

## **BRET EASTON ELLIS'S CONTROVERSIAL FICTION: WRITING BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW CULTURE**

Sonia Baelo-Allué

London and New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2011.

(by María del Mar Ramón Torrijos. Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha)

Mariammar.Ramon@uclm.es

---

107

Bret Easton Ellis (Los Angeles, 1964) is considered one of the most controversial writers of his time. Since the publication in 1985 of his first novel, *Less than Zero*, when the author was just 21 years old and still at college, Ellis's fiction has received contradictory critical attention. He was acclaimed by critics as the voice of a generation, but some accused him of playing to the gallery, especially with the publication of *American Psycho*, while some others rejected the status of the novel as a literary text. With seven novels to date, it could be argued that most of the critical attention generated has been concentrated on the most polemic factors of his work, increased by his status as celebrity writer, quite apart from its literary qualities. This interpretation is not shared by Sonia Baelo-Allué, the author of *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction* (2011), who, on the contrary, has decided to explore why Ellis's fiction has simultaneously received both the highest glowing praise and the harshest condemnation. Her subtitle, "Writing Between High and Low Culture", offers a clue to the origin of the controversy. She effectively links title and subtitle and argues that "his use of popular and mass culture genres and references, together with minimalist, blank fiction and metafictional techniques, has led to discomfort on both sides on the cultural spectrum" (6).

The book appears to fill a significant gap on the literary academic market. In fact, Baelo-Allué's contribution to the study of Ellis's fiction is a major one, since,

in addition to offering a thorough analysis of the reception of Ellis's work, she successfully explores even the deepest intricacies of his work, offering a coherent and comprehensive study on Ellis's fiction, bringing to the fore his status as a serious contemporary writer and going beyond his reputation as a sensationalist. As a literary author, Ellis has been included in anthologies dealing with key American authors; a book on *American Psycho* and a collection of academic essays dealing entirely with Ellis's later career have been published; Ramón-Torrijos's Ph.D. dissertation, published in 2003, was on the first part of his literary career and Martín Párraga published a book on his work in 2008. Baelo-Allué's book is the most comprehensive study of Ellis's oeuvre to date, and I am convinced that the academic world will welcome this extremely well constructed and elaborate volume for its high scholarly value and its excellent contribution to the field of cultural studies.

The book starts with an introductory chapter in which Baelo-Allué briefly introduces the author and sets the agenda for the following chapters, and quickly moves on to Part I with the aim of exploring the ambiguous relationship of Ellis's fiction with high and low culture. Baelo-Allué devotes the rest of her book to an exploration of Ellis's relevant novels: *Less than Zero* (1985), *American Psycho* (1991) and *Glamorama* (1988), the last part of the book being devoted to Ellis's later novels *Lunar Park* (2005) and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010). There are also some references to his not-so prominent novels *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) and *The Informers* (1994). Baelo consistently offers a comprehensive textual and contextual analysis of each of Ellis's novels, dividing each part into three chapters: the first chapter deals with the reception of the novel both in mass market newspapers and also in academic journals; the second chapter is devoted to an analysis of Ellis's use of popular and mass culture along with an analysis of the deconstruction of some popular genres that the author incorporates into his fiction, and the third chapter in each part consists of a close-reading of each novel with great attention to the narrative style.

Before making a detailed analysis of his novels, Baelo-Allué offers an interesting section —Part I— entitled “Between the High and the Low” where the author explores Ellis's position within the two interrelated contexts to which Ellis's literary production alludes: the celebrity world and the literature panorama. Departing from the emergence of the celebrity author in the early nineteenth century, Baelo-Allué offers interesting data about how many relevant authors have been interested in developing a relationship with both the market and the advertising industry. Ellis, much like Hemingway and Mailer, has been interested in creating a name in literature, but unlike them, his status as celebrity author has not always benefited him as a writer, since, as Baelo-Allué comments, “the more

of a media star he became, the less they were willing to take his work seriously” (15). The wide range of labels that critics have used to contextualize Ellis’s fiction occupies the second chapter of Part 1. Bearing in mind that the labels used to describe Ellis style have changed in parallel with the evolution of his writing, Baelo-Allué reviews an ample bibliography to discuss the large variety of terms used to describe his style and his place within literary movements. Accordingly, the author offers a balanced, enlightening discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of each term, commenting on labels such as “workshop fiction”, “assembly-line fiction”, “postmodernist fiction”, “minimalist novels”, “downtown writing”, “hybrid fiction” and “Generation X fiction”. Among these terms, the author singles out for clarification three labels in particular that, as she argues, are most appropriate when it comes to categorizing Ellis’s fiction: *Brat Pack*, *Postmodern* and *Blank fiction*.

Part 2 is devoted to *Less than Zero* starting with an examination of the critical reception of the novel. While some critics linked the novel to lowbrow literary culture, due to its dependence on references taken from popular culture—songs, videos, brand names—others underlined its literary features, describing it as an updated *Catcher in the Rye* and connecting Ellis to well-established authors like Didion, Chandler, Capote, Fitzgerald, Hemingway or Carver. Dealing with the structure of the novel, Baelo-Allué introduces the concept of *intermediality* that the author describes as “the convergence of the language of literature and the language of cinema, newspapers, television and other popular culture forms” (49) and which links the novel’s structure and content to the world of MTV. In the last chapter of Part 2, Baelo-Allué analyzes the way in which *Less than Zero*’s controversial subject matter is developed in terms of genre. In this sense, the novel can be considered a deconstruction of a *bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel. I agree with Baelo-Allué that the novel, as representative of blank fiction, allows for multiple interpretations. Considering the end of *Less Than Zero*, which implies a certain process of maturation on the part of the main character, I would say that the novel is not so much a failure as a coming-of-age novel but rather the most conventional of Ellis’s novels in terms of content and narrative plot.

Baelo-Allué starts the section devoted to *American Psycho* considering the circumstances that surrounded the novel’s publication and analyzing the controversy generated even before its publication, with negative prepublication reviews. In order to study its use of popular, mass and consumer culture, Baelo-Allué introduces an interesting discussion about the importance of seriality in popular culture underlining the two intertwined forms of seriality that appear in the novel: the never-ending killings—since Bateman, the main character, is a serial

killer— and Bateman’s serial consumerism of surrounding mass culture. Baelo-Allué also comments on gender issues —the link between sex and violence in the novel is quite evident since Bateman ends up torturing and killing some women he has sex with— and discusses the strong controversy originated by pornographic passages in the novel since some reviewers could not accept that a serious book could use such language and detailed description (108). Taking into account ideas from Lynda Nead and Susan Sontag on the topic, Baelo-Allué embarks on a discussion of whether a work of art may be classified as pornographic or not to conclude “there has been a progressive acceptance on the part of the Academia that pornography may have social aims” (108). For Baelo-Allué, the pornographic passages in *American Psycho* are part of the general commodification that takes place in Bateman’s mind. Of particular interest is the section where Baelo-Allué analyzes some of the conventions of the serial killer formula and the way *American Psycho* departs from them. While the traditional genre offers the reader sources of pleasure, in Ellis’s novel the aesthetic sources of pleasure are diminished to “make readers face the real horror behind the serial-killer phenomenon” (113). As representative of blank fiction, the novel avoids open condemnation and admits different interpretations although Baelo-Allué’s innovative conclusion is that the novel posits violence as critique.

110

By the time of *Glamorama*’s publication, Ellis’s narrative style alongside his public appearances had prompted the confusion between Ellis’s own attitudes in real life and those of his characters, the critics being too much concerned with criticizing Ellis’s lifestyle and his literary celebrity status as to review the novel seriously. Baelo-Allué is clear on this point when she comments that “some reviewers would have done well to keep their eye more exclusively on the novel instead” (140). As Baelo-Allué explains there are two parts in the novel: the first part focuses on the celebrity culture and takes the shape of a novel of manners where we find the world of spectacle described by Debord and the world of Boorstin’s pseudo-events. The second part of the novel belongs to the conspiracy thriller genre, where *Glamorama* plays with its conventions and transforms them in order to obtain new meanings. One of the most interesting aspects in the discussion of this novel is the sharp contrast Baelo-Allué establishes between the first part of *Glamorama*, which may be closer to Debord’s more modernist ideas of spectacle —a world where people could make the distinction between the real and the representation of the real— and the second part which relies on Baudrillard’s more postmodern grasp of the social condition and where we enter the hyperreal, where such a distinction cannot be drawn anymore. According to Baelo-Allué, *Glamorama* is Ellis’s most ambitious novel where reality is constantly manipulated and reinterpreted.

*Lunar Park* was published seven years after *Glamorama* and was both a collection of the various themes that run through Ellis's previous work and also something of a departure from Ellis's literary career. In fact, it reduces the level of violence and sex, and his blank fiction features, while the characters seem to learn from their behavior and there seems to be a chronological plot. Baelo-Allué describes its uses of intermediality and metafictional devices, most of them from Ellis's previous novels, before offering a comprehensive analysis of the novel's high and low sources—references to songs and TV shows, Stephen King and horror films, but also metafictional devices that echo Philip Roth, Shakespeare's Hamlet and Barrie's Peter Pan. In tune with the deconstruction of popular genres that Ellis incorporates in his fiction, the novel has two different sections: the first one is a mock autobiography of Ellis's career and his new life in the suburbs, and the second one is about a haunted house, a possessed toy, his father's ghost and even the return of Bateman to re-enact his killings. With *Imperial Bedrooms*, Ellis comes full circle and returns to the literary style, location, and characters of *Less Than Zero*, this time through the deconstruction of the hard-boiled genre, with the main character becoming detective and villain at the same time. In the novel we revisit the same character 25 years later and there are common motifs recycled from his earlier works—popular culture references, songs lyrics, the same personality traits in characters, narcissism and self-obsession and some graphic passages of sex and violence—but there is also an important difference with respect to his first novel: *Imperial Bedrooms* has a coherent plot whereas *Less than Zero* consisted of a collection of disconnected images. After some concluding remarks Baelo-Allué provides the readers with a clue to Ellis's next work of fiction: "Ellis claimed that he is no longer attracted to darkness" (197).

Using postmodernist discourse as the theoretical frame, Baelo-Allué offers a thorough study of the literary work of one controverted contemporary author, proving that his fiction deserves a in-depth analysis beyond his lifestyle and self-promotion, and his use of provocation. Baelo-Allué describes the evolution of his literary work in both his literary style—from the minimalism of his first novels to the blank writing of *American Psycho* and the metafictional prose of *Glamorama* and *Lunar Park* to return again to his literary origins in *Imperial Bedrooms*—and in the content of his fiction, through narratives which evolve from the juxtaposition of images without a plot to more complex narratives where popular genres are deconstructed. Moreover, Baelo-Allué successfully contributes to contemporary debate on relevant cultural issues such as the blurring of boundaries of high and low culture, the distinction between prestige and mass-market authors or the new ways authors deal with the literary marketplace, all of them being issues which are relevant both to the cultural studies field and to contemporary culture alike.

## Works cited

---

MARTÍN PÁRRAGA, Javier. 2008. *American Provocateur: La literatura de Bret Easton Ellis*. Granada: Grupo Editorial Universitario.

NEAD, Lynda. 1992. *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge.

RAMÓN-TORRIJOS, María del Mar. 2003. *La crisis*

*existencial en la concepción y caracterización de los personajes en la narrativa de Bret Easton Ellis*. Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, <http://www.isbnonline.com/libro/la-crisis-existencial-en-la-concepcion-y-la-car>.

SONTAG, Susan. 1969. "The pornographic imagination". *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Dell: 35-73.

Received: 29 June 2012