Tampere University

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CONSUMED LIVES

The Relationship Between Consumerism and Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I examine the relationship between consumerism and violence in Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*. When *American Psycho* was first released, it was widely criticised for both the vacuousness of its narration and its scenes of extreme violence. It was commonly argued that the novel lacked any real content due to its lengthy descriptions of various consumer products, while some critics claimed that the novel was misogynistic because of its detailed descriptions of violence against women. The purpose of this thesis is to show that there is, in fact, a strong and meaningful connection between the novel's excessive focus on consumer products and its portrayals of violence. The hypothesis presented in this thesis is that through its shallow characters, heavy emphasis on empty consumerism, and graphic violence, the novel satirises the postmodern consumer culture.

The theoretical framework employed in this thesis consists of various studies written on postmodernism and consumer culture, with heavy emphasis on Fredric Jameson's theories on postmodernism and late capitalism as well as Jean Baudrillard's theories on the simulacrum and simulation. As the novel can be seen as an example of postmodern literature, it is also analysed through three key devices of postmodern fiction that play a major role in the way that it constructs its satirical portrayal of consumerism: fragmentation, the erosion between high culture and mass culture, and pastiche.

The analysis of the novel is divided into four parts: The first part focuses on the novel's setting and the way that it represents the postmodern consumer society. In the second part, the emphasis is on the dehumanising effects of consumerism and the way that it is portrayed in the novel's characters. The third part focuses on the novel's criticism of the idea of finding personal identity through consumerism. And finally, in the fourth part, some of the novel's violent scenes are analysed in close detail, with emphasis on the idea that the excessive nature of these scenes can be explained by the findings from the previous chapters.

The key findings of this thesis are that the relationship between violence and consumerism is visible in the novel on two levels: Firstly, it discusses the violence of the capitalist system by showing the dichotomy between the novel's main characters, who are wealthy Wall Street bankers, and the underprivileged people they come across throughout the novel. Secondly, it employs the hyperviolent segments in a satirical way, suggesting that for the novel's main character, violence is a means of coping with the pressures caused by the incessant consumption and his vain efforts of finding a personal identity and keeping up his social status through consumer products.

Keywords: Ellis, postmodernism, consumerism, violence, capitalism, satire

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen kulutuskulttuurin ja väkivallan suhdetta Bret Easton Ellisin teoksessa *Amerikan Psyko*. Julkaisunsa aikaan *Amerikan Psykoa* kritisoitiin laajalti sen tarinallisesta onttoudesta sekä sen yksityiskohtaisista väkivallan kuvauksista. Teoksen väitettiin olevan luonteeltaan sisällötön, ja sitä kritisoitiin ankarasti sen sisältämien pitkien, luettelomaisten massahyödykkeiden kuvausten vuoksi. Toisaalta teoksen väitettiin olevan myös naisvihainen johtuen sen sisältämästä, yksityiskohtaisesta naisiin kohdistuvasta väkivallasta. Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on osoittaa, että teoksessa esiintyvien, luettelomaisten tuotekuvauksien ja sen sisältämän väkivallan välillä on vankka ja tarkoituksenmukainen yhteys. Tutkielman hypoteesi on, että teos satirisoi postmodernia kulutuskulttuuria onttojen hahmojensa, yksityiskohtaisen väkivaltansa sekä kulutuskulttuurin kuvailuun nojautuvan kerrontansa pohjalta.

Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu postmodernismia ja kapitalistista yhteiskuntaa kuvaaviin teorioihin, erityisesti Fredric Jamesonin postmodernismia ja myöhäiskapitalismia kuvaileviin tutkimuksiin sekä Jean Baudrillard'n postmoderneihin simulacrumin ja simulaation teorioihin. Koska Ellisin teos voidaan nähdä osana postmodernistisen kirjallisuuden kenttää, sen esittämää kulutusyhteiskunnan satiiria analysoidaan tutkielmassa myös kolmen postmodernistisen fiktion avainkäsitteen kautta. Nämä käsitteet ovat fragmentaarisuus, korkeakulttuurin ja massakulttuurin välinen eroosio sekä pastissi.

Teoksen analyysi on jaettu tutkielmassa neljään lukuun: Ensimmäisessä luvussa tarkastellaan teoksen tapahtumapaikkaa sekä sitä, miten se ilmentää postmodernia kulutusyhteiskuntaa yleisellä tasolla. Toisessa luvussa painopiste on kulutuskulttuurin ihmisarvoa vähentävällä vaikutuksella sekä sillä, miten tämä ilmenee teoksen hahmojen tasolla. Kolmannessa luvussa tarkastellaan sitä, kuinka teos kritisoi käsitystä henkilökohtaisen identiteetin löytämisestä kulutushyödykkeiden kautta. Neljännessä luvussa puolestaan analysoidaan tarkemmin tiettyjä teoksessa esiintyviä väkivaltaisia kohtauksia ja tuodaan esiin, kuinka niiden ylenpalttinen luonne voidaan selittää aiempien lukujen tutkimustulosten perusteella.

Tutkielmassa selviää, että väkivallan ja kulutuskulttuurin suhde näyttäytyy teoksessa kahdella tasolla: Ensinnäkin, se käsittelee kapitalistisen järjestelmän väkivaltaa tuomalla esille ristiriidan teoksen päähenkilöiden, varakkaiden Wall Streetin pankkiirien, sekä heidän kohtaamiensa vähäosaisten ihmisten välillä. Toisekseen teos hyödyntää ääriväkivaltaista kuvastoa satiirisessa tarkoituksessa. Se tuo ilmi, kuinka teoksen päähenkilölle väkivalta toimii selviytymiskeinona tämän kamppaillessa jatkuvan kuluttajuuden aiheuttamien paineiden kanssa pyrkien samalla löytämään henkilökohtaisen identiteetin ja säilyttämään sosiaalisen asemansa kulutushyödykkeiden kautta.

Avainsanat: Ellis, postmodernismi, konsumerismi, väkivalta, kapitalismi, satiiri

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1 Introduction

In this thesis, my aim is to point out how the extreme violence and the satirisation of the 1980s consumer culture are closely connected in Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991), with the violent scenes and their several gory details essentially having a very similar role in the novel as the prolonged descriptions of different consumer goods. I will show that there is a connection between studies done on postmodern consumer societies – for instance how capitalism, mass culture and mass consumerism affect both our sense of identity and individualism and the way we regard other people – and the themes addressed in *American Psycho*. My argument is that the characters created by Ellis, especially the novel's main character who turns to outlandishly violent actions in order to escape the numbness and the confusion created by the postmodern consumer society, are exaggerated, satirical embodiments of the developments addressed by various postmodern theorists; through them, Ellis is addressing both the individual and the societal effects of the late capitalist society and the all-pervading mass culture related to it. In addition, I will argue that the violent scenes are excessively gory for a reason, because excess, in many ways, is something that is emblematic to consumer culture and thus plays a vital role in the novel's critical and satirical outlook on consumerism.

When Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* was released in 1991, it was immediately met with media furore and widespread criticism. In fact, the backlash against the novel began even before it was officially released, as extremely violent excerpts appearing in *Spy* and *Time* magazines resulted in the publishing house Simon and Schuster withdrawing from releasing the novel (Young 1992, 85). Most critics dismissed the novel as pure trash and glorification of violence, and particularly vehement in his response to the novel was The New York Times' critic Roger Rosenblatt who, in the headline of his review of the novel, asked "Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?" (Rosenblatt 1990). Few other contemporary critics had a less harsh response towards the novel, with Brad Miner calling it "pornography, not literature" (Miner 1990, 43).

However, not all contemporary critics reacted as negatively towards the novel. In *The Guardian,* Fay Weldon reviewed the novel favourably, calling it "a beautifully controlled, careful, important novel which revolves about its own nasty bits" (Weldon 1991), but such positive reviews were in the minority. However, nowadays the opinions towards *American Psycho* are generally much more favourable than during the time of its release. For instance, Sam Jordison, in his retrospective article on the novel in *The Guardian,* states that it "has become an established feature of the literary landscape and is generally acknowledged as a modern classic" (Jordison 2010). Still, it is fair to say that the novel's satirical take on the modern consumer society did not, at the time of its release, receive the critical attention that it would have deserved and was overshadowed by its controversial aspects.

While it is true that *American Psycho* contains multiple scenes that the readers may find disturbing, it was ultimately not, even in the year of its release, unique in its portrayal of graphic violence and controversial subject matter. Many other novels released in close approximation to *American Psycho* never caused a similar, frenzied reaction that Ellis's novel was met with. Elizabeth Young (1992, 90) uses Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991) – a novel about a homosexual murderer containing highly graphic depictions of sexual abuse and violence – as one example of such novels. I would add Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* (1991), a darkly humorous and often very explicitly violent novel about a female serial killer, to the list. Both of the aforementioned novels share many thematic similarities with Ellis's novel, yet neither of them caught the media's attention in the same way that *American Psycho* did. While the critical reaction towards Zahavi's novel especially was quite harsh, it also had its fair share of defenders. Most notable of them might be Naomi Wolf, who in her article *The Animal Speaks* compares the novel to *American Psycho*, stating that

> Neither obscenity–sexual explicitness–nor violence are the real problems with Ellis's book. No matter how much better written *American Psycho* might be than it is, it would still be, in terms of its use of sexual violence, a pornographic piece of writing. No matter how flawed *Dirty Weekend* might be in literary terms […], it would still be a milestone. (Wolf, 1991)

One reason for the wide attention *American Psycho* received after its release, as Young (1992, 92) states, was that Ellis was already a recognised writer whose earlier works, especially his first novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985), had already received some critical acclaim. Cooper and Zahavi were writers who had not reached a mainstream audience – in fact, *Dirty Weekend* was Zahavi's first novel – and were almost certainly doomed to remain somewhat in the underground due to their decidedly transgressional thematic and subject matter: In *Frisk,* Cooper explores the issues of homosexuality, sado-masochistic desire and death, and Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend,* which could be labelled as a feminist revenge narrative, tells the story of a young female serial killer who targets men who have sexually assaulted women.

With *American Psycho* the situation was somewhat different. In fact, Young suggests that much of the furore that surrounded Ellis's novel was not caused by its violent content alone. In her view, it was rather the combination of the novel's political subject matter – the criticism of empty materialism and the drive towards success and wealth that was emblematic of the 1980s – and its highly graphic violence that fuelled the critical backlash. (Young 1992, 89.) After all, the novel was released in the early 1990s, a time when the frantic drive towards wealth and success of the 1980s had started to die down and the recession had reared its head. While the early nineties recession was relatively brief, lasting for only eight months, it did end the second-longest period of economic growth in the United States and had a relatively major hit on, for instance, the unemployment rate in the US (Berman 2009, 703–704). Thus, as Young (1992, 90) points out, it "would have proved destabilizing" for the readers and reviewers of *American Psycho* to able to fully recognise and take into account the novel's scathing satire of the era that had only recently passed. It was then easy to dismiss the content that makes up large parts of the novel – the detailed depictions of shallow consumerism and materialist lifestyles – as empty and meaningless, which would have the effect of making the ultra-violence in the novel seem even more repulsive.

The reason I discuss the controversies surrounding *American Psycho* is because they not only generally overshadowed all of the other content in the novel, but also made it clear that the violent scenes *themselves* were widely misread. In addition to being read almost as an autobiographical expression of Ellis's personal sadistic lusts (Annesley 1998, 12), the significance of the completely farcical and over-the-top style of the novel – evident in both the gory scenes and the seemingly endless listings of consumer products – was lost on most critics and readers at the time of the novel's release. This can be seen, for instance, in Rosenblatt's and Wolf's reviews of the novel; the two fiercely criticise the novel, claiming that it lacks any real theme, purpose or substance, and instead replaces them with the endlessly detailed listings of various luxury products. As Mandel (2010, 19) points out when discussing the graphic violence and social critique in *American Psycho*, the excessiveness of its violence and the elusive way in which it constructs its criticism of the consumer culture were a major reason for the controversy the novel sparked. While it must be said that *American Psycho* has been more widely appreciated over the years and has been considered somewhat of a classic in the field of late postmodern literature, there is still an aura of contempt that haunts it, and I believe that it deserves more critical attention due to its still-relevant themes and the fact that it has been an influential novel in many regards and, as Mandel (2010, 12) notes, has had a significant impact on contemporary culture.

2 Theories on Postmodernism, Late Capitalism and Consumerism

In this chapter, I introduce the theoretical framework which I utilise in my analysis of Ellis's novel. Considering the themes of the novel – including the de-individualising and de-sensitising effects of materialism – and the way it comments on the late capitalist society in general, I have decided to examine the novel through postmodern theory, employing in my analysis sociological studies that discuss the postmodern consumer culture from various perspectives. I also apply theories of post-modern art and cultural theory in my analysis of the novel in order to account for the postmodern literary techniques employed in it.

In the first section I focus on defining the term postmodernism in relation to another similar concept (one which some might call its predecessor), modernism. My attempt is to clarify the different uses of these terms as both literary and sociological concepts. This section is further divided into three subchapters in which I introduce some key definitions and ideas related to postmodernism. I explain how the concept of postmodernism is related to Ellis's works, focusing specifically on the features that are most prevalently found in Ellis' novels, namely fragmentation, the erosion between high culture and mass culture, and pastiche. The aim of these subchapters is to familiarise the reader with these concepts and terms and explain how they are relevant for my analysis of *American Psycho*.

In the following section, I focus on the historical background and the development of the post-modern consumer society. I argue that these developments help understand some of the key aspects of how the capitalist society and consumerism is portrayed in *American Psycho*. I examine the history of the American postmodern consumer society on a general level, focusing mainly on the develop-ments that took place roughly from the 1940's to the 1980's, which can be seen as point of culmina-tion for the late-capitalist period which is the one that Ellis's novel is set in. I then move on to examine in some detail how these developments affected the American cultural and literary sphere.

In the third section, I move on to examine the consumer society through some key postmodern sociological and philosophical theories. First, I briefly introduce the reader to Guy Debord's theory of the society of spectacle, which can be seen as a precursor to later postmodern theories. I then move on to discuss Jean Baudrillard's theories on simulacra, simulation and the hyperreal, as I find that Baudrillard's views on the media-saturated, image-filled postmodern society are reflected in the themes of *American Psycho* and thus prove useful for my analysis of the novel.

Finally, I move on to discuss the politics and ethics of consumption and the issues of individuality, personal identity and power relations in the postmodern age, focusing heavily on sociologists Mike Featherstone's and Roberta Sassatelli's discussions about the postmodern consumer society and consumer culture.

2.1 Modernism Versus Postmodernism

Despite its fashionability during the late twentieth century, and even today, postmodernism remains a term that has the reputation of being a notoriously hard-to-define concept (Featherstone 2007/1991, 30). Bennett and Royle (1999/1995, 231) outright state the paradoxical nature of the term ("after the contemporary") means that "the postmodern resists definition." McHale (2001/1987, 3) follows on the same lines, stating that the term is inherently problematic by its very nature and pointing out its temporally paradoxical nature: if we are to understand the term modern as something referring to the present, then *post*modern should, logically, mean something anteceding the present, something that does not yet exist. Furthermore, Hutcheon (1988, 3) argues that postmodernism, of all the various terms discussed and debated in the fields of cultural theory and arts, "must be the most over- and under-defined."

It could be argued that the reputation of postmodernism as an elusive term also stems from the fact that it can be applied to multiple fields and discourses, making it hard to pinpoint any simple definition for it. In fact, Featherstone (2007, 2) lists music, art, fiction, film, drama, architecture, literary theory and criticism, philosophy, anthropology, sociology and geography as some of the fields that the term can be applied to. Similarly, when listing what he calls different constructions of postmodernism, McHale (2001, 4) mentions that "there is John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on."

Morawski (2006/1996, 5) also states that the ambiguity of the term "postmodernism" is in great part caused by the wide variety of fields to which it can be applied and the different nature of the term within these different fields. He does, however, provide a somewhat more controlled scope for postmodernism by dividing it into three different varieties: social-cultural, artistic and philosophical (Morawski 2006, 1). I find this division particularly useful for my purposes, as *American Psycho* is very much a postmodern book in the first two senses: it is postmodern both in *style* and *content,* as it employs many of the techniques associated with postmodern literature and also acts as a commentary on the postmodern consumer society itself. Thus, in my thesis, I will mainly focus on the sociocultural and literary elements of postmodernism. It is also worth noting that usually there is a distinction made between the terms "postmodernity" and "postmodernism" (or "postmodernist") in that the former usually refers more specifically to a specific stage of society while the latter one more often refers to the cultural sphere such as literary, philosophy and arts (Hassan 2001, 3), and from here on, I will use the two terms accordingly.

It should also be noted that the definition of the term "postmodernism" is further complicated by the fact that it is quite often compared to or viewed as a successor to modernism, as Morawski

(2006, 1–2) points out. Modernism itself, it could be argued, is a concept that is nearly as contradictory as postmodernism and, as there is some notable overlap between the two terms, making a clear distinction between them is not always an easy task. As with postmodernism, there exist various schools of thought on which artistic eras and forms modernism actually covers. Morawski (2006, 2–3) argues that this ambiguity and lack of consensus in the definitions of modernism has carried over to the discussions on postmodernism and, to further complicate matters, there is also disagreement on the time period during which the shift from modernism to postmodernism takes place. In fact, Hassan (1982, 259) goes as far as to question whether modernism and postmodernism are, indeed, two different phenomena that need to be distinguished from one another.

There are, however, certain features that are commonly associated with modernist texts, and according to Featherstone these include:

> [A]n aesthetic self-consciousness and reflexiveness; a rejection of narrative structure in favour of simultaneity and montage; an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous and uncertain open-ended nature of reality; and a rejection of the notion of an integrated personality in favour of an emphasis upon the de-structured, de-humanized subject. (Featherstone 2007, 7.)

Indeed, many of these aspects, such as the rejection of narrative structure, ambiguity and the de-humanised subject, are commonly associated with postmodernism as well. However, there are also some features that are often viewed as distinctly related to postmodernism, which, according to Featherston, include such aspects as:

> [T]he effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchal distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface 'depthlessness' of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer; and the assumption that art can only be repetition (Featherstone 2007, 7.)

Featherstone (2007, 3, 7) argues that postmodernism can in some sense be seen as an attempt to break away from the dominant features of modernism and views it more as a negation of modernism rather than something which simply comes after the modern. When comparing modernism to postmodernism, he states that understanding postmodernism in the field of arts is problematic partly because it is

difficult to pinpoint when the term "postmodernism" starts to signify something substantially different than the term "modernism" that it is so closely related to. McHale also argues that the prefix *post* in postmodernism does not signify a temporality as such but rather indicates that postmodernism is something that follows the modernist *movement*. In his view, postmodernism should be viewed as a consequence of modernism rather than a chronological continuation of its time period. As such, postmodernism can be seen as a successor of, or a counter-reaction to, the prevailing features of modernism. (McHale 2001, 5.)

I find that the fundamental difference between modernism and postmodernism is perhaps best illustrated by Jameson, who also states that the features usually associated with postmodernism are not new as such but something that already characterised modernism before it. However, Jameson also suggests that the primary distinction between modernism and postmodernism is that the features that were dominant during the modernist era have become secondary with postmodernism, and the features that were secondary with modernism have become dominant with postmodernism. Thus, the major difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the features that were considered of minor importance by the modernists have become the central features of cultural production in the postmodern age. (Jameson 2009/1998, 18–19.)

McHale (2001, 6) shares a similar view when discussing what he calls the *dominants* of different literary-historical periods, quoting Roman Jakobson's description of the dominant. In Jakobson's view (1987, 41), the dominant, a concept central to the Russian formalist theory, is the central component in a work of art which defines its integral structure and "specifies the work". Thus, it is the dominant, the central defining feature of a work, which allows us to make a distinction between different genres, periods and styles of written art. As an example of this, Jakobson (1987, 41–42) mentions the different defining features of verse during various periods of Czech poetry, defining verse as a "system of values [which] possesses its own hierarchy of superior and inferior values and one

leading value, the dominant" (Jakobson 1987, 42). Thus, while in the fourteenth-century Czech poetry, rhyme constituted as the mandatory constituent without which verse could not be regarded as verse, during the second half of the nineteenth century it was replaced by syllabic scheme. Similarly, with free verse neither rhyme nor syllabic scheme were seen as a mandatory element of the verse, but intonation had rather become its dominant. Jakobson emphasises that while the verses from all three periods contain the same three elements – rhyme, a syllabic scheme and intonational unity – their hierarchical status varies from period to period, which defines the role and the structure of the other components in the work. (Jakobson 1987, 42.)

According to McHale, the dominant helps in finding a historical change that could best explain the systematic, underlying opposition between modernism and postmodernism. He points out that while there are certain features that are commonly associated with postmodernism and used to separate postmodernism from its modernist counterpart, these individual features tell us little about how the literary system as a whole shifted from the modernist mode to the postmodernist mode. In other words, the individual features do not satisfactorily account for the historical aspects that underlie the change from one mode to another, and this, McHale argues, is where the dominant comes in. According to him, it is specifically the dominant – the shift in the relationship and hierarchy between these individual components – that best helps explain the evolution from modernism to postmodernism. He further states that the central change has been the shift from modernism's *epistemological* dominant – such as the questions about our role in this world and how we are to interpret it, and the uncertainty of this knowledge – to postmodernism's *ontological* dominant, where the focus has shifted to questions about the world – both the real world and its literary interpretations – and reality itself. The dominant, then, dictates the hierarchy between these elements, meaning that the ontological implications of postmodernist texts are brought to the foreground instead of the less crucial epistemological implications. (McHale 2001, 7–11.)

2.1.1 Fragmentation

To illustrate these changes, I will use as an example a feature that is common to both modernism and postmodernism, *fragmentation.* While Bennett and Royle (1999, 234) state that fragmentation is a characteristic feature of postmodernism, they do add that it is not unique to postmodernism but something that the modernist authors often employed in their works as well. As an example, they mention T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), a poem which centres around the idea of fragmentation in both its form and content. However, they also point out that the fragmentary nature of postmodern texts gives rise to a heavier emphasis on literary techniques such as intertextuality, parody and pastiche. This suggests that originality, which was previously seen as something to be pursued, is no longer an important criterion of postmodern texts but rather an "ideological fetish" (Bennett and Royle 1999, 234). Furthermore, the notion of fragmentation differs significantly between the modern and the postmodern: while the modernists were more concerned with a loss of unity and meaning in life, the postmodernists see fragmentation and the uncertainty it entails as an essential part of our very existence (Bennett and Royle 1999, 234).

Hutcheon argues that the modernists' paradoxical lamentation after an aesthetic or moral stability is something that the postmodernists also seek to contest; they challenge any search for a coherent, homogenous identity or unity through art that would be characteristic to such humanistic, modernist authors as Eliot or Joyce. Instead, the postmodernists view life and art as inseparable domains and reject the idea of any kind of universal master narrative that the liberal humanists were seeking after. Thus, by contesting the limits and function of art, the postmodernists have also challenged the previously dominant Western liberal-humanist values. (Hutcheon 1988, 6–8.) In other words, whereas the modernists were seeking some kind of coherent and unified "truth" through their art – manifested in their use of fragmentation among other things – the postmodernists celebrate the fragmentary nature of life itself and display this in their art.

As Jameson (1992/1991, 5) points out, modernism and postmodernism, despite their apparent similarities, are also two very different concepts in regards to their social function, "owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capital and, beyond that, to the transformation of the very sphere of culture in contemporary society" (Jameson 1992, 5.) Jameson argues that for the modernists, the driving force behind their fiction was both a lamentation and celebration of the old political structures and forms of both cultural and industrial productions which were already being displaced by the social order of late capitalism, and a utopian vision of a more humanistic future and human experience. According to him, neither the lamentation for the archaic forms of production nor the utopian vision of the future were no longer relevant for the postmodernists, as they were already living in the middle of a new kind of reality presented by the late capitalist forms of production. For the postmodernists, the sense of a definite past with its multitude forms of production has been blurred and swept away, replaced by the more homogenous model of the global markets, mass production and commercialism. (Jameson 1992, 307–310.) Thus it could be argued that if the modernists used fragmentation as a means of portraying the uncertainty caused by the changing world around them, for the postmodernists fragmentation is something that is present in every facet of their daily lives and in the almost infinite amount of choices available to them as producers and consumers in the media-saturated late capitalist system. This very same consumer society-related fragmentation is central to the topics addressed in *American Psycho*, and thus I wanted to discuss it in detail as I find it to be quite relevant to my study question.

2.1.2 Erosion Between High Culture and Mass Culture

The shift in the mode of production brings us to another major feature of postmodernism, the erosion of the distinction between high culture and mass culture (Jameson 2009, 2), which is often present in Ellis' works. Again, one could say that this an aspect that could be found in many modernist works as well but, as Morawski points out, the modernists were drawn to the mass culture in order to purge

the literary scene of its academicism and to allow the public to see the world from a completely fresh perspective. According to him, however, the postmodernists are not concerned with creating new and distinct forms of arts through the adoption of mass culture, but rather with assimilating the two and celebrating the "wear and tear of art". (Morawski 2006, 6.) Hutcheon (1988, 9–10) adds that the boundaries are not only crossed between art and mass culture but between different genres and styles as well. Indeed, if we consider *American Psycho* from this point of view, one could argue that the novel blurs the line between the discourses of literature and commercials with the main character's lengthy descriptions of various consumer products. As Jameson (2009, 2) mentions, the major difference between modernist and postmodernist art in this regard is that, instead of merely quoting the mass culture texts, the postmodernist texts include them as integral part of the narration, blurring the line between high art and commercialism. Morawski (2006, 6) continues along the same lines, pointing out that "In the postmodern perspective […] mass culture does not fertilize elitist culture but brings the latter down to its own level".

What this means, then, is that in the postmodern arts, the elements of mass culture become an essential and natural part of the works rather than presenting a unique way of viewing the world per se. For instance, in Ellis's novels, the literary worlds that the characters inhabit are completely saturated with commercialism, mass culture and consumerism, and this is all presented as an inseparable part of the young characters' lives. It is something that is completely natural to them, as the postmodern society in itself is a complicated amalgamation of mass culture and so-called high-culture; not only do pieces of art draw influences from mass culture and commercial products, but the pieces of art themselves, and even the artists, are used for commercial purposes and become commodified.

Jameson (1992, 11) uses Andy Warhol's famous paintings of Marilyn Monroe as an example of this. While, as a major pop culture icon and sex symbol, Monroe was arguably already highly objectified during her career, it could be said that it was Warhol's paintings that solidified her status as a commodity; to a large extent, her legacy was carried on via this iconic painting, copies and prints

of which are still being sold in high numbers all over the world. Of course, the painting itself is in many ways a good example of the erosion between high and low culture; while it serves as an example of art commodifying its subject, the work can also be seen as a reference – or even an homage – to the mass production of objects through the repetition of Monroe's face in the multiple variations of the painting. This complex interplay between mass culture and high culture, then, is one of the features that distinguishes postmodern art from its modernist counterpart.

2.1.3 Pastiche

The third element I want to discuss is pastiche, which is also often viewed as one of the key features of postmodern art and which Jameson (1992, 16) links closely with the idea of the disappearance of the individual subject, another element often associated with postmodernism. According to Jameson, it is vitally important to distinguish pastiche from parody, a stylistic device found in many modernist artists' works. Whereas parody requires a certain idiosyncratic style which to imitate, in the postmodern era the various distinct literary styles have been are accompanied by the fragmentation of language in the social sphere, leading to a wide array of social codes which themselves have developed into specialised discourses of various professions and disciplinaries. (Jameson 1992, 16–17.) In other words, there is a distinct lack of a norm which to draw the parody from due to the fragmentary nature of the postmodern era itself.

Hutcheon, however, argues that parody is a crucial element of the intertextual relations in most postmodern texts. She points out how the modernists such as Eliot use parody and fragmentation in order to evoke a kind of longing for a more unified and coherent past. According to her, this is something that the postmodernists contest, instead evoking a sense of discontinuity and difference through the use of the parodic elements. Furthermore, she mentions that parody, at its heart, could be seen as an ideal example of a postmodern form due to the way that the parodied elements can simultaneously be incorporated within the texts themselves and the way that it challenges the idea of originality.

(Hutcheon 1988, 11.) It is worth noting that Hutcheon's description of the postmodern parody seems to echo Jameson's sentiments about the dichotomy between modern and postmodern condition to a degree; in the modern texts, the past reference from which the parody is drawn from is usually much clearer than in postmodern works where, due to the fragmentation of the whole social and cultural sphere in the postmodern era, such clear reference points are more elusive. What this means, then, is that the postmodernists seem to draw the parody from a much wider range of references,

Indeed, Jameson (1992, 16–17) seems to agree with Hutcheon's view to some degree, as he sees pastiche as similar to parody in the sense that it is also an imitation of a certain idiosyncratic style, but he argues that it does the imitation without parody's satirical elements or the intention of making the reader laugh, and he thus describes pastiche as "blank parody" (Jameson 1992, 17). One can sense in Jameson's text a certain lamentation for modernism's unique style that has been replaced by what he refers to as postmodernism's "stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" (Jameson 1992, 17). Hutcheon (1988, 11) disagrees with Jameson's view and states that instead of trapping the artists in the past through pastiche, this loss of unique style has rather been seen by postmodernists as liberating development, allowing the ideas of artistic creativity and subjectivity to be challenged in more profound ways. According to Hutcheon (1988, 11–12), this heterogeneity manifests itself in the multitude of perspectives of different classes, races, genders sexual orientations and ethnicities versus a "unified and coherent subject" (Hutcheon 1988, 12), which challenges the implied notion of a homogenous, middle-class, male, heterosexual, white and western culture. To quote her, "Certainly women and Afro-American artists' use of parody to challenge the male white tradition from within, to use irony to implicate and yet to critique, is distinctly paradoxical and postmodernist." (Hutcheon 1988, 16.)

I'm inclined to agree with Hutcheon's views, and to some degree disagree with Jameson's idea that pastiche would be completely devoid of any satirical elements. What I argue is that many postmodern works, be it literature, films or pieces of art, specifically create satire through the use of both

parody and pastiche (in the sense that Jameson defines the term). Consider, for instance, such film as Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012), a satirical take on American consumerism and popular culture. The film opens with a montage of teenagers celebrating their spring break in various rowdy ways. The scene, accompanied by the pounding electronic rhythms of a highly popular dance artist Skrillex, is shot in such a way to meticulously resemble the style of modern music videos. However, at this point in the film there are no specific reference points which would imply that there is anything parodic in the scene, and one could argue that here we have Korine not only commenting on modern popular culture but also embracing its stylistic devices. In other words, the opening scene could be seen as a *pastiche* of a modern music video.

However, as the film progresses it becomes clear that it also satirises the excessive nature of the modern American consumer culture through the use of parodic elements. One such instance would be a montage – again shot in the style of a music video – depicting teenagers in pink ski masks performing armed robberies while Britney Spears's *Everytime*, one of her early teen pop ballads, is playing in the background. The scene is made to imitate an MTV-style music video to an almost perfect degree, and I would argue that here Korine is parodying the genre of the music video, drawing the humour from such a saccharine pop ballad playing over the gruesomely violent imagery – a complete opposite of what one would expect as a music video for such an innocently sweet pop song. However, in the grand scheme of things, the scene is a continuation of the film's satirical take on the American dream and the media-saturated consumer culture of the late capitalist America.

Another example would be Gregg Araki's film *Nowhere* (1997) that quite directly and broadly borrows elements, and even pieces of dialogue, from Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Less Than Zero,* and then twists and bends these elements in such an over-the-top-way that the end result is much more humorous than Ellis' original novel. There is no clear indication, however, that the film is a parody of Ellis' novel but rather an homage of a kind, and I would argue that part of the humour in the film comes from the viewer noticing these similarities to Ellis's novel and the way that they have been

twisted around. Similarly, in *American Psycho*, Ellis uses pastiche as a satirical device in the way that he incorporates the discourse of commercials in his narrative; in multiple scenes, the characters speak in what could be best described as an advertisement jargon, listing the details and features of the various consumer products they own in very explicit detail. These segments are not parodic in and of themselves, but the humour comes from the reader recognising the element of pastiche – the language of commercials – in these scenes and further contrasting them with the extreme violence portrayed in the novel, described in similarly explicit detail.

My argument, then, is that pastiche, while being "blank parody" in and of itself, can be used as a satirical device in some contexts. In my view this is precisely what Ellis does in *American Psycho*; for instance, the lengthy ad-talk-filled descriptions of various consumer products throughout the novel serve as a pastiches of advertisements – when viewed in isolation, they are indeed a form of humour-less parody – but they also work as a means of satire, emphasising the all-enveloping scope of the consumer society and its effects on people.

2.2 Consumer Society from Early to Late Twentieth Century

In order to fully make sense of the satirical aspects of *American Psycho*, I believe it is important to take into consideration the developments that took place in the American economic sphere during the twentieth century. I will be especially focusing on the era of the post-WWII capitalism, as it could be argued that this is the period that gave way to the eighties consumer society that Ellis' novel revolves around.

According to Jameson (2009, 3), the roots of the postmodern American consumer society can be dated back to the late 1940s and early 1950s post-war expansion in American economy. During this period, the United States and the other western advanced capitalist countries experienced a rapid and sustained economic growth (Glyn et al. 1991/1990, 39–40). At this point, as Fox and Lears point

out, consumerism had become the "status quo" of American lifestyle and "the American way of life equated with the 'American standard of living'". (Fox and Lears 1983, ix.) It is worth noting that, while the roots of consumer culture can be dated back to a much earlier period in time – Fox and Lears (1983, ix.) refer as far back as the beginning of the nineteenth century, while some sources see the first signs of commercialisation of products taking shape in the West as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century (Sassatelli 2007, 5) – there was a crucial shift in the power relations of the elite and the masses in the twentieth century; according to Fox and Lears (1983, xii.), "While nineteenth-century elites ruled through ethical precepts that they encouraged people to internalize, twentieth-century elites rule through subtler promises of personal fulfilment." Thus, the strict bourgeois moral codes of the nineteenth century, emphasising rationality, hard work and saving, transformed into a more liberal mode of thought during the twentieth century, where consumption, leisure and personal fulfilment were encouraged (Lears 1983, 3). Thus, around the turn of the century, the culture shifted from production-orientation to consumption orientation, "dominated by bureaucratic corporations" (Lears 1983, 3).

Indeed, Roberta Sassatelli traces the beginnings of the contemporary consumer culture to such things as the growing number of department stores, the emphasis on increasingly sophisticated modes of advertising and the spread of mass production from the late nineteenth century to the post-World War II era. She emphasises the change in the way that people consume goods brought on by the birth of the department stores in the United States and France. She states that they not only brought a vast number of commodities visible to a much larger part of the population, but also helped to create a strong link between personal identity and consumption. A new kind of leisure activity, shopping, was born during this time and, according to Sassatelli, this change in the nature and spaces of consumption, together with the significant developments in advertising and marketing, gave rise to a new kind of social actor, a consumer. (Sassatelli 2007, 43–45.)

Fox (1983, 103) places weight on the 1920s and the 1930s as critical decades in the development of the American consumer society – stating that things such as the motion picture, the radio, the automobile and the five-day work week took central place in the American way of living. Jameson, on the other hand, views the post-World War II period as a "radical break" from the modernist, pre-war society. He highlights the ever-increasing consumerisation and mass culturalisation of the Western world, with various media products and outlets taking a central role in the lives of the so-called baby boomers. (Jameson 2009, 3.) In fact, Jameson describes postmodernism itself as "a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order" (Jameson 2009, 3). In other words, he is saying that postmodernism is, in his view, tied to the time period where the third big stage of capitalism, or what he calls "late capitalism" (Jameson 2009, 3) can be seen to emerge. Continuing along the same lines, Featherstone states that the shift from modernism to postmodernism meant the upheaval of the previously dominant social order, with new modes of production, technology and information marking the shift towards a post-industrial society (Featherstone 2007, 3). Featherstone then refers to Baudrillard's idea of a transformed social order "in which simulations and models increasingly constitute the world so that the distinction between the real and appearance becomes erased" (Featherstone 2007, 3).

Similarly to Jameson and Featherstone, Daniel Grassian also sees postmodernism arising from the globalisation of the world market and the post-World War II capitalism. He places weight on the psychological and social effects stemming from the rise of the consumer society and points out that in the mid to late eighties there were changes in American capitalism that affected the individuals in such a way that they became subjects of a large-scale cultural domination, and their identities were largely defined by the popular consumerist culture of the time. (Grassian 2003, 12.) In fact, one could argue that this period of late capitalism in the United States can be seen to have culminated in the 1980s, as Nealon (2012, 16) also claims that there were certain aspects in the politics and economy

of the 1980s that make the period distinct from the 1960s. He argues that "if in the US 'the '60s' functions politically as a kind of shorthand for resistance and revolution of all kinds, 'the '80s' most immediately signifies the increasing power and ubiquity of markets and privatized corporatization in everyday life" (Nealon 2012, 16).

In many ways, however, the 1980s was a very divisive decade in the American history. As Troy and Cannato state:

> [S]ome see the 1980s as a Golden Age, a "Morning in America" when President Ronald Reagan, American conservatives, and baby boomer entrepreneurs revived America's economy, reoriented American politics, reformed American society, and restored Americans' faith in their country and in themselves. Others see the 1980s as a new "Gilded Age," an era that was selfish, superficial, divisive, and destructive. (Troy And Cannato 2009, 3.)

As pointed out by Troy and Cannato above, the 1980s is well remembered for Ronald Reagan's presidency and his Program for Economic Recovery. When Reagan was inaugurated in early 1981, the United States was experiencing significant problems in numerous areas of public policy, especially on the economic front, and these crises had become more serious during the latter years of the 1970s. (Meese III 2009, 23.) Reagan's solution for revitalising the economy was to introduce several tax cuts with the intention of creating more incentives for working and thus increasing the purchasing power of both individual citizens and businesses. The significantly lower inflation meant that people could avoid being pushed into the highest tax brackets, thus relying less on tax shelters and more on investing their capital, which helped the businesses to increase their productivity. (Meese III 2009, 26–27.) Meese III (2009, 31) also points out that Reagan was also able to bring some optimism to the lives of American citizens who, due to the bleak years that had followed the post-World War II economic boom, had lost their faith in their country. He states that Regan's effort to boost the people's faith in the country and its institutions through his frequent encouraging, televised speeches "was an important part of the national recovery during the 1980s" (Meese III 2009, 31).

However, there were also those who saw this period in a bleaker light, emphasising the growth in materialism, inequality, and disregard for the underprivileged people as well as the regression in

the rights of minorities and women that took place during this era (Cannato 2009, 71). For instance, the tax cuts that Reagan introduced meant that funding for many federal programs, such as health services, was also reduced. Reagan's economic policies – centred on the tax cuts and the emphasised role of the free market – also greatly affected the distribution of wealth in the United States, so that the 1980s' economic growth was characterised by an increasing gap between the poor and the wealthy. (Phillips-Fein 2009, 125, 127). The idea behind the economic policies was, in simple terms, to give the wealthy segments of the population more incentives to invest their capital, which in turn would lead to the recovery of the economy. However, the flip side to these policies was that things such as welfare services were seen as unnecessary spending, and the Reaganists believed that giving such options to the poorer population would only encourage them to work less. (Phillips-Fein 2009, 132–133.) All in all, the economic growth achieved by Reagan's business-prioritising policies came at the cost of increased inequality and the shrinking of the welfare state (Phillips-Fein 2009, 135).

Of course, the 1980's was also the period of the so-called Generation X, or GenX, a term commonly associated with Ellis's fiction. As Mandel explains, Generation X refers to those people who lived their adult life in the 1980's "in a world marked by the ascendency of the New Right which reached its peak with the election of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency in 1980" (Mandel 2010, 4). According to Mandel, there are two major things that define the GenXers: Firstly, she emphasises the role of mass culture and advertisements in the GenXers' lives. She explains that the GenXers did not see themselves as mere passive spectators but interacted with images, the main language of postmodern culture, in more complex ways. They would dissect and deconstruct the language and structure of the images, particularly of advertisements, instead of seeing them as purely "transparent vehicles for meaning". (Mandel 2010, 4.) The second main characteristic of the GenXers, according to Mandel (2010, 4–5), is their apathy and ignorance in regard to any sort of ideological engagement or political causes, instead replaced by their unfaltering commitment to consumerism and mass culture.

Mandel (2010, 5) also associates the blank style and views found in the literature of the Generation X – or the Blank Generation as Young and Caveney (1992, xiii) call it – with those of counter-culture movements, especially the New York punk scene of the 1970s and the 1980s. She points out how both of them are fuelled by an "ethos of resistance, however futile" (Mandel 2010, 5) and refers to Young's and Caveney's (1992, xiii) idea that the literature of the Blank Generation shares similarities with the punk scene with its "stunned" style. In Mandel's view, the violent and extreme style of the Blank Generation literature is underscored by the fact that the writers employ real-life socio-economic and political issues in their fiction, and she views *American Psycho* as the "most vehement example" of this style of fiction (Mandel 2010, 5).

Indeed, the developments discussed above are quite clearly reflected in Ellis's works and in the way that his characters' actions, thoughts and traits are almost exclusively guided by excessive consumption. Grassian (2003, 15) states that "In recent fiction, young American fiction writers often portray popular culture as a prison of postmodern fragmentary thought" and claims that in their writing the mass culture gives birth to the affectless and shallow characters that can be found in their novels. When discussing the "blank fictions" of the GenXers , Annesley also states that Ellis's novels "resonate with the spirit of the age" (Annesley 1998, 5). He continues that the drug-fuelled, high-class elite world of excessive consumption portrayed in novels such as *Bright Lights, Big City* and *American Psycho* invites the readers to interpret these novels through drawing parallels to the actual cultural and political sphere of the late twentieth-century America (Annesley 1998, 5).

However, Annesley also states that reading literature as a direct reflection of the social conditions of its time would be too much of a simplification and points out that the relationship between literature and reality is a much more complex one. He mentions that while reading literature purely as a mirror of the real-world society might be problematic in its own right, blank fiction is very much bound in its own time and place through its various references to the cultural and social characteristics that define the twentieth-century American life. (Annesley 1998, 6–5.) Thus, it is tempting to read

these novels as a direct portrayal of the twentieth-century American culture and its social conditions, but such a straightforward approach would ultimately serve much less purpose than an analysis which takes into account the way that a particular novel "thematises contemporary conditions on structural, stylistic, linguistic and metaphorical levels" (Annesley 1998, 6).

I find this to be a particularly important distinction, as examining *American Psycho* as purely a depiction of its own time and social conditions, i.e. the culture of the 1980s America, would be to admit that the novel and its contents are obsolete at this point in time which, considering the history of the novel and the way it gained popularity years after its publication, is clearly not the case. In fact, I would argue that *American Psycho's* satirical depiction of the capitalist culture and the relationship between wealth and power relations is every bit, if not more, topical today than it was when the novel was released.

2.3 The Spectacle, Simulacra and Simulation

In this chapter I discuss two theoretical concepts that are closely related to my study of *American Psycho*: the concept of the spectacle, as developed by the situationist theorist Guy Debord, and the concepts of simulacra, simulation and the hyperreal by the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard. First, I briefly introduce the concept of the spectacle, as in a sense it can be seen as a precursor to Baudrillard's theorisation of the postmodern society. However, I will focus more heavily on Baudrillard's theory, as his observations of the postmodern, media-saturated and commodity obsessed societies reflects the themes of *American Psycho*.

The spectacle, according to Guy Debord, refers to the complete mass-media saturation that is emblematic of modern societies. He explains that everything that was directly experienced before has become mere representations, the fragmentary state of reality leading to a creation of another,

separate ”pseudoworld” which does not exist as physical manifestations but is only available as images and visual representations. (Debord 2002/1967, 6.) Debord does point out, however, that the spectacle is not merely collection of images, but rather a materialized worldview which “In all its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — [...] represents the dominant *model* of life” (Debord 2002, 6, emphasis by Debord). The spectacle has become a part of our social lives with its “mass of image-objects” (Debord 2002, 7), and thus it cannot be seen as something separate from the real world; it may falsify reality, but at the same time it materially assimilates with the real life and becomes a part of it (Debord 2002, 6–7). What this means in simple terms is that the leisure industry, the commodity production and the mass media have become an inseparable part of each aspect of our everyday lives to the extent that “Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real” (Debord 2002, 8). In other words, our social life and identity are determined by the entire media saturated system of production introduced by the late capitalist system, not merely by the individual commodities that it produces.

Here it is worth noting that Debord’s theory of the spectacle can be viewed as the next phase in the line of theories about the post-war consumer society as presented by other theoreticians from roughly the same period of time, such as Herbert Marcuse. In his book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse is concerned with the loss of a free subject via the control of late capitalist production that they are subjected to. Marcuse’s argument is that the capitalist system acts as a manipulative and totalitarian force that aims to limit the individuals’ creative, political and intellectual freedom – the only freedoms through which individuals could oppose to such a system of suppression. According to Marcuse, this is done by creating false needs in individuals through mass media and advertisement, needs which are then satisfied by the commodities created by the system of production of late capitalist societies. (Marcuse 2007/1964, 3–8.) Debord, on the other hand, takes the stance that such individual freedoms as those described by Marcuse are no longer relevant, because we have entered a

new phase of passivity in which “The spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them” (Debord 2002, 7).

Young (1992, 32) also points out how the concept of the spectacle is also visible in Ellis's work, especially his earlier novels. His first novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985), is set in California and is concerned with lives of young college students who try to cope with the trials of entering adulthood and maturity. The specific setting of the novel, the city of Los Angeles, is used to reflect the empty lives of the novel's disaffected and often largely blank characters; While Los Angeles, and specifically the Hollywood area that the novels' characters inhabit, has a stereotypical reputation of being a wonderland of fulfilled dreams and aspirations, in *Less Than Zero* it is depicted as an almost apocalyptic place, with the endless signs, overwhelming media saturation and rampant consumption proving alienating and ultimately dissatisfying for the novel's characters. The spectacle that “promised to satisfy all desires [and] fulfil every dream” (Young 1992, 32) only results in an endless cycle of insatiable desires and consumption for the young characters of *Less Than Zero*.

I argue, however, that the later postmodern theory by Jean Baudrillard, which more or less continues on the themes discussed in Debord's theory on the spectacle, is more relevant to Ellis's later works, especially *American Psycho*. In the said novel, the lines between real and unreal are constantly blurred and the all-pervading world of consumer goods and mass production seem to Ellis's characters more real than reality itself, which is something that is also central to Baudrillard's ideas about the postmodern image society. Similarly to Debord, Baudrillard (2014/1981, 30) argues that in the postmodern world the isolation of the real from the unreal has become impossible. However, he states that “We are no longer in the society of the spectacle [...] nor in the specific kinds of alienation and repression that it implied” (Baudrillard 2014, 30). Baudrillard continues that in the postmodern society the concept of reality is blurred due to the infinite production of signs in the media that simulate the real, that “[substitute] the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 2014, 2). That is not to say, however, that postmodern societies are merely artificial. Artificiality requires some kind of reality

against which it can be measured, but according to Baudrillard, there no longer exists a reality against which to compare the simulation. (Baudrillard, 1–2.) Thus, we have lost the ability to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, and all that we are left with are the models of the real and the "simulated generation of differences" (Baudrillard 2014, 3). This simulation – the imitation of real-world processes, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 2014, 1) – is one of the central concepts in Baudrillard's theory.

To further clarify this idea, Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an example of the simulation and the hyperreal: while there is a stark distinction between real and imaginary in Disneyland, Baudrillard states that Disneyland still reflects reality and acts as a miniaturized version of the real America, a "social microcosm" that represents the American values and ideologies (Baudrillard 2014, 12). However, Baudrillard argues that the distinction between real and imaginary that is so distinct in Disneyland is only an attempt hide the fact that there is no "real" America outside the gates of Disneyland: "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation." (Baudrillard 2014, 12.) In other words, Disneyland with its artificiality drives our attention away from the fact that in the surrounding world the distinction between what is real and what is not is constantly obscured; we are living in a world of hyperreality, which Young (1992, 33) describes as "a free-floating chaos of signs, images, simulations and appearances" and in which the true and the false have become indistinguishable.

Similarly, Featherstone (2007, 15) mentions that Baudrillard's emphasis on the semiology of the consumer culture and the commodity logic marks a major shift from the earlier materialistic emphasis of the consumer culture theories into a cultural one. He further explains that this shift of focus from production to reproduction and the overabundance of signs and reproduced images and simulations means that we are left with an aestheticised version of reality "in which the masses become fascinated by the endless flow of bizarre juxtapositions which takes the viewer beyond stable sense"

(Featherstone 2007, 15). In other words, the postmodern consumer culture has shifted from mere production and consumption of commodities to a model of endlessly reproduced signs and symbols in the form of mass-produced commodities and mass-media which has permeated all aspects of our life.

In his introduction to Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1998/1970) George Ritzer uses nature as an example of how the concept of simulation is applicable to the modern societies. He states that in primitive societies, nature was seen as a kind of model of original against which all culture – the artificial – has been measured. (Ritzer 1998, 12.) Indeed, even today naturality is often regarded as something of inherent value and something worth pursuing. However, in modern cultures nature has been "reduced to something carefully groomed, managed, policed and tailored to the needs of humans" (Ritzer 1998, 12). Thus, there no longer exists an "original" against which to compare nature as it is found in modern societies, and so it must mean that "naturality" is nothing but a simulation either, an example of the kind of "sham objects [...] that define our consumer society" (Ritzer 1998, 12). Furthermore, Featherstone mentions cultural saturation and the shift in production towards consumption as some of the key aspects of postmodern consumer societies, suggesting that postmodernism was seen as a dangerous shift away the ascetic, ethical production of the pre-war period and towards a more hedonistic mode of consumption. (Featherstone 2007, xiv–xv.)

2.4 Politics and Ethics of Consumption

In this chapter, I move on to discuss the politics of consumption and the effects of consumerism on a more general level. In her discussion about consumer culture, Sassatelli displays some scepticism towards such pessimistic views about postmodern consumer culture as those expressed by theorists such as Baudrillard. She states that the condemning tone of such interpretations, where consumer

culture is simplified as pure, uncontrollable lust for new material things, can overshadow the complexity of the phenomenon. She does, however, point out that the capitalist mode of the Western societies is singular in comparison to other types of societies. She emphasises that consumption itself seems to be a world of its own for us, in that we have separate, clearly defined times and spaces for both work and consumption. As such, we satisfy our daily needs of pleasure through the act of consumption. (Sassatelli 2007, 2–3.) One important point that Sassatelli makes is that despite aiming to satisfy our daily needs through commodities and mass production, we also try to retain our personal identities in the process through means of distancing ourselves from the commercial nature of the products that we buy; things such as brand loyalty, personalised items and products, and gifts act as means of reinforcing our identities and social relations within the sphere of commercial mass production. (Sassatelli 2007, 5)

Featherstone also pays attention to the social elements of consumption in the contemporary Western societies, pointing out how our free time is increasingly linked with consumption, be it our everyday routines or leisure. Some products also have other meanings for the consumers beside their intrinsic values as consumables; as an example, Featherstone mentions expensive wines, which not only have value to us as consumables, but also as items of prestige and perhaps as signs of one's social status and lifestyle. Thus, consumables often have a symbolic value to them in addition to their practical uses, and they are one element through which people construct their identities. (Featherstone 2007, 16.)

Furthermore, Sassatelli argues that the ethics of consumption in the post-war period shifted not so much from asceticism to hedonism – she argues that a materialistic mixture of hedonism and asceticism can be dated as far back as the Renaissance – but rather from one form of hedonism to another, one that reached beyond the upper and middle classes. She emphasises the importance of such things as the vast increase in mass production and the way that ordinary household objects became not only aestheticised but also standardised in production, meaning that things such as designer

goods became available to a much wider customer base. She further argues that the availability of credit services lowered the threshold for consumption, both psychologically and materially. (Sassatelli 2007, 49–50.)

However, as Featherstone (2007, 17) points out, it should be noted that the increase in production and the seemingly unrestricted access to commodities has also brought along a new type of social exclusion wherein the availability of certain products is limited to exclusive groups of people. Fashion – which Sassatelli (2007, 53) uses as an early example of modern consumption phenomena, dating its origins to the late nineteenth century – can be seen as an example of such systems. Not only are there certain sets of rules that dictate the appropriate use of certain types of clothing and who can use them (Featherstone 2007, 17), but one also needs to possess the knowledge of the latest trends and the capital required to purchase said items (Sassatelli 2007, 54). While Featherstone (2007, 17) argues that in contemporary Western societies such restrictive rules have somewhat lost their meaning due to the increased flow and availability of consumer goods, I would argue that there is a case to be made about the exclusive nature of certain consumer products. For instance, products such as expensive designer suits, luxurious watches, and luxury cars, while more readily available to the common consumers, are to this day regarded as markers of the bearers' social status and wealth.

Featherstone (2007, 17–18) does, however, address the issue of how wealth can determine the kinds of goods and services people are able to consume, creating a link between how we consume the more everyday items such as food and drink and the consumption of what he calls "high cultural goods" (Featherstone 2007, 17). Featherstone, referring to Douglas and Isherwood's (1980) discussion, mentions three sets of consumable goods and services:

> [A] staple set corresponding to the primary production sector (for example food); a technology set corresponding to the secondary production sector (travel and consumer's capital equipment); and an information set corresponding to tertiary production (information, goods, education, arts, cultural and leisure pursuits). (Featherstone 2007, 17–18.)

Featherstone explains that those belonging to the highest tier of consumption must not only have higher earnings than those belonging to the staple set, but they also need to invest more time in acquiring the competence and know-how for judging and consuming the value of the cultural and informational goods belonging to the information set. This daily investment in the cultural and informational capital can thus be seen as a class issue; the high rate of production and constant flow of new goods and products in capitalist societies means that those belonging to the lower social classes may not possess the time and resources required for assessing the social and cultural value of said products. (Featherstone 2007, 17–18.)

This issue regarding the overflow of information and messages, at least partly brought on by the developments in consumption and advertisement that took place after the Second World War (Sassatelli 2007, 74), is closely related to Baudrillard's theory about the free flow of signs and images in postmodern societies. However, as Sassatelli mentions, in Baudrillard's view the relationship between the consumers and products is not born out of particular needs or use value, but rather through media manipulation relying on incessant reproduction of objects and the fluctuation of self- and cross-referential images and signs. Therefore, the value of an object is no longer tied to any individual needs or pleasures but is created within this system of signs and images; objects no longer signify anything outside of themselves, but their meaning is generated only through their relationship with one another. This way, the objects constitute a social system of their own where real needs are replaced by those generated by the mass media and advertisement which pursues the interest of the prevailing system of mass production. Within such a system, the role of the consumer is more or less reduced to that of a passive player whose actions and decisions are largely guided by the prevailing system of production. (Sassatelli 2007, 82–83)

It can be argued, as Sassatelli does, whether such a way of looking at consumer culture is somewhat simplistic and limited in scope, not taking into account the more complex and nuanced role of the consumer nor the multiplicity of consumption as a practice, among other things. However, I find

that the theories presented in this and the preceding chapters are highly relevant to my analysis of Ellis' novel, as I argue that he himself observes consumer culture through a similar lens in *American Psycho* and that he draws his satire from a highly exaggerated forms of patterns of consumption as presented by theorists such as Debord, Baudrillard and Marcuse.

3 Consumerism, Identity and Violence in *American Psycho*

In the following chapters I will analyse *American Psycho* by a close reading of certain key chapters and segments in the novel, applying the theories and studies on postmodernism and consumer culture in my analysis. I examine how the developments in the American consumer culture are portrayed in the novel and how they can be used to interpret its characters' motivations and actions. The theoretical framework of my analysis leans heavily on Baudrillard's theory on the postmodern image society and the concepts of simulation and hyperreality, and I show how they can be used to interpret many of the central themes in *American Psycho*. These include the blurring line between real human experience and the perceived reality created by the mass media and advertisement, the oversaturation of objects and products in our everyday lives, and the way that these elements have affected the postmodern, late twentieth-century human experience. Furthermore, I will show how the novel makes use of the literary conventions of postmodernism in conveying its message, arguing that these are not merely stylistic elements but crucial to the themes in the novel. This is especially true of features such as pastiche and fragmentation which are extensively used during the course of the novel and serve an important purpose in its overall commentary on the postmodern consumer society.

My analysis of the novel is divided into four subchapters. In the first one, I examine the setting of the novel, arguing that it plays a major role in the way that the novel portrays the capitalist consumer culture and its side effects of inequality and uneven distribution of wealth and power. In the second, I examine the dehumanising effects of consumerism, arguing that there is a connection between the media and commodity saturated lives of the novel's characters and their disregard toward human suffering. The third subchapter is devoted to the analysis of de-individualising effects of consumerism, and in the fourth subchapter I analyse the explicitly violent scenes in the novel and argue

that there is a link between the novel's main character's commodity obsession and his violent tendencies, and further claim that there is a connection between his obsession with films, television programs and other mass media and his increasing inability to separate reality from fiction.

3.1 Fear City – Inequality and the Disbalance of Power in the 1980s New York

In his novels, Bret Easton Ellis usually places a very heavy emphasis on place and location. His first novel, *Less Than Zero*, is set in Los Angeles and its surrounding areas, and the city has a very particular role in setting the tone for the novel and in guiding its character's motives and actions. The sprawling and seemingly endless highways of Los Angeles can be viewed to represent the lack of direction in the main character's life, the signposts and billboards seem to contain foreboding messages, and in general the novel's Southern California setting has a very ominous and almost apocalyptic atmosphere to it. With its constant heat and scorching sunlight, the Los Angeles heatwave is described as "hellish" and so hot that "the crosswalk signs were twisting, writhing, actually melting in the heat" (Ellis 2011/1985, 60), and even insects are, seemingly, "driven mad by the intense heat" (Ellis 2011, 61). Furthermore, in the last chapter of the novel, after having left Los Angeles, the main character describes the images he has in his mind after hearing a song about the city:

> The song was called 'Los Angeles' and the words and images were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days. [...] The images I 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. (Ellis 2011, 195.)

Another crucial element in the novel is the dichotomy between the urban areas and the desert surrounding the city of Los Angeles. To the novel's protagonist, the desert – and his childhood home in the desert resort city of Palm Springs – seems to act as some kind of nostalgic haven from the chaotic life in the city. The vastness and quietness of the desert – as opposed to the bustling city of Los Angeles – have an almost eerie quality to them, further reinforced by the blackness of the desert at

night. It is as if there was something almost phantasmagorical about the sprawling, quiet, empty desert when compared to the hyperreality of the City of Los Angeles with its constant overflow of signs and images and sounds. Thus, Ellis seems to use this stark contrast between the two areas and his vivid description of the setting in general to emphasise the mindset of the characters in his novels.

Notably, Baudrillard also talks about the desert and its vast, empty and borderless landscape as a perfect image of America: "Here, the cities are mobile deserts" (Baudrillard 2010, 133), he states, explaining his equal fascination of both Los Angeles and the deserts with their "brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity" (Baudrillard 2010, 133). In Baudrillard's view, both the desert and the American cities are barren of all aesthetic and cultural forms of European cities as well as their history, and thus the depthlessness and formlessness of the American culture manifests itself in the deserts that surround its cities. (Baudrillard 2010, 133–134.) The deserts, then, represent to him "an ecstatic form of disappearance" (Baudrillard 2010, 6)[1].

Similarly to *Less Than Zero*, the setting – this time New York City – has a very central role in *American Psycho* as well. In fact, this becomes apparent in the very first chapter of the novel where we are introduced to some of the novel's main characters. During a cab ride to their friend's party, one of the characters, Timothy Price, starts to make scornful remarks about life in New York City: "I hate to complain – I really do – about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city really is" (Ellis 1991, 4). He then starts reading the day's newspaper:

> In one issue—in one issue—let's see here… Strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis […] baseball players with AIDS, more mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis… and the joke is, the punch line is, it's all in this city—*nowhere else, just here* (Ellis 1991, 4, emphasis mine.)

[1] It is worth noting that disappearance is also a motif that is present in *Less Than Zero*. "Disappear here" is one of the many reoccurring phrases in the novel, first seen by the main character on a roadside billboard, and later repeated throughout the novel. The phrase perhaps has a dual meaning in the novel: it can be seen to represent both the protagonist's subconscious desire to escape from the confusion and anxiety caused by his superficial lifestyle and the "disappearance" of the self within the postmodern world of signs, surfaces and images.

Ellis' description of New York City stands in stark contrast to that of Los Angeles in *Less Than Zero*, replacing its constant, suffocating heatwaves and sunshine, endless stretches of highways and vast deserts with a gloomy, dirty and perhaps even claustrophobic atmosphere. This description is not unlike that of Baudrillard's (2010, 18), who describes New York as follows: "[The streets of New York] are filled with crowds, bustle, and advertisements, each by turns aggressive or casual. There are millions of people in the streets, wandering, carefree, violent [...] There is music everywhere; the activity is intense, relatively violent, and silent." He later continues, further painting a very distinct image of the city:

> In New York, the mad have been set free. Let out into the city, they are difficult to tell apart from the rest of the punks, junkies, addicts, winos, or down-and-outs who inhabit it. It is difficult to see why a city as crazy as this one would keep its mad in the shadows, why it would withdraw from circulation specimens of a madness which has in fact, in its various forms, taken hold of the whole city. (Baudrillard 2010, 19.)

Ellis's New York, then, seems to be a hyperbolic amalgamation of all the elements described by Baudrillard – it is a place that is clearly grounded in reality yet evokes an uncanny feeling of dread right from the beginning. It is Price's final statement that I find especially noteworthy: this is something that's specifically characteristic to New York and sets it apart from the rest of North America – or maybe even the rest of the world.

It is worth noting that in the seventies, New York had gone through a major fiscal crisis and was on the brink of bankruptcy. During the post-war era, the city was well known for its wide-ranging social and public services – such as an extensive public health care system, an inexpensive public transportation system, public housing, day-care centres aimed at low-income families and rehabilitation clinics for drug users, and its numerous, inexpensive cultural services – many of which helped the city's working-class and impoverished residents in major ways. (Phillips-Fein 2017, 15–17.) However, by the 1970's, the city's economy was in decline. This was partly due to heavy job losses and the fact that many manufacturing companies moved to other areas in search of cheaper labour. However, the situation was also aggravated by a phenomenon known as white flight, which meant

that middle-class people were incentivized to leave the cities in favour of moving to the suburbias, a move partially motivated by the racial fears of the time and the favouring of racially homogenic communities. (Phillips-Fein 2017, 6, 21–22.) A large portion of the people who stayed in New York were growing resentful towards paying for the social services that mostly benefited the African-American and Latin-American communities, and there were growing fears that the welfare services would prove too expensive to maintain. The city's business elite in particular was worried that up-holding them would lead to major tax increases. (Phillips-Fein 2017, 22–23.) These developments, and the fact that the federal and state governments were reluctant to aid New York with its financial problems, meant that the city eventually found itself in massive debt. This, in turn, led to a vast rise in crime rates, violence, unemployment, and general unrest, all of which earned the city its nickname, "Fear City" (Cannato 2009, 72). This period in the history of New York City is widely remembered as "an era of social breakdown, economic malaise, and political collapse" (Phillips-Fein 2017, 4), bringing about a vast increase in inequality and the division of wealth, among other issues (Phillips-Fein 2017, 7). Some see the 1980s as a period of restoration for the city, helped by Reagan's economic policies and Wall Street's newly restored status as the city's economic engine (Cannato 2009, 74). However, as Cannato points out, "[I]t was often two steps forward and one step back as serious fiscal, economic, and social problems persisted" (Cannato 2009, 71).

The polarising effects of these developments play a major role in *American Psycho* and are referred to throughout the novel. The novel begins with the words "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" (Ellis 1991, 1), an inscription found above the gates of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* that is written on the side of the Chemical Bank in the novel. Of course, this sentence, as Young (1992, 93) points out, can also be seen as directly addressing the reader him- or herself, implying that not only are the characters in the novel trapped in this Hell on Earth, but we, as readers, also become entangled in their world from the very moment we start reading the novel. The following passage seems to further emphasis this impression: "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." (Ellis 1991, 3.) The word "fear" and its blood-red lettering seem to announce to the reader that something very sinister is going to take place during the course of the novel, and notably both of the messages are written on sides of buildings that evoke images of a quintessentially American, capitalist setting. Clark (2011, 24) argues that the irony of the reference to *Inferno* on the side of a bank is lost on Price – and the reader – when a bus bearing the advertisement for the musical *Les Misérables* blocks his view to the words, interrupting the scene abruptly. I, however, argue that the scene might contain another, less obvious reference to *Inferno* that further elevates its sense of irony: The Fourth and Seventh street are mentioned in connection with the graffiti "fear", and in Dante's *Inferno*, the fourth and seventh circles of hell represent Greed and Violence. Thus, it could be argued that Ellis subtly draws a connection between capitalism, greed and violence right in the very first page of the novel. Notably, these references to fear and hell also echo the similar themes and slogans[2] found in *Less Than Zero*.

"Greed", of course, is a very central theme in the novel, with its central characters being quite stereotypical representations of the 1980s yuppie culture. Presented almost as idealised embodiments of the capitalist success story and the Reaganist values of 1980s, they are wealthy and good looking and they have respectable jobs and more material possessions than most people could dream of. They are also hopelessly trapped in the world of mass production and mass consumerism, materialism, and advertising, in the realm of the Baudrillardian *hyperreal*. This is especially evident in the main character, Patrick Bateman; the way he introduces various commodities and various fashion items in long, monotonous passages that closely resemble television ad-speak indicate the how the line between real life and the represented reality of advertisements is blurred in his mind. For him, there is no real

[2] The novel begins with the sentence "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles." (Ellis 2011, 1), and this phrase is repeated throughout the novel, reflecting the main character's insecurities and his inability to have any meaningful interactions with other people.

distinction between the real world and the world of advertisements. The advertisements, and more precisely the commodity-obsessed society that they are an integral part of, *are* his reality.

In fact, this theme of Wall Street materialism and yuppie culture is quite common in the American fiction of the 1980s, with novelists such as Jay McInerney (*Bright Lights, Big City)* and Tom Wolfe (*Bonfire of Vanities*) as well as filmmakers such as Oliver Stone (*Wall Street*) having dealt with the subject matter in one way or another. In fact, Ellis seems to view this fictional version of the Manhattan yuppie scene as a microcosm of its own, having multiple references to the aforementioned works in *American Psycho*: The fictional investment firm in which Bateman works, Pierce & Pierce shares the same name as Sherman McCoy's firm in *Bonfire of Vanities,* and one of Bateman's victims is a character from Jay McInerney's novel *Story of My Life,* to name a couple of instances. While such metafictional references are not uncommon in postmodern literature, I feel that they deserve a closer look here, as they perhaps say something about the way Ellis constructs his vision of the late capitalist society. While Murphet's (2002, 52) argument that Ellis is using these metafictional strategies to emphasise the fictionality of Bateman's existence might be accurate to an extent, I feel there is more to it.

To elaborate on this idea, I will examine the reference to *Bonfire of Vanities* in greater detail. Curiously, the reference is never truly elaborated upon and is only ever mentioned in passing during various discussions, leaving it up to the reader to connect it to the other fictional account of the Wall Street finance world. In fact, when Bateman mentions to a prostitute that he works at Pierce & Pierce, he follows the statement up with the question: "Have you heard of it?" (Ellis 1991, 171–172), as if Ellis was jokingly asking the reader whether they recognise the reference. Of course, should the reader make the connection, it immediately invites them to draw a connection between the two novels. Thematically, *Bonfire of Vanities* also deals with the Wall Street greed and corruption, as well as the racial tensions that were looming heavy upon New York in the 1980s. The intertextual reference might then act as Ellis's way of not so much emphasising the fact that Bateman exists solely within

the realm of fiction, but of obfuscating the line between fiction and reality; one might argue that Ellis, by extending the fictional universe of *American Psycho* to other works dealing with similar thematic matter, emphasises the fact that the issues of greed, violence and oppression brought up in *American Psycho* also exist outside the pages of the novel.

Commenting on *American Psycho's* critique of the cultural sphere of New York in the 1980s, Colby (2011, 60) notes how the novel destabilises the image of the city's emblem of wealth, the Wall Street banker. She argues that "Ellis, in casting his serial killer as a white privileged unmarried white man working on Wall Street, subverts what Didion termed in 1989 'the sentimental narrative that is New York public life'" (Colby 2011, 64). In her article, Didion recounts the story of a white, single, female Wall Street executive who was brutally beaten and raped when she was jogging in Central Park. Six black and Hispanic teenagers were charged for the assault, and the incident was widely reported in the media. Didion (1990, 82) goes on to state that although, based on the police statistics, African American women are more often victims of rape than white women, it is the "attractive", white middle-class women who receive the most coverage rape cases. In the essay, Didion highlights the cultural and socio-economic difference between the victim and the accused assailants, "four of whom lived in Schomburg Plaza, a federally subsidized apartment complex at the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 110th Street in East Harlem, and the rest of whom lived in the projects and rehabilitated tenements just to the north and west of Schomburg Plaza" (Didion 1990, 83). The victim, on the other hand, was described in the Times magazine as belonging to "'the wave of young professionals who took over New York in the 1980s'" and being "'handsome and pretty and educated and white'" (Didion 1990, 83). As Colby (2011, 65–66) points out, Ellis inverts this victim/perpetrator relationship by making the middle-class, wealthy business executive the antagonist in the story, turning the bourgeois victim into a bourgeois serial killer. It is also worth noting that during the course of the story, Bateman generally targets marginalised groups such as homeless people, homosexuals, prostitutes and people of colour. In other words, Ellis subverts the readers' expectations by turning

the celebrated Wall Street “hero” into a contemptible monster and, by doing so, deconstructs the mythical American success stories of the Reagan-era United States and – specifically – New York City itself.

This also highlights one of the central dichotomies present in the novel, the polarity between Wall Street’s wealth and the social tensions and uneven distribution of wealth elsewhere in New York City during the 1980s. As Price continues his rant about life in New York, he sees a beggar at the corner of the street and notes that it’s the twenty-fourth one he has seen during that day. The novel then changes tone, describing in great detail the expensive designer suits that the main characters are wearing, so immediately our attention is drawn towards the enormous imbalance of fortune and misfortune and wealth and poverty that is very emblematic of the city (Ellis 1991, 4–5). The said scene also reveals much about the novel’s central characters and the way they view the world and other people. They have no empathy towards the homeless people populating the streets and simply see them as a sign of all the things that are wrong in New York City, and this sensation is further heightened when they exit the cab and run into a homeless man who is holding out a coffee cup, begging for money. “Ask him if he takes American Express” (Ellis 1991, 7) one of the characters quips, as if the homeless people in the city served no other purpose than being a form of entertainment for them. This idea is further emphasised in a later chapter where Bateman meets a homeless person outside of another restaurant. The homeless man tells Bateman that he is “Bob Hope’s younger brother, No Hope” (Ellis 1991, 214). Bateman, amused by the line, throws the man a quarter, clearly indifferent about the greater implications of the homeless plight present in the man’s remark.

The juxtaposition between the wealthy and the poor is later elaborated upon in a scene where Bateman and his crew are on their way to a fine restaurant, with Bateman being "on the verge of tears" due to his fear of not getting a table at the place. However, they manage to secure a table for themselves, and as they are making their way towards the restaurant, Price nonchalantly throws a paper napkin at a homeless person holding a sign that says "I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS

PLEASE HELP ME" (Ellis 1991, 39–40, capitalisation by Ellis). The novel then immediately switches the scene and jumps inside the luxurious restaurant without addressing the homeless person in any more detail, again bringing forward the inequality and cultural tensions arising out of the 70s fiscal crisis by highlighting the fact that these people mean nothing more to the novel's central characters than the crumpled-up napkins and various other pieces of trash littering the streets of the city. Emphasising this idea is an article Bateman reads in a gossip magazine which causes deep anxiety in him: "[M]y eye catches a story about recent sightings of these creatures that seem to be part bird, part rodent [...] found deep in the centre of Harlem and now making their way steadily toward midtown" (Ellis 1991, 115). In the 1980s, Harlem was known for its large African-American demographic and its high crime and poverty rates. Bateman's anxiety, then, is likely caused by the idea of the poor parts of New York quite literally invading its more affluent areas.

Also worth noting are the constant references to a musical version of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, a novel about people's struggle against inequality and social injustice in nineteenth-century France. As Murphet (2002, 55) points out, the fact that the novel references the musical version in particular is significant. It serves as an allegory for the exploitation of the misery of the underprivileged as the social issues that the original novel addresses are turned into an entertaining spectacle of dance and music only available to the middle- and upper-class people who can afford the price of admission. The fact that the musical is only ever referred to in passing, whether it is playing in the background or seen in advertisements or leaflets, further serves to highlight the idea that the social issues in the city are nothing but fleeting background noise for the privileged classes.

Of course, another crucial aspect in regard to the novel's setting comes from the title itself. Seemingly a reference to Robert Bloch's thriller novel *Psycho* – note the aspect of intertextuality at play here that is central to postmodern arts – the added adjective *American* gives the title, and thus the novel itself, a very specific sense of location. It gives weight to the idea that there is something about this particular psychopath that is very characteristic of the American society and culture. Colby

(2011, 66), however, argues that the name "Bateman" might also be a reference to another well-known character, Batman, pointing out the similarities in the names. She explains that there exists a very ideological image of New York in many Hollywood movies and that this extends to the way the fictional Gotham City – for which New York served as an inspiration – is presented in Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman.* Colby (2011, 66) states that that there is a very distinct duality to the city in Batman and explains that there is a clear divide between the business sector and the downtown, the latter being "home to petty criminals, prostitutes, and people with disfigurements" (Colby 2011, 66). She points out how, in Batman, there is a clear connection between impoverishment and crime, and argues that in *American Psycho*, this relationship between the wealthy and the impoverished is reversed. In *American Psycho*, it is the middle-class Wall Street bankers who are displayed as inhumane and monstrous as opposed to the disaffected groups, and Colby states that in Ellis's novel this opposition is "symbolic of both Republican ideology and a wider, more universal, sadism. The subjective violence of Bateman's killings realizes the unseen objective violence of capitalism." (Colby 2011, 66.) I argue that the novel's criticism of this more implicit violence arising from the uneven distribution of power and wealth enabled by the capitalist system is precisely what has been widely overshadowed by its more visible and subjective scenes of violent and gory killings.

3.2 Lost Souls – The Dehumanising Effects of Consumerism

The themes and issues discussed in the previous chapters tie into the way that the 1980s consumer society is presented in *American Psycho*, as it could be argued that the novel can be seen almost as a microcosm of the broader late capitalist period. As Annesley (1998, 8) points out, by using a language

that is highly saturated with aspects of commercial culture, "[the blank fictions] develop formal dimensions that appear, in some cases commodified and in others, part of a wider engagement with consumer culture."

In *The Consumer Society,* Baudrillard (1998/1970, 25) points out that in consumer societies, people are not so much surrounded by other people as they are by objects and no longer socialize with other people so much as receive and manipulate goods and messages. Keeping this statement in mind, I will examine an early chapter in the novel in which Bateman describes his apartment and his morning activities. The section begins with a sentence typically used to set the scene in fictional narratives: "In the early light of May this is what the living room of my apartment looks like" (Ellis 1991, 24). It then continues with a very lengthy and detailed description of the apartment, containing sentences such as "The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze frame)" (Ellis 1991, 25) and "Vidal Sassoon shampoo is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older" (Ellis 1991, 26). Taken out of context, both of these descriptions could be from an advertisement – a sensation further enhanced by Bateman's use of the indefinite pronoun "you" as if he was addressing a potential customer. Also note how the postmodern practice of pastiche as a narrational device comes into play during this scene; Jameson, when discussing the relationship between the market and the media in the postmodern economic world, notes that

> Today, the products are, as it were, diffused throughout the space and time of the entertainment (or even news) segments, as part of that content, so that [...] it is sometimes not clear when the narrative segment has ended and the commercial has begun. (Jameson 1992, 275.)

Here, Ellis uses a similar technique as a narrative tool, mixing two different registers during the scene, that of the traditional first-person narrational style and the language of commercials. By doing so, he

creates the sense of a very cold and affectless narrative voice and reinforces the idea that Bateman's whole existence revolves around commercial products.

Murphet (2002, 27) also points out the heavy use of product placement in the novel, stating that the various brand names catalogued throughout Bateman's narrative almost become more identifiable characters in the novel than the main character himself. The excessive use of product placement was something that the critics of the novel were quick to dismiss: in addition to the extreme violence, the novel received negative comments about the long lists and descriptions of consumer products that Bateman's narration is littered with. These passages were often deemed unnecessarily long and detailed, and simply boring by many critics (Young 1992, 87, 89). While it might be true that the style that Ellis has adopted makes for heavy reading, dismissing it simply as "boring" is missing the point; rather, the focus should be on *why* the novel is written in such a way that it evokes this numbing feeling in the reader. Annesley (1998, 10) also points out the importance of these scenes, stating that through these seemingly lightweight elements the blank fictions do, in fact, tackle the issues related to the excessive materialism that is a fundamental part of the twentieth century, and continues by noting that "In a commercial world understanding the relationship between subjectivity and commodification is crucial. Blank fiction may well be like a 'wellmade beer commercial', but it can still provide a surprising amount of 'intellectual nourishment'" (Annesley 1998, 10).

This is especially true of *American Psycho,* because the advertisement-like segments are clearly intended to be as tedious as they come across as. At face value, the segments seem to serve no real narrative purpose in the novel, and they are much longer than they need to be to set a scene in the traditional sense. However, on further observation it becomes clear that these segments are, in fact, an essential part of the novel and the themes that it deals with; Firstly, they call attention to the idea that the characters in the novel are so completely lost in their commodity-filled world that the consumerism starts to dictate their very language and ideology; And secondly, they can be seen as a manifestation of the postmodern depthlessness and superficiality – what Jameson (1992, 9) calls "the

supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" – that later ties into the novel's depictions of extreme violence. As Grassian (2003, 12) states, "It is not that the writers [of blank fiction] and their characters are dull, as some critics have proposed. Rather, the world of the characters (and even authors) revolves around the popular culture forms of television, film, music, fashion and consumer products."

To provide an example of this, there is a scene in during an early chapter in the novel in which Bateman is having dinner with his friends at a fine restaurant; their discussions are notably shallow, mostly revolving around various material things, and their materialism even extends to the way that they evaluate other people. When a mutual acquaintance of Bateman and his friends is scorned, McDermott is quick to emphasize that he is still "worth eight hundred *million*" (Ellis 1991, 43, emphasis by Ellis). Also, when the table company discuss the looks of their waitress, someone makes a comment about her knees. Bateman then realises that "The left knee is knobbier, almost imperceptibly thicker than the right knee and this unnoticeable flaw now seems overwhelming and we all lose interest" (Ellis 1991, 48). The characters in the novel seem to be so distracted by the illusion of perfection provided by the consumer products and advertisements that the one human "flaw" in the waitress is enough to make them lose interest in her.

Further proof of this obsession with superficiality is provided during a short section where, after returning home from a friend's party, Bateman starts masturbating, first thinking about his girlfriend Evelyn, then two of his other female acquaintances, and then Evelyn again. What finally makes him come, however, is a thought of "a near-naked model in a halter top […] in a Calvin Klein advertisement." (Ellis 1991, 24) This brief remark, again, emphasises the fact that Bateman is completely engulfed by the material world, so much so that he only finds himself truly aroused by the artificial, overly unblemished people from the world of advertisements. Furthermore, there is a strong connection between commodities and pornography in the novel. In a later scene, Bateman recalls a pornographic film he had watched the previous night and, immediately after a lengthy description of the

said video, nonchalantly states that “The new Stephen Bishop came out last Tuesday and at Tower Records yesterday I bought the compact disc, the cassette and the album because I wanted to own all three formats” (Ellis 1991, 98). There is a strong sense of commodity fetishism to be found in this juxtaposition between pornography and consumer goods, and Bateman’s lengthy description of the pornographic scene also draws parallels to his highly detailed descriptions of various consumer products throughout the novel.

In fact, there exists a well-established link between pornography and consumerism, as pornography essentially means the objectification of the human body and sexual desires, and some even view it as a representation of male dominance, focusing on the way that it dehumanises and oppresses women. (McNair 1996, 47–48.) For instance, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon argue that in pornography “women are presented as dehumanized sexual objects, things or commodities” (Dworkin and MacKinnon in McNair 1996, 48). McNair also points out how pornography can be viewed as “the mass cultural, commoditized form of sexual representation” (McNair 1996, 51). Debra Merskin also notes that there is a strong link between pornography and advertisement, pointing out that women in advertisement are often presented “not only as objects of the male gaze, but also as objects of a *pornographic* gaze” (Merskin 2012/2006, 199, emphasis by Merskin). She proceeds to point out how sex is often used in advertising as a means of shaping our image of femininity and to maintain the apparent normality of submissiveness of women and male dominance (Merskin 2012, 205). Additionally, she notes how the human body is often dehumanised and objectified in advertising, pointing out how individual body parts such as breasts, bare legs or a bottom are portrayed in advertisements in very sexualised ways regardless of their relation – or the lack thereof – to the item being advertised (Merskin 2012, 207). Furthermore, Merskin (2012, 210–211) argues that violent imagery and pornography are often interconnected elements in advertising and states that portraying human beings as mere objects can be seen as the first step towards justifying violence, reflecting Bateman’s eventual descend into sadism.

The obsessive strive for perfection both in regards to material goods and the human body is what makes Bateman's ad-speak monologues more than simple page filling: they are the only things that Bateman can discuss about in an eloquent and richly detailed language, but also underline the fact that Bateman's whole world view and the way he regards other people is shaped by the world of consumerism and advertisements. Whenever he tries to tackle any deeper or more meaningful topics, he ends up sounding ridiculous and contradictory. A good example of this is provided early in the novel when Bateman has a discussion about foreign and domestic political issues. He starts a considerably lengthy monologue about all the issues he feels need to be addressed in the world. The list is full of contradictions, and the last paragraph of his rant is especially revealing:

> We have to provide food and shelter for the homeless and oppose racial discrimination and promote civil rights while also promoting equal rights for women but change the abortion laws to protect the right to life yet still somehow maintain women's freedom of choice. We also have to control the influx of illegal immigrants. We have to encourage a return to traditional moral values and curb graphic sex and violence on TV, in movies, in popular music, everywhere. Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and *less materialism in young people*." (Ellis 1991, 16, emphasis mine.)

The assumption here is that the reader notices the contradictions both within Bateman's speech itself but also between the text and his own values. Earlier in the novel he and his friends have shown no respect towards homeless people, throwing scornful insults at them instead, yet suddenly Bateman is in favour of providing food and shelter for them. Also, the novel's main characters constantly refer to homosexuals as "faggots" – there is even a chapter in the novel titled "Confronted by a Faggot" (Ellis 1991, 291) – and they use racial slurs throughout the novel. Furthermore, as Colby (2011, 69) also points out, the republican pro-life politics and women's freedom of choice are at such stark odds against each other that the list cannot represent anything other than what she calls "the American utopian vision" (Colby 2011, 68). Of course, the whole litany is also reflexive of the tumultuous climate of the Reagan-era America and the raging debate between those defending the more liberal values of the 60s and those arguing for the more strict and conservative policies that Reagan's office in particular introduced in the 1980s.

However, considering the materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle that Bateman himself embraces, the last sentence is perhaps the most revealing one; At this point it becomes very obvious that the whole speech is nothing but memorized media-talk, a summary of all the issues that were likely circulating in the media and the headlines at the time. It is in such stark contrast with the real values of Bateman and his friends that you have to come to a conclusion that this paragraph presents yet another example of Bateman's unreliability as a narrator and represents the clash between the real and the hyperreal that permeates the rest of the novel; the speech comes across not so much as an honest view of the current problems in the world, but rather as a list similar to the numerous product listing Bateman offers during the course of the novel. Thus, if Bateman's outlook on life and politics is completely guided by the mass media and consumerism, it inevitably brings into question his general capacity for empathy towards other people. This notion is further reinforced when Bateman scolds his friend Preston for telling an obviously racist joke, telling him that "It's not funny [...] it's *racist*" (Ellis 1991, 38, emphasis by Ellis), yet during a later passage Bateman himself uses the same racial slur when confronted by an African-American worker at the Central Park zoo:

> "A black custodian mopping the floor in the men's room asks me to flush the urinal after I use it. 'Do it yourself, nigger,' I tell him and when he makes a move toward me, the flash of a knifeblade causes him to back off." (Ellis 1991, 297.)

The scene reveals that Bateman's apparent opposition to racial discrimination is nothing but an empty façade he keeps up to appear more sophisticated in front of his friends; he discusses the political issues that are topical – perhaps even *fashionable* – at the time despite having no true regard for human suffering.

Here, one might also consider Jameson's (1992, 6–10) discussion about the difference between modernist and postmodernist arts. He argues that in the modernist arts, the notion of human suffering and misery, the *real* human experience of the past, was often brought to the foreground. The postmodern arts, on the other hand, are marked by indifference, meaninglessness and a lack of immediacy in Jameson's view. It could be said, then, that Ellis incorporates the idea of postmodern indifference

into the novel both textually – the affectless, monotonous narrative – and in a more literal sense – the characters' indifference towards human suffering – in a way that the two become inseparable from each other. The passages also draws inevitable comparisons to Baudrillard's theories about the consumer culture; in *The Consumer Society* he states that the consumer society is characterised by the universal nature of the news item, pointing out how we receive all our information about global events, politics and culture via that one, single format (Baudrillard 1998, 33-34). He further elaborates that the news report in yet another example of the hyperreal, because it enables us to witness events, now reduced to signs, without actually being present at the site of the event: "It is the truer than true which counts or, in other words, the fact of being there without being there." (Baudrillard 1998, 34.) It is, surely, this distance from the real event – or rather his inability to make the vital connection between real life, real human suffering, and the media-imposed reality – that makes this speech feel completely valid to Bateman himself.

A similarly misinformed disposition can be seen in Bateman's banker friends as well. For instance, at one point in the novel, Price starts listing all the diseases one can supposedly catch from having unprotected sex:

> "There's this theory out now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone who is infected then you can also catch anything, whether it's a virus per se or not—Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, haemophilia, leukemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes—you can get dyslexia from pussy—" (Ellis 1991, 5, emphases by Ellis).

The list is obviously completely absurd, and here Ellis seems to be parodying the slew of misinformation about circulating about HIV and AIDS which can be, as Colby (2011, 70) mentions, at least partly blamed on the Reagan administration's indifferent attitude towards the AIDS crisis in the United States and the lack of public education and funding towards AIDS research. In fact, the AIDS issue is a running theme throughout the novel, and at one point in the novel, when McDermott is worried about catching a sexual disease, Van Patten dismisses his fears by simply stating that "We can't get *that.* It's like zero zero zero point oh one percentage—" (Ellis 1991, 54, emphasis by Ellis).

During another conversation, the group again has a discussion that revolves around sexually transmitted diseases, and one of them simply says "Guys just can*not* get it" to which another one replies "Well, not *white* guys" (Ellis 1991, 34, emphases by Ellis). Colby (2011, 71) points out how these conversations bring forth the characters racist and homophobic attitudes as well as the fact that as white, heterosexual men, they believe they are immune to any sexually transmitted diseases. According to her, this group of white, middle-class young urban professionals was the socially dominant "ideological super-class" in the late eighties' New York City. (Colby 2011, 71.)

While I agree with Colby's argument I argue that, at least in Bateman's case, the blindness these characters have towards the more marginalised people's suffering is not only caused by their own sense of superiority. It is also brought on by their complete inability to register people outside of their own point of reference and their own social bubble, to the point that they only see those people as real human beings who are more or less on the same socio-economical level as they are. An example of this is provided during a scene where Bateman comes across a young woman whom he believes is one of the numerous homeless people scattered across the streets of New York:

> Suddenly I find myself eyeing a very pretty homeless girl sitting on the steps of a brownstone on Amsterdam, a Styrofoam coffee cup resting on the step below her feet, and as if guided by radar I move toward her, smiling, fishing around in my pocket for change. Her face seems too young and fresh and tan for a homeless person's; it makes her plight all the more heartbreaking [...] My nastiness vanishes and, wanting to offer something kind, something simple, I lean in, still staring, eyes radiating sympathy into her blank, grave face, and dropping a dollar into the Styrofoam cup I say, "Good luck." (Ellis 1991, 85.)

Bateman then realises that the girl was not a homeless person after all, but a university student having coffee on the steps. This sudden realisation and the girl's angry reaction makes Bateman flee in panic, and he describes his following taxi ride as follows: "I hallucinate the buildings into mountains, into volcanoes, the streets become jungles, the sky freezes into a backdrop, and before stepping out of the cab I have to cross my eyes in order to clear my vision. Lunch at Hubert's becomes a permanent hallucination in which I find myself dreaming while still awake." (Ellis 1991, 86).

This comical scene again underlines Bateman's contradictory stance towards homeless people and human suffering in general; elsewhere in the novel, it has been made clear that Bateman has zero sympathy for the suffering of the underprivileged people, yet in this case he suddenly feels sympathy for this particular "homeless" girl for the sole reason that she resembles the people in his own social circles; she is good-looking, tanned, healthy and – presumably – white, a complete opposite of the typical description of homeless people in the novel. Still, the one crucial detail that makes Bateman think the girl is homeless is the Styrofoam cup in front of her; the image of homeless people holding Styrofoam cups in front of them is one that is often repeated throughout the novel, and it is this precise stereotype that Bateman is guided by here. This is yet another example of the shallowness of Bateman's thinking: Unable to see the homeless people's real plight, his only points of reference are the minute and insignificant surface-level details such as the Styrofoam cup, and ironically Bateman's apparent sympathy for the girl is triggered precisely because she is young, tanned and more clean-looking than the other homeless people he encounters during the course of the novel. As a further evidence of this, there is a scene later in the novel where Bateman describes an encounter with a female beggar to her date: "'I beat up a girl today who was asking people on the street for money.' [...] 'She had misspelled *disabled*. I mean, that's not the reason I did what I did but... you know.' I shrug. 'She was *too ugly to rape*.'" (Ellis 1991, 213, first emphasis by Ellis, second emphasis mine.)

Furthermore, Bateman's subsequent reaction to the angry response of the girl he mistook for a homeless person – "I didn't... I didn't know it was... full" (Ellis 1991, 213), Bateman stutters – is almost character-breaking. Typically, Bateman's first-person voice is marked with cynicism, spite, and elitist remarks which, as Murphet expresses it, "is always ready to draw the worst conclusions and make the least generous concessions to anything but its own interests" (Murphet 2002, 26). At this point, his usually arrogant attitude dissipates, and it seems that with the following hallucinatory sequence, Ellis is giving the reader the first hints of the fact that Bateman's sense of reality is starting to crack and that the mass-media produced and consumer-product filled life he is living might just be

a kind of waking dream – or, perhaps a Baudrillardian *simulation*, an amalgamation of all the various artificial yet more lifelike-than-reality media-produce he is surrounded with.

Here, we can draw parallels to Baudrillard's example of Disneyland as the ultimate example of *simulacra,* a place that is presented as artificial for the sole reason of hiding the fact that the rest of America "belongs to the order of simulation" where "the real is no longer real" (Baudrillard 2014, 12–13). This artificial representation of reality is created by various media outlets, popular culture, advertisements and so forth, and thus the hyper-commercialized New York in *American Psycho* is Bateman's Disneyland. It is a place that exists to hide the fact that his whole life is nothing but *hyperreality*, and for the first time, he gets a glimpse behind that veneer of artifice. The confusion caused by this seemingly subconscious realisation is described in his vivid, hallucinatory description of New York; New York now appears to him as a kind of highly volatile urban jungle, and the description of the sky as a "frozen backdrop" creates the sense that the city as Bateman has previously seen it is nothing but a set, a kind of illusory world carefully crafted by various media institutions, popular culture and advertising agencies.

The scene also highlights the fragmentary nature of the novel, as the kind of hallucinatory stream-of-consciousness narration that we see at the end of the it is commonplace throughout the novel. There are a number of instances in *American Psycho* where Bateman is narrating the story in a seemingly normal and linear fashion, then suddenly switches to a completely different subject matter in a very jarring way. Take, for instance, the following scene where Bateman's girlfriend, Patricia, launches into a lengthy, cocaine-fuelled tirade:

> "I mean [...] Avatar is such a great lead singer and I actually thought I was in love with him once—well, actually I was in lust, not love. I really liked Wallace then but he was into this whole investment banking thing and he couldn't handle the routine and he broke down, it was the acid not the cocaine that did it. I mean I *know* but so when that all fell apart I knew that it would be, like, best to just hang out and not deal with
>
> J&B I am thinking. Glass of J&B in my right hand I am thinking. Hand I am thinking. Charivari. Shirt from Charivari. Fusilli I am thinking. Jami Gertz I am thinking. I would like to fuck Jami Gertz I am thinking. Porsche 911. A sharpei I am thinking. I would like to own a sharpei. I am twenty-six years old I am thinking. I will be twenty-

> seven next year. A Valium. I would like a Valium. No, *two* Valium I am thinking. Cellular phone I am thinking. (Ellis 1991, 80–81, emphases and omitted closing quotation mark by Ellis.)

Here Patricia's dialogue is cut short very abruptly and replaced with Bateman's rambling inner thoughts, as if to show that he is unable to concentrate on anything or anyone for more than a moment at a time before he has to switch back to his consumer product-filled fantasy world. Notably, these sudden cuts most often happen when Bateman is visibly bored or stressed, giving the impression that this is his way of dealing with those emotions. Also, they are often tinged with violent thoughts, suggesting that violence to him is just another means of escaping the stress caused by the exhausting consumerist lifestyle that he is so deeply involved in.

Murphet (2002, 30) also points out that the boredom and venomous thoughts are often elicited in Bateman during his conversations with the opposite sex and that the conversations between men and women in the novel rarely amount to more than the same kind of list-making monologues presented to us throughout Bateman's first-person narration. He then makes the point that men and women seem to exist on completely separate planes of reality in the novel, with both sexes having only preconceived ideas of how to satisfy the other's needs (Murphet 2002, 31). It is this same disconnect between the sexes that enables Bateman to verbally exhibit his violent fantasies, as none of the female persons he is talking to seem to register anything he says unless it is somehow related to their consumerist lifestyle. For instance, when Bateman and his girlfriend Evelyn are discussing what their dream wedding would be like, Evelyn brings up details such as the wedding ring, the catering, the wedding band and so forth. Bateman, on the other hand, brings up his violent fantasies once more:

> "I'd want to bring a Harrison AK-47 assault rifle to the ceremony," I say, bored, in a rush, "with a thirty-round magazine so after thoroughly blowing your fat mother's head off with it I could use it on that fag brother of yours." (Ellis 1991, 124.)

Evelyn, however, remains oblivious to Bateman's hateful response and simply carries on with her wistful fantasy. Bateman then continues:

> "Or an AR-15. You'd like it, Evelyn: it's the most expensive of guns, but worth every penny." I wink at her. But she's still talking: she doesn't hear a word; nothing registers.

> She does not fully grasp a *word* I'm saying. My essence is eluding her. (Ellis 1991, 124, emphasis by Ellis.)

Clark (2011, 23) argues that these violent outbursts are merely Bateman's desperate cries for attention, his attempts to become seen in a world where everyone – himself included – is so preoccupied with material things that it leaves little room for real human interaction. Tellingly, when Bateman's secretary Jean asks him if he has ever wanted to make anyone happy, Bateman panics and launches into a disjointed monologue about his encounter in men's room of a restaurant:

> I saw some guy in the men's room... a total... Wall Street guy... wearing a one-button viscose, wool and nylon suit by... Luciano Soprani... a cotton shirt by... Gitman Brothers... a silk tie by Ermenegildo Zegna and, I mean, I recognized the guy, a broker, named Eldridge... (Ellis 1991, 374.)

Again, Bateman's incapacity for human compassion becomes clear here; he tries to dodge Jean's question but by doing so reveals that he is unable to have any meaningful conversation without in some way including into it the subject that he knows most intimately, consumer products. It is this obsession with material things and the way that the characters in the novel try to achieve individuality through mass produced commodities that I will focus on in the next chapter.

3.3 Mistaken for Strangers – Identity, Individualism and Consumerism

One crucial aspect of *American Psycho* is the de-individualising effect of the consumer lifestyle. According to Colby, the novel "documents the repression at work in the commodity society of the 1980s, the merging of the subject with the economic apparatus" (Colby 2011, 59). To back her claim up, she quotes one of the novel's main characters, Price: "I'm resourceful […] I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society can*not* afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*" (Ellis 1991, 1, emphases by Ellis). Colby then continues by stating that the novel shows how the merging between the subject and the economic system led to "the liquidation of subjectivity" (Colby 2011, 59).

Almost every character in the novel looks the same, so much so that the characters themselves have a hard time telling each other apart. This is already evident very early in the novel, when Bateman and his friends meet someone they think is their acquaintance: “Is it Victor Powell? It can't be.” (Ellis 1991, 8), one of them wonders aloud, and when they realise that the person indeed is not Victor: “It looked a lot like him” (Ellis 1991, 8). Later, when Bateman and his friends are sitting in a bar, his friend Preston mentions in passing: “What the fuck is Morrison wearing?” to which another character, Price, answers: “That’s not Morrison […] That’s Paul Owen.” Bateman then corrects them both: “That’s not Paul Owen […] Paul Owen’s on the other side of the bar. Over there.” (Ellis 1991, 36.) Similar conversations are abundant in the novel, and they seem to reflect what Jameson (2009, 5–6) states about individualism and unique personality being a thing of the past in the postmodern world. The same idea is also present in Baudrillard's theory. He argues that in the postmodern world of mass production, all our culture and social life has become homogenised. Thus, there must be a parallel between the mass of consumers and the mass of products, and so the mass-produced commodities have no other purpose in our lives than to keep us in a constant state of “mass integration”. (Baudrillard 2014, 67.) He goes on to explain that the term mass production can now refer to two things: massive production of commodities, or “the production of *the masses*” (Baudrillard 2014, 68, emphasis by Baudrillard).

This idea is further reinforced by the fact that these conversations are often preceded and followed by detailed descriptions of the type of clothes these characters are wearing (often expensive designer suits), as if these details were the only discernible features that separate them from the rest of the characters in the novel. For instance, when we are first introduced to one of Bateman’s close friends, we are given the following description: “Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti” (Ellis 1991, 4–5). As Bateman himself says, “Luis Carruthers is still

standing at the bar waiting for a drink. Now it looks to me like his silk bow tie is by Agnes B. *It's all unclear."* (Ellis 1991, 38, emphasis mine).

During one of the murder scenes, the motif of mistaken identities becomes an important plot point. Immensely jealous about the prestigious Fisher account that a fellow Wall Street banker Paul Owen is holding, Bateman invites him for dinner, exploiting the fact that Owen mistakes Bateman for a person named Marcus Halberstam. Bateman's intention is to find out more about the Fisher account, but instead he ends up killing Owen in a jealous rage and shipping his packed suitcase to London to cover his act. When a private detective later questions Bateman about Owen's disappearance, he mentions that, indeed, someone had presumably seen Owen in London: "A... Stephen Hughes says he saw him at a restaurant there, but I checked it out and what happened is, he mistook a Hubert Ainsworth for Paul, so..." (Ellis 1991, 273.) The detective then states that on the night of his murder, Owen had booked a dinner date with Marcus Halberstam, who denies having met Owen although "at first he couldn't be sure" (Ellis 1991, 274). Nervous about the answer, Bateman demands to know where Halberstam was on the night of the murder, to which the detective answers: "'He was at Atlantis with Craig McDermott, Frederick Dibble, Harry Newman, George Butner and [...] you'" (Ellis 1991, 274). While the scene hints at Bateman's unreliability as a narrator, it also implies that Bateman is able to get away with the murders precisely because the characters in the novel are so interchangeable: basically, *it could have been any one of them*.

I argue that through this motif of reoccurring mistaken identities, Ellis is satirising the idea of shaping one's own personality and identity through consumerism, something that I discussed in chapter 2.4 of this thesis. Despite the characters' best efforts of distinguishing themselves from each other through fashion items, luxury products and various other commodities, they are unable to hide the fact that they have no real identities, no distinguishable voice. Indeed, when discussing the multiple monologues scattered throughout the novel, Murphet (2002, 29) asks a valid question: "Are the voices actually distinguishable? Or are they not mere prehensile extensions of a single, interminable inner

monologue, caught in a clumsy hesitation over where to go, what to do?" It could be argued that most of Bateman's friends are not real, fleshed-out characters at all but mere hollow embodiments of the consumer lifestyle the novel satirises. As Bateman at one point notes during an uncharacteristic epiphany about the state of the world he lives in: "Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in..." (Ellis 1991, 375.)

For instance, there is a whole chapter in the novel dedicated to Bateman's discussion of his favourite music, namely the band Genesis. However, Bateman is willing to admit that before their commercial hit album *Duke,* he "didn't really understand any of their work" (Ellis 1991, 133). He goes on to explain how during the 1980s, their music "turned more modern", "the lyrics started getting less mystical" and "complex, ambiguous studies of loss became, instead, smashing first-rate pop songs" (Ellis 1991, 133). The ironic humour in the scene is derived from the fact that Bateman, despite giving an overly detailed account of Genesis' discography, only focuses on their output from the eighties onward, the period when they started to turn more accessible and radio-friendly in comparison to their earlier progressive rock leanings. Despite acting like an authority on the band's output, the scene reveals that Bateman can only truly appreciate things when they are made accessible and commercial enough. In other words, it is questionable whether his tastes are truly his own or whether they are simply fed to him through the mass media and advertisements.

The idea of finding one's own identity through commodities and the anxiety caused by this desperate quest is perhaps best displayed in an early scene where Bateman, Van Pattern, McDermott and Price are sitting at a restaurant and comparing their business cards with each other. Bateman is the first to pull out his card, and he proudly presents it to the others. They all admire the card and its delicate fonts and fine colours, which Bateman seems very pleased by. However, as the others follow suit and present their own cards, each one finer than the previous, he starts getting more insecure, and seeing Van Patten's card causes in him "A brief spasm of jealousy" (Ellis 1991, 44). As they admire

another card that has been left on their table, starting the whole thing makes Bateman feel "unexpectedly depressed" (Ellis 1991, 45). The group's obsession over the business cards and for trumping each other almost comes off as a sort of penis envy or phallic competition and has an almost pornographic undertone to it, as evidenced by Bateman's reaction to Montgomery's card: "I pick up Montgomery's card and actually finger it, for the sensation the card gives off to the pads of my fingers" (Ellis 1991, 45).

The business card scene is also significant in another sense, as it is there that Bateman, for the first time during the course of the novel, starts to show clear signs of insecurity and uncertainty, although this is not expressly stated in his narrative. Shortly after this scene, we witness the first violent outburst from Bateman, who so far has presented himself as a very collected person: when he grows tired of McDermott's constant pleads for a red snapper pizza, he raises his fist at him and screams "No one wants the *fucking red snapper pizza*! A pizza should be *yeasty* and slightly *bready* and have a *cheesy crust*!" (1991, 46, emphasis by Ellis) Again, Bateman has very clear specifications of what a good and proper pizza should be like, and this is a repeated theme in his narration: he needs to be able to display his impeccable taste in every category of consumerism, be it food, clothing or home decorations and appliances – or, as seen in the previous scene, business cards – because that is his only means of defining his own identity.

Later in the novel, Bateman apologises to McDermott about the episode: “I’m sorry I insulted the pizzas at Pastels. Happy?” (Ellis 1991, 109) Notably, he is not apologising for his own behaviour or the fact that he hurt McDermott’s feelings, he is sorry about insulting the *pizzas,* as if insulting a commodity was the worst crime one could perform. McDermott, however, strikes back at him and shows Bateman an article in the Times where Donald Trump states that the best pizza in Manhattan is served at Pastels. This causes a noticeably nervous reaction in Bateman, and while he at first tries to avoid the issue by stating that he has to go back and retaste the pizza, he finally concludes: “Listen, if the pizza at Pastels is okay with Donny [...] it’s okay with me” (Ellis 1991, 110). This pathologically

compulsive striving for perfection and acceptance from other powerful figures seems to mirror Sassatelli's (2007, 114) observations about the politics of consumption and the way that we judge other people based on their taste and in that way deem their value. Being despised and ridiculed for his tastes appears to be Bateman's worst fear, and he is ready to go to any lengths to gain acceptance from those in his own social circles. This is further evidenced during a chapter titled "Lunch With Bethany", where Bateman confesses to his ex-girlfriend, Bethany, that he hates working at Pierce & Pierce. When Bethany asks him why he does not simply quit, Bateman gives her an uncharacteristically honest answer: "Because [...] I... want... to... fit... in" (Ellis 1991, 237).

It is precisely this overwhelming pressure from keeping up his social status and fitting in with his social class – yet at the same time trying to desperately distinguish himself from those belonging to it – that triggers the violent urges in Bateman. For instance, after a failed effort to get a late reservation at a top-tier restaurant for himself and his date, Patricia, Bateman starts contemplating his options, "stunned, feverish, feeling empty" (Ellis 1991, 75). He manages to get a reservation at a less luxurious restaurant, and after shaking off the tension this ordeal has caused him, he states:

> I come to the conclusion that Patricia *is* safe tonight, that I am not going to unexpectedly pull a knife out and use it on her just for the sake of doing so, that I am not going to get any pleasure watching her bleed from slits I've made by cutting out her throat or slicing her neck open or gouging her eyes out. She's lucky, even though there is no real reasoning behind the luck. It could be that she's safe because her wealth, her *family's* wealth, protects her tonight, or it could be that it's simply *my* choice. Maybe the glass of Scharffenberger has deadened my impulse or maybe it's simply that I don't want to ruin this particular Alexander Julian suit by having the bitch spray her blood all over it. (Ellis 1991, 76–77, emphases by Ellis.)

There is a certain element of dark humour to this passage that stems from the fact that, again, Bateman displays his unreliability as a narrator; he seems to be completely unaware about what causes these violent outbursts in him.

However, in a later chapter in the novel titled "Summer", Bateman momentarily reflects on his lack of emotions and the emptiness of his life:

> There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust [...] my depersonalization 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, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. (Ellis 1991, 282.)

According to Murphet (2002, 50), these philosophical musings clash with the otherwise one-dimensional, banal and detached narration of the novel. He goes on to state that

> [I]t is at least slightly discomfiting to have the words emerge from the fictional 'mind' of a character who is elsewhere so completely trapped by what they portend into reification, habit, repetition, pedantry and lurid fantasy. (Murphet 2002, 51.)

I, however, argue that despite this seemingly revelatory moment, Bateman is still unable to pinpoint the true cause behind this feeling, lapsing back to his old habits, only moments later announcing that "The only thing that calmed me was the satisfying sound of ice being dropped into a glass of J&B" (Ellis 1991, 282). Thus, I argue that the acts of violence Bateman commits are fuelled by the stress and anxiety caused by his consumer lifestyle, exacerbated by the fact that he is unable to truly see the roots of his problems which keeps him forever trapped in the endless rat race of shallow consumerism.

3.4 This Is Not an Exit – Violence and Consumerism

Although *American Psycho* was widely criticised for its extreme violence during the time of its release, it is worth noting that the first act of extreme violence does not occur until approximately one-fourth into the novel. Bateman's first victim is a black homeless person who Bateman encounters while on his way back from a black-tie party. Bateman describes the man in his typical fashion: "He's dressed in some kind of tacky-looking lime green polyester pantsuit with washed-out Sergio Valente jeans worn *over* it (this season's homeless person's fashion statement)" (Ellis 1991, 129). The irony here is that Bateman is more appalled by the way that the man is dressed than his true predicament, showing once more Bateman's indifference and incapacity for other people's misery. Bateman then begins to tease the man with a five-dollar note, asking him why he does not get a job. When the man

replies that he was laid off, Bateman continues: "'Why don't you get another one? [...] Why don't you get another job?" (Ellis 1991, 130) Unsatisfied with the man's answers, Bateman starts scolding him: "'Listen, do you think it's fair to take money from people who *do* have jobs? Who *do* work? [...] You've got a negative attitude. That's what's stopping you. You've got to get your act together.'" (Ellis 1991, 130, emphases by Ellis.) Finally, after having a fit of rage, Bateman concludes: "'Al... I'm sorry. It's just that... I don't know. I don't have anything in common with you.'" (Ellis 1991, 131.) Here, Bateman's excessively conservative, Reaganist values become clearly evident. According to him, the disadvantaged people have brought their problems onto themselves and have the same opportunities for good life and affluence as everybody else should they work towards it. However, Bateman also acknowledges in his own, affectless way that they are so far removed from each other in terms of social class that there is nothing in common between them. It is precisely this distance that enables Bateman to mutilate the homeless man in a highly graphic fashion. After finishing his deed, Bateman simply states: "I can't help but start laughing and I linger at the scene, amused by this tableau" (Ellis 1991, 132). The comment highlights the idea that for Bateman, the misery of the underprivileged is nothing but entertainment that he can exploit as he pleases.

Later, Bateman invites two women to his apartment: Elizabeth, "a twenty-year-old hardbody who sometimes models in Georges Marciano ads" (Ellis 1991, 283) and a prostitute called Christie whom Bateman had assaulted earlier. As the evening progresses, Bateman, who has spiked the girls' drinks, proceeds to have sex with them. After the very explicitly detailed sex scenes, things suddenly take a turn for the darker. As if in a movie, the scene suddenly cuts to Elizabeth dashing out of the bedroom, "blood already on her" (Ellis 1991, 289) and Bateman going after her and killing her with a butcher knife, all of which is described in gory detail. Patrick then returns to the bedroom where Christie is still lying and proceeds to torture and kill her as well. Afterwards, we get the following, grisly description of the aftermath:

> In the morning, for some reason, Christie's battered hands are swollen to the size of footballs, the fingers are indistinguishable from the rest of her hand and the smell coming from her burnt corpse is jolting and I have to open the Venetian blinds, which are spattered with burnt fat from when Christie's breasts burst apart, electrocuting her, and then the windows, to air out the room. Her eyes are wide open and glazed over and her mouth is lipless and black and there's also a black pit where her vagina should be (though I don't remember doing anything to it) and her lungs are visible beneath the charred ribs. What is left of Elizabeth's body lies crumpled in the corner of the living room. She's missing her right arm and chunks of her right leg. Her left hand, chopped off at the wrist, lies clenched on top of the island in the kitchen, in its own small pool of blood. Her head sits on the kitchen table and its blood-soaked face—even with both eyes scooped out and a pair of Alain Mikli sunglasses over the holes—looks like it's frowning. (Ellis 1991, 290–291.)

Bateman's narration contains an almost absurd amount of information here, and he describes the mangled corpses in such detail that it almost seems as if he was describing a work of fine art, marvelling at all its intricate details. Thus, the scene invites the reader to draw a connection to the points in the novel where Bateman describes the various consumer products in excessive, almost pornographic detail.

In fact, Murphet (2002, 45) argues that the gory scenes are the only instances in the novel where Bateman is capable of complex and eloquent language, indicating that the violence in the novel acts a means of liberating himself from the tediousness and repetition of consumerism. I, however, argue that this is not entirely true. While it is true that Bateman resorts to violence in order to relieve the stress caused by the consumer lifestyle, he is still unable to distance himself from the language and imagery of consumerism. For instance, after having killed Christie, Bateman has placed her severed head in a corner of his living room, intending to "use it as a jack-o'-lantern on Halloween" (Ellis 1991, 301) as if the body part was simply a part of his decoration. Furthermore, when describing the body of another girl he has murdered, Bateman states that "her stomach resembles the eggplant and goat cheese lasagna at Il Marlibro or some other kind of dog food" (Ellis 1991, 344) and that he wishes to "drink this girl's blood as if it were champagne" (Ellis 1991, 344). Thus, despite his best attempts, Bateman is simply too heavily absorbed in the world of consumerism to dissociate himself from it. As Bateman himself states, in a moment of rare self-reflection: "My rages at Harvard were

less violent than the ones now and it's useless to hope that my disgust will vanish—there is just *no way*" (Ellis 1991, 241, emphasis by Ellis).

The link between violence, pornography and consumerism is further emphasised in a chapter simply titled "Girls." After presumably having killed Paul Owen, Bateman has taken over his apartment and plans to have sex with two female escorts there. Bateman begins his exhaustive description of the scene by simply stating that "Sex happens—a hard-core montage" (Ellis 1991, 303) as if he was merely recounting a scene from a pornographic film. Bateman's extensive detailing of their sex acts is interrupted by sentences such as "I stare at the Angelis silk-screen print hanging over the bed and I'm thinking about pools of blood, geysers of the stuff" and "[A]ll I can think about is blood and what their blood will look like". He then proceeds to murder the escorts, filming their deaths in what he calls "an attempt to understand these girls" (Ellis 1991, 304). The implication here is that Bateman is only able to gain a deeper understanding of other human beings through a television screen, reflecting Baudrillard's (2014, 80) argument about the desocialising effects of mass media.

The idea of Bateman's world view being completely shaped by consumerism and mass-media is something that the novel constantly hints at. In fact, the phrase "I have to return some videotapes" (Ellis 1991, 265) becomes something of a catchphrase for him, repeated numerous time throughout the novel in slight variations. Bateman is also constantly referring to *The Patty Winters Show,* which deals with such ludicrous topics as "UFOs That Kill" (Ellis 1991, 115), "a boy who fell in love with a box of soap" (Ellis 1991, 297) – note the reference to commodity obsession – and "Toddler-Murderers" (Ellis 1991, 138). Bateman's obsession with serial killers is also brought up several times during the novel, as confirmed by a friend of his: "Bateman reads these biographies all the time: Ted Bundy and Son of Sam and Fatal Vision and Charlie Manson. All of them." (Ellis 1991, 92.) However, even in relation to this subject, Bateman is unable to distinguish between reality and fiction. Annoyed about Bateman's tendency to bring up serial killers into discussions in the most casual way, his friend McDermott complains: "I don't want to know anything about Son of Sam or the fucking

Hillside Strangler or Ted Bundy or Featherhead, for god sake" (Ellis 1991, 153). Bateman then corrects his friend, saying that the killer's name is in fact Leatherhead and that "He was part of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre [...] And he *was* exceptionally dangerous" (Ellis 1991, 153, emphasis by Ellis). The fact that Bateman makes no effort to separate the fictional killer, Leatherface, from the real-life counterparts that McDermot mentions suggests that he confuses Leatherface for a real person. Once again, this brings into focus Bateman's attitude towards human suffering: to him, there is no discernible difference between real and fictional violence, as to him it is all just a form of mass-produced entertainment.

Here, I want to go back to Baudrillard's concept of simulation, the substitution of "the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard 2014, 2), and consider how it might be applied to Bateman's obsession with serial killers and true-crime stories. Discussing a drama series about the Holocaust, Baudrillard (2014, 49–51) argues that the televised, hyperreal version of the event overshadows the real historical event and effaces its memory, replacing it with an artificial memory of the tragedy instead. A similar argument could be made about the so-called true-crime stories. Despite their claims for authenticity, they are often written in a style closely resembling that of fictional novels, allowing us to experience real violence from a distance. They seemingly represent the real yet are inevitably a constructed and selective version of reality, one often ignores the victims' side of the story entirely and thus eclipses the real tragedy in the same way as the televised version of the Holocaust. To add to the confusion, there also exist not only fictional stories based on real-life serial killers, but also stories that take their cues from real-life violence yet have no true basis in reality – such as the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Thus, the line between simulated violence and real-life suffering is increasingly blurred to the point where Bateman's understanding of the latter is overshadowed by the fictional accounts of violence.

As the novel progresses and the number of killings increases, Bateman's narration turns more and more disjointed and hallucinatory, and the blurred line between reality and fiction becomes increasingly heightened. For instance, Bateman's dreams are filled with images of "car wrecks and disaster footage, electric chairs and grisly suicides, syringes and mutilated pinup girls, flying saucers, marble Jacuzzis, pink peppercorns" (Ellis 1991, 371), as if they were a compilation of the kind of imagery one might find in news reels, commercials and movies. This disconnect between the real and the unreal is perhaps best illustrated in a later chapter called "Chase, Manhattan"[3] in which Bateman is fleeing from the police after shooting someone in the streets in a frantic scene that almost resembles something out of a lurid action movie. During this passage, the novel switches from its usual first-person narration to a third-person account of the events, and the scene proceeds to turn ever more outlandish: during a shootout between Bateman and the police, there are very cinematic descriptions of "guns flashing like in a movie", of a police car exploding and "sending a fireball billowing up into the darkness", and of Bateman "somersaulting" over an embankment. (Ellis 1991, 350–351.) The switch in the narrative mode heavily points to Bateman's inability to separate reality from the violent entertainment which he so eagerly consumes, mirroring the Baudrillardian idea of a postmodern image society where reality as we see it is constructed through various mass-produced commodities and mass media.

Bateman's tendency to distinguish between what is real and what is not is culminated when even the reality of his murders is brought into question. Bateman, wanting to return to the scene of crime at Paul Owen's apartment, wonders why there has not been any news about the bodies of the two escorts he murdered being discovered. He asks people if they have heard anything, to no avail, forcing him to conclude that "[L]ike in some movie, no one has heard anything, has any idea of what I'm talking about" (Ellis 1991, 367). When Bateman gets to Owen's apartment building, he notes that

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[3] Note the dual meaning here: "Chase" can be seen as a reference to the Chase Bank in Manhattan and the literal police chase that we witness during this scene, slyly inviting us to draw a link between capitalism and Bateman's declining sense of reality.

the building looks different than before, and also finds out that the keys he has do not fit the lock of the front door. When Bateman eventually gets inside the building and reaches the apartment, he discovers that a real estate agent is showing the apartment, now spotless, to a young couple. Looking at the apartment, Bateman makes the following observation: “New venetian blinds, the cowhide paneling is gone; however, the furniture, the mural, the glass coffee table, Thonet chairs, black leather couch, all seem intact” (Ellis 1991, 368). However, as Murphet (2002, 47) points out, the details differ from Bateman’s earlier description of the apartment:

> The living room is very spare, minimalist. The walls are white pigmented concrete, except for one wall, which is covered with a trendy large-scale scientific drawing, and the wall facing Fifth Avenue has a long strip of faux-cowhide paneling stretched across it. A black leather couch sits beneath it. (Ellis 1991, 218.)

There is no mention of Thonet chairs or a glass coffee table, and the fact that Bateman gets the black leather right can be attributed, Murphet argues, to the fact that it “in 1989, was *de rigeur*" (Murphet 2002, 48). This all indicates that Bateman has never actually been in the apartment, thus suggesting that the murders never took place either.

Further reinforcing the possibility that the murders are simply a figment of Bateman’s imagination is a conversation he has with Harold Carnes. Earlier, in the chapter titled “Chase, Manhattan”, Bateman had confessed his “thirty, forty, a hundred murders” (Ellis 1991, 352) to Harold in a message he left on his answering machine. Harold, who mistakes Bateman for someone named Davies, finds the idea of Bateman having killed anyone laughable. Frustrated, Bateman tries to convince Harold that he was the one who killed Paul Owen and the others, which Harold brushes off as an impossibility. This frustrates Bateman even further, and he demands to know why it is not possible, to which Harold answers: “’Because... I had... dinner... with Paul Owen... twice... in London... *just ten days ago*.’” (Ellis 1991, 388, emphasis by Ellis). Of course, given that Harold has already mistaken Bateman for someone else, it can be argued that the same thing had happened with Paul Owen. However, Bateman himself seems to become less and less convinced that the murders have happened at all,

indicated by his response to Harold: “I tell him simply, ’No, you... didn’t.’ But it comes out a question, not a statement.” (Ellis 1991, 388.)

Finally, in a revelatory moment of metafictional musing, Bateman declares:

> … 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 simply am not there*. (Ellis 1991, 376.)

At this point, the fictious nature of Bateman’s existence becomes clear to himself. In the end, he is nothing but a hollow embodiment of the consumer lifestyle, an illusory entity in a world that itself is formed out of illusory representations of reality. This sensation is deepened by Bateman’s subsequent observation:

> Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and persistent. [...] My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. (Ellis 1991, 377.)

However, despite this epiphany, Bateman still maintains that nothing has truly changed:

> But even after admitting this—and I have, countless times, in just about every act I’ve committed—and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*.… (Ellis 1991, emphasis by Ellis.)

Thus, in spite of recognising his hollowness as a human being and despite acknowledging the fact that his violent urges are his way of coping with the incessant pain caused by his lifestyle, no new insight has ultimately been gained; nothing he has done during the course of the novel has changed the fact that he still remains the same non-person that he ever was. He has not been able to challenge the *status quo* in any way nor find any new meaning for his existence, and all he is left with is this empty act of admission. In some ways, this scene brings to mind Baudrillard’s words about America as the perfect simulacrum:

> Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too. It may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum – that of the immanence and material transcription of all values. The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves

> simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model. (Baudrillard 2010, 28.)

Previously, I have argued that the world that Bateman inhabits is a perfect example of simulacra and the hyperreal. If this is the case, we then must conclude that he, too, lacks the ability to view it from the outside. What this means is that, despite his moments of self-reflection, he is not truly able to see this "the material transcription of all values", which thus renders his epiphany useless.

During the final pages, the novel returns to its familiar format, with Bateman and his friends sitting in Harry's and having their usual, empty discussion about restaurant reservations, expensive consumer goods, and fashion products. This serves as a further indication that, despite everything, Bateman's life remains the same as ever, and his lust for violence also remains unsatisfied: amidst discussing with his friends, he tells us that "I'd made a necklace from the bones of some girl's vertebrae" (Ellis 1991, 395) and that his ATM has started to leave him messages such as "'Cause a Terrible Scene at Sotheby's' or 'Kill the President' or 'Feed Me a Stray Cat'" (Ellis 1991, 395). This tells us that, if anything, Bateman's violent fantasies have turned even more lurid and absurd than before. As a final revelatory moment, the novel ends with the words "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (Ellis 1991, 399, capitalisation by Ellis), illuminated on a sign above one of the doorways in the bar. The words seem to serve as a confirmation for the fact that, in the end, Bateman is doomed to forever remain trapped in the endless and unavoidable cycle of consumerism and violence, with no exit in sight.

4 Conclusion

In the beginning of this thesis, I explained that my goal was to show how the violence in *American Psycho* serves as a means of reinforcing its satirical take on the consumer society. I pointed out how the novel was widely misread during the time of its release and was criticised for both its extreme violence and its monotonous, multi-page descriptions of various consumer products. Thus, my crucial concern was to point out a link between the novel's violent passages and its more tedious sections, my hypothesis being that hyperviolence is the novel's main character's way of dealing with the numbness caused by his lifestyle and the constant pressure of trying to prove his superiority through incessant consumption.

Employing studies on postmodernism both as a literary form and as a social phenomenon as my theoretical framework, I examined how the satirisation and criticism of postmodern consumerism is constructed within the novel. Firstly, I examined the novel through its setting, arguing that *American Psycho* has a special emphasis on place. Set in New York in the 1980s, the novel's setting can be seen as a microcosmic representation of the consumer society in general, and my finding was that the novel discusses violence on two main levels: in addition to the explicit violence inflicted by Bateman on his victims, the novel also examines the objective violence of capitalism, wealth and power through the dichotomy present in the form of its Wall Street yuppie main characters and the city's underprivileged population.

This finding was further reinforced when I examined how the novel comments on the link between consumerism and the disregard towards human suffering. Through its characters, the novel reflects the Baudrillardian idea of a media-saturated world where mass-produced commodities have replaced real human interaction. The only things that the characters in the novel are able to discuss in length are the various luxury products and commodities that they are surrounded by, and the

novel's main character's lengthy descriptions of various consumer products delivered in monotonous ad-talk heighten the sense that his existence and language is completely shaped by the world of mass produced commodities, advertisements and mass media. I discussed how, through creating characters whose only values in life lie in how many and how expensive products they own, Ellis comments on the dehumanising nature of capitalism and its tendency to breed more inequality.

I also examined how the link between violence and consumerism is emphasised in the novel through its discussion of the de-individualising nature of consumerism. The characters in the novel are in a constant competition of who owns the nicest clothes, who possesses the most expensive and luxurious products, and who generally has the finest and most refined taste. I showed that the pressure caused by this constant competitiveness is what fuels the violence tendencies in the novel's main character. My argument was that it is this overwhelming pressure of trying to keep up one's social status through means of consumption that Ellis satirises in the novel, emphasising the excessiveness of this lifestyle with the excessive portrayals of violence.

Finally, I examined some of the novel's gratuitously violent scenes in closer detail, arguing how most of the aforementioned issues come together in these segments. The dehumanising effects of capitalism, the blurring between reality and fiction through constant media saturation, and the pressures of consumerism are the reasons that Bateman is able to perform these murders. Furthermore, the excessively graphic nature of the murders is explained by the fact that Bateman's whole existence is characterised by excess, which then is reflected in these passages. My final finding was that despite Bateman's best efforts, he is simply too deeply involved in the hyperreal world of materialism and media saturation to escape the endless cycle of empty consumerism, which implies that his murderous lust also remains unsatisfied, ultimately solidifying the link between consumerism and violence.

In further studies, it might be of interest to examine how the themes of mass consumerism and violence as well as the Baudrillardian hyperreal examined in this study are relevant to Ellis's later

works. For instance, Ellis's 2010 novel *Imperial Bedroom* – a sequel to his first novel *Less Than Zero* – deals with somewhat similar themes as *American Psycho* but takes place in the 2010's and comments on the new communication technologies that have taken a major role in people's lives today. Thus, it might be worthwhile to analyse the novel through the Baudrillardian theories of hyperreality and image-mediated culture presented in this thesis and to examine what parts of Baudrillard's theories still remain relevant in the wake of the new technologies and what might have changed. Another topic for further studies could be to examine the themes of *American Psycho* against modern-day society and culture in general. For instance, in today's turbulent cultural and political climate, the issues of wealth, power, oppression and inequality have reared their head again in a very prominent way, meaning that the themes of capitalism and violence examined in this thesis remain topical to this day.

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