

SERIAL MURDER, SERIAL CONSUMERISM: BRET EASTON ELLIS'S *AMERICAN PSYCHO* (1991)¹

SONIA BAELO ALLUÉ

University of Zaragoza

71

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) features a very characteristic figure in US popular culture —the serial killer— and, formally, it mixes popular genres and the language of different media. Mass culture is inextricably linked to the concept of seriality since talk shows, daily news, advertisements, pop music and magazines, among other mass culture products, are consumed in a serial and repetitive way. They rely on a structure known to the audience, which results in feelings both of reassurance and anticipation. In *American Psycho* mass culture references constantly appear and serve as a linking structure to the sixty short chapters into which the book is divided. As part of this seriality we find the consumerist patterns followed by the main character, a serial killer called Patrick Bateman, who consumes in all possible ways: buying, eating and destroying. The three forms of consumption are produced in series, the text thus building a close link between the seriality of the serial killer and the seriality of mass culture, a link that may account for the interest aroused by the figure of the serial killer in Western societies, and especially in US society.

American Psycho is to be understood within the literary context that has favoured its creation: Ellis belongs to a generation of writers that Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (1992) have called the “blank generation”, a generation that includes Jay McInerney, Joel Rose, Tama Janowitz, Dennis Cooper or Susanna Moore, authors who became especially prominent in the USA during the 80s and

90s. The subject-matter of their novels is usually violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, drugs, consumerism and commerce which they deal with through dense plots and elaborate styles but in a flat, affectless, atonal prose. Characters are usually undeveloped, something characteristic of our postmodern culture where “character” “comes to us in wraiths, projections, pastiche, mutating entities, archetypes, comic cut-outs and intertextual refugees from history, film, fiction and myth” (Young 1992a: 20). These novels are urban in focus and are loaded with images of the excesses of New York in the 80s: the world of cocaine, Wall Street, exotic eateries and expensive major-label suits (Annesley 1998: 5). This was a decade of extreme conspicuous consumption for rich, status-conscious yuppies, which increased the gap between them and the underprivileged masses. Even though not all blank fiction writers deal with yuppies, all of them point out the specifics of time and place, and are in direct relation to the social, cultural and political dynamics of late 20th century US life. This direct relation is especially seen in their use of products, personalities, places and mass cultural references of the time. They write about the reality they live in, freely incorporating plain language and mass culture into their writings, since, as Elisabeth Young believes, “their entire lives have been lived out within a milieu wherein art and pop music, advertising, films and fiction have always been inextricably intertwined, inseparable one from the other” (1992a: 14).

72

In blank fiction we see a mixture and use of styles characteristic of popular and mass culture, such as that of advertisements, cinema, TV or music. Several critics have noticed how blank fiction and literature in general have progressively adopted features corresponding to mass-cultural forms, although, of course, this use of non-literary materials in literature is not something new: Edgar Allan Poe included newspaper accounts in his Dupin stories and non-literary materials were also used by a number of 20s and 30s Modernists. The originality of these writers lies in the fact that apart from incorporating mass culture materials, they also make of them literary forms, transcoding their style into narrative prose. In this respect, Ellis’s first novel, *Less than Zero* (1985), was classified by many critics as an “MTV novel” (Freese 1990: 68-85). The style of Music Television “with its incessant flow of video clips, its devotion to glittering surfaces, its limitation to the immediate present, and the reduction of its ‘stories’ to the short attention span of contemporary youth” (1990: 69) had found a verbal equivalent in the narrative style of the novel. *Less than Zero* is a 208 page novel, divided into 108 very short chapters, thus limiting the attention span demanded for each chapter. The narrated events are very superficial: they include partying, watching TV, eating out, shopping, taking drugs or having sex, and their time and space constantly change, mirroring the rapid sequence of video clips which are shown on MTV. Apart from the specific case of MTV, for Philip E. Simmons the common

procedures seen in blank and postmodern fiction are all also found within contemporary film and television: “ontological disruption, mixing of high and popular styles; pastiche and parody of genres and of methods of representing history, and a continual disruption of representational conventions” (1997: 8). He claims that certain features of our mass culture correspond to the formal features of some literary manifestations. In a way, and maybe due to our global, image-driven, electronic culture, we are witnessing a progressive approach of the languages of mass culture —cinema, television, radio, popular music and consumer culture— to the world of literature. Simmons might be right when he affirms that mass culture has become our “cultural dominant”, the force field in which all forms of representation, including the novel, must operate (1997:2).

The influence of mass culture can be seen in blank fiction's interest and use of surfaces. For David Harvey this concern with surface is partly due to the shaping role of television. It seems that the average US citizen is reputed to watch television for more than seven hours a day and this has left its mark on postmodern and blank fiction. The era of mass television explains the attachment to surfaces, instead of roots, to collage rather than to in-depth work, to superimposed quoted images instead of worked surfaces, and to a collapsed sense of time and space (1989: 61). Thus, blank fiction's fixation on appearances and surfaces may be partly explained by this influence of mass culture and television. The fact that blank fiction's language resonates with references to commercial culture and surfaces has aroused the suspicion of some literary critics, who have dismissed it as lightweight and as a means of strengthening contemporary capitalist structures and of promoting further consumption.² Both Elizabeth Young (1992) and James Annesley (1998) have defended blank fiction writers from these accusations and have studied the ways in which their use of mass culture and consumerism provides a critique of contemporary social practices and lifestyle as it discloses a ruined society. Blank fiction writers have an exceptionally sophisticated apprehension of the excesses of our culture and show them from within. Since their way of proposing a social critique varies in form and degree with each writer, in this paper I will concentrate on one of them, Bret Easton Ellis, since he has been one of most controversial US writers to emerge in the last decades.

An important opening question that springs to mind is the way in which Ellis's fiction has been influenced by television. When asked about it Ellis said:

Media has informed all of us, no matter what art form we pursue, whether painters or musicians. TV has unconsciously, whether we want to admit it or not, shaped all of our visions to an inordinate degree. How? I don't know. I couldn't give you specifics. Is it good or bad? I don't know. I think it just is (Ellis in *Amerika* and Laurence 1994: 1).

As we can see, Ellis is very conscious of the influence that TV has exerted on his generation but he does not judge this influence as something negative, he is simply aware of its significance. He uses the media and denies that this is detrimental to literature. When asked about the origins of the plain language he uses in his novels he answers:

I would say from seeing a shitload of movies, reading a ton of books, watching enormous hours of television, and having it all soak in. If for some reason you want to be a writer, that's where the ear comes from. I don't know what other reference points there were when I was growing up. It was books, movies, TV and rock and roll (Ellis in *Amerika* and Laurence 1994: 2).

Ellis's main influence is then popular and mass culture. For James Annesley, the range of mass cultural references that blank fiction writers use positions this fiction very precisely in a particular time and place. The sense of context is not developed through detailed descriptions but through the texts' incorporation of the commercialised products of a particular epoch. Thus, blank fiction does not simply depict its own period but "it speaks in the commodified language of its own period" (1998: 7). In fact, the very language and style of these novels is influenced by mass culture. As Young has pointed out, blank generation writers do not have a memory of a clear demarcation between high and low typical of the pre-sixties world. Thus, they blur the boundary between both high and low culture because, through their own experience, they have never seen that difference (1992a: 14).

74

Bret Easton Ellis's most controversial and representative work is *American Psycho* (1991), a novel which clearly illustrates this influence of mass culture in blank fiction literature. *American Psycho's* subject-matter is taken from popular literature. Its main character is a rich white heterosexual yuppie called Patrick Bateman. Although Bateman seems to be a successful man perfectly integrated in society, he is actually a sexist, racist, and xenophobic serial killer. Bateman himself narrates all the events portrayed in the novel, deploying the same flat tone to describe both his daily routine and his horrific killings. In a narration overcharged with details we learn of his favourite television talk shows, magazines, films, cosmetic products and preferred ways of torturing people. The book could be an example of popular horror, if it were not for the fact that it is filled with references to the theoretical constituents of postmodern culture. Thus, Elizabeth Young underlines the presence in the novel of "the commodity fixation, the focus on image, codes and style, the proliferation of surfaces and the deindividualization of neo-fogey characters who 'play' with the past —'I'm pro-family and anti-drug'— and in doing so embody irony and paradox" (1992b: 121).

The narrative rhythm in the novel is marked by two intertwined forms of seriality: the seriality of Bateman's never-ending killings, and Bateman's serial consumerism

of surrounding mass culture. Curiously enough, these two forms of seriality were in the mind of the FBI special agent Robert Ressler when he coined the term serial killer in the mid-1970s: on the one hand, we have the British designation of “crimes in series”: a series of crimes committed in a fairly repetitive way: on the other hand we find the repetitive rhythm of many mass cultural representations. As Ressler explains:

[...] also in my mind were the serial adventures we used to see on Saturday at the movies [...] Each week you'd be lured back to see another episode, because at the end of each one was a cliff-hanger. In dramatic terms, this wasn't a satisfactory ending, because it increased, not lessened the tension. The same dissatisfaction occurs in the mind of serial killers (in Seltzer 1998: 64).

Thus, Ressler was thinking of adventure serials when he coined the label serial-killing. Along this line, we might postulate that part of the pleasure that US audiences get out of consuming serial killer narratives derives from the way serialised homicidal crimes seem so well-adapted to mass cultural forms. For Richard Dyer it is only under capitalism that seriality became an important structure in cultural productions. It started with the serialisation of novels and cartoons, then it spread to news and movie programming (1997: 14). It is obvious that the serial novels popular in the 19th century have given way to the serial television shows of the late 20th century. In fact, seriality has become the main structure of television, constantly interweaving serial strands, whose orchestration is known as scheduling.

Cultural critic John Ellis reduces the system of television to segments, which are:

[...] small sequential unities of images and sounds whose maximum duration seems to be about five minutes. These segments are organised into groups, which are either simply cumulative, like news broadcast items and advertisements, or have some kind of repetitive or sequential connection, like the groups of segments that make up the serial or series. Broadcast TV narration takes place across these segments, characteristically in series or serials which repeat a basic problematic or dilemma rather than resolving it finally (1992: 112).

Apart from advertisements, news, promotional material and title sequences, most programmes are themselves composed of a number of segments: that is the case of series and serials. The serial provides a narrative progression and conclusion, whereas the series (fictional or non-fictional) does not. The fictional series (everlasting soap operas, situation comedies...) revolve around a situation and a group of characters, while the non-fictional ones (documentaries, news programmes, chat shows, sports programmes...) have a recurring format and a set of routines which provide a framework of expectancy. Both series and serials are “a form of continuity-with-difference that TV has perfected” (Ellis 1992: 123).

Through scheduling the segments are arranged, thus producing a repetitive regular slot.

Seriality and climactic moments are marketing devices deployed by these television series so as to defer the moment when all plot lines reach an all-embracing ending. Once this happens the programme is given the label of “complete” and its cancellation takes place. The serial killer kills on and on and does not want to be given the label of “complete” either, which would imply that he is caught or dead.³ His killing in series has a similar structure to the TV series and to the mass media structure. Thus, it is not surprising that the serialised media and the serialised killings converge in the pathological interest of many real serial killers to attain media fame. They kill precisely in order to see themselves mass produced and “serialised” in the newspapers and television reports about them.⁴ The serial killer formula combines the structure of the serial and that of the series. The killer kills in series and apparently in a disconnected way. Each new killing creates a framework of repetition and expectancy for the audience, and ultimately the serial killer formula becomes a serial when the series of murders shows that there is a pattern behind them that explains the choice of victims and the nature of the killer. The narrative is completed with the arrest or death of the killer. In this way, the formula combines the attractive aspects of the series with the reassuring ones of the serial.

76

For readers and viewers the sources of pleasure in the serial killer formula are many and varied. Dyer argues that people have always been conscious of the pleasures provided by series so that throughout history, bards, jongleurs, griots and yarnspinners have all long known and used seriality to leave their listeners wanting more (1997: 14). The series provides an attractive mixture of repetition and anticipation, since the audience always craves for more and the structure makes them anticipate the continuation of the story. The serial structure also provides pleasure, since the knowledge that there is usually a pattern emerging from the choice of victims and from the moment and way they were killed makes the audience anxious to know who the next victim will be and why. This serial structure also guarantees the promise of closure that will infuse the whole narration with a final meaning. Accordingly, an important aspect, and notable pleasure, of the serial-killer fictional narrative is not only its structure in series but its serial structure.

The case of *American Psycho* is more complex since Patrick Bateman, the serial killer in the novel, kills in series, but the series of murders does not lead anywhere. Every new killing sheds no light on Bateman’s motivations and, since he murders rich and poor people, children, homosexuals, men and women, it becomes difficult to find a pattern in the killings. The reader cannot guess who the next

victim will be or where the murder will take place. Even Bateman's confession seems futile. After reflecting on his reasons for slaying people and a possible explanatory confession he ends by saying:

[...] and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing...* (1991: 377).

There is no ending to Bateman's killings, which go on and on, in a sequence replicating the way most television series are broadcast nowadays.

The thematic and structural significance of different forms of seriality within the novel seems to demand that close attention be paid to the devices used in order to highlight the notion and the practice of seriality. To further understand these forms of seriality I am going to use Mark Edmundson's *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic* (1997). In this book Edmundson interprets our culture as a culture of the Gothic where serialised forms of the Gothic world have entered and are part of our social practices and mass culture. As corollary of the Gothic world, Edmundson also perceives a parallel social tendency towards its complete opposite, what he calls "easy transcendence", which constitutes "a vacation, a few hours away from more pressing Gothic fears" (1997: 76-77). On the one hand, Gothic is now present not only in Stephen King's novels or Quentin Tarantino's films, it is present in politics, in media renderings of the O. J. Simpson case, in TV news, in the environmental debates, etc. On the other hand, easy transcendence is seen through films like *Forrest Gump*. If we are made what we are by traumas, *Forrest Gump* provides a trauma-free past, the opportunity to experience the freedom of a life without traumas. It is not simple escapism, it also contains the Gothic pressures that surround us while denying their power, reassuring us. Other forms of pop transcendence are angels (whose image has been lately mass-produced and printed on all sorts of objects), TV, celebrities, advertisements, etc. The non-fictional Gothic and the world of pop-transcendence include forms of repetitive and serialised mass culture and these forms become key aspects of *American Psycho* where the examples of pop transcendence are mixed with the examples of pop Gothic and serial killings. Thus, the flow of the novel is based on a sophisticated structure infused with the rhythm established by mass culture and consumerism in contemporary society.

The world of pop Gothic in the novel is represented by *The Patty Winters Show*, a parody of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, where different traumas are aired every day: raped women, men with cancer, abortions and the like. The sensationalist and morbid orientation of television talk shows has led Linda S. Kauffman to doubt

whether *American Psycho* is really more “psycho” than their average topics. To prove her point she quotes a 1991 *Time* article on television talk shows which charted the formula for a successful ratings sweep: “handicapped sex addicts married to organ donors” (in Kauffman 1998: 245). This is a formula not so different from the one used in *American Psycho*: “unwed sex addict serial killer, who murders prostitutes, in love with Whitney Houston” (246). A possible formula for a successful talk show becomes the subject-matter of the book. Furthermore, the afternoon talk show becomes a repetitive obsession for Bateman: nearly all the chapters in the novel start with a brief summary of the programme’s topic of the day. He records the programme if he cannot watch it, and when summer comes and the shows are all repeats he reacts very strongly: “Life remained a blank canvas, a cliché, a soap opera. I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage” (279). *The Patty Winters Show* provides his life with a rhythm and when the rhythm is broken by the programmes’ lack of unpredictability (the repeats are already known to Bateman), his own life is disrupted and he risks revealing his hidden nature. He goes on holiday to the Hamptons with Evelyn, his girlfriend, but he cannot stand the tempo imposed by the countryside and decides to go back home when he discovers himself “standing over our bed in the hours before dawn, with an ice pick gripped in my fist, waiting for Evelyn to open her eyes” (282). With his return to the city returns *The Patty Winters Show* with the topic “People Who Weigh Over Seven Hundred Pounds —What Can We Do about Them?” (283) and it is not casual that the return of the programme should coincide with the continuation of Bateman’s murders: in the same chapter in which *The Patty Winters Show* reappears Bateman has sex with, tortures and kills two girls called Elizabeth and Christie.

The media also tell “Gothic tales” or horror stories. This is what Bateman reads in the *Post*:

The *Post* this morning says the remains of three bodies that disappeared aboard a yacht last March have been recovered, frozen in ice, hacked up and bloated, in the East River; some maniac is going around the city poisoning one-liter bottles of Evian water, seventeen dead already; talk of zombies, the public mood, increasing randomness, vast chasms of misunderstanding (383).

The *Post* comes out everyday, so readers can read this horrific news day after day, following it, wondering whether the murderer of the three people who disappeared aboard a yacht last March will be found and whether the maniac that poisons Evian water will be caught. Television news also repeats terrifying events endlessly, something Bateman himself seems to be aware of:

There were four major air disasters this summer, the majority of them captured on videotape, almost as if these events had been planned, and repeated on television endlessly. The planes kept crashing in slow motion, followed by countless roaming shots of the wreckage and the same random views of the burned, bloody carnage, weeping rescue workers retrieving body parts (278).

The gory event is turned into a series by its constant repetition on the news and in spite of its gory nature (or maybe because of it) people are eager to watch it, even in slow motion. They want to know more and they watch the news every day to find out what really happened. At the end of each programme they know there will be another day, same time, when their questions may finally find an answer.⁵ Through the news, US Americans consume murder as a daily fare: quoting Edmundson, “Local TV news gives over more than 50 percent of its air-time, on average, to covering crime and disaster”. It is not only the news that shows crime and disaster, we also have “true police-stories, true rescue-tales, documentaries about crime, tragedy, sorrow, disease, mistreatment, humiliation, and loss under the postmodern sun” (1997: 30). We have become used to these series of endless horrors, which may account for our fondness for the serial-killer narrative. This is a kind of narrative that satisfies our crave for an explanation of the daily horror, a craving that grows with every new programme we watch on TV, since serial killers, like chapters in periodicals, stand in need of interpretation, and the fictional form usually provides such interpretation through the figure of the detective, the police officer or the profiler. Although Ellis is aware of the seriality that surrounds a great deal of society’s behaviour, he is not willing to provide an interpreter for all the horror. As a result the reader faces a narrative that lacks closure, comfort and reassurance, which intensifies the underlying horror.

Edmundson also discusses the side effect caused by this obsession with horror: pop transcendence, a kind of transcendence that also has a relevant place in *American Psycho*. Accordingly, Linda S. Kauffman considers that reading *American Psycho* is “like skimming *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Interview*, *Playboy*, *Hustler*, *Spy*, and *New York Magazine*, complete with music and food reviews” (1998: 246). Even Bateman’s friends acknowledge this openly when they state that Bateman is “total *GQ*” (1991: 90). Pop music is one of these forms of pop transcendence, a form that Ellis incorporates in the novel in a very curious way. As Elizabeth Young has pointed out, after the major killings there are whole chapters completely given over to strange, bland analyses of pop music (1992b: 112). The murder of Al, a black bum, is followed by a chapter on Genesis; that of Bethany, an ex-girlfriend, by a chapter on Whitney Houston; finally, the mass murders in “Chase Manhattan” by one on Huey Lewis and the News. The style of these chapters completely disrupts the narration: they are also narrated by Bateman, but they are completely cut off from what has happened before or will happen later.

Their style is typical of pop magazines where groups are reviewed and judged in very technical terms: “My favorite track is ‘Man on the Corner’, which is the only song credited solely to Collins, a moving ballad with a pretty synthesized melody plus a riveting drum machine in the background” (134). Unlike conventional pop transcendence, these episodes do not work as a means of obliterating the horror narrated in the preceding chapters. Their strategic position in the narration, each one occurring after a murder, changes their significance: they stress the horror narrated in the previous pages and the oblivion of the people who are capable of watching the horrors of the evening news and then of effortlessly listening to pop music. In *American Psycho* (2000), Mary Harron’s film adaptation of the novel, this contrast is very well captured: Bateman murders Paul Owen while listening to “Hip to Be Square” and commenting on the virtues of Huey Lewis and the News. The critical intention of the novel is underlined by juxtaposing superficial comments about music with an appalling murder.

80

Another example of pop transcendence that is used and deconstructed in the book is the musical *Les misérables*, repeatedly publicised on buses and hoardings. The founding notion of musicals is that of entertainment, but in Ellis’s novel *Les misérables* is used as a form of denunciation, not of escapism. It becomes a leitmotif that figures in the background of everything that happens in the story, as the musical is alluded to or named at least on twenty occasions. Victor Hugo’s “misérables” are juxtaposed with the contemporary “miserable” people that populate the book and the city: beggars, the homeless or the insane, some of Patrick Bateman’s potential victims. This is the telling way in which a beggar is introduced: “Once outside, ignoring the bum lounging below the *Les misérables* poster and holding a sign that reads: I’VE LOST MY JOB I AM HUNGRY I HAVE NO MONEY PLEASE HELP, whose eyes tear after I pull the tease-the-bum-with-a-dollar trick [...]” (113). Pop transcendence and the contemporary Gothic are juxtaposed in an ironic comment on our enjoyment of Victor Hugo’s “misérables” and our disregard for New York “misérables”.

Hollywood and its celebrities also work for Edmundson as a means of forgetting everyday horrors. Tom Cruise is Bateman’s neighbour, while Donald Trump is Bateman’s obsession. The self-help movement and the how-to books have a similar role in the novel; they aim at counterbalancing and protecting us from the power of the pervasive present Gothic world. Jean, Bateman’s secretary, who is completely innocent and naïve, reads books with titles such as “*How to Make a Man Fall in Love with You. How to Keep a Man in Love with You Forever. How to Close a Deal: Get Married. How to Be Married One Year from Today. Supplicant*” (265). However, the form of transcendence most frequently mocked in *American Psycho* is consumerism. There are constant descriptions of clothes, furniture,

videos, restaurants, etc.; one of the chapters, dealing with Bateman's plans for Christmas, is significantly entitled "Shopping". The chapter has the form of a monologue in which Bateman talks about the colleagues he is going to give presents to, his priorities for Christmas and the places where he shops. The monologue is interrupted on three occasions by long lists of products he plans to buy:

[...] pens and photo albums, pairs of bookends and light-weight luggage, electric shoe polishers and heated towel stands and silver-plated insulated carafes and portable palm-sized color TVs with earphones, birdhouses and candleholders, place mats, picnic hampers and ice buckets, lace-trimmed oversize linen napkins and umbrellas and sterling silver monogrammed golf tees and charcoal-filter smoke trappers and desk lamps and perfume bottles, jewelry boxes, office tote bags, desk accessories, scarves, file holders, address books, agendas for handbags [...] (177).

The long lists continually disrupt the narrative, denouncing the consumerist fever that takes place at Christmas time.

Related to Bateman's obsessive consumerism is his obsession with brand names and labels, which is not just a sign of his social status since in the course of the narrative it acquires other, more symbolic, meanings. He looks not at his watch but at his "Rolex", he drinks not whisky but "J&B", nor water but "Evian". On the subject of water he and his friends prove to be "experts":

Courtney starts, counting each name off on one of her fingers. "Well, there's Sparcal, Perrier, San Pellegrino, Poland Springs, Calistoga..." She stops, stuck, and looks over at McDermott for help. He sighs, then lists, "Canadian Spring, Canadian Calm, Montclair, which is also from Canada, Vittel from France, Crodo, which is Italian..." [...] "It's your turn, Patrick" [...] I list the following. "You forgot Alpenwasser, Down Under, Schat, which is from Lebanon, Qubol and Cold Springs—" (247-248).

This wide use of labels is also deployed by other authors. Philip Stevick believes that this is something shared by much experimental fiction of the 70s. Authors such as Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Coover or Thomas Pynchon incorporated mass-cultural objects, especially ephemeral ones, to their fiction for comic effects (1981: 123). Similarly, as we have seen, one of blank fiction's most recognisable characteristics is the use of a broad range of mass cultural references. Stevick and Annesley disagree on the meaning of this use of mass culture and brand names: for Stevick they are mainly used for comic purposes and he mentions twelve different situations in which an object is potentially funny when it is named (1981: 136-139). In the book the constant use of brand names produces comic effects on some occasions: when a taxi driver, who recognises Bateman as the killer of a fellow taxi driver, aims at him with a gun, Bateman remarks that "he's holding a gun, the make of which I don't recognize" (392). Even at a tense and dangerous

moment like this Bateman worries about makes and brands. Similarly, when he is being chased across Manhattan by the police he tries to steal some cars, cars that are described in full detail:

[...] he dashes past a row of Porches, tries to open each one and sets a string of car alarm sirens off, the car he would like to steal is a black Range Rover with permanent four-wheel drive, an aircraft-grade aluminium body on a boxed steel chassis and a fuel-injected V-8 engine, but he can't find one, and though this disappoints him [...] (350).

Although Stevick is right in his reading of brand names as a device to achieve a comic effect, in the case of *American Psycho* it is Annesley's position that proves more interesting and illuminating. The way blank fiction writers use brands and designer labels is more related to critical purposes, as mass culture and consumerism come to contain a "double meaning": on the one hand they express the power and reach of commercial culture, on the other hand they reveal "the ways in which the commodity can be used in an expressive and communicative way" (1998: 92). When the book was published, the use of brand names was seen in the light of the first meaning, as a senseless and superficial empty reproduction of consumerism. One chapter called "Morning" is especially loaded with brand names and mass-culture products, and in it Bateman describes in detail his daily routine, the things he owns and the cosmetic products he uses, taking special pains to describe his favourite kinds of shampoo:

[...] a Foltene European Supplement and Shampoo for thinning hair which contains complex carbohydrates that penetrate the hair shafts for improved strength and shine. Also the Vivagen Hair Enrichment Treatment, a new Redken product that prevents mineral deposits and prolongs the life cycle of hair. Luis Carruthers recommended the Aramis Nutriplex system, a nutrient complex that helps increase circulation (27).

Passages like this led critic Roger Rosenblatt to affirm:

I do not exaggerate when I say that in his way Mr. Ellis may be the most knowledgeable author in all of American literature. Whatever Melville knew about whaling, whatever Mark Twain knew about rivers are mere amateur stammerings compared with what Mr. Ellis knows about shampoo alone (1990: 16).

Rosenblatt's ironic comments ignore Ellis's point: through the chapter we see the excess in the number of available products and Bateman is depicted as a compulsive consumer, completely engulfed by mass culture. Ellis's prose straightforwardly reflects this commercial culture but it does not necessarily mean that the narration strengthens capitalist structures by promoting further consumerism. In fact, in the film version of the book, released in 2000, it turned out to be very difficult to obtain the consent of many of the designers to use their brand names and labels in the film. As film's director Mary Harron mentioned,

American designers like Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren “didn’t want to be associated with anything so horrible” (in Gopalan 2000: 2). When the book was published, American Express apparently considered suing Ellis and his publisher because the psychopath used an American Express credit card to cut his cocaine, pay for his dinner, and order prostitutes and room service (Kauffman 1998: 251). The very companies that obtained free advertising in *American Psycho* did not seem to believe the theory that *American Psycho* promoted further consumption.

However, if Ellis’s intention when reproducing long lists of brand names and products was not to promote further consumption, one may wonder what his intentions were. We have said that consumer goods have a “double meaning”: on the one hand they are agents of social control, on the other hand they have an expressive use. Ellis employs these goods to criticise them from within and to do so he exaggerates their visibility by naming and repeating them to excess; it is not surprising that Bateman’s platinum American Express card snaps in half after so much use (1991: 278-9). Through exaggeration he makes us aware of the excesses of consumerism, the result not being pleasurable but boredom and asphyxia. Commercial names replace adjectives, qualifying phrases, and points of reference. What is being suggested is that they are used for description because they are charged with a series of additional meanings. In this respect, Mike Featherstone talks about the “new heroes of consumer culture” who accumulate goods to display their individuality and create their lifestyle. This kind of individual is conscious that “he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, decoration, car and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste” (1991b: 86). Consumerism taken to an extreme invades everything and becomes our only means of relating to and judging others. In this practice commodities lose their use value, which is replaced by their exchange value (price). In fact, for Karl Marx (1976) this rupture between use value and exchange value was the most distinctive feature of capitalist societies. In the novel, Bateman openly acknowledges this rupture in statements like “[...] Stash’s admittedly cheap, bad haircut. A haircut that’s bad because it’s cheap” (1991: 21). His obsession with the exchange value of things also explains his fixation on designer goods, whose use value alone cannot account for their elevated price; Bateman is eager to use them because of the message they provide, what they say about his lifestyle and about his identity.

For Baudrillard, this progressive erasure of use value by exchange value has resulted in commodities becoming signs in a Saussurean sense (1988d). When Baudrillard affirms that commodities have become signs, he means that goods do not have a use value and exchange value in a fixed system of human needs. Value now fluctuates in a changing system since it is determined by the rest of

commodities like the Saussurean sign, whose meaning is constituted by structural relations with other signs and by its position in a self-reflexive system of signifiers. Thus, Bateman's new business card is valuable only if those of his mates are less impressive. Just as commodities have lost their intrinsic value, so Bateman has lost any trace of a personality. As Martyn Lee suggests, Bateman's consciousness is assembled from fragments of the commodity-form and his experiences are channelled through an endless succession of commodity signs (1993: 176). This is literally seen in passages like: "Favourite group: Talking Heads. Drink: J&B or Absolut on the rocks. TV show: *Late Night with David Letterman*. Soda: Diet Pepsi. Water: Evian. Sport: Baseball" (395). Since his subjectivity is as unstable and fluid as the commodity signs and is free of social constraints, morality or conscience, he internalises everything offered by mass culture and consumerism. He leads a social life where everything is reduced to commodity consumption, a practice closely linked to his status as serial killer, another kind of consumption.

Seriality becomes a by-product of a society which stresses over-consumerism and offers a repetitive bombardment with messages that reinforce the "Just Do it" idea. The serial killer internalises the message of the ads: the archetypal advertising figure is now the isolated individual, a figure exuding power. As Mark Crispin Miller points out, "While the brand name may vary from ad to ad, all [...] are unified by their promotion of the same bad creed: that "power" is all, that it means nothing more than dominating others, and that you must therefore have that "power" or end up broken by it" (in Edmundson 1997: 90). These ads do not ask us to take it easy for a moment, but only to stand out, to come first, to take what you want, and take it now. For Christopher Lasch, "advertising institutionalizes envy and its attendant anxieties" (1991: 73), a philosophy internalised by Bateman, who even fantasises about his own appearance in a TV commercial:

I'm imagining myself on television, in a commercial for a new product —wine cooler? tanning lotion? sugarless gum?— and I'm moving in jump-cut, walking along a beach, the film is black-and-white, purposefully scratched, eerie vague pop music from the mid-1960s accompanies the footage, it echoes, sounds as if it's coming from a calliope. Now I'm looking into the camera, now I'm holding up the product —a new mousse? tennis shoes?— now my hair is windblown then it's day then night then day again and then it's night (327).

Bateman has internalised the language of advertisements and applies it literally to his own way of speaking. Jean Baudrillard's theories on the simulacra in postmodern society are a help in understanding the way Bateman internalises the messages emitted by films, advertisements, television, and the mass media in general. For Baudrillard, our culture is a culture of the "simulacrum". Simulation

“is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1988b: 166), that is to say, the process by which the distinction between original and copy is destroyed (e.g. in film and record). “Simulacrum” would then be an identical copy without an original. One of the consequences of this process of simulation and the appearance of simulacra is that it threatens to dissolve the difference between “true” and “false”, between “real” and “imaginary” (168). To reach this point the image goes through different phases: first, the image reflects a basic reality; then, the image marks and perverts that basic reality; later, the image marks the absence of a basic reality; and last, the image bears no relation to any reality whatever, it is its own pure simulacrum (170). In relation to Baudrillard’s theories, John Fiske claims that the postmodern media no longer provide “secondary representations of reality: they affect and produce the reality that they mediate” (1994: xv). All events that matter are media events and, in this way, a clear distinction between the media event and its media representation is lost. The media do not simply report or circulate the news, they produce them. Representation does not stand removed from reality so as to conceal or distort it, it is reality. In *American Psycho*, Bateman’s attitude reflects the power of the simulacrum as he internalises the messages of the media and turns them into reality. If the message says “Just Do it”, he does it: after renting Brian De Palma’s *Body Double* (1984), in which a woman is drilled to death, thirty-seven times, he also “does it” and kills in the same way. For Bateman, life is “played out as a sitcom, a blank canvas that reconfigures itself into a soap opera” (343) and the image in his head is not a representation anymore, it is reality: his life is the life of the nightmarish postmodern hyperreal.

The language of consumerism and advertising favours a series of themes, such as youth, beauty, energy, fitness, freedom, luxury, fun, etc., while it hides the dark side of consumer culture: the elderly, the unemployed, the poor, those whose consumption is limited to the consumption of images (Featherstone 1991a: 174-177). In postmodern consumer culture, reality may be partly produced by images but the system of consumption is still sustained by those who have the money to consume the products, not just the images. Patrick Bateman is a double consumer, of both objects and images that shape his behaviour. He is in a way the result of the logic of consumer culture: he represents all that is favoured by consumer culture, while he detests —on some occasions to the point of killing— everything consumer culture tries to hide. This logic of consumer culture is also the logic of the narcissist, who divides society into two groups: the rich, the great and famous on the one hand, the common herd on the other (Lasch 1991: 84). Bateman is a handsome, rich and seductive narcissist yuppie; he masters the rules of fashion and his friends repeatedly ask him what to wear or how to match their clothes, he makes reservations for the best restaurants and is admitted into the best night-

clubs, he is a member of a health club called “Xclusive” and lives in an expensive apartment, with Tom Cruise for a neighbour; he is even repeatedly mistaken for a model or a movie star (165, 206). Bateman represents a society’s obsession with the cult of the body: dieting, body-building, jogging, a “look” based on surface and image. A society that dreams of “fashion, the latest styles, idols, the play of images, travel for its own sake, advertising [...] In short, the orgy” (Baudrillard 1988a: 96).

In the US, during the decade of the 1980s, this general trend was reflected in the figure of the yuppie. While Christopher Lasch considered the 70s the “me-decade” for the selfishness and narcissism that invaded US society, in a 1991 afterword to his famous *The Culture of Narcissism*, he concluded that the eighties did not see a revival of altruism or civic spirit, but rather the contrary, since yuppies were known for their selfish devotion to themselves (1991: 237). This culture of narcissism was inextricably linked to the mass media and the images and messages perpetuated by them. Mike Featherstone has noted that advertisements, the popular press, television and motion pictures provide a proliferation of stylised images of the body, supporting an extended hedonism and an obsession with body maintenance (1991a). Advertisements, feature articles and advice columns in magazines and newspapers advise their readers to take care of themselves at all costs. This attitude can also be found in the way personality handbooks and self-help books have changed since the beginning of the century: from an emphasis on discipline and self-denial they have passed to the will to win and, in this context, the key terms are personal magnetism and dominance over others, success or the look of success becoming an end in their own right (Lasch 1991: 56-59). Mike Featherstone points out that this new narcissistic type of individual has been described as:

“Excessively self-conscious”, “chronically uneasy about his health, afraid of ageing and death”, “constantly searching for flaws and signs of decay”, “eager to get along with others yet unable to make real friendships”, “attempts to sell his self as if his personality was a commodity”, “hungry for emotional experiences”, “haunted by fantasies of omnipotence and eternal youth” (1991a: 187).

This happens to be a good summary of Patrick Bateman’s personality, but Bateman is more than just a narcissistic character, he is also a killer, two aspects of his personality that are not separated but linked by the narrative. Passages like the following exemplify the connection:

Shirtless, I scrutinize my image in the mirror above the sinks in the locker room at Xclusive. My arm muscles burn, my stomach is as taut as possible, my chest steel, pectorals granite hard, my eyes white as ice. In my locker in the locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I’ve attacked in the

past week. Two are washed off, one isn't. There's a barrette clipped to one of them, a blue ribbon from Hermès tied around my favourite (1991: 370).

He has a fixation with the perfection of his body, while his toneless narrative voice informs the reader about his other possessions, which include three vaginas; he even has a favourite one, which is signalled out with a ribbon, though not any ribbon, "a blue ribbon from Hermès". As Kauffman notes, "Bateman is the conspicuous consumer run amok" (1998: 250).

In *American Psycho* the word "consume" is used in all of its possible meanings: purchasing, eating and destroying (Annesley 1998: 16). With his credit card Bateman consumes (purchases) design clothes and women for the night, on the same day he consumes (eats) at the best restaurant in town, while at night he eats the body of a tortured girl. At the stock market he consumes (destroys) companies to make them more profitable, whereas in his free time he kills and literally destroys a large number of people. Kauffman explains that, curiously enough, stockbrokers from companies like Merrill Lynch or Pierce (whose equivalent in the book is Pierce and Pierce) have long referred to their clientele with the motto of "Murder'em, lynch'em, pierce'em, fuck'em and forget'em" (1998: 250). Bateman only makes literal a language that is already in society, consuming to the ultimate consequences, "just doing it", as the advertisement says.

87

People become commodified in Bateman's mind, so he uses the same flat tone when describing the three types of "consumption" he performs: the things he owns and the people he kills are equated. Thus when describing his room after one of his killings he tonelessly says that "things are lying in the corner of my bedroom: a pair of girl's shoes from Edward Susan Bennis Allen, a hand with the thumb and fore-finger missing, the new issue of *Vanity Fair* splashed with someone's blood, a cummerbund drenched with gore [...]" (343-344). He does not seem to see the difference between some design shoes, an issue of *Vanity Fair*, a cummerbund and a mutilated human hand. Jean Baudrillard drawing from Karl Marx's definition of reification (1976) describes how men of wealth in a consumer culture:

[...] are no longer surrounded by other human beings, as they have been in the past, but by objects. Their daily exchange is no longer with their fellows, but rather, statistically [...] with the acquisition and manipulation of goods and messages [...] (1988c: 29).

Bateman's attitude is thus that of a wealthy man immersed in a consumerist fever, who has internalised the consumerist logic to such an extent that he literally sees no difference between a person and an object.

American Psycho denounces consumerism by portraying the serial killer as the ultimate consumer. As a blank generation writer Ellis has used mass culture openly, to the extent of adopting the seriality characteristic of mass cultural productions in his own artistic language and style. The choice of a serial killer to channel and reflect contemporary consumer culture is effective and challenging: Bateman's never-ending serial killings mirror our own never-ending serial consumerism, the fact that we are engulfed by an ethic of disposal and repurchase in which consumption is present for the sake of consumption alone. The market continually provides "improved" versions of goods, artificially outdating products that are still useful. Envy is a powerful feeling that pushes people to comply with the ethic of disposal and repurchase: one has to have the best, which will make one stand out and dominate the rest. This is why the logic of consumerism is inextricably linked to the logic of narcissism and why the ultimate consumer narcissist is a man like Patrick Bateman. The fact that he is a serial killer comes as an extension of his immersion in the consumerist system and values. His killing in series is equated to his consuming in series, his equation of people and objects is linked to his "apparent" capacity to buy everything, to own anything he wants. Bateman's personality is constructed through the images and messages he receives through mass and consumer culture, which leads to his inability to distinguish self from surface. As Lasch has said, commodity production and consumerism "create a world of mirrors, insubstantial images, illusions increasingly indistinguishable from reality" (1984: 30), a world that Bateman thinks exists to gratify his desires. Bateman is thus the product of unrestrained consumerism in a society of the hyperreal, in which the difference between the real and the simulated, between our power and that of others is blurred and unclear. Bateman only does what the advertisements entice him to do, as a sports drink commercial claims: "It's your world, drink it up". Blank generation writers use this rhetoric of consumerism but not to promote further consumerism, nor as an example of literature fallen victim to the general commodification of society. In the case of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* it is a way of denouncing consumerism from within, from the mind of its most extreme representative, he who serially consumes objects and people: the serial killer.

Notes

¹. This paper has been written with the financial help of the DGICYT, research project nº BFF2001-1775. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their very useful comments.

². David Lehman dismissed Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis's fiction for having "the intellectual nourishment of a well-made beer commercial" (1987: 72). Roger Rosenblatt considered Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) "the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore. But that is unfair to sophomores. So pointless, so themeless, so everythingless is this novel, except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products, that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it certainly would be the funniest" (1990: 3). Both Lehman and Rosenblatt do not understand the use of commercial and mass culture and interpret it as a sign of the lack of artistic merit and capacity of these writers.

³. As Richard Dyer has noted, the number of female serial killers is statistically negligible (1997: 16).

⁴. Joel Black (1991: 135-187 and *passim*) deals with these possibilities in his fascinating book *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture*, where he analyses celebrity murders and murderers who have been inspired by mass media productions such as books, films or even television serials and series.

⁵. The events of September 11th, 2001, confirm Ellis's point here. The recorded images of the two planes crashing into the World Trade Center have been endlessly and insatiably repeated on TV. The story of subsequent events has similarly made the news for months. Questions such as where Bin Laden is, or how the war in Afghanistan is going have served as skeleton to the series of news on TV, combining the pleasurable aspects of repetition and anticipation.

Works cited

AMERIKA, Mark, and Alexander LAURENCE. 1994. "Interview with Bret Easton Ellis": 1-3. <http://www.altx.com/interviews/bret.easton.ellis.html> (27 Oct. 2000).

ANNESLEY, James. 1998. *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

BAUDRILLARD, Jean. 1988a. *America*. Trans. Ch. Turner. London: Verso.

—. 1988b. "Simulacra and Simulations". In Poster, Mark. (ed.). *Jean Baudrillard:*

Selected Writings. Cambridge: Polity Press: 166-184.

—. 1988c. "Consumer Society". In Poster, Mark. (ed.). *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Polity Press: 29-56.

—. 1988d. "For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign". In Poster, Mark. (ed.). *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Polity Press: 57-97.

BLACK, Joel. 1991. *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and*

Contemporary Culture. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U. P.

DYER, Richard. 1997. "Kill and Kill Again". *Sight and Sound* 7 (September 1997): 14-17.

EDMUNDSON, Mark. 1997. *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sodomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P.

ELLIS, Bret Easton. 1991. *American Psycho*. London: Picador.

ELLIS, John. 1992. "Broadcast TV as Cultural Form" In *Visible Fictions*. London: Routledge: 111-126.

FEATHERSTONE, Mike. 1991a. "The Body in Consumer Culture" In Featherstone, Mike, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner. (eds.). *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage Publications: 170-196.

—. 1991b. *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*. London: Sage Publications.

FISKE, John. 1994. *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Media Change*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

FREESE, Peter. 1990. "Bret Easton Ellis, Less Than Zero: Entropy in the "MTV Novel"?" In Nischik, Reingard M. and Barbara Korte. (eds.). *Modes of Narrative: Approaches to American, Canadian and British Fiction*. Wurzburg: Konigshausen & Neumann: 68-87.

GOPALAN, Nisha. 2000. "American Psycho: The Story Behind the Film". *The Guardian*. March 24):1-3

<http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3977532,00.html>
(27 Oct. 2000).

HARVEY, David. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

KAUFFMAN, Linda S. 1998. *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

LASCH, Christopher. (1979) 1991. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

—. 1984. *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

LEE, Martyn J. 1993. *Consumer Culture Reborn: the Cultural Politics of Consumption*. London and New York: Routledge.

LEHMAN, David. 1987. "Two Divine Decadents". *Newsweek*. (September 7): 72.

MARX, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital (vol. 1)*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

ROSENBLATT, Roger. 1990. "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away with Murder?" *New York Times Book Review*. (December 16): 3, 16.

SELTZER, Mark. 1998. *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. New York: Routledge.

SIMMONS, Philip E. 1997. *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture and History in Postmodern American Fiction*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

STEVICK, Philip. 1981. "Prolegomena to the Study of Fictional Dreck". *Alternative Pleasures: Postrealist Fiction and the Tradition*. Urbana: Illinois U. P.: 122-142.

YOUNG, Elizabeth, and Graham Caveney. 1992. *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*. London: Serpent's Tail.

YOUNG, Elizabeth. 1992a. "Children of Revolution: Fiction Takes to the Streets". In *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*. London: Serpent's Tail: 1-20.

—. 1992b. "The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*". In *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*. London: Serpent's Tail: 85-122.