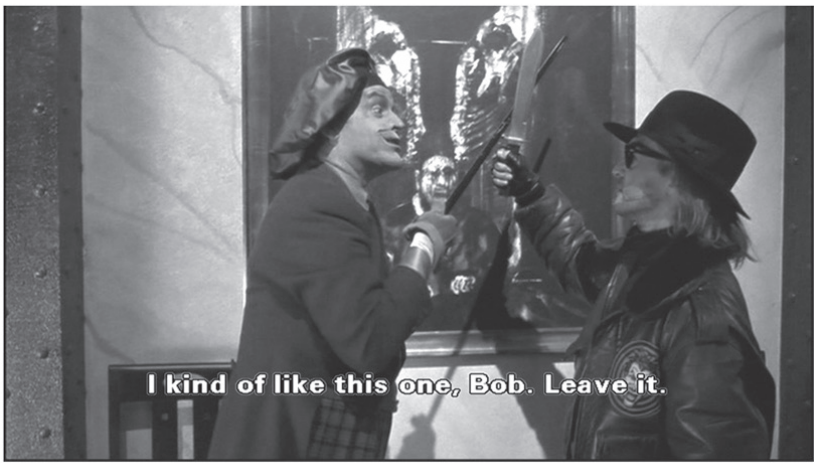






[Fig. 1 - 3] Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale)'s blood-splattered face in *American Psycho* (dir. Mary Harron, 2000); the Joker (Jack Nicholson) stops Bob (Tracey Walter) from destroying Francis Bacon's *Figure with Meat* (oil, 1954), in *Batman* (dir. Tim Burton, 1989); Blair (Jamie Gertz) snorts coke at her Christmas party in *Less Than Zero* (dir. Marek Kanievska, 1987).

Bret Easton Ellis

Casey Wei

When Bret Easton Ellis published his first novel, *Less Than Zero* (Simon and Schuster, 1985), he was still a college undergrad. Like a fairy-tale, it launched his career immediately, turning him into the literary spokesperson of his zeitgeist, poster-child for the 'brat-pack' of young writers who captured the postmodern ennui of and for their MTV generation. This instantaneous celebrity began what has since been a consistently controversial career, during which Ellis has been both revered as a bold and unique voice of contemporary American literature, and denounced as nothing more than a sensationalist hack.

Less Than Zero is a nihilistic and dark portrayal of what 'coming of age' means in the spiritually blasé upper echelons of Los Angeles. The protagonist, Clay, is home on a month long Christmas break from his freshman year. Reintroduced to his L.A. life that is a snapshot series of driving between excessive Hollywood parties to family luncheons to drug deals, he quickly learns that his friends, whom he had left only months ago, are spiraling down a dark path of hard drugs, debt, and prostitution. Ellis's blank, expository prose treatment of this spoilt Americana was met with both praise for its unapologetic presentation of the *new* lost-generation, and repulsion for the seemingly uncritical handling of sensitive content. *Less Than Zero* sets the foundation for Ellis's narrative voice: one of sociopathy, and later, psychosis.

While his debut novel inspired a passionate debate over its merit, his follow-up, *The Rules of Attraction* (Simon and Schuster, 1987), was unanimously panned both critically and commercially for doing nothing more than being a continuation of reporting on the lives of flat, unlikable characters — this time with less at stake. Like *Less Than Zero*, it fell too coldly into cool, and left the readers wondering at most, "Who cares?" *The Rules of Attraction* proved to the literary world that despite his natural talent, Ellis had fallen victim to his overnight celebrity.

His response to this flop was to dive deeper than anyone could imagine into the human depravity that he began to explore through Clay. *American Psycho* (1991), published by Vintage after being dropped last minute by Simon and Schuster, is the most convincing book-length inner monologue of a serial killer, as if written by an actual serial killer, disproving earlier criticisms of Ellis's work being more valuable when read as documentary.

The titular psycho is Patrick Bateman, a 26-year old Wall Street investment banker, and a very active serial killer. The book is written in first person, with the exception of three chapters of 'professional' music criticism on Whitney Houston, Phil Collins, and Huey Lewis. All three passages follow gruesome killings, but instead of functioning as a reprieve from the unrelenting master-text, these retrospective music reviews just add to the consumerist fervor that is Ellis's core thesis of the novel: people are consumed as commodities. The lives of these artists are summarized as quickly as the women are mutilated and killed.

For years, and probably still today, the work produces a strong split in its audience. To many, *American Psycho* is irresponsibly

exploitative in its violence towards women. Patrick Bateman is a brutally sexist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic serial killer. No moral confrontation is reached and nothing redeems the protagonist; the amount of torture and bloodshed is unaccounted for, and therefore, pornographic. Other critics have given it a superficial pass as a slick and reflexive comment on the greedy and corrupt ruling class.

Currently, Bret Easton Ellis writes for television, film, and hosts his podcast, *The Bret Easton Ellis Show*, a monologue-driven interview show centered around his vast knowledge of (Hollywood) cinema and his glib refrain that film is a dying art because filmmakers are no longer encouraged to be 'good' in today's corporate, mass-market driven studios. Him and his esteemed guests do the rounds of promoting new work, looking back at cinema's golden ages, and airing grievances against the 'social-justice warriors' and 'PC snowflakes' that reach for their whistles anytime a leaf is stepped on. Ellis's voice is essayistic and commanding; at times, his interview questions take on a Bateman-esque intensity, driving a point into a corner that is able to elicit only a "Yes" or "No" response, a pause, and an attempt by the guest to segue into actual conversation. However, the strength of his conviction and encyclopedic knowledge of his subject matter make up for the sometimes stifling and predictably cynical views he has of his industry.

The power of *American Psycho*, his best and most challenging work, can now be unpacked 25 years later. In 1991, it was received at the tail end of second-wave feminism and Ellis (a privileged white man), was easily vilified by the 'social-justice warriors' whom he still speaks of, to this day, in disdain.[1] The

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[1] This disdain is of the same sort that drove Bernie Sanders to say, "America is sick and tired of hearing about liberals' damn bathrooms!"

flat and saturated text gives the reader neither enough contrast nor time to interpret, and much of the subtle ambiguities are easily lost, too quietly sandwiched between acts of grotesque violence. For instance, the book begins with wrongly attributing "Be My Baby" to The Crystals instead of The Ronettes, and continues to insert the occasional Jeopardy mistake. Unless the reader is a knowledgeable music fan, these ticks fly by unnoticed until the glaringly intentional error, "You Can't Always Get What You Want," by The Beatles, three-quarters of the way through, a clever signal to Bateman's increasing instability from within his hermetic narration. In the 21st century, any doubt of whether it is The Shirelles or The Vandellas who sang "Dancing in the Street" can be relieved within a couple of seconds. The point is that, it doesn't really matter. We didn't know how little it mattered then, but we do now.

In the 25 years between now and then, *American Psycho* was also adapted into a film in 2000, by director/writer, Mary Harron. She saw the baroque violence against women as satire, and used it to create a feminist adaptation of the book that objectified the vanity of its 'protagonist.' She re-enacts the male gaze onto the male body (who could forget the awkwardly narcissistic mirror-threesome scene), and Bateman's acts of violence are neutered as they pass without repercussion. His inability to rebel, to *kill* his way out of the world, is the true cause of his madness. It was the film adaptation (many critics considered the film to be superior to the book) that gave *American Psycho* a new jolt of validity, where readers could reinterpret the violence vis-à-vis itself in filmic form, and past haters could re-evaluate their understanding of feminism. Ellis's prose is always chock-full of song references and reads like a script via his matter-of-fact, expository tone; his work is really 'ahead of its time' because to understand the

value of his writing, it is necessary to analyze them in hindsight through a worthy adaptation.[2]

Today, Patrick Bateman's obsessive-compulsive narration finds its rightful place in the post-Internet, post-political age. After the 2016 US election, his voice reads chillingly not as a metaphor for the author, or the corrupt ruling class, but for the whole political system. It speeds through research-based prose with automaton coldness to the point of abstraction. The voice of Patrick Bateman is the voice of capital's omnipotence. In this post-truth age, facts don't matter and therefore, nothing is able to function as a critique of anything. *American Psycho* is no longer pornographic, revelatory, or feminist. It is a symbolic mirror for the horrifying fact that no human act, no matter how extreme, is of any consequence to those watching.

It is during this heavy cultural climate that comes this collection of essays. The most memorable part of *American Psycho* is the chapter on Whitney Houston. It follows the murder of Bateman's ex-girlfriend, Bethany, whose name conjures up a similarly wholesome image as that of early Whitney. Most of it is written in third-person, with a couple of instances of an editorial "I" expressing a personal favorite. It is here where the voices of Bateman, Ellis, and the reader blur, as we find ourselves in our own psychotic slippage between realities. The music-review voice is convincing and loaded with anecdotal flourishes, but laced with generic descriptors as if written algorithmically; it is thoroughly prosaic and speaks for everyone. Ellis so adroitly contextualizes the meta-tensions between the work, the artist, the industry, and the audience. The "we" that is spoken for is

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[2] Unfortunately, the film adaptations of *Less Than Zero* (dir. Marek Kanievska, 1987) and *Rules of Attraction* (dir. Roger Avary, 2002) both do not live up to their source material.

as unreliable and eerie, if not frightening, as Bateman's "I."

Despite this untrustworthy narration (he is a psycho, after all), Whitney Houston's voice still rises above. Our memory of Houston's pure, emotive, profoundly human voice is more powerful than Ellis's skillful writing. The idea of her voice versus the facts surrounding the production of her songs — the text credits a long list of accompanying musicians, songwriters, producers, and industry professionals — presents the question, what is talent? Kant wrote that talent is the physical embodiment of a natural force.[3] This is an ideal, outdated and romantic, something to repeat to oneself infront of a mirror while engaged in an awkward threesome, perhaps.

The following essays are tangential responses to Ellis's chapter, 'Whitney Houston,' from his third novel, *American Psycho.* These are essays *around* music, accessed from our own consumptive cycles of fandom, obsession, reverence, and concession. Although the flat, nihilistic hyperreality of *American Psycho* reads almost completely blank and without mercy, there is a tiny pocket here and there for us to grasp at some semblance of agency. The chapters on Whitney Houston, Genesis, and Huey Lewis are all so definitive, yet so empty. So precise but unmoving. It drove us to ask, what do we have to offer when so much has been said already? These essays are our answers.

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[3] Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), 188-189.







[Fig. 4 - 6] Whitney Houston looks at a curtained figure in the music video for "I'm Your Baby Tonight" (dir: Julien Temple, 1990); Rachel Marron (Whitney Houston) draws a samurai sword at Frank Farmer (Kevin Costner) in *The Bodyguard*, (dir. Mick Jackson, 1992); Whitney Houston and Oprah Winfrey on the 24th season premiere of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 2009.