

Symbolic Consumption and Media in Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero*

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to argue that consumption and media wield an unparalleled influence over contemporary American society, in a way that these drives constitute the primary means through which identity is constituted. Closely referring to Jean Baudrillard's critical concepts, the present research contends that the fictional characters of Bret Easton Ellis, particularly in *Less Than Zero*, are prone to this postmodern world, where all experience via consumption has become fathomless, and traditional notions of identity have been changed. Ellis's characters oscillate between the extreme poles of violence and ennui as they do their best to prevent their psyches from collapse amidst the surrounding turmoil caused by excessive consumption. Neither one of these alternatives results in any relief. In this type of literature, the protagonists are immersed in the contemporary world of consumption and the mass media. The primary interest here is on the effects of this immersion in the world of commodities on the major characters (Clay and Blair), and their reactions in the selected novel. Accordingly, dependence on possessions by the characters of the novel in order to isolate themselves from the threatening disorder of the post-modern world is the major concern of present study of the novel.

Keywords

Consumption; Media; Baudrillard, Identity; Bret Easton Ellis; Blank Fiction.

1. Introduction

The post-modern period could be argued to have emerged with the rapid growth of consumption in the United States in the 1950s. The claim, however, that there has been a significant distance away from capitalism appears almost impossible to sustain. Capitalism continues to be the dominant mode of production and consumption on the globe. Looking at changes within capitalism, one may distinguish significant changes in the last four or five decades of the twentieth century. These changes have been summarized as constituting a move into a new

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phase, which could be roughly entitled the post-modern phase. As Fredric Jameson has stated in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism*: "...What is often called post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or spectacle, or multinational capitalism. This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the post-war boom in the United States in the late 1950s." (113)

This new trend is characterized as comprising a shift towards consumption as a central social, economic, and cultural process. In fact, consumption has become essential to many individual's sense of who they are. It has become as significant as work roles for human beings. Consumption has become a dynamic process consisting of the symbolic formation of both collective and individual identities. In this process of active identity construction, consumption has come to play a central role. Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) suggested that consumers did not purchase items of clothing, food, body decoration, furniture or a style of entertainment in order to express an already existing sense of who they are, rather, people create a sense of who they are through what they consume (*Selected Writings* 23).

This emphasis on consumption is not a new outlook in American literature. As early as 1877, for example, Christopher Newman, the hero of Henry James's, *The American* (1977), considered his idea of comfort as "Possessing a number of patented mechanical devices--half of which he should never have occasion to use" (86). Novelists including Nathanael West (1903-1940), John Dos Passos (1896-1970), and Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) writing in the 1930s and 1940s have already acknowledged the growing strength of consumption as the dominant American issue. *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) concerns itself with: "American individuals (who) are possessed by the economic machine of the city" (MacInerney7). As this evidence suggests, consumption has had a long history of engagement with American literature. Likely, one of the main reasons for the success of Bret Easton Ellis is the overriding concern of his novels with the effects of the consumerist culture that is ceaselessly renewed and intensified by an advertising industry.

Bret Easton Ellis is an American author, screen and short story writer. His works have been translated into 27 languages. He is a self-proclaimed satirist, whose trademark technique is the expression of extreme acts and opinions in an affectless style. Ellis employs a technique of linking novels with common, recurring characters. Though Ellis made his debut at age 21 with the controversial bestseller *Less Than Zero* (1985), a zeitgeist novel about wealthy amoral young people in Los Angeles, the work he is best known for is his third novel, *American Psycho* (1991). The novel is an example of Transgressive Fiction and achieved considerable cult status. Ellis released his fourth novel *Glamorama*

in (1998). The novel is set in the world of high fashion and plays with themes of media, celebrity, and political violence.

Ellis's novels are mostly touched by or relevant to the historical period in which they are written. As James Annesley points out, Ellis's fiction is very much a product of the contemporary period: "Loaded with references to the products, personalities, and places that characterize late twentieth-century American life ... profoundly aware of its own time and place" (*Blank Fictions* 6). Far from undermining the concept of history, therefore, the aggrandizing of the brand-names and advertising slogans that characterize Ellis's fiction makes it very much a product of the surrounding consumer culture. One of the most significant outcomes of this saturation of society with the signs and images of consumption and the mass media has been the replacement of the real with its representation and the subsumation of the commodity into its image—a condition Baudrillard calls the 'hyper-real'. Ellis's fictional world corresponds in many ways to the ideal of the postmodern as stated by Baudrillard, and is particularly influenced by two aspects of the theory: firstly, the idea that the surface or image should be privileged at all times; and, secondly, that many traditional distinctions—between reality and representation, art and life, for example—have been collapsed. These characteristics will be discussed in relation to Ellis's fiction in this study.

Ellis's novels draw agitating parallels between cultural decadence and social decline through blackly conveying American culture's corrosive influence on the individual. They exhibit mainstream American culture as an impenetrable factor oppressive in nature, particularly in its consumerist and cosmetic concerns, ruled by the semantic manipulations of advertising and the consistent discourses of the mass media. The enforcement of compelling social mores and etiquettes, as well as culturally defined desires and needs, through the omnipresent force of media images and technologies, intensifies the refashioning and standardization of the individual by culture. These forces do not solely prevent and confine, but also produce and remold human beings. In Ellis's world, this process is acutely realized yet also detrimental to the individual and society. The postmodern *mal de siècle* that prevails is contagious to the national obsession with representations, surfaces, and visuality, which has developed a superficial society of cultural consumers who are almost exclusively visually oriented, skillful at processing and emulating images, yet intellectually, emotionally, and morally impoverished.

The present paper first explores the major examples of the literature review. Then it elaborates on Jean Baudrillard's contribution to the concepts of consumption and media. At this point, the authors have given a full treatment of

the major concept of “symbolic consumption”. The fourth part addresses the highly charged concepts of consumption and media in Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less than Zero*. And the conclusion attempts to summarize the common ground through which Ellis has based his novel on consumer culture and media.

2. Literature Review

The present analysis seeks to present sketches of some of the major reading materials that helped us formulate our research questions and conduct our study accordingly. These materials deal with the theoretical background of the study, namely post-modern American literature and particularly Transgressive Fiction as well as concepts vital to this literature such as identity, containing the analytical or interpretive aspect of the study.

In *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction*, Sonia Baelo-Allue explores Ellis’s status as serious contemporary writer, alongside his reputation as a sensationalist trouble-maker. Baelo-Allue’s examination of the shallow surfaces and schizophrenic self-awareness of his work is subtle, informed and extremely well-judged. Both literary author and celebrity, Bret Easton Ellis represents a type of contemporary writer who draws from both high and the low culture, using popular culture references, styles and subject matters in a literary fiction that goes beyond mere entertainment. Baelo-Allue is of the opinion that, Ellis’s fiction arouses the interest of the academia, mass media and general public. Baelo’s book is possibly the first monograph to offer a comprehensive textual and contextual analysis of his most important works up to the latest novel *Imperial Bedrooms*. Depicting a study of the reception of each novel, the influence of popular, mass and consumer culture in them, and the analysis of their literary style, it takes into account the controversies surrounding the novels and the changes produced in the shifty terrain of the literary marketplace.

Georgina Colby in *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* demonstrates that Ellis’s work is a process of underwriting by which he critiques the socio-political structures of late capitalism. “We are just reflections of our time” (*Glamorama* 310). As professional fashion models, they are literally images of their time. Figuratively, they are consequences of the cultural climate of the 1990s. Ellis’s first person narratives are vehicles for serious thought, reflections on the contemporary. Colby regards Ellis’s work as a contemporary form of refusal. Through their roles as cultural products, Ellis’s books function to disclose the ways in which the contemporary political and cultural apparatus affects the individual. This book rejects any kind of branding of Ellis as moralist,

satirist, nihilist, or postmodernist. The approach this book takes to Ellis's work, then, is to draw attention to the importance of his novels in documenting the cultural conditions of the past three decades. Colby states, "Ellis refrains from adopting a moral or ethical stance in his novels" (Colby, *Underwriting the Contemporary* 7). According to Colby, Ellis's technique of underwriting is an act that discloses the damage inflicted by capitalist globalization on traditional ethical structures. But he is of the opinion that Ellis has not a specific subjective moral or ethical stance that is clearly disseminated in his fiction.

Julian Murphet in *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*, analyses the novel into categories like: the novelist, the novel, the novel's reception and the novel's adaptation. Murphy has commented briefly on the notions of alienation and reification in his analysis of *American Psycho*. She defines reification simply as "the transformation of intensely private human relation into things, tableaux, props, pieces." (Murphet, *American Psycho: Reader's Guide* 39) Murphet regards Ellis as a satirist who has some ethico-political touchstone in mind when he settles down to excoriate his various characters of yuppies and celebrities. He believes in most of Ellis's novels, the reader is confronted with the critical attention to the voice of urban alienation; a clear vestige of the earlier period of modernism.

Another major source on post-modern American fiction especially on Blank Generation is *Shopping in Space: Essays on American Blank Generation Fiction* (1992) by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney. In this work which consists of different essays, Young and Caveney insist on the notion that New York underwent a decisive renaissance in all the arts during the 1980s. The punk ethos of getting out there and doing something affected not only musicians but also young writers. These new Lower East Side or "Downtown" writers wrote flat affectless prose which contains all aspects of contemporary urban life: crime, drugs, sexual excess, media overload, consumer madness, inner-city decay, and fashion-crazed nightlife. It was an instantly recognizable style with an obvious appeal to a young metropolitan readership and the group soon widened to include writers from all over America. Although Young and Caveney established Ellis as an author who deserved critical attention, their essay, while reading Patrick's killings as a "satirical comment on democracy" (*Shopping in Space* 113), still tended to conceive Ellis's novels as uniquely assimilable by the culture in which he wrote.

3. Theoretical Framework

A study of post-modern American fiction, especially that which focuses on Transgressive Fiction to discover, analyze, and problematize the notions of identity, society and culture cannot dispense with consumption and media, since the post-modern era has been aptly named “consumer society”. Undoubtedly, Jean Baudrillard with his critique of consumerism and media is one of the most significant critics whose theories to be used for the study of post-modern American fiction, for the reasons which the researcher is going to pinpoint in the following paragraphs.

Of all the major theories on consumption and media—those of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Baudrillard—Baudrillardian reading appears to be in close affiliation to the study of post-modern American fiction. In fact, Baudrillard made a sharp break with the model of capitalism which his predecessors had retained, a model derived from Marxism and Weberian sociology. He believes that consumption should not be seen as an activity which is simply induced or produced in modern consumers by advertising industry and commercial interests upon a passive audience. Consumption has become an active process involving the symbolic construction of a sense of both collective and individual identities.

From a theoretical perspective, Jean Baudrillard uses earlier definitions of commodities to explain the significance of symbols on commodities today. Marx defined the commodity as having two values: a use value and an exchanged value. For example, a shoe has a use, to protect your feet. It also has a value in relation to other things (i.e., shirts, food, hats) with which it might be exchanged. Baudrillard updates this concept by saying a third element has been added, and that is the element of the sign or sign exchange value. An example of sign exchange value would be the Nike swooshes on a sneaker, making a shoe symbolically more valuable without significantly altering the shoe itself. The value embedded in these symbols are said to determine the value of the commodity. Baudrillard argues that the primacy of the sign has altered the traditional configuration of capitalism. “Traditionally, capital only had to produce goods; consumption ran by itself. Today, it is necessary to produce consumers, to produce demand, and this production is infinitely costlier than that of the goods” (Bocock 148). Therefore, consumption is to be conceptualized as a process in which a purchaser of an item is actively engaged in trying to create and maintain a sense of identity through the display of purchased goods.

Modern consumption could be seen as a development of what Marx had called “commodity production” but at a quantitatively higher level than that Marx had ever envisaged. There is now a new and distinct form of capitalism in

the world, based on the ever increasing production of new commodities for consumption. This new type may be termed "consumer capitalism". The production of commodities was the distinctive feature of capitalism as a mode of production for Marx, but it was the processes associated with their production, rather than with their consumption, which were the center of Marx's attention. A commodity was defined by Marx as a product that had not been manufactured for direct use and consumption, but for sale in the market. (Bottmore and Rubel 137-154)

For Baudrillard, consumption in modern/post-modern societies is not based upon the satisfaction of a set of pre-existing needs, rooted in human biology beyond the most basic level, but it involves the consumption of signs and symbols, not of things, not of simple material objects. Hence, consumers may often experience a sense of emptiness once they have purchased an object which they have saved for, and longed for. The anticipation of consuming is frequently experienced as more enjoyable than the act of consumption itself. Baudrillard articulates this idea as follows:

This suggests that there are no limits to consumption. If it was that which it is naively taken to be, an absorption devouring, then we should achieve satisfaction. But we know that this is not the case: we want to consume more and more. This compulsion to consume is not the consequence of some psychological determinant etc., nor is it simply the power of emulation. If consumption appears to be irrepressible, this is because it is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do with satisfaction of needs nor with the reality principle...., Hence, the desire to moderate consumption, or to establish a normalizing network of needs, is naive and absurd moralism. (Baudrillard, Selected 24-25)

As can be seen in this quotation, for Baudrillard consumption is not to be conceptualized as a material process. It is an *idealist* practice. This means that it is ideas which are being consumed, not objects. The reason why Baudrillard can make this claim which runs counter to common-sense notions that when we eat, we eat something which is obviously material, for instance, is that he wants to emphasize that consumption is a matter of cultural signs and the relations between signs. Furthermore, consumption, in this sense, is not going to cease. Because it is an idealist practice, there can be no final, physical satiation. We are fated to continue to desire consumer goods and consumer experiences in the type of social formation which post-modern capitalism has developed.

The role of desire in modern consumption is important, for without consumers, or potential consumers, becoming socialized in such a way that they do seek satisfaction of their desires in modern consumer goods and experiences, the social and cultural relations which sustain the economic system of modern capitalism would break down. Baudrillard did retain a conception of desire in

his approach to modern consumption as an idealist practice. For Baudrillard, modern, and post-modern consumers are trying to satisfy their emotional desires, as much as, if not more than, simply satisfying their material needs. This is a key proposition for the purpose of analyzing the distinctive features of modern/post-modern consumerism in Baudrillard. Such desires, however, are seen as surface phenomena, not as depth structures, by Baudrillard.

Under advanced capitalism, Baudrillard contends, the masses are controlled not only by the need to labor in order to survive but by the need to exchange symbolic differences. Individuals receive their identity in relation to others not primarily from their type of work but from the signs and meanings they display and consume. Taking his cue from Veblen and certain anthropological theories, Baudrillard asserts the importance of commodities as social signifiers, not as material objects. The shift from the primacy of production to the primacy of exchange has been facilitated by the development of new technologies, such as radio and television. The cultural significance of these technologies is that they emit a single message and constitute a new code: "the message of the consumption of the message" (*Consumer Society* 188). The new media transform the structure of language, of symbolic exchange, creating the conditions in which the new code of consumption can emerge.

According to Baudrillard, unconscious desires can never be fully satisfied. The unconscious outwits the best laid plans of commerce, advertising and post-modern consumer industries. Consumption promises to satisfy people's unconscious desires for pleasures, some of which were forbidden to earlier generations, such as the pleasures of eroticized male body. This is achieved by offering 'real' goods, or travel experiences, a 'real' sense of excitement. But these 'real' things cannot satisfy directly the unconscious desires that they promise to fulfil. The symbolic level intervenes. In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard suggests that "...the consumer is impoverished by the collusion of the media and the closed, isolated world of the private individual who attempts to find personal satisfaction in the consumption of goods." (*The Consumer Society* 35)

4. Reading Ellis's *Less than Zero*

4.1. Consumer Culture in *Less than Zero*

Less Than Zero details a wealthy, alienated, sexually ambiguous young man's Christmas break from an eastern college in Los Angeles, more specifically Beverly Hills, all the parties he wanders through, all the drugs he consumes, all the girls and boys he has sexual intercourse with, all the friends he passively watches drift into addiction, prostitution and vast apathy; days are spent speeding toward the beach club with beautiful blondes in gleaming convertibles while high on Nembutal; nights are lost in VIP rooms at trendy clubs and

snorting cocaine at the window tables of Spago. *Less Than Zero* is an indictment not only of a way of life Ellis was familiar with but also he thought rather grandly of the Reagan eighties and, more indirectly, of Western civilization in the present moment.

The title *Less Than Zero* refers to a song by Elvis Costello which reads: Everything means less than zero—a suitable explanation of the novel's lack of coherence. The point that the book's title is thus second-hand—mirroring Costello's appropriation of rock 'n' roll's most famous icon's name—is revealing of the way Ellis's teenagers feel themselves to be at the end of things, as if the richness of past generations has deteriorated all possible experience. The fact that even the classics of literature, such as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, are accessible only at a remove through cliff's notes is but an evidence that all experience is now second-hand and mediated. Clay's friends are all rich, beautiful and popular, but also bored, purposeless and directionless, complaining that: "There is not a whole lot to do anymore" (*Less Than Zero* 126). Every action and conversation is fulfilled in a vacant manner and neither is filled with any sense of meaning or purpose: "Where are we going?".... "I don't know....Just driving".... "But this road doesn't go anywhere".... "That doesn't matter".... "What does?".... "Just that we are on it, dude" (*Less Than Zero* 195). The devastating vacation taken by Clay and Blair is another example that signifies very clearly the emptiness and the insatiable hunger that lie at the heart of the book. The couple, as Young and Caveney point out, are young, rich, attractive, and 'in love', and yet the conventional components of a happy romance—sun, sea, sex, and champagne—are consumed within a couple of days, whereupon the return of boredom and restlessness cause them to run away from each other and re-focus on the ever-present television which, ironically, will be selling them dreams of exactly the kind they are engaged in (Young and Caveney, *Blank Generation Fiction* 37).

Ellis's novels are noticeable in that they represent postmodernism—life under consumer capitalism—with great clarity and accuracy. Baudrillard argues that in the post-war consumer boom people had become alienated not only from labor but from their own lives, from their own desires and pleasures. These were repackaged and soled back to them as part of the "leisure" industry. (*Consumer Society* 36). Commodity relations had come to penetrate every aspect of life; social life, erotic life, knowledge, and culture, and this process inevitably alienated us from our own lives. The capitalist 'spectacle'—all the codes, messages, images, and representation emanating from a superfluity of communications, information, technologies and, virtual realities—is extremely attractive. It promises to satisfy all desires, relieve all burdens, fulfill every dream—but one could only achieve this nirvana through consumption. Leisure,

culture, art, information, entertainment, and knowledge are all being produced as commodities and sold back to the consumer. For the characters of *Less Than Zero* everything has become “life-styles” to be consumed so that their entire reality has become second-hand. They introduce each other primarily in terms of what they are wearing:

Trent mentions that Rip’s here and I walk with Trent over to where Rip is, and Trent tells me that they’re going to be singing “Sex and Dying in High Society” any minute now and I say “That’s great.” Rip is wearing black 501’s and a white X T-shirt and Spin’s wearing a T-shirt that reads: “Gumby, Pokey, The Blochheads” and black 501’s also. Rip comes up to me and the first thing he says is, “There are too many fucking Mexicans here, dude.” (*Less Than Zero* 184)

As it is crystal clear, in this part of the novel after the main characters leave the party, they address each other not by their true names but with what they are wearing. In fact, Ellis manages to present in a very pure form the conformity of the modern world and its inclination to characterless nonentities, to passive consumers. The characters are consumed by fatigue, by indifferent dissatisfaction. They are disheartened and weak. They are unable to see that their desires can never be satisfied because they have been unnaturally produced in response to commodity relations. Consumption is only conducive to alienation and isolation; that which they consume is part of a pessimistic process of production designed to generate capital. Commodities are essentially dissatisfying in that they reflect alienated social relations. Ellis’s characters are directed to extremes in their attempts to experience something. “I wanted to see the worst,” (*Less Than Zero* 194) says Clay. When every aspect of life is mediated by commodity form it is impossible to experience anything without the mediation of commodities. People are seen in terms of their commodity value—youth, beauty, and so on. The characters in all Ellis’s novels are the utmost consumers, victims of the hyperreal, destined to life-long cycles of insatiable desires.

This reliance on possessions to protect one from the threatening anarchy of the postmodern world gets to its crucial point in *Less Than Zero*, in which the family as Arthur M. Saltzman puts it: “With the urgency of addicts, accumulate material possessions to defend their sense of presence, to lend them personal density and the illusion of spiritual smugness” (*Modern Fiction Studies* 812-13). Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero*, explains the relaxation he feels when his ATM card works, thus authenticating his role as part of a huge system of consumers:

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

our father's charge account to buy him and me something and then to MGA and camp Beverly Hills and privilege to buy themselves something. (*Less Than Zero* 42)

In this part of the novel, Clay and his sisters emphasize the feeling of security that they acquire from a full carload of groceries signifying that they will be supported by the mere weight and triviality of their purchases: "It seemed to me that, ... the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—we had achieved a fulness of being that is not to people who need less, expect less" (*Less Than Zero* 44). One particularly essential feature of this use of consumerism as a protective factor comes when, having been described by a colleague as: "I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake" (ibid 46). To borrow a metaphor much favored by Baudrillard: "The new shopping malls make possible the synthesis of all consumer activities, not least of which are shopping, flirting with objects, idle wandering, and all the permutations of this," (*Consumer Society* 177) which makes Clay aware of the levelling of difference between himself and the rest of the human race and is trying to avert this entropic trend by involving himself in the supportive embrace of consumption.

4.2. Media Effect in *Less than Zero*

Besides the force of consumption, the mass media are also the dominant feature in Ellis's novels. Additionally, the power of the media—particularly of Television—originates from their ability to penetrate into the minds of their audience, thus acknowledging the predictions made by McLuhan in 1951: "the ad agencies and Hollywood....are always trying to get inside the public mind in order to impose their collective dreams on that inner stage" (McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* 97). Even when not actually watching television, the spectator is nonetheless still mesmerized by the images he/she has internalized. This manifests itself, as Marsha Kinder points out, both in public, in the consumer's deliberate choice of product, and in private, when images are reprocessed in thoughts or dreams, (Kinder, "Music Video and the Spectator" 11) a tendency exhibited, for example, in Clay's constant mulling over the words he reads on an advertising billboard (*Less Than Zero* 38). It is thus no surprise that the lives of Ellis's characters are shaped by the mass media to the same extent as they are by the forces of consumption and advertising.

Television has a great premium on Ellis's characters in a variety of ways. Some look to it to fill the void left by the removal of religion. Clay, in *Less Than Zero*, listens to a television missionary who declares that Jesus will come "through the eye of that television screen" in order to free the spectator of his frustration and disappointment,

There's another religious program on before I'm supposed to go out with Blair. The man who's talking has gray hair, pink-tinted sunglasses and very wide lapels on his jacket and he's holding a microphone. A neon-lit Christ stands forlornly in the background. "You feel confused. You feel frustrated," he tells me. "You don't know what is going on. That's why you feel hopeless, helpless. That's why you feel there is no way out of the situation. But Jesus will come. He will come through the eye of that television screen. (*Less than Zero* 140)

Television has become considered as the mere means of realizing any sensible certainty or knowledge about reality. In *Less Than Zero*, Clay's—the spectator's—gaze has therefore become as Jean Baudrillard states "the prototype of social act" (*Baudrillard, Fatal Strategies* 24). Clay's psychiatrist advises him to try to become more active in his life: "The psychiatrist I see tells me that he has a new idea for a screenplay. Instead of listening you should become more active not passive" (*Less Than Zero* 109). Clay is solely willing on looking rather than listening or participating. He articulates a mumble, confuses the psychiatrist in a cloud of smoke, and goes ahead to continue looking through the window of his sunglasses outside through another window. These escapist retreats through windows makes parallels to cinema, television and advertising screens – 'disappear Here'- and imply a deep hatred to social interactivity. To make matters worse, becoming 'active' is merely comprehended by Clay's psychiatrist as becoming part of the creative process of artifice, the creation of a spectacle –a screenplay—rather than through any connective interaction with the real world. As Dona Polan writes: "Spectacle offers an imagistic surface of the world as a strategy of containment against any depth of involvement with that world" (quoted in Kroker, *Cinema of Loneliness* 300). An extension of this strategy is also exhibited in the investment and containment of one's self-identity in their image.

The dull atmosphere of Ellis's world is often expanded through the presence of familiar cultural notions, objects and images that drawn out the peculiar and the idiosyncratic. Unconsciously at least, media are expanded higher on the reality level than real events because of their pervasiveness in everyday life. Ellis's details state the reality effect of postmodern capitalist society. Rarely does a page go by in his novels that is not accompanied by a pop song, a designer name, a TV show, a poster, or a commodity.

The billboard enclosed with the menacing words "Disappear Here" that appears repeatedly throughout *Less Than Zero*—and even makes an intertextual feature in *The Informers*—attracts the viewer to resort into the void of the image and forget the world:

I come to a red light, tempted to go through it, then stop once I see a billboard that I don't remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is "Disappear Here" and even

though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light. (*Less Than Zero* 48)

The billboard catchphrase, advertising 'some resort', not only summarizes the timid withdrawal of Clay and his group into the escape world of drugs and teenage debauchery but also, as Peter Freese notes, "proves a highly effective strategy of providing the understated and scarcely verbalized problems of the rather incoherent narrator and his peers with some deeper meaning" (Freese, "Less Than Zero: Entropy in MTV Novel" 76). These omnipresent signs and images, which enlivens the cultural landscape of Ellis's novels, indicate the hegemony of capitalism, while other messages and mottoes take on profound significance in pronouncing the dirtiness and corruption at the heart of society—Disappear Here--; which reminds one of what Jean Baudrillard argues in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: "Messages compete and conflict with each other in juxtapositions imposed by the random shuffle of traffic and through the defacement of surfaces" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 78). The familiar, 'functional' signs of advertising are attacked by the dark realities of hopelessness, fear, sexism, and homophobia that lie behind them, splitting forth their violent, bloody retaliations in a kind of uproar of signs.

As Ray Cummings points out, a pervasive feature of Ellis's work is that many of his characters are afflicted with a sense of abandonment/emptiness and interchangeability. Despite assured monetary standing, the lives of these literary characters lack a sense of direction and purpose, and stripped of any possibility of emotional support from their friends and family, they are: "Living their lives half-dead, bobbing afloat by holding on to cultural references" (Cummings, "Bret Easton Ellis and Why You Shouldn't Hate Him" 2). *Less Than Zero* is consistent with the doubtful difference of having defined the particular ennui of Generation X. The reason for this dominant feeling of malaise stems, according to Daniel Boorstin, from a problem that is characteristically American: "There is an obvious cure for failure, he says, that of Success. But what is the cure for Success? The over-achievement of people buoyed by a successful economy has led, he believes, to the creation of a common national ailment that is characterized not by misery, deprivation, or oppression, but by malaise, resentment, and bewilderment" (Boorstin, *Democracy and Its Discontents*, xii). Boorstin's theory is represented in Ellis's own inability to handle the public admiration donated upon him after the publication of *Less Than Zero*, an inability that resulted in a nervous breakdown: "I was not mature enough to sit around discussing myself....I couldn't handle it. Young success is a bad thing, a mistake, a freak of nature, it makes you feel the randomness and chaos of life" (Gerard, "Bret and Beast in the Corner" 14). Once again the boundaries between Ellis's experiences

and his art seen to collapse, and we are left to conclude that if Ellis himself found his life difficult to handle, it is little wonder that his characters are as disheartened and futile as they are under the forces of consumption and media.

5. Conclusion

In the course of this study, the authors have examined of the effects of consumption and the mass media which are widely believed to shape and mould the contemporary world, and have concluded that the ennui and violence into which Ellis's characters have variously fallen are their inevitable bi-products. Nor does their acceptance of these behaviors do anything to help his characters achieve a sense of identity or belonging. On the contrary, the more apathetic Clay becomes, the more fragmented and alienated an existence she leads. The problem, as the novel reveals, is that a dependence on the empty signs and signifiers of consumption has grown to such an extent that the integral identities of the characters themselves have been deconstructed. This results in the widespread lack of individuality witnessed among Ellis's characters. As a 'non-contingent human being', Ellis's characters are superficial and unformed, they seem to disappear and deteriorate, and no matter how often they analyze their behavior, it is clear that the absence of death and meaning in their world will prevent the possibility of putting their fractured psyche back together again. The main reason that Ellis's novels lack a moral centre, therefore, is because the structures that could maintain it have crumpled.

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