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Spatialized Capitalism in Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences
M.A. Thesis
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ABSTRACT

Karo Nyman: Disappear Here: Spatialized Capitalism in Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*
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In this thesis, I examine Los Angeles as a space of capitalist proliferation and the effects the spatialized capitalism and consumerism have on the characters of *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010), two novels by Bret Easton Ellis. Both novels follow the same cast of affluent individuals, living in Los Angeles and having ties to the entertainment industry it is famous for. The combined narrative coincides with the emergence of intensifying consumer culture and the realization of new media, exploring these developments and providing critique from within. I argue that through capitalist pressures, Ellis' characters transform into two-dimensional subjects, akin to the two-dimensional surfaces featured prominently in the narrative, such as mobile screens and billboards. The loss of autonomy and the self result in characters' going through a process of engulfment and entrapment, two central terms in this thesis.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. In Chapter 2, I explore the city of Los Angeles as a paradigmatic center of capitalist developments. Through dialogue with scholars from multiple different fields, such as urban theory, sociology, and geocriticism, I lay out the framework for the concepts of engulfment and entrapment. In Chapter 3 I draw on Mike Featherstone's work on postmodern consumer culture. I argue that engulfment happens through clonification, dehumanization and commodification of the cast of *Less Than Zero*. In Chapter 4, I explore entrapment through an intermedial framework, focusing on the cinematic writing style of *Imperial Bedrooms*.

Capitalism and consumer culture are embedded into every aspect of Ellis' characters' everyday lives, and it is realized through their habits of consumption, as well as through the intermedial aspects of the narrative. Through textual analysis of the novels, I conclude that the intertwining of these levels creates a presentation of a capitalist space where characters are reduced to gears of the machine, essentially disappearing in and engulfed by the consumerist and superficial Los Angeles as portrayed in Ellis' novels.

Keywords: Los Angeles, capitalism, consumer culture, intermediality, spatiality

TIIVISTELMÄ

Karo Nyman: Disappear Here: Spatialized Capitalism in Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*
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Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tutkin Los Angelesia kapitalistisena tilana ja tarkastelen millaisia vaikutuksia tällä tilaan sidotulla kapitalismilla ja kulutuskulttuurilla on romaanien *Less Than Zero* (1985) ja *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010) henkilöhahmoihin. Molemmat romaanit ovat Bret Easton Ellisin käsialaa ja seuraavat samoja varakkaita, keskellä Los Angelesin viihdeteollisuutta asuvia henkilöitä. Kirjojen tarina sijoittuu samalle ajanjaksolle kuin kulutuskulttuurin yleistyminen ja uusmedian nousu ja näin ollen käsittelee ja kritisoi näitä kehityskulkuja. Esitän tutkielmassani, että kapitalismin seurauksena Ellisin henkilöhahmot muuttuvat kulutuskulttuurin kaksiulotteisiksi palvelijoiksi, subjekteiksi. Tämä saa heidät muistuttamaan muita tarinan kaksiulotteisia objekteja, kuten mannekiineja, näyttöjä ja mainostauluja. Autonomian ja identiteetin katoamisen myötä henkilöhahmot kokevat nielaisun (engulfment) ja motituksen (entrapment), jotka ovat kaksi tämän tutkielman keskeistä termiä.

Tutkielma on jaettu kolmeen lukuun. Luvussa 2 tarkastelen Los Angelesin kaupunkia mallikappaleena modernin kapitalismin kehityksestä. Esitän, kuinka tutkijat urbaaniteorian, sosiologian ja geokritiikin aloilta ovat luonnehtineet kaupunkia. Tämän debatin kautta luon viitekehyksen nielaisulle ja motitukselle. Kahdessa seuraavassa luvussa täsmennän näitä kahta termiä. Luvussa 3 teoriapohja perustuu Mike Featherstonen työhön postmodernin kulutuskulttuurin parissa. Väitän, että *Less Than Zero* -kirjan henkilöhahmot kohtaavat nielaisun kloonifikaation, ihmisarvon katoamisen ja esineellistymisen kautta. Neljännessä luvussa tarkastelen motituksen konseptia intermediaalisen ja monimediaisen viitekehyksen kautta. Keskityn erityisesti kirjan *Imperial Bedrooms* elokuvalliseen kerrontaan.

Kapitalismi ja kulutuskulttuuri ovat keskeisessä roolissa Ellisin henkilöhahmojen jokapäiväisessä elämässä. Tämä tulee esille henkilöhahmojen kulutustottumusten sekä tarinan intermediaalisten piirteiden kautta. Tekstianalyysin kautta selviää, että yhteen nivottuna nämä tasot luovat kuvan kapitalistisesta tilasta, joka alistaa henkilöhahmot toimimaan kapitalistisen koneiston palasina. Tämä nielaisee ja motittaa heidät Ellisin versioon kulutuskulttuurin ja pinnallisten piirteiden kyllästämästä Los Angelsista.

Avainsanat: Los Angeles, kapitalismi, kulutuskulttuuri, intermediaalisuus, spatiaalisuus

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1. Introduction

In this thesis, I examine Los Angeles as a space of capitalist proliferation, and what effects this spatialized capitalism and consumerism has on the characters of *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010), two novels by Bret Easton Ellis. Both novels follow the same cast of affluent individuals, living in Los Angeles and having ties to the entertainment industry it is famous for. The combined narrative takes place on two different eras, the cast being on the verge of adulthood in the mid-1980s and middle-aged in the subsequent novel, taking place in the early 2010s. As demonstrated in the following chapters, this period coincides with intensifying consumer culture and the emergence of new media, resulting in the intertwining of capitalist processes into every aspect of life in postmodern consumer societies. Through an in-depth study of Los Angeles as portrayed by Ellis, I aim to demonstrate how capitalism and consumer culture are embedded into space and everyday life of Los Angeles, and how the characters in Ellis' novels become subjugated and subordinated to capitalist machinery. I argue that the characters go through a process of engulfment and entrapment, two central terms that are elaborated on over the course of this thesis.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. In chapter 2, I examine the developments that led to Los Angeles being at the center of capitalist development. In this chapter, a heavy emphasis is put on the work of Edward W. Soja and how his work is examined and expanded by various scholars. As consumer culture is a central aspect of modern capitalism, I also outline how various critics see consumer culture, how it manifests itself in Los Angeles, and how it is expressed in Ellis' work, with emphasis on *Less Than Zero*. By analyzing capitalist Los Angeles and its consumer culture, I create the framework for

the concepts of engulfment and entrapment and exemplify how the privileged consumers that are Ellis' characters go through these processes.

The following chapter focuses on the engulfment of capitalist subjects. Through a textual analysis of *Less Than Zero*, I argue that engulfment happens with Ellis' characters when the subject goes through clonification, dehumanization and commodification brought about by the conspicuous consumption and extreme adherence to the consumer culture. Through engulfment, the subject becomes two-dimensional, subordinated to the capitalist ideology Los Angeles harbours. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the intermedial analysis of *Imperial Bedrooms*. I examine how cinematic storytelling realizes the concept of entrapment. With an emphasis on Clay's character, I argue that intermedial entrapment confines him to multiple intermedial spaces, further subjecting him to the capitalist ideology.

Ellis' distinctive literary style is nowadays widely known as 'blank fiction', a term coined by James Annesley. Ellis has been a central figure of this genre since the publication of *Less Than Zero,* the novel being "an instant success, both financially and critically" as described by Johannes Malkmes (85). During the 1980s, the period Ellis' debut novel was published and is situated in, "consumer culture reached a new level . . . and soon society had to face overconsumption." (Malkmes, 82) Naomi Mandel supplements Malkmes' statement, articulating that

> The novel [*Less Than Zero*] established Ellis as a representative writer of his generation, alternately described as the Blank Generation or Generation X, and (with authors Tama Janowitz and Jay McInerney) a member of the literary "brat pack"—a group of young, photogenic authors characterized by seemingly infinite media presence, popularity, and marketability. (2)

Annesley characterizes that this 'brat pack', a group of writers associated with Ellis and producing blank fiction, explores themes of "disaffection, decadence and brutality" (2), with "stories of indolence, extremism and marginality" (ibid.) often found in their works.

He then details that blank fiction is saturated with references to late 20th-century American life, the novels being cluttered with products, personalities and places that characterize this era (6). Therefore, "blank fiction is profoundly aware of its own time and place", not only depicting the time period but also speaking "the commodified language of its own period" (6-7). Blank fiction is also characterized by transgressive themes. For Laszlo B. Sari, "Bret Easton Ellis has been a transgressive writer ever since the beginning of his career" (481). Transgressivity can be found in the way Ellis' novels have "directly challenged received literary conventions", "confronting institutionalized forms of representation" and "transgressing generic boundaries" (ibid.).

Although Ellis rose to prominence already with *Less Than Zero*, his third novel *American Psycho* is considered Ellis' magnum opus, the start of his mature period (Mandel, 1) and has garnered greater academic interest compared to his other works, despite its tumultuous launch. Malkmes recounts how the book was initially dropped by the first publisher, subsequently picked up and published by Vintage House to great international controversy, the most critique directed towards its hyperviolent and misogynistic subject matter (88-89). Overall, Ellis' work has not received unanimous acceptance in the literary scene, with some critics[1] viewing his novels as self-indulgent and barren of meaning. Both Malkmes and Mandel disagree with this view, instead suggesting that Ellis' work has challenged the conventions of literary criticism, inviting academia to treat his works as a gateway into the ideology and structures they criticize, they essentially being the products of consumer culture. After this realization, the reader can find and analyze the critique of consumer capitalism hidden in the 'blank' pages of Ellis' novels.

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/26/critical-eye-book-reviews-roundup

As Malkmes argues, the prominent references to branded commercial products establish "a link between Blank Fiction and the dynamics of contemporary capitalism and its consumer culture" (96). The prominence of brand names thus comments on and criticizes the system from within, as the novels are firmly situated in the postmodern capitalist society. Graham J. Matthews agrees, proposing that "blank fiction is read as being able to provoke a stronger response by a virtue of its lack of affect" (69). These observations are in line with Annesley's characterization and thus derived from his seminal work on blank fiction. He articulates that while some critics have deemed this type of literature to have little to no value, "it is the blank, empty and commercial nature of these novels that, in a paradoxical fashion, open up a way of conceptualising contemporary conditions and turns the process of saying a little into the act of disclosing a lot" (10).

As already established, *American Psycho* enjoys the greatest amount of academic interest out of Ellis' novels and has been a popular primary material for Master's theses. Sini Mannila explores the unreliability of Patrick Bateman in her 2013 thesis, arguing that the unreliable narration of Bateman enables him to commit exceedingly audacious acts of murder without prosecution, creating dramatic irony (71). In a more recent thesis, Samuli Kauppila considers the relationship between consumerism and violence in *American Psycho*. Arguing that violence serves as a satirical criticism of consumerism, he explores the effects consumer culture has on identity and individual, themes that are also central in my work. Furthermore, he touches on the importance of geography, stating that "Bret Easton Ellis usually places a very heavy emphasis on place and location" (Kauppila, 33), and comments on how the city of Los Angeles is of great importance to the narrative of *Less Than Zero* before moving on to analyze New York. It is exactly this centrality of Los Angeles, both as a geographical location and as a space of capitalist

ideology, that I base my analysis on, thus expanding on the ideas proposed by Kauppila. Furthermore, he proposes that in future studies, it would be worthwhile to analyze how Imperial Bedrooms "comments on the new communication technologies that have taken major role in people's lives" (Kauppila, 71) an issue I examine in detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

In recent history, there has been a significant increase in interest towards a spatial standpoint in the field of literary and cultural studies, as opposed to the earlier domination of temporality (Tally Jr., 12). This shift is dubbed as "spatial turn" and is motivated by various socio-cultural changes taking place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as the development of the communication network and the World Wide Web. He then specifies that this spatial turn has essentially "been a product of, or response to, the postmodern condition" (Tally Jr., 38). In the vein of Robert Tally's proposal, Lev Manovich ties the spatial turn and advancements in the information technology together, stating that:

> In the 1980s many critics described one of the key effects of "postmodernism" as that of spatialization—privileging space over time, flattening historical time, refusing grand narratives. Computer media, which evolved during the same decade, accomplished this spatialization quite literally … In short, time became a flat image or a landscape, something to look at or navigate through.
> (Manovich, 78)

The "spatial confusion" (Tally Jr., 14) arising from these developments can be traced to a wider concept of globalization. When talking about globalization, the system of capitalism and its "permeation of almost every nook and cranny of the world" (ibid.) is central to the global economy, the two systems being in close relation to each other. Discussion of these massive constructs in the scope of this thesis becomes viable by focusing on a specific geographic area, Los Angeles. The city's central role in the proliferation of late modern capitalism, and its importance in the overarching narrative of *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms,* are the motivations for employing a spatial angle

in this thesis. I argue that capitalism is spatialized and embedded in the urban space of Ellis' Los Angeles. Through this spatialized capitalism, the characters of *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms* are engulfed and entrapped, transforming them into two-dimensional subjects subjected to serve the proliferation of consumer capitalism.

2. Los Angeles: Ground Zero of Capitalist Space

There was a song I heard when I was in Los Angeles by a local group. The song was called "Los Angeles" and the words and images were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days. The images, I later found out, were personal and no one I knew shared them. The images I had were of people driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children.
—Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*

The city of Los Angeles has been of great importance and interest to the 20th century critical social and urban theorists, especially to those having their theoretical roots in Western Marxism. In this chapter, the bulk of the theoretical framework is derived from the works of Edward W. Soja, Celia Lury, and Michael J. Dear. However, this list is far from exhaustive. Indeed, the academic interest surrounding Los Angeles seems to be as multi-faceted and heterogenous as the city itself, with scholars from a wide range of disciplines conducting research on the city. This multidisciplinary interest can be explained by Los Angeles' exceptional urban and industrial development and the central role in the rise and proliferation of modern capitalism, and adjacent to it, consumer culture. Moreover, Los Angeles, in many ways, seems to deviate from the "Chicago School" tradition that dominated the field for many decades (Dear, 10), making it a curious case of urban, social, and industrial development. One of the central assumptions of Chicago School was the "modernist view of the city as a unified whole, that is, a coherent regional system in which the center organizes its hinterland" (Dear, ix). As demonstrated later, Los Angeles is a decentralized, postmodern metropolis, resisting this characterization.

When it comes to consumer culture and mass consumption in Euro-American societies, capitalism and mass production are widely cited as the main sources of the pronounced consumption habits in contemporary western culture (Lury, 10). The rise of

Los Angeles as a concentration of capitalism has its roots in the developments that took place in as early as the middle of the 19th century. As Soja states,

> Marx's premonitory curiosity about California was piqued by the extraordinary events following the gold discoveries of 1848. Out of practically nowhere, a formidable capitalist presence emerged along the Pacific Ocean rim of the New World, beginning a Californian tilt to the global space economy of capitalism that would continue for the next century and half. (190)

At first, the San Francisco Bay region was the central geographical area associated with this phenomenon. However, it did not end there. From 1880 onwards, Soja describes an "another, more local, tilting that would sustain the Californianization of capitalism through the twentieth century" (191). This localization put Los Angeles at the forefront of capitalist development: "The rise of Southern California, the region centred on the city of Los Angeles, has confirmed the prescient intuition of Marx. Since 1900, there may be no other place where the upheavals associated with capitalist centralization have developed more rapidly or shamelessly" (ibid.). The curious aspect of Soja's discussion of Los Angeles is the prominent use of language associated with centrality and the circular. This already gives Los Angeles the impression of a space of ideological importance, radiating its influence in a circular manner. Furthermore, it denotes both inward and outward impact: while influence is spreading all around the center, individuals, members of the consumer culture, are unconsciously drawn towards it. Indeed, Soja asserts that

> one might call the sprawling urban region defined by the sixty-mile (100 kilometre) circle around the centre of the City of Los Angeles a *prototopos*, a paradigmatic place; or, pushing inventiveness still further, a *mesocosm*, an ordered world in which the micro and the macro, the idiographic and the nomothetic, the concrete and the abstract, can be seen simultaneously in an articulated and interactive combination. (ibid.)

Thus, it can be asserted that the spatial dimensions of Los Angeles are ideological both on concrete and abstract level, and furthermore, these two levels are intertwined and strengthen each other. Building on this claim, the purpose of this chapter is to

demonstrate, through a dialogue with various critics associated with the issue, how Los Angeles can be seen as an essentially capitalist space that has a multi-level influence on its inhabitants, in this case restricted to the characters of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*.

As capitalism is an ideological and political system, discussing it in tandem with space ties the spatial and political dimensions together. As understood by Tally Jr., geocriticism, "or spatial critical theory . . . include[s] both aesthetics and politics" (113). In defining geocritical methodology, Bertrand Westphal presents three stops that help to "identify the theoretical underpinnings of geocriticism" (6). The first of these is spatiotemporality, explaining the favouring of space over time as articulated by Tally Jr., and how "temporal metaphors tend to spatialize time" (ibid.). The second stop explores the mobility of contemporary space. This is called transgressivity and makes spaces "fundamentally fluid" (ibid.). Lastly, there is referentiality, which "refers to the relations between reality and fiction, between the spaces of the world and the spaces in the text" (ibid.). Los Angeles is understood as a postmodern, multiphrenic city. This, in addition to Ellis' version of the city being the focus of my analysis, makes geocriticism a viable methodology for this thesis, along with a post-Marxist critique of capitalism consumer culture.

As noted earlier, Los Angeles' association with capitalist machinery is indisputable. While Soja describes immense industrial growth in the Los Angeles area in the latter half of the 20th century, this development surely has not decelerated in the 21st century either. Indeed, the GDP of the Los Angeles metro area has almost doubled since the turn of the millennium.[2] Furthermore, the majority of the capital is accumulated at the very center of the system, as Dear states that the 60-mile circle, Soja's *protopos*, around

[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/183822/gdp-of-the-los-angeles-metro-area/

downtown Los Angeles ”has more than half the state’s population and personal income” while only comprising “5 percent of California’s total land area” (11). He also mentions the extraordinary consumption behavior happening inside this area. This brings us to the central aspect of modern capitalism, consumer culture, and with it, the consumption of commodities. Lury defines commodity and commodification in a Marxist way, describing them as goods characterized with an “alienating division of labour” and manufactured “for exchange on the market” (37). This means that there is a great gab between production and utilization of the goods. Malkmes agrees, identifying how modern capitalism is characterized by the gap between production and consumption, as the consumer is removed from the producer, with consumption treated as an antithesis to production, “because what is being produced must be used up”[3] (7-14). Indeed, for the latter part of 20th century and onwards, life in western societies has been characterized by increased centrality on consumption, especially compared to production, although the latter still “continues to play a key role in the US economy and society” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 16). This contrasts with the early form of capitalism conceptualized by Marx, where consumption was subordinated to production in a factory setting (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 20).

I would also like to add the dimension of non-necessity to the definition of commodity, as that is a central aspect of consumer culture. If people did not strive for possessions that are not vital for their sustenance, capitalism in its contemporary form would be in a dire predicament. In his book *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (1998), Jean Baudrillard presents a theory of consumption. As noted in an introduction

[3] However, George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson have argued in favor of a new ‘prosumer’ capitalism, in which the subject is both producer and consumer. This development is discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis. For a full commentary, see Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010).

by George Ritzer, Baudrillard's work is based in structuralism, a particularly spatially oriented tradition (Tally Jr., 117-118), and through this perspective, he proposes that what we consume are not commodities per se, but signs instead. These signs include messages and images (Ritzer, 7). "This means", Ritzer states,

> that consumers need to be able to 'read' the system of consumption in order to know what to consume. Furthermore, because we all know the 'code', we know the meaning of the consumption of one commodity rather than another. Commodities are no longer defined by their use, but rather by what they signify. And what they signify is defined not by what they do, but by their relationship to the entire system commodities and signs. There is an infinite range of difference available in this system and people therefore are never able to satisfy their need for commodities, for difference. It is that which in Baudrillard's view helps account for the seeming insatiability and continual dissatisfaction of consumers. (ibid.)

My reading of this passage is essentially rooted in the idea of deception. Although consumers may know the rules of the system and be familiar with this code of consumption, these aforementioned rules are not written by them, but rather by the capitalist structures and pressures that consumers are subjected to from all directions. This also happens unconsciously, as consumers are taught to read the signs, while their inherent emptiness is kept secret. This breeds anxiety, which in turn creates dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction essentially leads to entrapment and engulfment, two central terms in this thesis. Dissatisfied as they are, individuals in Ellis' novels seek to alleviate this feeling by increasing and intensifying their habits of consumption, until they reach a point where everything is seen as a commodity, including other people. At its extreme, this is portrayed when Rip Millar, a drug dealer and an acquaintance of the narrator-protagonist Clay, kidnaps and molests a twelve-year-old girl. The exchange between the two is as follows:

> "But you don't need anything. You have everything," I tell him. Rip looks at me. "No. I don't." "What?" "No, I don't." There's a pause and then I ask, "Oh shit, Rip, what don't you have?" "I don't have anything to lose."
> (Ellis, 191-192)

Rip, a subject for whom every conceivable commodity is within his reach, does not find meaning through consumption. The value of commodities comes out as nothing, leading to profound cynicism and indifference. Even the most severe form of 'ownership' cannot fulfil the void inside the privileged consumer. Thus, they are trapped in the permanent cycle of consumption, forever circling around an empty center. This leads to the loss of individuality and humanity, as well as engulfment by the capitalist machinery, reducing the characters into two-dimensional objects moving across the capitalist space and reproducing it with their vicissitudes.

These notions are connected to the very space of Los Angeles in the two novels by Ellis. In *Less Than Zero,* one of the important narrative devices is a billboard spelling "Disappear Here". The protagonist, Clay, drives past it at the beginning of the novel and remarks that "even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light" (Ellis, 38-39). The ominous message of the billboard stays with him, and later in the novel, Clay states that "You can disappear here without knowing it" (Ellis, 176). Here, the capitalist gravitational pull of the city becomes overt, internalized, and spatialized. The external signs of consumer culture written in the capitalist space of Los Angeles easily permeate the subject. These signs are ever-present, surrounding the individuals and imbuing them with a sense of uneasy feeling that is a mixture of dissatisfaction and fear of loss of the self.

According to Ritzer, Baudrillard argues that "Ultimately, what is being consumed in the consumer society is consumption itself. That last point is best exemplified by advertising" (15). As commodities are empty of meaning and unnecessary, the role of advertising is to fill this void and imbue the object with significance (Lury, 60). Moreover, a curious thing about watching or reading advertisements is that essentially, "people are

consuming them; they are consuming consumption" (Ritzer, 15). Taking this statement further, I argue that it is also the consumers that are being consumed through the consumer culture, and this can happen unconsciously to the consumer. Lury agrees, arguing that in Baudrillard's view, consumption leads to the loss of autonomy. Consumption is essentially a new form of power and social control in modern societies, and because of this people become "vehicles for expressing the difference between objects" instead of "people using objects to express differences between themselves" (Lury, 68-70). This can be tied to the idea of engulfment introduced above. As commodities are by nature dispensable, individuality does not matter as the consumer, in this case the consumer culture itself, moves on to the next commodity. Moreover, it should be noted that consumption does not have to be an active act or process: the members of consumer culture consume by simply being parts of the system.

In search of the difference mentioned earlier, consumers become so entangled in the system of signs that they become codified themselves, reproducing these signs for the benefit of the capitalist machinery: "As more and more needs, wants and desires are brought into the realm of signification, individuals lose autonomous control and surrender to the code" (Lury, 68). According to Ritzer, Baudrillard seems to agree, as he views consumption as a structure external to individuals that has coercive power over them: "it is above else a coded system of signs" (15) and individuals "are coerced into using that system. The use of that system via consumption is an important way in which people communicate with one another" (ibid.). But this sense of communication, Lury states, is both misleading and erroneous. For her, Baudrillard's argument says that through consumption, people are distanced from others and even from themselves: "while the new system of consumer capitalism appears to offer a new freedom or emancipation", this freedom is as empty of meaning and content as the pre-advertised commodity (Lury, 68).

Taking this line of thought further, this kind of communication between people also appears shallow, meaningless, and devoid of substance. Such examples of communication are widely present in Ellis' novels. The following excerpt also exemplifies how the ultimately hollow culture of consumption gains spatial dimension through a road metaphor:

> "Where are we going? I asked "I don't know," he said. "Just driving." "But this road doesn't go anywhere," I told him. "That doesn't matter." "What does?" I asked, after a little while. "Just that we're on it, dude," he said. (Ellis, 195)

Here, Clay and Rip are once again together shortly before the former's departure back to New Hampshire. Rip, driving the car, takes a turn down a street that is a dead end, sparking the exchange above. Continuing down that street is an act lacking meaning and substance, and Rip decides to do it anyway, even though he sees its insignificance. Los Angeles, I argue, serves as a capitalist impasse in Ellis's novels. The subjects, members of the consumer culture, are driving forward, endlessly searching for the difference within the system of consumer capitalism. No matter the direction, each turn and intersection brings them closer to the center. Through the mobility of the road, subjects are given a sense of advancement and agency as they navigate the consumer culture. This, however, only shrouds the fact that this very culture is the one holding the agency, and the members are thoroughly subjected to it, their movement serving only to reproduce the system. This demonstrates what Louis Althusser meant by interpellation. He argues that "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)" (130). The capitalist ideology indeed recruits and transforms every individual into a capitalist subject, being subjected by simply existing in the consumer-capitalist ideology.

When it comes to the concrete structural layout of the city, Dear points out that it lacks iconic architectural landmarks such as those found in New York or Chicago, and

"appears to be a city without common narrative, except perhaps an iconography of the bizarre" (11). "If pressed", he continues, "most observers would single out freeways as the key to LA, but the tenacity of this symbol seems to rest more with the picture-postcard makers than in the minds of the residents" (ibid.). However, he proposes that it is indeed the freeways that "created the signature landscape of modernist Los Angeles – a flat totalization, uniting a fragmented mosaic of polarized neighborhoods segregated by race, ethnicity and class" (110). Martin Wachs does not agree with this sense of union, instead asserting that "the freeways of Los Angeles are terribly destructive of a sense of community, that they cut swatches out of the urban fabric and provide barriers to community cohesion by creating enormous discontinuities throughout the city" (131). That is to say, while the freeway system seemingly unites the different, disjointed sectors of the city together, this cohesion is superficial and misleading. Ellis opens *Less Than Zero* with the following words: "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (9). These are the words that are uttered by Blair, Clay's ex-girlfriend, upon Clay's return to the city. Similarly, with "Disappear Here", the words leave an enduring echo in Clay's mind that stays with him "for an uncomfortably long time" (ibid.). This fear of merging can be tied to the wider socio-racial segregation taking place in the city, as the freeways serve as portals through which one can navigate to their own region without the need of merging with the social and urban substance outside this area. People are afraid to merge as they are unconsciously constrained by the surrounding socio-cultural pressures relating to their role and status in the capitalist consumer culture, the freeway serving as the spatialization of these pressures. Torin Monahan seems to agree with this sentiment, describing Los Angeles as an anti-urban, even anti-human environment. Drawing from the work of William Fulton, Monahan states that various social upheavals that have taken place in the city have only pushed the wealthy and the middle classes farther away from

each other, both in a physical and psychological sense, resulting in a "kind of *cocoon citizenship* that precludes diverse communities" (161). The characters of the two Ellis novels are undoubtedly part of this kind of cocoon, as they are privileged members of wealthy upper-class families involved in the entertainment industry. The heterogeneous patchwork of Los Angeles is thus reduced to a collection of homogenous and inward communities.

Therefore, fragmentation and disconnectedness seem to be qualities associated with Los Angeles. Westphal identifies multiple entities of Los Angeles that deviate from the conception of a traditional city, those being "a *flexcity* (postindustrial metropolis), a *cosmopolis* (a global and "glocal" world city), a *polaricity* (typified by increasing social inequalities), a *carceral* city (a prison or police polis), or *simcity* (hyperreal space of simulacra)" (160, italics in original). In addition to these definitions of Los Angeles, there are also strong mental images and conceptions tied to the city, once again communicated by the capitalist machinery. It can be argued that the majority of the people who have never been in Los Angeles but are familiar with western popular culture have their own, somehow distorted but nevertheless clear, picture of it. As Dear puts it, there is no single reality when it comes to Los Angeles, but rather a multiplicity of "singular myths in the minds of its many observers" (14). This, according to Monahan, mythicizes Los Angeles and derogates it as "a real place with historical roots where people live and are in constant need of better living conditions" (162). This is because the city, being the home of Hollywood, has an extensive representation in the entertainment industry, making it a subject to an external, distanced observance. Discussing the key characteristics of Los Angeles, Dear argues that "media-conscious observers take their lead from the cinematic and televisual, invoking images of LA as the labyrinth of *film noir*, a warren of half-truth

and deception" (11). This way, the city is indeed a space of ideals and promises rather than a space of concreteness and realities.

Eventually, it all comes back to the fact that Los Angeles is ultimately a space of capitalist proliferation. Dear describes that for "Ed Soja, Los Angeles is a decentered, decentralized metropolis powered by the insistent fragmentation of post-Fordism, i.e. an increasingly flexible disorganized regime of capitalist accumulation" (13). The limits of the city are difficult to define, thus the distinction between center and periphery has become blurred (Westphal, 160). My use of the terms center and centrality deviate from Soja's, emphasizing Los Angeles as the ideological center of capitalism. While I acknowledge the decentered and decentralized nature of the city, I also argue that the actual spatial layout does not disturb the idea of centrality, since capitalism and consumer culture are written into the very structure of Los Angeles. Thus, to inhabit the city is to be in the center.

A shift from Fordist to post-Fordist industrial organization is seen as a crucial moment in the emergence of global capitalism.[4] It is worth noting that the fragmented nature of the city is reflected both on the structural and social levels, with these two intertwining around each other. Los Angeles has extensive social and financial polarization, with the glistening and extravagant life of the Hollywood elite that is sold as one reality, whereas homelessness[5], minimum-wage jobs and the utilization of cheap labour abound. Those with the necessary capital are seemingly given extraordinary freedom and agency to operate as they wish. Soja describes the contemporary, in this case 1980s, Los Angeles as a "gigantic agglomeration of theme parks, a lifespace

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[4] For a more detailed commentary on this shift, see Dear 2000 p. 23.

[5] Jennifer Welch dubs Los Angeles as "the homeless capital of United States" in her essay *From Global to Local: The Rise of Homelessness in Los Angeles during the 1980s*. (Wolch, 390)

comprised of Disneyworlds" (146) and mentions such sanctuaries of capitalism as shopping malls and corporate headquarters embracing the subject from every direction. This illustration, too, evokes a sense of wonder, open-endedness and opportunity, while in reality these "spaces are tightly controlled by invisible overseers despite the open appearance of fantastic freedom of choice." (ibid.) In the same vein, Dear talks about "urban panopticon" (13), getting his terminology from the Foucaultian tradition. The subjects, members of the consumer culture, are socially controlled by the all-encompassing capitalist permeation written everywhere in the concrete urban environment of the city. The subject is subtly but surely monitored at all times: while the subject directs their gaze towards the center, the center stares back.

This multitude of realities creates an intricate web, akin to the freeway system, deceiving the subject with its apparent open-endedness and sense of cohesion. There is seemingly so much to see and experience that the subject is coerced into staying in the system. Ellis exemplifies this in multiple ways. One of the mediums through which this coercion happens is the music referenced in his novels. Different tracks, and their lyrical substance, are widely used as a narrative device in *Less Than Zero,* both covertly and overtly.[6] Oftentimes, these pieces of audio leave Clay with the same sense of confusion and dread as the visual representations of capitalism.

Notably, two different songs, not explicitly named in the novel, gain great importance in the closing chapters of *Less Than Zero*. During his last week in Los Angeles, Clay listens to "a song by an L.A. composer about the city" (Ellis, 193) on repeat. The song has a passage about a homeless person on their knees, which confuses Clay and inspires him to analyze the lyrical content further. Discussing the song with an

[6] The trend of using popular music as a narrative device can be seen throughout Bret Easton Ellis' work, see *American Psycho* (1991), for example.

unnamed acquaintance, Clay is told by them that "the bum was so grateful to be in the city instead of somewhere else" (Ellis, 193), hence being on their knees. Clay challenges this reading, telling the person they misinterpreted the song. The person in question denies it, stating "No, dude . . . I don't think so" (ibid.). This exchange exemplifies the grand narrative of consumer capitalism surrounding Los Angeles. The city is once again portrayed as a space of freedom, opportunities, and happiness, shrouding and repressing the underlying issues and structures behind the great façade. The bum, then, is thankful that they can inhabit the city because being homeless in Los Angeles is better than whatever the alternative is. Thus, a system that seemingly promotes freedom and equal opportunities for all, is deeply rooted in socio-economic inequality. Its very deceit is the fact that it misleads persons that have benefited from the system into thinking that it is beneficial for all. However, people at both ends of the spectrum are essentially victims of the system, albeit very different types at that. Those who lack the required capital are stripped of agency and means to bring about change, while the affluent members are given a false sense of power. However, in order to keep this privilege and protect their socio-economic status, the subjects of the consumer-capitalism need to adhere to the rules of the system and reproduce them with their behaviour.

The fact that Clay is challenging the misleading reading of his acquaintance reveals that he has started processing and questioning the consumer-capitalist machinery he is part of and seeing behind the façade. This is further illustrated by the second song, once again by an unnamed, Los Angeles-based band. As described by Clay, "the words and images" (Ellis, 207) conjured by the song "were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate" (ibid.) in his mind for days, and even after leaving Los Angeles, being his "only point of reference for a long time afterwards" (Ellis, 208). Clay remarks that these images, the underlying problems of capitalist Los Angeles, were his own personal

reading of the song's message, with none of his peers sharing his view (Ellis, 207). He starts to feel disconnection and resentment towards the city and the things associated with it, including the people around him. For Clay, one of the images conjured by the song was about teenagers of his own age, "looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun" (Ellis, 208).

This passage can be read in two different ways, both of them reasserting Los Angeles as an enigmatic capitalist center. Firstly, the idea of asphalt serves as a metaphor for the wider urban labyrinth of Los Angeles, its concreteness and scope hugging the subject from each direction. They are physically embedded into the system by embracing and navigating the urban environment, and the opportunities and amusements it offers. Asphalt, the urban capitalist city including the structures and power relations it entails, is what they are accustomed to. To look up from the asphalt is essentially an effort to turn the gaze away from the capitalist center. Being blinded by the sun, then, is what happens when the subjects try to look beyond the system. The sun is there, blinding and forcing them to stay in and look towards the center.

The sun as a restricting and shrouding entity bring us to the second reading. The sun can be understood as denoting the wider urban milieu of Los Angeles, and the mental images it produces. These include the sunny and warm climate and the abundance of different options for entertainment and leisure. Dear remarks that "the city tends to conjure up visions of infinite suburban sprawl, inconsequential architecture, freeways, sun, surf and smog" (10). Together, these portray a vast, open, and attractive playground-like picture. It is worth pointing out that Hollywood has played a crucial part in the spread of these notions. Being blinded by the sun is actually being blinded by Los Angeles and its apparent cheerfulness and warm exterior it has managed to sell to the world through different media. This superficial openness is once again revealed to be restricting in

reality. To be free in Los Angeles is actually to stay within the system and operate for the benefit of the capitalist grand narrative. In both readings then, the sun can be seen as a vessel to keep the subject engaged, although in two different ways.

Contemporary popular music is also used to spatialize capitalist indoctrination. In a particular scene in *Less Than Zero*, Clay is in his room watching a television show centred on music videos. In the program, there are "about a hundred teenagers", some of them familiar to Clay, "dancing in front of a huge screen on which the videos were played", and they are "turning and looking up to the lighted, monolithic screen that was flashing images at them" (Ellis, 194). Much like the sun in the earlier passage, here the gigantic screen bombards one's senses, blinding the subject with capitalist imagery. This scene is especially important and interesting, as it exemplifies the multi-, trans-, and intermedial way in which the consumer-capitalism reaches the consumer. In this case, the effect is achieved through two different media, or two different screens to be exact. The large screen that is used to project the videos serves as a tool for a specific kind of social control, enclosing the subjects' attention. Furthermore, this scene is mediated to Clay through the television screen, another, arguably important, medium for spreading consumer capitalist ideology. The fact that the subjects are constantly bombarded by capitalist messages written into the urban canvas of the city further strengthens the gravitational pull of the center.

Los Angeles, then, is the hungry and unfulfilled parent who eats their own children in incessant hunger for capitalist proliferation, as articulated by the song cited in the epigraph. The 'children', members of the consumer culture, do not see this engulfment, as their very being is subjected to the system by being embedded into the urban framework of Los Angeles. Citing Lefebvre, Soja states that "urbanization was a summative metaphor for the spatialization of modernity and the strategic 'planning' of

everyday life that has allowed capitalism to survive, to reproduce successfully its essential relations of production." (Soja, 50) Furthermore, Soja remarks that per Lefebvre's argument, the survival of capitalism "was built upon the creation of an increasingly embracing, instrumental, and socially mystified spatiality, hidden from critical view under thick veils of illusion and ideology." (ibid.) Such mystification is surely happening with Los Angeles, the media and entertainment industry portraying it as an enigmatic and exceptional place. This veil, or façade as I have remarked earlier, shrouds the underlying structures, leaving only the surface visible. In consequence, capitalist Los Angeles engulfs and entraps the subject. In the following chapters, the effects of engulfment and entrapment on the characters of *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms* are discussed in detail. I argue that these two terms highlight the processes that lead to the subject being assimilated and subordinated to capitalist consumer culture.

3. Engulfment in *Less Than Zero*: The Two-Dimensional Subject

Disappear Here.
The syringe fills with blood.
You're a beautiful boy and that's all that matters.
Wonder if he's for sale.
People are afraid to merge. To merge.
—Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*

In the first chapter, Los Angeles was established as a capitalist space, an exceptional concentration of consumer culture. In this chapter, the effects this ideological machinery has on Ellis' characters, with emphasis on the narrative of *Less Than Zero,* are examined in detail. Starting with aesthetics and the central role it plays in the lives of Clay's circle, I argue that the pressures of capitalism and consumer culture result in clonification, dehumanization and commodification of the human being, as demonstrated by the characters created by Ellis. Overall, I propose that together, these effects form the concept of engulfment. With engulfment, I illustrate and exemplify the erasure of the self and the assimilation of the individual as a part of capitalist proliferation. Engulfment is used instead of other terms, as it also entails the nuances of power relations between the individual and the machinery. That is, it highlights the subject as subordinate and subjected. Through engulfment, the characters of *Less Than Zero* are reduced to two-dimensional subjects inhabiting capitalist Los Angeles.

The importance and significance of aesthetics in contemporary everyday life is an issue that is studied in detail by numerous postmodern theorists, most notably Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. Mike Featherstone builds upon the work of the aforementioned scholars and proposes that the "aestheticization of everyday life" (69) happens through "the figural regimes of signification" (ibid.), meaning signification through imagery. This, as Featherstone theorizes,

> may have its origins in the growth of consumer culture in the big cities of nineteenth-century capitalist societies, which became the sites for the intoxicating

> dreamworlds, the constantly changing flow of commodities, images and bodies. (ibid.)

He proposes three angles that help in understanding the aestheticization of everyday life. The first angle examines the birth of Dada, or Dadaism, an early 20th-century avant-garde and Surrealist art movement (65). The second angle refers to "turning life into a work of art" (ibid.). The third angle, referring to a "rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society" (66) is the most relevant here,[7] and the one I build my discussion of aesthetics on. Featherstone also links aesthetics and consumer culture together, arguing that artistic and intellectual interest towards aesthetically pleasing life has stimulated the development of mass consumption, characterized by the "pursuit of new tastes and sensations and the construction of distinct lifestyles" (ibid.). Consumer society touches on people's dreams and desires, which essentially aestheticizes and derealizes reality (Featherstone, 67), creating a hyperreality where the subjects no longer recognize which is real and which is articulated and coerced by the mass media and entertainment industry. In this hyperreal space, influence of the consumer-capitalist machinery affects everything.

The life of Ellis' characters is indeed saturated by aesthetics in this sense, as they are constantly penetrated by imagery signifying capitalist consumer culture. Their existence and daily life are centred around designer clothes, expensive beverages, haircuts, tanned skin, and luxurious spaces such as mansions, nightclubs, restaurants, and other entertainment venues. Whenever new characters are encountered, Clay the narrator describes their attire in detail. For example, his on-and-off girlfriend Blair is described

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[7] However, Featherstone states that the second and third angles are interlinked, and this should not be overlooked when approaching the issue. He examines the interplay between these strands in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (67-71).

wearing clean tight jeans and a pale-blue T-shirt (Ellis, 9), while donning "a black leather jacket and matching pants and no shoes" (Ellis, 13) a couple of pages later at a Christmas party hosted by her. At the same party, Clay's fellow student Daniel wears "sunglasses and a black wool jacket and black jeans" (Ellis 1985, 12). Describing characters' wardrobe remains prevalent throughout *Less Than Zero.* Aside from clothing, other external qualities that are emphasized are hair colour, usually blonde, complexion, more often than not meaning tanned skin, and body composition, with the majority of characters described as being slim or skinny, one girl called Muriel characterized as an anorexic. These types of characterizations saturate the pages of *Less Than Zero*, the following passage being a descriptive example: "I . . . look over at three boys, friends of Blair I don't know, who go to U.S.C., all tan and blond" (Ellis, 14).

Aside from these external, superficial qualities, Ellis' characters are markedly left without a more comprehensive description. In *Less Than Zero*, people like Alana, Kim, Julian, Trent, and Rip are often encountered, but the reader does not really get to know these individuals. Their personalities or traits are not realized textually, making them flat, featureless bodies dwelling in the capitalist space of Los Angeles. They are not personalities per se, but rather objects, stands, displays, or even mannequins portraying brands and the overall consumerist lifestyle they market. There is a scene late in *Less Than Zero* where Clay goes to a clothing store with Trent. Clay spots "some pretty blond-haired boy" (Ellis, 197), whom he thinks is called Evan, trying on clothes. He describes the occurrence in the following way:

> He doesn't go into a booth to try them on. He tries them on in the middle of the store in front of a full-length mirror. He looks at himself as he stands there with only his jockey shorts and argyle socks on. The boy's broken from his trance when his boyfriend, also blond and pretty, comes up behind him and squeezes his neck. Then he tries something else on. (ibid.)

This scene of a blond, pretty, but otherwise featureless boy standing still in the middle of a retail store evokes a strong mental image of a mannequin-like entity. This image is strengthened by Evan's generic exterior, as his boyfriend's appearance is described as very similar to his. Firstly, the passage can be read as a commentary of 1980s youth culture and fashion suppressing individual expression. However, taking this line of thought further reveals the engulfing effect of consumer capitalism. The boundaries between objects and subjects, in the sense of autonomous actors, are dissolving. Evan is entranced by the image of his own body, but what he is really seeing is a capitalist projection that coerces him to stay within the consumerist system.

Aside from being pulled into the center of consumer-capitalism as individuals, Clay's clique monitors the behaviour and external qualities of its members closely. Clay, having spent the fall semester in New Hampshire, deviates from the expectations placed upon him. Upon returning to L.A. for Christmas break, multiple individuals, such as Blair and an acquaintance Trent, tell him that he looks pale, thus standing out from the homogenous group that is his circle of friends. At the Christmas party mentioned earlier, Trent hands over a card for Clay, which has "the address of tanning salon on Santa Monica . . . This thing is Called an Uva Bath and what they do is they dye your skin" (Ellis, 14). To be recognized as a member of this inner circle, one needs to be tanned, stereotypically attractive, and in a good physical shape: "*You're a beautiful boy and that's all that matters*" (Ellis, 183, italics in original). Furthermore, it should be pointed out that even though sunshine, and therefore a possibility to develop a natural tan, is readily available in Southern California, the characters still rely on a commercial product and service. Thus, the artificial simulation supplants the natural.

Everyone acting and looking alike leads to an erasure of individuality, in effect creating capitalist clonification. In a house party in Malibu, Clay remarks that there "are

mostly young boys in the house and they seem to be in every room and they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them" (Ellis, 152). This type of appearance seems to function as an archetype of the capitalist subject. Aside from the similar exterior, the unifying trait associated with these subjects is that of passivity. These young, uniform boys never do much aside from simply existing, dwelling in the hubs of consumer culture. Like in the passage in which Evan tries on clothes, this results in them being more like objects than individuals, placed around the party venue to provide a pleasing exterior. The ominous statement, "People are afraid to merge" (Ellis, 9), first uttered by Blair and then repeated by Clay throughout the narrative, should be considered here, as it has a deceiving double meaning. This merging can be first understood as a metaphor for creating meaningful human connection, such as showing affection and empathy towards one another. These qualities are famously devoid in the cast of Ellis' novels, as an aura of indifference encircles everything they say or do. Whether to stay away from meaningful relationships or to hide their inner emptiness, Ellis' characters are afraid to merge in this sense. As Clay states when confronted about his feelings by Blair, "I don't want to care . . . It's less painful if I don't care" (Ellis, 205). However, a different form of merging is happening, as exemplified by the blond, thin boys inhabiting the party. Because there is such a lack of distinguishing features between these individuals, coupled with the erasure of personalities, they become just mass-produced bodies. Featherstone mentions "young 'de-centred subjects who . . . play with fashion and the stylization of life'" (64), and "stroll through the 'no-place' postmodern urban spaces" (ibid.), these

terms being drawn from the work of Iain Chambers[8] and Patrizia Calefato.[9] What is curious about these terms is that they highlight the same de-centralization Soja mentions being a defining feature of the Los Angeles urban space. If Los Angeles is a decentralized no-place, then the consumerist youth inhabiting the urban space are two-dimensional no-beings, their self removed from their bodies.

To study this erasure of the self, a parallel can be drawn between the characters of *Less Than Zero* and that of Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of *American Psycho*. In contrast to Clay's narrator voice, which is oftentimes blank and indifferent, Bateman details his psyche and motives in lengthy monologues found throughout the novel.[10] He characterizes the entity called Patrick in the following way:

> 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. . . Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. (Ellis, 251)

As can be seen, Bateman lists external qualities that the observer can identify with and associate with humanity, such as eye contact, tangible handshake, and the lifestyle he leads. However, all the internal qualities that make up one's personality are missing, or illusory, fabricated, and unformed at best. With surface visible and interior missing, Bateman is two-dimensional. Bateman vocalizes the characteristics that are implied in the cast of *Less Than Zero*. Clay and his peers, with their homogenous habits, lifestyles, and tastes, are seemingly a tightly knit group of individuals with a relationship built around shared experience and

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[8] Chambers, Iain. "Maps for the Metropolis: A Possible Guide to the Postmodern." Cultural Studies (London, England), vol. 1, no. 1, 1987, pp. 1-21.

[9] Calefato, Patrizia. "Fashion, the Passage, the Body." *Cultural Studies (London, England),* vol. 2, no. 2, 1988, pp. 223-228.

[10] Patrick Bateman can be characterized as an unreliable narrator. For further reading, see Mannila, Sini.*Unreliable Narrator in Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho.* 2013. *https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/94704*

camaraderie. However, a closer inspection reveals that these same individuals are essentially empty husks, as synthetic and produced as the instruments of their consumption. Characters are depersonalized and dehumanized both by their actions, as well as the influence of consumer society engulfing them. In the next segment, this issue is detailed and studied further.

A central indicator of Ellis' characters' dehumanization is their total indifference towards their surroundings and other entities. People go through their days and their lives by following the same predefined, fixed behaviour patterns. For Clay and his circle of friends, this usually means driving around, attending parties, and going to restaurants, movie theatres, and arcades. However, these leisure activities, usually thought of as entertaining, are unappealing, mundane performances for Clay and his peers. An aura of indifference surrounds these subjects, seen and felt in everything they do. They are not really independent actors with agency, but instead simply existing, programmed to perform in the capitalist consumer culture. In one such performance, Clay is sitting in a restaurant, waiting for his friends to show up and notices a person staring at him, or towards him. That continues for a noticeable amount of time and unnerves him, resulting in the following line of thought: "The man keeps staring at me and all I can think is either he doesn't see me or I'm not there. I don't know why I think that. People are afraid to merge. *Wonder if he's for sale"* (Ellis, 26, italics in original). The last sentence of the citation refers to a seemingly innocent remark by Clay's younger sister regarding some man she finds attractive. Like the "people are afraid to merge", this brief comment also stays with Clay, resurfacing at various points in the book. These comments seem to have the power to temporarily wake him up from the capitalist trance that he has succumbed to and highlight the detachment of the self from the moving body subjected to reproduce the capitalist regime. However, as Patrick Bateman remarks in one of his monologues, these moments of clarity are fleeting: "I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human

being, . . . Something horrible was happening and yet I couldn't figure out why – I couldn't put my finger on it" (Ellis, 189-190). In consequence, all that remains are the feelings of uneasiness and dread that drive Clay to consume at increasing intensity, a form of deceiving escapism as it brings him back to the source, to the center of consumer culture.

Moreover, the characters' indifference towards each other is made explicit through their sexual behaviour and inability to communicate in a meaningful manner. Shortly after Clay is startled by the staring man, he, Blair, Alana and Kim discuss people they have had sexual relations with, many of the partners overlapping each other (Ellis, 27-29). Both Blair and Clay are indifferent to the fact that both have sexual encounters with multiple other partners despite being in a de facto relationship with each other. Monogamy or loyalty to one's partner does not matter here, as the life the characters lead is centred around instant gratification, moments of hedonistic pleasure, and elevating one's personal gain above everything. Encounters with other individuals are brief and shallow, fleeting moments usually situated in hubs of capitalist proliferation: an "arcade in Westwood" (Ellis, 19), "Du-par's in Studio City" (26), "Café Casino" (46), or "Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard" (88). This not an exhaustive list of examples, as most settings are restaurants, bars, night clubs, and lavish parties. When characters engage with each other, dialogue between them is stunted, cumbersome, and devoid of meaning. As an example, I'd like to highlight an exchange between Clay and Kim, as the former is picking up a vest he forgot in the latter's apartment:

> "What do you do?" She asks, holding out the vest. "What do you do?"
> "What do you do?" she asks, her voice shaking. "Don't ask me, please. Okay, Clay?" "Why not?" She sits on the mattress after I get up. Muriel screams. "Because . . . I don't know," she sighs. I look at her and don't feel anything and walk out with my vest. (Ellis 1985, 149)

The inquiry "What do you do?", a seemingly harmless question, creates a strong negative response in Kim. My reading of the scene is that Kim unconsciously realizes that she is

not in fact doing anything out of her free will, but rather follows and reproduces the capitalist grand narrative through her actions. This reproduction is mirrored on a textual level by the repetitive nature of the passage. Much like Kim cannot answer Clay's question, she cannot identify and comprehend the capitalist pressures. This loss of autonomy amplifies the existential anxiety felt by the characters, coercing them deeper into the system with a misleading promise of emancipation through intense consumption. The characters' level of indifference towards each other, and also towards themselves, grows as the narrative progresses. Thus, they are dehumanized, losing the ability or interest to form bonds with other human beings. In the same way that the characters are drifting through the urban landscape saturated with consumer culture, they are drifting through each other, as they do not merge on a personal, profound level. When there is no unique interior to see, only the mass-produced exterior is made visible. This stimulates the commodification of individuals.

This commodification is a multifaceted and multilayered issue mediated through multiple media in Ellis' reality. Firstly, there is the influence of Hollywood and the entertainment industry, a pointedly superficial and capitalist entity. This is a reality in which the majority of the characters are situated, their parents being film producers, managers, and movie directors. In Ellis' world, actors are not appreciated by their acting talent, but rather by their surface aesthetics. At a premiere party hosted by Blair's father, a discussion is had regarding which actor should have a main role in an upcoming film Blair's father is involved in. Jared, his companion, remarks that they should not hire "great actors. Just some guy whose ass looks as good as his face" (Ellis 1985, 132). This is another example of how the subjects of the consumer culture maintain the status quo by preferring to consume content that emphasizes external qualities. As these images are

distributed to a wider consumer base, they strengthen the hold of the superficial world image.

Commodification also happens when the self-destructive behaviour of an anorexic, mentally unstable individual is turned into a performance. Earlier in the novel, there is a social event attended by the majority of Clay's inner circle. Muriel, the anorexic girl who has just been released from the hospital, is also present. As the evening progresses, Muriel uses an unidentified drug intravenously. This is witnessed by multiple individuals and Kim, hostess of the party, seemingly tries to stop Muriel from injecting the drug. However, Clay observes that she does not really mean to interfere and actually seems thrilled to see the act: "her lips are trembling and she looks excited and I can make out the beginnings of a smile" (Ellis, 86). There is also a photographer present, who commemorates the scene (ibid.). Muriel is dehumanized and commodified on two different levels. Firstly, the spectators consume the act itself, as they enjoy seeing Muriel use narcotics and witnessing her reaction to them. Because of this, she is reduced to something resembling an actor as mentioned earlier, just a vessel to satisfy the curiosity of her peers. When Muriel injects the drug, Clay notes that the whole room is dark "except for a couple of candles in the corner and Muriel sits down in the corner next to one of the candles" (Ellis, 85). The candle illuminating Muriel gives an impression of stage lights being directed towards her, underlining the incident as a performance, with her friends observing from the dark audience. Secondly, there is the photograph, a two-dimensional object that might be later put on display at a gallery and marvelled for its artistic and aesthetic qualities. The act and the suffering it brought upon Muriel are flattened through mediation. Furthermore, because the act and the significance it has on her persona is flattened and subjected, it also flattens and commodifies the self.

Another prominent example of commodification of a human being is a pornographic film encountered in the latter part of *Less Than Zero*. In the film, a young girl and boy are seemingly raped and killed by an older man. The characters, clone-like young boys in the Malibu party, are watching the film with great fascination, and afterwards debating whether the footage was staged or real. Trent later remarks that a "guy paid fifteen thousand for it" (Ellis, 154). This exemplifies that in the capitalist reality of the novel, no commodity is unreachable, and even a human life has a price tag. As the act of raping and killing is mediated through a television screen, it is removed from the three-dimensional space the viewers inhabit, flattening the deed, making it two-dimensional and only entertainment, something to consume. This means that the victims remain as commodities even after they are consumed in the most horrific way. However, the factuality of the act seems to be the feature viewers value and look for, as expressed in an exchange after the viewing:

> "I bet it's real." Trent says, somewhat defensively. I sit back in the chair and watch Blair walk along the shore. "Yeah, I think it's real too," the other boys says, easing himself into the jacuzzi. "It's gotta be." "Yeah?" Trent asks, a little hopefully. (Ellis, 154)

The fact that the viewers probably witnessed an actual murder enhances the value of the film. At first, Trent has an inner conflict about the issue, as he is defensive towards claiming the footage is authentic. When the two other boys agree with him, he is relieved, because it means that he essentially got what he wanted. This once again exemplifies the intense grasp consumer culture has on these individuals. Ellis' privileged characters see the world through the lens of capitalism, as they are high in the capitalist food chain and benefit from the system. Thus, they elevate themselves higher and feel justified to consume, that is, abuse, everything that is available. And because the capitalist system favours those that are part of the elite, everything is available for them. As suggested by Monahan, the people of capitalist Los Angeles are living in their own micro-societies.

While this is a comment on real-life conditions in the city, this urban segregation can be identified in Ellis' work as well. This manifests itself through racism towards minorities. For example, Rip feels that "There are too many fucking Mexicans" at a party, and his friend Spin suggests that they "kill 'em all" (Ellis, 184). With their realities detached from each other, these inward collectives project their version of the world to their surrounding space. Baudrillard remarks that "quotidian reality . . . incorporates the simulatory dimension of hyperrealism", and as a result, "We live everywhere already in an "esthetic" [Baudrillard's spelling] hallucination of reality" (147-148). Capitalist hyperreality is indeed the state in which Ellis' characters live, as they are unable to recognize what is real and what is made by the system. This hyperreality coerces them to stay within and go deeper into the consumer culture, with a false promise of fulfillment, or emancipation. However, there are no such things, as the only thing that awaits in the center is engulfment.

The engulfing effect of consumer-capitalist Los Angeles is subtly exemplified by Daniel, Clay's fellow student at New Hampshire. As both of them return to the West Coast for Christmas, Daniel seems uneasy about being in Los Angeles again. The two boys have the following exchange:

> "I want to go back," Daniel says, quietly, with effort. "Where?" I ask, unsure. There's a long pause that kind of freaks me out and Daniel finishes his drink and fingers the sunglasses he's still wearing and says, "I don't know. Just back." (Ellis, 17-18)

Having spent a prolonged period of time away from the capitalist center, Daniel seems to be weaned from Los Angeles and the consumerist lifestyle, feeling detached from the reality he is now situated in. However, as the narrative of *Less Than Zero* progresses and Daniel starts to succumb to the pressures of the surrounding society, his consumption intensifies, with all the side effects it brings. Thus, the system slowly but surely engulfs him. As the Christmas break crawls to its end, Clay confronts Daniel about going back to

the East Coast and continuing their studies. Daniel then expresses his reluctance to go back. Smoking a joint, he states that "It doesn't seem like I've ever been there . . . It seems like I've been here forever" (Ellis, 160). Through conspicuous consumption and substance abuse, Daniel has again familiarized himself with the lifestyle Los Angeles offers to affluent people like himself. As his days center around homogenous acts of consumption, the passing of time loses its meaning, and the subject is stuck in a limbo of consumption. Here, the capitalist space abolishes temporality, Daniel's personal memories and narrative stretching, waning, and lastly dissolving into the ever-present circle of consumption.

Consumer culture thus has a firm, unyielding grasp on Ellis' characters. In the closing part of *Less Than Zero,* Clay finds out that his childhood friend Julian has been forced into prostitution by a man named Finn, to whom he owns money to. As Julian struggles to get out of the deal after paying the debt in full, Finn remarks that he doesn't have anywhere to go anymore with no friends left. He also claims that he didn't coerce Julian into prostitution, but he did it himself, out of his free will. He then proceeds to inject narcotics into Julian with Clay watching. Witnessing this performance, many important passages, or signs of engulfment, resurface from Clay's psyche:

> Disappear Here.
> The syringe fills with blood.
> *You're a beautiful boy and that's all that matters.*
> Wonder if he's for sale.
> People are afraid to merge. To merge. (Ellis, 183)

This passage is important, as it portrays how Julian is engulfed by Finn treating him as a commodity, an object he can capitalize on. This commodification effaces dimensions, with only the exterior, the sole thing that matters in this reality, left intact. Julian's good looks are the selling point, once again bringing us to the centrality of surface aesthetics. Any attempt to stray from the predefined path, to take control of one's own narrative, is

futile. Julian's fate is an exemplification of the larger, albeit more subtle, pressures imposed on individuals: a drug addiction, the very thing that drove Julian into this situation in the first place, subdues the emerging self and coerces him to stay under Finn's control. Finn knows the effect this has on Julian and his agency and uses it to his advantage. While this fate is an exacerbation, one cannot deny that consumer culture is built around producing feelings of pleasure and gratification. This creates the previously established endless cycle of consumption, as people are constantly searching for the next fad, the next iteration of their electronic device, and the next source of entertainment, both in Ellis' reality as well as our own.[11] The extreme and extraordinary consumer habits of Ellis' characters thus provide insight and commentary on the lives of everyone living in and benefiting from the consumer-capitalist system.

Clay's role within the narrative is often that of a spectator, an observer of the more graphic consumption happening around him. Examples include the snuff film viewing in Malibu, as well as the scene where the abducted minor is abused by Rip and his accomplices. In both examples, Clay chooses to leave the space rather than partake in said activities. His detachment and resentment towards the city, and the lifestyle it offers, increase throughout the narrative, from passive indifference to active rejection. At the end of *Less Than Zero,* Clay has decided to return to New Hampshire despite Daniel opting to stay on the West Coast. In a closing conversation with Blair, Clay remarks that "there's nothing here" (Ellis, 203), meaning Los Angeles. Here, Clay sees through the façade and recognizes the city as a capitalist no-space and its denizens as two-dimensional subjects conditioned to maintain the cycle of consumption.

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[11] In this case, our own reality refers to the collective reality of people inhabiting Western societies and identifying with Western cultural heritage. This reality, of course, is not all-encompassing, as there are multitude of realities situated within the said categorization. Furthermore, Ellis' work is situated within this reality as a form entertainment, as well as a social commentary, complicating the issue further.

In the end, then, it is Clay who leaves Los Angeles behind, ultimately returning to his studies after a month of increasingly erratic consumption. Having no love for the city or his peers. He remembers his time there through the violent imagery explored earlier. For a time, Clay seems to break free from the gravitational pull of Los Angeles. He can question and condemn his friends' actions, thus retaining some of his persona and self, his three-dimensionality. This partial emancipation is only temporary, as Clay ultimately ends up working for Hollywood and the entertainment industry. The sequel *Imperial Bedrooms,* set 25 years after the first novel, sees him returning to Los Angeles and his old circles. Clay, now middle-aged and a successful screenwriter, inhabits the inner circle of the American film industry. This demonstrates how the subject is not only engulfed but also entrapped. In the next chapter, the concept of entrapment and how it is realized in *Imperial Bedrooms* through new media of the 21st century is studied in detail.

4. I'm Watching You: Intermedial Entrapment in *Imperial Bedrooms*

The fades, the dissolves,
the rewritten scenes,
all the things you wipe away—I now
want to explain these things
to her but I know I never will,
the most important one being:
I never liked anyone and I'm afraid of people.
—Bret Easton Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms*

The novel *Imperial Bedrooms* opens with Clay the narrator acknowledging the existence of *Less Than Zero* and its actual 1987 movie adaptation by Marek Kanievska.[12] He chronicles that the events of that specific Christmas vacation in his youth had been portrayed faithfully in the novel, whereas the movie deviated from the source material fundamentally. Clay acknowledges that the reason for this deviation was the parents of the cast, who were working in Hollywood and would not want to expose their children's wrongdoings to the public, choosing to protect them by altering the plot greatly (Ellis 2010, 8). There is thus tension between these two iterations of the same narrative. Intermediality, and intermedial studies, focus on "the interaction of similarities and differences between media and the changes that may occur in communicative material when it is transported from one media type to another", as articulated by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher (3). This is a broad definition, as the term intermediality encompasses multiple subcategories and specific areas of interest that often overlap. Bruhn and Schirrmacher identify two such strands, transmediation and media representation, "like two sides of the same coin" (103). They exist in a tight relationship and complement each other. Transmediation is a term referring to a reconstruction of meaning previously mediated by another media type, such as a novel adapted into a film. Media representation, on the other hand, explores the way "one medium represents the

[12] *https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093407/*

characteristics of another medium" (ibid.). When Clay is discussing *Less Than Zero* the film, he is describing a transmediated product. Media representation is also present, as Clay directly references the film, stating "the movie was based on a book written by someone we knew" (Ellis, 4). This, in addition to the fact that the discussion can be found on the opening page of the very book in question, creates a myriad of interconnections that situate the narrative in an intermedial framework.

The situation is complicated further when Clay claims that *Less Than Zero* was written by someone other than himself, "a blond and isolated boy whom the girl I was dating had halfway fallen in love with" (Ellis, 3), suggesting that Clay's internal monologue was written by someone else, and thus also mediated, altered. In the previous chapter, the clonification of male characters was examined in detail, as most of them were described as young, thin, and blond. Consequently, this portrayal is very general and can refer to almost every male character in *Less Than Zero.* However, as Clay portrays this writer entity as being omnipresent and knowing things not disclosed to him (Ellis, 4), it can be understood to refer to Ellis himself, formed into a concrete entity by Clay and situated as an anonymous character in the novel. However, use of the word 'isolated' traces the depiction to Clay himself, as he feels detached from his peers and the surrounding reality. Thus, it can also be argued that Clay has created this 'writer' entity to alienate himself from the events of *Less Than Zero* and cope with the effects they had on his psyche.[13]

Concluding on the analysis above is not the important issue here. Instead, I emphasize the intermedial aspects, namely how these different media products can influence and alter each other and what that means for the overarching narrative of

[13] Due to this, Clay can be seen as an unreliable narrator, a device characteristic for Ellis. Clay's potential unreliability could be explored in another study.

Imperial Bedrooms. The concept of entrapment is a central one here, not only highlighting the way Ellis' characters are trapped in Los Angeles and their circle but also how they become a subject to different media in their lives. Centring on Clay, I will draw on Bruhn and Schirrmacher's analysis of cinematic writing to illustrate the phenomenon of entrapment. I will demonstrate that by choosing to become a screenwriter, Clay positions himself in the center of the entertainment industry, entrapping himself in the capitalist machinery as the space between reality and 'script' starts to fade. This, coupled with the existence of the *Less Than Zero* film adaptation, creates a multitude of stories and spaces in which he dwells, scattering his psyche and entrapping him in multiple intermedial spaces subordinated to capitalism.

One of the prime interests of intermedial studies is to examine the way "media products represent qualified media types" (Bruhn et al., 162), which means studying how references to other forms of media types can affect the overall narrative and what kinds of meaning these references have. Citing Irina Rajewsky, Bruhn et al. define that in the context of literary narrative such as a novel, "intermedial references invite the reader to consider the narrative in a different medial frame by means of explicit diegetic representation or more implicit structural representation, and often by combining both" (162). Out of these two ways of representation, the structural one is of more centrality and importance in the context of this study. That is because structural media representation gives the impression that the literary text emulates another media product, in this case film and by extension, manuscript.[14] Bruhn et al. posit that this emulation "changes the experience of reading and draws attention to aspects of literature and

[14] The relationship between the manuscript and a finished motion picture is an interesting one, as a script is a flat, written presentation of the complete audiovisual experience. Simultaneously, the film transmediates the written story and the script represents the film through its structure.

language that we usually pay less attention to" (163). Furthermore, the reading experience is altered as the reader perceives the similarities to another medium even though that said medium "is not present in the material and sensorial modality" (169), which means that the reader is still reacting to words on a page even though they conjure cinematic images in their mind. This effect has been dubbed 'illusion', 'imitation', and 'simulation' by various scholars (ibid.).

Ellis' work is especially compatible with intermedial analysis, as Bruhn et al. use his novel *American Psycho* as an example of a specific style of cinematic writing. They state that the novel "highlights a sense of alienation that is involved in the globalization and commercialization of the modern world, and that goes with modern film production" (170). In *American Psycho*, life is constructed as a modern cinematic experience, which according to Bruhn et al. expresses what Baudrillard meant with his term hyperreality, the boundaries between fact and fiction dissolving and the 'reality' playing out "just like a film" (ibid.). As can be seen, Bruhn et al. have identified similar themes, the hyperreal experiences of the modern capitalist society, in *American Psycho* that are at the forefront of this thesis, examined through *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*. However, the two latter novels, and especially *Imperial Bedrooms,* take the cinematic storytelling even further by not only emulating cinematic presentation, but also situating the narrative in Hollywood, the heart of the American entertainment and film industry. That narrative focuses heavily on Clay's profession as a screenwriter and a film called *The Listeners,* based on a "complicated novel" (Ellis, 14) he is adapting. Through the casting process, Clay becomes involved with an unknown actress named Rain Turner, who is vying for a role in the film. Through her, Clay becomes entangled in a plot with a familiar cast of characters, learning that he is not the only one to view Rain as an object of desire.

As characteristic as it may be for Clay to alienate and detach himself, he always gets pulled back towards the center, back to Los Angeles. Early in *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay returns to the city after a prolonged stay in New York. Officially, he relocates to Los Angeles because of his involvement in the film mentioned earlier, but Clay himself claims that the real reason for his return is to escape New York and the undefined events that took place there (Ellis, 14). At the end of *Less Than Zero,* Clay left Los Angeles, and it is implied that he has moved in and out of the city multiple times during the 25-year gap between the two novels. Upon his return, Clay observes from his apartment how "the mist keeps drifting in over the city, enveloping everything" (Ellis, 15). This mention of the characteristic Los Angeles smog serves two purposes. Firstly, it defines the milieu, underlining the fact that we are back in the city. Secondly, as the mist envelops everything, it also seals the subjects in, obscuring and erasing the area outside Los Angeles, left outside the frame as in a movie scene. What is visible in the frame is the fact that the city becomes an acting entity through its ability to contain Clay, making him part of the machinery he sought to break free from.

Right from the start, it becomes evident that this machinery prevails, and the status quo is maintained, as characters familiar from *Less Than Zero* are still trapped in the same reality, inhabiting the same spaces, and mingling in the same circles. Early on in *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay attends a pre-Christmas party held in a house located in Bel Air, only to find out that it belongs to his former lover Blair and acquaintance Trent, who are now in a loose relationship (Ellis, 18). This is reminiscent of Blair's party in the opening pages of *Less Than Zero,* the scene reconstructed with an uncanny level of similarity. This is best exemplified by an exchange shared between Clay and Trent in both novels. In *Less Than Zero,* Clay remarks that "I've been in New Hampshire for four months" (Ellis, 14) when Trent questions his light complexion in contrast to other, more tanned attendees. In

Imperial Bedrooms, Clay realizes he cannot hold a conversation with Trent, and resorts to repeating his younger self's comment, this time saying, "I've been in New York the last four months" (Ellis, 18). In the case of *Less Than Zero,* Clay's absence from Los Angeles serves as a justification for his paleness. At first glance, the remark is devoid of meaning in *Imperial Bedrooms*, a piece of "nonconversation" (ibid.) these individuals find themselves in so often. Ellis' term highlights how these interactions are like performances, rehearsed lines uttered without depth or affect. If younger Clay's comment is an argument, present-day Clay uses the same words almost as an apology, the full meaning thus being: "I was away for four months, but now I'm back where I belong." Unconsciously, Clay identifies the gravitational pull of the city and the ideology it harbours, drawing him back rather than him returning of his own volition.

Clay is thus unable to wean himself from Los Angeles despite the time he spends outside the city. Deirdre Russell argues that the role of temporality in narrative is challenged by "the postmodern 'spatial turn' heralding an intellectual shift from history to geography" (1), a paradigm shift already discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. She ties this shift to the emergence of 'new media', a term used to describe "the computerization of culture and the increasingly intimate interweaving of technology into everyday life" (3-4). This has been an ongoing and increasingly accelerating evolution since the mid-1980s, meaning that new media was an emerging field during the events of *Less Than Zero* while being established as a reality in *Imperial Bedrooms*. The computerized, networked nature of modern everyday life has created a new form of capitalism, dubbed surveillance capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff. Data is collected "through the automated medium . . . of "smart" networked devices, things, and spaces" (15) and then refined into what Zuboff describes as 'behavioral surplus', used by machine intelligence to anticipate a consumer's future behaviour (14). She calls the marketplaces

for such data 'behavioral futures markets', and states that "the competitive dynamics of these new markets drive surveillance capitalists to acquire ever-more-predictive sources of behavioral surplus: our voices, personalities, and emotions" (15).

Whereas industrial capitalists focused on "the continuous intensification of the means of production", surveillance capitalists direct similar zeal to behavioral modification (ibid.). George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson outline an emerging form of capitalism, called prosumer capitalism, "a distinct economic system . . . where [Internet] services are free and prosumers are not paid for their work" (31). Prosumer is of course a blend of producer and consumer, highlighting the synthetic nature of the two in this new form of capitalism. As an example, Ritzer and Jurgenson identify social media, networking, and entertainment services such as Facebook and YouTube (19), with services such as Instagram not yet launched at the time of writing their paper. This illustrates the exploding pace at which prosumer, and I argue, surveillance capitalism have emerged during the last decade. Therefore, in contrast to Zuboff, Ritzer and Jurgenson viewed this development in 2010 in a much more positive light, concluding that

> In producer and consumer capitalism, corporations are likely to exert great control over the production and/or consumption of content (goods and services), but in prosumer capitalism companies are more likely to stand back and to meddle less with the prosumers who are producing and consuming the content. The idea is more to get out of the way of the prosumers than to seek to control them. (31)

However, they identify that the situation must be re-assessed and monitored in the future, as capitalism has proved its adaptability and resilience throughout its existence (32). Zuboff, having seen the development for the bulk of the 2010s, argues that at "its core, surveillance capitalism is parasitic and self-referential", reviving the old Marxist metaphor "of capitalism as a vampire that feeds on labor" (15-16). However, instead of

just labour, "surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of every human's experience" (ibid.). She then elaborates that

> This logic turns ordinary life into the daily renewal of a twenty-first-century Faustian compact. "Faustian" because it is nearly impossible to tear ourselves away, despite the fact that what we must give in return will destroy life as we have known it. Consider that the internet has become essential for social participation, that the internet is now saturated with commerce, and that commerce is now subordinated to surveillance capitalism. (17)

This proposed causality illustrates what I mean by the term entrapment. In the previous chapter, I argued that the consumer-capitalist system in *Less Than Zero* engulfs its subjects, stripping their individuality, leading to two-dimensionality. To be assimilated into the system is also to be entrapped in it, because one cannot fully remove oneself from capitalism's sphere of influence. As the power of conventional marketing strategies start to wane, the system evolves and creates new ways to coax the consumer. As already discussed, this new form of power is embedded into everyday life, as we are dependent on technology and new media. Through this dependency, surveillance capitalists gain data that can be harnessed to shape our behaviour. Zuboff calls this instrumentarian power (15).

Capitalism thus uses every possible medium to shape and influence the thought processes and actions of the citizens of consumer culture. As established in the previous chapter, and by Clay's dialogue with Trent on page 42, Clay's social circle monitors the behaviour and appearance of individuals considered part of the clique. Surveillance gains more sinister aspects in *Imperial Bedrooms* and becomes a central characteristic of intermedial entrapment. Indeed, Clay becomes a subject to multiple forms of monitoring. Firstly, there are the various vehicles tailing him throughout the novel, first encountered as early as when Clay is driving from the airport towards Los Angeles: "The blue Jeep starts following us on the 405 somewhere between LAX and the Wilshire exit" (Ellis, 10). In addition to this car, a black Mercedes Benz is also regularly sighted throughout

the novel. However, an even more intrusive form of surveillance happens through cyberspace, made possible through text messages Clay starts to receive early in the story. As he is attending a premiere after-party at W Hotel, Clay receives a message declaring "I'm watching you" (Ellis, 31). This statement, coming from an anonymous source, fills Clay with the familiar feelings of paranoia and anxiety, and makes the party venue a hostile space for him. This first message is accompanied by the appearance of yet another familiar character. Upon leaving, Clay encounters Rip Millar, his dealer from *Less Than Zero* whom he has not seen in a long time. Clay is taken aback by Rip's appearance, a result of multiple cosmetic surgeries. The changes are so extensive that Clay does not recognize Rip at first, and describes that "his face is unnaturally smooth, redone in such a way that the eyes are shocked open with perpetual surprise; it's a face mimicking a face, and it looks agonized" (Ellis, 31). The excessive smoothness of the surface coupled with a fixed facial expression create a visage akin to a mannequin, or a doll. Rip's lack of morality and depth is now reflected by his twisted exterior. This metamorphosis serves as yet another visual expression of the city's engulfing effect examined in the previous chapter. An emphasis should indeed be put on the word visual, as it is Rip's unnerving appearance that carries the scene forward, with Clay's internal monologue minimized. This invites the reader to construct their mental image of the scene from visual cues, much like watching a motion picture. Furthermore, Bruhn et al. state it is characteristic of cinematic writing to use a "narrative point of view that refrains from evaluation and causal connection" (170). Clay's sudden encounter with Rip right after receiving the text message does raise the suspicion of the potential connection between the two, but this is not realized on a textual level. Throughout the novel, it is left for the reader to construct meaning and connection between short and detached scenes. I would indeed favour the term scene over chapter, since their length varies greatly, ranging from one paragraph to

multiple pages. This creates a more cinematic flow in the novel, as traditional literary chapters are usually more uniform in length and form a coherent whole.

Clay initially shields himself from the ominous message intrusions in his condominium situated in a building called Doheny Plaza. He considers the apartment as a haven, situated so high above the city that he can detach himself from the surrounding reality, but with details still visible, plain to see: “The view from Doheny Plaza is so tactile that you can almost touch the blues and greens of the design center on Melrose. Because of how high I am above the city it’s a good place to hide when working in L.A” (Ellis, 13). However, he soon starts to notice that various furniture and objects are rearranged while he is away. Based on this, he concludes that someone visits his apartment unbeknownst to the building staff and security. One such incident happens after his encounter with Rip. He notices that some food items are missing, as well as a strand of lights being disconnected from his Christmas tree. This, to Clay, is “the detail that announces: you’ve been warned . . . they want you to know” (Ellis, 32-33). Clay is entrapped because he feels that he is monitored all the time, a formless, ominous entity knowing his every action. Later, when Clay is at his apartment waiting for the actress Rain to arrive for a hookup, he receives the same “I’m watching you” text message as before (Ellis, 51). This time, the unidentified sender adds they know Clay is at home, even proclaiming that they can see him standing in his office (Ellis, 52). Before, Clay considered his apartment a place where he could hide from the clutches of Los Angeles, a space where he could break free from his entrapment. This invisibility gave him a sense of control, but upon the revelation that even in his apartment has he been made visible creates a shift in the dynamics of the space: “The condo suddenly seems so empty but it isn’t—there are voices in it, and they linger like they always do” (ibid.). A sense of emptiness evokes a mental image of a blank space devoid of personality, while lingering

voices are like an echo of the ominous text message, bouncing off surfaces and filling the otherwise empty room, essentially moving from cyberspace into Clay's perceived space. This demonstrates how Clay does not identify with the apartment itself, but rather with the promise of haven, which is now shattered by an unidentified intruder, filling Clay with uncertainty and dread.

To combat his feeling of containment, produced by the constant surveillance, Clay seeks to transform his reality into a script, a series of interconnected yet fragmented scenes that he can rewrite and reshape to his liking. Russell proposes that narrative "is posited as our way of making meaningful connections among past, present and future; among memories, actions and intentions, both personal and collective" (2). She argues that we realize our surroundings and the adjacent experiences through narrative interpretation of our lives. Essentially, the self is formed through the narrativization of your life (ibid.). Here, we can see a strong emphasis on temporality, as "theories of narrative identity . . . all stress the centrality of time" (ibid.).

If we think about a traditional literary narrative in a temporal sense, then we must approach Ellis' work, especially *Imperial Bedrooms,* from a different angle. Citing Manovich, Russell discusses the idea of 'database' supplanting narrative in the spatially oriented information age (4-5). Databases organize and store data in spatial and non-linear ways, thus bringing them in direct conflict with the temporal element of traditional narratives. A manuscript is a spatial object, either in print or digital form, and a flat, text-based framework for another media product, a motion picture. It is essentially a collection of stories, or data, that can be navigated in a nonlinear order. The manuscript can be then argued to resemble a database, consisting of multiple spaces and moments Clay can revisit and reshape at his will, free from the constraints of temporality and causality. Clay loses himself in his story worlds and delusions, projecting these fantasies onto his personal life

and relationships. This also reveals Clay's darker traits, his exploitative and narcissistic personality. However, if we consider Zuboff's notion of instrumentarian power, we must acknowledge that we are all part of a grand capitalist database, from where "vast domains of new knowledge" are collected "from us, but not for us" (Zuboff, 17). Ultimately, entrapment finds Clay even in his fabricated reality. The sense of entrapment connected to cinematic writing in *Imperial Bedrooms* extends to the structural level. Bruhn et al. propose three variables that should be examined: what is represented, how it is represented, and where these representations can be found (170-184). Much like the different strands of intermediality, these variables are also interrelated, as it is designated that "when one identifies *what* is being presented, one tends to answer automatically the *how* and *where* questions" (Bruhn et al., 174, italics in the original) as well. Using these three variables, I will now illustrate how the cinematic writing style reveals Clay's fantasy as an omnipotent screenwriter, and how he ultimately fails to realize this dream, being entrapped in his writer persona instead.

Clay often uses cinematic terms when he is interacting with various individuals, this tendency being a major source of the reader's cinematic experience. For example, at the beginning of *Imperial Bedrooms*, there is an encounter between him and his old friend Julian Wells. Clay is frustrated by Julian's inquiries into his past relationship with an actress called Meghan Reynolds and asks if they are "lost again" and going to "play out another scene" (Ellis, 23). Clay's accusing of Julian being lost creates a feeling as if he forgot his lines, in this case meaning that he deviates from the script Clay prefers and wants to impose, by bringing up Meghan. Referring to their exchange as a scene, in addition to marking it as a cinematic event, underlines the superficiality of the conversation, it being carefully curated and acted, neither individual wanting to reveal their real motives or disclose any real information. Another example of cinematic

terminology can be found in a scene where Clay and Rain discuss Rip's potential role in the disappearance of Rain's roommate Amanda Flew. As Clay listens to Rain's story, he notes that it has "been edited carefully" (Ellis, 123). When Clay questions Rain about her connection to Kelly Montrose, a member of Clay's circle found dead earlier in the novel, she denies any relationship with him. Clay does not believe this, "swiveling slowly back and forth" in his chair and "planning how this scene will play out" (Ellis, 124). Taking advantage of Rain's fear caused by Amanda's disappearance, Clay blackmails her into having sex with him, threatening to leave her out of his movie if she does not comply. He then states that "this is the way I always wanted the scene to play out and then it does and it has to because it doesn't really work for me unless it happens like this" (Ellis, 125). This passage demonstrates how Clay seeks to gain agency by abusing others through his Hollywood connections. Earlier in the novel, it is revealed through Clay's internal monologue that he has a habit of mistreating young, aspiring actresses who desperately want to make it in the entertainment industry: "this need is so enormous that you realize you can actually control it, and I know this because I've done it before" (Ellis, 55). Thus, a central characteristic of Clay is his tendency to seek agency through exploiting others. He refuses to see beyond his own ego and existence, holding onto his own projections instead, creating a story world revolving around him, amplifying his importance. He has his hands on the keyboard and feels that he has the power to write every character and their story arc as he wishes.

The overall plot, the script Clay wants to influence the most, revolves around and affects all major characters in the novel. The narrative has strong connections to a traditional film-noir plot elements, a murder mystery centring around a mysterious woman. In a footnote, Sari notes how the narrative of *Imperial Bedrooms* is heavily influenced by Raymond Chandler, a "major representative of the California noir" (487).

A quote from Chandler's novel *The Long Goodbye* is found in the epigraph of *Imperial Bedrooms*, highlighting this connection. To understand the plot, we first must examine the complex web of interrelations these characters have. At the center of this web are Clay, Rip Millar, and Julian Wells, each having their ambitions and desires targeted towards Rain. She becomes a haven, a place of escape, for Clay. He chronicles a week he spends with her, full of drinking, substance abuse, and sex (Ellis 2010, 54-60). However, her abrupt departure to San Diego has a strong effect on Clay as he once again starts to spiral into paranoia, his sense of dread amplified by the fact that the anonymous text messages return, asking "Where did she go?" (Ellis, 66). In Rain's absence, Clay meets with Blair who warns him about her, telling him that she has a simultaneous relationship with Clay and Julian (Ellis, 77). Upon hearing this fact, Clay is in denial, because the mental image he has created proves to be a misleading one. In his mind, he has conjured an image of Rain being a commodity only for him to possess and consume. Later, Rip discloses even more information regarding Rain, declaring that she is a part of an exclusive escort service run by Julian (Ellis, 86). This revelation underlines the fact that Rain is not a mere object and portrays her as film-noir's femme fatale with her own goals and ambitions.

Rip and Julian also have their personal dynamic affecting the overall plot, the latter being indebted to the former. Their relationship becomes even more volatile because Rip is also interested in Rain. Out of these three individuals, Julian seems to have genuine feelings towards Rain, whereas Rip and Clay both see her as an object to possess. In an exchange between the two, Rip expresses the want to have Rain for himself even though "she's just a dumb cunt actress" (Ellis, 89) in his eyes. Rip does not consider Clay a threat, since Rain is just using him to get a part in *The Listeners*, but views Julian as an obstacle (ibid.), since Rain also fancies him. Clay and Rip both view Rain as a commodity, and

because of their narcissistic personalities, are ready to commit drastic actions to claim her. After discovering that Julian and Rain were in San Diego together, Clay leaves him a voicemail in a state of intoxication, threatening to kill him and stating that he will like the act "because everything will be better" (Ellis, 98) once Julian is dead. This reveals his desire to alter the plot by essentially writing Julian out of the narrative. However, Clay does not act on his impulse and the two later meet to discuss the situation. Julian challenges Clay's self-centred worldview, stating that "there's a larger world out there and it's not all about you" (Ellis, 116). Clay, outright refusing to process Julian's message, simply states that "You're all fucking crazy." (ibid.) As already established, Clay tends to elevate himself in this manner, considering himself the most important entity of all. This egoistic behaviour is first and foremost his struggle to gain agency in a shifting and uncertain situation where he finds himself, unable to influence the outcome. Clay, being a screenwriter, is accustomed to having agency over the script and therefore being in control. This schema seems to have seeped from the pages of his manuscripts into his surrounding reality, boundaries between fact and fiction becoming diluted in his mind. As Clay questions Julian about Kelly Montrose's death, Julian advises against his attempt to connect the dots, saying that "this isn't a script . . . It's not going to add up. Not everything's going to come together in the third act" (Ellis, 117). This remark exemplifies and underlines how Clay's mind works: the situation being a script enables him to have the ultimate control over the outcome. Through this compartmentalization happening in his mind, he creates a false sense that everything happens in his sphere of influence. This is the reason he is taken aback when his world can be affected by forces unknown to him. His self-constructed exceptionalism is so profoundly embedded into his persona that it becomes a central characteristic, manifesting in increasingly narcissistic and exploitative behaviour.

Repetition is an important aspect of engulfment and entrapment. Assimilated into the system with no means to break the cycle, subjects are existing in a capitalist loop, their actions motivated by consumerism both consciously and unconsciously. After discussing Rain with Julian and finding out about her connections to Julian, Rip, and Kelly, Clay concludes that he does not care about the possible consequences of dating her, in his words ignoring all the "other shit . . . going down" (Ellis, 119). Julian then challenges this statement, arguing that Clay does not really care about Rain, but instead wants something else, adding that Clay repeats old behavioural patterns despite knowing the culture of Los Angeles and the entertainment industry (ibid.). Clay, unable to see his entrapment, agrees to help Rip in removing Julian from the equation, as he goes into hiding after tensions between Rip and him escalate. Clay lures Julian into his apartment and assures him that he will pay off the latter's debts to Rip. Consequently, the two leave Clay's apartment to meet Rip at an undisclosed address. Julian is under the assumption that this meeting settles the tensions between these individuals and he and Rain are free to leave the city afterwards. Instead, Julian is abducted by Rip's accomplices, men of a Mexican drug cartel, and suffers the same fate as Kelly Montrose and Amanda Flew, a hyperviolent and graphic execution. In this, Clay succeeds in writing Julian out of the story, in his mind regaining some of the agency he lost when Rain's connection to Julian was revealed. After conspiring with Rip and sealing Julian's fate, Clay meets Rain in his apartment. The hysterical Rain demands to know the motive for betraying Julian, but instead of answering, Clay drugs and rapes her (Ellis, 160-163). Subsequently, he confesses his persistent desire to be in a relationship with Rain. She states that it is "never going to happen", because Clay is "just the writer" (Ellis, 164), referring to the film that brought them together in the first place. This also reveals the underlying flaw in the narrative Clay has created and believes in. By treating himself, the writer, as an entity

holding the ultimate agency, he fails to see the other agents influencing the realization of the script.

If we consider the filmmaking process, the vision of the writer is realized by the director and producers, the manuscript's completion being just the first step towards the finished product. Julian's body is found a week after his disappearance or kidnapping, "depending on which script you want to follow" (Ellis, 170), as Clay puts it. He also reveals that couple of days before, "three young Mexican men connected to a drug cartel were found shot to death in the desert", and subsequently decapitated (ibid.). After these events, Clay receives two videotapes from an unknown sender. The first show Clay and Amanda Flew flirting at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, followed by altered images of Clay and Amanda together in various locations around Los Angeles (Ellis, 170-171). The second tape, however, contains footage depicting the torture-murder of Julian, Clay's threatening voicemail discussed earlier attached as an audio track. This media product entraps Clay in a tangible way. The tape is treated as evidence for Clay's complicity in Julian's murder and can be used to frame him should he not comply with the sender, heavily implied to be Rip.

Consequently, Clay himself plays a role in his own entrapment, as the malevolent words he directed towards Julian are now used against him. This is already foreshadowed in the epigraph of *Imperial Bedrooms*, the aforementioned quote from Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*: "There is no trap so deadly as the trap you set for yourself" (Ellis). As we are dependent on technology and the new media, our actions in the digital environment leave a trace, our digital footprint. All this data is once again valuable capital for surveillance capitalists, used to influence our everyday life. Taking this back to Clay, his situation exemplifies how the system makes its subjects conform to the given ruleset. If we tie this to the cinematic presentation and Clay's story world, we can see that Clay

indeed is just the writer, while Rip and the criminal organization behind him are the directors and producers. This is true both metaphorically and literally, as they are responsible for filming and editing the torture-murder footage.

With no way out of the trap Clay finds himself in, he continues his erratic habits of consumption, plunging him deeper into intermedial entrapment. After Julian's abduction, Clay "went to Palm Springs as if nothing had happened" (Ellis, 164). He brought two young, anonymous prostitutes with him, and made "them to express themselves only in gestures" because he did not want to hear their voices (ibid.). This is a mechanism for Clay to distance himself from his abusive behaviour, but also a way exert power over and commodify his victims. The whole scene, taking place in a ranch house situated in a movie colony, can also be read as a critique of modern Hollywood film production, characterized by alienation and commercialization as proposed by Bruhn et al. (170). Earlier in the novel, as Clay muses over Rain, he notifies that

> This is someone trying to stay young because she knows that what matters most to you is the youthful surface. This is supposed to be part of the appeal: keep everything young and soft, keep everything on the surface, even with the knowledge that the surface fades and can't be held together forever—take advantage before the expiration date appears in the nearing distance. (Ellis, 54)

Once again, all the emphasis is put on the external qualities, emphasized by the repetition of the word surface. The passage also highlights how subjects acknowledge their entrapment brought about by the superficial standards of the entertainment industry. The two-dimensional subject has value as a commodity, but as all commodities, they are dispensable and replaceable, because commodities by nature "must be used up" (Malkmes, 14). Thus, they surrender themselves to the clutches of consumption. As I have argued, it is the role of cinematic storytelling to emphasize Clay's alienation from the surrounding reality, as he aims to impose his script by any means necessary. This becomes apparent from the following excerpt found at the end of the movie colony scene:

> The devil was calling out to her but it didn't scare the girl anymore because she wanted to talk to him now, and in the house was a copy of the book that had been written about us over twenty years ago and its neon cover glared from where it rested on the glass coffee table until it was found floating in the pool in the house in the movie colony beneath the towering mountains, water bloated, the sound of crickets everywhere, and then the camera tracks across the desert until we start fading out on the yellowing sky. (Ellis, 166-167)

The passage above is saturated with cinematic elements. Firstly, there is a heavy emphasis on sensorial elements, such as the appearance of the book, referring to *Less Than Zero*, before and after it was thrown into the pool, as well as the pervasive sound of the crickets. Secondly, the pace of the passage is frantic, cutting from the girl to the book to the pool, evoking an image of consecutive fast-tracking shots. In the end, the focal point changes completely, as the camera is said to leave the characters behind, focusing on the surrounding landscape instead. it is also implied that as the camera goes further away from Clay and his company, they start "fading out", suggesting that they can only exist within the scene. It is characteristic for cinematic writing to use "shifts in narrative point of view that simulate the view of camera" (Bruhn et al., 170). Through these cinematic elements, the reader is left wondering whether the scene was authentic or one of Clay's scripts that play out according to his will. This ambiguity is characteristic of the whole narrative, as the reader is moving through a sequence of disconnected and fragmented moments narrated by Clay.

Imperial Bedrooms concludes with a memorial service dedicated to Julian, as foreshadowed in the novel's introduction. Clay's presence in the event can be read as his way of asserting agency, although he did not get Rain, as she is in a relationship with Rip, who "wants to make movies now" (Ellis, 169). Ultimately, Rip then becomes the producer that can exert power over Clay and shape his scripts, his reality. In the confines of the novel's narrative, Rip seems to be invulnerable and able to get exactly what he wants, something Clay lacks. If we consider the overall narrative, the tension between key

players, Julian is now written out, and Clay is entrapped through his compliance and animosity. This, coupled with Rip's appearance, "a face mimicking a face" (Ellis, 31), dehumanizes him, making him more of a symbol of capitalism's pervasiveness rather than an actual individual. Indeed, Clay remarks that "Rip's visage calmly scrutinizes" (ibid.) him in their initial encounter, suggesting that the entity called Rip is a manifestation of entrapment, his self erased and body subjected to serve the capitalist agenda.

Clay's entrapment is finalized through his encounter with Blair at the end of Julian's memorial. She offers him an alibi amid Julian's ongoing murder investigation, in return wanting a favour from him (Ellis, 176). Clay remarks that he realizes the extent of her proposal when he sees Blair's car, "a black Mercedes with tinted windows" (Ellis, 177), the same vehicle that has been tailing him on multiple occasions. This reveals that Blair is behind some of the surveillance directed towards Clay, her motive being to possess Clay in the same way he sought to possess Rain. Indeed, Clay defines that "*she's a witch . . . And her hand is a claw . . .*"[15] (ibid., italics in the original). Clay accepting Blair's proposal, her hand, can be read as a culmination of his entrapment. By choosing to go with Blair, Clay chooses to "DISAPPEAR HERE" (Ellis, 109, capitalization in the original). These prominent words appear in a delirious dream written onto a mirror in Clay's apartment after he has seen Blair's car circling the building. This makes his dreams yet another medium where he is bewitched and entrapped in. The cyclical nature of entrapment should also be underlined here, as the scene is once again eerily similar to the opening of *Less Than Zero*, where Blair picks up Clay from the airport to drive him to Los Angeles. This time, however, to go with Blair is to disappear behind the tinted

[15] Sari suggests that this is a cinematic pun, referring to the horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (489).

windows. Through this act, Clay forms a Faustian compact with his surveyor, as articulated by Zuboff. Furthermore, Blair suggests that Clay looks like nothing has happened to him, as if the whole narrative is being erased, adding "you're so pale" (Ellis, 177). This is reminiscent of Trent's similar remark "You look pale" at the beginning of *Less Than Zero* (Ellis, 14). The delicate shift from looking pale to being "so pale" is a visual presentation of Clay's dissolution and disappearance into the machinery of consumer capitalism. Searching for a way out, for emancipation, Clay only finds himself back at the beginning.

The epilogue of *Imperial Bedrooms* further highlights this cycle of entrapment by tying it into the cyclical nature of the narrative. Clay mentions the "fades, the dissolves, the rewritten scenes, all the things you wipe away" (Ellis, 178) and while wanting to explain all of them to Blair, he remarks that he never will. The choice of words once again underlines Clay's reality as a hyperreal cinematic experience. These scenes are the story worlds Clay inhabits, emphasizing his desire to alter the script and his surrounding reality. However, with every altered scene, with every erasure, Clay succumbs deeper into the intermedial entrapment, losing his grasp on reality. If we consider the meaning of the prefix inter-, it has the meaning of 'from one another', but also 'between'.[16] It can be inferred, then, that Clay moves between different scripts, story worlds, and media, while simultaneously being entrapped in them and between them. This results in scattering his psyche. Through intense molding brought about by the consumer culture, Clay has become fragile and easy to break, much like the material his name refers to. Clay concludes that the most important thing about his persona, a piece of information he will never share with Blair, is that "I never liked anyone and I'm afraid of people" (Ellis, 178). While this could potentially unlock a whole new angle into Clay's character, in here it

[16] https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/inter_2?q=inter-

explains Clay's tendency to disappear into his scripts. The narrative of *Imperial Bedrooms* concludes with the word "people", precisely the same term that starts *Less Than Zero*: "People are afraid to merge on freeways of Los Angeles" (Ellis, 9). Moreover, right after Clay's first-person epilogue concludes, the years "1985-2010" (Ellis, 178) appear as the last piece of writing, suggesting that the narrative that started in *Less Than Zero* has reached its conclusion with *Imperial Bedrooms*. This seals the narrative into a loop, the ending being the beginning. Clay's story is finalized by Ellis, entrapping him without providing catharsis.

5. Conclusions

The premise for this thesis is to approach Los Angeles as a paradigmatic capitalist space, an exceptional hub of consumer culture. Through dialogue with various scholars well versed in the inner workings of the city, it is established that Los Angeles is a postmodern space of multiple realities, as mediated by the entertainment industry and the signs and images of capitalism, and adjacent to it, consumer culture. This makes Los Angeles a highly mobile transgressive, city; the freeway system working as a key landmark, as well as a metaphor for the city's mobility. I have analyzed how these observations manifest themselves in Ellis' version of the city, focusing on various central moments in *Less Than Zero.* Through this analysis, I argue that the capitalist Los Angeles subordinates and assimilates its subjects and proposed two terms to identify these processes: engulfment and entrapment.

I then set out to elaborate on what I mean by engulfment by focusing on the cast of *Less Than Zero.* Starting with the aestheticization of everyday life through ever-pervasive signs and images of consumer culture, I have examined what kind of effect the pressures of consumer capitalism have on the self of Ellis' characters. My main argument is that through extreme adherence to consumer culture, the subjects become clonified, dehumanized, and commodified. Together, these constitute the capitalist engulfment of the individual. Through engulfment, the subject becomes two-dimensional, acting as a vessel of capitalism, dwelling in the consumerist space of Los Angeles.

The analysis of *Imperial Bedrooms* is heavily focused on Clay the narrator. Using intermedial framework, I argue that boundaries between reality and the manuscript that he is working on have dissolved in Clay's psyche, and he thus views his whole existence as a script he can influence and rewrite at his will. This manifests itself as increasingly narcissistic and exploitative behaviour, a form of consumption his younger self in *Less*

Than Zero felt an aversion towards. I demonstrate how the use of cinematic storytelling underlines the intermedial aspects, entrapping Clay in multiple levels of intermedial space. Through a close reading of *Imperial Bedrooms*, I have identified multiple layers of cinematic experience. Firstly, the overarching plot conjures a strong connotation of film-noir cinema, as realized on the level of plot elements and pacing. Secondly, cinematic terms and metaphors feature heavily in conversations between characters, as well as in Clay's narrator voice. Thirdly, the novel consists of fragmented, disproportionate chapters, or scenes. Through this disconnectedness, the whole narrative reads like a manuscript, or like an unfinished motion picture still in the editing phase. Furthermore, there is no catharsis to Clay's narrative, as the ending is the beginning. In my view this strengthens his entrapment further and reveals its cyclical nature.

Together, the combined narrative of *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms* highlights how profoundly the processes of the contemporary Western culture are subordinated to the machinations of capitalism. A study of these two novels, set on two different eras of development, reveals and underlines that as we evolve as a technology-dependent society, so does capitalism, finding new, increasingly pervasive ways to influence our behavior and embed itself in our everyday life. Although the fates of Ellis' characters are an exaggeration to the majority of people reading this study, they still exemplify the anxieties produced by capitalism's permeation of our everyday life. During my studies, I remember that in one course, we were asked to discuss the role of humanities in the present time. and how we could defend its role as an important discipline. I believe that through the process of writing this thesis, I can now formulate an answer. As our contemporary world is characterized by capitalist tendencies, various ecological crises, and constantly shifting geopolitical tensions, I think the role of humanities is a central one

in defining and examining these anxieties, arguing what makes us human, and identifying processes that might threaten those traits.

The examination of Ellis' work thus reveals the way the multifaceted capitalism influences our existence in the global postmodern world, exemplifying how there is meaning and significance to be found in blank fiction. There is also some irony present in the fact that Ellis, being an accomplished author and screenwriter himself, critiques the system and the industry he is working for and benefiting from. This is of course true for every individual living under capitalism's sphere of influence. In one way or another, we are all assimilated into the system and must navigate its ideology, deciding how much we let the pressures of consumerism affect us and our personalities. Thus, I see the terms engulfment and entrapment as worthwhile tools in reading Ellis' oeuvre in general, as well as other works dealing with similar themes.

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