraphrasing Eliot, "The Waste Land," I. IV. LXIII.

<sup>20</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 384.

attention”.<sup>23</sup> *Glamorama*, too, contains an allusion to the same iconic Yeats poem: “‘The center cannot hold, my friend,’ Bill drones on. ‘Hey Bill – what if there’s *no* center? Huh?’ I ask.”<sup>24</sup> By far the most frequent literary allusion within *American Psycho* – via its musical adaptation – is to Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, a classic tale of suffering and wretchedness in an urban setting. In its very opening page Ellis writes, “a bus pulls up, the advertisement for *Les Misérables* on its side blocking his view”,<sup>25</sup> and such references continue throughout: Patrick’s ex girlfriend Bethany, moments before her murder, is described as “fanning herself with a playbill from *Les Misérables* someone left in the back seat of the cab.”<sup>26</sup> This reference, like almost every other major literary or cultural citation in *American Psycho*, is presented not in its original form, but is in some way second-hand. Thus, *Les Misérables* appears not in relation to the French novel, but to its commercially successful popular culture adaptation. In a further remove, the musical usually appears through its advertising material and soundtrack, thereby heightening the distance from Hugo’s original message of social injustice. (Such an invocation is present in *Glamorama* too. The first name of his protagonist, Victor, could be read as a possible echoing of the French author.) Indeed, the second-hand status of Ellis’s allusions mirror the novels’ relation to the traditions they invoke: contemporary revisions and re-workings of motifs in classic urban texts.

This referencing of urban classics can be seen in Ellis’s use of narrative perspective as well. Every one of the key works are written in the first-person, locked into a single consciousness<sup>27</sup> that is written as both disturbed and vacuous, and thus apparently unable to critically analyse or condemn the societies in which they exist. His works’ almost uniformly first-person narrative perspective essentially traps readers within

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<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 234.

<sup>27</sup> The exceptions to this are *The Rules of Attraction* and *The Informers*, which continue the first person perspective, though split in these works between multiple narrators.

traumatized consciousnesses. As Elizabeth Young writes of *American Psycho*, “we have no way out. It is a closed system. These imprisoning, claustrophobic qualities are deftly manipulated in order...to force us to live as close to Patrick as is possible in a fictional sense.”<sup>28</sup> This element has been widely criticised, with Murphet describing it as “high-risk” in that it leaves no moral counterpoint from which to evaluate that which is presented in the texts.<sup>29</sup> I have already suggested that Ellis’s epigraphs and allusions work, if not as a moral counterpoint, then as a metafictional critique and commentary upon the surface events of the narrative. Yet the almost claustrophobic first-person perspective is invaluable in examining the *psychological* affects of urban life upon its inhabitants. In his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson noted the “waning of affect” of all feeling, emotion or subjectivity in Postmodern culture. As opposed to those “great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation”,<sup>30</sup> the death of the subject has meant a corresponding death of feeling and anxiety in the Postmodern figure: “not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.”<sup>31</sup> Such a description might seem apt for an oeuvre in which the selves depicted seem decidedly absent. Yet, while Ellis certainly writes in a blank, affectless style about characters who, on the surface, appear unaffected by their environments, the actual distortions to the characters’ psyches caused by these environments are constantly underscored. It is the goal of this thesis to show that what has been widely interpreted as the gratuitous violence in Ellis’s novels can paradoxically be read as an attempt to render the profoundly destructive effects that Postmodern urban spaces have upon the main protagonists, and to show that the violence is in fact symptomatic of their fragmented and estranged consciousnesses.

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<sup>28</sup> Young, “The Beast in the Jungle” in *Shopping in Space*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho: A Reader’s Guide*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 15.

This section accordingly examines the ways in which the very elements Ellis's works have been criticised for – the blank stylistics and sadistic violence – constitutes an attempt to demonstrate at a characterological level the mental distortions the Postmodern city inspires. Let us again turn to one of Ellis's "high" cultural allusions. *American Psycho* begins with an epigraph from Dostoyevsky:

Both the author of these *Notes* and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these *Notes* not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed. I have wished to bring before the public, somewhat more distinctly than usual, one of the characters of our recent past.<sup>32</sup>

Though many critics have noted the epigraph from *Notes from Underground* (1864), and as I have outlined, been quick to deride Ellis on this basis, not one has noticed that the epigraph was written by Dostoyevsky himself as a prelude to, and a commentary upon, his *Notes*. This is a crucial point as it changes the nature of the epigraph. Ellis is not only invoking *Notes from Underground* as a work in itself, but Dostoyevsky as a writer and his preoccupations. Ellis is essentially equating Patrick Bateman not simply with the "Underground Man", but with all of Dostoyevsky's (anti)heroes of the city, in that the *Notes* are, as is widely acknowledged among Dostoyevsky critics, a representative text in his oeuvre. As Richard Peace writes, "many themes which are raised here will be developed in greater depth in such novels as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils* and *Brothers Karamazov*."<sup>33</sup> Given his use of Dostoyevsky's commentary upon the *Notes* as a commentary upon his own work, it might be fruitful to examine whether Ellis is allying his literary project with that of the Russian writer.

Indeed, the links to Dostoyevsky in *American Psycho* go beyond merely the epigraph. To note just one example, the relationship between Patrick and prostitute

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<sup>32</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, epigraph.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Peace, *Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), v.

Christie. She is first presented to the reader as standing, “on the corner of Washington and Thirteenth. She’s blond and slim and young, trashy, but not an escort bimbo”<sup>34</sup>. Such a description could be read as a perverse re-working of the “fallen woman” motif at the heart of *Crime and Punishment* (1866) between protagonist Raskolnikov and Sonya, the noble prostitute who “still retains her purity of spirit”<sup>35</sup> and for whom “not one drop of genuine lust had as yet penetrated her heart”<sup>36</sup>. Ruth Heyler, commenting upon Ellis’s text, notes the resonance in Bateman and Christie’s relationship to the older Pygmalion legend, “When he first takes her home he bathes her in expensive products, dresses her in designer clothes, and feeds her exclusive chocolates and wine in a travesty of the Pygmalion fantasy (one might point to *Pretty Woman* as a recent example of such fantasy) that a rich, handsome, and kind man will come along and save a young, pretty prostitute from the streets.”<sup>37</sup> Dostoyevsky complicates the Pygmalion myth himself, with the “fallen woman” becoming Raskolnikov’s own saviour<sup>38</sup>, while Ellis desecrates the noble theme of Dostoyevsky’s tale, with Bateman searching for his salvation in Christie’s charred remains<sup>39</sup>.

The frequency with which Ellis references Dostoyevsky throughout his canon is itself highly suggestive. In the earlier *Rules of Attraction* (1987), the Russian writer is mentioned twice when a character questions female cashiers regarding the author of that same text:

Norris pays and asks the shy, acne scarred cashier if she knows who wrote *Notes from the Underground*. The girl...smiles and says no, and that he can look in the bestseller paperbacks if he’d like.<sup>40</sup>

In the second instance, at another shop, the narrator Sean writes,

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<sup>34</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 161.

<sup>35</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. David McDuff. (London: Penguin, 2003), 385.

<sup>36</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 384.

<sup>37</sup> Ruth Heyler, “Parodied to Death,” 743-4.

<sup>38</sup> See Richard Peace for further insights around this theme in *Crime and Punishment*. Richard Peace, *Dostoyevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 31.

<sup>39</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 279.

<sup>40</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (London: Picador, 1988), 246.

As she rings up Norris's stuff, he asks her if she knows who wrote *Notes from the Underground*. She laughs at him with contempt...and says 'Dostoevsky' and gives Norris back the album and no change and the two of us drive back to campus, mildly surprised.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly in *Glamorama*, the protagonist's explanation of his self-improvement involves a further reference to the novelist: "No more drinking binges, I've cut down on partying, law school's great, I'm in a long-term relationship...I've stopped seriously deluding myself and I'm rereading Dostoevsky."<sup>42</sup> While in both instances the character's use of the name "Dostoevsky" might easily have been selected as a kind of short-hand for undergraduate pretension, the Russian writer's frequent and explicit invocation by Ellis suggests an importance to his narrative project beyond mere name-dropping. It is a significance that centres on the specific nature of Dostoevsky's writing of the city.

Georg Lukács has described Dostoevsky as "the first and greatest poet of the modern capitalist metropolis",<sup>43</sup> claiming that while writers such as Dickens and Balzac had given important poetic treatments of the city, "Dostoevsky was the first – and is still unsurpassed – in drawing the *mental deformations* that are brought about as social necessity by life in a modern city."<sup>44</sup> It is this particular psychological approach that distinguishes his work, in its exploration of the effects of the urban environment upon the individual, and Ellis's writings, I hope to suggest, follow this. Albert J. Guerard has characterised Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* as "the most intense and most authentic rendering...of neurotic suffering, seen from within,"<sup>45</sup> and it is this narrative strategy, and this tracing of a disturbed and disturbing interior pattern of thought, that lends Ellis's first-person narratives their power as examinations of the effects of the city upon

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<sup>41</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, 246.

<sup>42</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 446.

<sup>43</sup> Georg Lukács, "Dostoevsky," in *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. René Wellek (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962), 153.

<sup>44</sup> Emphasis my own. Lukács, "Dostoevsky," 153.

<sup>45</sup> Albert J. Guerard, *The Triumph of the Novel: Dickens, Dostoevsky, Faulkner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 166.



the individual. “Seeing from within” is of course the dominant mode of the Modernist project, as well as earlier Realist novels, and Ellis does indeed emulate this technique. While Ellis’s works do not rival the experimental, high Modernist “stream of consciousness” style of a Joycean psychological narrative, the way Ellis traps readers so uncomfortably within disturbed consciousnesses means that we are able to experience first-hand the mental deformations of city life. It is this strategy that allies Ellis’s vision of the city with the classical writers he metafictionally invokes such as Dostoyevsky or Hugo.

For Georg Simmel in his classic essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, “the deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society”.<sup>46</sup> Perpetually confronted with the myriad cultural objects inherent in the structure of the metropolis with its frenzied pace, this constant flow of objects and stimulations appears to the individual as “other”, they estrange and oppress, forming a barrier between the person and their innermost self.<sup>47</sup> Simmel expresses the fear felt by dwellers in the urban environment of being anonymous and superfluous, erased by the tides of city life: “the resistance of the individual to being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism”.<sup>48</sup> The particular adaptive response to this is what Simmel calls the “blasé attitude”, in which “the nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them.”<sup>49</sup> The indifference characteristic of the blasé attitude is pervasive in *American Psycho*. Throughout the work, Bateman is constantly informing those around him of his murderous tendencies, “‘My life is a living hell,’ I mention off the cuff [...]”

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<sup>46</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324.

<sup>47</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 484.

<sup>48</sup> Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 324.

<sup>49</sup> Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 330.

‘And there are many more people I, uh, want to...want to, well, I guess *murder*’”,<sup>50</sup> or, as he informs an oblivious Paul Owen, “I’m telling him ‘I’m utterly insane’ and ‘I like to dissect girls’.”<sup>51</sup> Yet, each of the characters remains utterly unaffected by these claims. This apathy is evident not only in Bateman’s acquaintances, but in all the inhabitants of the city. Thus, when Bateman has a breakdown on the city streets, “people pass, oblivious, no one pays attention, they don’t even pretend to *not* pay attention”,<sup>52</sup> or, as he jabs threateningly at his colleague Luis Carruthers with a switchblade in public, “people move out of the way, continue walking.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, this is a society so oblivious that a maid can clean Bateman’s blood-soaked apartment seemingly without noticing, “she waxes the floor, wipes blood smears off the walls, throws away gore-soaked newspapers without a word”<sup>54</sup>. Bateman can also walk down the street with a dead body in a sleeping bag, and remain undetected:

I place Owen head-first and fully dressed into a Canalino goose-down sleeping bag, which I zip up and then drag easily into the elevator, then through the lobby, past the night doorman, down the block, where briefly I run into Arthur Crystal and Kitty Martin...Luckily Kitty Martin is supposed to be dating Craig McDermott, who is in Houston for the night, so they don’t linger, even though Crystal – the rude bastard – asks me what the general rules of wearing a white dinner jacket are. After answering him curtly I hail a taxi, effortlessly manage to swing the sleeping bag into the backseat, hop in and give the driver the address in Hell’s Kitchen.<sup>55</sup>

Many have taken such episodes as proof of the unreliability of the narrator and thus of the “fictionality” (even within fiction) of all the events in the work<sup>56</sup>; however, as Mark Storey importantly points out, “the question is not whether the ‘action’ really takes place – a careful reading reveals that was never the point – but what the ‘action’ tells us about

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<sup>50</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 136. Non bracketed ellipsis in original.

<sup>51</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 207.

<sup>52</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 144.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 214.

<sup>54</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 367.

<sup>55</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 210.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine, “American Psycho: A Double Portrait of Serial Yuppie Patrick Bateman,” *Post Script* 22.3 (2003): 46+.

the person who recounts it”,<sup>57</sup> and, I would add, what the person’s recounting says about their experience of the society in which the “action” is taking place. The effect of these passages is to highlight, in an albeit exaggerated sense, the alienating effects of life in the Postmodern city.

According to Simmel, in the modern urban environment, people’s personalities are relentlessly suppressed and worn away by the impersonality of its structures and its emotional climate. As an individual, one feels fragmented and estranged. Such feelings of fragmentation are strongly present throughout *Glamorama*, with the constant refrain, “spare me,” which begins as a throwaway insult that occurs almost as frequently as once every second page in the opening section, and continues throughout the rest of the work<sup>58</sup>. Yet the phrase takes on a more literal, and sinister, connotation later when it appears that the terrorist ring is creating second “spare” selves. As Victor cries at one point, when presented with a recent photo of an Asian model whose torture and murder he had witnessed weeks earlier, “I think they double people. I mean, I don’t know how, but I think they have...doubles. That’s not Sam Ho...that’s someone else...I mean, I think they have doubles, Palakon.”<sup>59</sup> Ellis casts metafictional winks to the audience to emphasise the doubling in the novel, with a club called Doppleganger’s<sup>60</sup> and the name of Victor’s band: “We’ve changed the name. We’re the Impersonators now.”<sup>61</sup> Even the soundtrack is littered with doubling references: clubs play songs including U2’s “Even Better Than The Real Thing”<sup>62</sup> and “a cover of the Who’s ‘Substitute’”.<sup>63</sup> The fact that the Who song is a cover is just one further instance of the nesting of irony inside irony, for those who are willing to look.

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<sup>57</sup> Mark Storey, “‘And as things fell apart’: The Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk*,” *CRITIQUE* 47.1 (2005): 58.

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 17, 18, 20, 26, 28, 37, 57, 74, 81, 85, 86, 111, 137, 170, 278.

<sup>59</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 373. Ellipsis in original.

<sup>60</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 81.

<sup>62</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 144.

<sup>63</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 303.

Henrik Skov Nielsen provides an important analysis of this motif in his essay on the theme of the double in *Glamorama*,

[T]he double takes over not just the identity and life of Victor Ward but the narration of the narrative, which itself becomes doubled and double-voiced... The words 'Who the fuck is Moi?' on the novel's first page become the starting signal for a game of hide and seek, where the reader is invited to guess: 'Who is "I" now? Who is now saying "I"?'<sup>64</sup>

Both Ellis's referential, as well as his textual, contexts work to complicate and critique the surface reading of the narrative. Yet, at a characterological level, there is a very real sense in which the societies depicted have an alienating affect upon Victor, fragmenting him psychologically, and "doubling" him too. Victor is continually told he has been at places he knows he hasn't<sup>65</sup>, and discovers photos in which he is shown to be present but is certain the person depicted is not truly him.<sup>66</sup> As Skov Nielsen notes, "he is known as both Victor Johnson and Victor Ward; his new surname...begins with the letter W, 'the double you.'"<sup>67</sup> This can be read as a further invocation of Dostoyevsky's preoccupations, with the divided self being a feature of the Russian author's entire canon: "the double is one of Dostoevsky's most characteristic themes. It is almost a fixed idea – it recurs in his work many times and in several versions".<sup>68</sup> Or as Michael Holquist argues, "there is a sense in which all his characters are 'doubles.'"<sup>69</sup> Dostoyevsky's doubling is about "rendering the truth of subjective reality",<sup>70</sup> and the cumulative traumas of urban life in the narrative of *Glamorama* certainly psychically split Ward.

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<sup>64</sup> Henrik Skov Nielsen, "Telling Doubles and Literal-Minded Reading in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*," *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, ed. Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2006) 24-5.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 11, 18, 25, 38, 60, 80, 102, 331-2.

<sup>66</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 224.

<sup>67</sup> Nielsen, "Telling Doubles and Literal-Minded Reading," 23.

<sup>68</sup> Dmitri Chizhevsky, "The theme of the Double in Dostoevsky," in *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. René Wellek (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962) 112.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 76.

<sup>70</sup> Malcolm V. Jones, *Dostoevsky after Bakhtin: Readings in Dostoevsky's Fantastic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 14.

This “splitting” is a prominent feature of the Modernist conception of the city too. As Simmel has argued, through an intensity and proliferation of concrete structures and the “depersonalized cultural accomplishments”<sup>71</sup> so characteristic of the metropolis, “the personality can...scarcely maintain itself in the face of it”.<sup>72</sup> This is particularly pertinent to the impersonal structures of New York. Berman, in his *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, writes of Manhattan’s great structures and boroughs:

Many of the city’s most impressive structures were planned specifically as symbolic expressions of modernity: Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, Coney Island, Manhattan’s many skyscrapers, Rockefeller Center and much else. Other areas of the city – the harbor, Wall Street, Broadway, the Bowery, the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, Harlem, Times Square, Madison Avenue – have taken on symbolic weight and force as time went by. The cumulative impact of all this is that the New Yorker finds himself in the midst of a Baudelairean forest of symbols. The presence and profusion of these giant forms make New York a rich and strange place to live in. But they also make it a dangerous place, because its symbols and symbolisms are endlessly fighting each other for sun and light, working to kill each other off, melting each other along with themselves into air.<sup>73</sup>

In the Postmodern metropolis of 1980s New York City, the effect upon the individual of this forest of symbols is not only one of apathy and alienation, but mental disintegration. Jane Augustine describes New York as the “city of craziness”, which is “an inevitable consequence of its contradictory and high-density stimuli which bombard the individual who has no reference point from which to interpret them.”<sup>74</sup> In *American Psycho*, Ellis portrays Bateman’s difficulty in dealing with life in this consumerist space. At several points in the novel, Bateman suffers a complete mental breakdown while walking the streets of the city. Thus, the chapter entitled “Glimpse of a Thursday Afternoon” – implying perhaps the banal regularity of such occurrences – begins, “and it’s

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<sup>71</sup> Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 338.

<sup>72</sup> Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 338.

<sup>73</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 289.

<sup>74</sup> Jane Augustine, “From *Topos* to *Anthropoid*: The City as Character in Twentieth-Century Texts,” in *City Images: Perspectives from Literature, Philosophy, and Film*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1991), 78.

mid-afternoon and I find myself standing at a phone booth on a corner somewhere downtown, I don't know where, but I'm sweaty and a pounding migraine thumps dully in my head and I'm experiencing a major-league anxiety attack, searching my pockets for Valium, Xanax, a leftover Halcion, anything."<sup>75</sup> Such a passage embodies everything Simmel claims about the individual's inability to cope with the frenetic pace of urban life. Ruth Heyler writes of the way in which Bateman "is confused, rather than liberated, by modern technology"<sup>76</sup>, yet he appears to be overwhelmed by Postmodern life itself, as evidenced in his inability to choose a film: "suddenly I'm seized by a minor anxiety attack. *There are too many fucking movies to choose from*".<sup>77</sup> His final choice – a film which, by his own admission, he has seen thirty-seven times<sup>78</sup> – Brian de Palma's homage to Hitchcock, *Body Double* (another referential nod to "doubling"), suggests not just his desire to escape this mind-numbing confusion, but also the extent to which everything is always already experienced. Bateman is fundamentally alienated by the simulacral quality of the Postmodern urban world.

In *American Psycho* we see the nadir of this psychological splitting into atavism. As Bateman comments; "I had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin, hair – but my depersonalisation was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being."<sup>79</sup> And yet, Bateman recognises his lack of feeling. This in itself suggests Jameson's waning of affect has not yet fully colonised those in the Postmodern city. Indeed, Ellis has Bateman explicitly link his murderous rage and fragmentation to the urban spaces: "I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My

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<sup>75</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 143.

<sup>76</sup> Heyler, "Parodied to Death," 736.

<sup>77</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 108.

<sup>78</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 108.

<sup>79</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 271.

mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage.”<sup>80</sup> There is a sense in which Bateman feels controlled by the forces of the urban environment and therefore justified in eschewing personal responsibility or agency (although it is possible to read such apparently self-aware moments as his attempt to manipulate the reader). In the third chapter, however, will argue that the murders committed by Bateman, and the violent actions of the characters in *Glamorama* with whom Victor becomes embroiled, are a symbolic revolt against the prevailing order, an attempt to break out of the alienating artificiality of their worlds and connect with something real.

### III

Let us turn to another significant literary reference from a different author. At one point in *Glamorama*, Victor notes that Bobby has a “Hermès rucksack with a copy of a book by Guy Debord hanging out of it.”<sup>81</sup> This is the only mention of Guy Debord in the work, and yet the allusion to Debord’s theories of psychogeography are relevant to Ellis’s narrative project, in their emphasis upon the “imaginative” qualities of cities. Debord famously defined psychogeography as, “the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals”.<sup>82</sup> This link between geography and psychology, as I have already outlined, is central to Ellis’s project in rendering the deforming psychic affects of these spaces. The practice of psychogeography originated with a group known as the Situationist International, an avant-garde political organisation active in Paris in the 1950s and ‘60s, with Debord as perhaps its most famous figure<sup>83</sup>. He theorized contemporary life as a “Society of the Spectacle”, in which the pervasive mediation of life divorces people from

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<sup>80</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 268.

<sup>81</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 265-6.

<sup>82</sup> Guy Debord qtd in Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden, Hertfordshire: Pocket Essentials, 2006), 10.

<sup>83</sup> Keith Bassett, “Walking as an Aesthetic Practice and a Critical Tool: Some Psychogeographic Experiments,” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 28.3 (2004): 397.

authentic experience, controlling activities and consciousnesses, rendering individuals spectators to their own lives<sup>84</sup>. Psychogeographers sought to subvert the forced architectural paths of interaction with the urban environment through the figure of the urban wanderer, and the key psychogeographic practices of *dérive*, *détournement* and unitary urbanism were attempts to resist “being accommodated into the society of the spectacle.”<sup>85</sup> It is particularly this practice of the *dérive* or “drift” – “an exploratory, destinationless wander through city streets, detecting and mapping ambiances”<sup>86</sup> – that is central to psychogeography. I noted at the outset of this chapter that the protagonists’ movements throughout Manhattan’s precincts can be “mapped”. This highlights not only the importance of the city’s spaces to the events of the novel, but also the fact that the two protagonists, Patrick Bateman and Victor Ward, consistently stroll through their cities. Ellis’s texts certainly mourn the effects of the society of the spectacle, yet the resonances here extend even earlier than the mid-twentieth century. Psychogeography itself owes a debt to the *flâneur*: that original and elusive urban wanderer captured by Charles Baudelaire and later Walter Benjamin, who walked the streets of a city, attuned aesthetically to the landscape, fundamentally part of the crowd yet remaining aloof from it<sup>87</sup>.

Baudelaire first wrote about the *flâneur* in his seminal essay, “The Painter of Modern Life”, noting that,

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement,

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<sup>84</sup> Adam Barnard, “The Legacy of the Situationist International: The Production of Situations of Creative Resistance,” *Capital and Class* 84 (2004): 107.

<sup>85</sup> Barnard, “The Legacy of the Situationist International,” 401.

<sup>86</sup> Phil Smith, “The Contemporary *Dérive*: A Partial Review of Issues Concerning the Contemporary Practice of Psychogeography,” *Cultural Geographies* 17.1 (2010): 104.

<sup>87</sup> James V. Werner, “The Detective Gaze: Edgar A. Poe, the *Flâneur*, and the Physiognomy of Crime,” *The American Transcendental Quarterly* 15.1 (2001): 6.



in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.<sup>88</sup>

The flâneur traditionally “read” the crowds around him. The figure itself arose out of a particular journalistic trope popular in the 1840s known as the physiologies. Such writings were short sketches of types or characters seen in the urban multitude. Gilloch writes, “Supposedly humorous sketches, they presented crude and facile stereotypes for the readers’ reassurance. They sought to relieve the anxiety produced by the vast anonymous urban crowd by depicting strangers as harmless and benign figures.”<sup>89</sup> The flâneur offered a way of understanding the new and potentially menacing figure of the stranger in the street by dividing, classifying and often mocking in an effort to nullify their alien nature. As McDonough notes, at this point in the history and development of the city, there was “a remarkable conjunction of discourses...in critical theory, in sociology, in aesthetic practice, and in architecture, all of which [were] concerned with reinventing the figure of the urban stranger, of the passerby on the street, as an object of anxiety.”<sup>90</sup> This anxiety around the stranger is written in Ellis’s novels as only worsening in the Postmodern environment of the city, where it becomes equated with the figures of the serial killer and the terrorist in *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* respectively.

A fundamental fear of the stranger permeates all of Ellis’s novels. The very opening page of *American Psycho*, for instance, begins with “the word FEAR sprayed in red paint on the side of the McDonalds store on the corner of Fourth and Seventh”,<sup>91</sup> while in *Glamorama*, Victor constantly notes his uneasiness while walking the urban streets: “I’m getting that certain feeling of being followed, but whenever I look behind me it’s

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 9.

<sup>89</sup> Graeme Gilloch, “The Heroic Pedestrian or the Pedestrian Hero? Walter Benjamin and the Flâneur,” *Telos* 91 (Spring 1992), 108.

<sup>90</sup> Tom McDonough, “The Crimes of the Flâneur,” *October Journal* 102 (Fall 2002): 101.

<sup>91</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 3.

only bicycle messengers carrying models' portfolios";<sup>92</sup> or later in the novel, "On the sidewalk, lights from the stores lining the street throw shadows of someone following me. Stopping suddenly, I whirl around, but no one's there, just this sort of semi-electric feeling that I'm unable to focus in on."<sup>93</sup> Ellis recognises this anxiety as a central part of urban life, and he heightens it in the protagonist's responses in both works.

Central to the concept of the flâneur has been Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Man of the Crowd," highlighted by Baudelaire in his earliest conception of the figure as native to the crowd, and cemented in the later writings of Walter Benjamin. In turn, Benjamin's work on Baudelaire and Poe confirmed the flâneur as an "icon of modernity".<sup>94</sup> In Poe's tale, an unnamed narrator watches from a café window the teeming crowds of people returning home from work, guessing their occupations from the peculiarities of their dress and gait, until he observes one whom he is unable to classify: "[S]uddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepid old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age) – a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression."<sup>95</sup> Poe's observer follows the unnamed "man of the crowd" throughout the city streets, watching as he lurches maniacally from desperation to joy as he loses and once again immerses himself amongst thronging multitudes of people. The tale reaches its climax when the narrator, wearied from pursuit, stops in front of his target and gazes directly at him. Yet the old man does not notice and continues his frenzied wanderings. "This old man", the narrator concludes,

[I]s the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd.* It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him,

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<sup>92</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 57.

<sup>93</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 135.

<sup>94</sup> Martina Lauster, "Walter Benjamin's Myth of the Flâneur," *The Modern Language Review* 102.1 (2007): 146.

<sup>95</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Tales*, ed. David Van Leer (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 88.

nor of his deeds. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the  
“Hortulus Animae,” and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God  
that “*er lässt sich nicht lesen.*”<sup>96</sup>

This threatening presence of the urban stranger, once implicit, is now made explicit. Poe’s unnamed observer was his earliest prototype of the detective figure, which he extends in his tales of Auguste Dupin, those seminal literary investigator stories. Indeed Poe’s “Man of the Crowd”, as Tom McDonough suggests, sets up the skeletons of what will become the classic detective story framework: “the pursuer, the invisible but ever-present crowd, and the individual being sought.”<sup>97</sup> In his article on “The Crimes of the Flâneur”, McDonough argues,

[I]t was just this ability of the multitude on the street to unwittingly shelter the criminal, the malicious, the delinquent, which proved menacing, and it was this threat that the mystery story phantasmatically allayed by transforming the flâneur into the detective – that figure of social control who would pull aside the cloak of the crowd to reveal the asocial criminal hiding at its very heart.<sup>98</sup>

The flâneur, once merely an observer, had morphed into a detective. McDonough’s article is particularly insightful in its recognition of the dual nature of the flâneur. He cites Benjamin’s observation that: “No matter what trail the flâneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime,”<sup>99</sup> which, he argues, gives rise to “two opposed possible readings”: one is as detective, but the second “allows for another, precisely opposite, reading; for here we also can see the flâneur as himself criminal, his wanderings through the city streets as themselves perhaps criminal acts, inevitably leading him into crime.”<sup>100</sup> This reading by McDonough of the flâneur as linked to crime and criminality is significant, and both incarnations can be read as present in Ellis’s renderings of the

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<sup>96</sup> Poe, “The Man of the Crowd,” 91.

<sup>97</sup> McDonough, “The Crimes of the Flâneur,” 108.

<sup>98</sup> McDonough, “The Crimes of the Flâneur,” 105.

<sup>99</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” qtd in McDonough, “The Crimes of the Flâneur,” 101.

<sup>100</sup> McDonough, “The Crimes of the Flâneur,” 101.

figure. Ellis's New York novels employ the two classic Poe types: the detective flâneur figure in *Glamorama*'s Victor Ward, and the monstrous "man of the crowd" in *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman. Both are inextricably bound up with crime: one as an observer, one as a perpetrator.

*Glamorama* begins as a novel satirising and critiquing the celebrity obsession of the 1990s. Yet the work becomes steadily darker and more violent as the protagonist finds himself at the centre of a group of high profile models who work as a terrorist ring, bombing locations throughout Paris. It is in this city – the original home of the flâneur – that Victor strolls in a manner startlingly reminiscent of the lead character in Poe's tale:

I'm walking aimlessly through a dark early-morning fog, staggering for long stretches, until automatic timers turn the streetlights off and clubs are just closing and a figure, a specter, strolling by smiles venomously at me and in the fog the outlines of glass and concrete towers keep shifting shapes and without thinking about direction I find myself walking toward the Eiffel Tower, through the Parc du Champ de Maris and then across the Seine on the Pont d'Iéna and then past the Palais de Chaillot.<sup>101</sup>

The "specter in the crowd" who "smiles venomously" at the protagonist conjures clear parallels with the climactic conclusion of Poe's "Man Of The Crowd". Yet, more broadly, *Glamorama*'s representation of its protagonist adheres closely to the conception of the flâneur as an observer of his urban milieu who slips easily into the crowd. Indeed, part of the reason the terrorist leader Bobby selects models as a front for his terrorist activities is due to the idea that in a society so enamoured of beauty and glamour, they would be virtually impossible to detect. As Victor desperately tries to warn a character at one point: "‘He’s a terrorist,’ I tell Markus, motioning to Bobby. ‘No,’ Markus says, shaking his head. ‘He doesn’t look like a terrorist. He’s way too gorgeous.’"<sup>102</sup> Jamie later outlines Bobby's reasoning in a drug-stilted monologue:

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<sup>101</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 342.

<sup>102</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 317.

How did he recruit people?...It was only models...and famous models...  
He wasn't interested in anyone else...He would use the fact that as a model  
all you do all day is stand around and do what other people tell you to do...  
He preyed on that...and we listened...and it was an analogy that made  
sense...in the end...when he asked...things of us...and it wasn't hard to  
recruit people...everyone wanted to be around us.<sup>103</sup>

Victor is a character who, like Poe's observer in "The Man Of The Crowd" becomes bound up with the object of his pursuit. Initially tasked simply with finding a girl with whom he attended college, he becomes deeply embroiled in a terrorist ring, and the bones of the classic detective story are all present. Indeed, one of Ellis's references is to the works of a writer of classic genre novels that centre on conspiracies and intrigue, when Victor notes that "the collected works of Philip K. Dick fill an entire row in the room's only bookcase"<sup>104</sup> in his band mate's loft. Victor's position as detective is underscored first metafictionally with refrains that occur constantly throughout the text – "What's the story?"<sup>105</sup> and "The better you look, the more you see",<sup>106</sup> or the constant warnings from the "director" that "It's what you don't know that matters most"<sup>107</sup> – yet unlike Poe's later Auguste Dupin, a hopelessly ineffectual one. Ellis peppers his tale with clues, but the narrative becomes so hyperreal and frenetic that Victor is unable to make any sense of it. At one point the director steps in to help Victor figure out the case. "I think things need to be reduced for you," the director says. "In order for you to...see things clearly...Otherwise we'll be shooting this all year".<sup>108</sup> The final chapters depict what the reader must assume is the "real" Victor trapped in Italy, his identity in New York stolen, noting that "I'm still piecing together clues – there's only a blueprint, there's only an outline – and sometimes they come together, but only when I'm drinking from a

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<sup>103</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 309. Ellipsis in original.

<sup>104</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 90.

<sup>105</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 36.

<sup>106</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 27, 81.

<sup>107</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 341, 98, 233, 283.

<sup>108</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 393.

cold, syrupy bottle of Sambuca”.<sup>109</sup> The novel ends with very little confirmed or resolved for either the protagonist or the reader. The narrative of *Glamorama* deliberately evades resolution, and in this sense, Victor is closely allied to the aristocratic onlooker merely observing fractured parts of the activities of the people “in the crowd”. *American Psycho*, however, presents the monstrous flaneur of the “man of the crowd” himself.

*American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman conforms to the classic flâneur on surface level – aristocratic, of independent means<sup>110</sup>, always in sumptuous attire: “the suit I wear today is from Alan Flusser...The tie is a dotted silk design by Valentino Couture. The shoes are crocodile loafers by A. Testoni”.<sup>111</sup> Just as the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” relates the dress of those he encounters, fashions are endlessly recounted in *American Psycho*, to the point where the clothing goes beyond metonym to actually stand in for the personages themselves. As Bateman notes, “I count three silk-crepe ties, one Versace silk-satin woven tie, two silk foulard ties, one silk Kenzo, two silk jacquard ties”.<sup>112</sup> Aristocratic dress is elevated to an almost comical extent in the novel, and as with *Glamorama*, it is difficult not to see parallels between the dénouement of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” in a passage such as this,

A figure with slicked-back hair and horn-rimmed glasses approaches in the distance, wearing a beige double-breasted wool-garbadine Cerruti 1881 suit...The man passes under the fluorescent glare of a streetlamp with a troubled look on his face that momentarily curls his lips into a slight smile and he glances at Price almost as if they were acquainted but just as quickly he realizes that he doesn’t know Price and just as quickly Price realizes its not Victor Powell and the man moves on.<sup>113</sup>

A constant in *American Psycho* is an almost comic tendency for the characters to mistake one another. Indeed it becomes the central argument for the imaginary nature of the

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<sup>109</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 471-2.

<sup>110</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 227-8.

<sup>111</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 28.

<sup>112</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 106.

<sup>113</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 7.

atrocities Bateman commits. The extent to which the characters confuse one another to the point of interchangeability means that Bateman is able to slip easily into the crowd unnoticed: “Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam...but for some reason it really doesn’t matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same exact thing as 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.”<sup>114</sup> This “cloaking” becomes Bateman’s alibi for the murder of Paul Owen. Yet the flâneur’s ability to cloak himself in the anonymity of the crowd has even more sinister implications. Ellis writes graphically of Bateman’s descent into the demonic “Man of the Crowd”, grotesquely rendering Baudelaire’s famous conception of the flâneur as the “collector of specimens” by making it perversely literal: “In my locker at the locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I’ve attacked in the past week... There’s a barrette clipped on one of them, a blue ribbon from Hermès tied around my favorite.”<sup>115</sup> Such a literalisation demonstrates the degenerate psyches Ellis is suggesting such urban environments foster. In his two New York novels Ellis creates protagonists who can be read as flâneur figures, and yet his own authorial project might be said to be that of the classic flâneur too: observing the urban crowd precisely in order to critique it.

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<sup>114</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 86.

<sup>115</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 356.

# Chapter Two:

## Invoking the “Anti-Myth”: Writing Los Angeles

In every age there is a capital city, an absolute theater of ambition. Paris was ‘the capital of the nineteenth century.’ After 1945 New York City became indisputably ‘the supreme metropolis of the present.’ In the strange new postmodern imperium we live in, Los Angeles, at the very least, has become the American city the world watches for signs and portents.

– David Reid. *Sex, Death and God in L.A.*<sup>1</sup>

As with the New York novels, setting is centrally important to Ellis’s three Angeleno works, *Less Than Zero*, *The Informers* (1994) and *Imperial Bedrooms*. The opening section of his most recent work *Imperial Bedrooms* provides one of the most sweeping depictions of Los Angeles in his oeuvre. The protagonist Clay, returning to his home town after months away in New York, enters his new apartment on the fifteenth floor of the Doheny Plaza in West Hollywood and gives a lush portrait of the city:

The entire window wall that runs the length of the living room is actually a sliding glass door divided into five panels that I push open to air the condo out, and where the large white-tiled balcony drops into an epic view of the city that reaches from the skyscrapers downtown, the dark forests of Beverly Hills, the towers of Century City and Westwood, then all the way to Santa Monica and the edge of the Pacific. The view is impressive without becoming a study in isolation; it’s more intimate than the one a friend had who lived on Appian Way, which was so far above the city it seemed as if you were much more alone than you thought you were, a view that inspired the flickering thoughts of suicide.<sup>2</sup>

It is striking how quickly his description of Los Angeles turns to thoughts of self-destruction; an overriding tendency in the L.A. novels to which I will return. Important here is the manner in which the novel immediately sketches the full extent of its setting: “the dark forests of Beverly Hills, the towers of Century City and Westwood, then all the way to Santa Monica and the edge of the Pacific.”<sup>3</sup> The passage is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau’s comments in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) on the view from the summit

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<sup>1</sup> David Reid, ed., *Sex, Death and God in L.A.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.)

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 13.



of the (then still standing) World Trade Center: “lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to anonymous law”.<sup>4</sup> Clay is orienting himself in his home city, and yet there is no comforting nostalgia for an idea of home here. Out of the suffocating clasp of the streets, Clay’s vision remains one of distance and detachment. Indeed, what is significant about Ellis’s rendering of L.A. throughout all three works is the manner in which it is almost always written from an outsider’s perspective, as if to underscore the alien nature of this Postmodern city. The protagonist of both *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay – like Ellis himself – is a native Angeleno, yet he is portrayed in both novels as feeling overwhelmingly like a stranger.

## I

In the very nature of its planning and its physical structures, Los Angeles’s geography marks it as unique. As David Fine writes, “[I]n its low-density horizontal spread across a vast basin the city simply did not look like a city...not like New York, Chicago, or San Francisco. It was a city that appeared to have no center and no periphery.”<sup>5</sup> Los Angeles separates itself decisively from earlier European models<sup>6</sup> and has been regarded by scholars including Jean-Francois Lyotard<sup>7</sup>, Edward Soja<sup>8</sup> and Deepak Narang Sawhney<sup>9</sup> as the premier Postmodern metropolis. While critical discourse, led by Soja<sup>10</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice Of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 92.

<sup>5</sup> David Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), viii.

<sup>6</sup> Richard S. Weinstein, “The First American City,” in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 22.

<sup>7</sup> See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Pacific Wall* (Venice: Lapis Press, 1990.)

<sup>8</sup> See Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 191.

<sup>9</sup> See Deepak Narang Sawhney, “Journey Beyond the Stars: Los Angeles and Third Worlds,” in *Unmasking L.A.: Third Worlds and the City* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 191.

Lyotard<sup>11</sup>, figures L.A. as the great *fin-du-millénaire* city if not of the world then certainly of America, comparatively little has been written about the fictional texts in which the city is featured. David Fine, one of the few critics dedicated to examining L.A. literature rather than the city's geography or social aspects, writes about this gap in the critical literature,

Surprisingly, given the fact that Los Angeles has emerged as a major twentieth-century literary center, arguably *the* late twentieth-century American literary city, scant critical attention has been given to the extensive body of fiction produced in and about it.<sup>12</sup>

Scholarly discourse has tended to focus on Postmodern urbanism,<sup>13</sup> ethnic divisions within the city,<sup>14</sup> and the vexed question of the (endlessly scare-quoted) “real” L.A.,<sup>15</sup> rather than its literary identity. Those who do discuss the fiction, such as Fine or Michael Sorkin, have tended to figure it as a literature of exiles who have conferred upon the city an outsiders' identity which is known as the “anti-myth”. This “anti-myth” is the idea of L.A. against which contemporary, native Angelenos have had to battle: “Like the ‘Orient’ of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries,” Sorkin writes, “the common image of L.A. is the invention of outsiders, a traveler's version, chained to the hyperbole of discovery”.<sup>16</sup> Sorkin describes those writers lured to the west by the false promises of Hollywood as “literary pilgrims”,<sup>17</sup> with Los Angeles fiction centering on an outsider's journey into a place figured as a kind of Western heart of darkness.

That the literature of the city was established by non-native writers is an historical fact. However, in the current criticism of L.A. fiction, the distinction between “insider”

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<sup>11</sup> Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*.

<sup>12</sup> Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, ix.

<sup>13</sup> See Michael Dear and Steven Flusty, eds., “Postmodern Urbanism,” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88.1 (1998): 50-72.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example Charles Jencks, “Hetero-Architecture and the L.A. School,” in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 49-51.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 8-9, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Sorkin, “Explaining Los Angeles,” in *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings* (London: Verso, 1994), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Sorkin, “Explaining Los Angeles,” 49.

and “outsider” writers has become something of an obsessive theme. Fine focuses throughout all his works<sup>18</sup> on the literary dominance of immigrants over natives, saying: “Any discussion of the emergence of Los Angeles as a literary territory must begin with the recognition that the writers – like almost everyone else – were newcomers, and thus strangers in a strange land.”<sup>19</sup> In an article in *American Literary History*, “Los Angeles Literature: Exiles, Natives, and (Mis)Representation”, J. Scott Bryson similarly addresses this issue of authorial provenance, claiming that a literary identity shaped by exiles has significant limitations:

Approaching the city from the outside...they were still largely responding to how the boosters and other ‘sunshiners’ presented Los Angeles; or (relatedly) they were reacting to their own experiences writing for and interacting with ‘the Industry,’ which certainly would not have given them access to a depth of insider information or have allowed them to write about Los Angeles in the sort of authentic and deeply lived way a native could.<sup>20</sup>

Bryson goes further than Fine in arguing that these immigrant writers’ tales are “inauthentic” as they are necessarily mediated by the myths they sought to deconstruct<sup>21</sup>. Likewise, Murphet in *Literature and Race in Los Angeles* advocates questioning the validity of the imported vision of L.A. He writes that “the glance from without which captures the whole – has been discredited,” and it is the insider, “who is better positioned to express the truth of a city.”<sup>22</sup>

Murphet, Bryson and McClung all contend that native Angelenos are better placed to story the city more “authentically”. Certainly, native Angeleno writers have the potential to recast the nature of fictional impressions of the city, highlighting aspects that

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, David Fine, “The Emergence of Los Angeles as a Literary Territory,” *California History* 79.1 (2000): 4. and David Fine, introduction to *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Original Essays* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 2-10 and David Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction*, vii-21.

<sup>19</sup> Fine, “The Emergence of Los Angeles as a Literary Territory,” 6.

<sup>20</sup> J. Scott Bryson, “Los Angeles Literature: Exiles, Natives, and (Mis)Representation,” *American Literary History* 16.4 (2004): 710.

<sup>21</sup> Bryson, “Los Angeles Literature,” 710.

<sup>22</sup> Murphet. *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 15.

may have been neglected in immigrant writers' accounts. However, these straightforward binaries of insider/outsider, and native/immigrant appear rather problematic and simplistic in the context of much contemporary literature about the city. Los Angeles-born Ellis does not fit easily within either category: his works, I contend, destabilise these distinctions insofar as he is a native writer who writes the city from an "outsider" or "immigrant" perspective. Ellis, by subverting the binaries of much Los Angeles criticism, renders the city in a way that distinguishes his writings from the work of other native Angeleno novelists. In depicting his protagonists' feelings of alienation from the city's mainstream inhabitants, he aligns his project with a tradition of writing against the city, further positioning his metanarrative amongst the works of those novelists who highlight the feelings of estrangement that are endemic to urban life.

## II

In the debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, the protagonist Clay is presented as a foreigner in his hometown upon landing in Los Angeles after four months away at college in New Hampshire. This is signified at first through his dress, "my gray argyle vest, which seems vaguely more eastern than before, especially next to Blair's clean tight jeans and her pale-blue T-shirt"<sup>23</sup> and then in his constantly noted "paleness": "Trent looks at me and says, 'You look pale.' I notice I do, compared to Trent's deep, dark tan and most of the other people's complexions around the room."<sup>24</sup> Though returning home in clothes suited to an east coast climate and a faded tan shouldn't be considered abnormal, such observations are given a weight within the novel that elevate them to a symbolic status. In the later *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay – who, in Ellis's typically metafictional style, is the "real life" Clay from *Less Than Zero* – returns to L.A. again, "*I've been in New York the last*

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<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 6.

*four months* is the mantra, my mask an expressionless smile”<sup>25</sup> and is similarly depicted as feeling alien in this world, as he writes of a launch party for a new film: “my eyes wander over to the boys barely old enough to drive, swimming in the heated pool, girls in string bikinis and high heels lounging by the Jacuzzi, anime sculptures everywhere, a mosaic of youth, a place you don’t really belong anymore”.<sup>26</sup> It is this feeling of “not belonging” or “not belonging anymore” that permeates Ellis’s sense of L.A. in *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms* in particular. Though Ellis is a native-born Angeleno, his novels convey the same sense of dislocation, disorientation and lack of belonging that characterise “anti-myth” American and earlier European novels of urban alienation.

In *The Informers*’ short story “Letters from L.A.”, the protagonist Anne, a genuine outsider in the city, visits Los Angeles for the first time and notes that, “the city is so quiet...Especially compared to New York. And everything seems so clean and to move so much more slowly in a very relaxed way. But yet I don’t feel too safe here yet. I feel vulnerable – like I’m in this big open environment.”<sup>27</sup> It is a vulnerability, if not outright feeling of danger, that permeates Ellis’s depiction of the west coast in all his works. His writing of the city of L.A. is far darker and ominous than the New York novels. The Californian landscape holds a particular source of dread for his characters, a constant and menacing presence, figured as a dark other to the known urban world yet encroaching always upon it. Gone is any of the classical Modernist comfort in the pastoral. *Less Than Zero* holds perhaps Ellis’s darkest visions of a threatening natural landscape: “I sit up, and through the Venetian blinds I can see the palm trees shaking wildly, actually bending, in the hot winds”,<sup>28</sup> signaling from the very opening pages the destructive power of California’s natural climate. Indeed, Clay is tormented throughout the novel by what he regards as an ominous territory. The howling of coyotes, shaking and trembling of palm

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<sup>25</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 16. Emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 17-18.

<sup>27</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *The Informers*. (London: Picador, 1994), 131-2.

<sup>28</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 4.

trees in the lashing winds, street lights that flash on and off in the eerie nights, dogs barking in the distance, and the slithering threat of rattlesnakes are some of the rhythmic undercurrents of the novel<sup>29</sup>.

As noted above, Clay's first view of home in *Less Than Zero* is one in which great winds have ravaged the palm trees outside his house, but what is interesting in this passage is the reaction of his former girlfriend Blair, a native Angeleno who attends college in California:

Blair drives off the freeway and comes to a red light. A heavy gust of wind rocks the car for a moment and Blair smiles and says something about maybe putting the top up and turns to a different radio station. Coming to my house, Blair has to stop the car since there are these five workmen lifting the remains of palm trees that have fallen during the winds and placing the leaves and pieces of dead bark in a big red truck, and Blair smiles again. She stops at my house and the gate's open and I get out of the car, surprised to feel how dry and hot it is.<sup>30</sup>

There are two moments in this passage that serve as subtle reminders of the menacing nature of the environment – a heavy gust of wind so powerful as to actually rock their car, and the same winds destroying palm trees. Importantly, in both instances Blair's reaction is to "smile", suggesting the obliviousness of Angelenos to the ubiquitous threat of their landscape. There is indeed a material basis for Ellis's menacing representation of L.A.: the unique geography of the city and the ever-present threat of natural disaster, Fine argues, "makes the city both an obvious and inevitable choice for doomsday renderings. The land itself, lying on a major fault line, given to periodic quakes as well as annual cycles of fire, flood, and mud slide, offers itself to such dark visions".<sup>31</sup> In the novel there is a sense in which the inhabitants are blissfully unaware of the dangers of their own environment, or conversely, so used to it that the threat no longer holds any power in their imagination. As Peter Freese notes, the fact that Los Angeles is situated

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<sup>29</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 54, 127, 180.

<sup>30</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 236.

on the San Andreas Fault means that “the pleasure-seeking activities of its rich denizens are a dance on the volcano”.<sup>32</sup> Only Clay, suddenly an outsider, notices and is disturbed by it. Later in the novel Clay hears a song on the radio, “some little girls are singing about an earthquake in L.A. ‘*My surfboard’s ready for the tidal wave*,’”<sup>33</sup> the danger of the landscape here lightened into an endearing part of popular culture. What is ultimately remarkable in this passage then, is that Clay notices these ominous elements of the landscape *at all*. His preoccupation with the potential for disaster and catastrophe in the city suggests he, like all of Ellis’s protagonists of the Postmodern urban environment, is not without affect.

### III

It is Ellis’s representation of L.A. as a space colonised by mass and consumer culture – “a void filled with commodities”<sup>34</sup> – that has been the overriding focus in scholarly critiques of the west coast works. Both Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney emphasised Ellis’s depiction of L.A. as a hollow consumerist space in their analyses of *Less Than Zero*. As Young writes, “the characters in Ellis’s novels are the ultimate consumers, victims of the hyperreal, doomed to life-long cycles of unappeasable desires....They embody all the depthlessness, centrelessness and cultural schizophrenia of the postmodern world.”<sup>35</sup> Certainly, Ellis’ oeuvre – and the L.A. novels in particular – depicts the colonising influence of consumer culture on individuals. A passage in *Less Than Zero* is representative:

We have been in Beverly Hills shopping most of the late morning and early afternoon. My mother and my two sisters and me. My mother has spent most of this time probably at Neiman-Marcus, and my sisters have gone to

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Freese, “Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero*: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel?’” in *Modes of Narrative: Approaches to American, Canadian and British Fiction*, eds., Reingard M. Nischik and Barbara Korte (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990) 76.

<sup>33</sup> Freese, “Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero*: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel?’” 37.

<sup>34</sup> Caveney, “Notes Degree Zero: Ellis Goes West,” in *Shopping in Space*, 124.

<sup>35</sup> Young, “Vacant Possession,” in *Shopping in Space*, 33-4.

Jerry Magnin and have used our father's charge account to buy him and me something and then to MGA and Camp Beverly Hills and Privilege to buy themselves something. I sit at the bar at La Scala Boutique for most of this time, bored out of my mind, smoking, drinking red wine.<sup>36</sup>

In place of any evocative description or presence of emotion, brand names are the only markers of significance – Neiman-Marcus, Jerry Magnin, MGA *et al.* His texts incorporate wholly and apparently uncritically the language of consumerism. Of course, there is a sense in which Ellis parodies this, such as in the following novel *The Rules of Attraction*, set in New Hampshire, where Clay narrates a short chapter: “the Price Chopper, a place I like to hang out in, a place that reminds me of California, a place that reminds me of the frozen food section of Gelson's, a place that reminds me of home.”<sup>37</sup> Price Chopper and Gelson's – two large American supermarket chains – are what soothe and evoke any wistful feeling for the city and idea of home. Here, Ellis seems to ridicule the extent to which consumerism dominates the experience of life in L.A. Yet, there is no doubt that his texts reflect and reproduce, on the surface level at least, the influence of consumer culture on the individuals of the city.

In *Literature and Race in Los Angeles*, Murphet provides an insightful examination of Ellis's L.A. novels, *Less Than Zero* and *The Informers* (*Imperial Bedrooms* had not yet been published). In his analysis, Murphet follows Young and Caveney in emphasising Ellis's depiction of L.A. as a hollow consumerist space, describing the texts as providing “a vicarious ‘non-experience’ of Los Angeles through the lens of a conspicuous consumer.”<sup>38</sup> Murphet argues that Ellis has attempted to map the abstraction of space in L.A. by providing us with an experience of the city from the point of view of narrators for whom the commercial sphere is their only horizon.<sup>39</sup> In a land so inundated with commodities, what recourses, Murphet asks, are left for a writer who wishes to break the

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<sup>36</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis, *Rules of Attraction*, 206.

<sup>38</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 35.



polished surface of consumerism in his novels? How to “disturb this unbroken surface of consumer space and insert some moment of negativity in order to protest its outright domination of everyday life?”<sup>40</sup> According to Murphet, Ellis employs five strategies with which to approach this problem: character, plot, space, pop-cultural icons, and prose style:

His early strategies for suggesting an ‘outside’ to it, a critical distance which would somehow call into question its implacable dominion over social being, take several forms: characterological, in the moral ‘growth’ of Clay the narrator of *Less Than Zero*; narratological, in the increasing frequency of violent and amoral events and apocalyptic portents as that novel progresses; spatial, in the unrepresented, though frequently alluded to, place of the East, and Camden College from which Clay is on holiday; totemic, in the poster-icon of Elvis Costello stuck over Clay’s bed, and the title *Less Than Zero* itself; and immanent, in the very texture of the sentences which tell the tale.<sup>41</sup>

Murphet’s focus is on the last of these strategies. He argues that Ellis negotiates the problem of consumerism through his prose style, what he terms “distanciation through immanence”, which consists of “a dogged stylistic consistency, running through all five novels, in the matter of person, tense and mood.”<sup>42</sup> This describes his uniformly blank, present-tense, first-person style that varies little from character to character.<sup>43</sup> It is Ellis’s immense debt to Didion that Murphet sees as central to his distinctive prose style; “Incorporating Didion’s diction, Ellis became her literary *doppelgänger*, liquidating his own identity in the conviction that it was much cooler to assume hers.”<sup>44</sup> According to Murphet, Ellis adopts and surpasses Didion’s “white writing” (seen for example in her 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays*) – a stylistic technique which was itself a version of Roland Barthes’s *le degré zéro de l’écriture*, or “writing degree zero” in which all traces of political

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<sup>40</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 83.

<sup>41</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 83.

<sup>42</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 84-5.

<sup>44</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 88.

allegiance and ideology are erased – thereby achieving an even more effacing prose style, what Murphet nicely coins Ellis’s “writing degree less-than-zero.”<sup>45</sup>

Murphet’s analysis is important and perceptive to the extent that it pays close attention to Ellis’s stylistics. Yet, I believe there is a further way that Ellis signals his dissent from the consumer-bound world, a sixth option to “disturb his unbroken surface of consumer space and insert some moment of negativity in order to protest its outright domination of everyday life.”<sup>46</sup> This can be termed the “referential” or “allusive” mode. Just as T. S. Eliot made heavy use of quotations and allusions from classical literature in *The Waste Land* to criticise the west’s lack of spirituality, so Ellis’s use of epigraph and allusion to “anti-myth” literary works that warn against the lures of the city is how he protests the domination of everyday life by consumerism. This is his way of metafictionally signaling his opposition to the mediated and derealised world of surfaces that Murphet outlines.

#### IV

I have previously noted broadly that the majority of critiques that have paid attention to Ellis’s use of reference have highlighted his use of pop-culture, especially bands, celebrities and labels. This is especially true of the Los Angeles works. Interpretations of *Less Than Zero* – the only L.A. novel in Ellis’s oeuvre to receive sustained critical analysis – have focused thus far mainly on its title allusion to Elvis Costello<sup>47</sup>, its use of song lyrics,<sup>48</sup> and its status as an “MTV novel”.<sup>49</sup> It was the last of these – the uniquely “MTV” quality of Ellis’s debut – that was the most commonly noted element of the text; the

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<sup>45</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 89.

<sup>46</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Young “Vacant Possession,” in *Shopping in Space*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction*, 58-59.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Matthew J. Marr, “An Ambivalent Attraction?: Post-Punk Kinship and the Politics of Bonding in *Historias del Kronen* and *Less than Zero*,” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 10 (2006): 9-22. As well as Annesley, *Blank fictions*, 90-1. And Freese, “Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero*: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel?’”

manner in which the novel didn't simply reference MTV, but actually incorporated it stylistically into the form of the novel. As Michiko Kakutani noted in one of the early reviews, "Its narrative [is] told in fast-paced, video-like clips."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Young wrote that, "the chapters in *Less Than Zero* are brief and work like sound-bites or Polaroids, a form which echoes the flash-card, low attention span and presumed illiteracy of the Californian culture."<sup>51</sup> It was Peter Freese, however, who gave one of the most sustained examinations of the book's MTV quality, noting that the "outward pattern of the novel might well be compared to the rapid sequence of video clips as they abruptly and unceasingly follow each other on Music Television."<sup>52</sup> The novel certainly incorporates the style of this format into its structure, however one of the most significant points to notice about the references to popular music and lyrics the work is laden with, is the manner in which Clay "misreads" these musical allusions. He confesses to being puzzled by Randy Newman's "I Love L.A.":

The week before I leave, I listen to a song by an L.A. composer about the city. I would listen to the song over and over, ignoring the rest of the album. It wasn't that I liked the song so much; it was more that it confused me and I would try to decipher it. For instance, I wanted to know why the bum in the song was on his knees. Someone told me that the bum was so grateful to be in the city instead of somewhere else. I told this person that I thought he missed the point and the person told me, in a tone I found slightly conspiratorial, 'No, dude...I don't think so.'<sup>53</sup>

Here, Clay is troubled by the lyrics, apparently unable to grasp the reference to poverty in the city or the irony of the song's title, though the words are plainly misinterpreted by the other Angeleno with whom he discusses the song. Such misinterpretations continue in *Imperial Bedrooms*, where Clay, listening to a song by "The National"; mishears "One time

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<sup>50</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Books of the Times; The Young and Ugly," *New York Times*, June 8, 1985, accessed March 16, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/08/books/books-of-the-times-the-young-and-ugly.html>

<sup>51</sup> Young, "Vacant Possession," in *Shopping in Space*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Freese, "Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero*: Entropy in the 'MTV Novel?'" 71-84.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 181. Ellipsis in original.

you were a glowing young ruffian” as “One time you were blowing young ruffians.”<sup>54</sup> Like the three stand-alone “music journalism” chapters in *American Psycho*, these misreadings function like a metafictional signal to the audience, underscoring the distance between the milieus represented in the narratives and what can be read as Ellis’s rejection of them.

The focus on pop-culture references has understandably been prominent in analyses of Ellis’s L.A. works because these are the most overt. Freese comments in his discussion of *Less Than Zero* that Ellis’s “referential context is not that of ‘mainstream’ literature but of contemporary pop culture”,<sup>55</sup> an argument that Baelo-Allué reinforces in her monograph when she observes, “The set of referents does not come from the literary classics but from the world of pop culture, namely youth culture: music, cinema, shopping and brands.”<sup>56</sup> Freese and Baelo-Allué are certainly correct to say that the pop-culture allusions in *Less Than Zero* are more prominent than the literary ones since they dwarf the latter by sheer dint of numbers. Furthermore, the novel takes its title from an Elvis Costello track, its epigraphs are from bands X and Led Zeppelin, and the promotional poster for Elvis Costello’s album *Trust* attains an almost iconic significance within the work<sup>57</sup>. But this does not mean we should overlook the high cultural allusions just because they are fewer in number; if anything their scarcity potentially helps to underscore their importance since it means that the reader may be less inured to both them and the ideas they point to. In this regard, it is significant that many of the literary references in the L.A. works fall into the “anti-myth” tradition, an idea that is curiously at odds with the claims concerning Ellis’s native “insider” status.

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<sup>54</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 33.

<sup>55</sup> Freese, “Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero*: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel?’” 83.

<sup>56</sup> Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 194.

## V

Literary regionalism, the fiction of a particular place or city, is “traditionally and almost by definition,” David Fine notes, “the work of writers born in, and nourished by, the regions about which they write.”<sup>58</sup> Yet historically, Los Angeles was not made into a fictional entity by those born in the region. As Fine argues, “The Los Angeles novel is not the work of those born to the manor but of visitors and outsiders...Like almost everyone else in Los Angeles, they were strangers to the place.”<sup>59</sup> It is this feeling of displacement that Fine sees as fundamental to L.A. narratives, giving the fiction its particular quality:

Los Angeles fiction is about the act of entry...The distanced perspective of the outsider, marked by a sense of dislocation and estrangement, is the central and essential feature of the fiction of Los Angeles, distinguishing it from fiction about other American places.<sup>60</sup>

Because it was storied by writers whose perspective was one of displacement and isolation, the classical fiction of L.A. has a peculiarly negative slant. In the 1880s the Los Angeles town planners, who came to be known as “Boosters”<sup>61</sup> sought to kick start the city’s economy by populating it quickly, and they did this by selling a myth of endless sunshine, citrus groves and healing properties in an attempt to lure people west. The Boosters were successful and the region was rapidly populated – with the booming motion picture industry and the beginning of the “talkies” bringing many writers to the region. By the Depression-era, however, the conditions in the city meant writers could no longer sustain the glimmering image of the Booster myth.<sup>62</sup> The immigrants’

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<sup>58</sup> Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 15-16.

<sup>61</sup> Fine gives perhaps the most comprehensive histories of L.A. Boosterism. See David Fine “The Emergence of Los Angeles as a Literary Territory,” *California History* 79.1 (2000): 5-6. And *Imagining Los Angeles*, 30-50.

<sup>62</sup> William Alexander McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 45.

narratives became disenchanted responses to the romantic mythologisation of Los Angeles, responses that according to Fine came to be known as the “anti-myth”<sup>63</sup>, a mode which constitutes the canon of Los Angeles fiction, whose authors include Nathanael West, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James M. Cain, Aldous Huxley and Raymond Chandler.

It is a profound disillusionment, even a sense of betrayal that has informed this particular literary trope. The anti-myth, Mike Davis writes, “was like a transformational grammar turning each charming ingredient of the boosters’ arcadia into a sinister equivalent,”<sup>64</sup> and this can be seen clearly in the canonical themes of the literature of the region. In his book, *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings*, Michael Sorkin outlines twelve of the key tropes of Los Angeles fiction: apocalypse, the weather, madness, Disney, death, the movies, banality, America, cars, the artist, back East, and the future.<sup>65</sup> One could add many others to the list, such as quacks and spiritualists, cults, fire, and cliffs, for example. All, however, center on a negative reading of L.A., the product of the exiles’ literary imagination. It is with these tropes, described by Julian Murphet as the “inherited baggage of cliché through which the city is endlessly represented”,<sup>66</sup> that contemporary native writers such as Ellis have had to contend, the canonical anti-myth texts necessarily shaping their understanding and their perspective on their own city. The literary references that Ellis borrows can be read as metafictionally signaling his opposition to the world he presents, and this potentially complicates the “insider/outsider” binary that has characterised current discourse about Los Angeles fiction. Indeed, even the protagonist’s name in *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, “Clay”, may be a self-conscious and ironical reference to his molding by the canonical traditions of the city.

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<sup>63</sup> See Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*.

<sup>64</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 38.

<sup>65</sup> See Sorkin, “Explaining Los Angeles,” 54-60.

<sup>66</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 31.

## VI

Two significant epigraphs taken from “anti-myth” L.A. authors begin Ellis’s most recent west coast novels. *Imperial Bedrooms* carries an epigraph from Raymond Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* (1953): “There is no trap so deadly as the trap you set for yourself,”<sup>67</sup> while *The Informers*’ epigraph is the opening lines of John Fante’s *Ask the Dust* (1939):

One night I was sitting on the bed in my hotel room on Bunker Hill, down in the middle of Los Angeles. It was an important night in my life, because I had to make a decision about the hotel. Either I paid up or I got out: that was what the note said, the note the landlady had put under my door. A great problem, deserving acute attention. I solved it by turning out the lights and going to bed.<sup>68</sup>

The lines of Fante’s classic set the tone for Ellis’s collection in its amusing apathy towards an official notice, but also in its immediate signaling of place and of a decision about whether to stay in the city. Yet, the invocations of Fante and Chandler are significant not simply in that they conjure canonical L.A. writers and works – Fante, the school of “wino” writing (of which Charles Bukowski was later a disciple), and Chandler’s Philip Marlowe stories, a classic of the hard-boiled detective fiction and L.A. *Noir* – but because both novels have as their central character a writer: Fante’s *Ask the Dust* charts Arturo Bandini’s journey from down and out in Bunker Hill to publishing his first novel, while Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* centers on the story of the downfall and murder of a famous romance novelist. The two novels Ellis explicitly invokes center on the hardships of a writer in L.A., a classical west coast theme, and one of the most enduring “outsider” tropes of the city.

The “writer in Hollywood” is a central part of the L.A. anti-myth. With the invention of sound in film in the late 1920s, writers were drawn west to the film capital. Those authors now key to the Los Angeles identity, such as James M. Cain, Nathanael

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<sup>67</sup> Fante, in Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, epigraph.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis, *The Informers*, epigraph.

West, F. Scott Fitzgerald and the British-born Aldous Huxley, arrived in the 1930s in response to the demand for scriptwriters. In Los Angeles fiction written by these immigrants about the city, Hollywood in particular was mythologised as the place to which writers are lured and ensnared, their talents wasted at the altar of the studio machine. *Imperial Bedrooms* is the most overt of the L.A. works set in this tradition: the novel revolves around the story of the “real” Clay from *Less Than Zero*, now a screenwriter, returning to Los Angeles to help with the casting of a film he wrote, *The Listeners* (the name of the film is a metafictional reference to Ellis’s other L.A. work, the short story collection *The Informers*, such is the winding intertextual maze that is his oeuvre). *Imperial Bedrooms*’ explicit epigraphic reference to Chandler therefore – “There is no trap so deadly as the trap you set for yourself” – in the context of both Chandler’s and Ellis’s works, refers equally to a situation in which the protagonist entangles himself, as well as the broader theme of the “trap” that Hollywood scriptwriters set for themselves by relocating to Los Angeles.

Yet the oppressive trap of Hollywood, and Los Angeles by extension, was about more than the soullessness of the film industry. The city’s architecture was a central part of the writers’ alienation from and frustration with their environment. As Fine writes, “from its beginnings in the 1920s, the Hollywood novel has taken for its essential theme the confusion of reality and illusion, of lives lived and lives performed, of real and reel life.”<sup>69</sup> Central to this trope was the nature of its buildings. Hollywood, and by extension all of L.A., was seen as utterly artificial and inorganic. The city was equated by the exiles with the backlots of the studios, with buildings looking like film sets or giant props; hence the illusory nature of the city was always underscored. In West’s classic *The Day of the Locust* (1939) for example, “there were bridges which bridged nothing, sculpture in trees, palaces that seemed to be made of marble until a whole stone portico began to flap

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<sup>69</sup> Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 155.



in the light breeze.”<sup>70</sup> In anti-myth fiction there is a sense that there is no “authentic” architecture, an almost parodic extension of the Modernist “unreal city”<sup>71</sup>. We can see Ellis similarly underscoring the artificiality and inorganic nature of Los Angeles using one of his narrators in *The Informers* who describes her entry into L.A. by train at dusk:

The city seems deserted. In the distance are Pasadena hills and canyons and the small blue rectangles of lit pools. The train passes dried-up reservoirs and vast, empty parking lots, running parallel to the freeway then past a seemingly endless row of vacant warehouses, gangs of young boys standing against palm trees or huddling in groups in alleyways or around cars with headlights on, drinking beer, the Motels playing. The train moves slowly as it eases toward Union Station, as if it’s hesitating, passing Mexican churches and bars and strip joints, a drive-in where a horror movie is playing with subtitles. Palm trees are highlighted against a shifting orange-purple mass, a sky the color of Popsicles...<sup>72</sup>

There is much here that evokes the artificiality of life in L.A; the sense in which the city has been imposed upon the landscape, the juxtaposition of idyllic palm trees and empty parking lots and warehouses. Most revealing in this passage is the way the sky is described in terms of an artificial and frivolous consumer item: “the color of Popsicles.” There is also a playfulness, as with earlier exile representations of L.A. architecture in fiction. The urban constructions are depicted as possessing a kind of baffling strangeness; as in Fante’s *Ask the Dust*, where Bandini’s topsy-turvy hotel is built upside-down: “It was built on a hillside in reverse... so that the main floor was on the level with the street but the tenth floor was downstairs ten levels”,<sup>73</sup> or in Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon* (1941), where the studio backlots are dreamily described as “thirty acres of fairyland”<sup>74</sup> and like “the torn picture books of childhood.”<sup>75</sup> The most pessimistic vision of the Hollywood backlots by the exiles was West’s “dream dump”: “a gigantic pile of

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<sup>70</sup> Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 106.

<sup>71</sup> Eliot, “The Waste Land,” I. IV. LX.

<sup>72</sup> Ellis, *The Informers*, 78-9.

<sup>73</sup> John Fante, *Ask the Dust* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 15.

<sup>74</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 32.

<sup>75</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*, 32.

sets, flats and props. While he watched, a ten-ton truck added another load to it. This was the final dumping ground.”<sup>76</sup> In Ellis’s novels, however, this blurring between the world of film and reality, takes a darker and more sinister turn, as can be seen in the closing pages of *Imperial Bedrooms*, where the glamorous image of Hollywood is replaced with a more threatening one:

The cemetery pushes up to the back walls of the Paramount lot and you could find meaning in that or be neutral about it in the same way you could find something ironic about the endless rows of the dead lined up beneath the palm trees with their fronds blooming against a sparkling blue sky or choose not to, and I’m looking at the sky thinking it’s the wrong time of day for a memorial, but the day, the sunlight, chases the ghosts away and isn’t that the point? They show movies here during the summer, I remember, studying the giant white wall of the mausoleum where the movies are projected.”<sup>77</sup>

Ellis plays up the juxtapositions here, with death and Hollywood intimately linked, the cemetery encroaching upon the land of a film studio and films projected onto a tomb for the dead. His emphasis is on the role of the architecture in this, as the descriptions point to the structures of the city being “tainted”.

It is the intermingling of the city with the forces of destruction that comes to the fore in the L.A. novels. Disaster and apocalypse narratives have, of course, been one of the more powerful and enduring of the L.A. anti-myths. In his work, *Ecology of Fear*, Mike Davis devotes a chapter to a near-exhaustive charting of the history of apocalyptic representations of Los Angeles in literature and film. “No other city” Davis writes, “seems to excite such dark rapture”,<sup>78</sup> and he claims that “the destruction of Los Angeles has been a central theme or image in at least 138 novels and films since 1909”, and that “since 1952, the city and its suburbs have been destroyed on average three times per

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<sup>76</sup> West, *The Day of the Locust*, 106.

<sup>77</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 174-5.

<sup>78</sup> Mike Davis, “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles,” in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 277.

year.”<sup>79</sup> It is this apocalyptic view of the city, represented in disaster and survivalist tales, that has overwhelmingly become the literary image of L.A.:

Like some monstrous blob from a 1950s sci-fi movie, the form has slowly absorbed every competitor. Despite the critical obsession with Los Angeles as the home of hardboiled detective fiction, the disaster novel has long been an equally characteristic and symptomatic local export...[D]isaster, as allusion, metaphor, or ambience, saturates almost everything now written about Southern California.<sup>80</sup>

Drawing from the anti-myth, disaster “as allusion, metaphor or ambience” saturates Ellis’s L.A. novels. *Less Than Zero* in particular is filled with imaginings of the city’s catastrophic obliteration. A girl playfully moving on roller-skates in a shopping complex relates, “I had this dream, see, where I saw the whole world melt. I was standing on La Cienega and from there I could see the whole world and it was melting and it was just so strong and realistic like.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, even the names of the clubs the characters frequent, The Edge, Nowhere Club and Land’s End<sup>82</sup>, signify impending destruction and “end of days”. The novel closes with two powerful images of the destruction of L.A. There are of course the often-quoted closing lines: “The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun.”<sup>83</sup> Yet there is another, less noted symbolic instance on the closing pages of the novel: “There was also a poster of California that I had pinned up onto my wall. One of the pins had fallen out and the poster was old and torn down the middle and was tilted and hanging unevenly from the wall.”<sup>84</sup> Ellis’s depiction here makes literal the devastation of the city where the map itself has been

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<sup>79</sup> Davis, “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles,” 276.

<sup>80</sup> Davis, “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles,” 280.

<sup>81</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 92-3.

<sup>82</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 13, 89, 95.

<sup>83</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 195.

<sup>84</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 194.

scarred. Here again, the symbols work as damning commentary upon the otherwise blank and affectless narrative of the text.

## VII

The disaster and apocalypse narratives that characterise many of the fictional representations of L.A. are unique among urban narratives, Davis writes, “not simply in the frequency of its fictional destruction, but in the pleasure that such apocalypses provide to readers and movie audiences. The entire world seems to be rooting for Los Angeles to slide into the Pacific or be swallowed by the San Andreas fault.”<sup>85</sup> Indeed, there is a particular sense of glee at the prospect of the city’s devastation, unusual within urban traditions:

The destruction of London – the metropolis most persecuted in fiction between 1885 and 1940 – was imagined as a horrifying spectacle, equivalent to the death of Western civilization itself. The obliteration of Los Angeles, by contrast, is often depicted as, or at least secretly experienced as, a victory *for* civilization.<sup>86</sup>

This idea of the destruction of L.A. as a victory for civilization is present strongly in *The Day of the Locust* where the apocalypse is depicted in Todd Hackett’s painting “The Burning of Los Angeles” with just such delight:

[He] began to think about the series of cartoons he was making for his canvas of Los Angeles on fire. He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Davis, “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles,” 276-7.

<sup>86</sup> Davis, “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles,” 277.

<sup>87</sup> West, *The Day of the Locust*, 85.

Although West's famous passage is disturbing, there is ultimately a sense of purification in the burning of Los Angeles, an almost biblical resonance in which the fire purges and purifies the city of its sins. Yet here is where Ellis's portrait alters the anti-myth tradition that went before, and adds a further level to negative portrayals of the city. Davis claims L.A. is "the city we love to destroy",<sup>88</sup> however in Ellis's works it is the city of L.A. that *destroys its inhabitants*. This reversal is significant, and as I have outlined in the previous chapter, it is a theme that is strongly present in the New York novels too. In the majority of his depictions of L.A., it is the individuals themselves, not the city, who are damaged or obliterated.

Alison Lutton's perceptive essay on psychogeography in Ellis's texts – a resonance I have already outlined as significant in the New York novels – outlines Clay's disturbing flashbacks prompted by place: "Clay's narrative is frequently punctuated by italicised flashback sequences which, usually following a synaesthetic trigger, propel it from listless description of the geographical present to more deliberate orientation within the psychogeographical past."<sup>89</sup> In one such flashback, the endlessly sunny climate of the city, for example, is portrayed as an oppressive inferno, as Clay notes in *Less Than Zero*,

The temperature readings at the Security National Bank in Rancho Mirage would read 111 and 112 and 115 and all I could do was stare at the numbers, refusing to believe that it could get that hot, that hellish. But then I'd...squint to see that the metal grids in the crosswalk signs were twisting, writhing, actually melting in the heat, and I knew I had to believe it.<sup>90</sup>

Ellis's vision begins by rendering the destruction of the city, but later goes further, emphasising the ways in which the oppressive heat works to devastate the inhabitants: "While reading the paper at twilight by the pool, I see a story about how a local man tried to bury himself alive in his backyard because it was 'so hot, too hot'",<sup>91</sup> and even the

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<sup>88</sup> Davis, "The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles," 278.

<sup>89</sup> Lutton, "East is (not) East," 6.

<sup>90</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 185.

insects are tormented to destruction by the swelter, “the pool would be totally still except for an occasional ripple caused by big yellow and black bees with huge wings and black dragonflies, crashing into the pool, driven mad by the insane heat”.<sup>92</sup>

Indeed, destruction and obliteration of the individual is, quite literally, written on the cities, being inscribed as text across the landscape. In one of the key phrases in *Less Than Zero* that reverberate throughout the text, Clay sees the words on a billboard advertisement: “I come to a red light, tempted to go through it, then stop once I see a billboard that I don’t remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is ‘Disappear Here’ and even though it’s probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little”.<sup>93</sup> Significantly, he regards the phrase as disturbing *instructions* rather than the empty consumer language of an advertising campaign. “Disappear Here” is interpreted as the city commanding Clay to obliterate himself. This entreaty becomes disturbingly literal in the later *Imperial Bedrooms* when, in a series of harrowing murders, several actresses and finally Clay’s old friend Julian, all quite truthfully disappear there: “For one moment he leans far enough into the car so that he’s close enough to touch my face, but the men pull him back and then he disappears so quickly it’s as if he was never here at all”.<sup>94</sup> It is in the context of this destructive impulse in the city that we come to the final chapter of this thesis, an examination of the escalating levels of violence for which all the works have received such condemnation.

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<sup>92</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 61.

<sup>93</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 30.

<sup>94</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 162.

# Chapter Three:

## “Seeing the Worst Thing”: Urban Psycho/sis

...a white T-shirt with the words LOS ANGELES written on it in red handwriting  
that looks like blood that hasn't quite dried, dripping.<sup>1</sup>  
– Bret Easton Ellis, *The Informers*.

Ellis's vision of the city in his fiction has always skewed towards the extremes of violence. The opening pages of *Imperial Bedrooms*, for example, hold one of the most powerfully grotesque images in his writing to date, and it is worth quoting at length:

His body was discovered by a group of kids who went to CalArts and were cruising through the streets off of Hillhurst in a convertible BMW looking for a parking space. When they saw the body they thought the 'thing' lying by a trash bin was – and I'm quoting the first *Los Angeles Times* article on the front page of the California section about the Julian Wells murder – 'a flag.' I had to stop when I hit upon that word and start reading the article again from the beginning. The students who found Julian thought this because Julian was wearing a white Tim Ford suit (it had belonged to him but it wasn't something he was wearing the night he was abducted) and their immediate reaction seemed halfway logical since the jacket and pants were streaked with red. (Julian had been stripped before he was killed and then re-dressed.) But if they thought it was a 'flag' my immediate question was: then where was the blue? If the body resembled a flag, I kept wondering, then where was the blue? And then I realized: it was his head. The students thought it was a flag because Julian had lost so much blood that his crumpled face was a blue so dark it was almost black.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the American flag is represented as a dead man in a white Tom Ford suit streaked with blood, the head so mutilated it resembles a blue square and mangled stars. This is Ellis's bleakest symbol of America yet; signifying not only his representation of the society as devoid of beauty, but as inclined to increasing abstraction, given how easily a human being could be robbed of all humanity and mistaken for a flag. Brutality is the

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, *The Informers*, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 9-10.

white noise in Ellis's texts, and it can be heard humming constantly throughout each of the novels. Not surprisingly then, violence is the overarching theme of Ellis's canon that finds its origins in Los Angeles, reaches its nadir in New York, and then returns the reader once again to the west coast.

This final chapter examines the potential meanings behind the escalating levels of violence and gore in Ellis's major works about both cities. Taken together, his narratives are notorious for their brutally graphic depictions of violence, a feature which arguably enables us to view him as writing in the same classic urban tradition as Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which critically addresses the themes of murder in an urban context. Yet, as previously mentioned, the very level of violence that characterises his novels has been seen by many to set him apart from such writers and given over instead to a gratuitousness that precludes social critique. In what follows I ask when does the portrayal of violence become a form of violence in itself and should we read Ellis's novels in this way; or should we adopt the more cautious and arguably sophisticated approach and question instead if the violence might be considered a perverse revolt against the alienating nature of the commodified Postmodern urban environment?

## I

In his discussion of Ellis's L.A. novels in *Literature and Race in Los Angeles*, Julian Murphet contends that the characters in these works are definitely not alienated by their environments, "They are well beyond that state of affairs, too at home in their homelessness for the idea of alienation ever to arise."<sup>3</sup> Murphet writes that in place of the existential horrors the subjects of literary Modernist texts felt in the face of the urban environment, the individual in Ellis's Postmodern city has instead been thoroughly absorbed by it.

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<sup>3</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 78.



This spatial problematic in effect substitutes for the older existential thematics of literary modernism: Eliot's London, Joyce's Dublin, Döblin's Berlin, and Bely's Petersburg, all became demanding testing-grounds for the endurance of the *petit-bourgeois* individual in a space of pitiless heterogeneity and change. Whether this individual failed these rigours of the 'Unreal City' (Eliot) or survived them (Joyce), he was nevertheless always felt somehow to be distinct from it, a Subject to its kaleidoscopic Object. In late twentieth-century Los Angeles, the resonating depths of the individual would appear to have been absorbed by the object-sponge of the city, subsumed into space, surface and visibility.<sup>4</sup>

For Murphet, Ellis's characters are neither alienated by nor distinct from the commodified spaces of Los Angeles. Unaffected and unquestioning, they exist in its structures without any of the feelings of alienation and despair exhibited by the Modernist subjects seen in the works of James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Alfred Döblin or Andrei Bely. I have sought to argue throughout this thesis precisely the opposite: that Ellis's key characters are *fundamentally* affected by their environments, and do indeed feel alienation in the face of the Postmodern city. In this chapter I seek to show that the very elements Ellis's works have been criticised for, primarily their graphic and sadistic use of violence, can indeed be read as the strongest evidence of this estrangement. The protagonists of all the novels, I seek to illustrate, attempt to break from the monotony of consumerism and the alienating Postmodern environments of their cities by seeking out ever-increasing levels of violence and depravity. His characters' perverse desires to feel something, through either voyeuristically witnessing or committing acts of violence, paradoxically suggest that they have not yet been completely hollowed out and colonised by the commodified cities they inhabit. These desires suggest there is still some remnant of the Modernist self haunting their thoughts and behaviour, which can be found precisely in the felt tension between a sentient interiority and a "blank" outside world.

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<sup>4</sup> Murphet, *Literature and Race In Los Angeles*, 78.

## II

The phrase “see the worst” is uttered in Ellis’s debut novel and has become a refrain in his oeuvre. In *Less Than Zero* it occurs first when Clay is about to accompany his best friend Julian to a motel room where Julian will prostitute himself to an older man in order to pay off a drug debt. Clay muses, “I want to see if things like this can actually happen. And as the elevator descends, passing the second floor, and the first floor, going even farther down, I realize that the money doesn’t matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst”,<sup>5</sup> and as he sits in a motel room watching as his best friend is about to engage in the act, “the need to see the worst washed over me, quickly, eagerly.”<sup>6</sup> The phrase is repeated in *Imperial Bedrooms* when Clay’s girlfriend Rain asks him repeatedly “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”<sup>7</sup> and then later, “What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you?”<sup>8</sup>

In the L.A. works, all the characters display a morbid fascination with seeing the “worst things.” Thus, Clay’s young sisters have a macabre interest in car crashes, “On Little Santa Monica, a car lays overturned, its windows broken, and as we pass it, my sisters crane their necks to get a closer look and they ask my mother, who’s driving, to slow down and she doesn’t and my sisters complain.”<sup>9</sup> Later, when Clay drives past a car engulfed in flames with a Mexican family and young children standing around it, his sisters “stopped fighting and told me to stop the car so they could watch.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Clay’s friend Rip goes sightseeing on one of Mullholland’s most treacherous turns, showing Clay the glittering paintbox colours of all the wrecked cars at the bottom of the cliff: “Rip told me that, on some quiet nights, late, you can hear the screeching of tyres and then a long silence; a whoosh and then, barely audible, an impact. And sometimes, if

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<sup>5</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 160.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 163.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 62.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 67.

one listens very carefully, there are screams in the night that can't last too long."<sup>11</sup> Violence in these texts is figured fundamentally as spectacle for most of the inhabitants, as in *The Informers* where a club plays the shower scene from Hitchcock's *Psycho* on a loop in video screens above a bar, with Spin "staring at Janet Leigh getting stabbed over and over again."<sup>12</sup> Throughout *Less Than Zero*, characters are similarly transfixed by images of violence and destruction on television, "it takes me a little while to say anything because there's a video on cable of buildings being blown up in slow motion",<sup>13</sup> and when Clay and his friends go to see a film about "this group of young pretty sorority girls who get their throats slit and are thrown into a pool," Clay notes that he watches "just the gory parts."<sup>14</sup> The only visual images that have an arresting hold on the characters in the L.A. novels are those of death and destruction, while MTV – the apparent voice of 1980s youth – is, in an interesting reversal, usually used as a way to get to sleep<sup>15</sup>.

The lure of the "worst things" can also be seen in the rumours and stories that loop constantly in the background. Characters speak in hushed, almost gleeful tones of ever more gruesome and sadistic murders. In *Imperial Bedrooms*, rumours of grisly execution-style killings circulate, becoming ever more violent and sadistic as the novel progresses, with reports of young men found decapitated and missing their hands.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in *The Informers* there are stories of drug dealers stabbed to death in the Hills,<sup>17</sup> and a man's arms found "in a bag off La Brea."<sup>18</sup> In another story, a character is awoken by gunshots and goes down to ask the Doorman what has occurred, "I don't know, I think some guy has his wife up there and is, like, threatening to shoot her or something. Something like that...Maybe he's already shot her. Maybe he's already killed a whole

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<sup>11</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Ellis, *The Informers*, 172.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 88.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 170.

<sup>17</sup> Ellis, *The Informers*, 137.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, *The Informers*, 150-1.

bunch of people.”<sup>19</sup> Such habitual expectation and acceptance of violence is there in the debut novel as well, where Clay notes in passing that the checkout clerk in a supermarket is “talking about murder statistics.”<sup>20</sup> It would be easy here to fall into cataloguing the instances of violence, so numerous are they throughout the works, but what I have sought to show with these examples is the pervasiveness of violence in the society as a whole. Such incidents suggest a kind of banal regularity to the brutality and murder in the city, to the point where it is no longer seen as outrageous or of concern to most of the city’s inhabitants. What is crucial here, and often overlooked by those condemning the apparent sadism of the novels, is the way Ellis presents the protagonists’ *reactions* to this violence.

It is Clay in particular – the protagonist of both major L.A. works – who exhibits a morbid fascination with death and violence. In *Less Than Zero*, he notes that when he was fifteen he would keep clippings of all the murders, deaths and atrocities that had occurred in the city:

...one about some twelve-year-old kid who accidentally shot his brother in Chino; another about a guy in Indio who nailed his kid to a wall, or a door, I can’t remember, and then shot him, point-blank in the face, and one about a fire at a home for the elderly that killed twenty and one about a housewife who while driving her children home from school flew off this eighty-foot embankment near San Diego, instantly killing herself and the three kids and one about a man who calmly and purposefully ran over his ex-wife somewhere near Reno, paralyzing her below the neck.<sup>21</sup>

Although his collecting of physical newspaper clippings may have stopped, Clay’s cataloguing of the murders continues, to such an extent that it becomes yet another rhythm of the novel, as recurring as the phrases “Disappear Here” and “People are afraid to merge” that reverberate throughout the pages of the work. Clay explains that he

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<sup>19</sup> Ellis, *The Informers*, 161.

<sup>20</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 68.

collected the newspaper clippings “because, I guess, there were a lot to be collected,”<sup>22</sup> and as the narrative attests, the frequency of violence has not abated. Yet, what is most significant here is the *inverse* of Clay’s statement – not the fact that there were a lot of clippings to be collected, but that he collected them at all. Clay, unlike his former classmates who populate the novel, notices the level of violence in the society and regards it as something remarkable. He seemingly feels if he doesn’t collate the deaths, they will remain unnoticed in this affectless society. Clay experiences the instances of death and violence as something other than pure spectacle. Ellis never goes so far as to sentimentalise, but there is a sense in which Clay’s clippings can be interpreted as a collecting of evidence against the city and the terrible nature of human behaviour within it. For Clay, “seeing the worst” could be read as a curious and perverse mixture of voyeurism and social responsibility.

### III

If “seeing the worst” can be said to characterise the west coast novels, then “doing the worst” might accurately describe the content of the east coast works. There is a steady accumulation of violence across the oeuvre, with *American Psycho* notoriously constituting the nadir. What is of interest here is the potential meaning in the level of sadism and violence documented beyond mere gratuitousness. Such meaning can be found in the choice of victims against which the violence is perpetrated. In Ellis’s first New York novel – which signals a break in his oeuvre towards a new level of depicted brutality – the violence is fundamentally directed at “others”: homosexuals, women, migrants. It is these very groups whom he regards as responsible for the decline of his city.

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<sup>22</sup> Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 68.

As I canvassed in my Introduction, when *American Psycho* was released, it was criticised for its violence against women<sup>23</sup>, with the National Organisation for Women (NOW) staging high profile protests against its release<sup>24</sup>. Yet, a body count of Bateman's victims in the novel highlights an even split between seven female, and seven male (as well as two dogs). Indeed, with the exception of allusions to earlier murders and assaults, the first three killings in the novel are of men<sup>25</sup>. I highlight this fact not to diminish feminist criticisms of the work – there is no doubt that the level of sadism and desecration of bodies is heightened in the case of the female victims – but to draw attention to the other potential unifying factors among the victims in the work. The first victims are a black homeless man named “Al” and his dog “Gizmo”, in front of which a sign reads “I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME.”<sup>26</sup> The second is an unnamed “old queer” and his dog, “the queer with the sharpei is now within feet of me and I get a good look at him: late fifties, pudgy...with a ridiculous mustache that accentuates his feminine features,”<sup>27</sup> and the third is a Chinese delivery man whom Bateman mistakenly believes is Japanese and therefore “the wrong type of Asian”<sup>28</sup> for Bateman's purposes. Each of these three victims differ significantly from Bateman and his milieu. They are members of social minorities and representative of various forms of “otherness”: ethnic, sexual and economic. In a city that privileges wealthy straight white males, the majority of his victims are the underclass (the only aberrations to this are the instances when the victim is from Bateman's own milieu; his colleague Paul Owen and his ex girlfriend Bethany). Such a reading is underscored by the fact that the killings are impersonal with the victims either remaining nameless, or deliberately given a new name by Bateman

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<sup>23</sup> See Robert Brannon, “Torturing Women as Fine Art: Why Some Women and Men are Boycotting Knopf,” in *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*, ed. Diana E.H. Russell. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993)

<sup>24</sup> See, for a good overview of the reaction, Murphet, “The Novel's Reception,” in *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*, 65-71.

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 126, 159, 173.

<sup>26</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 173.

himself in the case of the prostitutes such as “Christie”. I have already outlined the perversion of Dostoyevsky’s “fallen woman as saviour” motif in this relationship, but the atavistic symbolism upon Christie’s first appearance is also instructive: “Behind her in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned brick warehouse, is the word M E A T and the way the letters are spaced awakens something in me.”<sup>29</sup> It is through the prism of their standing in the strata of the city that Bateman regards the city’s inhabitants, as he notes in a representative piece of criticism, “On my way over to Park Avenue to find a cab I pass an ugly homeless bum – a member of the genetic underclass.”<sup>30</sup> Far from showing sympathy, Bateman’s solution is to destroy those who do not fit within his view of an idealised city; as he says to his first victim immediately before disfiguring him, “Al...I’m sorry. It’s just that...I don’t know. I don’t have anything in common with you.”<sup>31</sup>

It is particularly the effects of these “others” upon the city that is integral to identifying a potential motive for the murders that lies beyond mere barbarism. This is signaled most explicitly in the case, noted above, of the unnamed Chinese victim, whose murder is presented as a direct consequence of the Japanese race’s encroachment upon the ideals of “old New York.” Immediately before his murder, Bateman listens to a racist tirade from his friend Charles Murphy about the Japanese:

They’ve bought the Empire State Building and Nell’s. *Nell’s*, can you believe it, Bateman?’ he exclaims over his second Absolut on the rocks – and it moved something in me, it sets something off, and after leaving Rusty’s, while wandering around the Upper West Side, I find myself crouched in the doorway...and leaping out at a passing Japanese delivery boy<sup>32</sup>

Prior to each of the murders, Bateman is witness to what he regards as evidence of the city in ruins. Before his first murder, for instance, he is confronted by the sight of “a

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<sup>29</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 161.

<sup>30</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 255.

<sup>31</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 126.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 173.

couple of skinny faggots...One of them whistles at me, the other laughs: a high, fey, horrible sound.”<sup>33</sup> Bateman walks the city and those who do not conform to his view of traditional Manhattan inspire murderous wrath. It is not a coincidence that the violence is directed at mainstream America’s “others”, those whom he regards as responsible for the moral decline of the city because they spoil the fantasy of perfection that underpins consumerism, whether it be the money-making success story that is the predominantly male yuppie ideal or the acquiring of beauty, glamour and youth that is so integral to the Postmodern, urban world. Of course, Bateman’s actions are profoundly ironical. In what many would regard as true Postmodernist fashion, he misrecognises the causes of his discontent and sense of alienation, identifying the cause in the cipher itself rather than the object, but his actual feelings of anger and discontent themselves belong to the non-Postmodern world of affect. The passage depicting the death of the Chinese delivery boy therefore could not make the pattern more explicit; Bateman is confronted with “evidence” of the decline of the city and moves to correct it. In *American Psycho*, then, the victims are not as abstracted as the dead body/flag of *Imperial Bedrooms*, but they are regarded by Bateman as similarly symbolic. They represent his society’s decline and hence the need for removal. In this sense we can see the other connotation of Bateman’s allusive surname, not to Hitchcock’s Norman Bates (the generally accepted allusion), but a perverse “Batman” in Bateman’s self-styled attempts to “clean up” Gotham City.

#### IV

What is clear from the above examples in *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho* is that Ellis depicts protagonists specifically as feeling trapped and claustrophobic within their urban environment. Although each of his protagonists represents the “ideal” within their societies, they are each portrayed as fundamentally alienated. Rather than what we might

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<sup>33</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 123.



term conscience, his characters feel discontent. They're looking for meaning, seeking stimulation; they yearn for something more than just existing or consuming. Indeed, empty consumerism is almost always a precursor to the acts of violence that permeate these novels, as can be seen in *American Psycho* where, prior to the first two murders, Bateman takes money out of an ATM for no reason other than to have even amounts of crisp notes in his wallet.<sup>34</sup> He then goes to a boutique deli to buy gourmet ingredients only to realise, as he's contemplating the choices, that he needs something deeper and more "real" to satisfy his restlessness.

I've arrived at D'Agostino's, standing directly in front of it, gazing into it, and I have an almost overwhelming urge to walk in and browse through each aisle, filling my basket with bottles of balsamic vinegar and sea salt, roam through the vegetable and produce stands inspecting the color tones of red peppers and yellow peppers and green peppers and purple peppers, deciding what flavor, what *shape* of gingerbread cookie to buy, but I'm still longing for something deeper, something undefined to do beforehand, and I start to stalk the dark, cold streets."<sup>35</sup>

The "something deeper" that he longs to experience turns out to be murder, the second depicted in the book. It is notable that Bateman immediately recognises this need whilst in a supermarket, contemplating his next act of consumption. He can feel the lethal impulse rising, and it is significant that he attempts to subdue it with thoughts of consumerism, the two being seen by him as polar opposites: "I can see my gloved hands moving, alternately clutching themselves into fists, fingers stretching, wriggling, and I have to stop in the middle of Sixty-seventh Street to calm myself down, whisper soothing thoughts, anticipating D'Agostino's, a reservation at Dorsia, the new Mike and the Mechanics CD."<sup>36</sup> The numbing effects of consumption can only dull his impulse for so long, and Bateman does of course go on to indulge his lethal tendencies. Is there a moment of catharsis? Only momentarily it would seem, and Bateman is very quickly

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<sup>34</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 123, 156.

<sup>35</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 157.

<sup>36</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 157.

lured back into the act of consumption, which thrusts him once again into the feelings of blankness and alienation that this environment stirs.

Afterwards, two blocks west, I feel heady, ravenous, pumped up, as if I'd just worked out and endorphins are flooding my nervous system, or just embraced that first line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped that first glass of Cristal. I'm starving and need something to eat... So I decide to go somewhere Al would go, the McDonald's in Union Square...after two more milk shakes my high slowly dissolves, its intensity diminishing. I grow bored, tired; the evening seems horribly anticlimactic and I start cursing myself for not going to that Salvadorian bistro with Reed Thompson and the guys.<sup>37</sup>

Inhabiting an empty world, and feeling themselves empty, Ellis's characters seek connection to something meaningful outside of themselves. Theirs is effectively a breaking free of a self that they feel disgusted by and a society that wearies them.

In perhaps the darkest and most perverse section of *American Psycho*, the chapter entitled "Tries to Cook and Eat Girl," we are witness to the final culmination of the horrific violence which has been escalating throughout the work. Bateman descends to an almost animalistic state in his utter desecration of a woman's body, recounting, "I spent 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."<sup>38</sup> He concludes this gory episode by stating, "This is my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw."<sup>39</sup> While such a statement may be further evidence of Bateman's psychotic mind, there is a perverse logic here, in that the superficial, consumerist world of spectacle and surfaces in which he lives is so far removed from any organic sense of humanity that he feels the only way to connect with it is through murder. To witness life through touching and ingesting its working parts, like a depraved

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<sup>37</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 331.

<sup>39</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 332.

Dr. Frankenstein. Indeed, Mark Seltzer, in his examination of serial killer culture in America, writes that the killer's dissection of victims' bodies is an attempt to externalize "the fear of his own pulpy and secret interior in the conversion of another body into the bloody pulp he then witnesses,"<sup>40</sup> and claims that this desire to "see how things work" is an attempt by the serial killer to "isolate and to make visible 'life itself.'"<sup>41</sup> The level of gory violence in *American Psycho* represents, at an allegorical level, an attempt to get beyond all the artificiality and consumerism, to return to something raw, real and organic<sup>42</sup>. As David Cronenberg comments of the novel,

You invent a world where clothes and money and brand names are the value system and you are in the mind of someone who is locked into that. But inside that mind there is an awareness that it all is meaningless and artificial, completely invented. And the murders, the hideousness, are an attempt to break out of that, to try to shatter it and to connect with something real.<sup>43</sup>

Bateman's violent acts may be read as an attempt to break out of this constructed, "unreal" world of surfaces and reconnect with some sense of humanity. Ellis caricatures this, metaphorically rubbing our noses in it. The literary style of the work thus mirrors the content: the characteristic flatness of the writing undergoes a profound change in the murder scenes. As Murphet powerfully argues, "here, as nowhere else, Bateman's voice is capable of complex sentence formation, clausal subordination, detailed analyses of material processes, descriptive verse, adjectival and adverbial precision, and bravura periods,"<sup>44</sup> although he concludes that such passages are evidence of the fictionality of the murders, which should be understood instead "as an act in language."<sup>45</sup> The reader thus becomes implicated in the murders as our boredom in reading the incessant

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 273.

<sup>41</sup> Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 192.

<sup>42</sup> See, Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*, 39-49. And Barry Keith Grant, "American Psycho/sis: The Pure Products of America Go Crazy," in *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>43</sup> As cited in Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys*, 249.

<sup>44</sup> Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*, 45.

consumerism is only relieved by scenes of murder and mutilation, we problematically yearn for the connection with narrative action too. In a society where, as Bateman notes, “Individuality [is] no longer an issue...Desire – meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore”,<sup>46</sup> the murders become a revolt against the affectless quality of the city and an attempt to connect with organic humanity, or if nothing else, a demonstration of the psychic decline of an individual existing within this environment. While Patrick Bateman is indeed, “the most demented killer ever to appear in the pages of a serious American novel,”<sup>47</sup> his acts, viewed at a symbolic level, are arguably a revolt against the prevailing order and a statement of affect by Ellis of the fragmentation and alienation that occurs within the minds of the inhabitants of the Postmodern city. His collection of corpses and body parts could be read as an extension and literalisation of Clay’s clippings.

## V

In the first chapter I noted the way in which Ellis locks readers within disturbed consciousnesses as a way to render the destructive effects of the urban environment with its mantra of non-stop consumption upon these individuals. One result of this is that Ellis’s protagonists have frequently been criticised for lacking an “inner life.” As Norman Mailer complained of *American Psycho*, “since we are going to have a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis, the author must rise to the occasion by having a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him...Bateman, however, remains a cipher.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Caryn James commented in relation to the novel’s Hitchcock-inspired title, “Audiences may not have got into Norman Bates’s mind, but at least they knew that he,

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<sup>46</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 360.

<sup>47</sup> Mailer, “Children of the Pied Piper,” 220.

<sup>48</sup> Mailer, “Children of the Pied Piper,” 220.

and Hitchcock, had one. It is impossible to say the same about *American Psycho*.<sup>49</sup> As these examples show, the problem with Ellis's portrayal of Bateman was his refusal to explain his character's psychosis, or provide any explicit analysis that might bring meaning to the blood and gore that washes over the pages of the novel, and indeed this continues to be the criticism of all Ellis's texts. Mailer concluded: "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 mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film."<sup>50</sup> This longing is perhaps a consequence of Ellis's title allusion to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, with its Oedipal explanation for Norman Bates' psychosis. As Carla Freccero comments, "what critics reproach Ellis for is that he precisely does not provide a psychologized narrative of origins, a comforting etiology for his killer's illness; we do not hear that he was a sexually abused child or that he had a domineering mother."<sup>51</sup> Ellis himself has said of his character, "I didn't want Bateman to literally verbalize: 'I was mistreated by my parents when I was younger, and that is why...I was rejected by women when I was in my teens, and this is why I do this'."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Ellis appears to have preempted the criticism by having Bateman himself claim to be utterly without any interiority, as in the oft quoted passage:

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*.<sup>53</sup>

This seems to negate the claims of critics such as James and Mailer, that Ellis does not possess enough artistic skill to portray a killer with an inner life; rather, it suggests that

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<sup>49</sup> James, "Now Starring, Killers for the Chiller 90's," 2/1.

<sup>50</sup> Mailer, "Children of the Pied Piper," 221.

<sup>51</sup> Carla Freccero, "Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*," *Diacritics* 27.2 (1997): 51.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Love, "Psycho Analysis," Interview with Bret Easton Ellis. *Rolling Stone*, April 4, 1991, 41. Ellipsis in original.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 362.

Ellis was aiming for something quite different: a character who is not real in the sense of possessing a psyche but a cipher for the wider consumer culture into which he was born and in which he grew up.

Carla Freccero has written of the way in which the serial killer, imagined as “singularly embodied and psychically caused,”<sup>54</sup> has become a “consoling fantasy” in contemporary culture, obviating any societal responsibility,

[B]y 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 in the social order...The solution to the problem of violence then also becomes relatively simple: kill the serial killer and your problem goes away.<sup>55</sup>

But of course, Ellis’s oeuvre presents violence as inherent in the social order, and repeatedly gives us characters for which it is an unsettling lure. Importantly, Bateman does not fit into traditional profiling theories in which the criminal is figured as “other”; rather, as Baelo-Allué points out, “he is a white, heterosexual man. He is wealthy, handsome, intelligent and powerful.”<sup>56</sup> This apparent “aberration” is actually a representative member of society. Indeed, he is the ideal, as Bateman’s best friend Tim Price claims in a comment emblematic of the feelings of the whole yuppie class, “society cannot afford to lose me. I’m an *asset*.”<sup>57</sup> (This idea is heightened in *Glamorama* where the terrorists are the world’s most famous supermodels.) Seen like this, *American Psycho* can be regarded as a reaction against the view of the serial killer as a disturbed and isolated individual. Ellis presents the cause of Patrick Bateman’s mindset not as innate, nor as a result of his individual upbringing, but fundamentally as a product of the Postmodern

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<sup>54</sup> Freccero, “Historical Violence,” 48.

<sup>55</sup> Freccero, “Historical Violence,” 48.

<sup>56</sup> Sonia Baelo-Allué, “The Aesthetics of Serial Killing: Working Against Ethics in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and *American Psycho* (1991),” *Atlantis*. 24.2 (2002): 17.

<sup>57</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 3.

urban setting and the society in which he exists, and this is true of all of Ellis's protagonists.

In this context, the epigraph to *Notes from Underground* which Ellis cites is centrally important to our understanding of how he seeks to portray Bateman (even apart from the invocation of Dostoyevsky) in that it signals the importance of place and society in the mind set of the protagonist.

Both the author of these *Notes* and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these *Notes* not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed. I have wished to bring before the public, somewhat more distinctly than usual, one of the characters of our recent past.<sup>58</sup>

That these characters, this *Psycho* of the title “must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed,” is an expression of the protagonist as a *product of* their environment. The whole of Postmodern American society is thus implicated in Bateman's psychosis, with the city and the consumer-dominated lifestyle that it represents being presented as a direct cause of his depravity. Indeed, in a significant moment of insight, Bateman himself notes of his mental state, “I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city”;<sup>59</sup> an explicit link is drawn here between his mood and Manhattan. There is a recognition within Bateman that the city itself and the people who belong to it are a provocation to violence and that in order to regain some sense of normality, he must leave its spaces. Indeed, later, the objects of urban consumerism will be almost comically represented as responsible for Bateman's impulses: “my automated teller has started *speaking* to me, sometimes actually leaving weird messages on the screen, in green lettering, like ‘Cause a Terrible Scene at Sotheby's’ or ‘Kill the President’ or ‘Feed Me a

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<sup>58</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, epigraph.

<sup>59</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 268.

Stay Cat””.<sup>60</sup> At this point a key question arises; if the violence is caused by the society and Bateman is to be seen as representative of that society, then why is it that not everyone in the novel experiences the urge to kill? As I have argued throughout, this is his response to the society, one that is highlighted as unique. Ellis presents protagonists who are more closely aligned with Modernism in their ideology, as Elana Gomel notes, “Patrick’s violence is nostalgia for the Real, a Modernist and therefore old-fashioned affect in the postmodern world of fashionable simulacra. It is this nostalgia, rather than the violence itself, that dooms him to a Sartrean version of hell, from which killing ‘IS NOT AN EXIT’.”<sup>61</sup> Like Clay, this is Bateman’s despairing expression of affect.

## VI

If the progression of violence in Ellis’s oeuvre across his key texts involves “seeing the worst things” (*Less Than Zero*, *The Informers*, *Imperial Bedrooms*) and “doing the worst things” to people as a way to protest the increasingly alienating and commodified spaces and lifestyles of the urban environment (*American Psycho*), then *Glamorama* extends this in an even more explicit rejection of Postmodern urbanity through what we might describe as “doing the worst things to the structures of the city.” The violence in *Glamorama* is in the form of terrorist attacks: the emphasis being on physical destruction of the buildings themselves. In Ellis’s third key text, the progression of violence has moved directly to a desecration of urban space. In its most explicit formation, Victor outlines the terror cell’s philosophy:

The extent of the destruction is a blur and its aftermath somehow feels beside the point. The point is the bomb itself, its placement, its activation – that’s the statement...It’s really about the will to accomplish this destruction and not about the outcome, because that’s just decoration.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 380.

<sup>61</sup> Gomel, ““The Soul of this Man is his Clothes’,” 52.

<sup>62</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 296.



This is the most overt expression of the violence being aimed at the city itself. What was implicit in *American Psycho*, the idea that the desecration of bodies is but “decoration” to the wider aim of “re-setting” the city, is made explicit here. The violence is even more abstracted: the bombs literally destroy the cities and the violence done to people is incidental to the wider point of the violence.

Significantly, *Glamorama* is the first novel where the violence extends outside America. No longer confined solely to New York or Los Angeles, Ellis here expands his oeuvre into European capitals, the home of the very iconic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century urban novels that I have suggested Ellis’s oeuvre seeks to extend. Although there are still one-on-one scenes of torture and murder in *Glamorama*, the key scenes of violence in the text are the four terrorist bombs activated variously in Paris’s Institute of Political Studies, Café Flore near the Louvre, the metro at Pont Royal and finally inside the Ritz Hotel. It is the final detonation that enacts perhaps the worst carnage.

The building starts sliding in to the Place Vendome, its collapse accompanied by a whooshing roar.

Then another deafening roar.

Chunks of debris keep falling, walls keep cracking apart, and there’s so much dust the Place Vendome looks as if a sandstorm has struck.

The explosion is followed by the customary ‘stunned silence’.

The sound of glass continuing to shatter is an introduction to the screaming.

Boulders of concrete litter the streets surrounding the Ritz and you have to climb over them to get into the Place Vendome, where people are running around covered in blood and screaming into cell phones, the sky above them overcast with smoke. The entire face of the hotel has been blown off, rubber roofing is flapping in the wind and several cars, mostly BMWs, are burning. Two limousines lie overturned and the smell of burned tar is everywhere, the streets and sidewalks entirely scorched.<sup>63</sup>

What is striking about this passage, and contrasts strongly with the grisly detail in *American Psycho*, is the manner in which the wounds described are entirely those sustained by the buildings. Though people are screaming and covered in blood, it is the building’s

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<sup>63</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 354.

injuries, “The entire face of the hotel has been blown off,”<sup>64</sup> as well as its extremities “rubber roofing is flapping in the wind,”<sup>65</sup> that are described in detail like torn limbs or skin.

Indeed from the very opening pages of *Glamorama* the reader is thrust into a destabilising environment which only Victor, perhaps the least aware of all of Ellis’s intentionally blank protagonists, recognises as cracked and crumbling. The novel opens with Victor’s protestations from the very first page about the existence of specks. “Specks – specks all over the third panel, see? – no, *that* one...there they are: *specks*, annoying, tiny specks, and they *don’t* look accidental but like they were somehow done by a machine”<sup>66</sup>. As with the societies depicted in all the other novels, Ellis’s protagonist is the only one who is aware of and disturbed by the state of urban life. Victor’s colleagues can’t envision a world in which there wasn’t this flaw, as JD notes: “Are you sure these specks *aren’t* supposed to be here?”<sup>67</sup> While others aren’t able to see them at all, “I really can’t see anything, baby”<sup>68</sup>. Similarly in *American Psycho*, Bateman notices cracks everywhere: on the streets, “a torn playbill from *Les Misérables* tumbles down the cracked, urine-stained sidewalk,”<sup>69</sup> in his apartment, while waiting for Paul Owen to die, “I stand there waiting, staring up at the crack above the Onica,”<sup>70</sup> and in the bathroom at Dorsia, “I stare into a thin, weblike crack above the urinal’s handle and think to myself that if I were to disappear into that crack...the odds are good that nobody would notice I was gone.”<sup>71</sup> This is a feeling which permeates all the novels’ visions of the Postmodern city, one of apocalyptic decline, “walking down Fifth Avenue around four o’clock in the afternoon, everyone on the street looks sad, the air is full of decay, bodies lie on the cold

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<sup>64</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 354.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 354.

<sup>66</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 123.

<sup>70</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 209.

<sup>71</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 217.

pavement, miles of it, some are moving, most are not. History is sinking and only a very few seem dimly aware that things are getting bad.”<sup>72</sup>

Although it is not explicit, Ellis’s murderous protagonists are vehicles of social critique. Aware of their own lack of feeling, they are able to ponder it but not escape it. This suggests that despite the alienating nature of the urban environment, there are yet elements of interior subjectivity still present, and this subjectivity thoroughly resists being subsumed by the forces of the city. The characters feel a disjunction between their interior selves which long for meaning, and the selves required by the external world which feel blank and hollow. They are unsettled and bored in the L.A. novels and full of resentment and rage in the New York texts. Yet Ellis merely identifies the problem. He shows rather than resolves. The protagonists never manage to escape their discontent, and are left tragically as Modernist selves trapped within their Postmodern cities.

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<sup>72</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 370.

# Conclusion:

## Ellis's Liminal Position.

People who have made up their minds about a man do not like to have their opinions changed, to reverse their judgments on account of some new evidence or new arguments, and the man who tries to compel them to change their minds is at least wasting his time, and he may be asking for trouble.

– John O'Hara. Epigraph to Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*

In a review of *Glamorama*, Gary Shteyngart wrote, “Reading Bret Easton Ellis is like watching a brilliant dive into a very shallow pool: We admire the technique while awaiting the splatter.”<sup>1</sup> Such a comment is representative of the tendency in criticism surrounding Ellis's texts. There is the perceived shallowness of the pools into which he fictively dives, as the works are overwhelmingly concerned with the lives of beautiful, rich, apathetic twenty-somethings. Many readings centre on examining the extent of the splatter, and the manner in which it seeps out beyond the page in controversies that taint the interpretation of each new work. While the admiration of his technique has seen Ellis classified primarily as an author of “blank fiction” or more broadly as a proponent of the stylistic trickery characteristic of Postmodernism.

In the preceding chapters, I have sought radically to question Ellis's literary classification, and to make the case for opening up the fields in which his works are analysed. My project began by investigating the ways in which Ellis is engaged in “storying” his cities. What does Ellis illuminate, I asked, of the period in which he is writing and the spaces in which his characters exist? In response to the widespread critiques of his explicit content, the overarching question I sought to answer was whether his fiction is gratuitous in its representation of violence, and therefore empty, or does the use of explicit material have a more fundamental idea behind it? Was the brutality used with

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<sup>1</sup> Shteyngart, “Big Book of the Month: Bret Easton Ellis.”

purpose, or was it simply violence for violence's sake? My way into these questions was through an examination of his use of "high cultural" epigraph and allusion, in order to reveal the potential meaning in the stories he overlays upon his own.

## I

"[A]long the highway are billboards with answers on them".<sup>2</sup> These are amongst the closing lines of *Glamorama*. They can be taken as the incoherent ramblings of Victor at the end of a deeply traumatic series of events. They can be regarded as a metafictional reference by Ellis to his debut novel, in which billboards seemed to speak to Clay, imploring him to disappear. What is clear, however, is that throughout the works, "writing on cities" – both in the literal sense of advertising and graffiti, as well as the fictive sense of urban narratives – are vital to making meaning in Ellis's texts. Indeed, in both *Glamorama* and *Lunar Park*, the keys to the stories' mystery narratives centre on reading references correctly. The protagonists of both works are required to note citations accurately in order to survive. Thus, the cryptic words on a note in *Glamorama*, which might prevent the next terror attack, appear initially to be simple flight details:

I glance down at the WINGS printout, crumpled in my hands.

BAND ON THE RUN

1985

511

'It's a song...', I'm saying.

'What do you mean?' the director asks.

'It's a song,' I'm saying. 'It's not a flight.'

[...]

The device will be activated as the opening piano notes to the song '1985' by Paul McCartney and Wings (Band on the Run; Apple Records; 1973) start playing. The bomb will detonate on the final crashing cymbal of the song – five minutes and eleven seconds after it began.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 482.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 437-8.

This apparently straightforward meaning turns out to be an allusive pop-cultural reference, with lethal consequences for Victor's "misreading." His failure to note the resonance beyond the surface one results in carnage raining down in a grotesque mingling of confetti, glitter and gore.<sup>4</sup> Similarly in *Lunar Park*, it is only by recognising forgotten childhood stories in the menacing figures that stalk and haunt the house in Elsinore Lane, that the protagonist is able to rescue his family from attacks. Only by recognising the references to his own unruly body of work that the fictional "Bret Ellis" can save himself, as the demonologist explains:

'Who brought the doll into the house, Mr. Ellis?'  
 'I did,' I whispered. 'It was me.'  
 'And who created Patrick Bateman?'  
 In a whisper: 'I did.'  
 'And the thing you saw in the hall?'  
 Another whisper: 'Me.'  
 I was brought back when Miller pushed his pad across the table. There  
 was something on it he wanted me to see.  
 I noticed a word spelled in capital letters: T E R B Y.  
 Below this, the word spelled backwards: Y B R E T.  
*Why, Bret?*<sup>5</sup>

Reference and allusion is central to making meaning both within Ellis's fictional world, and for those of us analysing the works. "Why Bret?" is the question Ellis asks himself in *Lunar Park*. The question I have sought to answer in the chapters that have gone before is why *any* of the references throughout the works? What, I asked, was the purpose of referring to these "storied cities"?

## II

Dostoyevsky is an author I have argued throughout this thesis that Ellis may be ideologically allied with. Writing of the Russian novelist, Derek Offord claims,

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<sup>4</sup> Ellis, *Glamorama*, 441.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis, *Lunar Park*, 388-9.

It is one of the qualities of the greatest writers of imaginative literature that they succeed in capturing in their works both what is of lasting, universal significance and what is of most pressing concern in their own age and for their own nation. They deepen our knowledge both of man's experience in general and of his condition in a given society in particular.<sup>6</sup>

Ellis's novels capture the symbols of the cultural period so strongly that they do not immediately invite readers to look beyond their respective historical bounds. They are so suffused with the symbols of their contemporary era that they present themselves, on the surface level at least, as thoroughly of their time. Yet, the allegorical resonances potentially position the texts beyond the Postmodern era they depict, and as I have suggested, Ellis's vision is coloured by the ideologies of the works he references. Many of the most prominent citations are from texts or authors whose oeuvres centre on the oppressiveness of the city, or indeed of life in urban environments – Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Hugo *et al.* Ellis's texts cite urban literary traditions not only through their explicit referential context to urban fictions – both classic and contemporary – but also through their invocation of canonical tropes of urban narratives, such as the figure of the flâneur, feelings of alienation, representation of the “unreal city,” and the often destructive psychological affects of life amongst impersonal metropolitan structures.

### III

Ellis, of course, is not a city novelist in the way writers such as Dickens or Dostoyevsky are. His works do not record the contemporary reality of Los Angeles or New York so minutely that his name could be said to be synonymous with them. And yet “the city” as an entity is a central and abiding part of the works. As readers, we leave each of the texts with a sense of his fictional Los Angeles or New York as fundamental forces impacting upon the inhabitants generally, and the protagonists in particular.

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Offord, “The Causes of Crime and the Meaning of Law: *Crime and Punishment* and Contemporary Radical Thought,” in *New Essays on Dostoyevsky*, eds. Malcolm V. Jones and Garth M. Terry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 41.

Throughout his oeuvre Ellis has wrestled, in his own way, with what Tom Wolfe termed the “urban beast”<sup>7</sup> in an attempt to capture it and bring it to terms. The city is crucially important to his narratives, exerting – as in Wolfe’s apt phrase – “its relentless pressure on the souls of its inhabitants.”<sup>8</sup> His works show, without explicit condemnation, the pressure exerted on their souls, and what happens when they are worn away by the tides of Postmodern life. He conjures a version of cities that are antagonistic to the healthy flourishing of the inhabitants, and fundamentally opposed to their sense of being free. Through the unrelenting and almost claustrophobic first person narrative of the key novels, Ellis’s strategy of presenting urbanity from the point of view of disturbed consciousnesses means we are able to experience first-hand the “mental deformations”<sup>9</sup> of city life. It is this approach that allies Ellis’s vision of the city with the classical writers he metafictionally invokes such as Dostoyevsky, Sartre or Hugo. Ellis’s characters’ descent into violence – whether through voyeuristic fascination or escalating levels of perpetration – are an attempt to stave off being erased by the tides of urban life themselves.

In his work *Writing London*, Julian Wolfreys gives one of the more lucid articulations of the importance of writing the city away from questions of verisimilitude: “The texts which are herein analysed are read in their efforts to inscribe a sense of the city, instead of merely recording a representation.”<sup>10</sup> Wolfrey’s analysis highlights the usefulness of the phrase “writing the city” in its constitutive implication: “Instead of writing about architecture, I came to see writing as a form of architecture”.<sup>11</sup> Writing a city can be seen to be creating a literary entity in itself. In the written architecture of Ellis’s oeuvre, then, what version of Los Angeles and New York has been built?

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfe, “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast,” 55.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfe, “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast,” 55.

<sup>9</sup> Lukács, “Dostoevsky,” 153.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfreys, *Writing London*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Wolfreys, *Writing London*, 25.



The L.A. works see Ellis, a native Angeleno, writing his city as an outsider. Through his use of tropes characteristic of classic “anti-myth” texts, he positions his metanarrative within a tradition of writing against the city in the way that earlier novelists highlighted the estrangement endemic in urban life. It is this feeling of “not belonging” or “not belonging anymore” that permeates Ellis’s sense not only of L.A., but his oeuvre more broadly. The characters feel they don’t belong in their city or even their era. There is an overriding sense of dislocation, disorientation and lack of belonging that similarly characterise eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels of urban alienation. The New York works reveal personalities suppressed and worn away by the impersonality of its structures and its emotional climate. As an individual, one cannot maintain oneself in the face of it. One of the coping mechanisms is a fragmentation that manifests itself in a psychological “splitting” of the protagonists, either into the “spare me” of *Glamorama*, or the demonic double in *American Psycho*. Ellis’s characters seek connection to something outside themselves. A breaking free of a self that they’re disgusted with, and of a society that they’re bored by.

The phrase “see the worst thing” is uttered in Ellis’s debut novel, and has become a refrain in his oeuvre, and in the rumours and stories that loop constantly in the background. “Seeing the worst thing” can be said to characterise the west coast novels, while “doing the worst things,” both to humans, and finally to the structures of the city characterises the escalating content of the east coast works. Inhabiting an empty world, and feeling themselves empty, the violent acts may be read as an attempt to break out of this constructed, “unreal” world of surfaces and reconnect with some sense of humanity. Ellis offers a coda to this theme in *Lunar Park*, where an imagined writer asks the fictionalized Ellis, “*Hadn’t you once wanted to ‘see the worst’?*” The writer asked me. *Didn’t you once write that somewhere?* I might have. But I don’t want to anymore. *It’s too late*, the writer

said.”<sup>12</sup> The return to violence, and the same phrase<sup>13</sup> in the following novel *Imperial Bedrooms*, offers a damning conclusion to his thesis.

In his classic analysis “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Jameson noted Postmodernism’s offensive features, which he argues paradoxically are no longer offensive. As Jameson explains, an art which pushes the boundaries in an ever permissive society struggles to push up against anything other than itself.

[F]rom obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance, which transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism – no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society.<sup>14</sup>

Such is the banal regularity, Jameson suggests, in the Postmodern era of sexual and explicit content that readers are no longer scandalized. Certainly, given the furore surrounding *American Psycho*, Ellis has demonstrated that readers are still able to be shocked. Yet, that controversial text highlights the level to which one has to descend in the depiction of violence and taboo in order to scandalize the reading public enough to stage a critique. Importantly however, that same level of graphic violence is required not only in the reception of the works in contemporary Postmodern society, but within the content of the novels themselves. Ellis’s characters are only shaken out of their apathy by encounters with violence and “the worst things”.

#### IV

Frank O’Hara’s words I cited at the beginning of this chapter, on the difficulty of changing the perception of a man – which Ellis employs as an epigraph to *Lunar Park*, the most “autobiographical” of all his works – is a rather explicit authorial call for

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<sup>12</sup> Ellis, *Lunar Park*, 371.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4.

reassessment. It is one we should heed, and it is fitting that this signal is delivered, like most of his others, in the form of an epigraph from a writer who also held a reputation for cataloging social ephemera.

To the extent that categorisation is useful at all, it is problematic to lump Ellis in amongst Postmodernism or “blank fiction” as his final classification. “Blank fictions” are characterised by moral, ideological and psychological apathy in the face of the pervasive commodification of the world that this fiction portrays. Though “blank” may be correct stylistically, due to the flat and affectless prose style, and Postmodernism is certainly the era in which he is writing, at a characterological level Ellis’s protagonists are too fully plagued by affect to sit properly within this movement. Much of the criticism of the content and stylistics of his oeuvre stems from what I argue is this original miscategorisation. Indeed, Ellis’s texts might be said to have literary relevance due precisely to those aspects which critics saw as evidence of each work’s *failure* as literature. Thus, the overarching “characterlessness” of the characters represents, in a caricatured way, the erasure of humanity in alienating and consumerist urban environments. The sadistic nature of the murder and mutilation scenes, viewed at a symbolic level, may be evidence of the degeneration that has occurred in the minds of many of the protagonists. It has been my argument that it is in this rendering of affect in the characters – the disjunction between the stylistics of the works and their underlying morality – that the perceived flaws lie.

Ellis’s works are more than symptomatic of their age. They are deeply critical of Postmodern consumerist urban life, and searing in their examination of the affects of the city on the individuals. He sets himself within the cannon of authors who sought to critique and change the society in which they found themselves. Ellis’s canon represents, at a symbolic level, the profoundly destructive effects of the urban environment upon the individual. It is this project which sets the novel alongside those authors in the canon

who mourn the inhumanity of their urban metropolises, such as Dickens' London, Dostoyevsky's St. Petersburg or Balzac's Paris. Ellis's New York or Los Angeles are late-capitalist renderings of the great decaying literary capitals that went before him, and by implicitly locating his city within this tradition, Ellis invests his text with resonances that reach far beyond 1980's, 90s and noughties America. Ultimately, Ellis holds a liminal position, between both the high and the low, as Baelo-Allué has outlined<sup>15</sup>, and between both the Modernist and the Postmodernist, as I have sought to argue throughout. Ellis is much like the characters he depicts: at once part of the era, but feeling alienated from it. As the author himself noted in an interview, "But then I'm stuck in this position: What do you do when you're part of it?"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*, 22-25.

<sup>16</sup> Bret Easton Ellis in Robert Love, "Psycho Analysis," 45+.

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