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BLANK FEMINISM:
READING BRET EASTON ELLIS' *AMERICAN PSYCHO* IN
A POST-FEMINIST WORLD

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Abstract

Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* is notorious for its gruesome descriptions of rape, murder, and torture, particularly against women. After its controversial publication in 1991, many literary critics, prominent feminist leaders, and mainstream readers alike chose to simply dismiss Ellis as a deviant amateur and the novel as trash unworthy of further review; however, nearly twenty years later, the *American Psycho* franchise of books, films, and even an upcoming Broadway musical adaptation is still going strong. In this paper, I explain how *American Psycho* has firmly established its literary merit and transcended its original criticism of being nothing more than misogynist pulp fiction. I examine how Ellis goes about constructing violence in the novel (particularly against his female characters) and show that this violence is not merely gratuitous or pornographic but complexly crafted with a sophisticated satirical agenda. I also discuss how this very deliberate construction can be read in support of traditionally feminist ideals despite the overwhelming criticism leveraged against it claiming otherwise. Finally, I show how *American Psycho*, though at first seemingly anti-feminist itself, is a product of an emerging form of feminism borne as an adaptive and activist response to the underlying anti-feminist attitudes of post-feminism.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
CHAPTER 1 Establishing <i>American Psycho</i>'s Merit	6
Contextualizing <i>American Psycho</i>'s Historical Relevance	6
<i>American Psycho</i> , Post-Modern Gothic.....	7
19 th Century Decadence and Fin de Siècle Parallels.....	9
Parallels to the Beats.....	10
Understanding <i>American Psycho</i> Within the Post-Modern Landscape	14
Blank Fiction.....	15
Criticism and the Public.....	19
CHAPTER 2 Constructing Violence in <i>American Psycho</i>	21
Commodification and Violence	21
The Embodiment of an Era.....	21
Creating Distance.....	23
Sex and Violence	25
Commodifying Sex.....	26
Cinematic Narration: A New Take on Pornography.....	27
The Language of Violence, The Violence of Language	29
CHAPTER 3 <i>American Psycho</i> in a Post-Feminist World	32
In Support of Feminist Ideals	32
Exposing vs. Promoting Violence	33
Masculine Language.....	34
A Satire of Patriarchy.....	35
As a Response to Post-Feminism	37
Contextualizing the Advent of Post-feminism.....	37
“Blank Feminism”	39
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	45

Introduction

“Time is moving along. Planned to have this done already. I will just keep a running log here as time passes. Many of the young girls here look so beautiful as to not be human, very edible.”

So began the December 22, 2008, blog entry of George Sodini: the gunman who opened fire on a Pennsylvania aerobics class eight months later, killing three women and injuring nine more. “Mr. Sodini had not known anyone in the class, and chose it simply because it had a lot of women in it,” the New York Times reported, referencing Sodini’s angry and frustrated blog in which he wrote about his resentment towards women and chronicled the days leading up to the violence (Hamill A18). “What was unusual about Sodini,” Bob Herbert later wrote in an op-ed for the Times, “was how explicit he was in his blog about his personal shame and his hatred of women” (A19). Sodini’s rampage was not a random act of violence, but a deliberate hate crime leveled specifically against an entire sex.

For those who have read Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *American Psycho*, such a chillingly nonchalant passage about “very edible” women might seem commonplace or even tame in the context of the novel. Set in 1980’s Manhattan, *American Psycho* is the story of Wall Street yuppie Patrick Bateman—handsome investment banker by day, ruthless serial killer by night. Gruesome descriptions of Bateman’s rapes, cannibalism, murders, and full-frontal misogyny catapulted the book to notoriety in 1991, with

mainstream critics and readers alike having never before dealt with such explicit violence, specifically against women. Many critics chose to simply write Ellis off as a deviant amateur employing shock tactics to stage one of the greatest publicity stunts in modern publishing history. Despite critics attacking Ellis as having a “lame and unhealthy imagination,” and reviews lambasting the novel as “pure trash, as scummy and mean as anything it depicts: a dirty book by a dirty writer,” and “so flat and tedious that the reader wants to scream,” *American Psycho* grew to be nothing short of a pop culture sensation (Rosenblatt; Yardley; Lehmann-Haupt). After the book in 1991 came a major motion picture version in 2000 (with a sequel, *American Psycho 2*, produced in 2002). Plans for a musical adaptation were announced in 2008¹, an audiobook was released in 2009, and The National Entertainment Collectibles Association even created a Patrick Bateman action figure, complete with axe and knife accessories.

Such a collective cultural fascination with *American Psycho* becomes increasingly intriguing in the wake of a tragedy like the Sodini shootings. Other entries from Sodini’s blog read almost interchangeably with passages from *American Psycho*. On December 29, 2008, Sodini wrote, “Just got back from tanning, been doing this for a while...actually look good. I dress good, am clean-shaven, bathe, touch of cologne...”, mirroring Bateman’s own obsession with his daily grooming routine. His July 23, 2009, entry is chillingly reminiscent of Bateman’s own preoccupation with attractive women he dubs as “hardbodies” throughout the novel. “I just looked out my front window and saw a

¹ Little has been released regarding the status of these plans following the original announcement (see Cox, “‘American Psycho’ Heads to Stage”). According to a February 3, 2010 article by the Associated Press, singer-songwriter Duncan Sheik has signed on to write the music and lyrics for the musical, however a production timeline for the show has yet to be announced (“‘American Psycho’ Musical in the Works”).

beautiful college-age girl... College girls are hoez,” Sodini wrote, “She was a long haired, hot little hottie with a beautiful bod. I masturbate. Frequently.” One could potentially make a case that Sodini was inspired by *American Psycho*, that it in fact served its purpose as the “how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women” that Tammy Bruce, then-president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, infamously accused it of being, although there does not appear to be any substantial evidence that Sodini read the book, saw the film, or was even familiar with the *American Psycho* franchise (McDowell C17). Regardless of no established direct link between Sodini and *American Psycho*, it is evident by the blunt misogyny and objectification of women present throughout his blog that, at the very least, Sodini was influenced by the same anti-female attitudes pervasive in society that Ellis demonstrates (and, as I will argue, artfully critiques) in his novel.

Although a side-by-side reading of the two texts could potentially render interesting results, such a narrow analysis would fail to recognize the greater issue at hand: that is, nearly twenty years after the novel was first published, violence against women in the real world is still modeling that of Ellis’ gruesome fiction. Had he simply employed the violence as a device to provoke temporary shock value, such a lack of progress would not be so unsettling. But, as Ellis explained in a 2005 interview with the BBC, his intention in writing *American Psycho* was really to present “a criticism of certain male values...pointed at the men who live that kind of life”. Despite the novel’s violence (and really, at the heart of it), there is a pointed indictment against the very kind of gender-based brutality George Sodini would go on to commit. Although feminist leaders and mainstream critics alike were initially outraged at the explicitness of the

violence against women and the unrestrained male chauvinism in *American Psycho*, aside from isolated protests and calls to boycott the book itself, little change in terms of the “certain male values” that Ellis set out to satirize seems to have taken place. In fact, with such a demonstrated and sustained market for the archetype that is Patrick Bateman—whether in novel, film, or musical form— *American Psycho* is more relevant now than ever.

No longer a fleeting blip on the 20th century cultural radar, *American Psycho* has arguably been canonized in the post-modern literary landscape, with calls from critics as early as 1999 that “The time has come to canonize Bret Easton Ellis” (Keats). At the very least, even the most skeptic of critics has commended the novel’s time-capsule quality, meticulously recording the particulars of 1980’s yuppie society and becoming an icon of Reagan-era consumer culture. In what is arguably the most well-circulated negative criticism of the novel, Roger Rosenblatt wrote for the *New York Times* in 1990, “It does [have something worthwhile]. What ‘American Psycho’ has is the most comprehensive lists of baffling luxury items to be found outside airplane gift catalogues. I do not exaggerate when I say that in his way Mr. Ellis may be the most knowledgeable author in all of American literature. Whatever Melville knew about whaling, whatever Mark Twain knew about rivers are mere amateur stammerings compared with what Mr. Ellis knows about shampoo alone.” In another review, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Henry Bean comments, “What Ellis fully understands is the politics of social irresponsibility, that electoral strategy initiated by Richard Nixon but which has reached full flower in the Reagan-Bush years”; however, a contemporary reading of the novel should not be limited to an exercise in history. Rather, by returning to *American Psycho* as a raw, scathingly

satirical statement about American attitudes towards women (as Ellis originally wrote it to be), the text achieves a renewed and enriched significance when read as a response to many anti-feminist sentiments inherent in the post-feminist movement. For this reason, in this paper I will explain how, despite overwhelming criticism against the book, *American Psycho* has established its literary merit and transcended its original criticism of being nothing more than misogynist pulp fiction. I will endeavor to examine exactly how Ellis constructs violence, and particularly violence against women, in *American Psycho*, and to prove that this violence is not merely gratuitous or pornographic but complexly crafted with a sophisticated satirical agenda. I will go on to discuss how this very deliberate construction can be read in support of traditionally feminist ideals despite the overwhelming criticism leveraged against it claiming otherwise. Finally, I will discuss how *American Psycho*, though at first seemingly anti-feminist itself, is a product of an emerging form of feminism borne as an adaptive and activist response to the underlying anti-feminist attitudes of post-feminism.

CHAPTER 1

Establishing *American Psycho*'s Merit

In what would become one of *American Psycho*'s most cited reviews, Roger Rosenblatt wrote for the New York Times, “the book goes nowhere. Characters do not exist, therefore do not develop. Bateman has no motivation for his madness.... No plot intrudes upon the pages. Bateman is never brought to justice, suggesting that even justice was bored” (73). Even Ellis himself admits to the lack of depth in *American Psycho*: in a 1991 interview with the New York Times, he said, “I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface—food, clothes—that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action: no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive,” going so far as to flat out say, “Look, it’s a very annoying book” (Cohen). When even a book’s author is admitting to its lack of plot and “annoying” narrative, how does one even begin to assign it any literary merit?

Contextualizing *American Psycho*'s Historical Relevance

The key to understanding *American Psycho* lies chiefly in its context, both within the scheme of already established literary traditions and in terms of its own socio-historical position. Ellis is diligently conscious of previous works’ representations of the themes and content present in *American Psycho*. How Ellis truly establishes *American Psycho*'s foundation as an operational novel, though, is by deliberately borrowing from and contextualizing the novel within the scheme of other literary movements and

traditions. Given the book's radically postmodern style, *American Psycho*'s roots in other literary forms provide it with preexisting models on which to build its bold satirical style upon. Where *American Psycho* deviates in traditional character and plot development, it supplements with a solid framework of traditional literary archetypes, forms, and conventions from such previously canonized genres as the Gothic novel and "decadent" and fin de siècle literature of the 19th century. Additionally, examining the logic behind much of *American Psycho*'s criticism in light of similar criticism faced by the now canonized Beat writers of the 1950s works to legitimize reading *American Psycho* as a true satire and not just a reckless postmodern experiment.

American Psycho, Post-Modern Gothic

One of the most obvious traditions from which *American Psycho* borrows is that of the classic Gothic novel. Ellis incorporates many elements readers would find in classic Hemingway or Bronte novels, creating a post-modern take on the already familiar Gothic archetype. Ruth Helyer identifies hallmark characteristics of Gothic novels:

Classic examples of Gothic literature deal with characters' fears of the forbidden and their repression of unauthorized urges. They warn against extremes of pleasure and stimulation...Archetypes of 'civilized' society are used in the narrative to justify the condemnation of unacceptable acts, and likewise to feed into our conception of reality.
(726)

American Psycho, then, fits comfortably "within a well-established literary tradition" (Helyer 728). As I will later discuss, one explanation of the motivation behind Patrick's violence is his deathly fear of "the other"—women, homosexuals, the homeless, and other demographics of which he is not a part and thus sees as threatening. Patrick himself also represents the warning "against extremes of pleasure and stimulation" noted by

Helyer to be characteristic of Gothic novels, with the entire novel recounting Patrick's overstimulation by products and brand names all in the name of luxury. Helyer goes so far as to see Patrick himself as a nod to the Gothic tradition, writing that "Gothic characters are typically highly stereotyped and Patrick is no exception, teetering precariously between categories the reader can easily recognize. He is a psychotic serial killer, but also a rich and eligible young man..." (728). While these archetypes and categories that Helyer identifies will arguably be recognizable to a considerable amount (or perhaps even most) of *American Psycho*'s readers, my object in identifying them (and the other traditions I discuss next) is not vested in assuming or even necessarily understanding what the "common" or "average" reader's response to Ellis' invocation of them may be. Instead, I discuss Ellis' use of these archetypes to support a case for the novel's literary merit in the sense that he did not "lose sight of what writing is supposed to be," as accused by some of his most ardent critics (Rosenblatt). Quite contrarily, he was actually intimately familiar with what writing *should* be and deliberately used these expectations to lend structure to an otherwise admittedly superficial novel. In other words, it is certainly not essential for an individual reader to definitively identify Patrick Bateman as a traditional Gothic character in order to understand the irony, humor, or satire of *American Psycho*, however in order to appreciate how the novel successfully operates without using traditional literary techniques (such as a dynamic plot or any substantial character development), an acknowledgement of the already established literary forms that inform *American Psycho* is fundamental.

19th Century Decadence and Fin de Siècle Parallels

Although Ellis borrows heavily from Gothic novels in constructing the world of *American Psycho*, it cannot simply be reduced to a postmodern interpretation of the genre. Ellis also looked to nineteenth century decadent fiction and fin de siècle writing to shape the novel, revisiting many of the same topics and themes featured in literature produced during the previous fin de siècle era. Critics slammed *American Psycho* for its subject matter, reducing it in one case as being simply “the most comprehensive lists of baffling luxury items to be found outside airplane gift catalogues” (Rosenblatt). The decadent lifestyles of the characters in *American Psycho*, so preoccupied with dining at the most fashionable restaurants, drinking top-shelf cocktails, and indulging in routine drug binges (like the perpetually drunk and/or drugged character Courtney) represent the same “preoccupation with the artificial that defines the decadent project” and “general hostility towards the material world” that characterizes nineteenth century fin de siècle narratives. James Annesley, writing in 1996, spoke of 1990’s literature’s revisiting of previous turn-of-the-century anxieties. “As memories of the cold war fade and the threat of nuclear apocalypse recedes, concerns about the environment...provide new sources of anxiety...This entropic zeitgeist is sustained by a series of obvious comparisons of the last fin de siècle” (Annesley, “Decadence and Disquiet” 365). Specifically, Annesley notes that *American Psycho*’s “focus on issues linked to narcotics, gender and sexual experimentation parallel the concerns of nineteenth century fin de siècle narrative” (369). Thus, even though its subject matter may seem painfully pedestrian, it does not suffice to reject *American Psycho* on content alone given its thematic similarities to the critically accepted fin de siècle narratives and decadent genre.

Parallels to the Beats

Perhaps just as famous for its element of controversy as its actual subject matter, *American Psycho* was publicly lambasted in major publications ranging from The New York and Los Angeles Times to Vanity Fair and even Britain's Guardian newspaper for its lack of form or plot, abrasive style, and explicit (or even, as some argue, obscene) content. Critic James Gardner said of the book, its "characters are too realistic for satire and too unbelievable for realism; long passages are meant to be monotonous— and they are; the book proceeds by repetition rather than by development and is never satisfactorily resolved." Roger Rosenblatt wrote, "*American Psycho* is the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore. But that is unfair to sophomores. So pointless, so themeless, so everythingless is this novel," while Jonathan Yardley proclaimed it to be "pure trash, as scummy and mean as anything it depicts: a dirty book by a dirty writer." Having published his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, with considerable success at the mere age of 21 (and still enrolled in college), Ellis was routinely criticized as an overly-ambitious amateur even by the time he published *American Psycho* (his third novel) and even by those who appreciated his creative vision. Critic Henry Bean insisted that we should "applaud Bret Easton Ellis for setting out in this noble and dangerous direction" with *American Psycho*, but quickly qualified his praise by writing that Ellis' "fault is that he did not go far enough." Regardless of the particulars of a given critic's review of the novel, surrounding its release, *American Psycho* was continually branded as a failed rebellion against the literary canon by a starry-eyed young writer; however, such criticism of the young and avant-garde is hardly anything new.

Writing in the *Partisan Review* in 1958, Norman Podhoretz wrote a very similar critique of the then-emerging young writers of the Beat generation titled “The Know-Nothing Bohemians”. “The Beat Generation was greeted with a certain relief by many people who had been disturbed by the notorious respectability and 'maturity' of post-war writing,” he mocked, “this was more like it— restless, rebellious, confused youth living it up, instead of thin, balding, buttoned-down instructors of English composing ironic verses with one hand while changing the baby's diapers with the other.” (Podhoretz). Three years later, critic Paul O’Neil also supported Podhoretz’s disapproval of the growing popularity of Beat literature, writing, “the bulk of Beat writers are undisciplined and slovenly amateurs who have deluded themselves into believing their lugubrious absurdities are art simply because they have rejected the form, style and attitudes of previous generations and have seized upon obscenity as an expression of ‘total personality’” (qtd. in Nash 56). Podhoretz and O’Neil are only two examples of countless critics who insisted on the lack of literary merit in “the unreadable un-novels of Jack Kerouac” and the other young writers of era given their rejection of traditional novels’ structures and conventions (O’Neil, qtd. in Nash 56). Without a doubt, the Beats “attracted widespread media interest in the fifties, with much of the coverage relatively unfavourable”, in many ways paralleling the plight of Ellis (and his own contemporaries) in the 1990s to achieve acknowledgment as an author of valid works of literature (Nash 54). Although there are certainly many differences between Ellis’ body of work and that of Beat generation writers’ (such as Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs), what unites their work is this cultural, critical, and media tendency to reject young authors critical of establishment. Just as writers of the Beat generation were critical of their own repressive

post-war society, *American Psycho*, writes Elizabeth Young, “is of course a classic of the 1980s. In a sense it is the 1980s. It embodies the decade and all the clichés of the decade in the West— the rampant self-serving greed, relentless aggression and one-upmanship; the manic consumer overdrive, exhaustion, wipe-out and terror.” Thus, “it was hardly surprising that a novel which unequivocally condemned a way of life to which many people had sacrificed their youth and energy was tepidly received” (Young and Caveny 88-9). Even though *American Psycho* has received such an overwhelming amount of negative criticism for its bold and edgy form (or perhaps its lack thereof), such trials in literature are not uncommon for young writers like Ellis who dare to confront and denounce the very society of which they are a product.

The tumultuous publication history of *American Psycho* also has parallels to the turbulence faced by Beat writer Allen Ginsberg’s notorious poem *Howl*, infamous for its coarse language and graphic depictions of sex (in and of itself mirroring much of *American Psycho*’s criticism nearly 35 years later). In 1957, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the owner of the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, published *Howl* and was later arrested and charged with willfully and lewdly printing, publishing and selling obscene writings (King). Although neither Ellis nor his publisher ever faced legal recourse for producing *American Psycho*, Ellis found himself in a similar censorial position when, a mere weeks before the release of the novel, his publisher, Simon and Schuster, abruptly decided not to publish it. Ellis’ agent, Amanda Urban, told the Los Angeles Times, that she “knew of no other case in which a manuscript by a well-known author was accepted and legally vetted, was listed in the publisher's catalogue and for which the advance was paid to the author--and then weeks before the book's release, the publisher chose not to

release it” (Mehren). Even though *American Psycho* did not face the legal battle that *Howl* did, both books were effectively (though, in the end, temporarily) banned and removed from public access due to their allegedly obscene content.

Furthermore, not only were both works censored for their controversial content, but both books were also crucified for their brash depictions of reality. Neither book necessarily held as its object the desire to shock for the sake of shocking, but instead to maintain a sense of honesty regarding their respective subjects, no matter how unsavory or uncomfortable that honesty may require their writing to be. “Ellis said he had conducted extensive research before writing *American Psycho*,” reported the Los Angeles Times, noting that he read “criminology textbooks as well as books about the psychology of serial killers” in order to write *American Psycho*. Even though “it was upsetting to write some of these chapters,” Ellis told the Times, he noted that “he felt ‘at the same time that it was vital to the overall texture’ of the novel. It would not make sense for me to edit (those sections),” Ellis said. ‘I would feel I was censoring myself’ (Mehren). It is this same spirit of artistic integrity that informed Judge Clayton Horn’s decision in *The People of the State of California v. Ferlinghetti*. “There are a number of words used in ‘Howl’ that are presently considered coarse and vulgar in some circles of the community; in other circles such words are in everyday use. It would be unrealistic to deny these facts,” he wrote in his decision. He continued,

The author of "Howl" has used those words because he believed that his portrayal required them as being in character. The People state that it is not necessary to use such words and that others would be more palatable to good taste. The answer is that life is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same or conforms to a particular pattern. No two persons think alike; we were all made from the same mold but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism? An author should be real in treating his subject and be

allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words. (*People v. Ferlinghetti*)

While it is tempting to leave a comparison of *American Psycho* and *Howl* simply at the allegations of their obscene content and subsequent bannings, what is of particular interest is the fact that both works authors were “reporting from within a lived reality,” arguably providing the most salient (though perhaps not most obvious) basis for their respective controversies (Young and Caveny 14). *American Psycho* is certainly explicit, however just as “the author of ‘Howl’ has used those [vulgar] words because he believed that his portrayal required them as being in character,” Ellis too was writing as an honest product of his own postmodern generation, legitimizing the content and style of *American Psycho* as both deliberate and necessary.

Understanding *American Psycho* Within the Post-Modern Landscape

With its roots in already well-established literary traditions like Gothic novels, fin de siècle narratives, and the works born out of the Beat generation, the unique postmodernity of *American Psycho* gains additional significance when reading it in the context of the contemporary literary world. While much of the work published in recent years has simply been labeled as postmodern, such a blanket term often does not sufficiently serve the novels in supposedly defines, as is the case with *American Psycho*. The novel certainly exemplifies characteristics of postmodern literature with its dramatically experimental structure, but it is more appropriate to classify *American Psycho* (in addition to Ellis’ other novels) in a separate, thematically and aesthetically unique genre now known largely as “blank fiction”. Additionally, when one examines the criticism levied against *American Psycho* by academics and citizen critics alike, one is

able to understand the novel in terms of its real-world implications and social resonance in ways that would not necessarily be evident when limiting one's reading explicitly to the novel's literary theory and traditional critical merit.

Blank Fiction

A term born out of the works of Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, and other writers of the 1980s, blank fiction, sometimes also referred to as “downtown,” “post-punk,” “new narrative,” or “hybrid” fiction, represents a body of work attempting to reconcile the twenty- to thirty-something demographic coming of age in the late twentieth century (Young and Caveny xiv). As the novels that exemplify blank fiction are still a critically contentious body of work oftentimes not even recognized as valid literature, it is difficult to entirely define such a contemporary genre. Regardless, “[t]here is, quite clearly, both a common context and a common vision” amongst novels of blank fiction, and “while there is no ‘blank manifesto’, these affinities suggest the existence of a ‘blank scene’ ” (Annesley, “Blank Fictions” 3). Despite its distinctively organic genesis, it can typically be agreed that novels of blank fiction all tend to deal with the particulars of modern urban life, social decadence, and consumerism, with these topoi typically accompanied by raw depictions of the unsavory grit of violence and Bacchanal sex and drug indulgences. These novels also oftentimes employ a seemingly superficial, affectless tone and (if it even exists at all) a largely nonmomentous plot. “Instead of the dense plots, elaborate styles, and political subjects that provide the material for writers like Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon and Norman Mailer,” says Annesley, blank fiction authors “seem determined to adopt a looser approach” (“Blank Fictions” 2). Similar in spirit to

the raw, experimental, and street-smart punk and post-punk music that paralleled its emergence, blank fiction is not only a “looser approach” to literature but one that prioritizes cultural relevancy over philosophical prowess.

Given this priority of cultural relevancy, at first glance, blank fiction may seem incommensurate with the other literary genres discussed previously. In fact, because a defining characteristic of *American Psycho* (and other novels of blank fiction) is its revolt against previously established literary conventions, the novel may even seem to stand in complete opposition to the much more cohesive and formally defined genres discussed earlier; however, just because blank fiction is aesthetically radical in comparison to previous literary movements, this does not necessarily mean that all works of blank fiction are merely odes to pop culture that are unable to engage intellectually. In fact, quite contrarily, their common thread is their focus on reflecting issues facing mainstream culture *and* their insistence to confront them head on. Just as nineteenth century fin de siècle narratives exposed the anxieties and concerns of the turn-of-the-century’s “entropic zeitgeist,” *American Psycho*, though intentionally lacking the aesthetic finesse of the nineteenth century fin de siècle genre, similarly reflects comparable millennial anxieties of its own time (Annesley, “Decadence and Disquiet” 36). Just as Gothic novels confront “fears of the forbidden” and the “repression of unauthorized urges” concerning society at the time of their publishing, blank fiction echoes comparable concerns of its own period (Helyer 726). Blank fiction’s raw and radical approach to confronting and critiquing what is on the forefront of a cultural moment’s consciousness should not wholly separate it from previous literary genres. Instead, its dedication to recognizing the realities and anxieties of people in a given

society within a particular cultural-historical moment is exactly what makes the genre viable within the scheme of literary history.

What cements blank fiction's identity as a legitimate literary movement rather than simply a fad or limited event within late twentieth century literature is this rejection of the dense, incredibly theoretical novels that have come to represent a large portion of postmodern works published over the past several decades (referred to by Elizabeth Young as the "high postmodern"). Instead, blank fiction is unique in its commitment to expressing, examining, and exposing the realities and peculiarities of late twentieth century American pop culture.

[P]ostmodern fiction has already achieved a form of metafictional classicism known as 'high postmodernism'. Many of these writers, who include Umberto Eco, John Barth, Donald Bartheleme, Robert Coover, D. M. Thomas, E. L. Doctorow are... highly esteemed and very influential but they are all very theoretical writers, heavily dependent on what Eco has called 'the game of irony'. This kind of writing gradually tends towards a point where it has only the most minimal and self-conscious relation to anything that might be called 'reality'.
(Young and Caveny 13)

The authors of blank fiction used their own experiences as citizens of a postmodern world to reexamine people, experiences, and value systems previously dismissed as uncultured, pedestrian, and banal. They are "reporting from within a lived reality, not dissecting its constituents from the academic perimeters" (Young and Caveny 14). Ellis' characters wear Ray-Bans, not sunglasses, and drink Evian, not water. Whether it's discussing the etiquette of wearing a vest with a suit (Ellis 154-155) or narrating a sexual encounter down to the water-soluble spermicidal lubricant (101-105), Ellis (and other blank writers) are undoubtedly informed by their own lived realities and observations of the world and illuminate these experiences through their writing, no matter how trivial the specifics of these realities may seem in the shadows of their "high postmodern" contemporaries.

The chief criticism leveled against blank fiction, and overwhelmingly against *American Psycho*, is that it lacks substance, with scenes of sex and violence only serving to titillate and shock against a backdrop of seemingly endless mundane product placement and day-to-day minutiae. In his New York Times review of *American Psycho*, Roger Rosenblatt writes that the book is “[s]o pointless, so themeless, so everythingless...except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products,” even declaring it “the most loathsome offering of the season.” While at first glance *American Psycho* may indeed seem to be little more than nearly 400 pages of catalogue speak, to simply dismiss it as such is to miss the point. Rather, it is through this entirely superficial language of the book that Ellis satirizes the modern social conditions of which the novel itself is a product. “[I]t is the blank, empty and commercial nature of these [blank fiction] novels that, in a paradoxical fashion, opens up a way of conceptualizing contemporary conditions and turns the process of saying a little into the act of disclosing a lot,” writes Annesley (Blank Fictions 10). In other words, *American Psycho* “does not just depict its own period” but in a much more sophisticated twist, “it speaks in the commodified language of its own period” (Blank Fictions 7). By using the language of the superficial consumerist world he aims to critique, Ellis is able to evoke a more complex and poignant response (be it from his supporters or his critics) than if he were to simply give a straightforward wag-of-the-finger to yuppie culture. It is through this saturated, self-reflecting brand of satire that *American Psycho* gains its place in the canon of postmodern literature and establishes its worth as a deliberately constructed and sophisticated piece of modern social commentary.

Criticism and the Public

Given the public uproar surrounding *American Psycho*'s publication and the informal, "of the streets" nature of the blank fiction movement, it is both appropriate and important to include non-academic criticism in any discussion of the book's literary merit. The novels of blank fiction are not strict products of literary theory and philosophy (or even convention), but include an undeniable component of dependence upon cultural relevance and resonance. Journalistic reviews of *American Psycho*, such as Jonathan Yardley's in the Washington Post, Henry Bean's in the Los Angeles Times, and, perhaps most famously, Roger Rosenblatt's in the New York Times were all well-circulated surrounding the novel's release, and were pieces of criticism likely to be encountered by readers picking up *American Psycho* outside of the classroom. Nearly twenty years after its publication, the novel is still controversial in terms of its literary merit and role in academia, necessitating the examination of *American Psycho*'s nonacademic criticism alongside more traditional literary critiques.

Additionally, following the publication of these reviews in their respective newspapers, actual readers and other real members of the public were presented with a forum through which they could discuss the book in a real-world context, becoming what Rosa Eberly refers to as "citizen critics". She writes,

[W]hereas institutionalized literary critics, lawyers, and judges have accepted the criterion of "literary merit" as warrant for no longer censoring or suppressing most works of fiction, citizen critics are less settled about whether 'literary merit' (or the more pedagogical "good writing") is in itself a legitimate or ultimate criterion for making judgments about works of fiction. (Eberly 3)

By including the nonacademic criticism of writers like Yardley, Bean, and Rosenblatt in my own analysis of *American Psycho*'s merit, and by using actual readers' reactions and responses such as letters to the editor to further inform it, I am acknowledging a crucial

aspect to novels of blank fiction—that is, their social or “real-world” engagement with actual readers. Furthermore, in the case of *American Psycho*, social engagement is paramount to its successful operation as a satire of the cultural conditions of which it is a product. This is not to say that academic criticism of the novel is irrelevant, but rather that there is a unique richness in the content and scope of a *citizen* critic’s criticism of the novel that has the potential to effect collaborative public rhetorical engagements and social change. Writes Eberly,

In the twentieth century, literary public spheres have been most robust when institutional, expert literary critics have had the least cultural authority. The rise of English studies and the professionalization of something called first “literary critic” and then “literary theorist” relegated the opinions of nonexpert or citizen critics to a position of relatively little cultural authority. (Eberly 9)

However, by turning to forums for nonacademic criticism like the editorial and opinion pages of newspapers, “these practices allow literary and other cultural texts to matter— to become inventional prompts not to mere contemplation but to public rhetorical exchanges and action” (Eberly 9). As I later discuss in Chapter 3, when one reads *American Psycho* as an “inventional prompt” to “public rhetorical exchanges and action” in terms of the state and evolution of modern feminism, public criticism of the novel rather than (strictly academic criticism) has the potential to be a crucial component to the novel’s success as a catalyst for social change.

CHAPTER 2

Constructing Violence in *American Psycho*

Aside from the meticulous attention to brand names, the flat plot and caricatured characters, perhaps the most controversial aspect of *American Psycho* is its unabashed depictions of violence. As the violence contained within the novel is so explicit and is written in such graphic detail, many critics automatically dismissed *American Psycho* as “pure trash” unworthy of any further analysis (Yardley). In reality, one cannot afford to hold such a myopic interpretation of *American Psycho*, seeing it simply in terms of its brutality. Furthermore, it does not serve readers to acknowledge the violence but to reduce it to nothing more than a motif or to write it off as purely gratuitous; rather, Ellis’ construction of violence is much more complex and works to support a deeply satirical agenda.

Commodification and Violence

The Embodiment of an Era

In supporting his claim that “[s]urface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in” in the world of *American Psycho*, Ellis necessarily aligns the violence in the book with blind commodification—the very cultural practice he aims to critique (Ellis 375). Elizabeth Young writes, “*American Psycho* is of course a classic of the 1980s. In a sense it is the 1980s. It embodies the decade and all the clichés of the decade in the West—the rampant self-serving greed, relentless aggression and one-upmanship; the manic consumer overdrive, exhaustion, wipe-out and terror” (88). Serving as the

personification of the era, Patrick, then, “seems unaware of the difference between commodities and human life” in his interactions with others (Annesley, “Blank Fictions” 13). Specifically, his detailed descriptions of other characters (particularly of women) read as though they’re straight from a catalogue or advertisement, hopelessly reducing them to living, walking objects. “I’ve spent *months* prowling this section of town for the appropriate babe—I find her on the corner of Washington and Thirteenth,” narrates Bateman as he trolls for a prostitute one night (adding another layer to the commodification of sex in the scheme of the book). He continues:

She’s blond and slim and young, trashy but not an escort bimbo, and most important, she’s *white*, which is a rarity in these parts. She’s wearing tight cutoff shorts, a white T-shirt and a cheap leather jacket, and except for a bruise over her left knee her skin is pale all over, including the face, though her thickly lipsticked mouth is done up in pink. Behind her, in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned brick warehouse, is the word M E A T and the way the letters are spaced awakens something inside me... (Ellis 168, emphasis in original)

Patrick goes on to strip her of her name and requires that she answer to “Christie,” the name *he* chooses to assign to her. “I don’t know her real name,” he tells the reader, “I haven’t asked, but I told her to respond *only* when I call her Christie” (170, emphasis in original). She is not a woman or even a human being to Patrick, but meat to be bought, packaged, and sold like the word painted on the warehouse behind her. Bateman knows no difference between purchasing a suit or hair products and purchasing women and thus faces no moral repercussions or remorse after committing brutal acts of violence towards them. “The violent treatment of his predominantly female victims,” then, says Annesley, “is thus tied to his vision of a world in which everything has been commodified” (Blank Fictions 14). Patrick gains power from his sense of ownership, as is evident by the pride he derives from his extensive lists and descriptions of his things. His entire identity, and

specifically his masculine identity, is completely dependent upon his dominant relationship with his material possessions (and the women he sees as such).

Thus, when this air of ownership is conflated with violence, it becomes a significant element within Ellis' greater satirical framework. In an interview about writing the screenplay for the film version of *American Psycho*, Ellis confirms the significance of this link between commodities and violence. He commented that the film's original director, David Cronenberg,

...really wanted to fixate on the décor, labels, status symbols. It was really going to be a movie about period, sort of like *The Age of Innocence*, the Scorsese movie. I think that's what he was envisioning. That was made later, but what Scorsese did with that was concentrate on the décor having much to do with the characters' inner lives. Surrounded by products and furniture and clothing and all these things; that's what [Cronenberg] was aiming for. I just didn't think it would make a very viable movie. It's a very interesting idea for a movie, but I think the violence is part of it. (Klein, A.V. Club)

It is Ellis' use of violence (and his aligning it so closely with labels and incessant commodification) that elevates *American Psycho* above merely serving as a cultural snapshot of a particular era. Although the novel certainly does achieve this, Ellis' choice to incorporate violence as such a central aspect to the text propels it beyond simply being a period piece to being a cutting indictment against an increasingly patriarchal society (or at least a society increasingly accepting of already existing patriarchal influences) for holding these values that became so characteristic of the time.

Creating Distance

Ellis also equates violence with materialism as a technique to simultaneously dehumanize Patrick as a character and desensitize the reader to reality of the horrific

events described throughout the novel. Many critics were quick to dismiss Ellis' exhaustive lists of brand names and meticulous attention to otherwise banal details: Roger Rosenblatt asserted that the book had "the most comprehensive lists of baffling luxury items to be found outside airplane gift catalogues," chiding that "whatever Mark Twain knew about rivers are mere amateur stammerings compared with what Mr. Ellis knows about shampoo alone." Rosenblatt certainly isn't off-base in this assertion—for example, Ellis devotes an entire dinner conversation to the mind-numbing details of business cards.

I decide to even up the score a little bit by showing everyone my new business card. I pull it out of my gazelleskin wallet (Barney's, \$850) and slap it on the table, waiting for reactions... "Cool coloring," Van Patten says, studying the card closely.
"That's bone," I point out. "And the lettering is something called Silian Rail."
"Silian Rail?" McDermott asks.
"Yeah. Not bad, huh?"
"It *is* very cool, Bateman," Van Patten says guardedly, the jealous bastard, "but that's nothing...." He pulls out his wallet and slaps a card next to an ashtray. "Look at this..." I notice the elegance of the color and the classy type. I clench my fist as Van Patten says, smugly, "Eggshell with Romalian type..." (Ellis 44)

And the conversation continues on, eventually highlighting a "Raised lettering, pale nimbus white card" with "subtle off-white coloring" and "tasteful thickness," and so on and so forth. The amount of detail in the novel in itself is an exhausting read, inundating readers with specific lists of items, brands, and features that, while they certainly are effective in establishing the socioeconomic status of the characters, do little to develop them beyond a superficial level. Although readers are provided with plenty of information regarding the material and designers of Bateman's suits and furniture, readers are provided with very little insight into Bateman as a human being, effectively distancing them from the book and dehumanizing Patrick.

This distancing and dehumanizing effect from the gross commodification in the book sets the stage for readers to experience the juxtaposition of the novel's horrific violence. Patrick's describes his violent acts in the same tedious, distanced method as with everything else in his life, and thus "[e]ven the violence becomes distracting in *American Psycho* and the reader desensitized to it," according to critic Leigh Brock.

Although Bateman announces all of his torturings and killings, he describes them so methodically, so coldly, one tends to skip over them. Eventually, the reader notices the depictions of Bateman's violence lack passion and emotion, and he rushes past the mind-numbing detail of exactly what everyone is wearing or eating. The exceedingly graphic episodes become more dull than nauseating. Ellis' style allows the reader to distance himself from the text, lessening its shock and impact.
(Brock)

By incessantly aligning the Bateman's violence so closely with his commodities, Ellis creates and successfully maintains a distance between readers and Bateman (and likewise, his atrocious crimes) for the duration of the novel. Writing violence in the novel in the same exhausting language of commodification that the novel's non-violent passages follow constructs the dystopic distance necessary to facilitate the text's dark satire.

Sex and Violence

It is important to note that the violence in *American Psycho* is often (perhaps even usually) combined with sex, but that sex in *American Psycho* is not necessarily arousing or pornographic in nature. "Ellis' text...lacks eroticism, metaphysics, and substance, offers 'no catharsis,' 'no deeper knowledge' about identity. There is only 'surface, surface, surface'," writes Sabine Sielke (287). Even though there is a considerable amount of sex in the book, and though Ellis is certainly explicit in his descriptions of sex,

these passages are written in the same hollow language of brand names and material wealth that characterizes the rest of the book, conflating sex, violence, and possessions as indistinguishable. Additionally, Ellis uses a production oriented perspective in his invocation of the pornographic film genre to deliberately distance readers from experiencing the novel in *purely* erotic terms and instead to present an additional manufactured and socially controlled aspect to sex. By framing sex and violence as commensurate with material possessions and

Commodifying Sex

As noted earlier, Ellis deliberately conflates violence with commodification in the novel as a means of distancing and desensitizing the reader from the act at hand. Similarly, Ellis also describes sex in terms of commodities, in turn blurring the boundaries of things, violence, and sex. One method of commodifying sex and simultaneously minimizing its erotic capital in *American Psycho* is by consistently interrupting it with direct interjections of brand names and material possessions, sabotaging any true or sustained pornographic potential. “Sex happens—a hard-core montage,” Ellis begins one such scene between Bateman and two prostitutes, only to jarringly disrupt the building erotic momentum a mere five lines later when Bateman changes his focus mid-sex act to a piece of artwork. “Fucking one of them with a condom while the other sucks my balls, lapping at them, I stare at the Angelis silk-screen print hanging over the bed and I’m thinking about pools of blood, geysers of the stuff” (303). In another passage, Ellis writes, “Elizabeth is making out with Christie, both of them naked on my bed, all the lights in the room burning, while I sit in the Louis Montoni chair by the side of the futon, watching them very closely, occasionally repositioning their

bodies” (288). This interjection of a brand name chair, a blunt non-sequitur amidst an otherwise tantalizing passage, brusquely jars the narration’s erotic energy.

Cinematic Narration: A New Take on Pornography

In addition to literally interjecting commodities into the novel’s descriptions of sex, Ellis also uses a cinematic style to inform Patrick’s narration but chooses to invoke a directorial or production-oriented point of view (rather than the perspective of the viewer) to highlight Patrick’s overwhelming need to maintain complete control over his masculine identity. On multiple occasions, Bateman even literally uses film terminology to describe his experiences. “[S]everal times, writes Sabine Buchholz, “the border between literature and film is opened up by Bateman's metaphorical application of film vocabulary ('cut', 'setting', 'zoom', 'close-up' etc.)" (15). Patrick takes on a role similar to that of a film director throughout the novel, forcing readers to continually take a step back from the carnal draw of a given moment and confront the mechanical details of the scene rather than passively consuming its fantasy. That is to say, Ellis’ audience is not necessarily only “watching” a pornographic film with Bateman as its protagonist, but is also experiencing the making of the film itself.

In the previously discussed passage in which Bateman watches two prostitutes engage in a scene that, realistically, might also be found in any modern pornography film, Bateman gives attention to the proper lighting (“all the lights in the room burning”), is “occasionally repositioning” the actors throughout the scene, and even sits in a Louis Montoni director’s chair where he is removed from the actual sex act in progress but still very much in a position of control. Ellis frames the women in the scene as mere props to

be positioned rather than as participants and largely removes Patrick's own sexual investment from the picture. Ellis' emphasis, then, is not necessarily on the sex act itself, but on the *making* of the sex, with Bateman as our director. Whether a given reader finds Ellis' sexual imagery to be erotic or revolting (or perhaps even a combination of the two), what is key in reading these scenes is recognizing this very specific construction of the *production* of sex. Casting Bateman in this directorial role enables Ellis to maintain a distance between readers and the acts described within the text, and allows him to incorporate sex into the novel in the same way that he links commodities and violence as discussed earlier. The language of sex in *American Psycho* is that of production and possessions. It is blunt and utilitarian, not sensual or seductively fantastical, regardless of whether or not an individual reader personally finds the sexual material to be erotic or arousing.

Although this might seem like a strange argument to make in favor of Ellis' employment of sex and violence—that is, that it lacks depth and is merely surface-level, merging sex, violence, and materialism as one and the same—if it wasn't so over the top and contrived, it would not fit into Ellis' greater satirical scheme for the novel. Without caricaturing this concept of sex as a manufactured commodity, the novel would exist solely as a traditional, indulgent object of pornography. Unlike other novels that show restraint, discretion, and even a sense of morality in their depictions of violence and sex, whose very lack of explicitness “compels us to keep our eye glued to the keyhole,” *American Psycho* “forces us to turn our backs on that door, to put the book down, spent, exhausted” (Sielke 180). Absolutely saturating the novel with his graphic descriptions alongside Bateman's unremitting lists of brand names and material things, Ellis removes

illicit appeal from the equation and desensitizes readers to passages that, if used sparingly or with restraint, would otherwise likely be impactful and even shocking. Ellis does not necessarily provide the reader with any substantial pleasure or satisfaction with his graphic scenes of sex and violence in *American Psycho*. In contrast to the characters in his book, by providing such over-the-top, disturbing descriptions, Ellis challenges readers' cultural instincts to mindlessly consume.

The Language of Violence, The Violence of Language

Finally, as a postmodern work, it is necessary to examine the complex construction and choices of language that Ellis chooses to use to create the violence in the novel. Perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects to Ellis' use of violence in *American Psycho* is the seemingly affectless, atonal descriptions of otherwise nauseatingly gruesome acts. Patrick explains the particulars of his murders with the same tone and measure as he does the details of his new camcorder or cassette player. For example, in one instance he explains, "Part of Tiffany's body—I think it's her even though I'm having a hard time telling the two apart—has sunken in and her ribs jut out, most broken in half from what's left of her stomach, both breasts having been pierced by them," only to launch into a description of his new audio receiver, "the Pioneer VSX-9300S," and all of its features in the paragraph immediately following (305-306). "It seemed clear to me that Bateman would describe these acts of brutality in the same numbing, excessive detail and flat tone that he recounts everything else—his clothing, his meals, his workouts at the gym," said Ellis, "it seemed to me that he would not avoid telling the reader what he does when he murders people. For me, it was an esthetic choice that made sense" (Cohen). Not

only does this serve to conflate the violence with the pervading attitude of commodification discussed earlier, but this very intentional discrepancy between the tone of the narration and the gruesome acts being described necessitates and agitates a response from the reader. Although the nonchalant, seemingly disengaged tone may at first seem to send a message of Ellis not caring about or perhaps even accepting Patrick's violence, "the existence of his books, the fact that he writes them, indicates, as noted, raging extremes of affect" (Young and Caveny 40). Rather than straightforwardly condemning Patrick's behavior, the disjunction between the tone of the novel and the gravity of the events described within it has the potential to elicit a much more profound and involved response from readers.

It should also be noted that the language of *American Psycho*—regardless of its tone— is constructed entirely in physical, violent, and traditionally masculine terms, exemplifying poststructuralist feminist Hélène Cixous's criteria of a phallogocentric narrative (234). With its hyper-masculine language and Patrick's constant preoccupation with his own masculinity, the violence of *American Psycho* is presented to the reader in strictly masculine terms. As Elizabeth Young notes, the book "is written largely in brochure-speak, ad-speak, in the mindless, soporific commentary of the catwalk or the soapy soft-sell of the market-place"— all loci controlled by men and dominated by aggressive, linear, masculine language. By presenting such a caricatured take on the masculine language that dominates consumer culture and by largely excluding women's voices from the novel, "Ellis destabilizes genres and suggests that, in general, a close study of our cultural debris" could reveal telling information about our attitudes towards women (Young and Caveny 101). Ellis himself speaks to the importance of writing

American Psycho strictly in strictly patriarchal terms: “Women don't play a part in that book really at all,” he told the BBC in a 2005 interview, “they’re just there to go to bed with, basically, and to be rated physically on their desirability level. I mean, that's the only function of the women in that book, and the criticism therefore is pointed at the men who live that kind of life” (“Ellis on Ellis on Ellis”). Ellis’ choice to focus exclusively on masculinity by using inherently masculine language, then, is reflective of a deliberate authorial decision rather than necessarily being indicative of a misogynist author.

Thus, though seemingly counter-intuitive, by excluding the experiences, language, and humanity of the female characters of *American Psycho*, Ellis creates an arguably feminist subtext to the novel. In other words, by constructing Patrick and his world out of “deliberately clichéd and extreme” hyper-masculine language, then “the novel exists to expose and satirize the beliefs that masculine language has about human nature: The murderous insanity of Bateman is merely the ultimate realization of normative masculinity’s internal logic” (Storey 62-63). In reading *American Psycho* as a satirical denunciation of the patriarchy rather than in its support, it is possible to understand the novel as a feminist tool for reexamining contemporary feminism(s) and societal attitudes towards women.

CHAPTER 3

American Psycho in a Post-Feminist World

Even before its publication, *American Psycho* gained notoriety for being “a how-to manual on the torture and dismemberment of women” (according to then-President of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, Tammy Bruce) (McDowell C17). Even when critics are willing to read the novel for the satire that it is, the majority still cannot see past its gruesome violence and revolting scenes of rape and murder, accusing Ellis of failing at creating viable satire due to his own (alleged) misogynist beliefs; however, *American Psycho* is not “a book about misogyny by a misogynist,” as Ellis told the BBC, but “a book *about* a misogynist” and the patriarchal society of which he is a product (“Ellis on Ellis on Ellis”).

In Support of Feminist Ideals

As discussed earlier, in the world of *American Psycho*, violence is one and the same with sex and commodification. Together, they are the ultimate destructive trifecta, embodying the most repulsive qualities of the era and presenting them to the extreme. In creating such a grossly caricatured world inhabited by equally (or perhaps even more obviously) caricatured characters, Ellis is able to expose real world violence against women, illuminate the shortcomings of masculine language structures, and support the ideals of what might be considered a traditionally feminist agenda.

Exposing vs. Promoting Violence

The presence of misogyny and violence against women in *American Psycho* is nothing that does not already exist in modern, Western culture and that feminists (even those identifying in the most general sense of the term) have been fighting against for years. In this way, *American Psycho* is not unequivocally a “how-to” manual or directive to commit violence against women. Rather, it is “a profoundly political text: Ellis was never attempting to glorify or incite violence against anyone, but rather to expose the effects of apathy to these broad social problems,” like violence against and the objectification of women by men, “including the very kinds of violence the most vocal critics feared the book would engender” (Brien). As Sabine Sielke notes, “[i]mages, so the lesson of modernism goes, do not literally mean what they represent, just as their absence... does not prevent the reader from supplementing meaning.” Thus, “*American Psycho* is not about sexual violence against women, even if it deploys its depiction” (Sielke 293). Instead, by including such graphic violence, Ellis supports an assertion that society has become numb to violence against women (similar to my earlier discussion of desensitization and distance in terms of sex and commodification in the novel). After all, the core elements consistent in all of the novel’s violence are not foreign to readers. They “are not shocking deviations from the mainstream, but elements that are, in fact, characteristic of it” (Annesley, “Blank Fictions” 12). With women’s bodies (and/or specific parts of them) regularly used to push everything from designer jeans to alcohol in advertisements, Ellis’ commodification of women in *American Psycho* differs only in its bluntness and his honesty, as an author, about what he is doing. Similarly, with more than half of all American adults reporting that they know someone who has personally

experienced domestic violence², Ellis uses familiar images of battered women to create the violence in *American Psycho*. For example, in one case, Bateman admits, “Tomorrow Sabrina will have a limp. Christie will probably have a terrible black eye and deep scratches across her buttocks caused by the coat hanger. Bloodstained Kleenex will lie crumpled by the side of the bed” (Ellis 176). Such imagery is not sensational or radical, but consistent with typical representations of violence against women already present in mainstream culture. This is not to say that readers *shouldn't* be shocked and/or horrified by the gruesome violence present in *American Psycho*: in fact, the novel has the potential to be a call to arms to reject the apathetic attitudes about violence against women that saturate mainstream culture. If consumers, for example, were as outraged over the commodification of women’s bodies in advertising for the products they buy as so many readers and critics were over the publication of *American Psycho*, perhaps some sort of real change in the representation of women could be effected. In this sense, *American Psycho* can, at the very least, be used as a consciousness-raising tool to advocate on behalf of a feminist cause.

Masculine Language

American Psycho also works as an example of the instability and insufficiency of strictly masculine language systems, standing in resounding support for Hélène Cixous’s critique of masculine writing. As previously discussed, Ellis writes *American Psycho* in

² According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, “Approximately 33 million or 15% of all U.S. adults, admit that they were a victim of domestic violence. Furthermore, 6 in 10 adults claim that they know someone personally who has experienced domestic violence.” (Based on July 2005 U.S. Census estimate released January 2006 (223,000,000 total U.S. adults aged 18 or over).) (“Get Educated, The Harris Poll 2006)

extreme terms of violence, pornography, economics, and the media, all of which are traditionally masculine arenas. The very “ad-speak” that the novel is written in is an additional example of what Cixous identified as phallogocentric male language at work.

As she wrote in her essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*,

I mean it when I speak of male writing. I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural - hence political, typically masculine - economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction. (879)

What is interesting to note about *American Psycho* is that Ellis directly asserts the very “libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy” engine behind the masculine language systems present in the novel by taking them to the far extreme. He does not deny that this language oppresses and excludes women and most certainly does not hide or adorn it “with the mystifying charms of fiction” that Cixous warns against. Although he does not directly create a space for the type of feminine writing that Cixous calls for in her essay, Ellis utilizes his position in power as a male writer to acknowledge, satirize, and undermine the very masculine language present in *American Psycho*. While it may not be a straightforward or conventional feminist gesture, regardless, Ellis’ deliberately extreme masculine language exposes its inadequacy and calls to question the very assumptions that it makes about humanity and the sexes.

A Satire of Patriarchy

Ellis goes beyond just critiquing masculine language systems and goes so far as to challenge the very patriarchal society that *American Psycho* both portrays and is itself a

part of. Bateman is the poster child for a patriarchal value system, and consequently, is terrified of “the other”— be it women, homosexuals, non-whites, or any other opposition to his own strictly defined identity. Not surprisingly, each of his victims poses some sort of threat to his identity as a wealthy, heterosexual, white male. Even though with this identity he is supposedly the greatest beneficiary and person with the most control over society, as Ellis shows over the course of the novel, in reality, Bateman is hopelessly trapped within the rigid confines of the inherently oppressive patriarchal power structure and thus must constantly defend his place in the order. “To Bateman, the rise of the marginalized” groups in society, such as women and ethnic minorities, “threatens his central position as hegemonic male; to protect that position, he lashes out, attempting to eliminate the threat” (Storey 63-4). Though Ellis never makes a direct critique about the problematic nature of such a patriarchal value system, such is the nature of his satirical style, and Bateman’s spiral towards insanity and sheer helplessness at the novel’s climax stand as indirect yet pointed testaments to its instability. Just as the infamous final scene of the book concludes with Bateman reading a sign above a door reading “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT,” there is no redemption for Bateman and no way out of the strict patriarchal system he himself embodies (Ellis 399). The novel, then, distinctly operates as a feminist social commentary: in its satire, with its gross exaggerations of masculinity, it works to expose the limitations of a hegemonic system based exclusively on and privileging patriarchal values.

As a Response to Post-Feminism

Contextualizing the Advent of Post-feminism

In 2003, Janelle Reinelt wrote for The Barnard Center for Research on Women, “There is little debate that we are no longer in the period of Second Wave Feminism” (2). With some scholars tracing the beginning of a post-Second Wave era back to the 1970s, it wasn’t until the mid-1980s that the term “post-feminism” began to appear in the media and take shape as the next phase in contemporary feminism. Although there is hardly a fixed definition of post-feminism, one of the most contentious yet definitive aspects to it (or perhaps even a possible definition) is that we are living in an era after feminism; that is, that feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer a relevant cause to modern women. “Postfeminism involves a mapping of social space that renders feminism homeless and groundless,” writes Mary Hawkesworth, going on to note that post-feminism “is a marker of time as well as space, implying a temporal sequence in which feminism has been transcended, occluded, overcome” (969). It is important to note that just as there is no single, authoritative definition or type of feminism, there can be no one-size-fits-all version of post-feminism. Furthermore, given that, “ ‘Yes’ we are in Postfeminism” currently, the term and movement itself are still in a state of flux, constantly evolving and being redefined (Reinelt 2). Regardless of these caveats, the acknowledgement of post-feminism creates a clear and intentional division, an “us” versus “them” mentality pitting the allegedly old-fashioned feminists with the purportedly progressive post-feminists. Simply ignoring post-feminism or denying its

existence is futile given its substantial history, and I agree with Reinelt's conclusion that "avoiding 'postfeminism' is impossible and unproductive"—in fact, its divisive consequences necessitate further analysis of the movement (2).

At the same time, it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in an in-depth discussion of the (in)validity of post-feminism or to critique the modern-day relevance of conventional (or perhaps, more appropriately, the "modern-" or "post-" Second Wave) feminists. Much has already been written on the subject and current scholarship examining the disjunctions between the two ideologies tends to offer much more sophisticated analyses than merely opposing binary observations³. Instead, for the purpose of this discussion, I take interest in the fact that in the late 20th century, support of a "traditional" Second Wave feminist agenda began to lose resonance for a number of reasons, but chiefly because of "the perception of restrictive and detrimental positions associated with feminism" held by many women (Reinelt 2). As Hawkesworth examines in her article "The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age," despite evidence of a "vibrancy" and "variety of proliferating forms of feminist theory and practice," a rhetoric of death has dominated contemporary mentions of feminism (963). For instance, she writes, "Between 1989 and 2001, for example, during a period in which the number of feminist organizations grew exponentially, a Lexis-Nexis search of English-language newspapers turned up eighty-six articles referring to the death of feminism and an additional seventy-four articles referring to the postfeminist era" (962-

³ For more information about the contentious evolution of post-feminism within feminist scholarship, see Alison Piepmeier's "Postfeminism vs. the Third Wave" (*Electronic Book Review*, 2006), Elyce Helford's "Tank Girl, Postfeminist Media Manifesto" (*Electronic Book Review*, 2005), and part II of Deborah Siegel's *Sisterhood, Interrupted: from Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

3). Regardless of the validity of these claims of feminism's death, what is key to acknowledge is the undeniable tension facing modern feminism that gained momentum in the 1980s and continues to challenge the movement today, particularly because it has been noted that this new brand of "feminism" "appeals particularly to young women" (Helford). Modern feminists must acknowledge and confront the fact that though their cause is certainly not irrational, their platform(s) has failed to adequately adjust to the challenges of a post-postmodern world. Given this inability to adapt, it is imperative for feminists to adjust and confront the criticism that post-modern feminists have leveled against them in order to regain relevancy and grounding, and to achieve any substantial social justice. For this reason, reading *American Psycho* not only as a novel that reflects feminist ideology but that supports it as a progressive response to post-feminism is just one example of how modern feminists can begin to regain relevance within a greater social context.

"Blank Feminism"

As previously discussed, the seemingly pedestrian blank fiction movement of the 1980s and 90s (and of which *American Psycho* is itself a part) established itself as a return to reality from the abstract and exclusory canon of high post-modernism, branding itself as work straight "from out of the streets with no name... reporting from within a lived reality" (Young and Caveny 19). Though some critics originally scoffed at the notion that the works of blank fiction constituted a legitimate literary movement or genre and instead classified them as being strictly post-modern, in hindsight, it is now apparent that this body of work is truly a separate response *to* post-modernism. The same lesson is

relevant when it comes to contemporary feminists, who must adopt and nurture the very sort of “blank feminism” present in *American Psycho*. Although it certainly is a departure from conventional feminist scholarship, this is precisely why it, and other works that share its progressive approach, must be incorporated into a contemporary feminist arsenal as a return to the concerns of people from “the streets with no name” that made blank fiction so successful.

One reason why post-feminism has achieved such widespread popularity is because of its connection to the same “lived reality” that Young and Caveny connected with blank fiction. For example, as Susan Douglas notes in her article, “Manufacturing Postfeminism,” women—and particularly young women—are regularly bombarded with post-feminist influences in the media, be it advertisements, television shows, or magazine articles, all of which support the “notion that whatever challenges women face in juggling work and family are their individual struggles, to be conquered through good planning, smart choices, and an upbeat outlook” rather than institutional problems to be addressed by the conventional feminist movement (Douglas). All of these venues are *already* found within women’s own lived realities, thus reaching women who don’t necessarily identify with either feminism or post-feminism but who appreciate the resonance the messages have in terms of their own every day experiences. ““I’m sitting here, in one hand Vogue’s April edition called ‘The Shape Issue,’ featuring Angelina Jolie (‘Rebel with a Cause,’ we’re told) on the cover,” Douglas writes, “and in the other Time’s April 15 issue devoted to the question of ‘Babies vs. Career.’ (Time promises to offer women ‘The harsh facts about fertility.’)” She continues,

Thirty years after the height of the women’s movement, here we are: Vogue tells us “How to Change Your Shape from Head to Toe” and Time warns us that if we get settled in a career first and then try to have

kids, we are doomed to childlessness. And I'm sitting here thinking:
This is it. This is postfeminism in action. (Douglas)

These post-feminist messages engage mainstream readers with their allure of understanding the “real world” issues facing women and providing them with purported solutions focused on individualism. “From sexual harassment to rape to attaining a fulfilling sex life, a postfeminist perspective suggests that women can control their destiny through their individual efforts alone,” writes Elyce Helford. “Just quit that job, take a martial arts class, and wear sexy clothes to the dance club and life is your oyster.” Of course, the post-feminist perspective is not necessarily so simplistic, but regardless, “[t]he hopeful, positive tone of postfeminism is alluring. We all want to feel we control our destiny; we all want to wish sexism away sometimes” (Helford). *American Psycho*, then, as anti-feminist as it may seem at first glance, has the potential to be such a valuable weapon for the contemporary feminists struggling to regain a perception of relevancy.

As a pop-culture success, *American Psycho* represents the ideal opportunity for feminism to engage with and empower the mainstream to effect the social change Ellis advocates for with his satire. For example, within two-weeks of its publishing in 1991, *American Psycho* sold over 100,000 copies and later went on to become a bestseller (not to mention the hysterical media storm before the novel was even released) (Brien). As previously mentioned, the *American Psycho* empire has continued to deliver over the past two decades, begetting two films, plans for a musical, and various other incarnations like action figures. Regardless of the debate over its scholarly merit or place in the literary canon, it is undeniable that society maintains a legitimate and sustained fascination with Patrick Bateman. Rather than embracing this opportunity to connect with mainstream culture, feminists have sharply distanced themselves from it, further casting their cause as

oblivious to the “lived realities” of mainstream culture. For example, instead of critically examining the novel and utilizing its potential to connect with the masses for a frank discussion about violence against women (just as post-feminists utilized mainstream magazine articles in Douglas’ example), the Los Angeles chapter of NOW established phone lines with recordings of the novel’s most violent passages in an act of protest. By “reducing fiction to content and translating writing into speech act,” NOW’s American Psycho-hotline essentially alienated Ellis’ readers and the organization effectively “distanc[ed] itself from Ellis’ ethics, which comes closer to feminist morality than feminism would dare to acknowledge” in a decision to maintain its clunky and exclusionary hard-line approach to feminism (Sielke 293). NOW effectively made a declaration of “separatism, not only from men but from ‘patriarchal culture’—thus abandoning most of the ground on which male power can be fought” (qtd. in Hawkesworth 964). Had NOW (and other feminists of the time) embraced the advent of *American Psycho* as a thread in the fabric of mainstream pop culture, they could have seized an opportunity to present their agenda in a fresh and progressive context, and to connect with the very audience they so desperately needed to regain bearing with in the same return “to the streets” mentality of the blank fiction movement. While the original publishing of *American Psycho* and the disappointing response from feminists (like those representing NOW) has come and gone, it is in feminism’s best interest to learn from their squandered opportunity and embrace the unique, emergent form of “blank feminism” that *American Psycho* represents for their cause.

Conclusion

In a July 2009 interview, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg told the New York Times, “I always thought that there was nothing an antifeminist would want more than to have women only in women’s organizations, in their own little corner empathizing with each other and not touching a man’s world. If you’re going to change things, you have to be with the people who hold the levers” (Bazelon MM22). Such is precisely the approach that contemporary feminists must begin to adopt should they stand any chance at rebutting the post-feminist claim that feminism has run its course, achieved all there is to achieve, and as a result is now rendered irrelevant. While the overwhelming criticism of *American Psycho* appeared to support and strengthen the feminist agenda back in 1991, in reality, by maintaining this same uncompromising and alienating approach to feminism, 21st century feminists are continuing to turn a blind eye to the lived realities of those members of society who do not identify as feminist and are failing in their critical obligation to connect with them. The 2009 Sodini fitness club shootings are just one example of a flaw in the postmodern assumption that feminism has achieved all there is to achieve, as it is clear from his blog that the killings were not random but very deliberate violence directed specifically against women *because* of their gender. Regardless of this confirmed and accepted conclusion, feminism’s inability to adapt to and engage with the experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of the lived realities of other members of society is still holding the movement back from effecting any real, current change. In an August 23 letter to the editor published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in the wake of the shootings, one woman wrote, “I cannot connect the dots

between the motives and actions of one mentally-deranged individual and how women are treated overall by society,” and it is no stretch to assume that others share her opinion (Paff). Thus, it is imperative now more than ever, when there is such a demonstrated disconnect between the goals of contemporary feminists and the rest of society, for more texts like *American Psycho* to become a part of mainstream culture and bridge the gap between theory and reality.

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