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THE BEST ELLIS FOR BUSINESS:

A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE MASS MEDIA FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF

AMERICAN PSYCHO

Justine Ettler

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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DECLARATION

I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

Signature __________

Date __________

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One in five women reported being a victim of rape.

Maureen Downey, “Every Woman’s Nightmare”

Every 22 days a husband or boyfriend kills his mate; every 15 seconds a man beats up the woman he lives with.

ABSTRACT

The Best Ellis For Business analyses the mass media feminist critique of Bret Easton Ellis’s third novel, American Psycho (1991), and employs this to challenge the dominant modes of reading Ellis’s work. The thesis identifies the major shifts in literary criticism about American Psycho, both journalistic and scholarly, and discusses them in relation to the novel’s problematic sexualisation of misogynistic violence. In particular, the neutralisation of the mass media feminist critique in scholarly literary criticism is questioned, then contextualised in terms of the backlash, and finally linked to postmodern defences of the novel that ignore the important role played by the reader. The thesis employs a mixture of narratological and theoretical approaches to perform close readings of the sexually violent scenes.

The thesis challenges dominant defences of American Psycho such as the ubiquitous defence of the novel as a satire, as well as the equally prevalent defence of the novel as a postmodern classic. The formalist qualities of the novel, which this thesis claims make it a postmodern parody, prevent the novel from ever being read as a straightforward satire. Further, analyses that focus on the novel’s form at the expense of its content tend to fail to account for the reader’s response to the sexualised violence. This thesis raises the oft-ignored but important issue of reader competence, particularly in relation to the marketing practices of Ellis’s corporate publishers. It will also be argued here that the novel’s excessive ambiguity leaves the reader no choice other than to resort to their biographical knowledge of the author in order to make sense of it. Thus, the thesis rereads the novel in relation to Ellis’s biography, as well as in relation to Ellis’s recent revelations about his sexuality and his interview practice.
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INTRODUCTION

THE SQUEAKIEST WHEEL

... the controversies surrounding ‘American Psycho’ received—however ephemerally—more and wider public attention than any novel in recent memory.¹

Perhaps more than any other American work of the last twenty years, ‘American Psycho’ can legitimately be labelled a scandalous novel.²

The chief thing to understand about Bret Easton Ellis’s ‘American Psycho’... is that it counts as an incident in the annals of contemporary American publicity, not American literature.³

American Psycho is without doubt a scandalous novel: whether it is also misogynistic, however, is a matter for ongoing debate. Inviting comparison (in terms of the degree of vitriol expressed) with the scandal that accompanied the publication of Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, not only did the novel include a degree of sexually graphic detail foreign to literary fiction but also more common to snuff pornography, but it presented scenes of sexualised misogynistic violence without a clearly discernible moral framework, and amidst a

confusing plethora of aesthetic conventions. American Psycho is a flawed novel (this thesis suggests it is technically inferior to both Less Than Zero [1985] and Lunar Park [2005]), and yet its sensationalistic content made literary headlines and has ensured its author and his oeuvre lasting notoriety, commercial success and ever increasing scholarly attention.

Paradoxically, of all the critiques levelled at American Psycho, the critique that did most to ensure the novel’s notoriety was the mass media feminist critique, the very critique that protested the novel’s extremity and misogyny. Published in 1991, many interpreted American Psycho as an example of Faludi’s anti-feminist backlash. The combination of Ellis repeatedly refusing to remove four misogynistic scenes prior to publication—Ellis mentions “three or four violent sequences that they not only wanted trimmed but they wanted excised from the manuscript”—with his publisher deciding to market American Psycho “aggressively,” amounted to something of a red flag (Ellis’s novel) to a bull (feminists). Curiously, in spite of the prevalence of the feminist critique in the mass media, there is little evidence of this critique in scholarly analyses of American Psycho. Indeed, most scholars erased the misogynistic violence by means of the postmodern defence. In a second paradox, the feminist critique that made American Psycho famous has been effectively neutralised by scholars. This thesis aims to reverse the process whereby political debate has been erased from both the novel and literary criticism about it by revisiting the mass media feminist critique and thereby to challenge current scholarship about the novel. While American Psycho also contains a scene depicting racist torture and assault, this thesis will focus on the four sexualised misogynistic scenes that featured in the scandal.

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Literary critical scholarship has tended to ignore the feminist political aspects of the novel and to limit its analyses to aesthetic and/or theoretical subjects and concerns. Scholars argue feminists, publishers, journalists and commentators misinterpreted *American Psycho* by failing to appreciate its aesthetic postmodernity. Two seminal studies of *American Psycho*, Elizabeth Young’s essay, “The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,” (hereafter, “Beast”) and Julian Murphet’s book, *Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho: A Reader’s Guide*, (hereafter, *Reader’s Guide*) make precisely this case for the novel. More recently, Baelo-Allué’s book-length study of Ellis’s work claims the novel is an aesthetically misunderstood combination of minimalism and Blank Generation Fiction (this latter term coined by Young and Caveney); of high and low culture.\(^7\)

Aesthetic defences come in a variety of guises. Thus, Riquelme, Eldridge, Phillips, Heyler, and Price read the novel in terms of various literary tropes and genres such as the Gothic, the unreliable narrator and parody.\(^8\) Kauffman and Frances Ferguson read the novel in relation to pornography, while Murphet, Young, Storey, Sahli and Williams read the novel according to aesthetic criteria.\(^9\) Stubblefield reads *American Psycho* in terms of the history of

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American Literature, whereas Kevin Ferguson and Annesley read the novel as typical of 1980s New York fiction. Ellis’s oeuvre and autobiography feature in the analyses of Young, Murphet and Hawryluk, while Seltzer and King read the novel in terms of crime fiction and other serial killer novels. Sharrett, Freccero and Messier read the novel in relation to histories and genealogies of violence, whereas Mandel and Messier use it to form a genealogy of sexuality. Petry, Jarvis, Blazer, Buscall, Brusseau, Abel, Blazer and Annesley read the novel in the light of postmodern and post-structuralist theories, while Squires reads it in terms of genre, as genre is defined by the publishing industry. Only a few scholars—Eberly and Serpell—prominently feature the mass media feminist critique but neither makes it the primary focus of her study.

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Mandel, introducing her recent collection of essays about Ellis, summarises the 
American Psycho scholarship as consisting of: the examination of the issues of censure and
censorship; interpretations of the novel in relation to literary trends of the 1980s, for example,
serial killers and yuppies; critiques of Reagan’s 1980s; demonstrations of the novel’s
postmodernity; and comparisons of the novel with Sade, Sacher-Masoch, Zola and Hogg.
Significantly, the mass media feminist critique is only central to the censure/censorship
studies (most of which ignore or refute feminist claims). The three essays on American
Psycho in Mandel’s collection focus on affect (Clark), masculinity and literary paternity
(Blazer), and postmodernity (Gomel).

Yet beyond this point of consensus, scholarship becomes deeply divided and is unable
to agree on whether American Psycho is a satire or a parody; a realist or a postmodern
novel. Naomi Mandel writes the novel “challenges the very foundation of critique” and
Michael Clark notes the “divergent responses” the novel elicited. The degree of scholarly
division begs the question: what is it about American Psycho that produces such opposed
readings?

It is argued here that while the actual author claims to have written a satire, the
implied author wrote a satirical postmodern parody. While most scholars claim the novel
implicitly critiques misogyny (among other things), this thesis argues a postmodern parody
can never pose a simple critique because its criticism remains complicit with that which it
critiques. Reading American Psycho as postmodern parody restores the mass media feminist
critique because a postmodern parody can never be a straightforward critique, it is always

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15 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 1.
also a celebration of what it parodies, in this case of sexualised misogyny. Such an interpretation thereby challenges most scholarly analysis. Further, while leading scholars claim the novel is a postmodern classic, this thesis argues *American Psycho* fails as a postmodern parody and is a confusing mixture of realist and postmodernist elements. The thesis concludes by speculating that Ellis lost control of his material.

Young, Murphet and Baelo-Allué all champion Ellis’s claimed intentions, quoting Ellis’s interviews to support their interpretations, a methodology thrown into doubt by Ellis’s recent admissions of lying in interviews, his correction of his initial denial of the autobiographical content of *American Psycho*, and his admissions about his sexuality. Noting Foucault and Barthes’s famous critiques of the Intentional Fallacy, this thesis concedes that while the author is not the sole arbiter of meaning in a text, she/he remains an important source of meaning and cannot altogether be ignored. Further, given the simultaneous ubiquity and unreliability of autobiographical interpretations of Ellis’s work (Young would argue, the necessity), this thesis argues that recourse is necessary to Ellis’s biography and claims that recently disclosed factual information about Ellis’s life invites a revisitation of literary criticism about *American Psycho*.

Questions of politics rarely intrude into scholarly analyses of *American Psycho* but when they do, it is not the question of sexualised misogynistic violence towards the female characters that most scholars note, but the novel’s critical relation to capitalism. Murphet’s section “The Politics of *American Psycho*” focuses on finance, not feminism. Some scholars claim a Marxist intention on Ellis’s behalf, arguing that the novel can be construed as a “war

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18 Young, 99-100; Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 69.
on poverty,” and make this intention central to the novel’s project. However, this thesis argues *American Psycho* is not a critique of capitalism per se, only of “yuppies” as the latest form of nouveau riche to take root in New York. On the contrary, this thesis reads the novel as a defence of “old money,” a form of wealth Ellis claims to admire and envy. As Ellis recounts,

‘Going East meant getting culture. It was wonderful. I met my first rich people, I mean real rich, old money. People with trust funds. Not nouveau riche like in L.A. where old money only dates from the 1930s. People with these famous old Eastern names and you’d ask them, ‘do you belong to that family’ and it turned out they did.’

Ellis’s admiration for “old money” and the “real rich” are palpable in this statement. Noting that Ellis’s remarks cannot be taken at face value, this thesis nevertheless challenges the idea that Ellis’s novel is a Marxist critique of capitalism and consumer culture, and that financial concerns are the primary political issue on the basis of textual evidence. Contrary to Murphet’s analysis, this thesis claims the primary political concern of the novel is with gender and sexuality.

Whether scholars acknowledge the centrality of the four misogynistic scenes or not, they retain their power to shock intensely and offend readers today. Thus this thesis challenges interpretations of the novel based on the idea that readers are desensitised to sexualised misogynistic violence. While *American Psycho* failed to inspire a national debate

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on the subject of the representation of sexualised violence towards women at the time of publication, the ongoing neutralisation of the mass media feminist critique by scholarship makes it unlikely the debate will ever take place.\textsuperscript{23} Further, the increasing scholarly interest in \textit{American Psycho} (three books about Ellis and his work were published in 2011) indicates that Ellis’s scandalous novel is well on the way towards scholarly recognition and acceptance, with some commentators calling for the novel’s canonisation.\textsuperscript{24} This thesis does not question this process, but attempts to shift the focus of academic recognition: \textit{American Psycho} deserves to be recognised as the most scandalously misogynistic novel of recent times (and not only, as many scholars argue, as a “sophisticated high postmodern text.”\textsuperscript{25}) The four sexualised misogynistically violent scenes remain \textit{American Psycho} ’s most outstanding characteristic and they overshadow the novel’s other qualities: its postmodern parody; and its satirical portrait of New York in the 1980s. As Ellis’s editor Gary Fisketjon at Vintage complained:

‘these scenes are so shocking, so in-your-face, that they distract from the overall mood of the rest of the novel... How are we going to be able to concentrate on the next scenes of social satire after we’ve read two pages about how a woman has been nail-gunned to the floor, and raped, et cetera.’\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{The question remains: without the extreme depictions of misogyny, would \textit{American Psycho}’s other characteristics, taken collectively, have earned it such a place of prominence}

\textsuperscript{23} Eberly, “Novel Controversies,” 185. Eberly complains that the debate did not take place but her analysis attempts to correct this oversight.


\textsuperscript{25} Young, “Beast,” 121.

in today’s literary scholarship? Would Ellis’s novels attract so much scholarly attention? It seems unlikely.

Indeed, search results from academic databases reveal a stark contrast between results for Ellis and his novels, and the results of other “Brat Pack” authors, and novels by Ellis’s contemporaries. When the following authors’ names are searched on the MLA database, the results are: “Bret Easton Ellis” 141; “Jay McInerney” 32; “Tama Janowitz” 7; “Dennis Cooper” 51; “Mary Gaitskill” 51; and “Catherine Texier” 5. Similarly, the Google Scholar search results are as follows: “Ellis novelist” 2,720; “Jay McInerney novelist” 862; “Tama Janowitz novelist” 300; “Dennis Cooper’s Frisk” 610; “Mary Gaitskill novelist” 305; and “Catherine Texier novelist” 677. Thus, Ellis gets nearly ten times the results of Janowitz on Google Scholar, and twenty times more on the MLA database. On Google, “Bret Easton Ellis” gets a staggering 2,540,000 results, and “American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis” gets 900,000 results. By contrast, “Tama Janowitz” gets 660,000 results. While films were made of all three “Brat Pack” novels—Bright Lights, Big City (1984), by Jay McInerney, Less Than Zero (1985, hereafter Zero), by Bret Easton Ellis, and Slaves of New York (1986), by Tama Janowitz—and all films received negative or mixed reviews, only Ellis has had subsequent novels adapted into films (according to Baelo-Allué, all Ellis’s novels have been, or are in the process of, being adapted into films).

No other scholarly analysis has placed the mass media feminist critique of American Psycho and its neutralisation in scholarship at the centre of its analysis. No other scholarly

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study has made the incorporation of the feminist critique into scholarly defences its objective. One possible exception is the work of Namwali Serpell; yet while Serpell’s project argues for a balanced analysis of *American Psycho*, one that incorporates both feminist critique and scholarly defence, she fails to re-examine the literary criticism about *American Psycho* from such a point of view. 31 Such a project is long overdue.

While there were numerous protests of “cynical publishing” upon publication, Keats provocatively suggests we add *American Psycho* to the canon because its extremity sets new limits for literary fiction. 32 The question remains whether cynical literary scholarship, which dismisses the mass media feminist critique at the same time that it employs it to justify its own interest, will follow cynical publication. 33

The thesis will situate the mass media critique at the centre of its analysis with most chapters beginning with a re-examination of key aspects of this important early commentary. In so doing, it will treat the commentary as being of equal importance to Ellis’s novel and to scholarly analysis. The thesis will also employ narratological and theoretical approaches to analyse *American Psycho* and discuss existing scholarly literary criticism. As employed here, “commentators” are authors of critical texts published in the mass media, many of whom are also journalists (commentators best known as authors will be identified); and “scholars” are authors of critical texts published in academic books and journals.

This introduction will now discuss the reception, and inter-linking, of Ellis’s early work; will overview the role of literary institutions in the *American Psycho* scandal; will

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33 Conley, “Capital Cynicism,” 6. Conley laments the way recent scholarship embraces cynicism as “a conceptual and explanatory tool.”
contextualise the novel in terms of the backlash; will provide feminist definitions; and finally will map the current scholarly terrain.

1. **Realism and Autobiography in Early Novels**

An important historical context for the present re-examination of the *American Psycho* scandal is the pattern of reception of Ellis’s first two novels. Thus, both *Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987, hereafter, *Rules*), were read as realism and thinly disguised autobiography, with Ellis’s characters interpreted as fictionalised versions of himself and his friends.\(^{34}\)

The term postmodernism was occasionally mentioned in relation to the novels though usually in the sense of a style or an historical period (as opposed to the theoretical [anti]aesthetic sense later employed by scholars), and often as the object of suspicious scrutiny. For example, Ellis’s use of rock lyrics and repeated refrains like “‘Disappear here,’” were read as characteristics of Generation X fiction or as part of Ellis’s engagement with popular culture, any evidence of (anti)aesthetic postmodernity was incorporated within a realist framework.\(^{35}\)

Further, early reviews established a pattern whereby Ellis’s work received mixed (Zero) or negative reviews (*Rules*). These patterns in reception continued in reviews of *American Psycho*, which were mostly negative. In addition, prior to the publication of *American Psycho*, Ellis’s novels attracted little scholarly attention (Freese’s study is an

\(^{34}\) Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 11, 41, 45. Baelo-Allué claims that Teachout reads Ellis’s work autobiographically on page 41. On page 45, she argues other critics read Ellis’s work according to “biographical details” and in terms of Ellis’s “persona.”

important exception). Thus, when *American Psycho* was reviewed, it was received by commentators as thinly disguised autobiography and as realism. However, reading *American Psycho* in this way posed a number of problems.

Reading *American Psycho* autobiographically implied that Bateman was based on Ellis and that Price, McDermott, Van Patten and Bateman’s other friends were based on Ellis’s friends and acquaintances. Taking this autobiographical reading to its logical conclusion also implies that Ellis was a racist misogynist who abused sex, alcohol, prescription and illegal drugs. By extension, reading the novel as literal autobiographical realism suggests Ellis may also be prone to violent rages and violent misogynistic fantasies. Further, Ellis was seen to condone Bateman’s behaviour. This pattern of reception, particularly when the text offered no clear solution to its many ambiguities, made the novel instantly scandalous. It was not much of a leap to suggest *American Psycho* was a deliberate provocation on Ellis’s part. The death threats Ellis received imply many readers did indeed employ an autobiographical realist filter when reading the novel. That is to say, some members of the National Organization for Women (hereafter referred to as NOW), as distinct from the feminist critique made by journalists writing in the mass media, interpreted the novel in a literal autobiographical sense and concluded that Ellis was a thinly disguised version of Bateman. The death threats NOW members made constituted an extreme response but perhaps this is not surprising and at some level even makes sense given the extremities of the horrific scenes themselves and the ambiguities of both text and author. Further, while


38 Young, “Beast,” 100. Young notes this very dynamic in the text and complains that the reader has to work hard to discern Ellis’s relation to sexual violence.

most other readers did not make death threats, autobiographical readings of the novel were the standard at the time of publication. That being said, thesis champions the mass media feminist critique, not the behaviour of NOW members, an important distinction.

For example, in her review of *American Psycho* Pagan Kennedy affirms the realistic qualities of *Zero*: “He [Ellis] depicted spoiled L.A. teens who live up to adults’ nightmares perfectly,” and then reads *American Psycho* autobiographically by interpreting its contents in relation to Ellis’s life. Thus, Kennedy claims the extremity of *American Psycho* resulted from the critical and commercial failure of *Rules*, which “sank like a stone.” Kennedy adds that Ellis, frustrated with the commercial failure of *Rules*, exaggerated the misogynistic sexual violence he employed in *Zero* in *American Psycho*, and claims Ellis’s lack of skill as a writer meant he had to resort to sensationalistic content to achieve commercial success.

Kennedy continues:

You want violence? *Less Than Zero*’s narrator, witnessing friends raping a 12-year-old who’s been shot up with heroin, mumbles ‘I don’t think it’s right’ but doesn’t stop them. *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman revels in slicing up people... if he suffers a twinge of regret, it’s only that blood might splatter his Burberry... In short, *American Psycho* is *Less Than Zero* reductio ad absurdum.

In a similar vein, Coates claims that “Ellis wrote *American Psycho* for the same reason John Hinckley Jr. shot President Reagan—to make a name for himself.” Kimball and Yardley also agree. This pattern of reception was a key factor in the *American Psycho*

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41 Kennedy, 427.
42 Kennedy, 427.
given most commentators interpreted *Zero, Rules* and *American Psycho* as realism and autobiography.

Later commentary continues this pattern of reception. Thus, Thomas reads *American Psycho* autobiographically and as realism. For Thomas, “The materially spoiled, but emotionally devastated LA brats,” from *Zero* are precursors to Bateman’s “emotional autism” in *American Psycho*, and concludes: “Ellis, it has always been assumed, did not just create these people by accident... He, too, lived in New York, wore expensive clothes, went to cool clubs, took too many drugs, screwed up his personal relationships.”45 For Thomas, *American Psycho* is an aesthetic continuation and development of the autobiographical strategies and themes Ellis first employed in *Zero*.

Similarly, commentators in the documentary film *This Is Not an Exit: The Fictional World of Bret Easton Ellis*, (hereafter *Exit*,) describe Ellis’s work as naturalist realism and read *American Psycho* autobiographically. Jay McInerney observes, “It [*Zero*] had this wonderful sense of cinema verite. Realism. It wasn’t a documentary but seemed like one,” and his opinion is echoed by Ellis’s writing teacher from college, Joe McGinnis, and British author, Will Self.46 Ellis’s un-named friend claims: “*Less Than Zero* was definitely semi-autobiographical... Bret looked at the people around him and took certain character traits from some people he knew and combined them with others and then embellished it all.”47 Other examples of realist/autobiographical readings include articles by Klein and Battersby.48

46 *This Is Not an Exit: The Fictional World of Bret Easton Ellis*, dir. Gerald Fox, (USA: Maximum Marquee Productions, 2000), DVD.
47 *Exit*, Fox.
Again, later commentators failed to note the (anti)aesthetic or formalist aspects of

*Zero, Rules* and *American Psycho*. Tyrnauer, who notes the naturalist and realist aspects of Ellis’s early work, is an exception defining *Zero* as “artifaction:” “[Zero] is most interesting as artifaction—the reflection of a moment—and as the production of a certain kind of jaded, MTV sensibility that seems to imitate and incorporate everything that it admires.”

Significantly, Tyrnauer notes the postmodernist style of Ellis’s early work, the way Ellis assembled “selves from media compost” and “wove postmodern books and attitudes from styles and identities borrowed from all over.” Bottoms also implicitly notes *Zero’s* postmodern style, “There aren’t so much characters in the book as automatons carrying warning messages.”

Even Tyrnauer, however, ultimately reads *American Psycho* autobiographically and not in terms of its formal properties, interpreting the novel in terms of Ellis “losing his mind,” having “nervous breakdowns” and consuming excessive amounts of drugs and alcohol.

Tyrnauer quotes Ellis saying “‘I’d go to parties fucked up out of my mind and then plan on escaping the party to get even more fucked up.’” Tyrnauer concludes, “It was around this time that Ellis began intensive work on *American Psycho*. And it was around this time that word began to circulate: he *was losing his mind*. While more will be said about autobiographical readings below, the difference between Tyrnauer’s autobiographical reading of *American Psycho* and Ellis’s initial denial of autobiographical content makes a stark

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50 Tyrnauer, 96.
53 Tyrnauer, 97.
54 Tyrnauer, 124.
contrast. Thus, in addition to denying the novel’s misogynistic content, Ellis asserts: “‘I can’t say this book is autobiographical in any sense of the word.’”

Freese’s analysis of *Zero* is one of the first scholarly critiques of Ellis’s work and significantly, precedes publication of *American Psycho*. As such, it is the only scholarly analysis of Ellis’s work that is immune to the effects of the *American Psycho* scandal. Unlike commentators, Freese combines a discussion of the naturalistic, realist and psychological elements of *Zero* with a discussion of the novel’s formal and postmodern anti-aesthetic qualities. Most significant to the discussion here, Freese notes the thematic centrality of violence to *Zero*, claiming “sadistic violence” is “all-encompassing”, “ubiquitous,” and that it “pervades” the novel. Further, Freese claims that *Zero*’s characters are the children of divorce and family breakdown and that they are sexually promiscuous abusers of illegal drugs and alcohol, but he also notes that despite *Zero*’s “artless” appearance the novel is structured around repeated refrains and popular culture.

Significantly, Freese argues the protagonist, Clay, fails to resolve into a rounded character: his personality remains an unresolved mix of inarticulate passivity and bursts of coherence. For Freese, the reader must do all the work to make sense of the ambiguous novel proceeding on “mere hints and oblique clues.” This last point is pertinent to the current analysis which will argue *American Psycho* is even more ambiguous than *Zero*. Overall, Freese’s methodology departs from that of initial commentators and from most subsequent scholars in its combined focus on realist and postmodern elements, on content and form. For these reasons it represents an important precedent for the present study in terms of

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58 Freese, 86.
59 Freese, 71, 73.
its balanced approach that combines and integrates an analysis of both the novel’s realist/mimetic and postmodernist/formalist contents.

Most scholarly defences fail to discuss *American Psycho*’s sensationalistic, mimetic content, concentrating instead on the novel’s postmodern aesthetics. Scholars, perhaps reacting against the mass media feminist critique’s focus on content, concentrated on the novel’s form. Few argue *American Psycho* is a continuation of the autobiographical content and themes of Ellis’s first two novels. While Young claims *American Psycho* is a “natural even inevitable development,” of *Zero* and *Rules*, and Grimshaw argues that *American Psycho* is a thematic continuation of *Zero* in terms of themes of deindividuation, such arguments are the exception.60 Young also argues, however, that the scandal was not a result of the novel’s “extreme sexual violence,” but was caused by the combination of the autobiographical way Ellis’s first two novels were read, with Ellis’s image as a “serious” novelist.61 Further, Young disputes Kennedy’s assertion about Ellis’s intentions with *Rules* claiming Ellis began *American Psycho* before *Rules* was released.62 Baelo-Allué argues that Ellis’s image as a “Brat Pack” author contributed to the negative reception of *Rules* in the form of a reaction against the speed at which Ellis had become a literary celebrity.63 (Davis’s work suggests that the negative critical response in the mass media towards Generation X and “Brat Pack” fiction is a result of the generational prejudices of Baby Boomer commentators.)64

61 Young, “Beast,” 92-3; John M. Berry, “Bean Counting Replaced editorial judgement years ago: *American Psycho* is Not the Problem,” *Library Journal*, (Jan 1991), 6. While Young argues *American Psycho* is a serious work, Berry is the first to make this point.
62 Young, 85.
The tendency to read Ellis’s early novels autobiographically finds contradictory support in Ellis’s interviews. Despite many denials of autobiographical content, Ellis has recently conceded Zero began as “‘teen diaries or journal entries,’” and that Bateman was based on him.65 On the other hand, the tendency to interpret American Psycho in relation to Rules and Zero finds convincing support in the texts themselves. While the three novels share similar content, themes and narrative strategies, many of the characters in Ellis’s novels are related to each other and reappear. For example, Clay, the protagonist of Zero, appears for a chapter in Rules on pages 182-4, and Patrick Bateman makes his debut in Rules (as Sean’s big brother) on pages 237-40, (Evelyn is mentioned on page 233). Again, while American Psycho is narrated by Patrick, Sean from Rules appears on pages 225-7, as does Vanden, on page 12, and Alison, Scott and the restaurant Deckchairs, on page 93, (Vanden appears in Rules, on page 20, and Anne and Scott on pages 256-8). Clearly Ellis intends the novels to be read as linked.

This formal inter-relation of the novels has implications for the mass media feminist critique. Thus, Zero begins Ellis’s fascination with sexualised misogyny that will come to the fore in American Psycho (a fascination that is also present in Rules, though to a much lesser degree).66 While Zero implies a degree of authorial disapproval for the sexualised violence, the question of authorial disapproval (or lack thereof) becomes important in terms of the sexualised misogynistic violence in American Psycho. For example when Clay realises his

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66 Bret Easton Ellis, The Rules of Attraction, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1987), 52-3. In a similar vein, Rules also contains sexualised violence: Sean fantasizes about being physically and sexually violent to women, and Paul fantasizes violence towards a female rival but without the sexualisation. On page 209 Sean uses pornography, and on page 224 he references The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, one of Bateman’s favourite videos.
friends are playing a video depicting sexualised violence, he leaves “quickly.” While Clay is a passive character he clearly has an implicit moral perspective on the sexual violence, that is, he leaves, and his departure suggests his disapproval. Clay’s behaviour can be contrasted with Bateman’s in American Psycho. Bateman takes great pleasure in inflicting sexual violence. For example, he finds it “amusing” to walk around his apartment with the decapitated head of a prostitute he has just tortured and killed impaled on his erect penis. While there are hints that suggest Bateman at some level knows that what he is doing is wrong, these hints are too subtle given the extremities of the text.

Unlike American Psycho, Glamorama received “little attention” on publication, and like Ellis’s earlier novels—but unlike American Psycho—it received mixed or negative reviews (though it was panned twice in The New York Times). This is partly due to the different way sexual violence is depicted in Glamorama. Indeed, the way sexualised violence is depicted in all Ellis’s subsequent novels is strong proof of the argument here. None of Ellis’s subsequent novels depict sexualised misogynistic violence as it takes place and none of Ellis’s subsequent novels have created scandals. While Glamorama resembles American Psycho in that it lacks closure, a moral perspective and is a deeply ambiguous novel, it failed to attract a controversy due to the different way it depicts sexual violence (Baelo-Allué also

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68 Ellis, 153.; Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 70-71. Clay also indicates disapproval of sexualised misogynistic violence on page 189. Baelo-Allué argues rape and paedophilia are the norm for Clay and his contemporaries.
71 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 134-5, 177. Baelo-Allué disagrees, arguing Ellis’s treatment of sex and violence is similar until Lunar Park, where violence becomes second-hand, copy-cat killings.
notes its ambiguity). Heath observes: “Though there are moments of ghastly violence and destruction, and of methodically explicit sex, in this book the sex and violence keep a polite distance from each other.” Further, if Ellis truly believed the misogynistic sexualised violence in *American Psycho* was acceptable or desirable, then why did he not repeat it as a strategy in subsequent novels? While it is possible he wished to avoid further controversy, what novelist would pass up the high sales garnered by the *American Psycho* scandal? While at some level it makes sense that a novel about a serial killer contains scenes depicting sexualised violence, other novels about serial killers did not cause scandals because they did not contain equally horrific scenes. For example, Thomas Harris’s *Silence of the Lambs*. Unlike most reviewers and scholars this thesis notes the important difference in the presentation of the sexual violence in *American Psycho* and Ellis’s other novels.

In *Glamorama* sexualised violence is depicted when the victims are male, but most scenes with female victims are shown after the fact and most are straightforwardly violent, without the violence being sexualised. For example, Mica’s death on page 149 is shown after the fact and involves no sexual violence, and Tammy’s death on page 383 is shown after the fact, (while we are told she was raped on page 401 we see no evidence on her body that indicates rape nor is the rape depicted in the text). When Jamie dies on page 421 we cannot tell how she was killed because she is wrapped up in plastic. The only characters whose sexual torture and murder are depicted as action in *Glamorama* are male. For example, Sam Ho is castrated and killed on page 284; and Bentley dies horrifically, narrated in graphic detail, his limbs blown off by individual time bombs, on pages 418-9. The murder of Chloe, the only scene in which violence is depicted towards a female, is only symbolically sexually misogynistic: Chloe is poisoned by terrorists and internally bleeds to death, the blood

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72 Baelo-Allué, 168.
74 Schmid, “Unusual Suspects,” 70; Baelo-Allué, 166.
dripping out of her vagina. Thus, Glamorama prevents a scandal by showing the sexualised violence when directed at men, and alluding to violence when it is directed at women (this will also be film director Mary Harron’s approach when adapting the novel for the screen). With Glamorama it is as if Ellis made the editorial adjustments demanded both by his editors at Simon & Schuster and Vintage and by the mass media feminist critique of American Psycho. Schmid’s work is an example of a scholar who neglects to note this important difference: while he notices differences in violence between American Psycho and Glamorama and within Glamorama, Schmid only notes the difference between the violent bombings, and the violent murder and torture of individuals in the latter novel.

Glamorama, like Ellis’s early novels, was also read autobiographically, as a “reflection of Ellis’s persona and life,” not in terms of its formalist properties. This is the standard way novels by celebrity authors are read, and there were fewer reviews and more profiles and interviews than before. Ellis complains in one interview: “People who are very critical of my work tend to say I am like my characters....many of the reviews seem to be motivated by a reaction against what ‘Bret Easton Ellis’ means or what they assume my persona is,” (Ellis’s complaint about autobiographical readings of his work nevertheless manifests in the plot of Lunar Park). While Baelo-Allué claims commentators projected the attributes of celebrity onto Ellis, the fact that Ellis employed these same attributes as literary devices and themes contributed to the reading of his work as an extension of his public persona. It is argued here that Ellis deliberately creates such a loop post-American Psycho

75 Bret Easton Ellis, Glamorama, (London: Picador, 1999), 429.
77 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 19.
79 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 19.
in order to: increase suspense in his work; give voice to his resentment about the mass media feminist critique of *American Psycho*; and to increase interest in his *oeuvre*.

While female characters are still sexual objects whose primary purpose is to boost the fragile egos of Victor and the other male characters in *Glamorama*, the different presentation of sexually misogynistic violence suggests women’s sexuality and sexual violence towards women are no longer primary issues in the 1990s, and that Ellis has learned from the mistake he made in his depiction of sexually violent misogyny in *American Psycho*.

The reception of Ellis’s novels as autobiography becomes more complex with *Lunar Park* which parodies the genres of autobiography/memoir and horror. Thus, Neilson classifies *Lunar Park* as “autofiction,” a kind of fiction that cannot be dissociated from autobiography and where narrator and author have the same name, and Annesley notes the way autobiography allows Ellis to reflect on his status as a celebrity/commodity in the novel. While Ellis complains people read his work in terms of his celebrity persona, he simultaneously always “appears willing to use his image to promote his books.” Baelo-Allué claims that *Lunar Park* is ambiguous because the reader cannot tell where the fictional biographical and the real biographical begin and end.

While *Lunar Park* will be discussed in later chapters, suffice it to say here that violence happens second-hand in the novel: the killings are copycat killings from *American Psycho*. Thus Kimball, the detective from *American Psycho*, reappears to inform “Bret” that someone is committing copycat killings based on the violence depicted in *American Psycho*. A Chinese delivery boy and a black homeless man have just been killed and a man called

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81 Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 16.
82 Baelo-Allué, 176.
Paul Owen is under “‘heavy surveillance’” and “‘police protection.’” When Aimee Light is dismembered the gruesome details are described on page 188 after the fact. In Imperial Bedrooms (2010), there is just one violent scene wherein Clay sexually tortures two prostitutes (which some have read as a reference to American Psycho). While the male prostitute beats the female and the female prostitute is tied up and fisted, Clay also beats the male prostitute. While the sex contains pornographic language, the violence is less extreme (neither is killed) and is fairly equal in terms of gender (both male and female are beaten and “fisted,” though only the female is tied up). In another scene featuring sexual violence, Amanda’s sexualised torture, rape and murder appear as a clip on the internet, that is, second-hand.

Ellis continues linking/recycling his characters in subsequent novels. Thus: Victor, a minor character in Rules reappears as the protagonist of Glamorama; Lauren Hynde, a central character in Rules, reappears in Glamorama on page 83; Alison Poole, originally from McInerney’s Story of My Life (1988) and who briefly appears in American Psycho on page 207, reappears in Glamorama on page 12; even Bateman briefly reappears in Glamorama on page 38:

Patrick Bateman, who’s with a bunch of publicists and the three sons of a well-known movie-producer, walks over, shakes my hand, eyes Chloe, asks how the club’s coming along, if tomorrow night’s happening, says Damien invited him, hands me a cigar, weird stains on the lap of his Armani suit that costs as much as a car.

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84 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 196.
85 Bret Easton Ellis, Imperial Bedrooms, (London: Picador, 2010), 165-166.
86 Ellis, 150.
87 Ellis, Glamorama, 149. Mica, a DJ, is killed in Patrick Bateman style.
**Glamorama** also includes motifs from earlier works such as “DISAppEar HERe,” which was first featured in *Zero*, and the song On the Sunny Side of the Street (which appears most prominently in *Lunar Park*). Again, Clay and Patrick reappear in *Lunar Park* (2005), and *Imperial Bedrooms* is narrated by Clay and includes other characters from *Zero* including Julian, Blair and Trent.

While Ellis never again overtly repeats his strategy of depicting extreme sexually misogynistic violence after *American Psycho*, all three subsequent novels link back by means of his recycled characters to *American Psycho* and *Zero* which do depict sexualised, sexually violent misogyny. This later linking of the novels implies that the issue never completely leaves his work or his thinking. Thus, while Ellis never again overtly employs sexualised misogynistic violence in his subsequent novels (which suggests he realised he went too far in his third novel and supports the idea that he lost control of his material), at an implicit level he continues to write in the same misogynistic vein as before (which suggests he does not recant his earlier position).

2. **Literary Institutions**

Another important context for the *American Psycho* scandal and the feminist critique is the transformation of literary publishing institutions during the 1980s and 1990s which had a significant impact on literary fiction and the way it was marketed and edited. The publishing world changed from numerous independent, family-run publishers, into a handful of large publishers owned by multinational corporations, leading to increased concentration

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88 Ellis, 421. (Layout of extract differs from layout in *Glamorama*.)
of ownership and transforming the industry. While McDowall first links the *American Psycho* scandal to the corporatisation of the publishing industry, including increased uniformity of lists and competitiveness, one of the important effects of the transformation of the publishing industry was the ascendency of marketing and publicity departments over editorial. Thus Ellis’s refusal to follow Vintage editor Gary Fisketjon’s advice to alter the sexually violent misogynistic scenes, may have been less important than his co-operation with Vintage’s marketing and publicity department. Publishers increasingly spent less time and money ensuring books were well edited than they did on marketing and publicising books.

Further, Barkin notes that corporatization meant that publishers of literary fiction needed to make a profit of 15 percent, as opposed to the 2-3 percent profit they were required to make prior to corporatization. Literary publishers, like André Schiffrin, complained of increasing pressure to publish commercially successful books in literary lists and to increase profit even with literary fiction: “It is now increasingly the case that the owner’s only interest is in making money and as much of it as possible.” This thesis suggests that publishers, under increasing pressure to elevate literary fiction sales, resorted to increasingly desperate measures to market novels. Many commentators, including Sheppard, Leo, Rosenblatt, Udovitch and Kennedy, argued that *American Psycho* was an example of cynical publishing.

Corporatisation also placed increasing pressure on authors to write commercial novels. As one novelist complains “If you write books that sell, your publisher will love you. If you don’t, it’s goodbye, no matter how much she likes your writing.”

Whether Vintage planned for a scandal is a matter for speculation. Claire Squires argues that the scandal ensured Ellis’s commercial success. Jon Heilpern in The Independent on Sunday concurs, “Its original publishers are now the proud guardians of taste; Mr Mehta (head of Knopf) is the saviour of freedom of expression; and Mr Ellis is even richer.” Again, as Michelle Green noted of the scandal: “Someone said, ‘He’s [Ellis’s] the luckiest writer in America today. He gets to keep his advance, he’s published somewhere else, he gets all this publicity.’” Coates notes “all the free publicity” that surrounded Simon & Schuster’s rejection, as well as the “sheer marketing efficiency” that brought the novel into the spotlight. Again, Kimball writes, “Mr Snyder’s decision transformed what promised to be simply another adolescent exercise in the consequences of nihilistic boredom into a cause celebre.” Thus, Green, Kimball, Heilpern and Coates suggest that the scandal, fanned by the feminist critique and the botched rejection of American Psycho by Simon & Schuster, ironically made Ellis’s career and his misogynistic text famous.

Some scholars support speculation about cynical publishing. Eberly complains that the American Psycho scandal is evidence of the disastrous effects when non-literary businessmen run publishing houses, and claims the novel’s publicity became the subject of

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95 Squires, Marketing Books, 147.
much of the publicity itself forming a kind of feedback loop.\textsuperscript{101} Baelo-Allué claims that the “innovative marketing” strategies, the requirement of “high sales,” and the way Ellis was marketed “like a star in the entertainment industry” wherein readers buy the book on the strength of the author’s name alone, were key factors contributing to the scandal.\textsuperscript{102} Baelo-Allué concludes that Ellis was not marketed like a traditional author. Promotion and marketing of Ellis’s novels have included “posters, trailers, fake web pages and TV appearances.”\textsuperscript{103} Many commentators claimed Paramount, the parent company of Simon & Schuster, played a key role in the cancellation and Murphet blames the cancellation on corporate publishing.\textsuperscript{104}

For some, it is the very nature of literary fiction that lends itself to sensationalistic marketing. Literary fiction, as defined by today’s publishing industry, is a marketing concept. An ambiguous genre, or “non-generic genre,” its blurred boundaries can readily be manipulated for marketing purposes to increase sales.\textsuperscript{105} American Psycho exemplifies this definition of literary fiction both because it blurs genre boundaries (that is, it includes the conventions of snuff pornography and horror, among other genres, in literary fiction), and because its blurring of genre boundaries is its most commercially viable trope. The sexually violent scenes were at the centre of the scandal (and most clearly transgressed the boundaries of literary fiction). As Coates ironically writes: “The distinguished house of Knopf, which owns Vintage and once gave us the work of Thomas Mann, has provided the first over-the-counter slasher novel.”\textsuperscript{106} Baelo-Allué claims that the “mixture of styles” lay behind the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{101} Eberly, 152, 154.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Baelo-Allué, \textit{Controversial}, 12, 13, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Baelo-Allué, 20; 176.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Baelo-Allué, 12, Murphet, \textit{Reader’s Guide}, 34.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Squires, \textit{Marketing Books}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Coates, “A Shocking Bore,” 5.1.
\end{itemize}
scandal, and that if the novel had been published as genre fiction or a pornographic novel, there would not have been a scandal.107

While McDowell first links the *American Psycho* scandal with the pre-corporatisation concept of lists, Squires later argues that imprint was central to the *American Psycho* scandal and that the actions of the publishers—Simon & Schuster’s rejection of the novel just prior to shipping—resulted from the failure of the novel to conform to its imprint.108 Simon & Schuster’s cancellation was related to its more conventional corporate image, whereas Vintage seized the book to be “at the publishing vanguard.”109 Squires claims the publication of books does not just win notoriety for the author, but wins it for the publisher and imprint as well. The *American Psycho* scandal allowed Vintage and Picador to promote themselves as imprints.110

Changes in the marketplace also contributed to the sensationalistic marketing of *American Psycho*. In the 1980s and 1990s, the recognition of the lucrative youth market lead to an increased interest in youth culture. Imprints like Vintage and Picador catered to this emerging market by making it easier to publish new, unknown, young writers by incurring lower costs and publishing a paperback only first print run.111

The absence of information about the content of the novel on the dust jacket and in blurbs further contributed to the scandal. Kate Douglas argues blurbs and dust jackets are more important today in marketing novels than ever before (given the decline of reviews).112

In *American Psycho*’s case, the dust jacket and blurbs are more significant in terms of what

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109 Squires, 148.
110 Squires, 149.
they do not say than what they do. Thus, they do not identify the formalist or literary properties of the work (there is no mention of satire, or postmodern parody). On the contrary, they exploit the blurred boundaries of literary fiction.

The US Vintage first edition fails to indicate that the novel contains sexually violent passages, nor does it refer to the novel’s formalist characteristics. The blurb refers to “apocalyptic horror” and “the very worst,” but there is no mention of pornography, extreme violence or misogyny. The only references that could potentially be related to the novel’s formalism are the suggestion that Bateman is living the “American Dream,” which could be construed as a vague postmodern parodic reference to Mailer’s novel, and the inclusion of the novel’s final sentence, “‘THIS IS NOT AN EXIT,’” though again its meaning is oblique in the blurb. The blurb and dust jacket indicate that the US first edition was marketed to a mainstream readership by their use of everyday language and lack of literary terms.

Unlike the US edition, the Australian first edition, a Picador paperback, features a “Restricted: Category 1” sticker on the front cover, while on the back, American Psycho is described as a “send-up of the blatant behaviour of the 80s” (which could be a vague reference to the novel’s satirical aspects, though again, the dust jacket eschews the literary term). A blurb by Nora Rawlinson does mention “horrifying scenes,” but claims these reflect “society” and insists American Psycho is not “pornography.” Blurbs by Mailer and McGinnis make no reference to the generic aspects of the novel. Thus, the Australian first edition similarly avoids the use of literary terms in order to market the novel to a mainstream readership. Here, the refutation of pornography may actually inspire interest in certain readers.

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The UK first hardcover edition, (published to coincide with Exit), refers to American Psycho as “a contemporary classic.” It also includes a blurb that describes American Psycho as “a satire on the terrible power of money,” by Jenny Turner. Another blurb by Maria Lexington compares American Psycho in generational terms with Mailer’s American Dream, “Mailer’s American Dream as interpreted by the pampered twenty-somethings of New York society.” Thus, the UK hardcover blurbs reframe the novel as a classic, employ literary terminology and acknowledge the novel is “shocking.” It nevertheless ignores the novel’s formalist properties and, unlike the Australian paperback edition, there is no mention of pornography or horror.

As a result, neither marketing department at Vintage or Picador provided reviewers with information that would have prevented a potential scandal (given the sensationalist aspects of the text). This thesis argues that Mehta and Fisketjon’s insistence that Ellis remove the offensive scenes indicates they were aware of their potentially scandalous nature. Thus Vintage maximised the ambiguity around genre when marketing the book to increase any potential scandal and thereby increase sales.

The increasing popularity of autobiographies was also significant as was the increased tendency to employ the autobiographical in selling books. For example, while Kathryn Harrison’s novels dealing with incest were ignored, her memoir The Kiss (1997) addressing an identical subject received intense media attention. The scandal surrounding James Frey’s A Million Little Pieces (2003) similarly dramatises the commercial importance of the autobiographical in the publication process. Frey’s novel was repeatedly rejected by publishers before being accepted and “re-tooled” by Gay Talese as a memoir and, as a result,

116 Douglas, 812.
becoming an overnight success. By implication, reviewers’ recognition of the autobiographical aspects of Zero, Rules and American Psycho reflected the commercial agenda of the publishing industry. According to Douglas, the blurb/dust jacket is the combined site where the “glue” is set that binds the biography of the writer with marketing and criticism. However, it is argued here that Ellis simultaneously attempts to confound the autobiographical, as well as employ it for commercial and artistic reasons in novels like American Psycho and Lunar Park.

The exploitation of the literary fictional elements of American Psycho by publishers did not go unobserved by commentators. Stiles critiques the way Simon & Schuster presented the novel in their catalogue because it does not inform readers about the novel’s actual content:

American Psycho is about a young investment banker who ‘can’t seem to stop killing people—especially young women,’ as some early promotional material described him. (Simon & Schuster has already begun to backpedal, by changing that last phrase to ‘women, men, animals’ in the catalogue. The equal distribution of victimhood is a ridiculous distortion.)

Stiles’s remarks further suggest American Psycho was irresponsibly marketed by publishers. Many commentators, including Baker, Rosenblatt, Mailer and Iannone, critiqued the lack of editing in American Psycho and held publishers responsible. Bean notes the novel

was published by Vintage “unchanged.” Love notes that Ellis was asked “again” by Mehta his publisher at Vintage to delete the most notorious passages, (this “again” implies he had already been asked to remove them by Simon & Schuster), but refused, which suggests Mehta knew the passages were problematic.

Stiles claims that Simon & Schuster would have faced a loss if it had continued with publication after the negative *Time* review (partly due to the withdrawal of Penguin’s interest in paperback rights, and the refusal of many booksellers to stock the book). While it was claimed the editor Bob Asahina hoped to break even on the $300,000 advance, “killing the book would mean taking an unpalatable $300,000 loss.”

Even if “Simon & Schuster sells all 40,000 copies of the first printing of *American Psycho*, it should only break even, and Penguin has declined to exercise its paperback reprint rights.”

Bottoms claims Vintage’s decision to give Ellis “carte blanche” over the manuscript was disastrous: “[I] wonder if he [Ellis] knows what he’s doing, wonder if carte blanche from editors because of big sales and a big name is such a good thing when the talent is, at best, suspect?”

As Albert N. Greco notes, publishers must take responsibility for the books they publish, “Publishers and editors have a fiduciary responsibility to the owners(s) of the publishing house and to their readers and to society.”

This thesis argues Ellis’s publishers neglected their responsibility to readers and society by not ensuring that the novel was edited for the mainstream readership to which it was marketed. That is, by allowing Ellis to STET suggestions that he cut the problematic four scenes, the publishers produced a novel that

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122 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 51.
124 Stiles, 43.
125 Stiles, 43.
required a sophisticated reader, not a mainstream reader, and which would remain problematic for any reader because of its inclusion of the four scenes.

Others like Mailer claimed that the fault lay entirely with Ellis and that the novel was not written well enough. O’Brien argues most publishers felt the novel was either distasteful or badly written. Scholars Young and Murphet argue *American Psycho* was technically flawed: Young argues Ellis places too much responsibility on the reader; and Murphet critiques the novel’s satirical and metafictional elements. While Ellis initially claims his editors and agent assured him that the manuscript was acceptable (he later changes his mind), it is unlikely Vintage was oblivious to the commercial value of a potentially scandalous work like *American Psycho*.

Significantly, most commentators concluded the novel was an example of cynical publishing and that the sensationalism was deliberate on the part of author and/or publisher. It is argued here that by transgressing the boundaries of literature into pornography in an ambiguous way, *American Psycho* invited scandal and sales. Indeed Sheppard, Baker, Adler and McGuigan, and Leo all made this claim. Sheppard notes “John McKeown, publisher of the trade division, will not offer his personal opinion of the book, though he has strong feelings as a businessman: ‘We plan to market it aggressively, with muscle and energy.’” Thus, Sheppard suggests the novel was published by non-literary businessmen and adds that the publisher was struggling financially: “For S & S, caught in a profit squeeze

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133 Sheppard, “Revolting,” 100.
like many other U.S. publishers, grossing out readers could mean netting a big return on Ellis’s advance, estimated at $300,000.”134 (This point is echoed by Miner.135) Sheppard also observes that Ellis’s strategy of hooking the reader on outrage is risky.136

The *American Psycho* scandal raised questions to do with reader competence: could mainstream readers navigate Ellis’s deeply ambiguous text? Most commentators and some scholars argued mainstream readers lacked the requisite skill; some argued the novel was sold to people who did not read it (Young makes this point; Murphet and Ellis argue commentators did not read it).137

This thesis argues the mainstream reader (what Hisson calls the “common” reader, and Baelo-Allué the “mass market reader”), read *American Psycho* as Generation X realism, as satire, or worst of all, cynical readers just read the pornographic sections for titillation.138 It is when *American Psycho* is read from the point of view of the mainstream reader that the mass media feminist critique makes the most sense. The book depicts misogynistic sexualised violence towards women in a morally ambiguous manner in a text that also never resolves aesthetically. Even when read as satire, the novel implies misogynistic sexualised violence towards women is a clever and humorous way of criticising consumer capitalism.139 This thesis speculates: if the novel had been contextualised as a postmodern parody of pornography, among other genres, on the dust jacket and in blurbs, would staff at Simon & Schuster still have complained and leaked passages to the press, would *Time* have critiqued it so harshly, and would Simon & Schuster have rejected it? If commentators had described

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134 Sheppard, 100.
136 Sheppard, “Revolting,” 100; Serpell, “Repetition,” 56. Serpell agrees Ellis’s strategy is risky.
137 Young, “Beast” 85; Murphet, *Reader’s Guide*, 67-8; Ellis, interview, “The Art of Fiction,” 181-2. Ellis claims the controversy stopped after the novel was published, but the reviews suggest otherwise (see Chapter 1).
*American Psycho* as a postmodern parody, would the mainstream reader have bought or read it?

Significantly, while mainstream readers may have unconsciously detected the postmodern aesthetic elements in the novel, they would also have been more likely to claim the ending of the novel was badly written, than to realise that the ambiguity was a deliberate device on the part of the author designed to encourage them to reflect on the nature of violence in our society. Again, mainstream readers would most probably have thought the characters were badly written rather than realising they were deliberately postmodern. Those mainstream readers who did understand that Ellis was deliberately writing the ending in an ambiguous way and flat characters would not necessarily have had the terminology needed to describe what they had read or access to tools or a public forum where such issues could be discussed and the potentially political aspects of the novel could be transformed into active debate.

Further to the above, female mainstream readers may have initially been drawn to the novel as a result of the sheer media noise but then many may have stopped reading the book because they were repulsed by the four problematic scenes. Those that believed these scenes constituted some kind of deliberate strategy on Ellis’s part and were not just a result of Ellis’s bad taste or poor writing skills may have interpreted the novel as a critique of sexual violence. However, without precise tools, without the awareness of the way postmodern parody operates, for example, even women readers with enough sophistication to tolerate the arguably tasteless joke would not have been able to pinpoint the way the book also simultaneously celebrates and critiques sexual violence towards women, though they may have sensed a general cynicism. Nor may such readers have been able to articulate why it is
important that the author clearly signal the parody. Without precise scholarly tools, female readers would not have been able to tell if book was badly written or not.

Hisson was the first scholar to argue *American Psycho* posed a problem for the reader, claiming the novel is too generically complex, too emotionally demanding and too ambiguous for the “common” reader.\(^{140}\) Murphet argues similarly, as does Buscall: the reader who “brings along old-fashioned expectations,” is going to be very irritated and anxious reading this book.\(^{141}\) Clearly, while any reader must work hard to make sense of the text, a mainstream reader may lack the skills to do so. This thesis will argue *American Psycho* is a difficult even impossible text requiring a highly skilled sophisticated reader. Thus, the novel was not marketed to the implied reader of the text, but to a mainstream reader in order to maximise sales. This study argues most readers read *American Psycho* in a manner consistent with the way the novel was marketed and reviewed, as a scandalous mainstream novel, and not the way it was written, as a complex literary fiction.

Not surprisingly, literary professionals and institutions figured in the scandal in an unprecedented way. A phenomenal number of literary professionals were involved in the *American Psycho* scandal including: media personalities, journalists, feminists, publishers, agents, editors, librarians, guild members, publicists, managing directors, authors, members of the public and CEOs. The controversy spanned a variety of literary institutions: publishers, agents, libraries, book-sellers, newspapers, magazines, journals, television talk shows, the authors’ guild, and the Writers’ Union. However, accounts of the involvement of literary institutions differ.

\(^{140}\) Hissom, “Mimesis,” 42-3.
While MacDowell’s article in The New York Times gives a thorough account, and Stiles’s initial critique mentions a number of staff at Simon & Schuster by name including Ellis’s editor Bob Asahina in an attempt to ascertain responsibility, other accounts focus on specific aspects of the scandal. 142 Thus, some commentators accuse publishers of greed, claiming they intended to publish American Psycho “swiftly” to “reach the widest possible readership” given its “immense coverage” in the media, while others accuse publishers of being patriarchal. 143 Thus, De Clarke claims that plots depicting sexual violence towards women can be more easily published than plots depicting violence towards men.

There is not one publication or person in a thousand willing to curtail the ‘rights’ of pornographers (straight, gay, or lesbian) to churn out violent and exploitative materials by the hundredweights. But there seems to be a sudden upsurge of moral concern among editors when a woman dares to write about doing violence to men for feminist reasons, out of violent political anger.

Spelling out exactly what she means by this, De Clarke adds, “The image of a woman killing a man—not for his or the reader’s obscure sexual satisfaction, but in cold vengeance—is blasphemy.” 144 Coates argues the structure of corporate publishing gave the novel an unfair advantage: without Ellis’s name the manuscript “wouldn’t have made it past the slush pile of a sado-porn house, much less to a mainstream publisher’s first reader.” 145 Young argued the

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144 De Clarke, 246.
publication history was the story: unlike the novel, Young claims, the publication story was full of “melodrama, plot, characterisation, irony, hubris.”

The drive towards profit and commercial success that now fuelled the marketing and editing decisions of corporate publishers manifested in the citing of print runs in advance and the quotation of inflated sales figures to increase hype for literary novels. According to Edward Nawatka, it is common for publishers to announce “wildly inflated first printings” in order to induce booksellers to make large orders. The scholar Brusseau argues American Psycho did not sell as well as was claimed (implying sales figures were exaggerated to increase the profile of the novel): American Psycho, “didn’t sell well.” While Maureen O’Brien claims 60,000 copies of American Psycho were shipped to booksellers, this figure may have been exaggerated.

Meanwhile, Reuter and Reid argued negative reviews reduced the print run (Simon & Schuster were only intending to print a paltry 20,000 copies once staff had seen the problematic scenes, though the advance had been $300,000). Baelo-Allué, on the contrary, claims American Psycho sold 100,000 copies in two months in the US, and that the novel became a best-seller “in spite of the controversy.” This thesis counters that the novel became a best-seller as a result of the inclusion of the sexually violent misogynistic scenes and the outrage they provoked in commentators.

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146 Young, “Beast,” 88, 85.
150 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 81; 90.
Best-seller lists are another means of creating hype (although they can also be vulnerable to publisher and author manipulation). *American Psycho* appeared as number fifteen on *The New York Times* best-seller list in April, with Thomas Harris’s novels *Silence of the Lambs* and *Red Dragon* as number one and two respectively.\(^{151}\) Notable for being a literary novel (corporatisation also contributed to the disappearance of literary novels from best-seller lists), a common theme emerges among *American Psycho, Silence of the Lambs,* and *Red Dragon:* the torture and killing of women.

An embargo date is a “gentleman’s agreement” that exists between publishers and literary editors of newspapers whereby editors agree not to publish reviews before the publication date.\(^{152}\) While some commentators and scholars blame staff at Simon & Schuster for leaking sections of *American Psycho* to the press prior to publication, others blame the press for publishing the leaked passages of the novel.\(^{153}\) In publishing reviews before the publication date, literary editors broke the embargo.

Though elsewhere unobserved in literary criticism about *American Psycho,* the politics of book reviewing also plays a key role in the scandal. This thesis suggests that reviews like Roger Rosenblatt’s in *The New York Times* were hatchet jobs.\(^{154}\) According to Hoggart, “hatchet jobs” may be motivated by the reviewer’s sense that the author’s success is ill-deserved, or in some cases hatchet jobs are actively requested by the editor:

Some honest journalists will recall how... they were asked to do a demolition job on an author the editor thought ready for such a process: not necessarily because there were strong literary grounds for it but ‘just for the hell of it’ or because ‘he needs

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taking down a peg or two’ or because his political opinions do not suit... This practice is more common than is widely known; its practitioners will deny it occurs.\textsuperscript{155}

In addition, during the 1980s and 1990s “synergy,” that is, the cross-ownership of \textit{mass media and book publishing enterprises}, ensured reviews became “increasingly linked to the process of book promotion,” because publishers increasingly owned the magazines where books were reviewed.\textsuperscript{156} Viewed in this way, scandals become just another way to market books; “even bad reviews can be good publicity,” Moran claims, as the \textit{American Psycho} scandal demonstrates.\textsuperscript{157}

Corporate publishing also translated to an increased focus on celebrity authors. By \textit{definition}, literary celebrities are controversial figures at the centre of a conflict “about the relationship between literature and the market.”\textsuperscript{158} Ellis’s image began with “Brat Pack” popularity, then moved into notoriety with \textit{American Psycho} (which included CNN \textit{reading extracts from the novel} on its show business segment, and a cover story in \textit{New York Magazine}), and is currently ascending into literary celebrity (as a result of increasing scholarly interest, positive reviews, and the Harron and Turner film adaptation).\textsuperscript{159} Some scholars argue that while Ellis’s early “Brat Pack” celebrity worked against him, in rejecting the “Brat Pack” \textit{label commentators were really rejecting the new style of marketing}.\textsuperscript{160}

The autobiographical has always been central to literary celebrity (the intertwining of promotion and self-promotion dates from Mark Twain).\textsuperscript{161} Loren Glass claims the increasing focus by authors on autobiographical subject matter coincided with the rise of corporate

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\textsuperscript{155} Hoggart, “Reviewers,” 66.\
\textsuperscript{156} Moran, \textit{Star Authors}, 40.\
\textsuperscript{157} Moran, 39-40. Note Moran suggests “synergy” may also have lead Simon & Schuster, which was owned by Paramount, to reject \textit{American Psycho}.\
\textsuperscript{158} Moran, 7.\
\textsuperscript{159} O’Brien, “American Gothic,” \url{http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,313573,00.html}.\
\textsuperscript{160} Baelo-Allué, \textit{Controversial}, 23; 46; 79.\
\textsuperscript{161} Moran, \textit{Star Authors}, 20.\
\end{flushright}
capitalism, which fused the personality of the writer with the text.\textsuperscript{162} Today, it is said that consumers increasingly need the personality and unique charisma of the author to differentiate novels that are becoming ever more uniform: readers increasingly encounter fiction as mediated by the author’s image (authors like Hemingway even lived out their characters in real life).\textsuperscript{163} Thus, reviews and profiles became the preferable way of publicizing literary celebrities, with only “lead” books selected for aggressive promotion.\textsuperscript{164} Thus, publishers increasingly had the power to “create” their own literary celebrities (as Vintage did when they purchased American Psycho).

Moran argues that the mass media and the academy are equally active alongside publishers in the creation of literary celebrity. Authors are often graduates of Creative Writing Courses (the term “workshop fiction” was coined to refer to such writers).\textsuperscript{165} The academy may also participate in canon formation with the increasing commercialisation of tertiary institutions contributing to an increased demand for sensationalistic material in the competition to attract fee-paying students. Baelo-Allué parallels the argument made here when she claims that today Ellis’s work is frequently taught at universities.\textsuperscript{166}

Literary celebrities sometimes literally embody the concept of rarity to increase their appeal, as is the case with “author recluses.”\textsuperscript{167} Ellis has used elusiveness to increase his celebrity, especially around his refusal to reveal his sexuality. Moran claims author reclusiveness can also be a form of “dissent,” a protest against promotional culture, but adds that it is a form of dissent that has “become implicated in what it condemns.”\textsuperscript{168} This aspect

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{163} Moran, \textit{Star Authors}, 31; Baelo-Allué, \textit{Controversial}, 10.
\bibitem{164} Moran, 38, 41.
\bibitem{165} Moran, 48; Baelo-Allué, \textit{Controversial}, 23.
\bibitem{166} Baelo-Allué, 19.
\bibitem{167} Moran, \textit{Star Authors}, 56.
\bibitem{168} Moran, 56.
\end{thebibliography}
of dissent is relevant here given the autobiographical trend in the reception of novels (a trend Ellis was no doubt aware of when he created Bateman and again when he refused to cut the sexually misogynistic violent scenes). Thus, Ellis dissents when he refuses to reveal his sexuality, but is implicated when he provokes readers around autobiographical reading patterns in Zero, American Psycho and Lunar Park. Of all his novels, Ellis claims that Glamorama “‘matters the most.’”169 Significantly, it explores “‘what it would feel like to become lost in celebrity, to lose your identity to the public’s conception of yourself.’”170 Ellis’s remarks here demonstrate an acute awareness and preoccupation with his own celebrity in Glamorama (and by implication, throughout his oeuvre).

While scandal can often lead to commercial success, scandal can also stigmatise authors. After the overnight success of Portnoy’s Complaint (1969), Phillip Roth became known “as a sex maniac.”171 Roth’s celebrity was of the “cheap notoriety,” variety, “involving the almost complete collapse of Roth’s cultural authority as an ‘author.’”172 Some have argued Ellis’s reputation was similarly damaged by the American Psycho scandal (only to be later redeemed).173

In sum, the publishing industry, author and mass media all contributed to the American Psycho scandal: publishers, by marketing the novel for a different readership (mainstream) than the one it had been written and edited for (literary), and by favouring marketing over editorial decisions about the manuscript; Ellis, by refusing to remove the misogynistic scenes; and, finally, the mass media, by breaching the publisher’s embargo and reviewing American Psycho before the release date, and by publishing hatchet-job reviews.

169 Ellis, “Art of Fiction,” 185.
170 Ellis, 185.
171 Moran, Star Authors, 101.
172 Moran, 102.
3. Backlash

While scholars like Young and Baelo-Allué argue that Downtown fiction and Blank Generation Fiction are primary historical contexts for the American Psycho scandal, this thesis argues that the primary context for the scandal is the backlash. While the extremity of American Psycho’s offensive scenes solicited a consistently voiced feminist critique (1990-1), twenty years after the novel’s initial publication the feminist critique is largely absent from scholarly literary criticism. This marked tendency in scholarly work begs the following questions: why is the mass media feminist critique virtually absent from scholarly literary criticism; why were most scholarly analyses of American Psycho defences; and why were opinions so polarised between commentators on the one hand, and scholars on the other?

A number of commentators and scholars have argued the backlash played a significant role in the American Psycho scandal. As Susan Faludi asserts, the 1980s, which was the period during which American Psycho was conceived and written, was a time of a troubling double standard around the status of women. On the one hand, it was a time of public celebration of the victory of feminism; on the other, it was a time of considerable private misery. When Faludi investigated the cause of the “new misery,” she discovered that feminism was being blamed. Various mass media texts blamed the women’s movement for women’s misery. In actuality, Faludi argues, while women had won some equality (they still lacked equal pay, and access to childcare), men were attempting to reverse feminism’s

175 Faludi, Backlash, x.
gains in a powerful backlash against women.\footnote{Faludi, xiii.} \textit{Significantly, some feminists argue that Faludi’s notion of the backlash is simplistic and possibly exaggerates women’s advances. For example, Walby argues that while feminism has made progress, divorce rates have “soared” so that there are more single mother households than there were before which are “very poor.”\footnote{Walby, Sylva. “‘Backlash’ in Historical Context,” \textit{Making Connections: Women’s Studies, Women’s Movements, Women’s Lives}, ed. by Mary Kennedy, Cathy Kubelska, Val Walsh. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1993), 83.} While such arguments do not dispute the backlash, they argue that it was more complex than Faludi’s argument suggests.}

Further evidence includes statistics depicting an increase in sexual violence towards women. While reported rape statistics doubled, sex related murders increased by 160 percent. \textit{Worst of all, one-third of the women were killed by their husbands or boyfriends, and the majority of that group were murdered just after declaring their independence in the most intimate manner—by filing for divorce and leaving home.}\footnote{Faludi, xvii.} \textit{The scholar Jane Caputi argues the 1980s and 1990s are an “‘age of sex crime.’\footnote{Jane Caputi, “American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction,” \textit{Journal of American Culture}, 16 (1993): 101.} According to Caputi, while women had won some equality, they were more likely than ever to become targets of sexual violence. The backlash, Faludi argues, only “pushes” into “public consciousness” during crises.\footnote{Faludi, \textit{Backlash}, xxii; Naomi Wolf’s \textit{The Beauty Myth} (London: Vintage, 1991), 132, 161. Wolf also notes the coincidence of the increase in sexually violent crime and sado-masochistic pornographic fashion photos.} The disturbing statistics included above, and the public attribution of blame for women’s misery on feminism are evidence of such a crisis, as is the publication of Ellis’s \textit{American Psycho}, with its scandalous depiction of sexualised misogynistic violence.}
Commentators were quick to relate backlash statistics to the *American Psycho* scandal. Anne Bernays writes, sarcastically:

> I wish I had the grit to mirror, as [Ellis] apparently does in this book, the continual physical abuse women suffer at the hands of men who kill and maim their wives and ‘sweethearts’ more often, more efficiently and with less conscience than they do household pests.\(^{181}\)

Bernays then cites statistics proving her point (see the epigraph to this thesis).

Maureen Downey made similar comments (see the epigraph to this thesis), and questioned whether representations of violence against women in the media illuminate or compound the problem. Downey claims that the “perception of women as victims is widespread in American culture,” and that “teenagers were emphatic about disliking women, perceiving them as legitimate targets that can be openly attacked.”\(^{182}\) Downey cites experts who allege representations “give men permission to mistreat women,” and enforce women’s role as victims.\(^{183}\) The British novelist Fay Weldon implicitly contextualises *American Psycho* in terms of the backlash, with her vision of a sado-masochistic misogynistic society lashing out at women.\(^{184}\)

While the overall death toll in *American Psycho* is not enough in itself to have caused a scandal upon publication—Bateman confesses to “thirty, forty, a hundred murders”—by far the most scandalous scenes are the gruesome sexualised torture, rape and murder scenes

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\(^{183}\) Downey, G4.

perpetrated upon women, and it is these scenes that lie at the root of the scandal.\textsuperscript{185} That being said, the thesis does note that not all victims are women, and that non-female victims include: Al a homeless black man, a gay man, two dogs, a Chinese delivery boy, a Jew, a taxi-driver, and one child. However it is argued here that the scandal was not caused by the scenes with non-female victims, it was caused by the sexualised misogynistic scenes. There are four of these sexualised, misogynistic violent scenes in the novel: the first involves two prostitutes, Christie and Sabrina, see pages 173-6; the second involves the prostitute Christie and an acquaintance of Bateman’s, Elizabeth, see pages 288-291; the third involves two “hardbodies” who are probably prostitutes, Torri and Tiffany, and which was excerpted in Time and Spy (which culminates with Bateman impaling Torri’s decapitated head onto his erect penis and masturbating himself with it until he reaches orgasm) see pages 303-6; and a fourth involves an anonymous “girl” (in this scene Bateman entices a live rat to enter the tortured girl’s vagina 329) see pages 326-329. In addition, Bateman sexually assaults and murders the following females: a woman he later cooks, page 344; Ursula, page 385; an anonymous woman, page 256; Evelyn’s neighbour, page 119; Monica Lustgarden, page 167; a raped woman, page 94; the Alison Poole assault, page 207; and Bethany’s first assault on page 211. Bateman himself recognises gender difference as primary: “I want to keep the men’s bodies separate from the women’s.”\textsuperscript{186} Further, various provocative comments directly address feminism as the object of Bateman’s wrath and scorn. For example, “‘The women’s movement. Wow.’ I smile, unimpressed,” or his meaningless intention to promote “‘equal rights for women.’”\textsuperscript{187} Or consider Bateman’s equally provocative comment to Jean to “‘Just
say no,” which parrots Nancy Reagan’s anti-drugs slogan (which later also refers to pre-marital sex and violence).^188

Few scholars note the relevance of the backlash to the *American Psycho* scandal. Caputi’s study does not speak of the backlash directly and yet is particularly relevant because it implicitly links the backlash to the **popular fascination with** serial killers. Caputi argues that the serial killer is a mythologised embodiment of “patriarchal culture.”^189 The serial killer is an immortal genius who terrorises women, inspires men to “emulate him, and participate in the cultural propagation of frequently lethal misogyny.”^190 Because serial killers are nearly always male and their victims almost exclusively female, Caputi conceives of serial killer literature as “legitimated misogyny and femicide.”^191 Further, Caputi claims feminist discourse features prominently as a target in serial killer novels, and cites George Stade’s *Confessions of a Lady Killer* as an example (Stade was one of Ellis’s early defenders).^192 Caputi cautions that with *American Psycho*’s best-seller status, femicidal violence has become normal and mainstream.^193

Berthold Schoene’s masculinist analysis of *American Psycho* contextualises the scandal in relation to the backlash.^194 Feminism, which brought the feminine into close alignment with mainstream culture, has left traditional masculinity at odds with contemporary culture.^195 Men can either allow traditional masculinity to “crack up” and work with women, or invest what remains of their “power in an autistic backlash against equality and

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^190 Caputi, 101.
^191 Caputi, 102.
^192 George Stade, *Confessions of a Lady Killer*, (New York: Alpha/Omega, 1979), 12. Stade’s novel begins, “My name is Victor Grant. I am the hero or villain of the narrative to follow, depending on whether you are a feminist or a human being.”
^195 Schoene, 380.
Schoene reads Bateman’s misogyny as an example of an autistic backlash against women. Like Schoene, Mark Storey claims Bateman is threatened by feminism and assertive women and lashes out in aggressive defence: “To Bateman, the rise of the marginalized threatens his central position as hegemonic male; to protect that position, he lashes out, attempting to eliminate the threat.”

In addition, within the broad context of the backlash lies a more specific feminist context for the American Psycho scandal: the association of the mass media feminist critique with Dworkinite anti-porn feminism, and by implication with the Meese Commission and the anti-feminist religious Right. Udovitch is the first to make the association claiming Dworkin’s reasoning is at fault. Calvin Thomas claims Linda Kauffman’s defence in Bad Girls and Sick Boys (1998) was partly a reaction against Dworkinite feminism because of its unfortunate association through the Meese Commission with the anti-feminist religious Right. Kauffman is too “celebratory” of the artists she studies, indeed, Kauffman “is so determined to protect some of her boys from puritanical Dworkinite feminism that she immunizes them from feminist critique altogether.” Thomas complains Kauffman’s interpretation of male hostility as an ironic deconstruction of patriarchy leaves patriarchy “intact.” Thus, many scholarly defences of American Psycho were reactions against Dworkinite feminism (and its association in the Meese Commission with the anti-feminist religious Right). This is an important point, as it is this unfair blurring of the boundary

196 Schoene, 380.
197 Storey, “Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity,” 64.
200 Thomas, review, 1089.
between the mass media feminist critique and the fundamentalist religious Right by scholars that this thesis aims to correct.

While critics of the Meese Commission argued its war against pornography merely diverted public attention from more important issues, this thesis counters pornography is an important issue that requires public scrutiny, especially when it is causally related to the increase in sexually violent crime towards women by pornography’s implicit validation of the objectification and sexual denigration of women.201

In addition, Superson and Cudd argue that there is a backlash against feminism in academia which may explain why scholarly feminists reject the mass media feminist critique of Ellis’s novel. Their anthology is a response to the “horrid discrimination” and “sexism” they and other feminists have experienced professionally, and they identify a number of forms including: denial of tenure, hostility and harassment from students and faculty, and the forced suppression of feminist opinions and activism to keep jobs.202 Burke and Black also argue the case for a backlash in the workplace.203 Danner and Walsh identify evidence of the backlash in media coverage of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women.204

Sadly, Wolf’s work subsequent to her critique of American Psycho merely links the issue of sexualised violence towards women with antipornography feminists and by

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implication, with undesirable and unfashionable “‘victim feminism.’” Wolf claims “‘victim feminism’” sees women as sexually pure, and essentially nurturing, and stresses the evil done to the good women. Opposed to “‘victim feminism’” is “‘power feminism’” which sees women as human beings—sexual, individual, no better or worse than men—and claims equality as an entitlement of women.

Wolf does however find evidence of the backlash in the fact that most 1990s mainstream women no longer identify with the term feminist, even if they appreciate what feminism does. Mainstream women reject feminism because they associate the term with lesbianism, man-hating, elitist academia, Marxism and antipornography fundamentalists. A male dominated mass media is also a contributing factor, as is the fact that women with jobs have something to lose (the threat of poverty has effectively silenced women again). Sadly, rather than educate the mainstream about the perils of homophobia, the short-comings of capitalist individualism, the joy of healthy sexuality (as opposed to promiscuous, sexually addictive sexuality), and the pros and cons of theoretical models, Wolf rejects the above and distances herself from the previous generation of feminists.

Another important contributing factor is that, despite there being no improvement in statistics pertaining to sexualised violence towards women in the period between 1991 and the present study, postfeminists no longer see the issue as relevant (the statistics will be included and discussed further below). But definitions of postfeminism vary.

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206 Wolf, xvii.
207 Wolf, xvii.
208 Wolf, 65.
209 Wolf, 63-8; 101.
210 Wolf, 73; 97-8.
Gerhard claims postfeminism does not reject second wave feminism so much as dialogue with it: postfeminism constitutes “a re-negotiation of antifeminist and feminist thought in and through popular representations of women.”211 For both Gerhard and Wolf, female access to pornography and the beauty industry are essential components of postfeminism.212 While Wolf argues in favour of a self-defined sexuality, Gerhard argues postfeminists must feel free to indulge in a bit of “sado-masochistic sex with their feminism.”213

But postfeminism can also imply that feminism is no longer necessary because feminism has achieved its aim. This idea is currently fashionable in academia and the mainstream media and it suggests another reason for the rejection of the mass media feminist critique of *American Psycho* by scholars. Then again, many scholars argue that postfeminism is a form of antifeminism.214 Sorisio’s scholarly essay agrees with Wolf’s claim that the current period is antifeminist.215 While Sorisio rejects Wolf’s critique of Marxism and academia, and the privilege Wolf accords sexual freedom, she nevertheless cautions that the academy must address charges of elitism and in particular make more of an effort to cater for a mainstream readership. Sorisio also claims the academy must address feminist and other political issues. Theory must combine practice (which means Sorisio implicitly supports the current methodology which combines scholarly and mass media readings of *American

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212 Gerhard, 37.
213 Gerhard, 38.
Psycho), and women’s ongoing oppression and exploitation must continue to be challenged by feminists without clinging to the status of victim.\textsuperscript{216}

Further, Sorisio notes the way the critique of “victim feminism” is all too easily incorporated in antifeminism.\textsuperscript{217} It is clearly pre-emptive for postfeminists to reject “victim feminism” while there remains little improvement in statistics pertaining to sexual violence.

Further, by emphasising dissent within feminism, postfeminism plays into the hands of the patriarchy: history is rife with examples of the way power works by setting potential allies to fight against themselves. This is the real victory of the backlash, the in-fighting within feminism itself (the creation of a confusing plethora of definitions that may overwhelm mainstream women), which in this case, when considered in relation to the lack of improvement in statistics pertaining to sexual violence against women, means that divided we fall. As Modleski writes, contemporary feminism must address the following problem: “the once exhilarating proposition that there is no ‘essential’ female nature has been elaborated to the point where it is now often used to scare ‘women’ away from making any generalizations about or political claims on behalf of a group called ‘women.’”\textsuperscript{218}

Read in this context, while American Psycho provocatively “plays” with the notion of “The War Against Women” and with feminist discourse in general, this thesis claims that Ellis’s overly ambiguous novel ultimately refuses to take a side, nevertheless exploiting the popularity of feminist discourse for its own ends.

\section*{4. Feminist Definitions}

\textsuperscript{216}Sorisio, 136.
\textsuperscript{217}Sorisio, 141.
\textsuperscript{218}Tania Modleski, Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 15.
Having situated the feminist critique of *American Psycho* in the broader context of the backlash and anti-Dworkin sentiment, this section will further explore why commentators embrace the feminist critique but scholars ignored it. But before commencing a detailed examination of the feminist critique of *American Psycho*, a few notes on feminist literary criticism are necessary. This thesis will follow Toril Moi in broadly dividing feminist literary criticism into two categories, “the Anglo-American and the French.” Defining feminism as the exposure of patriarchal practices, Moi argues that no feminist account is ever neutral, and is in favour of debate amongst feminists. Debate among feminists is not equivalent with infighting and does not result in a paralysing confusion about what feminism is. Debate also allows for respectful differences of opinion, hence it must be distinguished from the conflation of different feminisms, as when Dworkin’s anti-pornography feminism is made equivalent with the fundamentalist religious Right.

Of interest though is the way Moi’s thought neatly parallels scholarly defences and other attempts to salvage *American Psycho*. Feminists like Kauffman argue that mass media feminist critiques failed to recognise the novel as the “feminist tract” Ellis claims to have intended due to an aesthetic prejudice, (Kauffman claims the mass media critique failed to recognise Ellis’s novel’s postmodern aesthetics), and attempts to rescue Ellis’s postmodern novel by reading it through French theorist Jacques Lacan (or Deleuze and Foucault in Freccero’s case). Thus, part of the division between the mass media feminist critique and scholarly defences of *American Psycho* is a result of their different methodologies and aesthetic prejudices. Mass media feminist critics tend to read *American Psycho* as realism, whereas scholars, who read *American Psycho* as postmodernism, argue that mass media

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feminist critiques of *American Psycho* miss Ellis’s deconstructive methodology, and lack awareness of how their own liberal humanistic realist aesthetic informs their critique.

While scholars have a point, mass media feminists may have been unwilling to read *American Psycho* as a postmodern novel, this was as a result of Ellis’s inclusion of the four unacceptably horrific scenes. Further, it is argued here that scholarly defences of *American Psycho* have limitations. Not only do many fail to account for the reader’s very real shock upon reading the text, they also overlook the daily statistical reality of women’s lived experience, two important factors addressed by the mass media feminist critique (as noted in the epigraph, one in five women is a survivor of violent sexual assault). Theoretical defences like Kauffman’s tend to neutralise the sexualised violent misogyny by shifting the focus of their study away from feminist political concerns with the novel into the postmodern aesthetic realm. Serpell’s argument is preferable, in particular her point that many theoretically-informed defences of *American Psycho* ignored the issue of violence towards women altogether. It will be argued below that the affect defence, a defence that employs Deleuze and Guattaris’ post-structuralist theory, is a preferable defence to the postmodern aesthetic defence given the way it focuses on the reader. Postmodern defences tend to ignore the important role played by the reader and to concentrate instead on the novel’s formal properties.

5. **Doctoral Dissertations**

No other doctoral dissertation focuses on the mass media feminist critique. While Eberly devotes a chapter to public discourses in the *American Psycho* scandal, Stubblefield merely restates NOW’s claim that: “violence against women is no longer socially
acceptable."

Kevin Ferguson is unusual in that he argues that the backlash is a context for Ellis’s work, and also situates Faludi in relation to the work of theoretical feminists who came to prominence in the 1980s, such as Jane Gallop, whose work was informed by the French post-structuralist feminists Kristeva, Iragaray, and Cixous. Ferguson also claims Gallop’s book, *The M(Other) Tongue*, published in 1985, was the first anthology of psychoanalytic feminist criticism, though the bulk of his study is not concerned with this as a topic.  

Indeed, the argument here departs from the directions explored in many dissertations. For example, it disagrees with Hawryluk in her account of the feminist critique, in particular her surprise that sex was the problematic aspect when it came to rating the film adaptation, and not violence. In contrast with the focus here, recent dissertations about *American Psycho* have been concerned with masculinity, and Ellis’s celebrity.

Two doctoral dissertations are relevant to the second objective of the thesis, the incorporation of the feminist critique into the scholarly defences by re-reading the novel in relation to the work of Linda Hutcheon. While James Annesley, and Kevin Ferguson link *American Psycho* to her work, they contest and critique Hutcheon’s position. While Messier’s dissertation analyses *American Psycho* in terms of pastiche and satire, he defines these terms in relation to the work of Jameson, Bakhtin and Price. Again, while

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222 Stubblefield, “Manners,” 156.
224 Hawryluk, “Call Waiting,” 442.
Stubblefield notes the presence of satire and irony in the novel, she fails to note the novel’s parodic aspects.\footnote{Stubblefield, “Manners,” 146.} Thus, no other doctoral dissertation defines *American Psycho* as a satirical postmodern parody along the lines defined by Hutcheon (see Chapter 3).

While Vegari’s \textit{doctoral} dissertation links NOW with realism, and notes that *American Psycho* contains both realist and postmodern elements, \textit{she argues this is a successful, deliberate strategy with a revolutionary objective on Ellis’s part}.\footnote{Amy Neda Vegari, “Violence, Immediately: Representation and Materiality in Coetzee, Ellis, Cooper, Beckett, Godard, and Noé,” (Ph.D. diss., Rhode Island: Brown University, 2008), 109, 126.} Here, on the contrary, it will be argued that the ambiguous mixture of realist and postmodern elements is the novel’s central flaw, and that the resulting aesthetic confusion may be due to Ellis’s \textit{inability to control} his material. (See Chapters 4 and 5.)

This thesis will now re-visit the \textit{American Psycho} \textit{scandal}, paying particular attention to the mass media feminist critique and contrasting this with scholarly defences.
CHAPTER 1


... what difference does it make whether we believe Patrick committed some, any or all of the murders, or not? We have still had to read all the detailed descriptions of the killings and the effect on us is exactly the same. Whether Patrick’s murders are fantasies or not, within fiction, they are all fictional. Thus we are forced by the author to confront the definition and function of fictionality itself.

We have to provide food and shelter for the homeless and oppose racial discrimination and promote civil rights while also promoting equal rights for women but change the abortion laws to protect the right to life yet still somehow maintain women’s freedom of choice.

According to the feminist Naomi Wolf, American Psycho is a scandalous novel because of the pornographic way it depicts misogynistic violence towards women, and the powerful lesson in conditioning this delivers to the reader. While most commentators attribute the scandal to the novel’s violent misogyny, many fail to specify that it is the coincidence of misogynistic depictions of violence towards women with pornographic

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1 Ellis, Glamorama, 81.
3 Ellis, American Psycho, (Vintage), 16. [Vintage edition hereafter.]
scenarios that make the novel so problematic for readers.\textsuperscript{5} It is not enough to critique the novel’s violent misogyny, what is uniquely scandalous about \textit{American Psycho} is the way extreme misogynistic violence is sexualised and eroticised in the text so that the reader’s arousal becomes fused with graphic descriptions of extreme misogynistic violence.\textsuperscript{6} The close reading below will argue Bateman’s misogyny is the key motivation for these offensive scenes, and that pornography and violence are inseparable in the text. Only Wolf makes this point precisely \\textbf{but its importance cannot be underestimated: by analysing the novel in this way it becomes possible to understand why Ellis’s editors, publishers and female staff at Simon & Schuster wanted the scenes excised from the manuscript.}\n
There are very few opponents to Wolf’s critique.\textsuperscript{7} The American author Norman Mailer’s article, the closest to a defence, dismisses the feminist critique and reframes the debate by claiming the true cause of the scandal lay with \textit{American Psycho}’s moral/aesthetic ambiguity and Ellis’s lack of novelistic skill.\textsuperscript{8} Mim Udovitch argues similarly, that \textit{American Psycho} is not misogynistic, just badly written and overly ambitious.\textsuperscript{9} Most scholars follow Mailer and reframe the debate along aesthetic lines, though most employ different aesthetic criteria.\textsuperscript{10} \\textbf{That being said, a few commentators do counter-argue that} the cause of the scandal lay in the media’s treatment of the novel, the response of publishers, and in the mechanics of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} Stiles, “Michael Korda,” 43; Sheppard, “Revolting,” 100.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Wolf, “Animals,” 34.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Eberly, “Novel Controversies,” 153-4.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Mailer, “Children,” 154-9, 220-1
\item \textsuperscript{9} Udovitch, “Intentional,” 65.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Freccero, “Historical Violence”; Serpell, “Repetition”; Storey, “Things Fell Apart”; James, R. Giles, \textit{The Spaces of Violence}, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006); Williams, “Naturalist.”
\end{itemize}
the scandal itself. Udovitch argues that the publishing of excerpts from the novel prior to its release and out of context makes the novel seem more controversial than in reality it is.11

This chapter will first analyse Wolf’s argument, and then relate Wolf’s claims to the mass media feminist critique and to scholars, before finally demonstrating how the novel’s pornographic elements become fused with its horrific elements. The chapter will conclude with a close reading of the sexualised misogynistic violence in the novel which employs Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s concept of recency and which uses it to demonstrate the way the pornographic scenarios become fused with the violent misogyny. According to the recency effect, the pornographic scenarios are re-interpreted by the reader in terms of what comes last, that is, the violent misogyny.

Wolf’s review was published in April 1991, relatively late in the American Psycho scandal (which started publically in October 1990 but which began much earlier at Ellis’s publishing house, Simon & Schuster). Before discussing Wolf’s argument in detail, it is first necessary to give a brief overview of the controversy itself.

1. Overview of the Controversy

Overviews of the American Psycho scandal abound in literary criticism about the novel. Initial overviews given by commentators include: Michelle Green, Victoria Balfour and Ann Guerin in December 1990, Maureen O’Brien and Mailer in March 1991, and Love in April 1991. In a scholarly context, Young (1992), Eberly (1994), and Murphet (2002) all include overviews. Eberly’s account provides the most detail in terms of the feminist critique,

though even Eberly only devotes part of her study to the feminist critique.\textsuperscript{12} The following overview which focuses on the feminist critique is therefore essential. Love’s article, which consists of an introduction and an interview, is useful for mapping the key “topoi” of the debate.\textsuperscript{13}

Love’s introduction begins by claiming the novel’s progress towards publication at Simon & Schuster was marred by “early warning signs” long before the public scandal began.\textsuperscript{14} “A few women” at Simon & Schuster refused to work on it; people in the marketing division at Simon & Schuster became unsure whether the novel should be published; and George Corsillo—the cover designer for Ellis’s previous two novels—refused to design the cover for \textit{American Psycho}. Despite this, \textit{American Psycho} was typeset and sent out to “a few reviewers.”\textsuperscript{15}

On the 29\textsuperscript{th} of October “an excerpt from the most violent chapter,” of the book was published in \textit{Time} months before the novel was due to be published.\textsuperscript{16} The excerpt itself was not included in Love’s account but is included here as it appeared in \textit{Time}:

I start by skinning Torri alive, making incisions with a steak knife and ripping long strips of flesh from her legs and stomach while she screams in vain, begging for mercy in a thin, high voice. I stop doing this and move over to her head and start biting the top of it, hoping that she realizes her punishment is ending up being comparatively light compared to what I plan to do with the other one.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} Eberly, “Novel Controversies,” 160-4. Eberly devotes four pages to the NOW protest.
\textsuperscript{13} Eberly, 151.
\textsuperscript{14} Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 46.
\textsuperscript{15} Love, 46.
\textsuperscript{16} Love, 46.
\textsuperscript{17} Sheppard, “Revolting,” 100; Ellis, \textit{American Psycho}, 304. [Full section below.]
The excerpt depicts extreme violence towards women (later in the article, Sheppard critiques both novel and publisher).

As a result of the *Time* review, *American Psycho* caught CEO of Simon & Schuster Richard Snyder’s attention, and his boss Martin Davis, the Chairman of Paramount Communications, also took note. Snyder read the novel and rejected it on the 15th of November as “a matter of taste,” which meant Ellis was able to keep his $300,000 advance. Amidst complaints of “corporate censorship” Sony Metha bought *American Psycho* for Vintage within 48 hours.

Love’s account of the NOW protest is cursory. Love notes that the NOW president, Tammy Bruce, started a telephone hotline, had bumper stickers printed, and called for “a national boycott of the book.” NOW also informed companies mentioned in the novel and urged them to protest against it.

In December 1990 another extremely negative pre-publication review of *American Psycho* was released in *Spy* magazine. Confusingly, Love deviates from the chronology here, incorrectly implying the *Spy* article was published shortly after the *Time* article: “On October 29th an excerpt... appeared in *Time*... In December, *Spy* ran a passage... Suddenly, the book had the attention of Richard E. Snyder.” Love fails to clarify that Simon & Schuster’s rejection took place on the 14th November and the re-purchase of the novel by Metha for Vintage took place on the 16th November. Love suggests both *Time* and *Spy* together caused Simon & Schuster’s rejection, which is not the case as *Spy* was published in December, after

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18 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 46.
19 Love, 46.
21 Love, 46.
the rejection had taken place. Nor does Love specify that the NOW boycott began on the 19th November, that is, before the Spy article was published.\textsuperscript{23}

That being said, the Spy article is superficially similar to the Time article in that it also includes an extract featuring extreme violence towards a woman, with one important difference (the passage was not included in Love’s article but is included here):

I keep spraying Torri with mace and then I try to cut off all her fingers and finally I pour acid into her vagina which doesn’t kill her, so I resort to stabbing her in the throat and eventually the blade of the knife breaks off into what’s left of her neck, stuck on bone, so I stop. While Tiffany watches, finally I saw the entire head off—torrents of blood splash against the walls, even the ceiling—and holding the head up, like a prize, I take my cock, purple with stiffness and lowering Torri’s head to my lap I push it into her bloodied mouth and start fucking it, until I come.\textsuperscript{24}

Love fails to realise the Spy extract differs from Time in one crucial respect: the extract included in Spy features the fusion of pornography with misogynistic violence, thus, “I take my cock, purple with stiffness and lowering Torri’s head to my lap I push it into her bloodied mouth and start fucking it, until I come”; whereas the Time extract does not include the sexualised violence, only the violent misogyny, that is, Bateman only bites Torri’s head and does not have sex with it. One can only speculate why this might be but this thesis suggests it is because the Love article is more defensive than the Stiles article. Also unobserved by Love is Stiles’s use of the term “misogynist barbarism” to describe the novel.\textsuperscript{25} Love’s failure to note the important difference between the two extracts, and his

\textsuperscript{24} Stiles, “Michael Korda,” 43; Bret Easton Ellis, American Psycho, 304. The second extract follows immediately after the first in the original (full extract below).
\textsuperscript{25} Stiles, “Michael Korda,” 43.
confusion about the correct chronology of events is misleading and neutralises his account of the sexualised nature of the misogynistic violence. Most scholars follow Love here, equating the two extracts and thereby perpetuating the myth that the scenes are just extremely sexually violent, whereas in truth the sexual violence is pornographic.

Soon after *Spy*, Roger Rosenblatt’s review was published in *The New York Times*: “Now coast-to-coast Bret-bashing began in earnest.” However, what Love dismisses as “Bret-bashing” is actually a key phase of the feminist critique and includes Gloria Steinem and Kate Millet writing to Random House “expressing their outrage at the book.” In response, American Express complained that Bateman uses an American Express card to buy prostitutes and snort cocaine. Love claims Mailer first raised the “nagging question of literary merit,” and laments Mailer did not defend the novel.

In addition to the inconsistencies already noted, Love’s presentation of the feminist critique is far from neutral. For example, while Love names male employees at Simon & Schuster, the female employees who protest *against* the book are referred to as “a few women.” By naming the male editor, the CEO and the Chairman but not the female staff, Love implicitly gives the male perspectives more authority.

Again, when Love writes, “Enter the feminists, led by Tammy Bruce,” his “Enter the feminists” suggests mockery, and is reminiscent of a bull ring. The introduction of the

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26 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 46.
27 Love, 46.
28 Love, 46.
30 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 46.
31 Love, 46.
feminists can be contrasted with the studied neutrality Love accords literary institutions and senior publishing executives. In contrast, in the interview section Love confers with the feminist critique with his assertion that the novel is anti-woman and misogynistic. For example, Love asks: “‘Were you working out some kind of rage against women?’” “‘But do you think there’s a natural animosity between men and women?’” and “‘Since this book is, however, written from the point of view of the perpetrator, I think it would be hard for some women to believe you.’” Ellis responds with aggressive defensiveness; his hostility and indifference to female readers clearly surfaces, despite his initial denial of rage towards women:

‘I would have to say I don’t care what some women think or feel about this book, and I would have to say I don’t care whether they find it offensive or not. That’s not my problem, and I don’t feel any responsibility toward women or the women’s movement or NOW to write what they consider a socially acceptable book. At the very least Ellis’s remarks suggest resentment towards feminists and assertive women. On the other hand, the sense of hatred, the degree of hostility towards women indicated by remarks such as “I don’t care whether they [women] find it offensive or not,” is palpable. Significantly, this thesis understands misogyny as the hatred of women.

Love asks Ellis about NOW; Ellis counter-attacks that the NOW boycott of Random House is harmful. Love persists: “‘Are you shocked by the response the book has gotten even

32 Love, 46.
33 Love, 49.
34 Love, 49.
35 Cohen, “Answers Critics,” C13, C18. Ellis also contradicts his defence of the novel in Love as not “political” in his earlier interview with Cohen wherein he markets the book to readers as a satire. Like Mailer, Ellis in Love appears to be attempting to remove his novel from the political, that is, away from the feminists, and into the aesthetic/moral realm.
before it has been published?” and Ellis claims to be confused by it: the book is vile, he is not.\footnote{Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 49.} Finally Love takes up the feminist cause directly by name:

‘Let me stand in the place of the feminist critics: ‘Fine, you’re an artist, you write for yourself. But did you have to go into such graphic detail, having Bateman put a rat up a woman’s vagina, cut off a victim’s breasts and cook them in the frying pan? The awfulness of those descriptions! Can you understand how women feel about reading that?’ How do you respond to that?’\footnote{Love, 49.}

Ellis’s response is significant and suggests that, in Ellis’s thinking at least, there may be a link between misogyny and homosexuality:

‘Well I would respond with this question: ‘Would it be as upsetting to you, would you be as outraged by this book, if Patrick Bateman were a gay serial killer?’ … Well Patrick Bateman is not gay. He attacks women—he has rage against women.’\footnote{Love, 49.}

In conclusion, while Love’s questions in the interview section champion the feminist critique, they are undermined by his inaccuracies and lack of neutrality in the introductory section. Significantly, the omission of Ellis’s defence in the above account of Love’s interview is deliberate. Maintaining focus on the mass media feminist critique is crucial to the argument here given its central objective is to challenge the present scholarly focus on postmodern defences of Ellis’s work and their dubious reliance on Ellis’s inconsistent and dishonest responses in interviews. Furthermore, not only has Ellis’s defence been recounted on numerous occasions elsewhere,\footnote{Love, 49; Young, “Beast,” 86; Murphet, Reader’s Guide, 71.} and can be summarised as Ellis’s claim that he is not a
misogynist, Bateman is, Ellis’s recent admission that he lies in interviews means that Ellis’s interviews cannot serve as the basis of any study.

While Mailer’s overview precedes Love’s more comprehensive overview it nevertheless raises additional points. Unlike Spy and Time, Mailer’s article does not feature one of the misogynistic violent scenes, but cites the scene wherein Bateman racially and physically abuses (though is not sexually violent to) Al, a black homeless man. Mailer’s strategy implies feminist critics neglected the other kinds of violence in the novel and that these were equally important. Maureen O’Brien’s overview adds details of the boycott. Thus, the 15-minute recorded message on the telephone hotline was not sanctioned by NOW’s national board of directors who requested a meeting with Mehta to ask him to cancel the novel, but Mehta refused to see them.

Young and Eberly’s scholarly overviews also add details relevant to the mass media feminist critique. While Young refutes the feminist critique, she nevertheless cites Tammy Bruce describing American Psycho as “a how-to manual for the torture and dismemberment of women,” and Gloria Steinem cautioning Ellis “must take responsibility for any women tortured and killed in the same manner as described in the book.” Eberly’s overview includes more details about NOW than any other scholar and clarifies that the protest was not about censorship, as some defenders claimed, but was instead about asserting the lack of demand for such material. Baelo-Allué adds Tara Baxter’s arrest for reading the novel in a bookstore was further protest against the novel’s misogyny.

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42 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 87.
2. **Wolf’s Review**

Though not mentioned in Love’s overview, Wolf’s review was central to the mass media feminist critique. Wolf’s review uniquely compares and contrasts *American Psycho* with Helen Zahavi’s *Dirty Weekend* (1991) and Andrea Dworkin’s *Mercy* (1990). Wolf’s review begins with two quotes, one from *Mercy* and a second from *American Psycho*: “The big man has his teeth between my legs… he’s biting, not a little, deep bites, he’s using his teeth and biting into the lips of my labia and I’m thinking this is not happening and it is not possible…” and; “I’m biting hard, gnawing at Tiffany’s cunt, and she starts tensing up. ‘Relax,’ I say soothingly. She starts squealing, trying to pull away, and finally she screams as my teeth rip into her flesh.”

Central to Wolf’s position is her claim that literary spokespeople cannot differentiate the excerpts, in intention or effect. While Wolf fails to mention names, the following commentators (in addition to Mailer and Udovitch), partly defend *American Psycho* prior to Wolf’s review: Bernays rejects the feminist critique, Quindlen argues for the novel’s aesthetics, Berry claims it is a serious work, Rawlinson claims the leaked scenes were published out of context, and Lehman-Haupt identifies the novel’s postmodern aesthetics. There were no unqualified defenders.

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43 Wolf, *Beauty Myth*, 132, 161. Wolf’s position here parallels her argument presented *The Beauty Myth* which argues that the pornographicisation of the beauty industry promotes rape and other forms of sexual violence towards women.
45 Wolf, 33.
Further, Wolf asserts the controversial reception of *American Psycho* was “fake,” a superficial exercise.\(^{47}\) However, she adds that beneath the scandal, she claims “real-life power” is at stake:

The critical negotiations surrounding these two books… have almost nothing to do with their respective literary merits. This debate is actually a struggle over the proper gender of literary authority. The issue raised by these books’ critical reception is this: who gets to tell the story of sexual violence against women, the hunter or the prey? Who gets, textually, to bash women, with what pleasure, and to what end?\(^{48}\)

Thus for Wolf, the real life power at stake in the debate concerns: the gender of the author of sexually violent texts; the gender of the victim and perpetrator; and the narrator’s gender.\(^{49}\)

Thus, the author of *Mercy* and *American Psycho* are female and male respectively. In *Mercy*, a female author writes about male sexualised violence perpetrated by males upon a female narrator-victim in a way that is morally critical of the violent misogynistic male behaviour. In *American Psycho*, a male author writes about misogynistic sexualised violence perpetrated by a male protagonist upon female victims in a way that is morally ambiguous, and at times, overtly celebratory of the misogynistic violence.\(^{50}\) *Mercy* suggests sexualised misogynistic violence is unacceptable: *American Psycho* does not and may condone it. Thus, the two novels describe sexual violence from different points of view and with different outcomes. *Mercy* is written from the female victim’s point of view (although by the end of

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\(^{47}\) Wolf, “Animals,” 33.

\(^{48}\) Wolf, 33.

\(^{49}\) Wolf, 33; Aaron, Michele, “(Fill-in-the) Blank Fiction: Dennis Cooper’s Cineatics and the Complicitous Reader,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 3 (2004): 116. Aaron argues Cooper’s work, unlike Ellis’s, makes the reader complicit with “self-risk.”

\(^{50}\) Ellis, *American Psycho*, 132. Bateman has a “celebratory drink” after his attack of Al.
the novel the victim will become a vengeful murderer); and *American Psycho* is written from the male perpetrator’s *point of view* (and nothing changes in the end).

There is also, however, a difference between the way pornography and misogynistic violence interact in the two novels. In *Mercy* the sexual violence is not pornographic: the victim’s confused and angry thoughts are narrated while she is being sexually violated, creating a distancing effect from the sexual content and preventing voyeuristic pleasure in the reader. The female victim protagonist narrates that the sexual assault is so horrible it is “impossible,” and that sexual gratification from violence is unthinkable. Further, the reader identifies with the female victim and is encouraged to reject the male perpetrator’s behaviour.

Pornography and violence are deeply inter-twined in *American Psycho*. Four scenes fuse pornography and horror together; three of which are preceded by scenes wherein Bateman cannot assert himself directly in relation to assertive women like Evelyn and Courtney. As will be demonstrated below, Wolf’s point about the way pornography and horror fuse and condition the reader is supported by evidence in the text. According to the recency effect, as will be argued further below, readers are encouraged to modify original assumptions and assimilate all previous information in relation to the item presented last. Thus, misogynistic violence assimilates both pornography and Bateman’s passivity around assertive women into itself.

Wolf also claims the three novelists challenge liberal assumptions about gender and violence. That is, the novelists challenge the idea that perpetrator’s must be male, that women depicted in pornography are free, powerful and enjoying themselves, and that the consumption of pornography results from normal sexual desire. Thus, Zahavi has a female narrator who exacts revenge on men by killing them; Dworkin writes the “first-person truth” of what it is like to be a victim of sexual violence; and Ellis includes material normally found
in snuff “pornography” in literature. In Wolf’s words, Ellis “transgressed not against taste so much as against genre, by dragging the things usually done to women under the shade of pornography into the glare of middle-class, middle-brow daylight.”52 While all three novels challenge the beliefs of “liberals”; who “have tended to interpret sexually violent culture as a chimera, an immaterial catharsis, weightless and traceless in the world,” Wolf argues that a more thorough comparison of *American Psycho* and *Dirty Weekend* forces liberals to confront real life power imbalances.53 While both novels describe violence graphically, *American Psycho* does so in a world where sexual violence towards women is the norm. *Dirty Weekend*, on the other hand, fictionalises something that almost never happens in real life:

*American Psycho* finds an audience in a world in which, overwhelmingly, the sexual abuse and serial murder that exists is done by men to women. The possibility of female revenge described by *Dirty Weekend* exists almost nowhere outside Zahavi’s pages.54

Thus, the “‘shock value’” defence of *American Psycho* is “irrelevant” because “the ground has shifted.”55 Sexualised violence towards women is no longer transgressive, it is the norm, and Ellis is merely reinforcing “the tired old clichés of the most mainline mainstream.”56

While all three novels have been controversial, they have been controversial in different ways because of each author’s gender. The response to *Mercy* was a form of “annihilation” where “words have indeed been used to bludgeon the book into silence and

52 Wolf, 33.
53 Wolf, 33.
54 Wolf, 34.
55 Wolf, 34.
56 Wolf, 34.
punish its author.”\textsuperscript{57} Critics adopted a policy of “no holds need be barred,” when it came to critiquing Dworkin.\textsuperscript{58} Zahavi suffered a similar disastrous fate, according to Wolf: “You know you have stumbled against a taboo when a newspaper, as happened with Zahavi, publishes a poll of psychiatrists debating if you are mentally ill.”\textsuperscript{59} Defences of Ellis’s novel that argue in favour of its “shock” value and avant-garde status are irrelevant because Ellis’s novel represents societal norms, hence its controversy is “fake” and superficial. This may partly explain why some scholars have taken such an interest in Ellis’s novel above the work of his contemporaries: the novel reinforces patriarchal societal norms. By implication, calling “snuff pornography” literature is not transgressive because snuff pornography is the norm: books without sexual misogynistic violence—Zahavi and Dworkin’s novels—would be transgressive.

Wolf also finds Ellis’s novel aesthetically deficient. While Zahavi’s novel is significant as a literary turning point, Ellis’s novel is boring: “He grinds through about 30 cycles of clothes, restaurant menus, cunnilingus, and then, watch out! It’s the old nailgun through the palms again. Every 100 pages or so the writing wakes up, but only with this kinetic energy of cruelty.”\textsuperscript{60} Most significant of all is Wolf’s final point about the way Ellis fuses misogynistic sexual violence with the pornographic. Thus, Wolf’s argument echoes Dworkin’s and Catharine MacKinnon’s interpretation of violent pornography (Wolf paraphrases as follows): “that it is a violation not of obscenity standards, but of women’s civil rights, insofar as it results in conditioning male sexual response to female suffering or

\textsuperscript{57} Wolf, 33. \\
\textsuperscript{58} Wolf, 33. \\
\textsuperscript{59} Wolf, 33. \\
\textsuperscript{60} Wolf, 34.
degradation.” It is the conditioning function of *American Psycho* that makes the novel so problematic:

Ellis consistently and skilfully pairs scenes that are often (to this reader) very arousing, with scenes of carnage that follow as a consequence of that eroticism. The transition is so swift that the violence enters the reader while she is in a state of heightened erotic receptiveness; there has been a powerful moment of conditioning.62

Thus, Wolf pinpoints exactly why *American Psycho* is disturbing and Thomas Harris’s *Silence of the Lambs* is not: in *American Psycho* scenes that are “very arousing” are paired with “scenes of carnage”; and the carnage comes as “a consequence” of the arousing scenes. The “transition” between arousal and carnage is so swift that the reader is still “in a state of heightened erotic receptiveness” when the violence “enters” them. The result, is “a powerful moment of conditioning”: the reader equates arousal with misogynistic violence. Wolf ultimately objects to *American Psycho* because it legitimates eroticised, misogynistically violent behaviour. Wolf concludes by advising the reader not to buy the book.63

This thesis agrees with Wolf on many of the above points but chiefly concurs that it is the pornographic way the sexual violence is depicted so that horror, hatred for women and desire become problematically fused in the text that is *American Psycho*’s unacceptable flaw. Further, the thesis agrees that the sexualisation of the horrific violence conditions the reader into associating arousal with sexual violence perpetrated by men upon women. The thesis also agrees with Wolf when she argues that Ellis’s novel reinforces mainstream societal

61 Wolf, 34.
63 Wolf, 34; Weldon, “Squeamish,” C01. Note Weldon also recommends her readers not to buy the book.
norms to do with gender and sexual violence. The present study disagrees with Wolf when she claims there is no aesthetic value in the novel, there is, but this thesis argues that the four excessive passages overwhelm any other qualities, good or bad, the novel may have and that it is not possible to reconcile the scenes of horrific sexualised violence with the rest of the novel. The thesis agrees that persuading people not to buy the book was a reasonable but ultimately misguided attempt (because paying the novel any attention in the media would paradoxically only promote it further) at preventing the promotion of a gratuitously misogynistic novel. It is argued here that many readers are not desensitised to the representation of sexualised violent misogynistic atrocities, including the candidate of this thesis, and agrees with Ellis’s editor and publisher that the sections should have been removed prior to publication. Such excessive material does not work in such an aesthetically ambiguous novel, and the thesis suggests that Ellis failed to manage his material.

3. Supporters of Wolf

In addition to initial criticism by Sheppard and Stiles, other commentators noted the combination of pornography and sexual violence including Quindlen, McDowell, Rosenblatt, Yardley and Moore.64 Thus, McDowell and Quindlen complain about the sexualisation of the violence in American Psycho. McDowell implies that American Psycho is “obscene” and of questionable “taste.”65 Quindlen notes the hatefulfulness of the “graphic and impersonal” sex in American Psycho: “As an epitaph for the 80’s, this has a repellent reality. The people are hateful, the violence nauseating, the sex graphic and impersonal.”66 Quindlen finds

Bateman’s misogynistic attitudes and sexually violent behaviour towards women hateful and nauseating.

The American author Lorrie Moore’s review also suggests the novel sexualises violent misogyny. According to Moore, American audiences passively soak in violence and sex from television on a daily basis. Specifically, eroticised violence is made to drive the story in television shows, but eroticised violence, Moore notes, also happens to be the defining characteristic of “pornography”: “As a writing teacher, I have seen, over the last decade, more than one student short story that featured hacked-up women... What these boys have written, though they refuse to know it, is pornography.” Moore claims that the sexualisation of the violence is so extreme the novel transgresses the bounds of literature and enters the realm of pornography.

Moore raises two further points of significance to the broader argument here: she links American Psycho with aesthetic ambiguity; and raises the thorny question of authorial intentions. Thus, Moore complains American Psycho’s combination of pornography and ambiguity results in a confusing absence of “eloquence, authority and intelligence,” and cautions that a good novel always contains an element of “authorial sympathy” for its protagonist.

While this thesis will address the question of authorial intentions and the implied author in Chapters 3 and 5, suffice to say that Ellis’s use of first person point of view means his authorial intentions are difficult to surmise from the text. As Corliss observes, the book’s

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68 Moore, A27.
critics “have condemned Ellis as a sleaze merchant just because he is faithful to Patrick’s point of view.”69 Corliss claims the novel’s moral ambiguity caused the scandal,

Because the book’s murder passages are as rancid as any in mainstream American fiction, and because the first–person narration doesn’t allow for an authorial overview to explain and condemn Patrick’s crimes, the book can be expected to shock some readers.70

Rosenblatt’s review both critiques the novel and discourages people from buying the book: the “snuff” from the title means both to snuff out its success, and simultaneously puns a reference to snuff pornography (pornography wherein arousal coincides with death, as is the case when Bateman has sex with women in American Psycho). Rosenblatt also refers to the novel’s “sadistic contents.”71

Rosenblatt further anticipates Mailer’s critique of the novel as failed realism because Bateman’s “true inner satisfaction comes when he has a woman in his clutches and can entertain her with a nail gun or a power drill or Mace, or can cut off her head or chop off her arms or bite off her breasts or dispatch a starving rat up her vagina.”72 Rosenblatt argues Bateman has no inner self to satisfy, only superficial desires (unlike a realist character which must have depth). Rosenblatt also argues that the responsibility for the American Psycho scandal lay with Vintage and their concern for profit.73

Miner also sees American Psycho as pornography containing explicit sexual violence. Titled, “S & S, Not S & M,” Miner’s review claims that

70 Corliss, 56.
72 Rosenblatt, 3.
73 Rosenblatt, 16.
*American Psycho* is the story of a homicidal yuppy, and contains passages of such explicit sexual violence that when editor Robert Asahina distributed an excerpt of the book at a recent Simon & Schuster sales meeting, it was greeted first by a shocked and sullen silence, and then by spirited outrage. Following the meeting a few women huddled with their male supervisors to express concern, but when they were rebuffed with formulaic invocations of the First Amendment, they decided to let the Ellis sludge leak onto the desks of magazine editors.74

According to Miner, sadomasochistic sexual violence is the main problem with *American Psycho*. Miner concludes the novel is “pornography, not literature,” and cites the scene wherein Bateman copulates with the “severed head” of a woman he has just murdered as evidence.75 Yardley echoes Miner, describing the novel as “pornography,” “trash,” and “a dirty book by a dirty writer.”76 Worst of all, Yardley claims the novel was written with “relish”: “Ellis seems to have enjoyed his labours every bit as much as Bateman does his murders, decapitations, disembowelments and other amusements.”77

While the Australian Censor read the novel as pornography and rated it “Class One by the Office of Film and Literature Classification, making it unavailable to readers under 18 years old,” a rating usually reserved for pornographic magazines, Pagan Kennedy notes the sexualisation of the violence and links it to the novel’s commercial ambitions.78 Kennedy blames Ellis’s publishers: “By lauding Bret Easton Ellis for *Less Than Zero*, the literary establishment provided the jolt of electricity that brought a Frankenstein monster of a book

74 Miner, “S & S,” 43. [My italics.]
75 Miner, 43.
76 Miner, 43.
Kennedy identifies the combination of sex, misogyny and violence as Ellis’s “formula” for success. Terry Teachout agrees the sexualisation of violence in the novel is “obscene”: “Ellis describes the bestial acts committed by his card-board hero in a way that is positively lascivious.” That the “bestial acts” are described in “lascivious” prose is Wolf’s point precisely.

Wolf’s conditioning argument was first argued by John Leo. Thus:

The fact that our rape and murder rates are triple those of other Western nations has a lot to do with the violent images and fantasies flooding our culture.... Sexual violence against women, particularly, is being pumped into the culture at an astonishing rate. Many rock bands now sing about dismembering females. The same theme is a staple not only in horror movies but in mainstream movies, television and even once-sedate detective novels.

Leo expresses outrage at the depiction of violence towards women in American Psycho, and speculates that the novel was only published as a cynical exercise in making money. “In it [American Psycho], endless numbers of women are nailed to the floor, then carved up, drilled or cannibalized... The book is totally hateful—in effect, a how-to manual on the torture and dismemberment of women.” It is only being published “because pots of money can be made by brutalizing the culture.” Leo claims the book has “little literary merit,” and argues that the best possible outcome of its publication is “a serious national debate.”

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81 Leo, “Marketing Cynicism,” 23.
82 Leo, 23.
83 Leo, 23.
84 Leo, 23; Eberly, “Novel Controversies,” 164. See also below.
While Mailer only mentions misogyny indirectly—by quoting Stiles—he argues that reading *American Psycho* may condition us to act violently: “our fears are stirred and buried savageries we do not wish to meet again in ourselves stir uneasily in the tombs to which we have consigned them.” However, counter to Wolf, Mailer claims that *American Psycho* discourages men from treating women like Bateman: Mailer believes *American Psycho* is so hideous men will be shamed and horrified into ending their cruelty to women.

While it is certainly true that the fears women have of male violence are not going to find any alleviation in this work, nonetheless I dare to suspect that the book will have a counter-effect to these dread-filled expectations. The female victims in *American Psycho* are tortured so hideously that men with the liveliest hostility toward women will, if still sane, draw back in horror. ‘Is that the logical extension of my impulse to inflict cruelty?’ such men will have to ask themselves.

Mailer defends the way *American Psycho* forces the reader to look at difficult material. While many other commentators fail to identify that the sexualisation of violence is the novel’s central problem, they do, at a more general level, complain about the extremity of the violence towards women. These commentators include: Sheppard, McDowell, Rosenblatt, Cohen and Iannone. For example, Sheppard claims *American Psycho* caused offence to female staff at Simon & Schuster but does not describe the novel as sexualised misogyny: “Many Simon & Schuster employees were disturbed by the manuscript... Some women

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85 Mailer, “Children,” 157, 220.
86 Mailer, 221.
staffers are especially outraged by Ellis’ description of atrocities against females.” Sheppard adds Simon & Schuster was caught in a profit squeeze.

Commentators like Rosenblatt, Cohen, and Corliss make aesthetic critiques complaining that the excessive ambiguity contributed to the scandal: Corliss argues that Ellis’s choice of first person point of view confuses readers, and Rosenblatt that the fundamental ambiguity in the novel results from Ellis’s confused authorial intentions: “one only assumes, Mr Ellis disapproves. It’s a bit hard to tell what Mr Ellis intends exactly, because he languishes so comfortably in the swamp he purports to condemn.”

Commentators who claim the novel is badly written include Rosenblatt, Udovitch and Mailer, with Lehmann-Haupt claiming American Psycho is not literature because it lacks a moral framework.

The mass media feminist critique resurfaced in a separate debate in 1992 that was ostensibly about the Pornography Victim’s Compensation Act of 1991, the bill for which was under consideration at the time. This second mini-scandal consisted of an exchange of letters between American authors Andrea Dworkin and John Irving, in which Dworkin reinstated and elaborated Wolf’s critique.

In her response to John Irving’s article in The New York Times, Dworkin theorizes the legitimating and conditioning function of violent pornography as follows:

they [pornographers] eroticize inequality in a way that materially promotes rape, battery, maiming and bondage; they make a product that they know dehumanizes.

88 Sheppard, 100.
89 Sheppard, 100.
91 Rosenblatt, 3.
degrades and exploits women; they hurt women to make the pornography, and the consumers use the pornography in assaults both verbal and physical.  

The scenes in *American Psycho* certainly “eroticize” “inequality” in ways that lead to violent misogyny between Bateman and his female victims (noting too that Bateman is inspired by the pornography he watches and the actions of real-life serial killers).

Irving’s article, on the other hand, defends pornography and *American Psycho* as examples of freedom of speech.  

(The First Amendment defence of *American Psycho* was first noted by Miner.) Arguing that “sexually explicit material” does not cause “sexual crimes,” Irving believes feminists must not tell publishers what they can publish. In a second letter, Irving disagrees that “porn is to blame for violence against women,” and accuses feminists of trying to persuade the public that pornography causes violence to women.  

*The New York Times* did not publish a response from Dworkin to Irving’s second letter.

Later supporters of Wolf include Anita Harris and Diana Baker whose article follows both the structure and argument of Wolf’s review. It compares *American Psycho* with *Dirty Weekend* and then notes the following important difference between the two novels: in Zahavi’s novel the violence is not pornographic; Bella does not kill her male victims in the midst of pornographic scenes.

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95 Miner, “S & S,” 43.
Gardner’s article critiques the extremity of the violence in *American Psycho* but opposes Wolf by claiming that *American Psycho* was attacked because of the gender of its perpetrator. Gardner contrasts the favourable reviews of novels that feature female or homosexual male perpetrators of rape, sexual predaciousness and violence, with the hostile criticism directed at *American Psycho* which featured a wealthy, white, heterosexual male perpetrator.99 He cites Suzanne Moore’s *In The Cut* (1999), Dennis Cooper’s *Try* (1994), and A.M. Holmes’s *The End of Alice* (1996), as examples of politically correct female and homosexual male perpetrators.100 Gardner argues, counter to Wolf, that it is acceptable for the perpetrators of sexual violence to be female or homosexual, but that a heterosexual male perpetrator is unacceptable, whereas Wolf argues that only novels about sexual violence with female perpetrators have the potential to be avant-garde: those with male perpetrators merely reinforce the societal norm. Ultimately, however, Gardner that *American Psycho* fails because the violence is extreme and sadistic, thus his conclusion supports Wolf’s critique.101

*Exit* is the last significant piece of commentary dominated by the scandal. Relevant to the discussion here are Will Self’s remarks about the novel’s misogyny and Ellis’s misogynistic intentions:

When it comes to the misogyny, I would argue that *American Psycho* is a misogynist book in some very important ways, and, I suspect that I’m perhaps going out somewhere on a limb here, I suspect that it may have something to do with the author’s own reality and the questions he may have been grappling with about his own sexuality while he was writing the book… If you want to write a book in which

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100 Gardner, 56.
101 Gardner, 56.
you really really capture a certain disgust and revulsion from women, there’s a certain advantage to feeling it yourself.\textsuperscript{102}

Self’s comments are proven intuitive and insightful by subsequent events. In 2010, Ellis publically admitted the autobiographical nature of \textit{American Psycho} and claimed to be homosexual in 2005 with the release of \textit{Lunar Park} (though he has never admitted to misogyny).\textsuperscript{103} While Ellis has recently admitted he lies in interviews, the candidate offers the following speculative interpretation of Elllis’s contradictory behaviour. Firstly, when Ellis claims recently that he lies in interviews the lie he is referring to specifically is his early refutation of his own misogyny. Secondly, when Ellis claims \textit{American Psycho} is autobiographical and that his earlier refutations of the novel’s autobiographical content were untrue, what he means is that homosexuality is the novel’s subplot.

Self’s speculative comments suggest Ellis may have lied in early interviews when he denied any misogyny, an interpretation that is supported by the final ad lib section that takes place in the back of a New York cab between Candace Bushnell, a male friend of Ellis’s named Larry (Lawrence David), and Ellis. When Larry accuses Ellis of lying in interviews, Ellis agrees, “‘I do [lie].’”\textsuperscript{104} Ellis’s admission here of lying undermines not only his defence of the novel but any defences of \textit{American Psycho} that are informed by his expressed intentions. Ellis’s earlier denial of misogyny in \textit{Exit} must therefore be carefully reviewed:

‘It’s [\textit{American Psycho}’s] not about violence towards women. It’s not about violence at all. I really don’t see it as a book that’s about violence towards women. It isn’t. Can I be more adamant? I don’t think so.’\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{102} Exit, Fox, 2000.
\textsuperscript{103} Mailer, “Children,” 220. Mailer also complains Ellis wrote \textit{American Psycho} as therapy.
\textsuperscript{104} Exit, Fox, 2000.
\textsuperscript{105} Exit, Fox.
While *Exit* does not focus on the novel’s sexualised misogyny, the interviewer’s questions are clearly informed by the feminist critique. Ellis responds by defending *American Psycho* against the feminist critique, and distancing himself from any autobiographical connection with it (although Ellis claims the “misogyny in the novel” comes from his father, a defence he will return to in *Lunar Park*). Contradictorily, Ellis also concedes the novel is “emotionally” autobiographical, thus *Exit* represents a shift from Ellis’s earlier defences wherein all autobiographical connection was denied. Significantly, Ellis’s admission of dishonesty in interviews makes it difficult to believe his defence of *American Psycho*. Thus, Ellis’s claims that he is not a misogynist, and that the novel is not about sexual violence towards women, must be questioned. Reassessing Ellis’s defence in the light of his dishonesty supports the mass media feminist critique, and undermines many scholarly defences of the novel. That is to say, early scholars, such as Young, based their defence of the novel, and their rejection of the mass media feminist critique, on Ellis’s claimed intentions for the novel. If Ellis’s initial defence must be queried, then so must any critique that is based on Ellis’s claimed intentions when writing *American Psycho*. Ellis’s admission of dishonesty, tantamount to saying that he is a misogynist and that the novel is about sexual violence towards women, supports the mass media feminist critique and undermines many scholarly defences of the novel.

While scholars like Mandel assert that scholarly analysis is more “sober” than the “hysteria and vehemence” that accompanied the novel’s publication, many of these sober analyses do not defend the novel. Thus, Hissom’s analysis both agrees with the mass media feminist critique, and defends the novel. While *American Psycho* sexualises violence in the

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106 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 49-50. See also Love’s questions.
108 *Exit*, Fox.
fashion of “hard-core pornography,” it also subverts conventional hard-core pornography by forcing the reader into a sadomasochistic relationship with the dominant and aggressive author.  

Caputi is the first scholar to argue the importance of gender and sex in American Psycho’s violent scenes. When men are killed, the scenes are “relatively short” and “asexual;” when women are killed, the “sequences are extensive,” and “frequently follow upon several pages of basic sadomasochistic sexual description clearly aimed at arousing the reader.” Once the reader is “sexually primed” and in scenes of “unmatched violence” the women are killed and tortured in “highly sexualized ways.” This important point about the sexualisation of the violence escapes the attention of most scholars.

Eberly expands and transforms Wolf’s position by arguing the following points: that literary institutions are patriarchal; and that feminist politics are outside current literary concerns. Significantly, while Eberly does not directly cite Wolf, the structure of her analysis resembles Wolf’s and implies a continuation of her project (Eberly compares American Psycho to Dworkin’s Mercy with a similar outcome). Further, Eberly literally restates Wolf’s questions: who gets to tell the story of violent misogyny, “the hated or the hater?” and, “how should we read literature, as social critique or as social reproduction?” Like Wolf, Eberly is concerned with the role of gender, unlike Wolf she examines gender’s role in public constructions of author and reader. Eberly also analyses the role literary institutions play in constructing authorial image, and the centrality of authorial image in determining literary success as opposed to literary merit.

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113 Caputi, 104.
114 Eberly, “Novel Controversies,” 158. Eberly echoes Wolf here who asked: “who gets to tell the story of sexual violence against women, the hunter or the prey? Who gets, textually, to bash women, with what pleasure, and to what end?”
Further, Eberly argues that while misogyny featured prominently in the *American Psycho* scandal, this did not ensure it figured in later scholarly analysis. Eberly claims the two most influential factors ensuring that the issue of misogyny disappeared from scholarly analysis were the effects of the sensationalist publicity itself, and Mailer’s review.\footnote{Eberly, 154} Thus, early articles expressed “incredulity about the violent content” but noted that “publicizing the book was bound to make it sell.”\footnote{Eberly, 158.} Eberly shares commentators’ concerns about whether *American Psycho* might “describe society’s values, subvert them, or reproduce them.”\footnote{Eberly, 179, 183.}

Thus while Eberly argues that NOW’s objective was to persuade women to say no to the “perceived demand” for sexually violent literature, she also notes the debate in NOW about whether increased publicity for NOW was a good thing for women’s rights or not.\footnote{Eberly, 163.} If the NOW feminists protested they made the book more successful by drawing attention to it, if they did nothing the violent sexualised misogyny went unchallenged.\footnote{Eberly, 160–1.} Bruce believed the boycott was an opportunity to both publicize NOW, and critique the way violence towards women is perpetrated by our culture.\footnote{Nora Rawlinson, “Libraries Order Ellis Novel Despite Furore,” *Library Journal*, Jan 1991, 17, cited in Eberly, 161.}

Eberly complains that author, publisher and critics all exploited the novel’s ambiguous and controversial nature for their own ends but that the public was denied informed discourse around women and violence and ultimately denied a feminist reading of the novel: “it is clear that the mechanism of publicity about *American Psycho* was set off by
two publishers concerned more about their profit margins than about any social consequences Ellis’ book might have.\textsuperscript{121}

As noted above, Eberly claims publishers used the publication story to create hype.\textsuperscript{122} Thus, part of the responsibility for the scandal lay with Ellis’s publishers and their concern with profit. The claim that the \textit{American Psycho} publication scandal would sell more books was first articulated by Quindlen, Baker, and Udovitch.\textsuperscript{123} It is ironic that the feminist critique contributed to Ellis’s success.

Eberly concludes the best thing about the novel is that it briefly drew attention to sexual violence towards women (and its representation): “regardless of how painful Ellis’s book is and no matter how despicable the motives of those who published it might have been, the book at least temporarily resulted in people communicating in public about issues of common concern.”\textsuperscript{124} Eberly also notes the way Mailer’s review does not feature a passage from the novel depicting sexualised violence to a woman and thereby departs from the mass media feminist critique. Mailer’s review “had the effect of legitimating the criterion of literary value and thus—for many but surely not all—removing \textit{American Psycho} from the realm of the political and putting it safely into the realm of the aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{125} Mailer’s review was central in ensuring the feminist critique of the novel disappeared and was replaced by a non-feminist, aesthetic literary analysis.

Eberly’s analysis also compares Ellis and Dworkin’s literary success and argues gender and feminism played a critical role in ensuring \textit{Mercy}’s failure.\textsuperscript{126} Saying that literary
institutions treat male and female authors differently when authors depict misogynistic sexualised violence towards women, Eberly claims *American Psycho* and *Mercy* were not assessed in terms of their merits, but in terms of each author’s image, and their ability to manipulate the media.

Dworkin’s novel includes pithy parodies depicting male authors’ attitudes to writing about sex and violence towards women:

The men writers make it as nasty as they can... they type with their fucking cocks—as Mailer admitted, right?… They should just say [the male writers]: *I Can Fuck.*

Norman Mailer’s new novel. *I Can Be Fucked.* Jean Genet’s new novel. *I’m Waiting To Be Fucked Or To Fuck, I Don’t Know.* Samuel Beckett’s new novel. *She Shit.*

James Joyce’s masterpiece... *Mamma, I Fucked a Shiksa.* The new, new Phillip Roth…. I got to tell you, they get laid... two hundred million little Henry Millers with hard pricks and a mean prose style; Pulitzed prizewinning assholes using cash.

Looking for experience, which is what they call pussy afterward when they’re back in their posh apartments trying to justify themselves.  

Dworkin’s text suggests that society has become desensitised to eroticised misogyny, and that literary institutions are patriarchal and do not notice that sexualised misogyny is the norm in novels by canonical authors like Mailer, Beckett, Joyce, Roth and Miller. Dworkin’s text supports Eberly’s claim that Mailer’s review prevented the issue of sexualised violence towards women from becoming the topic of a national debate, because literary institutions are patriarchal.

*protagonist after themselves* has a long literary history, which includes Kafka’s “K” from *The Trial*; Acker’s “Kathy” in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, Ettler’s “Justine” in *The River Ophelia*; etc. The use of this trope does not automatically mean the work is autobiographical. Eberly is correct in that by labelling *Mercy* autobiographical, critics dismissed it of literary merit.

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Eberly’s work has had little impact on subsequent scholarship. For example, the feminist Carla Freccero dismisses the NOW feminists and the issue of the problematic sexualised misogyny depicted in the novel because they argue “representation is advocacy.” Freccero ridicules the way NOW unintentionally promoted sexualised misogyny with its telephone hotline, and argues NOW’s citation and Ellis’s text are identical: one cannot promote sexualised misogyny without the other doing the same. In other words, the NOW strategy of recording the problematic passages from the novel and playing them on their phone hotline to anyone who phoned in promotes sexual violence towards women. From Freccero’s perspective, both NOW and Ellis claim to be critiquing misogyny by including the problematic passages: but if Ellis’s intentions are to be ignored, then why should NOW’s intentions be treated any differently? Thus, NOW construed “representation” as “advocacy.” Freccero also argues that mass media feminists fail to notice the novel’s postmodern aesthetics and that its lack of morality is one of the novel’s strengths because it offers no “consoling fantasy.” Only a few scholars, Eberly, Heyler, Sahli, and Serpell continue the mass media feminist critique, not only by refuting the “equal opportunity killer” defence, as Heyler does, but by uniting, as in Serpell, Wolf’s critique with Eberly’s point about Mailer and the aesthetic shift.

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128 Freccero, “Historical Violence,” 49; Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 50. The advocacy argument first surfaced in Love’s interview when Ellis claims that he does not “advocate” the behaviour depicted in American Psycho.
129 Freccero, 50.
130 Freccero, 56.
132 Heyler, 739.
4. Defenders

While the defences of *American Psycho* will be covered in detail in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, an overview will help contextualise Wolf’s points. Bernay’s anti-political correctness defence complains that politically correct feminism had become a form of fascism: “Women who demand that novelists toe the p.c. line-of-the-moment, are no different from religious fundamentalists.”133 Iannone argues that politically correct feminists, with their “peculiar sensitivity on the topic of women,” denounced *American Psycho*, not just the fundamentalist Right.134

The equal opportunity defence argues that Bateman kills and tortures a variety of minorities, not just women: “He doesn’t much care whom he slaughters so long as it’s a long, drawn-out procedure and produces enough blood and gore.”135 Mailer, Baker, Bernstein and Teachout all make this defence.136

Another prevalent defence is the morally ambiguous defence which argues that *American Psycho* is deliberately ambiguous and therefore true to life, unlike other novels about serial killers. Weldon argues that Harris’s novels present serial killing within a moral framework and *American Psycho* does not (she fails to note the difference in the depiction of sexualised violence, however).137 It will be argued here that the morality in *American Psycho* is not just ambiguous, it is profoundly and problematically ambiguous.

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Another defence is the postmodern defence, initially suggested by Quindlen, Lehmann-Haupt, Corliss and Iannone. Postmodern defenders argue that feminists based their critique of *American Psycho* on a reading of the novel as realism, which it is not. They counter that, if the novel is read as a postmodern novel, the meaning of much of the novel changes, including the extreme sexual violence. Thus Lehmann-Haupt asserts that the “sex and mutilation scenes” are like a “Tom and Jerry cartoon,” and concludes Ellis is not a “leering sensualist or cynical pornographer.”

Another defence argues that *American Psycho* is an experimental literary novel that breaks conventions. McDowell compares *American Psycho* to other “obscene” literary novels such as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, and *Ulysses*, by James Joyce. Rawlinson argues that *American Psycho* is not “pornography,” but “a serious novel,” and argues the “horrifying scenes,” must be read in “context,” (Rawlinson is the first commentator to make the context defence).

On the other hand, the realism defence argues that if *American Psycho* is misogynistic and anti-women, that is because it mirrors life. Weldon claims, “The feminists—that’s me too—see Ellis’s book as anti-women. So it is. So’s the world, increasingly.” The novel mirrors our twisted, sado-masochistic society perfectly; it is “a novel devoted almost entirely to the obsessive consolations offered by a society, itself in the grip of a psychotic fit of sado-masochism.” While some scholars interpret Weldon’s review as a defence of the novel because of the way it appears to compliment Ellis’s writing, “he gets us to a tee,” it is argued here that Weldon’s review is really a critique because the “us” he “gets” is a corrupt, sado-

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139 Lehman-Haupt, “Whither Death,” C18
141 Rawlinson, review, 147.
142 Weldon, “Squeamish,” C01.
143 Weldon, C01.
A masochistic culture that hates women. Weldon concludes by advising the reader not to buy the book. Quindlen argues, “novels in which men and women treat one another with affection and respect,” do not “reflect the world.” Quindlen also anticipates Serpell’s conclusion by arguing in favour of a confrontation with violence, claiming novels like American Psycho are necessary:

The eternal question about violence in art is whether it simply reflects our worst behaviour, or inspires it. We are so terrified of inspiration that sometimes we are moved to suppression. But reflection is essential because it often leads to thought, and occasionally to understanding.

Another defence is the satire defence, first voiced by Ellis in his interview with Cohen, which claims American Psycho is a satire of 1980s materialism and superficiality that suggests our society is “de-sensitised” to “violence.” Unlike the satire defence, the author defence argues readers confuse the author with his protagonist: it states the novel is not autobiography but fiction. For example, Cohen notes: “the possible confusion between author and fiction here has been so extreme.” Bean is the first to make the fantasy defence, speculating the murders may be just fantasies, “Or is it possible that the murders themselves never occurred?” This will become a key defence for scholars.

Young’s book chapter on American Psycho is the first scholarly defence and, while she does not support the mass media feminist critique, (that is, she does not see the scenes of

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144 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 89-90; Murphet, Reader’s Guide, 70-1. Unlike Baelo-Allué who interprets Weldon’s review as a defence and as “social criticism,” Murphet claims Weldon’s defence is “insultingly illiterate” and notes the significance of her conclusion, ignored by Baelo-Allué, which is to advise the reader not to buy the book.
146 Quindlen, “Private & Public,” A17.
147 Quindlen, A17.
149 Cohen, C18.
sexualised misogynistic violence as problematic), as one of the most influential Ellis defenders it is worth noting a few points here. Expanding on early partial defences of the novel, Young argues for an aesthetic re-trial.

In contrast to the argument here, Young claims the scandal was not caused by the novel’s depiction of “extreme sexual violence,” but by the juxtaposition of this with Ellis’s image as a “‘serious’ novelist.”

Significantly, when Young first mentions the violence in the novel, she refers to it as “gore,” and makes no mention of its sexualisation when inflicted upon women (the sexualisation of the misogynistic violence is only mentioned once, seven pages into her study). Thus, Young’s article minimises the sexualisation of the violence.

Further, Young’s description of the *American Psycho* scandal lacks neutrality, depicting the mass media feminist critique as both unfounded, and as an over-reaction. For example, Young describes it as a “furious psychodrama” which makes it sound both subjective and trivial at once.

Significantly, Young’s claim that the offensive misogynistic scenes may just be fantasies transforms the issue of sexualised misogyny into “something of a chimera.” For Young, it is just another part of the novel’s postmodernity; Bateman is not a realist but a postmodern character. “Much of the frustration felt by critics as they tried to grapple with the book’s apparent context stemmed from a vague sense of Patrick’s insubstantiality as a ‘character.’” Young links Bateman’s postmodern characterisation to Ellis’s use of the unreliable narrator, a device which increases Bateman’s lack of “credibility.”

151 Young, “Beast,” 92.
152 Young, 85; 92.
153 Young, 86.
154 Young, 89.
155 Young, 118.
156 Young, 115.
While the postmodern defence will be discussed further in Chapter 4, suffice to say here that Young uses the postmodern aesthetics of the novel to dismiss the mass media feminist critique of the novel’s sexualised misogyny. This chapter argues that the dismissal of the mass media feminist critique weakens Young’s argument considerably: even as fantasies, the sexualised misogynistic sequences must still be read, and hence may still condition the reader. Curiously, while Young also makes the former point, she fails to make the latter.

Further, while Young argues it is the unreliable narrator that makes American Psycho such compelling reading, this chapter counters that the novel is compelling because of the way it combines unreliable narration with the sexually misogynistic content. Stimulated by outrage and confused by Bateman’s unreliability, the reader wonders continuously, did Bateman commit these horrific acts or not, and what is the author trying to say about sexualised violence towards women? Without the extreme misogynistic content, Bateman’s unreliability would not be as interesting: the content raises the stakes significantly.

While Young notes the different framing of the sexualised violence in Zero and American Psycho, and claims disapproval is not signalled in American Psycho, this thesis counters that there are hints of a moral perspective in American Psycho (though the hints are too subtle for the extremities of the text). For example,

A Richard Marx CD plays on the stereo, a bag from Zabar’s loaded with sourdough onion bagels and spices sits on the kitchen table while I grind bone and fat and flesh into patties, and though it does sporadically penetrate how unacceptable some of what I’m doing actually is, I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is

157 Young, 113.  
158 Young, 94.
nothing, is shit, and along with a Xanax (which I am now taking half-hourly) this thought momentarily calms me.\textsuperscript{159}

Thus, Bateman’s “how unacceptable” suggests at some level he knows what he is doing is wrong (as does his apology to the corpse of a Chinese delivery boy \textit{whom} he has just murdered).\textsuperscript{160} Again, this thesis challenges many scholars who argue that \textit{American Psycho} entirely lacks signalling of Bateman’s disapproval: there are hints, but they are too ambiguous.

Young argues that Ellis depicted sexualise misogynistic violence as a deliberate strategy, and that condemnation of Bateman’s behaviour is implied by the author (the reader must both assume this authorial condemnation, and also supply appropriate moral indignation for Bateman’s acts).\textsuperscript{161} While this aspect of Young’s defence will be discussed in Chapter 3, suffice to say here that Young supports her claim by contrasting the novel with \textit{Zero} in which Ellis’s narrator does signal his moral disapproval of misogynistic events. For Young, the reader of \textit{American Psycho} must make assumptions based on confusing and subtle clues.\textsuperscript{162} Thus the competence of the reader is central to her defence.

According to Young, the problem with \textit{American Psycho} is that pinpointing exactly where the authorial condemnation of the violent misogyny begins is difficult, if not impossible: “[Ellis] might, for example, mistrust women but presumably wasn’t in favour of popping out people’s eyeballs?”\textsuperscript{163} The reader, it will be argued in Chapter 5, in the absence of clear signalling by the author, must resort to the author’s stated intentions in interviews.

\textsuperscript{159} Ellis, \textit{American Psycho}, 345. [My italics.]
\textsuperscript{160} Ellis, 181.
\textsuperscript{161} Young, “Beast,” 100.
\textsuperscript{162} Young, 99-100. [My italics.]
\textsuperscript{163} Young, 100.
and autobiographical information about the author’s life in order to decode the text and solve the mystery of the misogynistic violence.

Young’s defence of *American Psycho* is nevertheless problematic because it depends on Ellis’s intentions, standards and feelings. These are nebulous entities at best and far too subtle as clues. Given that Young is a key defender, and that her defence depends on Ellis’s expressed intentions regarding the misogynistic scenes, the significance of Ellis’s admission of lying in interviews cannot be underestimated in terms of its effects on scholarly defences like Young’s as it is impossible to surmise Ellis’s authorial intentions from interviews.

While Young does note the “technical sophistication,” and critiques the novel as too difficult for careless readers, she neglects to note that the competence necessary to decode the fictive ambiguity goes beyond what is usually expected of mainstream readers. Nor does Young address the important issue of the way the novel was marketed. This study will challenge Young’s thinking again: the fact that so many commentators missed Ellis’s linguistic clues suggests that very few readers will have noticed them either.

Again, Young does concede that the requirements of *American Psycho* invert what the mainstream reader normally encounters when reading a novel, a moral universe that coincides with textual closure. Young adds, citing Roland Barthes, that the reader must engage in the “play” of the text because *American Psycho* is a “writerly” text. This thesis will argue that more authorial signalling is needed for the text to work for the mainstream reader who may be unfamiliar with Barthes’s work and who may only experience the writerly play at an unconscious level.

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164 Young, 109.
165 Young, 100, 119-20.
Most problematic is Young’s excessive tolerance of the novel’s misogyny. Her defence of the scene wherein Bateman tortures a prostitute by inserting a live rat inside her vagina consists of arguing that Bateman’s version of events cannot be believed. Because the writing is so stylistically blank it is unbelievable.

Young also fails to appreciate fully the female characters. When Torri and Tiffany are tortured and murdered, this is equal in Young’s thinking to the murders of Al and the homosexual man. On the contrary, the sexualised violence is far more gruesome than anything done to any of the male characters in the novel. Young also fails to draw out the subtlety of Jean’s character other than to argue she indicates another aspect of Bateman’s fragmented personality. Worst of all, the sexualised misogynistic violence merely performs a formal function in Young’s analysis: the scenes provoke the reader into questioning the “fictionality” of the text (something this thesis argues mainstream readers may not consciously know how to do).

In sum, Young’s aesthetic defence argues that the main reason the novel was critiqued was because Bateman was misinterpreted through a realist filter: he is not a fictional character, in no sense does Bateman “exist.” While Young has a valid point, her position is a reaction to the sensationalism and the mass media feminist critique: too eager to exonerate Ellis and American Psycho, Young dismisses the feminist critique altogether. The solution is not to exonerate American Psycho or Ellis on the basis of the novel having some aesthetic value. To claim American Psycho is not without aesthetic value does not automatically make it a great novel, a successful “sophisticated high postmodern text,” nor does it neutralise its

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166 Young, 111, 113-4.
167 Mandel, “Right Here,” 15-8. For example, in Mandel’s theory Jean is a masochist who undermines Bateman’s sadism.
169 Young, 118.
misogyny. While some of the solutions to the critiques of Ellis’s depiction of sexual violence against women, as suggested by the NOW feminists, were extreme, and the close connection between the NOW feminists with the Meese commission was undesirable because of its links with the religious fundamentalist Right, that is not to say the solution is to immunise the novel from feminist criticism altogether.

Most scholarly feminists equated the mass media feminist critique with the NOW boycott and dismissed it as a result. Yet even in NOW’s most extreme posturing there is evidence of legitimate cause for complaint. Ellis and the publishing industry in general are complicit in a system whereby autobiographical readings of novels are promoted in order to increase sales. However when NOW read American Psycho as literal autobiography and responded as if Ellis was Bateman, then scholars like Young conclude that NOW is at fault and Ellis and the publishing industry are innocent. This thesis does not condone NOW’s solution, that is, to threaten a misogynistic author with physical and sexual abuse which resembles his misogynistic representations, but it does agree with NOW’s complaint that Ellis’s novel is extreme. On the contrary, this thesis argues the novel should not have been published by a mainstream publisher unless either the four problematic and over-whelming scenes had been removed from the manuscript, or the marketing strategy had been intensely revised. As noted above, this is precisely what Ellis’s own editor and publisher suggested. Ellis’s Brat Pack celebrity presumably gave him the right to veto their suggestions and to STET the changes.

Young’s postmodern aesthetic defence was repeated by numerous later scholars and theorists. Freccero is of interest here because she is a self-proclaimed feminist who nevertheless defends the novel on aesthetic grounds and argues that NOW misread the

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170 Young, 121.
novel’s postmodernity. “Not only do these critics explicitly reject the MTV-style postmodernist aesthetics of surface adopted by Generation X (for which Ellis has been dubbed a spokesperson),” they also fail to note the deliberate “absence of a formal or stylistic surface/depth model.” Freccero’s argument suffers from similar failings to Young’s: the total exoneration of Ellis’s novel and dismissal of the feminist critique because the novel has some aesthetic value. On the contrary, it is argued here that no scholarly aesthetic defence of the novel can call itself balanced or fair unless it also takes the novel’s extreme misogyny and the mass media critique of this into account. While this thesis does present a balanced study in Serpells’s sense, it analyses both the mass media feminist critique as well as the scholarly defences, it nevertheless concludes that the four problematic scenes are so extreme that their inclusion in the novel completely dominates and ruins the text. The inclusion of these scenes tips the balance in favour of the feminist critique. Ultimately Ellis’s editors posed the best solution when they suggested he cut the scenes.

Many of Young’s points are echoed by later scholarly defenders, such as Baelo-Allué, who argues that the novel is written in “blank” “uncommitted prose” and that its style contributed to the scandal. Baelo-Allué adds that Ellis’s image as an over-hyped “Brat Pack” author contributed to critiques such as Kennedy’s: Ellis’s “Brat Pack” status indicates he is a fabricated author, not genuine, who writes bad novels.

5. The Recency Effect

There is considerable support for Wolf’s critique in the text itself. The pornographic scenes blur into, and overlap with, the misogynistic violent scenes. Wolf’s conditioning

171 Freccero, “Historical Violence,” 51.
172 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 35, 81.
critique is the only one that draws attention to this important aspect of the novel: unlike other serial killer novels *American Psycho* fuses pornographic scenarios with violent sexual misogyny. The following close reading will employ Rimmoth-Kenan’s concept of recency to demonstrate the fusion of pornographic and horror conventions, and the different way male and female characters are subjected to violence.

As Wolf has argued, it is the fusion of the pornographic with the misogynistically violent, and the speed with which *American Psycho* moves between the two, conditions the reader. By employing Rimmon-Kenan’s concepts of primacy, recency and delay it becomes possible to rethink the sexually violent scenes and to argue that their significance lies in the way they rewrite what immediately preceded them for the reader.

Primacy and recency are ways texts encode the reader’s response. The primacy effect theorises the way a text controls a reader’s response by inserting certain scenes before others: “information and attitudes presented at an early stage of the text tend to encourage the reader to interpret everything in their light. The reader is prone to preserve such meanings and attitudes for as long as possible.”\(^{174}\) For example, the reader’s first impressions of Bateman indicate he is a racist (Bateman’s silence during Price’s tirade about black homeless people on pages 4-5 indicates complicity), a womaniser (Bateman’s only comment during Price’s litany of diseases he believes a man can catch from unprotected sex with a women is “I don’t think dyslexia is a virus,” which similarly indicates complicity), and a man obsessed with superficialities (note Bateman’s excessive attention to the details of Price’s attire).\(^{175}\) When we later discover that he is also a serial killer, these first impressions can linger on in the mind of the reader “long after.”

\(^{175}\) Ellis, *American Psycho*, 5.
However, the primacy effect is countered and modified by the recency effect, which induces “the reader to modify or replace original conjectures,” and “encourages the reader to assimilate all previous information to the item presented last.” For example, when Bateman attacks Al, the black homeless man on page 131 (which is almost halfway through the novel), the reader rewrites Bateman’s character as a violent sadistic racist; everything about him now is reinterpreted in terms of his attack on Al. Again, after Bateman’s first act of sexualised violent misogyny, the recency effect rewrites his character as a misogynist serial killer.

But the recency effect also operates within scenes, at the micro level where it similarly rewrites the preceding events. Thus, the recency effect is also evident within chapters and events, from one scene to another, or at a microscopic level within the one scene. For example, during the scene where Bateman takes two female prostitutes named Torri and Tiffany home, the scene begins in a pornographic mode (on the top of 303), and then suddenly and abruptly switches within a sentence into hideous sexualised misogynistic violence (on the bottom quarter of 303) which combines pornography with horror:

Sex happens—a hard-core montage. After I shave Torri’s pussy she lies on her back on Paul’s futon and spreads her legs while I finger her and suck it off, sometimes licking her asshole. Then Tiffany sucks my cock—her tongue is hot and wet and she keeps flicking it over the head, irritating me—while I call her a nasty whore, a bitch. 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. Sometimes it’s very quiet in the room except for the wet sounds my cock makes slipping in and out of one of the girls’ vaginas. Tiffany and I take turns eating Torri’s hairless

176 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 120.
cunt and asshole. The two of them come, yelling simultaneously, in a sixty-nine position. Once their cunts are wet enough I bring out a dildo and let the two of them play with it. Torri spreads her legs and fingers her own clit while Tiffany fucks her with the huge, greased dildo, Torri urging Tiffany to fuck her cunt harder with it, until finally, gasping, she comes.

Again I make the two of them eat each other out but it starts failing to turn me on—all I can think about is blood and what their blood will look like and though Torri knows what to do, how to eat pussy, it doesn't subdue me and I push her away from Tiffany's cunt and start licking and biting at the pink, soft, wet cuntliness while Torri spreads her ass and sits on Tiffany's face while fingerling her own clit. Tiffany hungrily tongues her pussy, wet and glistening, and Torri reaches down and squeezes Tiffany's big, firm tits. I'm biting hard, gnawing at Tiffany's cunt, and she starts tensing up. 'Relax,' I say soothingly. She starts squealing, trying to pull away, and finally she screams as my teeth rip into her flesh. Torri thinks Tiffany is coming and grinds her own cunt harder onto Tiffany's mouth, smothering her screams, but when I look up at Torri, blood covering my face, meat and pubic hair hanging from my mouth, blood pumping from Tiffany's torn cunt onto the comforter, I can feel her sudden rush of horror. I use Mace to blind both of them momentarily and then I knock them unconscious with the butt of the nail gun.

Torri awakens to find herself tied up, bent over the side of the bed, on her back, her face covered with blood because I've cut her lips off with a pair of nail scissors. Tiffany is tied up with six pairs of Paul's suspenders on the other side of the bed, moaning with fear, totally immobilised by the monster of reality. I want
her to watch what I'm going to do to Torri and she’s propped up in a way that makes this unavoidable. As usual, in an attempt to understand these girls, I’m filming their deaths. With Torri and Tiffany I use a Minox LX ultra-miniature camera that takes 9-5 mm film, has a 15mmf/3.5 lens, an exposure meter and a built-in neutral density filter and sits on a tripod. I've put a CD of the Travelling Wilburys into a portable CD player that fits on the headboard above the bed, to mute any screams.

I start by skinning Torri a little, making incisions with a steak knife and ripping bits of flesh from her legs and stomach while she screams in vain, begging for mercy in a high thin voice, and I'm hoping that she realises her punishment will end up being relatively light compared to what I've planned for the other one. I keep spraying Torri with Mace and then I try to cut off her fingers with nail scissors and finally I pour acid onto her belly and genitals, but none of this comes close to killing her, so I resort to stabbing her in the throat and eventually the blade of the knife breaks off in what’s left of her neck, stuck on bone, and I stop. While Tiffany watches, finally I saw the entire head off—torrents of blood splash against the walls, even the ceiling—and holding the head up, like a prize, I take my cock, purple with stiffness, and lowering Torri’s head to my lap I push it into her bloodied mouth and start fucking it, until I come, exploding into it.\textsuperscript{178}

The scene is deeply shocking and, to this reader, difficult to read without skimming. One can only speculate that this tendency to minimise the horror, to skip over it, may explain why scholars tend to overlook the novel’s misogyny in their analyses.

\textsuperscript{178} Ellis, 303-4.
Resisting the urge to skim, the precise transformation from pornography to horror takes place in the sentence, “She starts squealing, trying to pull away, and finally she screams as my teeth rip into her flesh,” (although this is slightly foreshadowed with “but it starts failing to turn me on—all I can think about is blood and what their blood will look like.”)

Significantly, the recency effect ensures the horrific sexualised misogynistic violence assimilates and rewrites the pornography: at the end of this passage pornographic sex is reread as, and fused with, violent sexualised misogyny. The reader reassesses the pornography in relation to the sexualised misogynistic violence, and the feelings of disgust and horror become assimilated into arousal. According to the recency effect, the horror becomes inseparable from the arousal.

It is worth also referring to Bateman’s torture of Tiffany in this scene:

Later—now—I’m telling Tiffany, ‘I’ll let you go, shh...,’ and I’m stroking her face, which is slick, owing to tears and Mace, gently, and it burns me that she actually looks up hopefully for a moment before she sees the lit match I’m holding in my hand that I’ve torn from a matchbook I picked up in the bar at Palio’s where I was having drinks with Robert Farrell and Robert Prechter last Friday, and I lower it to her eyes, which she instinctively closes, singeing both eyelashes and brows, then I finally use a Bic lighter and hold it up to both sockets, making sure they stay open with my fingers, burning my thumb and pinkie in the process, until the eyeballs burst. While she’s still conscious I roll her over, and spreading her ass cheeks, I nail a dildo that I’ve tied to a board deep into her rectum, using the nail gun. Then, turning her over, again, her body weak with fear, I cut all the flesh off around her mouth and using the power drill with a detachable, massive head I widen that hole while she shakes, protesting, and once I’m satisfied with the size of the hole I’ve created, her mouth open as wide as
possible, a reddish-black tunnel of twisted tongue and loosened teeth, I force my hand down, deep into her throat, until it disappears up to my wrist—all the while her head shakes uncontrollably, but she can’t bite down since the power drill ripped her teeth out of her gums—and grab at the veins lodged there like tubes and I loosen them with my fingers and when I’ve gotten a good grip on them violently yank them out through her open mouth, pulling until the neck caves in, disappears, the skin tightens and splits though there’s little blood. Most of the neck’s innards, including the jugular, hang out of her mouth and her whole body starts twitching, like a roach on its back, shaking spasmodically, her melted eyes running down her face mixing with the tears and Mace, and then quickly, not wanting to waste time, I turn off the lights and in the dark before she dies I rip open her stomach with my bare hands. I can’t tell what I’m doing with them but it’s making wet slapping sounds and my hands are hot and covered with something.  

This effect (wherein pornography is assimilated into and fused with misogynistic violence) recurs a number of times in American Psycho. While the above example is not the first in the novel, it is the clearest example of the fusion of pornography and horror and therefore the most relevant.

The first act of sexualised misogynistic violence occurs on page 167 in the Christie and Sabrina scene and is an example of the recency effect on both macro and micro levels. On the macro level, Bateman’s attack follows a failed date with his lover Courtney, who, he complains, is “ditzed out,” too high on prescription drugs to be capable of conversation. Even more frustrated with Courtney after she asserts herself by insisting he wear a condom during sex, Bateman leaves her, after raging at her, and hires two female prostitutes for a

179 Ellis, 305.
180 Ellis, 166.
threesome. The recency effect is evident between one scene and the next, in the way the violent pornographic misogyny with Christie and Sabrina becomes assimilated with his frustrating date with Courtney. On the macro level, according to the recency effect, frustration with assertive women becomes fused with pornographic violent misogyny. On the micro level within the scene, the violent misogyny redefines the pornographic heterosexual sex: a pornographic threesome with Christie and Sabrina suddenly transforms into violent misogyny. Pornography and misogynistic horror become fused in the reader’s mind.

At the beginning of the scene the writing is reminiscent of *Playboy*.\(^\text{181}\) It is clearly pornographic, and is similar to the example, included above, on pages 303-4:

I pull my cock out of Christie’s ass and force Sabrina to suck on it before I push it back into Christie’s spread cunt and after a couple of minutes of fucking it I start coming and at the same time Sabrina lifts her mouth off my balls and just before I explode into Christie’s cunt, she spreads my ass cheeks open and forces her tongue up into my asshole which spasms around it and because of this my orgasm prolongs itself and then Sabrina removes her tongue and starts moaning that she’s coming too because after Christie finishes coming she resumes eating Sabrina’s cunt and I watch, hunched over Christie, panting, as Sabrina lifts her hips repeatedly into Christie’s face and then I have to lie back, spent but still hard, my cock, glistening, still aching from the force of my ejaculation, and I close my eyes, my knees weak and shaking.\(^\text{182}\)

The pornography, however, suddenly erupts into violence. Unlike the Torri and Tiffany scene, this first instance of the assimilation of the erotic into the misogynistically


violent is not depicted as it happens. Instead, there is a sudden temporal ellipsis, an impossible leap forward in time from the first person present tense into the future/past:

An hour later I will impatiently lead them to the door, both of them dressed and sobbing, bleeding but well paid. Tomorrow Sabrina will have a limp. Christie will probably have a terrible eye and deep scratches across her buttocks caused by the coat hanger.\textsuperscript{183}

Here Ellis employs delay: “Linearity can also be exploited to arouse suspense or deliberately mislead the reader by delaying various bits of information… this too may cause him to construct meanings which will have to be revised at a later stage.”\textsuperscript{184} By skipping over the violence Bateman does to Sabrina and Christie, Ellis increases suspense and subsequently emphasises the importance of the scene. By not showing the reader directly what happens between Sabrina and Christie, the reader is forced to hypothesise what happened. Then, during later scenes, the reader actually sees what Bateman does to Torri and Tiffany and is able to re-construct what probably happened to Sabrina and Christie. Thus the first misogynistically violent scene uses recency as well as delay, and involves the reader in hypothesising and revision.

There are other temporal ellipses in later sexually violent scenes. There is an ellipsis in the Elizabeth and Christie scene:

I laugh when she dies, before she does she starts crying, then her eyes roll back in some kind of horrible dream state.

\textsuperscript{183} Ellis, 176. 
\textsuperscript{184} Rimmon-Kenan, \textit{Narrative Fiction}, 121.
In the morning, for some reason, Christie’s battered hands are swollen to the size of footballs.\footnote{Ellis, \textit{American Psycho}, 290.}

There is also an ellipsis in the Torri/Tiffany scene, from the moment of the pornographic threesome on page 303, to the moment when Torri wakes up on page 304. There is another ellipsis in the scene with the anonymous girl:

I feel little gratification when I Mace her, less when I knock her head against the wall four or five times, until she loses consciousness, leaving a small stain, hair stuck to it. After she drops to the floor I head for the bathroom and cut another line of the mediocre coke I scored at Nell’s or Au Bar the other night. I can hear a phone ringing, an answering machine picking up the call. I’m bent low, over a mirror, ignoring the message, not even bothering to screen it.

Later, predictably, she’s tied to the floor, naked, on her back, both feet, both hands, tied to makeshift posts that are connected to boards which are weighted down with metal.\footnote{Ellis, 327.}

These strategies keep variation within the repetition of the sexualised violence and ensure that the horror always comes as a shock. Again, Ellis’s attention to detail in variation emphasises the importance of the sexualised violent scenes in the novel.

While the next potentially sexually violent scene with Daisy is one wherein Bateman allows the victim to escape before he attempts to kill her (a form of delay used to control and direct the reader), the example that follows on from this with Bethany, Bateman’s ex-girlfriend from Harvard, is extremely violent and misogynistic and it is the first time we see

\textit{American Psycho, 290.}
Bateman’s sexual violence towards women in any detail. Bateman takes Bethany out to lunch and then lures her back to his flat where he tortures and kills her in one of the novel’s most gruesome scenes. In Bethany’s case, the segue into violence is not preceded by pornography, but is preceded by Bateman’s absolute fury when Bethany asserts herself as an intelligent, unavailable, independent woman. While Bethany asserts herself socially—she one ups him with her revelation that she is Robert Hall, the owner of Dorsia’s girlfriend, and while Bateman desperately wants to get into Dorsia, he lacks the appropriate social connections—and by ending their relationship, Bateman can only socially dominate and snub prostitutes like Christy and Sabrina.

On the macro level, Bateman’s lunch with Bethany is directly preceded by Bateman’s dinner with his younger brother Sean. This time Bateman’s rage towards Bethany is preceded by his jealousy of his brother, who is able to get a table at Dorsia, a fashionable but very exclusive restaurant, one at which Bateman is unable to secure a reservation, and who appears to be comfortable with his sexuality, unlike Bateman. (In Rules, Sean is too immature to be capable of a meaningful relationship and is violent towards women).

Sean calls at five from the Racquet Club and tells me to meet him at Dorsia tonight. He just called to Brin, the owner, and reserved a table at nine. My mind is a mess. I don’t know what to think or how to feel... Sean is half an hour late. The maître d’ refuses to seat me until my brother arrives. My worst fear—a reality.

After dinner with Sean, Bateman meets Bethany for lunch. Bethany represents what Bateman cannot have, a normal, loving relationship with a woman who is his social equal. Not only is Bethany beautiful, she looks “just like a model,” she is educated, intelligent and

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187 Ellis, 212-4; Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction, 121; Ellis, 230-47.
188 Ellis, 211, 170-3.
189 Ellis, 225-6.
observably kind and loving, and meeting her inspires “feverish, romantic notions” in Bateman.190

The violence is directly preceded by Bateman’s mistaken assumption that Bethany is flirting with him: “She has made a promise by asking me to lunch and I panic, once the squid is served, certain that I will never recover unless it’s fulfilled.”191 Bateman is wrong. Bethany is not flirting with him. In fact, Bethany is dating Robert Hall, the chef at Dorsia. Bateman lashes out verbally and accuses Robert of being “a fag,” who tried to give me “a blow job once.”192 Bethany almost leaves and Bateman apologises, but underneath his hatred of women (and homophobia) his misogynistic violence has been triggered. Bateman cannot be intimate with women without feeling violent rage.193

The final insult comes when Bethany pays for lunch with a Platinum Amex card. At which point, Bateman makes his sarcastic remark about the women’s movement, which contradicts his remarks in the opening chapter of the novel. On the one hand, the Women’s Movement is a pathetic organization, on the other hand, women’s issues are something Bateman parrots as an important social issue. Either way, Bateman’s rage against women remains constant.

Bateman manages to persuade Bethany to come back to his apartment against her better judgement, where she informs him he has hung his David Onica painting upside down. Because Bethany is immune to his seductions, Bateman must take her by force and, in just five lines, Bethany is knocked out cold. What follows is the predictable violence, nailguns, Mace and verbal abuse. Bateman screams, “‘You bitch,’” and “‘You fucking cunt,’” and

190 Ellis, 231.
191 Ellis, 237
192 Ellis, 240.
193 Ellis, 241
makes repeated accusations about Robert Hall. Then on page 246 Bateman cuts out Bethany’s tongue with scissors, and orally rapes her until he orgasms: “Then I fuck her in the mouth, and after I’ve ejaculated and pulled out, I Mace her some more.” The recency effect suggests Bateman’s hatred for an assertive, attractive, unavailable woman is fused with extreme misogynistic sexual violence.

Another example is when Bateman’s last desperate attempt at his pretend relationship with Evelyn, a disastrous trip to the Hamptons, erupts upon his return to Manhattan into a murderous pornographic threesome with acquaintance Elizabeth and prostitute Christy. Again, the pornographic sex suddenly shifts into violence (though the precise outset of the violence does not actually appear in the text). Thus, from the second paragraph on page 289, to the final paragraph, there is no transition between the pornography and violence in which both women are tortured then die. In fact, there is another ellipsis (noted above):

During this I lick Christie’s tits and suck hard on each nipple until both of them are red and stiff. I keep fingering them to make sure they stay that way. During this Christie has kept on a pair of thigh-high suede boots from Henri Bendel that I’ve made her wear.

Elizabeth, naked, running from the bedroom, blood already on her, is moving with difficulty and she screams out something garbled.

The recency effect here again suggests that, on the macro level, a committed relationship with a woman (Evelyn) is fused with violent sexual torture and murder (of Christie and Elizabeth). And on a micro level, pornographic sex becomes fused with the violent torture and murder of women.

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194 Ellis, 245.
195 Ellis, 246.
Significantly, the horrific Torri and Tiffany scene is preceded by Bateman killing a child at the zoo, which in turn is preceded by the third Luis scene, in which Bateman again fails to kill Luis, who begs Bateman for a relationship.\footnote{Ellis, 298-9, 292-6.} (There will be further discussion of the Luis scenes in Chapter 5.)

Finally, further confrontation and manipulation from Evelyn—Evelyn confronts Bateman with his lies about their plans for the evening, and then screams/rages at him and threatens to ruin Bateman’s plans to seduce Jeanette, his real date for the evening, when he pathetically fails to deny her accusations—precedes another pornographic scene that suddenly segues into sexually misogynistic violence with an anonymous “girl.”\footnote{Ellis, 326.} This time the transition from pornography to horror is very swift:

Excited, I slap her, then lightly punch her in the mouth, then kiss it, biting her lips.

Fear, dread, confusion overwhelm her. The strap breaks and the dildo slides out of her ass while she tries to push me off. I roll away and pretend to let her escape and then, while she’s gathering her clothes, muttering about what a ‘crazy fucking bastard’ I am, I leap out at her, jackal-like, literally foaming at the mouth.\footnote{Ellis, 327.}

\textbf{Mere pages after this comes} Bateman’s final date with Evelyn, during which he gives her a deodorising men’s urinal soap disguised as a Godiva chocolate before ending the relationship, and which is immediately followed by another violent misogynistic scene.\footnote{Ellis, 330-343.} This time the reader does not see the pornography, but is confronted by the aftermath as Bateman “Tries to Cook and Eat Girl” while crying, “‘I just want to be loved.’”\footnote{Ellis, 344-5.}
From these examples it is clear that Ellis repeatedly positions the pornographic contingent with and prior to the horrific and misogynistically violent, and that both are repeatedly positioned to follow scenes depicting Bateman’s passivity and rage around assertive women. According to the recency effect, the horrific sexual violence rewrites: the pornographic sex, Bateman’s frustration with feminist women, and Bateman’s inability to have relationships with women. As noted above, the recency effect induces readers to “assimilate” all previous information to the “item presented last,” conditioning readers to associate the erotic with the misogynistically violent, and assertive women and relationships with women with sexualised misogynistic violence. What makes these scenes even more disturbing is that given that the novel resists closure, the scenes are not morally or aesthetically contextualised. Instead, their moral context remains deeply ambiguous.

Indeed, extending this analysis further so that it includes two of the parodies of music criticism which follow on from some of the most violent and sexualised scenes, this thesis argues that the humour of the record reviews also becomes assimilated with the gruesome misogynistic violence as a result of the recency effect. Thus, the Bethany scene, directly followed by a failed date with Courtney wherein Bateman realises he has lost Courtney to McDermott, is followed by the Whitney Houston review on page 252. The Huey Lewis review on page 352 follows the scene wherein Bateman becomes a mass murder, which itself follows the scene wherein he attempts to cook and eat a girl. This suggests that for Ellis, scenes of horrific sexualised violent misogyny are inseparable from clever, postmodernist humour and parody.

My analysis of the sexually violent scenes runs counter to that of most scholarly critics who, when they do analyse the murder and torture scenes, tend to look for evidence of seriality, an essential convention in serial killer fiction in the killings. For example, in
Silence of the Lambs, Clarice searches for common elements that link all the female victims (for example, the moth pupa placed in the victim’s bodies). These common elements link each killing in a series. However, in American Psycho there are no common elements in the victims, and profound differences across gender. While the killing of women often involves pornographic threesomes, macing, and nailguns; and the action which precedes the killings is similar, when Bateman kills men it involves none of these weapons and is not sexual. Most scholars, when they fail to find a “series” in American Psycho, assume there is no cause for the murders and that they are entirely random. This thesis argues that the sexualised murders are motivated, though they fail to conform to a series.201

In Chapter 5 this thesis will examine the non-sexually violent scenes as final proof that the above scenes are more gruesome, violent and hateful than any of the violent scenes involving men. The excessive ambiguity at the novel’s conclusion is its greatest flaw because it leaves the pornographic and horror elements problematically fused and ambiguously double-sided. In the final analysis, the four problematic scenes are simply too extreme and dominate the ambiguous, ambivalent novel.

Of all feminist critics, Wolf’s critique of American Psycho most clearly isolates the central problem with these scenes and with the novel as a whole which concerns the way it fuses pornographic and erotic scenarios with extreme misogynistic violence. While many critics note the excessive violence towards women and some note the misogyny, few precisely identify the sexualisation of the violent misogyny as being at the centre of the novel’s flaws.

While Eberly expands and develops Wolf’s approach and argument—she implicitly follows Wolf’s structure by comparing Ellis and Dworkin in order to champion Dworkin’s

201 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 97.
work over Ellis’s, as well as directly re-stating Wolf’s rhetorical questions, and echoing Wolf
in her lament of the way the important political issues raised by the text were dismissed in
subsequent discussion of Ellis’s work—most scholars dismiss it. For example, while
Kauffman also compares Ellis and Dworkin, she employs the structure of Wolf’s critique in
order to champion Ellis and critique Dworkin. The important political issue of the
representation of sexualised misogynistic violence is completely absent from Kauffman’s
work. Such a dismissal is a mistake and fails to take account of the rhetorical strategies of the
text which serve to emphasise and refuse to resolve the fusion of pornography with
misogynistic violence. At best, with the problematic scenes left in and the marketing strategy
intact, the novel could have served as an opportunity to publicly discuss the daily reality of
many women’s lives as victims of sexual violence and misogyny. Most problematic of all is
the way the novel neither coherently critiques nor condones the sexualised violence. What is
indisputable is that the scenes completely overshadow the rest of the novel.

Challenging most scholarship, this thesis argues that American Psycho is not a book
whose primary concern is with critiquing Yuppies and the capitalism of the 1980s, or with
embodying postmodern aesthetics, but that it is a novel which cynically exploits interest in
sexual violence towards women, as was argued by Yardley, Kimball, Stiles and others. The
novel has been described as “a contemptible piece of pornography, the literary equivalent of a
snuff flick,” which serves no other purpose “save morbidity, titillation and sensation.”
While such critiques are extreme—the novel does have some aesthetic value—defences of
the novel cannot fall back on Ellis’s intentions for verification. Further, Ellis’s novel refuses
to play fair with the reader: “Ellis wants to have it both ways: to join the reader in looking
down his nose at these shallow young habitués of New York’s cafe society while at the same

time exploiting prurient interest in their doings." As noted above, the fact that Ellis failed to continue to depict graphically misogynistic sexualised violence as action in his follow-up to American Psycho, Glamorama, (or in later novels), suggests that, in spite of his defence of the scenes, he has realised that he went too far in American Psycho (though, as noted above, the links he forges between all his novels imply Ellis has not altered his opinions about the representation of sexualised, misogynistic violence). Victor’s explanation for his own unsavoury behaviour (see this Chapter’s title) is uttered to his father. Given the way Ellis collapses his work into his life, these words may be read retrospectively as suggestive of Ellis’s intentions with American Psycho.

The next chapter will note the important influence of the film adaptation on the feminist critique and the curious way the feminist aspects of the film adaptation have been ignored by scholarly work from the second period of literary criticism about American Psycho, which begins in 1999 and continues into the present. Again, scholars are predominantly interested in the aesthetic significance of the film adaptation and not its significance in relation to feminism or its relation to the mass media feminist critique.

203 Yardley, B01.
Watching ‘American Psycho’ is like witnessing a bravura sleight-of-hand feat. In adapting Bret Easton Ellis’s turgid, gory 1991 novel to the screen, the director Mary Harron has boiled a bloated stew of brand names and butchery into a lean and mean horror comedy classic. The transformation is so surprising that when the movie’s over, it feels as if you’ve just seen a magician pull a dancing rabbit out of a top hat.¹

A.M. Holmes writes ‘The End of Alice,’ which is a really horrific, gory book, but because she’s a woman and there’s an obvious feminist underpinning to it, she gets away with it.²

Mary Harron and Guinevere Turner’s film adaptation American Psycho (released April 2000), had a profound effect on the retrospective reception of its adapted text, the novel American Psycho. As often happens with adaptations, the adapted text was transformed—in Ellis’s case, salvaged and redeemed—by the process of adaptation. Less hostile reviews of Glamorama and screenings of Exit were also contributing factors in Ellis’s resurrection (Ellis was deemed celebrity enough to warrant a documentary about his life and work), but the film adaptation marked a clear turning point in his fortunes.³ In particular, Titanic star Leonardo DiCaprio’s interest in playing Bateman, combined with the association forged by scholars between Hollywood celebrity and Ellis’s misogynistic novel, consolidated the process of neutralising the mass media feminist critique, a process which began with Young’s defence.

³ Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 19. Baelo-Allué notes Ellis has been “redeemed.”
This chapter will first examine patterns in reception to Harron’s film by commentators and scholars.

Most reviews of Harron’s film discuss it in relation to the scandal surrounding the publication of the novel. Thus, the mass media feminist critique of the novel is restated in reviews of the film, and in most cases the novel is seen to be inferior to the film. Richard Porton, Dave Kehr, Stephen Holden, Jeff Sipe, Danny Leigh, Brian D. Johnson, Tom Block and Anne P. Dupre all note and critique the misogyny in the novel. Only Jonathan Romney and Christopher Sharrett defend the novel in the process of reviewing the film. Of all commentators from this second period of *American Psycho* literary criticism, the one who most clearly continues Wolf’s critique is Dupre.

Commentators are more divided as to whether the release of the film constituted its own controversy or not, with some reporting the release of the film was controversial in its own right and others arguing the release of the film was devoid of controversy. What most critics do agree about is that the film was a success, with Bradshaw, Holden, Block, Tony Rayns, Johnson, Leigh, and Porton all giving it a positive review. The positive reception of the film makes stark contrast with the predominantly negative reception of the novel.

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In contrast, the mass media feminist critique virtually disappears when scholarship from this second period is examined. The popularity in academia of French theoretical literary criticism and the way this is employed by scholars to neutralise the mass media feminist critique may be a contributing factor, other factors may include the popularity of postfeminism and its rejection of “victim feminism.” Indeed, a number of scholarly works from this second period of American Psycho literary criticism either reverse and critique Wolf and Eberly’s important arguments, as Linda Kauffman’s defence of Ellis’s novel and critique of Dworkin’s does, or ignore them, as Marco Abel does, or disagree with them, as in David Eldridge’s study. Other scholars who do not focus on feminism or the Wolf critique include Anthony King, James R. Giles, Tony Williams, Alex E. Blazer, and Scott Wilson. Mandel and Baelo-Allué continue this trend with neither focusing on the mass media feminist critique (Baelo-Allué claims the problem with the novel to be one of violence, not sexualised violence).

It is worth mentioning that while recent scholarship does follow commentators in some ways, for example, scholars argue in favour of the “redemption” of the novel as a result of the film adaptation, with the exception of Laura Findlay and Vartan P. Messier, there is an absence of scholarly writing which discusses the film in relation to Wolf’s feminist critique of sexualised misogyny. Other scholars who more generally discuss the novel in relation to the mass media feminist critique include Heyler, Sahli and Serpell.

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8 Kauffman, Bad Girls; Abel, “Judgement”; Eldridge, “Generic.”
10 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 85.
11 Heyler, “Parodied”; Sahli, “’I Simply’”; and Serpell, “Repetition.”
Two of the strongest implicit supporters of Wolf’s critique are the film-makers themselves: director Mary Harron, and script-writer Guinevere Turner. Both are self-proclaimed feminists who not only feel Ellis went too far in the novel with his depiction of eroticised misogynistic violence, but who also, in a move that uncannily echoes the recommendations of Ellis’s editor and publisher and which mimics the adjustments to the depiction of sexualised violence towards women by Ellis in Glamorama, change the way the story is told in their adaptation to give greater power to the female characters and to minimise the representation of misogynistic violence towards women.

Harron and Turner thus make important changes in the process of adapting the film. For example, they remove most of the misogyny from the story in a manner that addresses the issues raised by Wolf and other feminist critics. Scholars for the most part fail to note the importance of the feminist changes made by film-makers Harron and Turner. This chapter identifies a significant gap in recent scholarship and aims to rectify it by suggesting there is a clear relation between the film adaptation and the mass media feminist critique, and by focusing on the feminist reconfiguration of the American Psycho story in Harron and Turner’s film. A brief overview of the production of the film will add depth to the analysis.

From the outset, the glamour of Hollywood movie stars worked to salvage the novel’s damaged reputation during the film adaptation. Thus, Gopalan’s overview begins with the claim: the film prospects “looked bleak—until 1992, when Johnny Depp apparently expressed interest in it [American Psycho].”\textsuperscript{12} Richard Dyer theorises the process whereby stars convert political issues into personal issues as follows: they depoliticise by “individualising,” they make “the social personal”; in this case Depp’s star power (and later

DiCaprio’s) redeem *American Psycho*. Stars transformed the issues connected with the novel, for example the feminist critique, into questions about the star’s connection with the project: commentators speculate, is Johnny Depp/Leonardo DiCaprio the right person to play Bateman? Dyer argues that while stars are created to make money, their celebrity is transferable and can be used to sell a variety of commodities. In this case, DiCaprio’s celebrity was used to sell the novel *American Psycho*, and the prospect of its adaptation into film.

While a number of directors were considered in relation to the project, independent film-maker Harron’s script, which was one of three, won her the job in 1996 (a script written by Ellis was rejected). Harron, who debuted as a director with *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996), was known for tackling unusual projects. Thus, *I Shot Andy Warhol* tells the story of Valerie Solanis, the “controversial feminist” who experienced sexism growing up, and later shot Andy Warhol. Harron continued her interest in female identity and sexuality, extreme protagonists, and issues of “female empowerment” after *American Psycho*; thus, *The Notorious Betty Page* (2005) is about the 1950s model with “a strong independent streak” who popularised pornography, and *The Moth Diaries* (2011), explores themes of teenage lesbianism and vampires. Harron’s initial contract as director of *American Psycho*, however, was short-lived.

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DiCaprio’s success with *Titanic* (1997) meant he was much sought after in Hollywood.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, Lions Gate Entertainment sent Harron’s script and 20 million dollars to DiCaprio, who had expressed interest in the project. This chapter argues DiCaprio’s expression of interest is key in salvaging the novel’s reputation: only a star of DiCaprio’s magnitude could have redeemed Ellis’s novel. As Dyer argues, stars have different images at different times in their careers.\(^\text{18}\) DiCaprio’s interest in *American Psycho* occurred when his career was at its height. *Titanic* (1997), which became the highest-grossing film in its day, catapulted DiCaprio into international stardom and transformed him into a teenage heart-throb.\(^\text{19}\) The effect of DiCaprio’s much publicised interest in the film adaptation of *American Psycho* was immense.

In 1998 Lions Gate removed Harron from the project and at Cannes publicly announced DiCaprio would play Bateman. This is perhaps the single most important event in terms of the redemption of the novel, *American Psycho*. Gopalan reports a “huge battle” between Lions Gate and Harron erupted over the direction of *American Psycho* at this time, however Oliver Stone was next engaged as director and he and DiCaprio attempted to rewrite the script together but could not agree, DiCaprio lost interest and made *The Beach* instead.\(^\text{20}\)

At this point, Harron was reinstated as director and re-engaged Bale to play Bateman. However, her budget was capped at $10 million and she was locked into casting “recognizable talent” (Chloe Sevigny, Jared Leto, Reese Witherspoon, and Willem Dafoe among them) in the support roles.\(^\text{21}\) Shooting began in March 1999.

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The timing of DiCaprio’s involvement is significant in terms of scholarly analyses. Kauffman’s chapter on *American Psycho* coincides with DiCaprio’s interest and employs the praise of various Hollywood celebrities in her defence of the novel, a persuasive tactic given Kauffman is a self-proclaimed feminist and theorist. The intellectual credentials are made more powerful by becoming linked with the supremely powerful discourse of celebrity.

In addition, an article by Sipe adds detail to the above emphasising Cronenberg’s interest in directing the film adaptation, and noting that with DiCaprio’s involvement the budget blew out to $40 million (which led some to accuse Lions Gate of betraying its independent image).

Sipe also argues the film was controversial, citing Harron’s appearance on Canadian television to respond to allegations of a possible connection between her film and the Bernardo serial killer arrest as evidence (Bernado was alleged to have a copy of the novel beside his bed). Also during filming, two teenagers attacked a school in Colorado shooting fellow pupils, an event which had serious repercussions on the film and video industries and which is relevant here because of the way the media argued that violent films validated violent behaviour and the subsequent treatment of the film:

A day later Universal announces it is pulling copies of Scott Kalvert’s *Basketball Diaries* (1995) from video stores as it has been the target of criticism for a scene where DiCaprio fantasises bursting into a classroom and gunning down kids and teachers who’ve made his life miserable. Meanwhile Oliver Stone is in court defending *Natural Born Killers* against accusations by parents of the victims of a

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previous school rampage that the film was partially responsible for the actions of the
children’s killers.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Counter to Sipe, this chapter argues that the film adaptation of \textit{American Psycho} was not
transgressive in a way comparable with the novel.}

\textbf{1: Those Who Continue Wolf}

Significantly, after the film’s release, when Ellis’s novel is addressed by
commentators, it is \textit{cited} primarily in the context of the changes the film-makers made to the
story. Indeed, Harron and Turner are the strongest supporters of the mass media feminist
critique in this second period of \textit{literary criticism}, especially the way they see the novel as a
ruined project because of its depiction of sexualised misogyny.

Another strong supporter of Wolf’s critique in this period is \textbf{Dupre}, who primarily
reads \textit{American Psycho} in relation to the mass media feminist \textit{critique}. In spite of numerous
press releases linking various film directors and stars with the adaptation of the novel,
Hollywood celebrity appears to have had no effect on Dupre’s pre-film release opinion
(unlike Kauffman, whose work nicely dovetails with the resurrection of Ellis and his novel as
a result of the proposed film adaptation of \textit{American Psycho}). Thus, Dupre notes the
difference between the murder and torture Bateman perpetrates upon women as opposed to
that which he perpetrates upon \textit{men}: “[Bateman] reserves his most sadistic torture for
women,” and argues the sexual nature of the violence was the main cause of the Simon &
Schuster cancellation.\textsuperscript{25} Dupre also claims the main reason the novel was published by
Vintage was because sexual violence “entertains,” because “titillation both arouses and

\textsuperscript{24} Sipe, 10.
\textsuperscript{25} Dupre, “Violence, Depravity,” 54.
gratifies us,” and suggests that the success of *American Psycho* was ensured by its sexualised misogynistic content. Like Weldon and Rosenblatt, Dupre advises potential viewers not to watch the film. Thus, Dupre restates key aspects of the mass media feminist critique especially the central issue of the sexual violence and torture of women. However, Dupre also suggests the representation of sexual violence leads to sexually violent behaviour and, like Steinem, predicts the novel will inspire violent copy-cat crimes. Dupre’s analysis, published just before the film’s release, suggests Wolf’s critique was still very fresh in the public mind.

Most commentators reiterate aspects of Wolf’s argument in their reviews of the film. For example, Holden claims Harron’s film “salvages a novel widely loathed for its putative misogyny and gruesome torture scenes by removing its excess fat in a kind of cinematic liposuction.” Further, Porton notes the “chasm” between Harron and Ellis’s approach to the representation of sexual violence, and contrasts “Ellis’s graphic, detailed accounts” with the film’s “delicate treatment of the same events.” Porton adds, while Ellis’s scenes are written with “a suspect relish, no one could accuse Harron of a prurient approach to bloodletting.”

Thus, most commentators claim that the film adaptation removes what Harron termed the “torture scenes” from the story line. Block notes that while Ellis’s scenes display “sadistic gusto,” Harron and Turner remove “the tortures and suffering,” and the “misogyny”: “The single onscreen killing of a woman—seen in long shot—is played as a parody.”

Commentators who argue the film adaptation removes the sexualised misogyny also tend to argue the film emphasises the novel’s satirical elements. Thus, Harron (in Sipe), Kehr, Kehr, Kehr, Kehr, Kehr,
Porton, Marin, Rayns, Leigh, Block and Romney all note the film’s satire.\textsuperscript{33} Sipe first notes the furore caused by the eroticised misogyny: “Literary critics and feminist groups savaged the novel, and indeed it’s difficult to imagine anyone reading American Psycho without being repulsed by the gratuitously detailed scenes of sex and violence...” But then, citing the scene with the rat, Sipe quotes Harron arguing American Psycho is also a satire, “‘I thought it was very violent, very disturbing,’ says Harron... ‘But I thought it was a brilliant satire.’”\textsuperscript{34} The violence, Harron suggests, has been toned down for the movie. “‘I avoid the torture scenes,’ says Harron. ‘All that stuff with dead bodies, with rats.’”\textsuperscript{35}

The film’s producer, Edward D. Pressman, is quoted in Kehr’s article: “‘[Harron] was very interested in tackling it and thought she could find a solution to the script... She reduced the pornographic and physically disgusting elements in the book because what she was really interested in was the social satire.’”\textsuperscript{36} Pressman is quoted in Weber as saying, “‘we can make a terrific film that a mainstream audience can enjoy and tolerate, that will not be overly violent or pornographic and that will sustain the wit of the book.’”\textsuperscript{37}

In this way, commentators argue that Harron redeems and salvages the novel by removing the sexually misogynistic violence and increasing the satirical elements: “The director, Mary Harron, who was the co-writer of the screenplay, has deftly distilled the 400-page novel to 101 minutes of satirical dry ice.”\textsuperscript{38} Or, as Rayns argues, Harron and Turner not

\textsuperscript{33} Sipe, “Blood Symbol”; Kehr, “The Path”; Porton, review; Marin, “Sliced”: Rayns, review; Leigh, review; Block, review; and Romney, “Retro Psycho.”
\textsuperscript{34} Sipe, “Blood Symbol,” 8.
\textsuperscript{35} Sipe, 8.
\textsuperscript{36} Kehr, “Movies,” E28.
\textsuperscript{38} Marin, “Sliced. Diced,” ST1.
only remove the textual aspects from the screenplay such as the brand names, but also the “sex, violence and sadism.”

Some commentators make the important distinction that it was the sexualisation of the violence that was the problem, not the violence itself. Kehr argues the difficulties the film had with ratings concerned the way sex was depicted in the film: initially the Motion Picture Association of America wanted to rate American Psycho “a commercially fatal NC-17 rating.” Later the Association “granted the film an R rating after Ms Harron agreed to shorten a few explicit shots of sexual positions in the controversial sequence.” Thus it was the sexual nature of the violence that made it difficult to rate the film.

As a result of the changes—the removal of the sexualised misogynistic scenes and the emphasis on satire—most commentators argue that the film not only salvages the novel but is superior to it. Thus, Holden makes the “magician” remark, in which he claims Harron’s changes resulted in such an improvement, it was as if she had performed a magic trick. Holden implies here that Ellis’s novel was so problematic that to have made a film as good as Harron’s some supernatural or magic force must have been employed.

A few commentators do nevertheless argue that the novel is not a satire, and reject the satire defence. Bradshaw observes:

Fans of the novel routinely claim the stomach-turning violence that once made it so controversial is a brilliant metaphor for the 1980s culture of consumerism and self-

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39 Rayns, review, 42.
40 Kehr, “At the Movies,” E28.
41 Kehr, E28.
gratification. I am agnostic about these claims to moral seriousness, and that violence/materialism link has always looked a bit specious and glib.\textsuperscript{42}

Again, Block \textcolor{red}{argues that} \textit{American Psycho} is “another paste-up indictment of materialism... It’s a block of stale cheese,” and claims that \textit{American Psycho} fails as a satire:

And while Ronald Reagan did as much as anyone to create the shark-eat-shark mentality of the '80s, \textit{American Psycho’s} equation of his doublethink with the craziness inside Bateman’s head is exactly the kind of tar-brush tactic for which Reagan himself was famous.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{Like Fightclub, American Psycho} lets its “central ideas dissolve in a solipsistic haze.”\textsuperscript{44}

Commentators also observe the important changes Harron made to the female characters in developing them. As Porton writes,

More importantly, Harron’s conception of the film as a feminist project nurtures tangible empathy for the movie’s female prey. Close-ups are compassionately deployed to indicate the queasiness a hard-working prostitute feels as she crosses the threshold of Bateman’s apartment. Additionally, in a climactic scene that has no parallel in the book, Patrick’s secretary, Jean—a woman with a palpable crush on her boss—recoils in horror as she surveys his date book’s misogynistic doodles.\textsuperscript{45}

Porton’s thoughts are echoed by Romney:

It comes as a relief that Harron restores some humanity to the women. There’s something quite touching in the way that Bateman’s mistress, Courtney (Samantha

\textsuperscript{42} Bradshaw, “Nightmare,” http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/apr/21/breestonellis.
\textsuperscript{43} Block, review, \url{http://www.culturevulture.net/Movies/AmericanPsycho.htm}.
\textsuperscript{44} Block, \url{http://www.culturevulture.net/Movies/AmericanPsycho.htm}.
\textsuperscript{45} Porton, review, 43.
Mathis), seems trapped and infantilised by luxury. And there’s a black irony to Patrick’s date with his secretary Jean (Chloe Sevigny, spot-on as ever). ‘I don’t want to be bruised,’ she says (emotionally, she means, although we know she’ll be worse than bruised if she sticks around.)

That the book was adapted by feminists also caught the attention of some commentators. Romney observes, “That two women have taken on a novel attacked for vicious misogyny already establishes a crucial element of distance from the book.” Johnson writes, “[Harron] also slyly inverts the novel’s perspective, viewing its repellent protagonist, Patrick Bateman, from a feminist remove—as a fatuous supermodel of male vanity.” Johnson also records Harron’s loathing of the violence, “All the way through shooting, we were dreading filming those scenes.” Sipe claims Harron feels haunted by Bateman and quotes her saying: “When the women are killed it’s very upsetting... I had nightmares after shooting it.” Marin shrewdly observes: “There has been surprisingly little outcry about the movie. Having a female director no doubt helped calm feminist fears.” Sadly though, the presence of a feminist director of the film may have contributed to the neutralisation of the feminist critique of the novel, especially in recent scholarship. Scholars similarly fail to recognise Harron’s feminist achievements.

Without doubt the most convincing argument for the presence of sexualised misogyny in the novel are the film-makers themselves. In their interview with Nocenti, they assert that the novel is disturbing because of the way it fuses pornographic sex with “horrible
violence.”52 While Turner concedes the book “could” be read as “‘a feminist book’” (as Ellis has claimed to have intended), her could nevertheless implies that there may be other ways of reading the novel.53 In fact, Turner and Harron do not read the book as a feminist tract but as a “ruined” “project.” Indeed, Harron believes Ellis ruined the novel by going too far in the offensive scenes:

Turner: ‘Bret Easton Ellis said that he thought he was writing a feminist book. He says he was genuinely trying to show just how horrible men can be… and how horrible they are to women. How they really feel about women.’

Nocenti: ‘I think that comes off in the book, that it’s a portrait of modern male culture and how grotesque it’s become, but the clues to the contrary are the fact that he went too far in the descriptions of the murders of women. You stop thinking of it as a portrait of these guys and wonder about the author. He indicted himself.’

Turner: ‘That’s what we saw, that exact dynamic, that he took it one step too far and ruined the object of his project. So that’s what we tried to do, just take that step out, for the film.54

This is a crucial point: according to Turner, Ellis goes “too far” in his novel in the sexualised violence towards women and “ruins” it. (Turner echoes Ellis’s editor at Vintage, Gary Fisketjon’s critique.) Ellis’s “project” ceases to be a “‘feminist tract’” and instead becomes “an indictment of himself”: by taking that step out, Harron and Turner “removed” the erotically misogynistic scenes from the screenplay (and by implication, salvaged the novel).

53 Thomas, “Obsession,” 13; Harron and Turner, 188.
54 Harron and Turner, 188.
Harron and Turner only include two of the scenes depicting sexualised misogynistic violence towards women that feature in the novel: the Christie and Sabrina scene, and the Christie and Elizabeth scene, leaving out Torri and Tiffany, the anonymous prostitute, and numerous other “girls” and past victims. Thus, the quantity of sexualised violence towards women is significantly reduced (only one out of the four horrific scenes is retained in the film).

Of equal importance are Harron and Turner’s comments concerning the eroticised nature of the violence toward women in the novel and the changes they made to prevent the film from being interpreted voyeuristically and the violence from becoming sexualised. While Turner complains that the pornographic sections read like “‘a Penthouse letter,’” Harron focuses on the changes they made for the film:

‘When we read that three-way sex scene, it seemed like a parody of a Penthouse sex magazine fantasy. So we intended to undercut that. We didn’t want the women to look like they were having a fabulous time... I said to Christian; look in the mirror. Play the whole scene just like watching yourself in the mirror. And I told the girls to look like it was just a job, and they were kind of bored, and they had work to do.’

In the film version of the Christie/Sabrina scene, Bateman watches himself in the mirror and is more interested in how he looks than in having sex with the prostitutes, and Christie and Sabrina look bored. The scene is also intercut with black and white segments recorded on Bateman’s video camera which interrupt the flow of the pornographic tableaus. We also see Christie noticing Bateman staring at himself in the mirror and her look of contempt. Finally,

55 Harron and Turner, 189.
56 *American Psycho*, by Bret Easton Ellis, dir. Mary Harron, (2000; USA, Lions Gate/Universal), DVD.
57 *American Psycho*, Harron.
58 *American Psycho*, Harron.
the Phil Collins “Sussudio” soundtrack undermines any potential sexiness as the beat is too fast and aerobic to be erotic. In the novel, Bateman does not look at himself in the mirror, and while he speculates Christie and Sabrina “could be faking” their orgasms, he counters this with remarks that suggest the prostitutes are really enjoying themselves.\(^59\) They do not copulate in time to “Sussudio.”

However it is Turner who finally asserts: “‘It’s more disturbing to see disturbing sex than to see disturbing violence.’”\(^60\) This important point, that the scenes which fuse pornography and misogynistic violence are the most disturbing to read, is one that few commentators or scholars make in relation to the novel or film adaptation. For Wolf, the American Psycho scandal was never about violence alone, but was always about the fusion of misogynistic violence with pornography and the potential this had to condition the reader.

In addition to the scenes Harron and Turner changed in adapting the novel, the censors insisted certain scenes were cut. Harron recalls “‘we ended up taking out just the blowjob and a few shots of rear-entry sex.’”\(^61\) Turner speaks of another cut: “the line ‘Christie, bend over so Sabrina can see your asshole’ they changed to ‘ass.’”\(^62\) The scenes that were changed at the censor’s request aimed to prevent the sexualisation of the misogynistic violence.

Harron and Turner also discuss changes they made to the story in the process of writing the screenplay. An important aspect of their feminist adaptation concerns the way

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\(^{59}\) Ellis, American Psycho, 174-5.
\(^{60}\) Harron and Turner, “Adapting,” 189.
\(^{61}\) Harron and Turner, 189.
\(^{62}\) Harron and Turner, 189.
they created new female points of view that were not in the book and which make the female characters more empathetic and believable (hence more realistic).  

Laura Mulvey famously identifies two forms of cinematic looking. The first she defines as a form of scopophilia, “pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight,” a form of looking connected with the “sexual instincts.” The second, “developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen.” This is related to the “ego libido.” Harron and Turner’s film breaks scopophilia looking by desexualising the sex scenes. They do this by having Bateman more interested in looking at himself in the mirror than at the prostitutes, and simultaneously by strengthening the viewer’s identification with the female characters by creating extra points of view.

Harron and Turner thus increase the viewer’s identification with the female characters: they enable the viewer to connect emotionally with the female characters and to care what happens to them. As a result, the film has another dimension which does not exist in the novel. Further, with the new female points of view Harron and Turner shift the perspective away from Bateman so that the film is no longer simply “Bateman’s narrative.” The new perspective allows for realisations of “horror,” “destruction” and “sadism.” The film decreases identification with Bateman during these scenes: it is Harron’s intention that the viewer feels frightened, depressed and for the crimes to be “terrible” to watch:

Harron: ‘In the film I wanted you to be sad. It stops it from just being Bateman’s narrative. Because you should feel for the victims, you should be aware of the horror

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65 Mulvey, 18.
66 Mulvey, 18.
of what these crimes are. It can’t all be jokey... In the end, it’s the story of destruction and sadism, it’s very frightening and terrible.”

The emotional connection the viewer forms with the female characters in the film is crucial in terms of the film-maker’s critique of the novel. This chapter argues that interventions like the development of female points of view and female characters prevent the film from being consumed by mainstream viewers as misogynistic sensationalism. For example, in the film during the scenes where Bateman picks up the prostitute Christie, we see Christie’s face flash with fear and annoyance when Bateman telephones to book another prostitute and emphasises that the second prostitute must “‘do couples,’” and be “‘blonde.’”

In the novel, Christie is in the bath when Bateman orders the second prostitute: “Back in my apartment, while Christie takes a bath... I dial the number for Cabana Bi Escort Service and, using my gold American Express card, order a woman, a blond, who services couples.”

In sum, Harron and Turner expand and develop Wolf’s critique in their adaptation of the novel. That is, they implicitly agree with Wolf’s claim that the sexualisation of the violent misogyny is unacceptable by cutting these scenes out and by changing the point of view during the single remaining sexualised misogynistic scene. Both their overt critique of the novel (that Ellis goes too far), and the film adaptation they produce are persuasive in a way Wolf’s critique was not. Harron and Turner may be small players in the Hollywood scene, (witness Harron’s dismissal when DiCaprio became interested), however the Hollywood celebrity they as working film-makers have access to is far more powerful (and hence, persuasive) than the literary and media celebrity of feminists like Wolf, Steinem, and Weldon.

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68 Harron and Turner, 189.
69 American Psycho, Harron.
70 Ellis, American Psycho, 169-70.
What remains clear is that while Harron was attracted to Ellis’s novel because of its satirical (and this thesis argues parodic) aspects, and while she believed initial readings of the novel overlooked these elements (as Ellis has claimed), she equally strongly believes Ellis ruined his novel with the inclusion of the female murder and torture scenes. As a result Harron significantly changed this part of the storyline when adapting the film. That Harron’s film was celebrated for her feminist achievement by commentators is evident. A different picture of the film adaptation is suggested by the scholarly responses to the film which tend to ignore Harron and Turner’s feminist reconfigurations. Indeed for scholars, it is as if Harron and Turner’s film adaptation rewrites the novel in a virtual sense, similarly removing the problematic scenes from the novel’s storyline, or taking “‘that step out.’” This chapter seeks to accord Harron’s film the scholarly recognition it deserves both as a feminist film and as a coherent critique of the sexualised misogyny in the novel.

Unlike the film-makers and the majority of commentators, most scholarly writing during the second period of literary criticism fails to address Harron’s enlightened approach to the sexually violent scenes, and her creation of the new female points of view. Again, the mass media feminist critique is neutralised in theoretical and scholarly work. If scholarship addresses the film in relation to the novel at all, it is usually to focus on the satirical aspects of Harron’s film. Exceptions to this trend are analyses by Finlay and Messier (Murphet’s, and Eldridge’s work is exceptional too, to a lesser degree). This section will explore which, if any, scholars follow and develop Wolf’s critique of the pornographic nature of the sexualised misogyny in the novel. It will also describe the way some scholars use Hollywood celebrity and the glamour of film stars and directors to defend Ellis’s novel and silence Wolf’s critique.

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(an author whose novel is adapted into a film is seen as being more successful than one whose novel is not); and draw attention to the fact that while scholars disagree about whether the film is a satire, most agree the film and novel should be discussed in aesthetic and not feminist or political terms.

Scholars who follow Wolf include the following two responses to Kauffman’s work (more on Kauffman below): Thomas and Mehaffey’s critiques of Kauffman reinstate Wolf’s critique and support the argument made here. In addition to claiming Kauffman’s theoretical feminist defence of American Psycho overcompensates for the mass media feminist critique by becoming too celebratory of Ellis’s work, Thomas also asserts that

    any critic as familiar with Lacan, Kristeva, Mulvey, and Foucault—as Kauffman clearly is—should be more conscious of the constitutive role of (culturally produced) fantasy and representation in the formation of girls’ and boys’ subjectivities, and hence in their real, lived experience.72

In other words, Thomas argues that from a theoretical feminist perspective both pornography and fantasy play a constitutive role in creating the behaviours they represent. Thomas’s critique of Kauffman is the only scholarly work to make this point and reinstate Wolf’s conditioning critique of American Psycho.

Heyler’s work reinvents Wolf’s conditioning argument claiming that in American Psycho, representations of violence legitimate and lead to violent behaviour.73 Ellis’s use of “the word ‘backdrop’ gives the text a theatrical feel, which adds to this feeling of Patrick making his own re-make of a film. It seems false and created, perpetuating the inference that

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72 Thomas, review, 1090. [ My italics.]
73 Heyler, “Parodied,” 744.
he can do whatever he wants to, its only acting.” 74 However, Heyler also claims the novel raises questions about the difference between “acting” badly and actually “being” bad, and similarly, the difference between murdering someone and just watching or reading about it: “It would seem that one perpetuates the other. Patrick endlessly reads books about famous serial killers, enjoying, hence validating what they have done.” 75 Heyler argues that in American Psycho, reading about violence “perpetuates” violent behaviour (at one level, the novel embodies Steinem’s copy-cat critique). 76

Further, Heyler observes the importance of gender in the violent scenes: the men are killed and tortured as accidents, whereas the killing of women is planned. 77 While Bateman suffers from a fear of otherness, Bateman’s greatest fear is his fear of feminisation. 78 Thus, as Heyler points out, Bateman goes to great lengths to keep his female and male victims’ bodies separate. Heyler also notes a correlation between gender and the degree of violence: thus, “the multiple female victims die horrendously, amid a nightmare of blood and body parts.” 79 Heyler argues that male and female victims are fundamentally treated differently in American Psycho. (Stubblefield’s dissertation argues similarly, that while not all the violence in American Psycho is perpetrated upon women, the most violent scenes are. 80 )

Another perspective is given when scholars do address the novel’s content. While Kooijman and Laine’s analysis focuses on Bateman’s unreliable narration, they also claim American Psycho hooks readers through the outrage they feel on behalf of women, and not

74 Heyler, 744.
75 Heyler, 744.
76 Heyler, 744.
77 Heyler, 739.
78 Heyler, 739.
79 Heyler, 739.
80 Stubblefield, “Manners,” 156.
only through suspense.

Sharrett argues the content of *American Psycho* awakens the reader’s outrage; this outrage is what keeps them reading. Mark Seltzer’s study of serial killers similarly argues we are fascinated by violent content, that ours is a “wound culture.”

Messier argues *American Psycho* is pornography and that one of its aims is to voyeuristically titillate the reader (though he also defends the novel as a satire). While Messier’s early article does not mention the film, it was published after the film’s release, hence his restatement of Wolf’s feminist critique crucially follows the critical success of the film and the redemption of the novel that followed.

Following Weldon, who claims both the novel and society are sado-masochistic, Messier claims the effects of the extreme misogyny in *American Psycho* are harmful (he calls the novel “perverted”), and reads it as symptomatic of society’s fascination with excessive sex and violence. Messier argues one of the causes of the scandal is the way the novel fuses generic conventions from horror and pornography, yet calls itself literary fiction. While defining *American Psycho* as literature is problematic for Messier, he does continue Wolf’s work in important ways.

Noting the novel’s pornographic aspects, Messier argues readers are attracted by the promise of “excitement.” *American Psycho*’s readers find a scopophiliac pleasure in the novel’s voyeurism, and become complicit violators in the way the novel literalises the male gaze’s objectification of the female body:

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82 Sharrett, review, 67.
85 Messier, “Errancies,” 166. Messier more recently argues *American Psycho* “mimics” pornography in order to critique consumer capitalism.
87 Messier, 76.
pornography is widely considered to appeal primarily to the male gaze, because it objectifies the female body, turning it into a consumer good... many feminists, such as Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin, consider pornography to be degrading to women and representing an act of violence against the female body. The root of this analogy lies in the fact that the male gaze not only considers women as sexual objects but also sees the female body as fragmented, as separate and detachable pieces of anatomy—a breast, a leg, a foot, a mouth, a vagina—as if each could easily be severed from the unified entity of the body in its entirety, as a whole a three-dimensional subject. This concept is perfectly exemplified in American Psycho.89

Thus, American Psycho conditions the reader by sexualising—making pleasurable—a reading of the female body and female identity that is “degrading” and “objectifying,” and comprised of “detachable” body parts.

Central to Wolf’s critique is the difference between violence that is sexualised and violence that is not. Messier concurs “the most gruesome passages of the novel turn out to be the ones that involve acts of sexual violence.”90 Messier also notes the way sex with a woman is equated with misogynistic violence. The sexually violent scenes demonstrate the way sexual arousal for Bateman requires and becomes equivalent with “torture” and “mutilation.”91 Crucially for Messier, violence is not only or centrally about the savagery of capitalism, it is also about “the misogynistic aggression of the male pornographic gaze.”92 This thesis claims analyses that fail to make this point either implicitly condone, or are problematically oblivious to, the novel’s misogyny.

90 Messier, 80.
91 Messier, 82.
92 Messier, 82.
Like Heyler, Sabrina Sahli also divides Bateman’s crimes into: “those crimes committed against the Other, expressing his eroticised hatred for a system that is obviously lacking, and those executed for the sake of the Other, i.e., preserving its ruling ideology.”

Thus the crimes committed by Bateman against the Other—crimes against blacks, Jews, homeless people, Japanese, homosexuals, dogs—represent his hatred for a system that is obviously lacking. “These groups are a constant and clearly visible reminder for Bateman and his yuppie cronies that the ideology of their Caucasian American yuppie society is defective.” Crimes against women fall into the second category of crimes (which, for Sahli, includes his violent torture and murder of Paul Owen): crimes against his own circle, which he can never fully belong to. (Remembering the point made earlier here that Bateman wants to “fit in.”) Thus, this second group of crimes represents preservation of the system that is “lacking because it fails to incorporate the perverse subject.” The second group of crimes involves torture and Sahli notes how Bateman first invites the prostitutes into his social circle by insisting they wear certain specific symbols of belonging, a silk scarf, or pair of suede gloves—before having sex with them, torturing and killing them. Sahli concludes, “His violent deeds offer Bateman a vent for the hatred he feels against an Other he does not conform to but of which he would desperately wish to be a fully-fledged member.” (Cojocaru similarly differentiates Bateman’s relations with men from those with women: he links women with otherness, and men with his own lack of identity.)

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93 Sahli, “‘I Simply,’” 4.
94 Sahli, 5.
95 Sahli, 7.
96 Sahli, 7.
Serpell’s essay unites a concern with the problematic shift away from the feminist critique into an aesthetic critique, with a critique of violent misogyny and its effects on the reader and thus focuses on both the novel’s form and content. Serpell argues that critics who relegate *American Psycho* to the aesthetic are merely avoiding the issue of violence altogether, as the scenes unavoidably confront readers. Serpell cautions that moral/aesthetic defences of the novel must not be used to silence the feminist critiques by making the violence disappear.

Serpell divides critics of *American Psycho* into two camps: those who read the novel mimetically and argue Bateman’s violence is real and evil; and those who read *American Psycho* theoretically and argue that the violence did not happen because Bateman does not exist as a character (which is a version of the aesthetic defence). Serpell cites Murphet and Storey as examples: “The frequency and the rapidity with which Bateman’s unreliability gets transmuted into a disappearing act, which then allows the subsequent exculpation, erasure, or aestheticization of his ‘violence,’ is almost eerie.” Serpell challenges their thinking. The first problem with the aesthetic defence is that the novel is written from Bateman’s point of view; so how can you argue that the subject does not exist? Secondly, Serpell asserts that even as a non-character the fact that Bateman is a serial killer still signifies.

Critics who argue Bateman’s actions do not happen in the book because they are only fantasies go on to claim the novel cannot “infect” or condition the reader. Serpell counter-claims: “The logic of the debate overlooks two self-evident facts: first, that evil actions

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98 Serpell, “Repetition,” 63.
99 Serpell, 51.
100 Serpell, 52.
101 Serpell, 52.
within a novel are still words, and second, that words have effects on readers, even when they are merely fictional.”

While mimetic critics who believe Bateman is evil lend him too much power and too little to the reader, critics who say there is no Bateman limit the text to an aesthetic function. Serpell supports the argument here when she says both positions fail to engage with the violent scenes: “what cannot be denied is the aesthetic force of the violent passages, the way they impress themselves upon the reader in all their gruesome detail. They are unforgettable, even if the novel suggests that they never happened.”

Further, “As is often true in academic debates, these two absurd and absolutist arguments do not actually function on the same level. Nor do they actually counter each other.” Most aesthetic defences overlook the fact that the representation of misogynistic violence incontestably affects the reader. While Serpell adds the ambiguity surrounding the violence forces the reader to reflect on it, this chapter counters that the mainstream readers to which the novel was marketed may lack the competence to do so.

Before examining the feminist aspects of the film adaptation in detail, it is first necessary to note those commentators and scholars who defend the novel and reject the mass media feminist critique in order to more fully map the second phase of literary criticism about American Psycho. For example, even though the film was in production when Battersby’s article was published, there is no mention of the film or its pending release. Further Battersby’s failure to mention the feminist critique of the novel (a departure from most

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102 Serpell, 52.
103 Serpell, 52-3.
104 Serpell, 63.
105 Serpell, 50.
106 Serpell, 53.
107 Serpell, 68. Serpell does separate her work from the advocacy of mass media feminist critics and argues Ellis did not intend to promulgate real violence.
previous commentary at this time) suggests the salvaging of Ellis’s novel through the film adaptation is already underway. Battersby argues that *American Psycho* is not pornography but a serious, moralistic novel, and claims the scandal secured Ellis’s success.108 Battersby also defends the novel as satirical comedy, and argues that the violent scenes are probably fantasies.

Klein is one of the first commentators to employ the celebrity defence. Like most interviews, Klein’s doubles as a press release in the lead up to the release of Harron and Turner’s film. While Klein’s interview quotes Ellis expressing doubts about the viability of adapting the novel (Ellis was dissatisfied with the film adaptation of *Zero*), it nevertheless employs the Hollywood star system to sell the story.109 For example, Klein includes Ellis’s reference to auteur/director David Cronenberg: “‘David Cronenberg,’” Ellis says, “‘had very odd requests about what he wanted from the screenplay, and I couldn’t deliver it.’”110 While Klein only offers Ellis’s opinion of Cronenberg’s involvement, it works as a form of name-dropping and creates hype around the film.

Significantly, Ellis is increasingly unrepentant about the offensive aspects of his novel in interviews at this time. Thomas notes: “He is not expecting to be forgiven by the feminists who hated *American Psycho*. ‘There is nothing I can do to appease them or make them change their minds.’ Nor does he sound as though he is making much of an effort to do so.”111

With the film securely in production, Ellis increasingly refutes the mass media feminist critique. In an article published in *Harpers Bazaar*, Ellis claims the scandal was

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caused by “p.c.” culture. Of interest here, evidence of Ellis’s oft-denied misogyny surfaces in the article: Ellis writes “violence is ennobling,” “pain is cool,” and “a world without women might be preferable.” While Ellis is talking about *Fight Club* (1996), the implication is clear for *American Psycho* as well.

Significantly, Ellis rewrites the scandal in relation to Hollywood celebrity and claims that the film redeems the novel:

Then, nine years later, the book was rehabilitated when the most romanticized and beloved movie star for teenage girls (as well as the world’s biggest box-office draw) decided he would star in the movie adaptation. *American Psycho* was no longer a sick, dangerous book but a viable Hollywood commodity. Leonardo DiCaprio... understood that Patrick Bateman’s extreme behaviour was actually a metaphor for the greedy, materialistic ‘80s... Bateman was a fictional creation, mixing humour and horror, which is the lingua franca of Leo’s generation.

Thus Ellis employs DiCaprio’s image to transform himself as a result of the film adaptation from the author of a “sick, dangerous book” with only cult status into “the author of a viable Hollywood commodity” and a literary celebrity.

Further, Ellis conceives of feminism as a fashion, a form of “p.c.,” a fashion that is now unfashionable. (Marin also claims political correctness is out of fashion, and that if the novel were published now no-one would care.) Ellis disapproves of old-fashioned feminism, but approves of new feminism: “It [*Fight Club*] takes old-fashioned feminism and kicks it out of bed. The younger audience of women who saw the film were mostly amused

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113 Ellis, 247.
114 Ellis, 247.
115 Marin, review, ST1.
by what they interpreted as a criticism of brutish, simpleminded behaviour of men, and they responded with glee.”116 Ellis’s position completely opposes Wolf’s: by implication Wolf is one of the “old-fashioned” feminists Ellis wants kicked “out of bed.”

Of all the rebuttals of Wolf’s argument, Ellis’s critique of Harron’s film is the most personal. (It could also be read as further evidence of Ellis’s misogyny.117) Ellis claims that Harron was incapable of truly understanding the novel because of her age and gender: “I don’t want to be ageist or anything... but... American Psycho was directed by an older woman.” While it is true, Ellis does co-operate in marketing Harron’s film by contributing to the website (positive reviews of the film would help sell his novel), it is clear from Ellis’s comment that he would have preferred the film to have been directed by a man. Thus, in this later period of commentary, Wolf’s strongest opponent is Ellis himself because of the way he uses the Hollywood celebrity associated with Harron’s adaptation to reinvent himself and his novel in a positive light.

Both in her book chapter and later review of the film, Kauffman is one of Wolf’s chief scholarly opponents. Thus, Kauffman consolidates the anti-feminist shift initiated by Mailer (and critiqued by Eberly), defending American Psycho in aesthetic terms, and not analysing the novel in terms of feminism, social concerns or politics. For Kauffman, what is significant is the way American Psycho’s postmodern aesthetics confound traditional notions of artistic merit.

Further, while Kauffman agrees that American Psycho fuses horror and pornography, she nevertheless insists the novel “turns-off” readers: “We have already seen how David Cronenberg and Brian de Palma graft pornography and horror in film. Ellis translates the

codes and conventions of those two film genres into fiction.... By combining horror and porn, Ellis ‘turns off’ the audience.” Kauffman claims the fusion of pornographic scenarios with horror educates the reader. Like Murphet and Storey, Kauffman neutralises the violence by means of her aesthetic defence by arguing Bateman is a “fantasist.” Again, just because the crimes may only be fantasies, this does not mean they do not also condition the reader.

Significantly Kauffman reserves her harshest criticism for the NOW feminists, reducing them to a policing function (unlike Eberly who called for a public debate on the subject of sexual violence against women). Kauffman’s account of the NOW boycott also lacks a sense of objective neutrality. For example, NOW “went so far as to organize boycotts of all Knopf and Vintage titles”: Kauffman’s “went so far” implies her subtle condemnation. It is possible that some scholars rejected the mass media feminist critique because certain NOW members served Ellis with death threats. However if this is Kauffman’s reason for failing to deliver a feminist critique of Ellis’s novel she does not acknowledge this in her earlier or later work.

Finally, this thesis disagrees with Kauffman’s claim that Ellis is a moralist. While Ellis may have had moral intentions, the novel remains of indeterminate morality due to its excessive ambiguity. Kauffman’s work highlights the differences between the mass media feminists, and scholarly feminists. This thesis argues theoretical feminists are wrong to dismiss the mass media feminist critique altogether: not only is this an extreme reaction, in doing so scholars overlook the important role played by the reader and the question of reader competence.

118 Kauffman, Bad Girls, 243.
119 Kauffman, 248.
120 Kauffman, 252-3.
121 Kauffman, 253.
Murphet claims sexualised misogynistic violence is not the most significant issue facing feminism and women today, but that the ubiquity of the fashion industry, the lack of access to legalised abortions, and the lack of equal pay are far more important feminist concerns (something implied by Ellis’s selection of models and terrorism as twin subjects in *Glamorama*): “Yet the degradation of women surely occurs first and foremost at the frontline of the fashion industry and the patriarchal logic of a nation which refuses women equal pay and full rights over their own bodies.” Thus, Murphet dismisses the significance of the mass media feminist critique and minimises the effect on the reader of the sexualisation of the violence.

An examination of recent editions of the Australian feminist journal *Hecate* support Murphet’s claims to a degree. Recent editions are concerned with issues to do with women in the workplace, motherhood and with women writers and modernity. However, in spite of an apparent postfeminist disinterest in the subject, it is argued here that freedom from misogynistic sexualised violence has not been achieved. According to recent estimates by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2005, 33 percent of women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and 19 percent have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. This means one in three women has been violently assaulted, and one in five has been sexually assaulted. A previous survey documented that ninety-seven percent of

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perpetrators of female violence and sexual violence were men. Such figures suggest little improvement on figures cited in the current thesis that date from the time of American Psycho’s publication. Murphet’s remarks conform to postfeminist trends on this issue.

Further, while scholars like Cojocaru, Colby and Conley argue that American Psycho is predominantly a novel about critiquing Yuppies, consumerism and conformity, this thesis argues that the central issue raised by the novel is the problem of sexual violence towards women and the relevance of feminism to literature.

A key opponent to Wolf, Baelo-Allué claims Wolf reduces the novel to its “violent sections” and ignores other important aspects of the novel. She summarises Wolf’s position thus, “the inclusion of pornographic or/and violent sections in a book is enough to make all of its contents pornographic or gore.” Baelo-Allué also argues the scandal was caused by the way a serious writer and publisher transgressed the boundaries of literary fiction. With this last point Baelo-Allué follows Young, and yet it is important to remember that her argument makes no sense from Squire’s point of view given that the purpose of literary fiction is to exploit the transgression of boundaries for profit. Further, Baelo-Allué reads the pornographic elements of the novel in terms of the conventions of serial killer fiction, and argues Ellis’s depiction of sexual violence is really about commodification, not about sexual violence towards women. Significantly, serial killer fiction encourages the reader to read sexual violence not from an ethical or moral perspective, but from an aesthetic one, as the reader searches for patterns to the killings, “turning serial killing into an aesthetic game” that

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127 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 88.
128 Baelo-Allué, 87.
129 Baelo-Allué, 107-110.
is “pleasurable.” Baelo-Allué argues the scandal was caused by the fact that the serial killer does not get caught, unlike conventional serial killer novels, and that Ellis deliberately breaks from convention to evoke an ethical response. This thesis counters that the terrorists in Glamorama do not get caught either and yet Glamorama did not cause a scandal: the problem with American Psycho is its lack of signalling of the offensive scenes.

In sum, most commentators, including the film-makers, discuss the film in relation to the mass media feminist critique of the novel. Scholars, on the other hand, mostly ignore the feminist critique, or if they do incorporate it into their argument, they fail to relate it to the film.

2: Harron and Turner’s Feminist Adaptation

While Harron and Turner’s feminist reconfiguration of the plot of the novel in their adaptation was celebrated by commentators, it was not mentioned in scholarly work. Again, while commentators also recognised the feminist intentions of the film-makers in a manner that is consistent with the mass media feminist critique of the novel, scholars tend to neutralise the mass media feminist critique as a result of the film adaptation. For many scholars it is as if the film virtually rewrites the novel according to the mass media feminist critique.

Further analysis of the film adaptation is best informed by recent theories of adaptation, in particular, Hutcheon’s Theory of Adaptation. Most relevant to the discussion here is Hutcheon’s point about the way adaptations change the way people read the adapted

110 Baelo-Allué, 113.
Hutcheon cites a common example in the process of “salvaging,” whereby the adaptation salvages the adapted text.\textsuperscript{133} Of equal importance is Hutcheon’s point that the encoder’s intentions must be clearly signalled in an adaptation. While Hutcheon acknowledges that her work reconfigures the Intentional Fallacy and notes Barthes and Foucault’s famous challenges to it, she also argues scholars have taken this challenge to an extreme. What remains important in debates about authorial intentions is clarifying that “authorial intentions” are not the “sole arbiter and guarantee of the meaning and value of a work of art.”\textsuperscript{134}

Hutcheon’s distinctions between mainstream and avant-garde texts and audiences are also useful, as is her point that adaptations tend to be a form of “contested homage.”\textsuperscript{135} Hutcheon specifies which aspects of the adapted text tend to be changed in the adaptation, and further claims that adaptations result from what she calls “‘unfinished cultural business.’”\textsuperscript{136} Finally, Hutcheon argues that context is an important factor in the adaptation process. All of these points are pertinent to the discussion here.

Most commentators argue Harron and Turner’s film adaptation salvages Ellis’s novel: framing the film as a satire is a common form of salvaging. (Another common form of the salvaging argument by commentators celebrated the feminist changes Harron and Turner made to the story and characters.)

\textsuperscript{132} Linda Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation}, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 18. \\
\textsuperscript{133} Hutcheon, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{134} Hutcheon, 106-7. \\
\textsuperscript{135} Hutcheon, 43; 7. \\
\textsuperscript{136} Hutcheon, 116.
Harron’s intentions in adapting the novel are often noted by journalists and commentators. For example, Harron claims “‘the message in the horror… is feminist.’”\textsuperscript{137} As a result, not only does Harron’s film leave out a lot of the detail during the sexualised misogynistic violence, Harron and Turner are both clearly critical of the sexualised misogyny in the novel. Consequently, there is “no prurient blood-letting” in their film. (By contrast, both Ellis’s alleged intentions and implied authorial intentions are profoundly ambiguous. Ellis’s intention to write a satire cannot be equated with fact, nor turned into a definitive explanation of the novel.)

Hutcheon’s distinctions between avant-garde and mainstream cinema are evident in claims that a novel many believe to be avant-garde was both marketed to a mainstream audience, and then adapted into a mainstream film. Romney laments, “Truly extreme books rarely become truly extreme films.”\textsuperscript{138} According to this argument, the novel loses what is most valuable, namely its literariness, the “texture” of “a genuinely cacophonous text.”\textsuperscript{139} (Such comments support the argument here that \textit{American Psycho} was marketed to a mainstream audience who lacked competence and sophistication.) One of the consequences of salvaging \textit{American Psycho} as a satirical film is that the film can be viewed as “conventional” and “realist,” as opposed to avant-garde, with obvious commercial implications. Thus, the film resolves the scandal by transforming the novel in a virtual sense into a realistic satire with a degree of plot, closure and character the actual novel does not contain.

\textsuperscript{137} Harron, and Turner, “Adapting,” 159.
\textsuperscript{138} Romney, review, 46.
\textsuperscript{139} Romney, 46.
Harron and Turner also discuss their adaptation in terms of mainstream versus avant-garde aesthetics. In particular, they explain how they add depth of character, a realist convention, which transforms the postmodern parody of the novel:

instinctively, I wanted the women’s emotions, or something of their characters and their reality, to come out... it’s not just this heartless, glossy satire... In the book you’re sad when she [Christie] dies and in the film I wanted you to be sad. It stops it from just being Bateman’s narrative. Because you should feel for the victims, you should be aware of the horror of what these crimes are. It can’t all be jokey. And that’s why it has to get really frightening and depressing in the last part... In the end, it’s the story of destruction and sadism, it’s very frightening and terrible. I wanted there to be funny scenes, the social satire scenes, the restaurants, the business cards... But then there’s another dimension.140

The sense of empathy Harron intends the viewer to feel for the victims, the sadness, horror and the fear, are more usually associated with viewing realist and mainstream, rather than avant-garde, cinema.

Further, Harron and Turner’s adaptation is a form of Hutcheon’s contested homage: the misogynistic and sexually violent scenes are contested; and Ellis’s attempt at satire is paid tribute. While Ellis refused to cut the sexualised misogynistic scenes from the manuscript, Harron and Turner remove these scenes from their adaptation, thus they contest his intentions and his text. Significantly, the fact that the film failed to attract the same sort of mass media feminist critique the novel attracted in 1990/1 implies that had Ellis agreed to his editor’s advice and cut the offensive scenes, there would similarly have been no scandal (and Ellis’s

career would have remained at the same level as his contemporaries). Sadly, the misogyny ensured and continues to ensure his growing success.

Harron and Turner made significant changes to the adapted text by creating extra **points of view** for female characters and developing female characters into more significant characters in the film. In addition to the examples cited above, other examples include: Christie’s death; the Courtney/Bateman dialogue; and Jean and the doodle book. In the novel, Christie dies inside Bateman’s apartment, she never gets out after the second threesome. In the film, Christie almost escapes after the second threesome, and dies on the stairs outside, which makes her seem less of a victim. In the novel, the Courtney ‘‘Can we talk?’’ dialogue ends with Courtney saying, ‘‘Nothing.’’ However, in the film, her ‘‘Nothing’’ remark is followed by a shot of Courtney lying in bed. In the novel we wonder, what was she going to say? In the film, we feel her dissatisfaction.

Again, in the novel, Jean remains in love and fantasy with Bateman, overly trusting him in spite of his harsh treatment of her. For example, Bateman calls her a ‘‘simpleton,’’ dismisses her by ‘‘slamming the door’’ on her, tells her ‘‘Don’t wear that outfit again,’’ and to ‘‘Wear a dress.’’ Jean later confesses her love for Bateman and when he asks her why she loves him she says she finds him ‘‘sweet,’’ ‘‘considerate,’’ ‘‘mysterious,’’ in spite of Bateman’s behaviour and repeated assertions, ‘‘appearances can be deceiving.’’ However, in the film Jean discovers Bateman’s doodle book, and, disturbed by what she finds, changes her opinion of him. There is no such scene in the novel.

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142 *American Psycho*, Harron.
144 *American Psycho*, Harron.
146 Ellis, 377; 376, 378.
147 *American Psycho*, Harron.
Another important change is that the pornographic references are differently framed. In the novel, Bateman is constantly watching, renting and returning pornographic videos. In the film, pornographic videos become background noise. For example, Inside Lydia’s Ass plays in the background on video while Bateman harangues Courtney for a date over the telephone.

Further, Harron and Turner claim characters from the novel needed to change in order for American Psycho to work as a film, and that the changes they made have a feminist aspect. Turner notes the changes in point of view and their effects, especially the way they showed Christie “‘running down that hall, banging on doors and no one answering,’” and the way they cut to Courtney’s point of view after she’s had sex with Bateman, “‘she’s trying to talk to him. He leaves her, and you’re left sitting with her.’”¹⁴⁸ Such moments, Turner claims, transform the female characters into “‘real people.’”¹⁴⁹

Nocenti suggests such changes constitute a feminist intervention into the adapted text: the film depicts the victims as real people in contrast to the novel which suggests that they are not. Turner answers that they wanted Jean to be a likeable female character, for her not to be “‘detestable or pathetic like everyone else,’” and for there to be “‘the tiniest glimmer of hope that someone’s going to figure out that [Bateman’s] doing this.’”¹⁵⁰ The changes to Jean’s character are significant and make Jean more central to the plot. In the novel, Jean is only seen from Bateman’s point of view and her affection for him in spite of his rudeness make her appear stupid.

Film commentary also attempts to finish the novel’s unfinished cultural business. As Weber notes, the movie “may have more pre-release bias to overcome than any film in recent

¹⁵⁰ Harron, and Turner, 188.
memory.”¹⁵¹ For example, the excessive ambiguity in the novel, and the mass media feminist critique constitute unfinished business. Again, Corliss reframes and re-defines the novel as an extreme form of parody: “Ellis pushed past parody into nightmare farce,” thereby attempting to finish its unfinished cultural business.¹⁵²

Unfinished business is also evident in the way commentators are divided about whether the American Psycho scandal re-ignited with the film. Harron claims:

I hoped that by excising those graphic torture scenes, I would allow the novel’s true meaning to appear. Of course that was naive, for if the forces of outrage had not bothered to read the book, why would they wait to see it on screen?

Before the film was even edited, the British tabloid News of the World got hold of some innocuous photos of the actors standing around the set and published them with the headline, ‘The most disgusting film of the year.’¹⁵³

In contrast, Marin argues that there was no controversy when the film was released (which implies an absence of unfinished business): “What’s missing this time is the din of outrage, the vitriolic press and schadenfreude that accompanied American Psycho on its first go round.”¹⁵⁴ Marin’s review then recycles the American Psycho scandal in an attempt to create hype for the film (Marin’s article devotes half a dozen paragraphs to the release of the film but twenty nine paragraphs recounting the American Psycho scandal).¹⁵⁵

Unfinished cultural business is also evident in the way the satire defence reappears in film reviews. While many note the satirical elements of Harron’s adaptation, some argue that

¹⁵² Richard Corliss, “A Yuppie’s Killer Instinct: American Psycho, the Book They Didn’t Want to Publish, Becomes a Movie you Shouldn’t Miss,” Time, Apr 17, 2000, 78 .
¹⁵⁴ Marin,” ‘American Psycho,’” ST1.
¹⁵⁵ Marin, 8.
the novel was not a satire, that the satire defence was spurious, for example, Bradshaw, and that the film fails as satire, for example, Block and Rayns.\footnote{Bradshaw, “Nightmare,” http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/apr/21/breastndonells; Block, review, http://www.cultureculture.net/Movies/AmericanPsycho.htm; and Rayns, review, 42.}

Given that the film was released almost ten years after the novel, the context had changed. As noted above, while the novel was released during the backlash period (which legitimised the mass media feminist critique), by 2000 the backlash had become normalised, the crisis was \textit{over or invalidated}. Harron’s identity as a Canadian and as a feminist are also important contexts making the film a “transcultural” adaptation (which crucially involves a change in gender from Ellis’s male author to Harron and Turner’s female director and scriptwriter).\footnote{Hutcheon, \textit{Adaptation}, 145, 152.}

One of the reasons the film’s aesthetics and content are more consistent with the competence of a mainstream audience than the novel is because the economy of the film industry demands it. Thus Bradshaw notes “violence raises a distinctively generic problem in a commercial movie that it doesn’t in a literary novel, and Harron adroitly solves this problem or, at any rate, bypasses it, by having most of the slicing and dicing happen off-camera.”\footnote{Bradshaw, “Nightmare,” http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/apr/21/breastndonells} Further, as Bradshaw continues: “Harron defers the moments of horrid revelation until the end, and this restraint pays off...”\footnote{Bradshaw, http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/apr/21/breastndonells} Thus, the film is legible to a mainstream audience because of its sense of \textit{closure, which is lacking in the novel}.

Scholarly \textit{literary criticism} tends to overlook the important changes Harron and Turner made in adapting the novel. For example, neither Baelo-Allué’s nor Mandel’s recent studies devote space to this important topic. Ignoring the feminist intervention, scholarship
focuses on the complex relationship between the film’s success and the salvaging of the novel.

While Hawryluk, as noted above, argues Harron’s film achieves the “redemption” of both novel and author: “The complete ‘redemption’ of Bret Easton Ellis was effected upon the release in Jan 2000 of American Psycho, the film,” Wolf’s strongest supporter in terms of the scholarly analysis of Harron’s film is Findlay. While Findlay argues the film is a “lesser version” than it might have been because of the unknown director and actor, and the small budget (Findlay contrasts Harron’s budget with Jonathan Demme’s for Silence of the Lambs, [1990]), she adds that the film is also an important subversion of the novel. In particular, Findlay claims the film undermines “Ellis’s protagonist as the model of dominant masculinity,” and notes the film’s treatment of sexual violence (she claims that Harron effectively censors it). Findlay suggests Harron’s film offers a female perspective on Bateman and on Ellis’s novel.

For Findlay, the most interesting aspect of Ellis’s novel is the way it was “singled out” by feminist groups and critiqued as pornography. The British novelist, Angela Carter, defines pornography as “produced by men for a male audience,” and claims that it has an “inbuilt reactionary purpose” because it “reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes” by denying “the social context in which sexual activity takes place.” Taking such thinking one step further, Russell argues that pornography condones the abusive behaviour it represents. For Russell, pornography is something perceived by the viewer/reader:

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161 Findlay, “Female Subversion,” 79.
162 Findlay, 79.
163 Findlay, 80.
If some/many of the viewers of a movie, book, or pictures subsequently experience desires to degrade or abuse women, or behave in degrading or abusive ways toward women, it seems reasonable to infer that the movie, book, or pictures did endorse, condone, or encourage such desires or behaviour, and that we are therefore dealing with pornography.\textsuperscript{165}

Thus, pornography awakens desires to abuse women, as well as condones such behaviour. Findlay argues Ellis’s novel condones and encourages pornographic behaviour: Bateman watches pornography, then acts it out.\textsuperscript{166}

Findlay also argues the most significant thing about Harron’s adaptation is that “many of the scenes involving women are either omitted from the film altogether and those that are used are approached differently.”\textsuperscript{167} Thus for Findlay, Harron’s film is not pornography, it is a contested tribute. While Harron’s changes to the Christie/Sabrina scene have been noted above by commentators, Findlay restates these points in a scholarly context. Thus, Christie and Sabrina appear to dislike Bateman and his arrogant behaviour in the film; Harron undermines Bateman’s attempts to control events (especially by allowing Christie to escape); and Findlay argues Harron challenges society’s desensitisation to sexualised violence towards women.\textsuperscript{168}

Findlay also links Christie almost escaping with Evelyn pressuring Bateman into marriage; violence is his “only escape” from the assertive women who control him.\textsuperscript{169} In the film, whenever Bateman is about to triumph, “Harron undercuts him by showing a different

\textsuperscript{166} Findlay, “Female Subversion,” 81.
\textsuperscript{167} Findlay, 82.
\textsuperscript{168} Findlay, 82-5.
\textsuperscript{169} Findlay, 86.
perspective of his character, one less dominant.” In this capacity, the undermining of dominant patriarchal masculinity, Harron’s film is a successful feminist intervention into the misogyny in Ellis’s novel. Findlay’s analysis emphasises the contestation in Harron and Turner’s tribute.

While Messier’s recent work argues that the misogyny and pornography are ultimately critical of consumption, he nevertheless asserts that the sexually violent scenes are simultaneously “appalling” and “appealing” for readers. Messier both applauds and critiques Harron’s film: while Harron’s actions prevent a voyeuristic reading of the film and create a distancing effect from Bateman, such changes work against the novel’s affective mechanism. Messier laments the way Harron transforms Bateman into a realist character. Messier’s analysis draws attention to the shift from apparent avant-garde novel to mainstream film.

Thus, while Harron’s version of the Christie/Sabrina scene prevents the viewer from reading it voyeuristically, at another level the scene allows the reader to “‘exit’” the text. Harron’s film thereby fails to take account of “the discursive function of pornographic horror,” that is, its affective properties, and fails to subvert or critique the “culture industry.” Thus, on the one hand Messier agrees with Abel that Ellis’s novel subverts representational readings, but on the other hand, he concedes Harron’s film is also subversive by “expurgating graphic violence,” which is Wolf’s argument.

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170 Findlay, 86.
172 Messier, 183.
173 Messier, 185.
174 Messier, 189.
This thesis counters Messier’s analysis and argues Harron’s aesthetic strategy is congruent with her intentions of attracting a mainstream audience to her film. Further, Messier’s analysis fails to account for readers who refuse to share Ellis’s codes: only readers tolerant of misogyny will allow Ellis to coerce them into identifying with Bateman. Messier’s affective elitist defence requires a highly sophisticated reader and skills beyond most mainstream readers. That is to say, it requires a reader with a tertiary degree in order for them to be able to consciously understand what Messier claims to be Ellis’s affective strategy.

Murphet’s overview of the American Psycho scandal is of brief interest given that it was written after the film was released. Restating earlier defences, Murphet argues the scandal was caused by the sexually violent scenes, particularly by the way they were presented out of context. Murphet adds, however, that corporate publishing is also to blame. Overall Murphet argues that Ellis’s novel reflects society, and that it is mostly well written but essentially misunderstood: the sex scenes must be read symbolically. The main problem with Murphet’s analysis is his failure to question Ellis’s intentions. Thus, when Ellis defends the novel because the violent scenes only last a few pages, Murphet similarly argues the violence only comprises five percent of the novel.

Murphet is also critical of Harron’s film adaptation and his praise is reserved: “This is not the film it might have been, however.” For Murphet, Harron’s feminist politics potentially represent an obstacle in terms of the successful adaptation of the film. Murphet notes that Harron’s adaptation attempts to salvage the novel, but counters that the novel does
not need salvaging. Thus, while Murphet concedes the film to be a “curious” success, “the film as it now stands is a curiously satisfying and controlled social satire, which manages to retain much of the corrosive wit of the novel without indulging in the obvious temptations to screen violence,” he finds Harron’s project is nevertheless problematic:

the challenge for Mary Harron was to arrive at a compromise between filtering the violence out altogether (making it too clear that Patrick does nothing), and graphically rendering the worst excesses of the novel’s most infamous passages, reduplicating Patrick’s lurid consciousness (which would militate against her feminist politics). The result of a feminist adapting Ellis’s misogynistic novel is, for Murphet, “intriguing.”

Murphet notes the changes Harron makes to the story line—Harron depicts violence when it is directed at men, and rewrites the scenes when the violence is directed at women—but complains that the resulting scenes depicting violence towards women are “elliptical” and undermine Bateman’s attempts at domination.

On the other hand, Murphet argues Harron’s film finishes the novel’s unfinished business in that it de-sexualises the misogyny so the violent scenes with the women are not erotic: Harron’s approach “sacrifices all possibility of being read voyeuristically,” and, “We are confronted with the consequences, and not the perhaps titillating representation of misogynist violence.” Murphet’s analysis concurs with commentators and this chapter’s argument that the film de-sexualises the violent misogyny (which suggests Harron’s adaptation successfully addresses Wolf’s critique).

The intentions Murphet attributes to Harron are, however, problematic. Murphet claims Harron was “making the sexual violence less of an obvious ‘issue’ in the narrative

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183 Murphet, 79.
184 Murphet, 73-4.
185 Murphet, 74.
186 Murphet, 74.
187 Murphet, 74.
Murphet’s assertion that the sexualised misogyny in Ellis’s novel was merely a “disabling distraction,” is a cause for concern, as is his failure to relate this to the feminist intentions of the film makers. Regrettably, the issue of the eroticised violence in the novel is not central to Murphet’s aesthetically-focused study.

Further, contrary to the intentions of the film-makers, Murphet claims the changes to Jean’s character work to refute Wolf’s critique. According to Murphet, the scene wherein Jean sees the violent pictures in Bateman’s doodle book demonstrates the violence is just fantasy. This chapter disagrees: the doodles can just as easily be read as the drawings of a serial killer; the status of the murders in the film remains ambiguous.

Unlike Murphet, Eldridge argues the film salvages the novel, claiming that the salvaging was deliberate, economically motivated, and focused on the satirical elements of the film (there is no mention of the film-makers feminist intentions). Eldridge continues: “The perception of the novel’s satiric and allegorical qualities became the general form of film publicity and repeated descriptions of Ellis’s writing as ‘satire’ restored a sense of seriousness of purpose and literary merit.” For Eldridge, it was important both for the film to address the problems raised by early (that is, feminist), critics of the book, and for the novel upon which the film was based to look like it had a serious literary, hence satirical, purpose. For Eldridge, the adaptation potentially transforms the adapted text.

While the feminist reworking of American Psycho’s story in the film adaptation is significant, most scholars fail to address the feminist aspects of the film adaptation, neglecting both Harron’s enlightened approach to the sexually violent scenes, and the

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188 Murphet, 76.
189 Murphet, 77.
190 Eldridge, “Generic,” 22.
191 Eldridge, 23.
introduction of the new female points of view. Instead, scholarship focuses on the satirical aspects of Harron’s film. For example, Kauffman and Abel fail to mention Harron’s important feminist contribution in adapting the film.

Further, Kauffman misrepresents Harron’s intentions regarding the film adaptation, only quoting Harron when she defends the novel as a satire.\(^{192}\) This is an oversight as Harron is extremely critical of the sexual violence in *American Psycho*. The importance of context is also minimised in Kauffman’s review: when Kauffman asks Harron about her gender in relation to the project, Kauffman fails to add that Harron agrees with much of Wolf’s critique. The closest Kauffman comes to noting the important changes Harron made to the story are the following lines:

> I ask her [Harron] if she thinks it makes a difference that it was she who made the film, rather than a man. ‘Yes, I think it will make a difference. In some ways, people will look at it more critically because I’m a woman. But it feels like it’s safer to people in some ways for a woman to do it. I think we (co-writer Guinevere Turner) had a more detached view of the male character. We also tried to build up the female characters.’\(^{193}\)

Kauffman neglects to invite Harron to expand her points on this topic in her review.

Like Messier’s recent work, Abel’s affective, Deleuzian comparison of the novel with the film shifts the focus of the novel away from issues to do with women, misogyny and pornography and into a general non-sexual, non-gendered discussion of violence and its capacity to produce affect. Abel only mentions the new female points of view in terms of the way they strengthen mimesis in the film and not in relation to the mass media feminist

\(^{192}\) Kauffman, *Bad Girls*, 249.

\(^{193}\) Kauffman, review, 42.
critique. Abel is not interested in the representation of misogynistic violence and the conditioning and legitimating function the offensive scenes perform on the reader: he is not interested in representation at all.

Further, Abel interprets the film’s salvaging as a failure to adapt the novel. For him, the film does not salvage the novel; it destroys it because reading the novel as satire makes what is different about it disappear.\(^{194}\) Abel’s article also touches on important distinctions between mainstream and avant-garde adaptations when he contrasts what he sees as an anti-realist (avant-garde) novel with Harron’s “traditional satire.”\(^{195}\) Abel notes the changes Harron and Turner made in terms of pace, but not to the female characters.

Abel addresses the question of unfinished cultural business by arguing that the salvaging of the novel as a result of its adaptation into film is partly a reaction to the American Psycho scandal: Harron’s film instantiates “the critical reception of American Psycho.”\(^{196}\) Abel’s analysis also addresses context and speculates that Harron did not want the film to be attacked like the book, so she removed its “offensive” qualities.\(^{197}\)

Counter to Abel’s argument, the changes Harron made to the adapted text were not just about the satire, they were primarily about feminism. Abel’s claim that “Harron was essentially forced to respond to the critical discourse by amplifying the element that was thought to be the sole redeeming factor of Ellis’s violent novel: namely, its satire,” is only half true.\(^{198}\) Harron did not only frame the story as a satire, she also and more importantly amplified the feminism in the story by changing points of view, cutting scenes and developing female characters.

\(^{194}\) Abel, “Affective,” 140.
\(^{195}\) Abel, 138.
\(^{196}\) Abel, 138.
\(^{197}\) Abel, 141-2.
\(^{198}\) Abel, 141.
Curiously, the significance of Harron and Turner’s feminist reconfiguration of the novel in the film adaptation has been over-looked in most scholarly analyses of the film, of Ellis, and of American Psycho. What has been retained in recent criticism is Turner and Harron’s other rewriting contribution—their decision to film the novel as a satire. Thus, while the significance of the film has endured in aesthetic and moral terms, the political/feminist significance has largely been lost and does not feature in post-2000, scholarly literary criticism.

Commentators and scholars, such as Bernstein, Bradshaw and Eldridge, argue that economic and marketing concerns are key in presenting the film as a satire. In order to succeed, the film had to restore the novel’s damaged reputation before it could be successfully marketed first. It made sense to market it as a satire, because a satirical label restored a literary status to the sensationalised novel. However, this chapter argues differently. Defenders of the novel used the enormous glamour and power of film stars and directors connected to the film adaptation to defend American Psycho from Wolf’s critique and to effectively silence it.

As noted above, scholarly analyses of Harron’s American Psycho compounded Mailer’s initial shift, again transforming the film from a social political adaptation into an aesthetic/moral one in which the significance of the removal of the misogynistic scenes and the other feminist changes are neutralised.

Ultimately, as commendable as the film adaptation is, as a feminist project it cannot and must not rewrite the novel in a virtual sense: the novel must be judged and read independently of the film, and on its own merits and failings. While the film arguably needed to salvage the novel to ensure its own success, this thesis challenges the virtual rewriting of

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the novel that has accompanied its adaptation and argues the most interesting thing about
Ellis’s novel is the mass media feminist critique it inspired with its potential for public
political debate.

It is worth adding as a footnote to the above that Ellis, prior to the adaptation of
*American Psycho*, and again contradicting his alleged intentions in interviews, actually pre-
empts the changes that Harron and Turner will make in adapting *American Psycho* in his
novel *Glamorama*. Not only does Ellis remove the sexualised misogyny from the storyline of
*Glamorama*, but he exaggerates the “like in a movie” motif that repeats throughout *American
Psycho*. In *Glamorama*, which the present study suggests is Ellis’s novelistic response to the
mass media feminist critique of *American Psycho*, Victor literally believes he is being
followed around by a film crew and that a film is being made about him. Victor constantly
narrates things like, “the director leans into me and warns, ‘You’re not looking worried
enough,’ which is my cue to leave Florent.”

Observing Ellis’s strategy, Heyler *theorises* *Glamorama* as a “cinematic novel”
because it “suggests celluloid is more life-like than novels, indeed more life-like than life.”
Heyler also compares *Glamorama* to a “filmic adaptation” due to its complex intertextuality
wherein “It is impossible to differentiate between original and adapted” because the novel
implies only copying, recycling, repeating amending, and altering. Heyler claims that “The
complex layers of intertextual relationship and identity remind the reader of the created,
fictional nature of the adaptive culture they are both analysing and occupying.” While the
same can be said of the intertextuality in *American Psycho*, Heyler also implies that

200 Ellis, *Glamorama*, 168.
201 Ruth Heyler, “*Glamorama, Cinematic Narrative and Contemporary Fiction,*” in *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*, Rachel Carroll, ed. (London: Continuum, 2009), 197.
202 Heyler, 197.
203 Heyler, 200.
Glamorama pre-empts its adaptation: it is as if Ellis wants to incorporate the film adaptation into his own novels, remembering too that Ellis’s script for American Psycho was rejected. Significantly, Heyler adds that while Ellis embraces recycling and adaptation of other texts in his novels, Ellis forbids the incorporation of his own work into other people’s projects. For example, Ellis sued Ben Stiller, the director, co-writer and star of Zoolander (2001) for alleged copyright infringement: “whilst Ellis is happy to ‘adapt’ celebrity identities (including his own), he wished to protect his own work from similar borrowings.”

While Ellis’s self-plagiarising and self-adaptation are formal features in novels like Lunar Park, Ellis’s recent attempt to reframe American Psycho requires further comment. Ellis discusses American Psycho, not in relation to issues to do with misogyny or sexual violence towards women, which is, as this thesis has argued, the most significant aspect of the novel as well as being the chief contributing factor to the scandal, but as a masculinist project: “Bateman seems to embody something about masculinity that was blooming at a certain point in the late ‘80s early ‘90s.”

Ellis’s stance is best conceived of as both a continuation of his early defensive denials of the misogyny of the text, and further denial that the novel has anything to do with sexual violence towards women. However, in the same interview Ellis claims that the scandal resulted from people not reading the novel and that it died down upon publication. This is incorrect. Most commentary was published after the novel appeared. Thus, American Psycho was published in March 1991 and reviews (wherein the reviewer had read the novel and found it scandalous and misogynistic) by the following commentators were published after the novel’s release: Mailer, Wolf and Love. As Iannone writes:

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204 Heyler, 205. 
206 Coreno, 10.
These early pieces in *Time* and *Spy* were soon joined by a chorus of pre-publication denunciations in such places as *Newsweek, The Washington Post, U.S. News & World Report,* and *The New York Times.* And since its release in March—the novel having been snapped up by Random House, an even more prestigious publisher than Simon & Schuster—not only have feminist groups run a determined boycott of *American Psycho,* but it has received widespread critical condemnation, even from Norman Mailer.

Ellis’s account again represents a departure from the facts and leaves him open to accusations of lying and inconsistency: the novel was published in March, before it was critiqued by mass media feminist and non-feminist critics. These comments can be contrasted with the following extremely rare concession to Wolf’s critique made by Ellis in 1999: “I think the outcry to *American Psycho* occurred simply because that violence had a sexual nature. That seems to be far more upsetting to a reader than violence that isn’t overtly sexual in nature.”

Ellis’s inconsistencies in interview make it difficult to take any of his comments at face value (including those that support the argument here). This means, further substantiation must be sought. In this case, such comments are borne out by the fact that Ellis never depicts violence towards women in the same manner in subsequent novels.

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207 Iannone, “PC.” 52.
CHAPTER 3

PROTESTING TOO MUCH: SATIRE AND PARODY

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab as it lurches forward in the traffic leaving Wall Street and just as Timothy Price notices the words a bus pulls up, the advertisement for ‘Les Misérables’ on its side blocking his view, but Price who is with Pierce & Pierce and twenty-six doesn’t seem to care because he tells the driver he will give him five dollars to turn up the radio, ‘Be My Baby’ on WYNN, and the driver, black, not American, does so.¹

The next two chapters will examine three defences of American Psycho in relation to the feminist critique. This chapter will focus on the satire defence and challenge it: while American Psycho does have satirical, that is, socially criticising elements, its dominating formal characteristics mean it is more accurately described as a postmodern parody and make it impossible to read the novel as a straightforward satire. Significantly, defining American Psycho this way—in relation to Hutcheon’s theory of parody—also allows for the feminist critique and the satire defence to be integrated in the one methodology.²

Rethinking American Psycho as a postmodern parody draws attention to other important elements that emerged in, but were left unresolved by, the American Psycho scandal such as the question of the reader’s role in the text, and the author’s inability to signal his intentions effectively to the reader. While such a redefinition is timely given the emphasis on satirical elements in the film and the effects of the adaptation on the original, not to

¹ Ellis, American Psycho, 3.
mention Ellis’s ongoing experimentation with postmodern parody in recent novels such as *Lunar Park*, this chapter will also suggest *American Psycho*’s postmodern parody can be further theorised as a becoming-mass-media and becoming-other of the novel.

A re-examination of literary criticism about *American Psycho* reveals commentators and scholars are divided on the issue of whether *American Psycho* is a parody or a satire, with some even employing the two terms interchangeably. Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody* (hereafter *Parody*) resolves this confusion as Hutcheon conceives of parody specifically in relation to postmodernity, and provides clear definitions of postmodern parody, satire, irony and pastiche. While a text can be satirical and parodic at the same time, the two terms are not interchangeable in Hutcheon’s conception. Hutcheon’s work also proves useful in clarifying issues pertinent to: the author’s stated intentions; the reader’s knowledge and ability to interpret authorial signals; and the author’s signalled intentions in the text (all of which are of heightened importance in postmodern parody).

This is the first doctoral dissertation to analyse *American Psycho* in relation to Hutcheon’s theory of parody, although others have connected Hutcheon to Ellis’s work. Annesley, who prefers Jameson’s definitions and analyses Ellis’s work in terms of pastiche or blank parody, is critical of Hutcheon’s theory of parody (although he implicitly employs Hutcheon’s theory in his analysis of *Zero*).³ While Kevin Ferguson also notes Hutcheon’s work on parody, he argues Ellis’s work lacks the critical part of Hutcheon’s “complicitous critique”: Ellis’s novel does not simultaneously critique what it celebrates, it remains complicit with it.⁴

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Significantly, Hutcheon argues “para” has two meanings, “counter” and “beside”: it is not limited to ridiculing alone. Beside suggests an “accord” or “intimacy” that undermines any straightforward notion of ridicule or critique and it is this second, rarely mentioned meaning of parody that comes to the foreground in postmodern texts. Thus, Hutcheon’s definition of parody complements the analysis of American Psycho: parody as both counter and beside reinforces the way the recency effect ensures American Psycho can never be interpreted as a straightforward critique of misogynistic violence: for the reader, pornography and horror (pleasure and horror, desire and repulsion) become utterly fused throughout the novel.

Further, defining parody as intrinsically double-sided means that while defenders have argued American Psycho is a counter/against-parody of snuff pornography, American Psycho is equally a celebratory/beside-parody of snuff pornography. Thus, the misogynistic conventions of snuff pornography are not just critiqued in American Psycho’s postmodern parody, they are also condoned, and celebrated. As Sontag famously argued, while pornography can have literary and aesthetic conventions, it is impossible to parody pornography as it is by definition already parodic: “A parody of pornography, so far as it has any real competence, always remains pornography. Indeed, parody is one common form of pornographic writing.” The text supports such claims with numerous examples. In the Torri/Tiffany scene, a lengthy pornographic scenario suddenly changes into a horrendous nightmare featuring torture, rape, dismemberment and murder. This scene fuses arousal and violent misogyny in a way that implies violence is desirable and which suggests there is a positive (desirable) payoff for perpetrators of violent misogyny. Or, consider the scene

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6 Hutcheon, 32.
wherein Bateman tries to make a meatloaf out of one of the prostitutes he has raped, tortured and killed, and cries “‘I just want to be loved.’” Again, this implies there is a funny side to his violent sexualised behaviour which again suggests it is an enjoyable activity. Such textual complicity with sexualised misogynistic violence lends credence to the mass media feminist critique.

Formal evidence of Hutcheon’s “beside” parody is evident in the opening paragraph of the novel. From the novel’s opening line, the literary seriousness of the Dante quotation is undermined by the kitsch of the Les Misérables reference with its status as adapted-classic-turned-popular-entertainment. This ambiguous tone, which is suggestive of Hutcheon’s notion of parodic double-sidedness, is a constant throughout the novel. (Baelo-Allué similarly argues Ellis’s work combines high and low culture. 10)

It will be apparent from the above that Hutcheon argues the “conventions” of a work can be parodied, not just the text itself. 11 American Psycho’s parody of snuff is an example of this kind of parody, as are the numerous parodies of other literary genres: pornography (pages 173-6, 288-90, and 303-5), the Western, (the business card scene, pages 44-6), detective fiction (Donald Kimball, pages 266-277), romance (see the analysis below), the thriller (Chase Manhattan on pages 347-352), and of magazines (GQ, and Stereo Review, pages 24-30), and record reviews (Genesis, 133-6, Whitney Houston, 252-256, Huey Lewis and the News, pages 352-60).

Whether specific texts or textual conventions are being parodied, Hutcheon’s parody cuts both ways, including both rejection and respectful homage. This double-sidedness of postmodern parody helps explain why American Psycho has caused such confusion among

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9 Ellis, 344-5; 132. Bateman’s “celebratory drink,” after his attack of Al is another example.
10 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 1, 93.
11 Hutcheon, Parody, 13.
commentators, publishing staff, scholars and mainstream readers alike who for the most part remain unaware that *American Psycho* is a postmodern parody. That is to say, a text whose implications are never those of straightforward critique (or complicity). The double-sidedness of parody explains the novel’s profound ambiguity as well as lending ambiguity a formal dimension: *American Psycho* is ambiguous at both formal and mimetic levels.

Describing *American Psycho* as postmodern parody potentially allows for a more balanced and complex analysis, one that incorporates both feminist criticism, and scholarly defences. Feminist critics address one aspect of *American Psycho*’s postmodern parody, the problematic part which celebrates and condones sexualised violent misogyny (and which depicts violent misogyny as desirable); whereas defenders draw attention to the other side of *American Psycho*’s postmodern parody, the part which critiques sexualised violent misogyny (by forcing the reader, through a number of complex, formal devices, to confront violent misogyny and provide their own criticism). Thus, both feminist critique and scholarly defence are simultaneously right: only a view that combines both, defining the novel as postmodern parody, can do justice to this complex, flawed novel. Ultimately, however, it is necessary to qualify even this position: the sexualised misogynistic violent scenes dominate the novel to such a degree they demand centrality in any analysis. Shifting the scholarly terrain to a more balanced approach is a first step however.

Unlike other definitions of parody, Hutcheon’s parody always has a formal dimension. *American Psycho* perfectly illustrates Hutcheon’s definition with its trans-contextualisation of other texts from magazines, television, newspapers, crime reports, advertising, film scripts and FBI reports. For example: Ellis parodies fashion editorials with, “Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt

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12 Hutcheon, 11.
with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti.”\(^{13}\) Or, in a parody of magazine journalism Ellis writes:

The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it’s a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame); the audio includes built-in MTS and a five-watt-per-channel on-board amp.\(^{14}\)

Or, Ellis parodies record reviews,

The songs themselves seemed arranged more around Collins’ drumming than Mike Rutherford’s bass lines or Tony Banks’ keyboard riffs. A classic example of this is ‘Misunderstanding,’ which not only was the group’s first big hit of the eighties but also seemed to set the tone for the rest of their albums as the decade progressed.\(^{15}\)

Ellis also parodies a Diet Pepsi advertisement on page 97; and travel journalism on pages 137-41.

The specifically postmodern aspects of Hutcheon’s definition are worth briefly noting as they pertain to parody (the postmodern defence will be discussed further in Chapter 4). Hutcheon defines postmodernism as both an era, and a tendency in art forms (of which parody is a typical example).\(^{16}\) Ubiquitous in contemporary art forms and a major form of postmodern self-reflexivity, Hutcheon argues parody is intrinsically postmodern.\(^{17}\)

\(^{13}\) Ellis, American Psycho, 4-5.

\(^{14}\) Ellis, 25.

\(^{15}\) Ellis, American Psycho, 133; Ellis, “Art of Fiction,” 175. Ellis claims he wrote music reviews for high school newspaper until they kicked him off: “no one at my high school wanted to read about Elvis Costello,” they wanted the latest Journey or Foreigner records.

\(^{16}\) Hutcheon, Parody, 1-2.

\(^{17}\) Hutcheon, 1-2.
Hutcheon’s differentiation of parody from satire is also useful given the confusion about these terms. While satire is straightforwardly mocking, postmodern parody is not: it celebrates and condones. Further, parody’s target is always another text or codified form of discourse, whereas satire’s target is moral and social: “even the best works on parody tend to confuse it with satire… which, unlike parody, is both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention.”

Thus, Bateman’s name can be read as a formal parody of *Batman* (1939), and the title of the novel suggests a formal parody of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), (this point is also made by Corliss, Sharrett and Buscall.)

Bateman’s behaviour symbolises a moral/social satire of the lifestyle of Wall Street yuppies in 1980s New York.

The formal parodies of specific texts indicate inversions that simultaneously contain elements of homage. The parody of *Batman* stresses Bateman is not Batman: unlike Batman, Bateman does not fight bad guys, he is indistinguishable from the bad guys. Like Batman, he is a vigilante of sorts (ridding the white male yuppie world of minorities). Unlike Norman Bates, whose murderous rage has a psychological explanation, Bateman’s actions belie no psychological explanation. However, like Bates, Bateman’s sexual violence is triggered by his fear of femininity and Otherness: assertive women, prostitutes, stereotypical gays and black homeless people trigger Bateman’s murderous rage. So while Bateman resists psychology, his behaviour nevertheless conforms to predictable patterns: as Bate-man, he baits, tortures and kills women primarily (but also blacks, gays, dogs, Jews, children, Asians and rivals). Thus, *American Psycho* parodies, that is, inverts and ridicules, our need/expectation for rich heroic males, as well as our need for a psychological explanation of evil; but it also celebrates and plays with aspects of these conventions. (Ellis claims there is a playful aspect to the novel.)

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18 Hutcheon, 16.
*American Psycho* also parodies the conventions of the romance genre, as is the case in the Bateman/Evelyn scenes. Thus, in the scene where Bateman disguises a men’s urinal cake as a Godiva chocolate, gives it to Evelyn and watches her eat it, the dialogue and behaviour parodies a conventional romantic couple on a date.\(^{20}\) Unlike a conventional couple, Bateman is a commitment-phobic man, and Evelyn is a greedy and manipulative woman who is after his money in the form of a marriage contract. Instead of enjoying Evelyn’s conversation, Bateman narrates “I find myself cringing every time Evelyn opens her mouth.”\(^{21}\) Instead of being flirtatiously interested in each other, Evelyn openly flirts with another man during their date.\(^{22}\) Reversing the traditional roles where women are supposed to be paranoid about their looks and attach enormous value to them, Bateman retaliates against Evelyn’s flirtation by criticising the other man’s looks, referring to him as a “‘dwarf.’”\(^{23}\)

During the rest of the meal Evelyn talks about her girl-friends while Bateman does not listen. Instead he idly narrates that Evelyn lacks sexuality, reflects upon a recent conversation with his psychiatrist and considers which other women he would like to have sex with in the restaurant. While Bateman fantasizes about attacking Evelyn during this part of the meal, “Dimly aware that if it weren’t for the people in the restaurant I would take the jade chopsticks sitting on the table and push them deep into Evelyn’s eyes and snap them in two,” he restrains himself, limiting his animosity to his delight in her discomfort while she eats the Godiva chocolate.\(^{24}\) However, this too disappoints:

Even though I marveled at her eating that thing, it also makes me sad and suddenly I’m reminded that no matter how satisfying it was to see Evelyn eating something I,

\(^{21}\) Ellis, 330.
\(^{22}\) Ellis, 333.
\(^{23}\) Ellis, 332.
\(^{24}\) Ellis, 334.
and countless others, had pissed on, in the end the displeasure it caused her was at my expense—it’s an anticlimax, a futile excuse to put up with her for three hours.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{In a} parodic inversion of romantic conventions Bateman gives “the gift,” but Evelyn makes “the proposal”: after choking down two mouthfuls of the men’s urinal soap she demands, “‘I want a firm commitment.’”\textsuperscript{26}

From this point on, the conversation becomes a break-up scenario where Bateman peppers the inevitable with romantic clichés like “‘I think, Evelyn, that... that we’ve lost touch,’” “‘We need to talk,’” and finally, Ellis’s parody of a reason to break up, “‘my need to engage in... homicidal behaviour on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected.’”\textsuperscript{27} Evelyn, far from conventionally broken-hearted, refuses to take him seriously: “‘Let’s just avoid the issue, all right? I’m sorry I said anything. Now, are we having coffee?’”\textsuperscript{28} But Bateman realises that she is motivated by “‘greed,’” not “‘adoration.’”\textsuperscript{29} According to romantic convention, Evelyn should storm out in tears when Bateman breaks up with her, but Evelyn does not leave and Bateman notes there are “‘very few’” tears.\textsuperscript{30}

Examples of satire in the Bateman/Evelyn scene abound: during Bateman’s reflection on his recent session with a psychiatrist his “‘shrink’” asks him what form of contraception he uses with Evelyn and Bateman says, “‘Her Job.’”\textsuperscript{31} Again, when asked about Evelyn’s favourite sexual act, Bateman replies “‘Foreclosure.’”\textsuperscript{32} Ellis satirises the emancipated careerist woman as someone who is devoid of sexuality.

\textsuperscript{25} Ellis, 337.
\textsuperscript{26} Ellis, 337. Evelyn has proposed to Bateman once before, on page 125.
\textsuperscript{27} Ellis, 338.
\textsuperscript{28} Ellis, 338.
\textsuperscript{29} Ellis, 338.
\textsuperscript{30} Ellis, 342.
\textsuperscript{31} Ellis, 334.
\textsuperscript{32} Ellis, 334.
These parodies cut both ways. Firstly, they critique romantic clichés and hackneyed phrases, as when Bateman gives his reason for leaving as his “homicidal needs.” Secondly, they reverse roles and intentions: the gift is intended to humiliate and offend, not to please and charm; and Evelyn pushes for commitment, not Bateman. At the same time, the inversions and reversals reinvent romantic roles in a modern form. For example, contemporary women are assertive, and can speak up and ask for their needs, that is, marriage and commitment. Such scenes invert romantic conventions while simultaneously creating them (and may even imply the inversions are preferable at one level).

The Bateman/Bethany scenes also parody the romance genre. Reversing romantic conventions, Bateman recites a poem during their lunch that is racist and unromantic. Furthermore, Bateman is enraged by the role in which he finds himself cast: Bateman believes Bethany’s lunch invitation guarantees sex, but Bethany only intends friendship. When Bateman realises, he pleads for her to come back to his place (where he intends to torture and kill her). According to romantic cliché, the man asks the woman out, and she invites him back to her place for “a coffee.” Similarly, Bethany’s attractiveness—conventionally pleasing—makes Bateman anxious. Bateman is also enraged she has a Platinum American Express card like his (conventionally, the romantic hero is richer than the heroine). In addition, such scenes comprise a satire of contemporary relations between the sexes.

The sheer number of pages Ellis devotes to romantic scenes suggests romance as the central concern of the novel. The above Bateman/Evelyn scene comprises 13 pages; and the Bethany/Bateman scene 17. While the novel opens with Price and Bateman, segues to Evelyn’s dinner party (from pages 3 to 17), and ends with Bateman and his male friends, the

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33 Ellis, 233.
34 Ellis, 231. [Italics in original.]
extra space devoted to dates and Bateman’s “romantic” interactions suggests it is the central topic of the novel and that Bateman’s relationships with women comprise the plot, such as it is. There are approximately 120 pages of date scenes, as opposed to approximately 70 pages of scenes with Bateman’s male friends.

The date scenes consist of: Bateman/Jean on pages 64-7; the Patricia date on pages 72-81; the Courtney date and sexual tryst on pages 92-105; the first date with Evelyn on pages 117-26; Courtney and then the prostitutes on pages 166-76; Evelyn and Bateman after Evelyn’s Christmas party on pages 187-198; the Bethany sighting and the Daisy/Bateman scene on pages 211-4; a phone call with Evelyn, 219-21; the Bethany lunch on pages 230-247; the Bateman/Jean romance 257-266; Jeanette date and Bateman/Evelyn at the Hamptons on pages 277-282; Evelyn/Bateman phone call, pages 316-7; the final Evelyn date on pages 330-343; Bateman with Jeanette on pages 363-5; the Bateman/Jean romance on pages 371-380; Jeanette’s abortion 380-2.

The scenes with Bateman’s male friends consist of: Harry’s on pages 30-39; Pastel’s on pages 39-51; Tunnel on pages 52-63; Harry’s on pages 86-92; business meeting on pages 107-111; lunch on pages 137-141; Yale Club on pages 153-7; Nell’s on pages 199-201; Paul Owen on pages 215-217; the conference call on pages 309-315, 317-25; Smith and Wollensky on pages 362-3; and Harry’s on pages 394-9.

Close reading of the parodic record reviews suggests that Ellis is aware that romance and relationships are requisite subjects for commercially successful pop songs, and by implication, novels. Thus, in the review of Huey Lewis and the News, Bateman, whose views (the reader assumes) implicitly oppose Ellis’s here, observes the following characteristics of commercial pop songs: they have a message of “hope,” page 358; they are about “sustained relationships,” page 357; they espouse clean relationship values, page 355; they are about
love, not nihilism, page 354; they are about personal relationships, page 354; and their commercial success is all that matters. Bateman’s claim that nine million people cannot be wrong, that the proof lies in the fact that Huey Lewis and the News sell more records than Elvis Costello, emphasises this last point on page 354. Given Ellis’s own implied preference for mournful, ambiguous texts, *American Psycho’s* focus on hateful misogynistic heterosexual relationships and its ambiguous parodies of the romance genre make sense as an implicit protest against the corporatisation of the publishing industry and the critical and commercial failure of *Rules*.

Given Young and numerous others have adequately analysed the novel in terms of postmodern tropes, this type of analysis will not be repeated here.\(^{35}\) In addition to *Batman*, and *Psycho*, the novel also parodies: *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), and *In Cold Blood* (1966); as well as conventions from television soaps.\(^{36}\) *American Psycho* also trans-contextualises Jay McInerney’s *Story of My Life* (1988), Tama Janowitz’s *Slaves of New York* and Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of The Vanities*. Thus, Stash from *Slaves of New York* appears in *American Psycho*, as does Alison Poole from *Story of my Life*, and McCoy from Wolfe’s novel. Further, Bateman and his co-arbitrageurs work at Pierce & Pierce which was Sherman McCoy’s investment firm, and Bateman refers to cocaine as “Bolivian Marching Powder,” a name given it in *Bright Lights, Big City*.\(^ {37}\) Finally, as noted above, sundry characters in *American Psycho* attended Camden (Ellis’s fictionalised version of Bennington, the college he attended), the setting for *Rules*.\(^ {38}\)


\(^{37}\) Ellis, 54.

\(^{38}\) Udovitch, “Intentional,” 66.
Curiously, in his parodic review of Genesis, Bateman complains that Collins has “plagiarised himself.” Given the numerous ironic inversions here, we can assume that while Bateman disapproves, Ellis approves of self-plagiarism. Thus, in *American Psycho* Ellis self-plagiarises *Rules: Rules* refers to Huey Lewis and The News on page 68, Genesis on 257, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* on 224, all of which feature in *American Psycho*. *Rules* also introduces Patrick and Evelyn on page 233, Evelyn is a “junior exec at Am Ex,” and Patrick’s mother on page 224, who all feature in *American Psycho*. Thus *American Psycho* plagiarises and parodies Ellis’s earlier novel.

The difference Hutcheon discerns between parody and satire’s “‘intramural’” and “‘extramural’” aims is also relevant to the current study. By intramural aims Hutcheon means the way the text emphasises the difference between the background and foreground text. With extramural aims, Hutcheon theorises that the difference is between the foreground text and the outside world. For Hutcheon, it is the formal difference between background and foreground text that matters: thus in the Batman example, the parodied background text is *Batman*, and the foreground text is Ellis’s novel and the difference between the two constructs meaning in *American Psycho*. Batman rights wrongs; but in *American Psycho* Bateman commits evil in an indifferent world. Critics who defend *American Psycho* as a satire, overlook or choose to ignore the novel’s “intramural” characteristics: characteristics which undermine any idea of the text as a straightforward critical satire of Yuppie values, or violent misogyny.

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41 Hutcheon, 31.
Further, it need not always be the past or the background text that is subject to critique or ridicule, the present or foregrounded text can be critiqued as well.\footnote{Hutcheon, 11.} American Psycho’s parody of Batman also works in this way: while the world of Batman is shown as being no longer possible in 1980s New York, this may not be a good thing; the nostalgic past conjured by the world of Batman may be preferable to the lawless present (the signalling of difference here remains ambiguous). By curious coincidence, Christian Bale plays Bateman and Batman in both film adaptations.

Irony is also relevant to this discussion of parody, given the way it tends to alert the reader to the presence of parody.\footnote{Hutcheon, 31.} While commentators and scholars disagree about whether American Psycho employs irony—\textit{for example}, Murphet argues the novel is ironic, but Buscall argues it is devoid of irony—this chapter argues American Psycho is ironic and cites the record reviews as examples.\footnote{Murphet, \textit{Reader’s Guide}, 34; Buscall, “Whose Text?” 201.} Thus, the narrator/Bateman inflates commercial clichés into romantic genius. The Genesis “review” begins:

I’ve been a big Genesis fan ever since the release of their 1980 album, \textit{Duke}. Before that I didn’t really understand any of their work, though on their last album of the 1970s the concept-laden \textit{And Then There Were Three} (a reference to band member Peter Gabriel, who left the group to start a lame solo career), I \textit{did} enjoy the lovely ‘Follow You, Follow Me.’ Otherwise all the albums before \textit{Duke} seemed too artsy, too intellectual. It was \textit{Duke} (Atlantic; 1980), where Phil Collins’ presence became more apparent, and the music got more modern, the drum machine became more prevalent and the lyrics started getting less mystical and more specific (maybe
because of Peter Gabriel’s departure), and complex, ambiguous studies of loss became, instead, smashing first-rate pop songs that I gratefully embraced.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{The irony is} that Ellis, in direct opposition to Bateman, seems to regard the pre-Duke songs as the band’s best. Thus, while Bateman applauds band member Gabriel’s departure, as well as the commerciality of \textit{Duke}, Ellis views such events as regrettable. The text implies “arty” and “intellectual” music is preferable to “smashing first rate pop songs.”\textsuperscript{46} Thus, in \textit{American Psycho}, satire, irony and postmodern parody are linked and overlap, although parody alone manifests in formal characteristics.\textsuperscript{47}

The frequency of trans-contextualization is further testimony to \textit{American Psycho}’s status as an exemplary postmodern parodic novel.\textsuperscript{48} Again, the opening of the novel provides numerous examples. Citing Dante, a Broadway musical version of \textit{Les Misérables}, and a pop song “Be My Baby” in the opening paragraph, the complex trans-contextualisation continues throughout the first few pages (and for the rest of the novel). Thus, on page 3, “FEAR” is “sprayed” in red graffiti; over the page, another poster for \textit{Les Misérables} replaces FEAR but this time “DYKE” is written over Eponine’s face (the reference to lesbianism may serve as an indirect signal as to the homosexual subtext in the novel). All the details about New York that Price complains about on page 4 come from a newspaper: “‘In one issue—in one issue—let’s see here... strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops... more Nazis.’”\textsuperscript{49} Price just finishes summarising the news-stories when Bateman narrates “Pan down to the \textit{Post}.”\textsuperscript{50} Thus, the “pan” refers to a camera in a \textit{film}. Bateman’s sense that everything happens “like in

\textsuperscript{45} Ellis, \textit{American Psycho}, 133.
\textsuperscript{46} Ellis, 74. Another example is the parody of the Western in the business card section, which is also signalled by irony.
\textsuperscript{47} Hutcheon, \textit{Parody}, 62.
\textsuperscript{48} Hutcheon, 15.
\textsuperscript{49} Ellis, \textit{American Psycho}, 4.
\textsuperscript{50} Ellis, 5.
a movie,” becomes a motif in the novel: other references to this motif occur on pages: 3, 5, 114, 288, 367, 369 and 395. Bateman then reads a “moderately interesting” (this is ironic, Bateman is intensely interested), story from the Post about two people who disappeared at a party aboard the yacht of a semi-noted New York socialite while the boat was circling the island. A residue of spattered blood and three smashed champagne glasses are the only clues. Foul play is suspected and police think that perhaps a machete was the killer’s weapon because of certain grooves and indentations found on the deck. No bodies have been found. There are no suspects.51

The trans-contextualisation continues: further down on page 5 there is a reference to USA Today, as well as another reference to the movies, “Panning down to the sidewalk,” and on page 6 there is another reference to Les Misérables and another reference to the media: “‘Did you read about the host from that game show on TV? He killed two teenage boys? Depraved faggot. Droll, really droll.’ Price waits for a reaction. There is none.”52

Significantly, the first murder is the one Bateman reads about in the newspaper which suggests the other murders may be based on newspaper accounts as well. Such trans-contextualisation blurs the distinction between the novel, the mass media and popular culture. In swift succession, sometimes within a sentence, the novel cites advertising, newspaper content, literary classics, pop songs and impersonates the conventions of a film.

The novel also constantly refers to brand names. Thus, on page 4 Price wants “Blaupunks” installed in the cab. The description of Price’s briefcase and belongings is typically rich with brand names: “Tumi calfskin attaché case he bought at D. F. Sanders. He places the Walkman in the case alongside a Panasonic wallet-size cordless portable folding

51 Ellis, 5.
52 Ellis, 6.
Easa-phone (he used to own the NEC 9000 Porta portable).”53 Related to this is the idea that much of the description in the book reads like Advertorial, a combination of magazine advertising and editorial. For example, see Bateman’s morning beauty routine and the description of his lounge room on pages 24-30.

Finally, Hutcheon’s conception of the reader is relevant to the argument here. In postmodern parody, the reader and author are “‘on equal footing’”; and for postmodern parody to work, readers must be educated or “in the know.”54 Hutcheon’s point is important because it was exactly this lack of education in some of American Psycho’s reviewers and readers that enabled the novel to be sensationalised by the media. With postmodern parody, it is crucial readers do not misread the parody and as a result, authors must gauge their readers carefully: “Can the producer of parody today assume enough of the cultural background on the part of the audience to make parody anything but a limited, or as some would say, elitist literary genre?”55 It is argued here that American Psycho was not clearly enough signalled as a parody, making it easy to miss. Scholarly postmodern defenders tend to overlook the role of the reader in constructing meaning in the text, a role that becomes more important when analysing postmodern parody. In contrast to the postmodern defences, the affect defence, in keeping with Hutcheon’s work, focuses on the way the reader interacts with the boredom and revulsion they experience when reading the text.

Related to this is Hutcheon’s claim that debates about the Intentional Fallacy have suppressed the figure of the author, as noted above, and that postmodern parody aims to correct this measure.56 Parody suggests a re-examination of the interactive process in the

53 Ellis, 4.
54 Hutcheon, Parody, 5.
55 Hutcheon, 88.
56 Hutcheon, 85.
production and reception of texts and signals the return of the authorial “position.”

Hutcheon is not suggesting we need to return to a romantic idea of a god-like Creator, but that we rethink the authorial position as something that is inferred by readers.

Further, authors of parody tend to be either didactic or implicit parodists. Like Nabokov’s Pale Fire (1962), American Psycho is an implicit parody. Yet, as Hutcheon states, even implicit parodies must be recognised by the reader: it is crucial for the author to signal their intentions if the reader is to identify the parody, something American Psycho fails to do. Implicit parodies in particular require a “sophisticated” reader. Unlike Fowles, who frequently referred to his parodic technique in interviews, Ellis does not indicate he intended a parody. Indeed, some parodies make it very difficult for the reader to make sense of the work: authors like Ellis place readers in “tricky positions” where “The rules, if the author is playing fair, are usually in the text itself.” American Psycho places the reader in a “tricky position,” in which the reader is left to “make their own way,” and while Hutcheon notes that the author needs to be “playing fair,” for such a strategy to work, this thesis suggests that Ellis does not. For example, during the Christie/Sabrina scene, the reader—in the absence of overt authorial signalling—needs to recognise that this is a parody of Playboy or Penthouse magazine, and not just the normal machinations of Bateman’s mind. Close reading demonstrates that the prose is littered with typically pornographic language such as “cunt,” “clit,” “cock,” “asshole,” “humping,” “jerking it off” and “lapping at it like a dog,” as well as pornographic scenarios, such as Christie on all fours, Bateman riding her on top, and

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57 Hutcheon, 86.
58 Hutcheon, 86.
59 Hutcheon, 88.
61 Hutcheon, Parody, 89.
62 Hutcheon, 91.
63 Hutcheon, 92.
64 Hutcheon, 92.
65 Ellis, American Psycho, 173-6.
Sabrina behind Christie; Bateman lying down, Sabrina performing a blow job, and kissing Christie who masturbates herself; the frequent and exaggerated “faked” or real orgasms; and the clichéd cries of “‘Fuck me I’m coming oh god eat me I’m coming.’” However, readers who succumb to the text’s seductive language may miss the parodic clues (especially given the way Bateman becomes eroticised by what takes place). Then again, the parodic codes in American Psycho may not have been shared by many of the novel’s readers who, like reviewers, may have refused to “share” the codes. These readers rejected the novel on the basis of its complicity with misogynistic violence.

Few of American Psycho’s sensationalism-hungry readers would have been able to closely read the text, a skill necessary for the reader to recognise Ellis’s subtle hints. As Hutcheon argues, “Maybe we do need those sleeve notes on modern composers’ records in order to understand the music.” Indeed, sleeve notes, or informative description of the novel as postmodern parody on the dust jacket, would have ensured American Psycho was signalled as parody to the mainstream reader. However, sleeve notes were not provided by publishers (commercial motives seem likely).

While Ellis does not directly express an intention to parody—only to satirise—most of Ellis’s critics and sensationalism-hungry readers clearly failed to recognise Ellis’s intention to parody. While it is important that the reader remain in a state of doubt and ambiguity as to whether Bateman commits the crimes or not (Ellis’s strategy of withholding information from the reader works well in this sense for the first four-fifths of the novel), it is important that the parody is clearly signalled by the author.

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66 Ellis, 173-4; 175.
67 Hutcheon, Parody, 93.
68 Hutcheon, 27. [My italics.]
For example, while Bateman watches numerous pornographic videos—on page 69 he returns video tapes *She-Male Reformatory*, and *Body Double*; on page 70 Bateman buys lesbian pornographic magazines *Cunt on Cunt*, and *Lesbian Vibrator Bitches*; and on pages 97-8 he watches a movie called *Inside Lydia’s Ass*—these references to pornography do not occur within the pornographic scenes themselves. If they did, the parody of pornography would be more overt and the titillation of the reader less likely to occur.

Hutcheon’s conception of the politics of parody is also of interest. Hutcheon’s politics of parody as authorised trangression combines Bakhtin’s notion that true parody is a genuinely revolutionary genre with Barthes and Kristeva’s notion that parody is conservative: “Parody is fundamentally double and divided: its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression.”

It is also worth citing Hutcheon’s definition of pastiche, given the number of scholars who describe *American Psycho* as pastiche. Hutcheon differentiates parody from pastiche in terms of intention: parody signals difference from its model; whereas pastiche signals similarity. Hutcheon also differentiates her work from Margaret Rose’s *Parody/Metafiction*—while Hutcheon’s postmodern parody is self-referential, Hutcheon claims Rose’s parody is equivalent with self-reference—and from theories of intertextuality like Gerard Genette’s; while Genette’s parody is formalist, Hutcheon claims he limits the intention of parody to modes that denigrate.

Defenders of *American Psycho* argue it satirises misogyny, and Ellis has claimed it is “a feminist tract,” but *American Psycho* is not just a satire, it is also a postmodern parody.

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69 Hutcheon, 26.
71 Hutcheon, *Parody*, 20-1.
which reinforces as it critiques.\textsuperscript{72} Thus, as noted above, \textit{American Psycho} celebrates misogyny as equally as it critiques it. Defining \textit{American Psycho} as a postmodern parody that both critiques and celebrates sexualised misogyny supports the argument here: as noted above, any attempt at a balanced analysis of \textit{American Psycho} must incorporate both feminist critique and scholarly defences. That is, a balanced study must, at the very least, analyse both the sexualised violent misogyny and the novel’s aesthetic qualities.

While the author’s parodic intentions need to be clearly signalled to the reader, critics like Eldridge have argued that it was impossible for Ellis to signal his intentions in interviews once the controversy began: “Having been abandoned by his publishers, Ellis had effectively lacked the cultural weight to challenge NOW and critics like Rosenblatt and advance better readings of his ‘authorial intent.’”\textsuperscript{73} This thesis argues publishers should have more authentically framed the novel to signal the parody and Ellis’s intentions, and that Ellis should have agreed to cut the offensive scenes.

While commentators and scholars tend to analyse \textit{American Psycho} as a satire (though they disagree as to its success as satire), they are divided as to whether the novel is a parody or not. Confusion in terms of definitions of parody is rife. Unlike the satire defence, the notion that the novel is a parody is slow to emerge in literary criticism. Writing at the time of the controversy, Stiles, Cohen, Baker, Corliss, Teachout, Mailer and Iannone all describe \textit{American Psycho} as a satire, though Stiles, Baker, Iannone, Teachout and Mailer also argue that the novel fails as a satire.\textsuperscript{74} Only Corliss presents the satire in a positive light, and meanwhile Cohen presents the satire defence with studied neutrality. Thus, Corliss complains “most reviewers” strip \textit{American Psycho} of its “satirical style,” and Cohen’s

\textsuperscript{72} Exit, Fox.
\textsuperscript{73} Eldridge, “Generic,” 32.
combined interview/review quotes Ellis’s intentions at length and claims other critics missed the novel’s satire.\textsuperscript{75}

Given the importance of authorial intentions in relation to parody, Ellis’s comments in Cohen are of interest to the argument here. Ellis’s description of writing American Psycho implies he intended a parody of the realist conventions of “narration,” and “character”: “I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing... So I wrote a book that is all surface action: no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive.”\textsuperscript{76} Some of Ellis’s other comments in Cohen are relevant to the discussion of reader competence: “Bateman is a misogynist... But I would think most Americans learn in junior high to differentiate between the writer and the character he is writing about… I am not on the side of that creep [Bateman].”\textsuperscript{77} Ellis is aware his readers do not understand his intentions with American Psycho and lack the competence to read it: readers clearly have not learned their literary lessons in “junior high,” many are not able to distinguish between the writer and the character.

Ellis also mentions leaving the reader subtle “hints” in Cohen:

‘There seems to be a notion that when you are writing about someone killing and torturing people, especially women, you have to do it in a very earnest and politically correct way… But the murder sequences are so over the top, so baroque in their violence, it seems hard to take them in a literal context. And there are dozens more hints that direct the reader toward the realization that for all the book’s surface reality, it is still satirical, semi-comic and—dare I say it?—playful in a way... I guess

\textsuperscript{75} Corliss, “Vidiocy,” 56; Cohen, “Answers Critics,” C18
\textsuperscript{76} Cohen, C13.
\textsuperscript{77} Cohen, C18. [My italics.]
you walk a very thin line when you try to write about a serial killer in a very satirical way… There’s this new sensitivity. You cannot risk offending anyone."\(^78\)

**While** Ellis blames the scandal on political correctness, the problem is not only the relative political correctness of Ellis’s subject matter, it is not only about his decision to satirise a serial killer, the problem is also to do with readerships and with Ellis’s failure to adequately signal authorial intent to the book’s actual readers at the time of publication. The “dozens” of “hints” Ellis argues make it “hard” to read the novel in a “literal context” seem overly optimistic when applied to a mainstream readership who clearly found it very easy—as Ellis is only too aware—to miss the hints and read the novel in precisely a literal context. These readers lack the competence to interpret the parody. Cohen acknowledges the “extreme” “confusion” the text provokes between “author” and “character.”\(^79\)

Overall, Corliss and Cohen’s articles are the exception, not the rule. Critics like Baker, who feel *American Psycho* goes “too far” to work as a satire, are more common: “The extremely graphic nature of the brutality, the apparent reveling in pornographic detail, the sadistic excesses… all seem to go far beyond the author’s avowed attempt to satirically equate the materialistic ’80s with the rampages of a Wall Street madman.”\(^80\) Iannone also argues the satire fails though she adds this is because Ellis loses control of his material: “Ellis goes so far with the yuppie stuff that his novel is always threatening to turn into a satire not of Reaganist America but of people who hold such clichés about Reaganite America.”\(^81\)

Thus, Baker and Iannone argue that *American Psycho* fails as a satire, and counter Ellis’s initial satire defence.

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\(^78\) Cohen, C18. [My italics.]
\(^79\) Cohen, C18.
\(^80\) Baker, “Publisher Responsibility,” 7.
\(^81\) Iannone, “PC,” 53.
Teachout’s review goes further and explores exactly why the satire fails by identifying what it is Ellis loses control of. Thus, while Teachout notes “Ellis’ all-too-obvious purpose was to write a scathing satire of Eighties materialism that was politically correct in every possible way,” and agrees with Baker and Iannone that *American Psycho* is “ineptly written,” Teachout specifies the satire fails because Bateman’s character is too unrealistic for satire:

Anyone who knows anything about serial killers knows that all of this is perfect nonsense. They are weak, nondescript, maladjusted loners who kill women in order to satisfy their twisted sexual longings, not Masters of the Universe with a taste for human flesh.\(^82\)

*Teachout* argues Bateman is not conceivable as a character: no serial killer is also a mass murderer; serial killers who have a taste for sexually torturing and murdering women do not as a rule also murder black men, or homosexuals. Bateman is an impossible combination of a sexual serial killer, mass murderer, and multiple homicide.\(^83\) Teachout has a good point: that is for *American Psycho* to work as a satire, which conventionally requires realism, Bateman must first of all work as a character.

Teachout’s review also implies *American Psycho* is a parody:

Bret Easton Ellis would presumably argue that *American Psycho*, being a satire on the Reagan era, need not be overly literal. But having chosen to write his book in an ultra-naturalistic style, Ellis is stuck with the conventions of naturalism, which include a

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\(^83\) Young, “Beast,” 115. Young also makes this point.
certain amount of surface plausibility, of which *American Psycho* has none whatsoever.\textsuperscript{84}

This confusion of genres—naturalism with satire—is suggestive of parody: thus, *American Psycho* also parodies the conventions of naturalism. For example, the excessive textual details in the opening of the novel may also be interpreted as evidence of naturalism.\textsuperscript{85} Teachout’s critique, the novel’s lack of “surface plausibility,” also implies Ellis’s parody is not clearly signalled to the reader.

Other commentators imply *American Psycho* is a satire. Thus, Mailer, like Teachout, rejects satire as a defence, and implicitly agrees with Stiles’s critique of the satire defence: “Of course, it is a black comedy—that all-purpose cop-out!—but even black comedies demand an internal logic.”\textsuperscript{86} Yardley implies the novel is a satire as well, and similarly argues the satire fails. The metaphor for “emptiness” becomes “empty” in Ellis’s hands, and he rejects the novel’s “thin veneer of thematic posturing.”\textsuperscript{87}

Mailer also implies that *American Psycho* is a parody with his critique of the following formal characteristics of the novel. Firstly, there is no characterisation, just endless lists of designer clothes, “We are being asphyxiated with state-of-the-art commodities.”\textsuperscript{88} Secondly, the food descriptions are also “asphyxiatingly” detailed.\textsuperscript{89} Thirdly, there is “no narrative”; Mailer notes that we get a third of the way through the book and nothing happens, instead, there is “an unending primer on the artefacts of life in New York.”\textsuperscript{90} All of the above

\textsuperscript{84} Teachout, “Applied Deconstruction,” 46.
\textsuperscript{86} Mailer, “Children,” 220.
\textsuperscript{87} Yardley, “Trash,” B01.
\textsuperscript{88} Mailer, “Children,” 158
\textsuperscript{89} Mailer, 158.
\textsuperscript{90} Mailer, 158.
will become central in later defences of the novel as postmodern (such as Young’s). Mailer also implies parody with the following:

> The suspicion creeps in that much of what the author knows about violence does not come from his imagination... but out of what he has picked up from Son and Grandson of Texas Chainsaw Massacre and the rest of the filmic Jukes and Kalikaks. We are given horror-shop plastic."^91

Both American Psycho’s mixing of genres (as noted by Teachout), and the novel’s unconventional plot, descriptions and narrative, are key indicators that American Psycho is a postmodern parody.

The first journalist to use the term “parody” overtly is Miner, though Miner uses parody in the purely critical sense: “Mr Ellis claims to have written a parody” of “pornography.”^92 Miner adds however that the parody fails, and the result, that American Psycho is not literature but pornography, echoes the feminist critiques. Further, Miner’s comments about Ellis’s lack of skill are indicative of the loss of control: Ellis’s failure to clearly signal the parody may be evidence of this loss of control.

While Coates overtly classifies the novel a parody, he does so in the mocking sense, not in Hutcheon’s double-sided sense. Thus, Coates complains Ellis’s novel slips into “unintentional self-parody by Page 19...,” alleging that Ellis is accidentally parodying his own tendency to characterise his characters by brand names: “‘Vanden is a cross between... The Limited and... used Benetton,’ Price says... ‘No,’ I smile. ‘Used Fiorucci.’”^94

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^91 Mailer, 221.
^93 Miner, 43.
^94 Ellis, American Psycho, 19.
Clearly, most early commentators describe *American Psycho* as a satire, although very few think *American Psycho* succeeds as a satire. On closer examination, however, a number of early critics identify aspects of *American Psycho* that this thesis argues are evidence of postmodern parody. In addition, Mailer, Iannone, Corliss, Lehmann-Haupt, Adler and McGuigan and Love also describe characteristics of the text that imply postmodern parody.  

Thus, Corliss implies parody in his claim the novel is an inversion of *Bonfire of the Vanities*: Ellis “Cuisinearted a bunch of cultural influences” including “Dostoyevsky, the ’80s preppie-murder case and the original *Psycho*” with Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Corliss notes the way *Bonfire* is inverted in that McCoy “accidentally kills someone and gets hounded by an entire city” whereas no one believes Patrick’s confession.  

Again, Corliss implies *American Psycho* is a parody of *Psycho* and *American Gigolo*:  


Iannone argues contradictoriness is at the heart of the novel. *American Psycho* is “a novel that both seeks to portray and at the same time is itself a manifestation of extreme cultural breakdown.” Iannone’s contradictoriness resembles the double-sidedness of Hutcheon’s parody.  

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96 Corliss, “Killer Instinct,” 78.
97 Corliss, 78.
98 Corliss, “Vidiocy,” 56.
99 Iannone, “PC,” 54.
Adler and McGuigan argue the violent scenes were researched, and, by extension, that Ellis’s incorporation of this research is also evidence of postmodern parody:

‘I did so much research on this book. I read criminology textbooks. I read every pulp and true-life crime book I could get my hands on. I read every book about Ted Bundy. Actually, it was a really lousy year for reading… I read about murders that no one’s ever heard of that are just completely appalling—what serial killers can and do inflict on their victims. I think it might have been an aesthetic choice of mine to up the ante a little bit in the book, but not by much.’

While Love does not use the term parody Ellis implies the novel parodies serial killer fiction. An example of this is the Ted Bundy reference on page 92. Further, Ellis claims he exaggerated the violence, he “upped the ante,” in the novel: exaggeration is an indicator of postmodern parody; a marker of critical difference. Love notes other aspects of American Psycho which suggest postmodern parody, such as Ellis’s excessive quotation from other texts. More specifically, Love refers to Friday the 13th films, and GQ, and Ellis says GQ costumed the characters, and that Stereo Review inspired the description of Bateman’s electronic equipment. Love sums up: “Bateman seems to be made from magazines,” and Ellis agrees. Thus, a great deal of American Psycho was “made” from other texts, though Love fails to use the word parody.

Another interesting statement in the Love article is Ellis’s admission of what shocks him: “I’m shocked that Vanilla Ice sells 7 million copies of a record. I’m shocked by it.” Ellis is not only shocked by the commercialism of the mainstream, but it is clear the mainstream consumers of Vanilla Ice are not his intended readers for American Psycho.

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100 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 50. [My italics.]
101 Love, 51.
Ellis’s remark also indicates that he assumes his readers to be both media literate and cynical; such specific requirements are reminiscent of Hutcheon’s sophisticated, trained reader.

Ellis again implies parody in his Klein interview arguing *American Psycho* refuses to satisfy the conventions of any specific genre and that crossing genre boundaries contributed to the scandal:

‘I think the problem with *American Psycho* for many people is that it’s not genre fiction. Its ‘literary’ fiction and it enters into a realm that literary fiction generally doesn’t. There are aspects to it that are pulpier and more in the confines of horror fiction, comic books, slasher movies—elements that were brought into literary fiction that I think a lot of the higher echelon of the literary/critical establishment have just refused to accept as being suitable.’ \(^{102}\)

What Ellis describes as bringing “elements” from horror, comic books and slasher films into “literary fiction,” are suggestive of parodies of these genres.

Later commentators tend to follow the patterns established by commentators during the *American Psycho* scandal, even when retrospectively analysing *American Psycho*. Thus, Tynanuer and Stade celebrate *American Psycho* as satire with the claim “*American Psycho*... slashed the limits of biting satire in 1991.”\(^ {103}\) One later interview suggests *American Psycho* parodies the mass media. When asked how television informed his books, Ellis says: “‘Media has informed all of us, no matter what art form we pursue, whether painters or musicians. TV has unconsciously, whether we want to admit it or not, shaped all of our visions to an


\(^{103}\) Tynanuer, “Who’s Afraid?” 94.
This chapter will argue that *American Psycho* also parodies television shows, the format of the novel may even mimic that of television. For example, the novel is dotted with references to a fictitious television show, *The Patty Winters Show* (itself a parody of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*). Bateman constantly informs the reader of what he sees on the show that day: “While I’m dressing the TV is kept on to *The Patty Winters Show*. Today’s guests are women with multiple personalities.” As Bateman’s life unravels and his murderous rampage escalates, his reports of what he sees on the show become increasingly bizarre and are possible evidence of Bateman’s unreliability as a narrator.

Reviews of *Glamorama* also follow trends set during the *American Psycho* scandal. McDonald describes *American Psycho* as “a breathtaking satire about the 1980s.” Battersby’s interview implies *American Psycho* may be a parody of journalism: “‘My first books were more journalistic, I think I have moved closer to story.’” Bean first notes the journalistic qualities of *American Psycho* and argues the novel works as effective social commentary. The present study argues the lack of interiority in characters like Clay and Bateman are reminiscent of the New Journalism, but in reverse (a topic that will be discussed further in Chapter 4.)

In later interviews Ellis’s intentions again imply a parody of serial killer fiction and add new information: “I had a friend who introduced me to someone who could get me criminology textbooks from the FBI that really went into graphic detail about... what serial

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107 Ellis, 250. For example, one day Bateman reports the show features talking animals.
killers did to bodies... especially sexual killings.” Ellis does however overtly state his intention to write satire.

Ellis remains a strong opponent to the argument here especially his comments in recent articles which minimise the parodic and formalist aspects of his work. Curiously, given his frequent early refutation of autobiographical content in *American Psycho*, Ellis tends to assert the autobiographical aspects of the novel. For example, Ellis claims Alison Pool’s presence is part of a personal rivalry between McInerney and himself: “I decided the best way to get back at him (McInerney) was to have Alison Pool have an encounter with Patrick Bateman.” Ellis allegedly intends the very techniques which this thesis and other critics have called postmodern parody to be read autobiographically.

Ellis also intends the record reviews to be read as part of Bateman’s character: “those groups [pop bands] just happened to be Patrick Bateman’s favourites and the research that went into those chapters was much more gruelling than any of the violent chapters.” Many critics argue that Bateman is unconvincing as a character, as Ellis himself has done, but here Ellis contradicts himself by claiming the record reviews were psychologically motivated. On the contrary, these sections are parodies of rock journalism, something Ellis’s point about researching them implies. Thus, Ellis contradicts himself in his alleged intentions. Again, *Exit* quotes Ellis instructing readers to “‘skip the boring bits, the obsessive detail,’” which again suggests the novel should be skimmed, like a magazine. Ellis’s comment indicates

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115 Ellis’s experience writing music reviews noted above.
116 *Exit*, Fox.
readers do not understand his intentions with *American Psycho* and do not know how to read it.

On the other hand, Harron and Turner refer to both novel and film as satire and parody. In rewriting the story they aimed to emphasise the novel’s satirical elements. Thus, the first lines of dialogue in the film satirise *nouvelle cuisine* (which was both fashionable and *cliché* during the 1980s in New York) “‘Our pasta this evening is squid ravioli in a lemon grass broth...’” According to the primacy effect, beginning the film this way emphasises the satirical aspects of the film. While Harron and Turner also describe the novel as a parody, they employ the term in Jameson’s sense of blank pastiche, or copy, without the element of simultaneous critique with which it is used here. Thus, in their discussion of *Penthouse* and its relationship to the novel, Harron and Turner imply the novel parodies pornography. However, the changes they made for the film are in keeping with parody as it is defined here: the girls looking “bored” and Christian “looking in the mirror,” indicate critical difference from the background postmodern novel.

Finally, reviews of Harron’s film note the parodic aspects of the novel. Thus, Porton claims Bateman’s morning beauty ritual is “a warped parody of television advertising.” Romney’s description of the novel also implies the parodic combination of an “airport novel” and avant-garde novel, as well as acknowledging the satire.

Thus while commentators are frequently wrong when they claim *American Psycho* is a satire, they are not completely wrong: *American Psycho* is a satirical postmodern parody.

The confusion about whether or not *American Psycho* is a satire is partly a result of a lack of

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118 *American Psycho*, Harron.
120 Porton, review, 43.
consistency in the definitions of postmodern parody and satire. Clarifying the definitions helps dispel the confusion: *American Psycho* is a postmodern parody that nevertheless contains satirical elements.

While this is the first study to link *American Psycho* with Hutcheon’s theory of postmodern parody, it is not the first scholarly work to read *American Psycho* as a parody. The first scholar to overtly describe the novel as a parody is Young.\(^{122}\) While Young analyses *American Psycho* as a parody of various genres and of narrative conventions, she also implies postmodern parody in a number of ways.

Young claims that *American Psycho* overtly parodies two genres: “the book works at times as a parodic deconstruction of the thriller, or serial-killer mystery novel.”\(^{123}\) Young adds that the novel is littered with linguistic clues (not plot based ones) which the reader must decode in order to understand the parody. For Young, the novel does not directly signal the parody to the reader.

This raises an important point: that Ellis does not overtly signal the parody in the novel. For example, the Donald Kimball plot strand on pages 266–277 is an example of Ellis’s implicit parody of the detective novel. Thus, the scene does not overtly indicate that it is parodic. Nor do the thriller scenes. For example, overt signalling is absent when Bateman notices Evelyn’s neighbour go out without locking her front door on page 8; when Evelyn complains her neighbour was murdered on page 117; in Bateman’s confession of his murder of Evelyn’s neighbour on page 118; and in Bateman’s narration of details of the murder on page 119. Nor is there any overt signalling of parody when Bateman buys himself a knife for a Christmas present on page 119, or when Bateman’s cramps get so bad he hobbles into the

\(^{122}\) Young, “Beast,” 102.
\(^{123}\) Young, 99.
“next hardware store he comes across” and buys an axe, butcher’s knives, acid, then rats at a pet store, and canned ham, on page 150. Or again, Bateman’s narration on page 200, “Earlier in the day after a meeting with my lawyer about some bogus rape charges, I had an anxiety attack,” is without overt signalling of parody.

The second overt parody Young identifies is Ellis’s parody of narratorial conventions in the scenes building to the climax of the novel. For example, Bateman cooks and eats a “girl’s” brain, at which point the text becomes so perverse, Young asserts, “it can only be read as a parodically hyperbolic comment on affectlessness and a further destabilizing of Patrick’s competence as a narrator.” Soon after this scene, according to Young, the novel enters “into a parodic version of a cop-killer thriller” in the Chase Manhattan chapter.

Young implies a number of other parodies (most are noted above) including the parody of magazine journalism in “adspeak,” the parody of the realist conventions for description in Bateman’s description of his lounge-room, and in her assertion that Bateman is not intended to be a realistic, rounded character but that he is a “device,” “a cipher,” rather than a character.

Thus, the following are examples of parodies of character in the novel: on pages 179-180 Bateman reflects,

Some kind of existential chasm opens before me while I’m browsing in Bloomingdale’s and…. I decide this emptiness has, at least in part, some connection with the way I treated Evelyn at Barcadia the other night, though there is always the possibility it could just as easily have something to do with the tracking device on my VCR.

124 Young, 114.
125 Young, 114.
126 Young, 119.
The assertion that Bateman’s psyche is inter-connected with “the tracking device” on his VCR not only mocks the notion of an inner self, but suggests that the novel is a parody of film and television.

Again, on page 264 Bateman suspects Jean is attempting to understand his personality, but alerts the reader that this is “an impossibility: there ... is... no... key.” (There are other examples on page 282, and then again in the scene with Jean, from 374-380.) These examples suggest Bateman’s interiority consists of surface only, that there is no inner self.

Young also implies the novel satirises our society’s retail therapy, shop-till-you-drop mantras and beliefs.127

Young’s work is most interesting however when it addresses Ellis’s intentions. The author, Young argues, forces the reader to work hard to comprehend the text: “the onus is on the reader to interject the moral values so conspicuously lacking in the text.” Further, Young supports the argument here that the lack of signalling in *American Psycho* is a chief cause of the scandal. Young argues the reader must, in the absence of overt authorial signalling and on the basis of subtle clues, assume the author condemns Bateman’s actions: “there is absolutely nothing stated that implies a critique of Bateman’s world and his actions.”129

At the same time, however, the clues are confusing. The combination of Ellis’s confusing clues and indirect signalling caused critics to condemn the text as misogyny. Despite this, Young assumes—rightly or wrongly and “sub-textually”—that Ellis did not intend the novel to be read as misogyny.130 Young therefore concludes Ellis, in a gesture of

127 Young, 121.
128 Young, 100.
129 Young, 99.
130 Young, 99.
aggression towards the reader, expects (and even forces) the reader to work hard to resolve the ambiguities of the novel. Thus, “The reader is forced to scrutinise his own values and beliefs, rather than those being provided for him within a Good-Evil fictive universe.” Of course, the reader who misses the clues can easily read the novel literally and infer Ellis condones the misogynistic violence. While Young neglects to emphasise the point about reader competence, it is clear only a highly “sophisticated” reader is capable of inferring the author’s intentions (and of decoding the parody).

Consistent with the current analysis, Young acknowledges that placing such an enormous responsibility on the reader is not ideal:

This puts the critic in the ludicrous position of, firstly, supplying the moral framework to the book and arguing, in effect, for dualist and old-fashioned fictive ambiguity and secondly, of having to tangle with the autobiographical element in fiction—of defining the author’s own feelings, intentions and standards.

Significantly, it is this tangling with the “autobiographical” that has become, subsequently, so deeply problematic in Ellis’s case. Recent interviews such as Wyatt’s suggest that Young’s assumption that Ellis did not intend misogyny may have been an overly generous one.

Other scholars who follow Miner and Young in describing American Psycho overtly as a parody include: Buscall, Price, Heyler and Riquelme. While Buscall’s Baudrillardian study does describe American Psycho as a parody, he uses the term in Jameson’s sense of blank parody or pastiche, that is, as non-critical imitation: “On numerous instances the style

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131 Young, 100.
132 Young, 100.
133 Young, 100.
of the discourse blankly resembles that of media speech. These are indicative of what Jameson calls pastiche—or ‘blank parody.’”136 Thus, the critical element of Hutcheon’s postmodern parody is missing for Buscall, as are many of the formalist aspects of postmodern parody. On the other hand, Buscall claims the novel reproduces the forms of television, magazines and films which supports the argument here that *American Psycho* is a parodic, becoming-mass-media of the novel.

Price, on the other hand, employs Bakhtin’s notion of parody. Thus, few of Price’s points support the current analysis. Price supports the argument here on page 324 when he analyses *American Psycho* as a parody of “the discourses of high fashion, pop culture, and music, as well as the language of high-tech recording equipment, physical-fitness training, and television talk shows, among others,” and when he claims *American Psycho* parodies advertising and the media.137 However, Price’s notion of parody is all critique and lacks Hutcheon’s sense of double-sidedness thereby overlooking the text’s profound ambiguity.138 Most problematic is Price’s assertion that the graphic violent scenes “may be a form of [critical] parody as well,” as is his claim that *American Psycho* is a critical parody of slasher films.139 The novel is more ambiguous than Price’s study suggests and simultaneously celebrates and condones the objects of its critique.140

Two further scholars argue that *American Psycho* parodies the Gothic genre.141 Indeed Heyler equates the Gothic novel with postmodern parody. For Heyler the Gothic genre is “a hybrid, a self-conscious and parodic mixing of multiple genres and strands.”142 Thus

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137 Price, “Bakhtinian Prosaics,” 324; 326.
138 Price, 323.
139 Price, 328.
140 Price, 329.
141 Cojo, “Confessions”; Rogers, “Video Nasties,” 232. Cojo also notes the link between the Gothic and Postmodern genres; Rogers implies the novel is a Gothic.
142 Heyler, “Parodied,” 741.
American Psycho is a postmodern Gothic that parodies numerous genres wherein the media in particular is subjected to parodic inversion. Heyler’s focus on the novel’s Gothic conventions identifies an important boundary slip in American Psycho—the boundary between reality and fantasy—and argues it is typical of Gothic and postmodern novels. As a result, Bateman’s behaviour blurs the boundaries between fiction, fantasy, and reality, and good and evil. Overall, Heyler argues American Psycho parodies the Gothic novel, the conventions of literary character, and the conventions of numerous other genres.

Of further interest is the way Heyler links American Psycho’s Gothic qualities with its excessive ambiguity: “Gothic tales resist ‘telling all,’ and although very revelatory of blood and gore, American Psycho does follow this pattern by remaining silent about Patrick’s history and his true motivations.” This is an important point: American Psycho’s excessive ambiguity (which contributed to the scandal), resulted from the way Bateman’s motivations and personal history remain undisclosed in the novel, and the way the novel resists closure.

For example, Bateman’s visit to his mother is an occasion where American Psycho resists “telling all.” The visit reveals little information about his family history or clues to his motivation beyond the fact of his unhappiness. Other examples where personal details could be revealed but are not are Bateman’s recollection of his visit to his shrink, his dinner with his bother Sean, and Bateman’s date with Bethany. For example, during his date with Bethany we learn that while Bateman works at Pierce and Pierce, the company is actually owned by his family which means he does not actually need to work. Thus, Bateman only

143 Heyler, 741.
144 Heyler, 728.
145 Heyler, 741.
146 Heyler, 733.
147 Ellis, American Psycho, 365-6.
works to fit in, “‘I… want…to…fit…in.’” While such scenes provide some clues about Bateman’s character, they cannot be equated with a back story or personal history or direct signalling of parody. Again, while *American Psycho*’s excessive ambiguity is both a convention of the Gothic genre and evidence of the novel’s parody of this genre, Ellis does not signal the parody in the novel, nor is it signalled on the back cover. In other words, in the sense that parody is employed here and as it is defined by Hutcheon, the parody in *American Psycho* is unsuccessful.

Heyler also implies *American Psycho* is a parody of the romance novel when she argues the novel parodies the film *Pretty Woman*, which itself is a Pygmalion fantasy wherein “a rich, handsome, and kind man will come along and save the young, pretty prostitute from the streets.” Heyler notes the critical inversion of *Pretty Woman* in *American Psycho* whereby, when Bateman picks up prostitutes and takes them home, it is to sexually torture and kill them, not to save them.

Like Heyler, Riquelme argues that *American Psycho* is a parody of the Gothic genre, but Riquelme’s reading is of great significance to this thesis because it centres its interpretation of the novel as a parody around the violent misogyny in the novel. Consistent with the argument here, Riquelme also identifies ambiguity as the novel’s key trope. Thus, Riquelme compares Ellis’s novel with *Dracula*, and argues that the excessive misogynistic violence is a development of Gothic character. The excessive gruesomeness is part of the novel’s parody of the horror genre:

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148 Ellis, 237.
149 Heyler, “Parodied,” 744.
150 Heyler, 743-4.
151 Riquelme, “Gothic and Modernism,” 598.
The excesses of *American Psycho* might appear to put it in a class virtually by itself or to make it a parody of horror narrative... But the tendency toward excess is typical of the Gothic, which regularly comes close to parody or self-parody. The excessive, overtly artificial quality of the Gothic... enables us to recognise the staging of cultural tendencies rather than a capitulation to them. In the violence against women in *American Psycho*, as in the antifeminist conversations in *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, we recognise that prejudicial thinking and behavior are being put on display in ways that we are more likely to judge than to accept.152

For Riquelme the “excessive” “artificial” qualities of *American Psycho* signal it is a Gothic novel staging violence and prejudice to provoke the reader’s judgement. Again, however, Riquelme does not specify how mainstream readers encounter the novel.

Scholars like Messier and Serpell describe *American Psycho* as both satire and parody. While Messier’s description of Ellis’s satire in his early essay is straightforward, as a critique of 1980’s values, his definition of parody in the Bakhtinian sense as pure critique is problematic.153 Again, Messier limits parody to ridicule which means his definition of parody is more congruent with Hutcheon’s definition of satire; it lacks a conception of the double-sidedness central to postmodern parody. That being said, Messier does link *American Psycho*’s parody with Gothic ambiguity, and in his later work, Messier continues to defend *American Psycho* as satire, though he changes his definition of parody to Jamesonian pastiche.154

Serpell observes satirical passages on pages 48 and 51, parodic passages on page 51, and argues the novel is full of contradictions which engage (or fail to engage) the reader

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152 Riquelme, 599-600.
through ambiguity. Serpell’s emphasis on contradictions within the text and the way she links satire and irony with parody support the argument made here. However, while Serpell links the fundamental ambiguity in *American Psycho*, “Bateman does and does not exist,” to the Gothic, she nevertheless argues the “suspense” forces the reader to confront the violence: for Serpell, the reader’s confrontation with violence is the novel’s aim. Unlike Young, who has a problem with Ellis’s strategy here claiming that it asks too much of the reader, Serpell argues the extreme ambiguity works.

Other scholars imply *American Psycho* is a parody. For example, Freese’s study of *Zero* identifies formal properties that are consistent with postmodern parody as defined here. Thus, Freese suggests music videos and rock lyrics are the parodic background texts in *Zero*, and implies parody when he notes the way “the Western, Science Fiction, and Pornography,” not only provide a cultural “background” to the “foreground action” of *Zero*, but also act as “the target of its obliquely presented exposure of social grievances.”

Hissom also implies *American Psycho* is a parody given the way it subverts fictional genres, most significantly, hard-core pornography. Kauffman argues *American Psycho* satirises Americans’ belief that they are sexually repressed. However, confusingly, Kauffman also employs satire in the formal sense: *American Psycho* “satirises television talk shows”: as defined here, television talk shows

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155 Serpell, “Repetition,” 51; 63-5.
158 Kauffman, *Bad Girls*, 244.
would be the background text in Ellis’s parodic novel. Similarly, Kauffman employs satire in the sense of a parody when she compares *American Psycho* to *Don Quixote*.

Like Teachout, Murphet reads *American Psycho* as a satire that fails (he also refers to *American Psycho* as failed metafiction). Following Corliss, Murphet claims Ellis’s satirical project is technically flawed by his use of the first person. As noted above, Murphet also implies formal parody, though only in the Jamesonian sense of pastiche or blank parody where parody equals imitation without the critical element. For example, Murphet interprets what this chapter calls the parodies of snuff pornography as “the hollowest pastiche of pornographic textuality.”

Murphet does, however, imply *American Psycho* is a parody in the sense it is defined here in three respects: in his account of the record review chapters; by noting the importance of research in the misogynistically violent scenes; and in his analysis of the misogynistically violent scenes. This final point is most pertinent to the argument here. Murphet contrasts Ellis’s writing style in the violent passages with his style in the rest of the novel and argues the violent passages are written with “literary flair,” whereas the non-violent remainder of the novel is marred by “repetition, reification and inanity.” Murphet concludes,

The violence in the book should be understood as an act in language, the attainment of a certain kind of literary flair, which is elsewhere obviated by reification, repetition, and inanity... because we have to wait so long for any signs of literary distinction (the text otherwise being an object lesson in ‘bad’ writing), that when they finally arrive

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159 Kauffman, 244.
160 Kauffman, 247.
163 Murphet, 38.
164 Murphet, 33; 17 (as noted above).
165 Murphet, 45.
we feed on them hungrily, even though they occur in scenes of abomination... because it is here that the oppressive paratactic narrative voice finally ‘lets rip’ and tips over from weightless indistinction into driven, compulsive syntactical constructions.\textsuperscript{166}

On the contrary, this chapter argues Ellis’s text parodies the conventions of literary style. Ellis parodies literature by producing “bad” writing in the majority of the novel, that is, the non-violent sections, such as the record reviews.\textsuperscript{167} Ellis again parodies literature in the violent scenes in that he only writes in a stylized literary manner when writing on a topic of repellent bad taste. For example,

\begin{quote}
Then I turn to the barking dog and when I get up, stomp on its front legs while it’s crouched down ready to jump at me, its fangs bared, immediately shattering the bones in both its legs, and it falls on its side squealing in pain, front paws sticking up in the air at an obscene, satisfying angle.\textsuperscript{168}
\end{quote}

Counter to Murphet’s reading of the violent scenes as the realisation of “literary flair,” it is argued here that these scenes are parodies of literary style.

While Eldridge also implies that \textit{American Psycho} is a parody when he argues the novel was critiqued for having transgressed against genre by including horror and pornographic elements in a literary novel, and for its extreme use of quotation, and its numerous Hitchcock references, Abel’s analysis is extremely critical of the satire defence, claiming it worked as a kind of “order-word” to preserve the interests of the status quo and existing power structures within literary institutions. For Abel, the term satire imposes a realist reading upon an anti-realist novel.\textsuperscript{169} Again, other recent theorists tend only to imply

\textsuperscript{166} Murphet, 45-6.
\textsuperscript{167} Ellis, \textit{American Psycho}, 133-6.
\textsuperscript{168} Ellis, 132.
\textsuperscript{169} Eldridge, “Generic,” 27-9; Abel, “Affective,” 140.
American Psycho is a parody. Thus, Nielsen theorises the novel as metafiction; Clark notes the “contradictory associations” of the text; Blazer implies the novel parodies Hamlet; and Gomel notes the way the novel intertextually combines high culture with existentialist angst and resists closure.170

Essays by Rogers and Colby also tend to imply parody, as does the work of Baelo-Allué, which overtly interprets the novel as a satire of 1980s yuppie culture, while nevertheless claiming Ellis’s work has “a parodic tone” and implying American Psycho is a parody of the serial killer genre (as well as the gothic).171 In a similar vein to Gomel, Baelo-Allué claims Ellis’s work subverts distinctions between high and low culture, a subversion that never resolves itself, which again implies parody.172 Baelo-Allué also implies the novel parodies Body Double, and that Bateman is a parody of a realist character.173 Further, while Baelo-Allué notes the lack of overt signalling in the novel, she defends Ellis’s implicit signalling: thus the juxtaposition of the record reviews with the violent scenes imply critical distance.174 Finally, Baelo-Allué implies Ellis’s other novels are also parodies. Thus: Zero parodies sensationalist journalism; Glamorama deconstructs the conspiracy thriller; Lunar Park is a parody of the gothic and autobiographical novels, of Stephen King novels and of Hamlet; Imperial Bedrooms is a parody of hard-boiled detective fiction and of Raymond Chandler in particular.175 On the other hand, some scholars simply call American Psycho a satire and overlook the novel’s formalist and dualistic elements completely, neglecting to

171 Baelo-Allué, 4; 112.
172 Baelo-Allué, 94-5, 97.
173 Baelo-Allué, 107; 100, 106.
174 Baelo-Allué, 117; 100-1.
175 Baelo-Allué, 3, 42, 66-7, 134, 183, 189, 193,
mention the many ways Ellis’s novel simultaneously celebrates the society it purports to
critique.\textsuperscript{176}

By defining Ellis’s novel as primarily a postmodern \textit{parody}, the present study aims to
dispel much of the confusion about \textit{American Psycho}. However, no discussion of Ellis’s
work in relation to parody is complete without reference to \textit{Lunar Park}. Specifically, the
notion that \textit{American Psycho} is a postmodern parody is reinforced in the reception of \textit{Lunar
Park}. Thus, Hand critiques \textit{Lunar Park} as a failed parody of, and homage to, the work of
Stephen King in which the supernatural elements do not work, as well as suggesting other
novels in Ellis’s \textit{oeuvre} are also parodies.\textsuperscript{177} Again, my own review notes the attempted
parody of Stephen King in \textit{Lunar Park}; and Baelo-Allué refers to Ellis’s “self-parody” in
\textit{Lunar Park}.\textsuperscript{178}

\textit{Lunar Park} contains numerous examples of parodies of Gothic and horror novels: the
protagonist Bret’s description of \textit{American Psycho} as “evil,” his references to “the thing that
wanted it written,” and how the “thing” woke him at night, “It [\textit{American Psycho}] wrote
itself… I would fearfully watch my hand as the pen swept across the yellow legal pads I did
the first draft on. I was repulsed by this creation and wanted to take no credit for it.”\textsuperscript{179} While
\textit{Lunar Park} is also ambiguous, the ambiguity is less extreme than in \textit{American Psycho}. Even
so, as formal, dualistic parody \textit{Lunar Park} cannot ever be the explanation of \textit{American
Psycho} it pretends to be, it can only ever be another version of events, another “impression”:
“‘You do an awfully good impression of yourself,’” the novel begins.\textsuperscript{180} Of specific interest
here is the way the plot of \textit{Lunar Park} parodies the mass media feminist critique and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{177} Hand, “House of Horrors,” W8K06.
\bibitem{179} Ellis, \textit{Lunar Park}, 13.
\bibitem{180} Ellis, 3.
\end{thebibliography}
American Psycho’s ambiguous plot, as well as Ellis’s interviews where he refuses to disclose his sexuality. Lunar Park is thus the crystallisation of Ellis’s most successful idea, one that underpins all his novels, what Foucault calls the multiple selves of the “author-function”: the inherent ambiguity between the writer and her/his autobiography.\textsuperscript{181} The ultra-narcissistic Ellis, who enjoys teasing the reader with a game of hide and seek, would never say anything direct or conclusive about American Psycho in Lunar Park.

Lunar Park also parodies the memoir and the ghost story.\textsuperscript{182} Thus, Bret Ellis is a fictional version of the author, post-American Psycho scandal. The plot recounts Bret’s haunting, both literal and figurative, by his past work. Unlike in a conventional memoir, Ellis’s “self” in Lunar Park is ambiguous, and not “unified and stable.”\textsuperscript{183} In addition, like American Psycho, Lunar Park also parodies the conventions of literary character: characters are taken from real life, from other novels and from other Ellis novels. Again, in Lunar Park Clay, the main character of Zero appears dressed as Patrick Bateman (other examples noted above). However, when asked why he “recycles” his characters, Ellis replies, “‘I really have no idea why I do it,’” other than to say it is a private “‘joke’” (which implies the parody is unintentional.\textsuperscript{184}

The following is an example of the parody of the plot of American Psycho in Lunar Park:

In my office, I couldn’t concentrate on my novel so I reread the scene in American Psycho where Paul Owen is murdered and again was appalled by the details of the crime—the newspapers covering the floor, the raincoat worn by Patrick Bateman to

\textsuperscript{182} Heyler, “Glamorama,” 205.
\textsuperscript{183} Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 189.
\textsuperscript{184} Ellis, “Art of Fiction,” 191-2.
protect his suit, the blade of the ax splitting Paul’s head open, the spraying of blood and the hissing sounds a skull makes coming apart.\textsuperscript{185}

Passages like, “you could read the novel as either a satire on ‘the new sexual obnoxiousness’ or as the simple story of an average guy who enjoys defiling women with his lust. I was going to turn people on and make them think and laugh,” function as a fictionalised defence and explanation of \textit{American Psycho}.\textsuperscript{186} It is also worth noting, in terms of the argument presented in Chapter 1, that in the above scene, the violence comes to the reader second hand.

Another example of the parody of ‘\textit{American Psycho}’ centres on the novel Bret is writing; “a pornographic thriller” called \textit{Teenage Pussy} (which resembles \textit{American Psycho}). Phrases like, “I realized I was creating an entirely new genre,” are reminiscent of Ellis’s actual defence of \textit{American Psycho}. Here the fictional author instructs his readers to either read \textit{American Psycho} as a satire of New York in the 1980s (Ellis’s stock defence), or as the simple story of a guy who enjoys sexual violence towards women (this latter point echoes Ellis’s lack of repentance and suggests his misogyny).\textsuperscript{187} Another example takes place on pages 279-80 where Bret further discusses writing \textit{American Psycho}.

In ‘\textit{Lunar Park}’s parody of the feminist critique, the plot explores the idea that if writing can make (violent) things happen, it can make them stop, too.\textsuperscript{188} Thus, Bret again defends \textit{American Psycho} by parodying Gloria Steinem’s (and other critics’) prediction:

if anything happened to anyone as a result of the publication of this novel, Bret Easton Ellis was to blame. Gloria Steinem had reiterated this over and over to Larry King.…. I thought the idea was laughable—that there was no one as insane and vicious as this

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\textsuperscript{185} Ellis, \textit{Lunar Park}, 149.
\textsuperscript{186} Ellis, 68.
\textsuperscript{187} Ellis, 68.
\textsuperscript{188} Vegari, “Violence Immediately,” 115. Vegari also notes Steinem’s position becomes part of the plot in \textit{Lunar Park}.
\end{flushright}
fictional character out there in the real world. Besides, Patrick Bateman was a notoriously unreliable narrator, and if you actually read the book you could come away doubting that these crimes had even occurred. There were large hints that they existed only in Bateman’s mind. The murders and torture were in fact fantasies fuelled by his rage and fury about how life in America was structured and how this had—no matter the size of his wealth—trapped him. The fantasies were an escape. This was the book’s thesis. It was about society and manners and mores, and not about cutting up women. How could anyone who read the book not see this?[^189]

The parody further incorporates Steinem’s remarks into the novel’s plot. Murders that the author Bret has written about in *American Psycho* start to happen in the plot of *Lunar Park*.

There are, however, important differences between the two novels. While the difference in the representation of sexualised violence has already been noted, *Lunar Park*, unlike *American Psycho*, has closure, both at the realist mimetic level of plot, as well as at the formalist level of postmodern parody. While *Lunar Park* supports the argument that *American Psycho* is a postmodern parody, it also embodies the mass media feminist critique by changing the way it depicts misogynistic violence towards women.

In conclusion, an alternative theoretical model that potentially complements the present study of *American Psycho* is worth noting in brief. Deleuze and Guattaris’ conception of “becoming” could be configured in such a way that it would complement the current analysis.[^190] Thus, *American Psycho* could also be described as a becoming-mass media, and as a becoming-other-of—the-novel. This specific application of Deleuze and Guattari to Ellis’s work is unique to this thesis, and may be a useful adjunct to Hutcheon’s postmodern parody.

as useful as Hutcheon’s theory is, because of the way it focuses attention on the reader. Thus, while it is true that some commentators and scholars argue that Bateman’s violence is a form of escape or transgression, (suggested in the text by the references to Bacchus and Pan on page 263), some theorists also claim that the sexualised misogynistic violence is a form of “becoming.” Examples can be found in the work of Blazer, Heyler, King and Jarvis (though none employ the term “becoming” in a sense that incorporates the mass media feminist critique).

Thus, scholars like Abel employ the term of “becoming” to argue that Ellis’s violent misogyny is a form of revolutionary action, a breaking free of the constraints imposed by consumerist culture, and Rogers describes American Psycho as monstrous, and a form of cultural subversion. However, neither study incorporates the mass media feminist critique. Thus, while performing an analysis of American Psycho as a becoming-other-of-the-novel lies beyond the concerns of the current project, care must be taken not to use such an analysis to neutralise the mass media feminist critique.

In sum, the present study argues American Psycho fails as a postmodern parody because the implied author does not signal his intentions clearly enough to the reader—the novel is an impossible parody—and as a result, the reader must make recourse to the author’s autobiography to make sense of the novel. At the same time, Ellis’s inconsistency in interviews makes this an impossible task. American Psycho remains then a flawed, excessive, impossibly ambiguous postmodern parody.

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It must be noted, paradoxically, that by demonstrating *American Psycho* is not defendable as a conventional satire because the formal postmodern parodic aspects of the text undermine any straightforward critical satirical message, it also becomes possible to assert that neither does the novel simply celebrate misogyny, as the mass media feminist critics claimed. At the formal level, as a postmodern parody, *American Psycho* both celebrates sexualised misogyny, even as it critiques it. That being said, the thesis cautions that while an aesthetic defence can restore some value to Ellis’s novel, it should not be employed to neutralise the mass media feminist critique of the novel’s misogynistic content.

In the final analysis, however, *American Psycho* fails as a postmodern parody, the author’s intentions are not clearly enough signalled in either the text or in author interviews for it to succeed. As a result, the misogynistic scenes both undermine and dominate any aesthetic achievements of the novel. The four problematic scenes are indeed excessive. As Baker argues, Ellis’s alleged intentions to “satirically equate the materialistic ’80s with the rampages of a Wall Street madman” are far exceeded by the “sadistic excesses” of the book, which include Ellis’s “reveling in pornographic detail,” and the “extremely graphic nature of the brutality.”

194 Baker, “Publisher Responsibility,” 7.
CHAPTER 4

THE WOOD AND THE TREES: THE REALIST CRITIQUE AND THE POSTMODERN AND AFFECT DEFENCES

Mr Ellis’s true offense is to imply that the human mind has grown so corrupt it can no longer distinguish between form and content. He has proved himself mistaken in that assumption by writing a book whose very confusion of form and content has caused it to fail, and for that offense and no other does one have cause to excoriate American Psycho.¹

‘It was a class on the postmodern novel and Ulysses took up the bulk of the semester... so I found some of that creeping into the work a little [Rules]... it [Ulysses] really inspired me.’²

Having established the importance of the mass media feminist critique and demonstrated that American Psycho cannot be read as a critique of sexually violent misogyny because it fails as a postmodern parody, this chapter will revisit the realist critique and analyse it in relation to the postmodern aesthetic defence (in order to challenge it), the affect defence and the mass media feminist critique. While American Psycho certainly does have postmodern characteristics, they are ambiguously mixed with realist elements. Crucially, for mainstream readers the realist elements of plot and character fail to resolve adequately at the novel’s conclusion, leaving American Psycho a confusing jumble of aesthetic conventions. While scholars tend to interpret the confusion as further evidence of the novel’s

postmodernity and celebrate it, by reading *American Psycho* in relation to Ellis’s *oeuvre* the muddle of *American Psycho* can be contrasted with the more resolved narratives in Ellis’s other novels, such as *Zero* and *Lunar Park*. In contrast to *American Psycho*, both novels, while eschewing conventional plot, have enough closure to be legible to Ellis’s mainstream readership. Both *Zero* and *Lunar Park* contain their postmodern (and metafictional, in the case of *Lunar Park*) elements within a realist framework. It is possible to speculate, given the biographical information available about Ellis at the time of writing *American Psycho*—the nervous breakdowns, depression, and sex, alcohol and drug abuse—that Ellis may have failed to fully realise his intentions in his most notorious novel, as many commentators, including Iannone, Bernays, Lehmann-Haupt and Mailer, have claimed.

While commentators and scholars are divided as to whether *American Psycho* is a postmodern or a realist novel, this chapter, by arguing that the novel combines realist and postmodern elements, will create a space wherein the mass media feminist critique can again be incorporated within an analysis of the novel’s postmodern elements. Significantly, the lack of resolution of the novel’s realist elements contributed to the *American Psycho* scandal and elicited the mass media feminist critique. In addition, this chapter will explore the New Journalism in relation to the realist critique and as a further historical context for Ellis’s novel.

While the realist critique tends to overlook the novel’s formal properties, one of the main problems with the postmodern defence is the way the sexual violence as *content* tends to be subsumed and neutralised by the postmodern *form* the sexual violence is presented in: a

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process which, as noted above, invalidates the feminist critique. In ignoring the feminist critique and the novel’s realist elements, the postmodern defence adopts an extreme position that is neither straightforwardly borne out by Ellis’s alleged intentions, nor by the text itself.

In the light of Ellis’s ongoing fascination with postmodern techniques in subsequent novels—such as recycling characters from early or previous novels, and ambiguously interweaving realist and postmodernist elements—not to mention the growing scholarly interest in Ellis as an anti-aesthetic postmodern author, a re-examination of the ambiguity surrounding his combination of postmodern and realist elements in American Psycho is timely. The most useful aspect of the postmodern defence is the way it accounts for the formalist elements of the text, but its neutralisation of the sexually misogynistic content makes it insupportable in the present study, and its failure to address the role of the reader means it neglects the novel’s most important textual aspect: its ability to keep the reader turning the pages; its ability to compel the reader with horror, laughter, confusion and titillation.

Thus, this chapter will also explore an alternative defence in relation to the mass media feminist critique. Significantly, the affect defence has the advantage of focusing on the reception of the text and on the reader’s response (unlike the postmodern defence). While scholars tend to employ it to neutralise the feminist critique, this thesis suggests that it can be employed to incorporate the feminist critique.

For the mainstream reader, American Psycho ambiguously mixes postmodernist and realist elements in an impossible postmodern parody that fails to resolve the realist elements of the text: the text contains material that equally supports both the realist critique and the

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4 Gomel, “‘Soul.’” Gomel's article is just one in a recent anthology of essays about Ellis's work that re-examines American Psycho in terms of its postmodernity.
postmodern defence. On the one hand, examples which suggest realism include: the detailed shower and lounge room descriptions on pages 24-30; Bateman’s inner reflections during lunch with Jean (despite the clichés), see pages 374-80; the detailed descriptions of character that focus on designer clothes, such as Price on pages 4-5, Courtney on page 8, and Evelyn on page 9; and the setting and depiction of the yuppie Wall Street lifestyle. On the other hand, examples which suggest postmodernity include: the opening and final paragraphs where the novel begins with a quotation and includes three textual references in its opening paragraph as well as a reference to an advertisement on page 3, and the way the novel ends with a sign that reads “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT,” on page 399; the numerous references to serial killer literature for example, Preston tells Bateman “‘You should stop reading all those Ted Bundy biographies,’” on pages 38, and 92; the constant references to brand names, for example, the following all occur on page 4, “Blaupunks,” “Walkman,” “D.F. Sanders,” “Tumi,” “Panasonic,” “Easa-phone,” “Porta portable”; the numerous references to the mass media, for example, the advertisement on page 3, the advertisement and newspaper article on page 4, the references to both The Post and USA Today on page 5, the advertisement and newspaper references on page 6; the parodies of journalism for example, the record reviews, the description of Bateman’s lounge room and shower routine on pages 24-30; the Chase Manhattan scene wherein Bateman, who up until this point was a serial killer, turns into a mass murderer (in real life perpetrators tend to be one or the other, not both), see pages 347-352; the “just like in a movie” motif wherein Bateman continually reports events as if he is seeing them through a camera lens; Bateman’s reflections on pages 374-80; and finally, Bateman’s confession to Carnes where Carnes confuses him with another character on pages 387-9.
As noted above, given the novel’s ambiguity there is considerable overlap between the two lists (confusingly, all postmodern examples could also be evidence of realism). For example, the description of Bateman’s lounge-room and shower routine can be read as realism: that is, there is too much detail in Ellis’s description of Bateman’s lounge-room because that is what his life is realistically like, he lives in a world in which there are simply too many commodities. Other traits suggest the scene is a parody of magazines: thus the excessive detail in this scene could also be read as evidence that Ellis is parodically critiquing/celebrating the conventions of realist description (in a postmodern anti-aesthetic way). Or, it could be argued that the novel constantly refers to the mass media because professional life in New York in the 1980s is media saturated (this is evidence of realism).

Significantly, there is support in the text to suggest the aesthetic confusion is deliberate. For example, Bateman’s blurred sense of reality and fantasy. Thus, on page 378, real life people appear in the novel and blur with the characters. Or again, on page 71 Bateman meets Tom Cruise. Again, the blurring between reality and fiction at the beginning of the novel (as noted above) also supports the argument that the ambiguity is, to some degree at least, deliberate. The question remains, why did Ellis write such a deliberately ambiguous novel (this question will be addressed in Chapter 5)?

**1: The Realist Critique**

While the postmodern defence is predominantly a response to the mass media feminist critique, it is equally (though this is less frequently noted in scholarly literary criticism), a response to the realist critique: the feminist and realist critiques overlap (as does
the satire defence and the realist critique). The realist critique argues that the formalist elements of the novel are failed attempts at realism. While the novel is easy to read as realism by mainstream readers, this critique leaves the novel without value: the misogynistic content is offensive and the novel fails aesthetically as realism. But before fully exploring this critique, a brief detour into the New Journalism will add depth to the argument.

An important context for the *American Psycho* realist defence is the New Journalism (which also serves as an historical precedent to the notion of the novel-becoming-mass-media). *American Psycho* can be conceived of as an inverted form of the New Journalism when this term is understood as the incorporation of journalistic techniques into fiction. Thus, while the New Journalism sought to invigorate journalism, to win it the prestige otherwise reserved for the literary novel by introducing realist fictional techniques, Ellis’s novel reverses this process: Ellis divests the novel of plot and character, and heightens the techniques of journalism in the novel. The novel’s constant referencing of the mass media, the up-to-the-minute recording of trends, the parodies of journalism, the minimal interiority and lack of internal focalisation in characters, and Bateman’s detached objectivity around extreme violence are all reminiscent of news reporting and journalistic prose. For example, when the reader first meets Evelyn, Bateman’s fiancée, Bateman narrates:

Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and the same pair of silk-satin d’Orsay pumps Courtney has on. Her long blond hair is pinned back into a rather severe-looking bun and she acknowledges

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6 Baeo-Allué, *Controversial*, 52. Baeo-Allué notes the prominent place accorded the mass media in Zero.
me without looking up from the oval Wilton stainless-steel platter on which she has artfully arranged the sushi.⁸

The words “severe-looking” are the only clue as to Bateman’s feelings for her, otherwise it is as if we are meeting her from the outside, and aside from this detail, the prose could be straight out of a magazine: a fashion shoot featuring two models and a platter of sushi. Other examples where journalistic conventions have been overtly incorporated into the novel include the record reviews, and the FBI-sourced murder and torture scenes.

While a number of scholars and commentators link American Psycho to the New Journalism—Tynan, Stubblefield and Murphet—and Ellis recounts he was studying the New Journalism when he wrote Zero, no other critic suggests American Psycho to be a form of the New Journalism in reverse.⁹ Thus, it is argued here that Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote are important New Journalist genealogical predecessors to American Psycho.

Thus while traditional journalism is detached—like Bateman—when describing horrific events, Wolfe intended the New Journalism to be emotionally involved with the material: unlike American Psycho, realist fiction, as will be demonstrated below, conventionally aims to create emotional connection between characters and reader, especially during dramatic or cathartic events.¹⁰ Also of interest is Wolfe’s conception of his own work as being like “a garage sale,” a kind of patchwork “bricolage” (to cite another term from the work of Deleuze and Guattari), and his insistence upon the importance both of realist conventions and realistic content in contemporary fiction.¹¹

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⁸ Ellis, American Psycho, 9.
⁹ Ellis, "The Art of Fiction," 172. The course was "about using fictional techniques in journalism."
¹⁰ Wolfe, New Journalism, 35.
¹¹ Wolfe, 28; Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, 7. "Bricolage" is another useful term employed by Deleuze and Guattari, and is reminiscent of Wolfe’s conception of the New Journalism as like a "garage sale."
Like the New Journalism, *American Psycho* plays with the conventions of realism but inverts or replaces them with the conventions of journalism. Thus, the novel does not conform to traditional notions of expressive realism: the realist critique focuses on aspects of Ellis’s text that fail to conform to the realist novel (the very characteristics Wolfe reports incorporating into the New Journalism).

Contextualising *American Psycho* in this way is unusual. Most commentators and scholars tend to locate *American Psycho* in relation to other scandalous texts, such as Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964), or Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1959); or in relation to Blank Generation Fiction; or in relation to minimalism. While Young and Murphet discuss the novel in relation to the New Journalism, it is only in terms of recent literary history, or as a generalised “influence” on Ellis’s writing.

In addition to having a strong affinity with the New Journalism, the present study argues that Ellis’s third novel also resembles Kathy Acker novels in terms of the extremity of its formalism, as well as its thematic concerns. No seminal scholars of *American Psycho*—Young, Murphet, Baelo-Allué—link *American Psycho* to the work of Acker. (Young mentions Acker in the historical sense in relation to Blank Generation Fiction but does not discuss Acker in relation to *American Psycho.* While Blank Generation Fiction shares *American Psycho*’s interest in transgressive themes, in *American Psycho*’s case the resemblance is superficial as all other Blank Generation Fiction is realist and lacks *American Psycho*’s formalism. Thus, Blank Generation Fiction authors include: Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, Mary Gaitskill, Michael Chabon, Catherine Texier, Gary Indiana and Dennis Cooper. For example, McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* features popular culture as

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13 Young, 5; Murphet, 12.
14 Young, 7.
content, the protagonist’s ex-girlfriend appears on a billboard, but popular culture in McInerney’s work remains realistic and it does not feature at a formal level.  

Again, *American Psycho*’s formalism differentiates it from the New Journalism (with the possible exception of Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* [1968] and Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* [1968]): while closer to some of Didion’s and Wolfe’s work, *American Psycho* is not an essay, no matter how subjectively constructed. *American Psycho* is unlike Mailer’s novel *An American Dream* (1965), or Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), as both are examples of expressive realism.

The extremity of its formalism can also be employed to contrast *American Psycho* to Ellis’s more contained recent novels. Thus, *Lunar Park* contains its parodic and metafictional elements within a realist framework, and is similar to other recent novels, by Marisha Pessl, *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* (2006), and Dave Eggars, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) in this respect (Phelan applauds the containment of formalist devices within a mimetic framework). Further, what distinguishes Ellis’s novels is his focus on popular culture (a manifestation of the New Journalistic fascination with American daily life), and his formal incorporation of popular culture texts into his novels (which resembles Acker’s incorporation of literary and other canonical texts). For this reason, *American Psycho* cannot be adequately categorised as Blank Generation Fiction or minimalism, because of its prominent formalist qualities. On the contrary, *American Psycho* is most accurately described as a formalistically realised, journalistic fiction. Or as an inverted, formalistic—hence postmodern parodic—New Journalism, as Acker’s *Don Quixote* (1986) crossed with Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

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Having thus contextualised *American Psycho* in relation to other key American novelists and the New Journalism, the realist critique deserves fuller explanation. Initial commentary argues that not only is *American Psycho*’s content misogynistic, but the novel is badly written expressive realism. Such an argument is made by Sheppard, Leo, Bernays, Rosenblatt, Mailer, Kimball, Yardley, Kennedy, Teachout, and Moore.\(^\text{17}\) In spite of numerous postmodern defences, the realist critique of *American Psycho* has not disappeared: a significant number of more recent scholars and theorists have argued that the novel is not postmodern fiction but a failed attempt at realism. Hisom, Heyler, Wilson and Storey, among them.\(^\text{18}\)

The realist critique is as old as the scandal. Sheppard’s pre-publication review begins the critique with a complaint about *American Psycho*’s lack of conventional plot: “Instead of a plot, there is a tapeworm narrative that makes it unnecessary to distinguish the beginning of the novel from its end.”\(^\text{19}\) While expressive realist novels have plots which develop so that their characters and their situations have changed at the end, there is no such development in *American Psycho*. Sheppard’s review implies that Ellis attempted a conventional plot but was incapable of doing so successfully. Other reviews tended to continue this line of critique, especially given that realism is the dominant aesthetic criteria employed in broadsheet newspaper and magazine book reviews.

Another aspect of *American Psycho* Sheppard critiques is the novel’s style (the realist work’s formal characteristics should be hidden from the reader): “But to write superficially about superficiality and disgustingly about the disgusting and call it, as Ellis does, a challenge


\(^{19}\) Sheppard, “Revolting,” 100.
to his readers’ complacency does violence to his audience and to the fundamental nature of his craft. According to the “craft” of realism, the medium is not the message: the content can be superficial and disgusting, but the writing should still have demonstrable style, depth, even beauty. (Lehmann-Haupt echoes Sheppard here in the epigraph, arguing that Ellis does violence to art by confusing form with content: his writing about boredom is boring.)

Leo echoes Sheppard’s realist critique when he writes, “In my judgement, [American Psycho] has no discernible plot, no believable characterization, no sensibility at work that comes anywhere close to making art out of all the blood and torture.” Like Sheppard, Leo (implicitly and unquestioningly) compares American Psycho to realism and argues that Ellis’s novel fails.

Rosenblatt’s review echoes Sheppard’s critique: “you will be stunned to learn that 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.” Again, the novel lacks the characteristics of expressive literary realism: plot; characters with depth and motivation; and a sense of resolution and closure. Rosenblatt concludes that American Psycho fails as realism and satire: “The novel may not be much as fiction or as social criticism.”

Rosenblatt also expands Sheppard’s points about American Psycho’s style, and its literary realist qualities. First, he critiques Ellis’s grammar: what Bateman does “to the bodies of women [is] not unlike things that Mr Ellis does to prose... Let’s trust Vintage will at least

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20 Sheppard, 100.
21 Leo, “Marketing,” 23. While Ellis will later claim reviewers like Leo had not read his novel at the time of writing, (see below), the phrase “In my judgement,” and American Psycho “has no plot,” suggest Leo has read the manuscript in full.
23 Rosenblatt, 3.
clean up the grammar when it publishes the book next month." Rosenblatt also deplores Ellis’s descriptive passages claiming the novel is not fiction, but information, containing 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 stammering compared with what Mr. Ellis knows about shampoo alone.

Rosenblatt concludes that American Psycho is without literary worth: it is not even “meaningfully sensationalistic,” it is just “junk.”

Kimball and Yardley also critique American Psycho’s realism in terms of plot and character. Kimball notes, “Like all of Mr. Ellis’s writing, American Psycho is exceedingly short on plot and character, long on brand names, illegal drugs and mechanically pornographic descriptions of sex.” Yardley confirms, “his prose style here is flat and his dialogue is self-indulgently pointless, not to mention interminable. His ‘style,’ if that is the word for it, consists primarily of endless recitations of brand names as well as unrelated clauses connected in a wearying succession of non sequiturs.”

One final aspect of the realist critique is the complaint that American Psycho fails as realism because it transgresses the bounds of what is acceptable in mainstream literature by including material more suited to the genre of snuff pornography. It includes, that is, material that is sexually graphic to a degree not normally present in realist fiction. Early commentators

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24 Rosenblatt, 3.
25 Rosenblatt, 3. Again, such comments imply that Rosenblatt has read Ellis's manuscript in full.
26 Rosenblatt, 16.
28 Yardley, “Trash,” B01.
who make this observation include Rosenblatt, Baker, Miner, Yardley, Wolf and Reuters. As Baker argues, “it seems to us... that the book does transcend the boundaries of what is acceptable in mainstream publishing.” As noted above, Rosenblatt instructs readers to “snuff” this book, while Moore classifies the novel as “pornography,” and links its pornographic characteristics to its failure at realist “eloquence,” and “intelligence.”

Mailer’s review is more lengthy than other commentary and is central to the realist critique. While Mailer also notes “the murders begin to read like a pornographic description of sex,” he expands upon the initial realist critique and adds further characteristics of realism lacking in *American Psycho*: an emotional connection with the reader, and a sense of morality. Further, unlike other commentators, Mailer’s aesthetic criteria are clearly evident in his critique. Mailer’s central question “What is art?” indicates he is assessing *American Psycho* in terms of its ability to meet the criteria of expressive realism and literature. Mailer begins by comparing *American Psycho* with Tom Wolfe’s expressive realist novel, *Bonfire of the Vanities.*

Catherine Belsey defines expressive realism as “the theory that literature reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognise it as true.” Thus realist critics argue *American Psycho* fails to meet such criteria: they claim *American Psycho* fails to reflect reality; Ellis is not a gifted enough writer; and readers cannot recognise the novel’s truth.

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30 Baker, “Publisher Responsibility,” 7.
31 Rosenblatt, "Snuff!" 3; Moore, "Trashing Women," A27
32 Mailer, "Children," 220.
33 Mailer, 158.
34 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, (London: Methuen, 1988), 7. [Italics in original.]
Mailer’s point about the novel’s stylistic aberrations illustrates the second of these criteria, Ellis’s lack of skill. Mailer claims *American Psycho* is “needlessly long,” and complains that its attention to detail is excessive, that the reader is “asphyxiated” with “commodities.” Mailer also claims *American Psycho* lacks plot. Ellis fails to express himself in a discourse readers can recognise. Given the lack of plot, Mailer speculates whether the novel can be redeemed by its characterisation.

Again, Belsey states, “Classic Realism presents individuals whose traits of character, understood as essential and predominantly given, constrain the choices they make, and whose potential for development depends on what is given.” Mailer, however, finds Bateman lacks an “essential” quality, he has no “inner life” to apprehend. Mailer is disappointed again as *American Psycho* has “the worst and dullest characters a talented author has put before us in a long time.”

Another criteria of realism Mailer employs to analyse the novel is closure. As Belsey specifies, “Classic Realism is characterised by illusionism, narrative which leads to closure, and a hierarchy of discourses, which establishes the ‘truth’ of the story.” However, the monstrous murders in *American Psycho* “are not dramatic. They are episodic.” That is, “Nothing follows from them”; Bateman is not caught, life “goes on.” Thus, Mailer argues Ellis’s “monstrous,” “episodic” story breaks all expressive realist conventions: the murders do not resolve themselves, there is no catharsis, they are repetitive and episodic, there is no closure.

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35 Mailer, “Children,” 158.
36 Mailer, 158.
37 Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 74.
38 Mailer, “Children,” 220.
39 Mailer, 158.
40 Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 70. [Italics in original.]
41 Mailer, “Children,” 158.
42 Mailer, 158-9.
Another way *American Psycho* confounds the logic of realism according to Mailer is through its lack of morality. According to Belsey, the author expresses their morality in the work: “Narrative form, it is argued, comprises a story, an argument or moral theme, and the imitation of experience.” Mailer complains that *American Psycho* lacks all three. The novel does not teach us something, it fails to “bring” something “back.” For Mailer, there is no moral to the story: “All the more valuable then might be a novel about a serial killer, provided we could learn something we did not know before.” *American Psycho*’s lack of morality is, for Mailer, a profound failing.

Mailer also critiques the novel because the reader cannot emotionally identify with Bateman’s character, as Belsey claims the reader must do in Classic Realism. Bateman lacks a psychological profile, a family history, an inner life. Mailer also refuses to justify Bateman’s lack of identity with the satire defence, rejecting Ellis’s “black comedy” defence outright and describing Ellis’s claim that he merely depicted the world of Wall Street as he saw it as “a cop-out.” According to Mailer, the reader cannot feel pity for Bateman without forming an emotional connection to the character, and without connection, the novel is empty. “Blind gambling is a hollow activity and this novel spins into the centre of that empty space.” Ultimately, Mailer speculates that Ellis wrote *American Psycho* as therapy; that he uses the “reader” to work out “pest nests in himself”, and concludes that Ellis’s mental state adversely effected his novel.

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44 Mailer, "Children," 159.
45 Mailer, 159.
46 Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 74.
47 Mailer, "Children," 220.
48 Mailer, 221.
49 *Exit*, Fox, 2000; Mailer, “Children,” 220. Will Self claims Ellis was working out issues to do with his sexuality in the novel.
Bernays echoes Mailer on this point: good realist novels contain the “moral spin” of their authors, and get their readers to feel “what they [their characters] feel.” Good novels contain “powerful, emotive language,” and authors shape “a story to reveal a moral sense as lucid and persuasive as a declaration of love.” Like Mailer, Bernays claims the novel lacks these qualities and that it will need a lot of editing at Vintage; it needs to be “completely ripped apart and sewn together by a master hand.” Thus, “great” novels must be aesthetically coherent, as well as forge an emotive connection with the reader and display a clear moral sense (even if immoral). It is worth noting here that while Wolf argues *American Psycho* forges a connection with the reader, the connection is undesirable, consisting of the reader’s eroticisation during the pornographic scenes which immediately precede the misogynistic violence. The relationship forged with the reader is not of connection or empathy but one that combines disgust, arousal and horror with complicity, as in the scenes of sexualized misogyny.

While Mailer does analyse the formalist dimensions of the novel, he claims *American Psycho* is written in a “minimalist” style reminiscent of Carver, Beattie and Barthelme, adding that Ellis’s attempt at minimalism fails: *American Psycho*’s formalism merely contributes to the creation of a superficial, shallow protagonist who is not realistically believable. Mailer requires that we learn about violence from the novel: Ellis’s depiction of extreme violence is a case where less is less.

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50 Bernays, “Good Taste,” B5.
51 Bernays, B5.
52 Bernays, B1.
53 Mailer, “Children,” 220; Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 29. Baelo-Allué counter-argues that Ellis’s work is a form of minimalism that succeeds, for example, the novel’s detached inarticulate characters, reduced structure and plot.
54 Mailer, “Children,” 220.
Mailer wittily argues (from the perspective of a literary realist), that it is the novel’s aesthetics that evoke the true sense of “terror”: Mailer speculates, “Is Bateman the monster or Bret Easton Ellis? At best, what is to be said of such an imagination?” The aesthetics of the novel are unlike expressive realism, therefore the creator can only be a monster of bad taste. Like Sheppard and Rosenblatt (and others), Mailer concludes that *American Psycho* fails as realism: for it to work, Ellis needs a (realist) protagonist with depth, psychology and an inner life:

The failure of this book, which promises to rise occasionally to the level of the very good (when it desperately needs to be great), is that by the end we know no more about Bateman’s need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film.

Mailer adds that *American Psycho* is “written by only a half-competent and narcissistic young pen.”

Read from a realist perspective, Mailer is correct to identify the central problem in *American Psycho* as the lack of emotional connection between reader and protagonist, which is heightened by the way Bateman’s character never resolves in realist terms. While Ellis keeps his reader involved in the text by creating suspense, by the novel’s conclusion, the suspense leads nowhere: the ending is a “cop-out.” For Mailer, if Bateman as a character had confirmed to the conventions of realism, then *American Psycho* could have been a “great” novel: the novel could have been both formally clever and emotionally engaging, like *Zero* and *Lunar Park* (however with a stronger political message). Great literature must combine formalist and mimetic elements to engage the reader and make the reader care: if the reader

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55 Mailer, 159.
56 Mailer, 221.
57 Mailer, 221.
does not care, the novel remains “blind gambling.” Thus while *American Psycho* is a
postmodern parody of realism, among other genres, it nevertheless needs to resolve and
cohere on both abstract/formalist and particular/mimetic levels: “The mundane activity and
the supersensational are required to meet.”

Having explored the realist critique, it is worth observing that another subset of
commentators read *American Psycho* as realism and claim that the novel *succeeds* as realism
including: Quindlen, Bernays, Weldon, Battersby and Dupre. Again, this is unusual and
confusing. What is it about *American Psycho* that has produces such diametrically opposed
readings? How is it that scholars and critics cannot agree whether the novel is realist or
postmodern?

Not surprisingly, a number of scholars and commentators argue *American Psycho* is
both realism and postmodernism: Corliss, Rayns, Freese, Stubblefield, Williams, Heyler,
Mandel, Jarvis, Schoene, Sahli, Vegari, and Martin. For example, Vegari writes, “the novel
seems equally to invite readings that highlight its realism, and readings that highlight its
formalism... both views find substantial support in the text.” However, Vegari qualifies this
point by claiming that ultimately “the text falls short of either a formalist or realist
interpretation, despite the ample evidence it seems to present in support of each position.”

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58 Mailer, 220.
Dupre, “Violence, Depravity.”
60 Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 1. Baelo-Allué makes a similar point noting the extreme and opposite interpretations the novel inspired.
61 Baelo-Allué, 1.
64 Vegari, “Violence, Immediately,” 108; Martin “Contemporary Life,” 156. Again, Martin’s article argues that
*American Psycho* is a form of postmodern realism which combines and contains formalist elements within realism.
Baelo-Allué argues the novel is a confusing combination of minimalist realism and postmodern metafiction.65

Before discussing the other scholarship that focuses on the realist critique, the important connection between feminism and realism deserves further exploration. Thus, commentators Quindlen, Bernays, Weldon and Wolf all argue American Psycho succeeds as realism because it mirrors the world. Quindlen claims the hateful reality depicted in the novel mirrors the real hateful world where men and women treat each other despicably.66 In a similar vein, Bernays envies Ellis his ability to depict sexually violent misogyny on the grounds that it so closely resembles the real nature of relations between the sexes. According to Bernays, American Psycho not only succeeds as expressive realism by representing life-like situations, Ellis writes “about the world as it is, not as he or she would like it to be.”67

Weldon argues that American Psycho perfectly captures the misogyny of real life, as noted above, implying Ellis’s novel is realism because the world it depicts is sadomasochistic.68 Wolf argues that American Psycho is mainstream fiction, not avant-garde, because it mirrors society. Thus, as noted above, the realist critique claims the novel mirrors the world wherein sexual violence is perpetrated by men upon women: a novel which depicts sexualised misogynistic violence has no claim to avant-garde or transgressive status because violence towards women is a “cliché,” it is the “most mainline mainstream.”69 Significantly, all four commentators identify as feminists.

65 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 4.
69 Wolf, “Animals,” 34.
Again, Moi’s seminal analysis is useful here. Moi observes a marked difference between feminist readings of realist versus modernist literature.\textsuperscript{70} Moi famously claims Virginia Wolf’s modernist aesthetics alienate Anglo-American feminists like Elaine Showalter, because feminists like Showalter insisted that feminist literature needed to be “true to life,” that is, realism.\textsuperscript{71} As a result, Anglo-American feminist critics are “hostile to non-realist forms of writing.”\textsuperscript{72} Moi then critiques realist feminists, accusing them of a “simplistic” prejudice that transforms all literature into a form of autobiography and erases a lot of what is called literature. The literary qualities of a text disappear when the text is viewed through the realist filter employed by many Anglo-American feminists. When writing must be “faithful” to “reproduction” there is no consideration for the complexity of textual production.\textsuperscript{73}

For their part, Moi’s Anglo-American feminists claim to promote “a materialist approach to literature which attempts to do away with the formalist illusion that literature is somehow divorced from reality.”\textsuperscript{74} Further, Anglo-American feminists argue modernist authors neglect “the exclusions based on class, race and sex” and “take refuge” in “formalist concerns” believing other matters are irrelevant.\textsuperscript{75} They complain

[modernism] forces the work of art, the artist, the critic, and the audience outside of history. Modernism denies us the possibility of understanding ourselves as agents in the material world, for all has been removed to an abstract world of ideas, where

\begin{footnotes}
\item[70] Moi, \textit{Sexual/Textual}, 46.
\item[71] Moi, 2, 46.
\item[72] Moi, 47.
\item[73] Moi, 45. [Italics in original.]
\item[74] Moi, 46.
\end{footnotes}
interactions can be minimized or emptied of meaning and real consequences. Less than ever are we able to interpret the world—much less change it.\textsuperscript{76}

Thus, Anglo-American feminists reject modernism, arguing that such work is not feminist.

Applying Moi’s analysis to\textit{ American Psycho}, similarities emerge in terms of the mass media feminist critique and scholarly defences of\textit{ American Psycho}. The Anglo-American feminist critique of modernism is reminiscent of Mailer’s remark that\textit{ American Psycho} becomes mere “blind gambling” if severed from all mimetic ties: it parallels the realist critique of\textit{ American Psycho’s} postmodernity. Mass media feminist critics argue that if\textit{ American Psycho} is read as a postmodern text, interactions can be “minimized or emptied of meaning and real consequences” in a similar way to a modernist novels.

Further, mass media feminists argue Ellis neglects the exclusions based on sex—claiming that these exclusions are evidence of his misogyny—and takes refuge in formalist experimentation. Mass media feminist critics also refuse to read\textit{ American Psycho} outside history and contextualise it in terms of the backlash. The feminists argue novels have consequences, and are not just abstract ideas. Further, mass media feminists judge\textit{ American Psycho} in terms of realist aesthetics. While some find the novel lacks plot and character, others find it meets the realist criteria of mirroring the world’s misogyny.

Taking the mass media feminist critique into account,\textit{ American Psycho} needs to work at both realist and postmodern levels and for both sets of conventions. The parody of realism can only work for the mainstream reader and in a mainstream literary novel if the realist elements contain the postmodern elements. Ellis achieved this in\textit{ Zero}, but not in\textit{ American Psycho}. The scenes wherein realism fails to contain postmodernism are, as this thesis has

\textsuperscript{76} Robinson, and Vogel, 300-1. Cited in Moi, 45.
argued: the postmodern beginning and ending; and the extreme lack of resolution around
realist plot elements and Bateman’s character. For example, Bateman’s confession to
Carnes on pages 387-9, and the scene with the real estate agent at Paul Owen’s apartment on
pages 366-70 contribute to a lack of closure and make it impossible to determine whether
Bateman committed the murders or not.

Unlike Zero, which produces a sense of closure in the way Clay leaves California to
go to college, and unlike Lunar Park, which similarly produces closure in that Bret leaves his
wife and child and begins a homosexual relationship, Bateman remains the same at the
conclusion of American Psycho: there is very little closure. (Annesley also notes the
technical superiority of these two novels, and Mandel claims Ellis attempts to rectify the lack
of closure in American Psycho in the ending of Lunar Park where Bret narrates that his
father’s ashes were “exiting the text,” a possible reference to “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.”) It
is the overly ambiguous ending that most suggests Ellis failed to control his material. The
“EXIT” ending is a “facile out,” a “cop-out,” as well as being a significant departure from
Ellis’s previous and subsequent work, an aberration within his oeuvre. For example, if in
American Psycho Kimball had perhaps contacted Bateman requesting another meeting at the
end of the novel (which would have suggested the possibility that Bateman might still be
cought and punished, and had Bateman as a consequence of this, moved out of New York to
“lie low” for a while, or perhaps even for good, this would have given the novel a greater
degree of closure, and a sense of closure commensurate with his previous and subsequent
novels).

77 Baelo-Allué Controversial, 115. Baelo-Allué agrees the lack of closure contributes to the controversy.
78 Vegari, “Violence, Immediately,” 117. Vegari agrees with the argument here, that Lunar Park resolves, unlike
American Psycho.
Baelo-Allué counter-argues all Ellis’s novels (other than Lunar Park) lack closure equally.
Zero, as noted above, does resolve the realist aspects of the text. Clay refers to leaving five times from page 205 to page 208, which helps create a sense of closure. Thus, “Blair calls me the night before I leave,” “And before I left,” “It was time to go back,” “After I left the city,” “After I left.”\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Glamorama}, while it has more plot elements than \textit{American Psycho}, is equally ambiguous and similarly lacks closure. While Victor’s double moves on on pages 462-3—like Clay and Bret—the real Victor on page 482 does not (is it also possible to read the two Victors as one and the same person, differentiating the two is no more possible than deciding whether the murders in \textit{American Psycho} are fantasies or not). Ellis also resolves the realist elements in \textit{Lunar Park}: Bret and Jayne divorce on page 302, and Bret is “living with a young sculptor named Mike Graves,” on page 303. Bret asks Robby to come home, on page 306, and tosses his dead father’s ashes out to sea on page 307. Like Zero, which finishes with a reference to a song, \textit{Lunar Park} finishes with a metafictional reference, but significantly, the realist elements simultaneously resolve: “So if you should see my son, tell him I say hello... that he can always find me here, whenever he wants, right here, my arms held out and waiting, in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of \textit{Lunar Park}.”\textsuperscript{82} The metafictional ending—the “end” at the end—resolves at the same time as the realist one—the lost son is called home to his father.

Feminist and other critics who argue \textit{American Psycho} fails as realism do so because of the lack of authorial signalling about the novel’s postmodern formalist aesthetic characteristics, while those who say it succeeds as realism do so because its hatefulfulness and misogyny mirror the world in the mimetic sense. And yet, the question remains: what is it about \textit{American Psycho} that has created such diverse and divisive responses? The answer lies in the novel’s excessive ambiguities. As noted above, one of the things the novel is

\textsuperscript{81} Ellis, \textit{Zero}, 205-8.
\textsuperscript{82} Ellis, \textit{Lunar Park}, 309.
excessively ambiguous about are its aesthetics: the novel mixes postmodern parodies of realism and other genres without providing enough signalling to the reader as to how the novel is to be read. *American Psycho* remains ambiguous and hides in its ambiguity. What most commentators implicitly address in their critique is *American Psycho*’s non-signalled postmodern parody of realism which leaves the reader unsure how to read the realist aspects of the novel. Specifically, the reader cannot resolve the question: did Bateman commit the sexual crimes; and what sort of killer/person *is* he? (Again, numerous commentators and scholars have speculated the novel’s flaws may be connected to Ellis’s mental illness, and to his drug and alcohol abuse.)

While a few scholars argue, like Williams, that the novel is a form of naturalism, such a claim is the exception among scholars. Of all scholarship, Serpell’s work most complements the present study. Unlike the present study, however, Serpell argues the novel succeeds. Thus, Serpell argues that both realist critique and postmodern defences are credible, and that *American Psycho* fails to resolve its aesthetic ambiguities in a deliberate attempt to create a specific effect. In keeping with the present study, Serpell divides the *American Psycho* literary criticism into the feminist/realist critiques, and the scholarly and theoretical defences. The feminist/realist critics morally judge Bateman’s gruesome misogynistic behaviour but tend to downplay Bateman’s self-reflexivity, and defenders/theorists note the text’s formal properties, the “gaps” and “inconsistencies,” but reduce the violence to rhetorical and satirical functions overlooking its “signifying and promotional” functions. Serpell challenges both aesthetic critique and defence but ultimately rejects the aesthetic defence because reading Bateman as an impossible character

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makes him and his violence disappear (though she qualifies that this produces a deliberate affect).

In sum, the central problem posed by a realist reading of *American Psycho*, even allowing for the fact that *American Psycho* also parodies realism, is the degree of the lack of closure. While Ellis’s other novels create a sense of closure in that they end when his characters leave, Bateman is back at Harry’s bar with his male friends as if nothing had happened at the end of *American Psycho*. On the one hand, some degree of ambiguity can help create suspense without detracting from the overall unity of the text. For example, in Ellis’s other novels, *Glamorama* and *Rules*, it is never clear whether the violence actually happens or not. On the other hand, in order to be read as realism, the reader of *American Psycho* needs to be able to resolve Bateman’s psychology, to label him with a definitive “mental illness.” For example, the reader needs an answer to the question, is he a serial killer, a mass murderer, an emotionally autistic hallucinating narcissist, a psychopath, or a sociopath? While the novel suggests Bateman is a combination of the above, there is no such thing as a serial killer combined with mass murderer combined with hallucinating fantasist, in real life.

Not surprisingly, numerous scholars have analysed the complex (and this thesis argues problematic) ending of *American Psycho*. Blazer, who follows Young on this point, identifies four possible ways of describing “Bateman’s relationship with reality, with killing and raping and dismembering.”84 Thus, Bateman is either: a neurotic obsessional man who fantasizes violence to feel alive; a psychotic madman ranting about his life; a sociopath with

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psychotic tendencies who enjoys inflicting pain; or finally, a postmodern textual contradiction.\textsuperscript{85}

Negotiating the subtleties of the text may not pose a problem for a sophisticated, competent reader familiar with postmodern theory and able to perform close readings (that is, a scholar), but such readers were not the targeted reader for \textit{American Psycho} at the time of publication: the mainstream reader was the targeted reader for the sensationalised novel. While the novel was aggressively marketed by Vintage to readers who frequently lacked the competence to read it without “sleeve notes,” mass media commentators judged the novel as realism for precisely a mainstream audience and deemed it to fail. \textbf{Furthermore, as noted above, even for scholars, this thesis argues the novel fails as a postmodern parody due to its lack of signalling.}

The main problem with realist critics is that they fail to acknowledge their expressive realist filter. Realism is the aesthetic norm in mass media journalistic reviews, “Classic realism... is... still the prevailing form of popular fiction.”\textsuperscript{86} Also, \textbf{while the realist critique addresses the content, it causes the novel’s formalist qualities to disappear.} That being said, the novel can all too easily be read as realism (realism that fails but realism none the less), due to the overly oblique nature of the textual clues.

\textsuperscript{85} Blazer, http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/blazer.htm; Young, “Beast,” 116. While Young notes, “we are given three distinct opportunities to weigh up Patrick’s narrative, with evidence assembled both for and against its authenticity, as in a court of law.” Both Young and Blazer, however, make the violence disappear.

\textsuperscript{86} Belsey, \textit{Critical Practice}, 73.
2: The Postmodern Defence

Ellis’s only novel to directly refer to postmodernity is Rules: Lauren and Sean refer to tutorials and articles on “the postmodern condition.” In the epigraph to this chapter, Ellis makes a rare admission to an interest in postmodernism when writing Rules, something that the formalist properties and the constant referencing to popular culture in all Ellis’s novels would appear to testify. Again, however, Ellis contradicts himself in interviews. When the candidate asked Ellis whether he was interested in, or influenced by postmodern theory, Ellis answered emphatically that he was not. Again, Ellis’s assertions in Love completely contradict his personal communication with the candidate: “A lot of people would say prose must be pitch perfect. That novels must have traditional narrative structure—that characters must change. You would think that most writers in their twenties would want to fool around a little bit—would want to be a little experimental.”

Nielsen similarly finds Ellis contradicts himself about whether his writing is postmodern or not. Ellis’s inability or refusal to be consistent on this point is congruent with his response to most interview topics. Yet while Ellis the author may or may not be a postmodernist, this thesis argues the implied author of American Psycho attempts to be one. In addition, while the postmodern defence is the most common scholarly refutation of the mass media feminist critique, the present study argues that the novel is flawed in its postmodernity (which again lends credence to the oft-ignored mass media feminist critique).

As already noted, postmodernists argue American Psycho needs to be judged on the basis of postmodern aesthetic criteria, not on the basis of the aesthetic criteria of expressive

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88 Bret Easton Ellis, personal communication with candidate, Dec 1995.
90 Nielsen, "Double Exposures," 133.
realism. Unlike the realist critique, the postmodern defence accounts for the novel’s formalist elements. Before proceeding further, however, it is useful to define postmodernism. Thus, there are at least two common definitions of postmodernity. According to the first definition, the postmodern refers both to an historical period, and an aesthetic style. According to the second definition, the postmodern is an anti-aesthetic, a contemporary form of avant-garde. Just as with the parody/satire debate, a confusion around definitions is a contributing factor to the division in literary criticism about American Psycho.

Kauffman summarises the two definitions as follows:

There are two different ‘postmodernisms’: one preserves the humanist tradition by turning postmodernism into a mere style; the other deconstructs traditions, critiques origins, questions rather than exploits cultural codes to expose social, sexual, and political affiliations.\(^9\)

As this chapter will demonstrate, many commentators and scholars use the two definitions interchangeably in their analyses of American Psycho. Of significance to the argument here, the anti-aesthetic definition is the one that addresses the novel’s formal properties. That being said, few commentators writing at the time of the novel’s publication define American Psycho as postmodern. The first to overtly describe American Psycho as postmodernist are Miner and Iannone (with Lehmann-Haupt and Corliss implying postmodernity soon after).

Miner’s second article, essentially a challenge to Mailer’s realist critique, claims that the novel is postmodern in an attempt to explain Mailer’s critique of Ellis’s politics: “I think he [Mailer] means that American Psycho is nihilistic enough to satisfy the spiritual (which is

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\(^9\) Kauffman, Bad Girls, 14.
to say, political) demands of post-modern art, but fails to deliver aesthetically [as realism].  

That is, Mailer reads *American Psycho* as politically cynical, and as badly written realism. However, Miner himself argues the novel fails at both postmodernism and *realism*, his is not a postmodern defence, though Miner nevertheless reprimands Mailer for his “traditional” approach (that is, for his adherence to the aesthetics of expressive realism), which, Miner claims, will alienate the literary avant-garde.  

Thus, Miner suggests Mailer’s critique of *American Psycho* amounts to an aesthetic prejudice. Also of interest is the way Miner links the novel’s aesthetic ambiguity with the satire defence (which was essentially a realist defence) and which Miner later rejects: the satire “falls short”; “the dark cry against the eighties is false.”

For Miner, *American Psycho* fails on all accounts: as a realism, as postmodernism, and as satire.

Ianonne also notes the novel’s postmodernity:

Indeed, when Patrick Bateman speaks his mind, he invokes not the culture of Reagan, which for better or worse is only the culture of middle-class America, but rather a phantasmagoric, quintessentially post-modernist landscape from which all traditional structures, values, truths, have been eliminated.

But Ianonne conceives of *American Psycho* as postmodern in the historical, not the anti-aesthetic sense.

While neither Lehmann-Haupt nor Corliss describe *American Psycho* overtly as postmodern, they both imply it in the anti-aesthetic sense. Lehmann-Haupt argues that *American Psycho* fails at realism because it employs “too many devices” which take the

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93 Miner, 60.
94 Cohen, "Answers Critics," 13; Miner, 60.
95 Ianonne, "PC," 54.
novel into “abstraction” and concludes *American Psycho* is too abstract to work as realism. Corliss, whose “Tom and Jerry” statement appears above, similarly notes the formal and anti-aesthetic qualities of *American Psycho* only to argue for their effectiveness: “this is a book of lists”, “the tedium is the message”, and “this is concept comedy.” Corliss also analyses *American Psycho*’s close connection with popular culture: the novel is “a morality play disguised as a snuff movie.” Corliss is the only early commentator to defend *American Psycho* as a postmodern novel.

A number of other commentators imply the novel is postmodern. For example, Coates writes:

> In the scene in which the derelict is killed, Ellis effectively shows us how all Bateman’s values—despite a Harvard education—have effectively hardened into a sense of taste: ethics are all aesthetics for him, and he is enraged when they are violated.

Thus, Coates claims aesthetics have the highest value in the novel.

However, the most commonly implied postmodern attributes of *American Psycho* concern the lack of characterisation and plot, with commentators and scholars classifying the novel as postmodern because of the profoundly ambiguous plot, and the problematic use of the first person point of view, which, when combined with unreliable narration as it is in *American Psycho*, means the reader ultimately has to gauge whether the novel’s most sensationalistic scenes (the sexualised misogyny and other murder and torture scenes), are

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97 Corliss, “Vidiocy,” 56.
98 Corliss, 56.
99 Coates, “Psycho,” 5. 1.
real or not. In other words, the very attributes critiqued from a realist perspective imply postmodernism.

The postmodern defence, which begins with Young’s work, comprises a second shift within *American Psycho* literary criticism: just as Mailer moved the debate about the novel away from its problematic content into an examination of its form and aesthetics, Young’s book chapter moves the aesthetic debate away from realism and into the realm of postmodernism. In so doing, Young established what has become a standard in scholarly and theoretical responses to the novel (and by extension, to the mass media feminist critique): defence and neutralisation, not debate or exploration. While Young is not the first to note *American Psycho*’s postmodernity, hers is the first comprehensive postmodern defence and is worth examining in brief.

Young argues initial feminist (and other) critics failed to recognise the novel’s postmodern aesthetics. For example, Mailer and Rosenblatt fail to address *American Psycho*’s postmodernity in their early critiques. Young argues the cause of the *American Psycho* scandal was only superficially related to the novel’s content and was really caused by confusion among commentators about the novel’s aesthetics: to judge the novel with realist criteria is to set it up to fail. Young concludes, *American Psycho* is not a realist novel, it is a postmodern text.

While Young’s analysis acknowledges the novel’s postmodern plot, her analysis nevertheless focuses on Bateman as a postmodern character. Young argues that the following are all evidence of postmodernity: the fashion designer descriptions of the character’s clothes; the cipher-like absence of roundness to Bateman’s character; Bateman’s exaggerated consumerism; the removal of interesting characters; the intertextuality of the characters;

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100 Young, "Beast," 86.
Bateman’s lack of psychological profile; the ambiguity around the number of narrators; and the general impossibility of Bateman as a character. (Given the adequate existing analyses of Bateman’s postmodernity as a character by Young and other scholars, this thesis will not repeat their work here.)

Further, Young interprets Bateman, Ellis’s “unreliable narrator,” as a postmodern trait. Thus, for Young, the discrepancy between the number of bodies found on the yacht at the beginning, and then towards the end of the novel indicate unreliable narration. While Young is correct when she argues that Bateman is an unreliable narrator, Young’s claim that the unreliable narrator alone makes the novel compelling is misleading. As noted above, what makes the novel compelling is the combination of the unreliable narrator with the horrifying, eroticised sensationalistic content. Again, Young’s analysis minimises content and gives precedence to form.

Young identifies additional postmodern tropes such as deindividuation, irony and non-sequential chapter titles. While Young is not the first scholar to note the centrality of “deindividualization” in Ellis’s work, Freese notes it first in Zero. Young claims it works as a major plot device in American Psycho. For example, one of the reasons Bateman remains uncaught and unpunished is because all the characters look so alike that even Bateman’s lawyer misrecognises him. Further, while deindividuation explains some of the ambiguity in the realist plot of American Psycho, it fails to answer the riddle of Bateman’s character. In the end Bateman is different to others, though precisely how remains unclear: deindividuation does not explain whether he is a serial killer-mass murderer, or a fantasising misogynist.

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101 Young, "Beast," 94.
102 Young, 96.
Young also notes the novel’s postmodern irony when narrating the daily news (the present study calls this ironic postmodern parody). Thus, Bateman’s speech at Evelyn’s party about social issues is arresting according to Young because its delivery is deadpan and because it “denotes an abyss between Patrick’s daily life and any apprehension of the political realities behind it.”

This chapter counters that the presence of media-speak can equally be interpreted as evidence of realism and mimesis: 1980s New York is over-run by the media, the media does condition people’s thoughts.

While Freese first addressed the artificially named and non-sequential chapter titles in his analysis of Zero, Young claims their effect in American Psycho is that: “the seamless monotone of Patrick’s life... is subtly undermined and fragmented by continual narrative jump-cuts... The reader is given no chance to sink back mindlessly into a warm bath of narrative.”

What Young does not say is that the titles are part of the novel’s parody of the non-sequentiality and fragmentation of television.

However, there are a number of problems with Young’s postmodern defence. Firstly, as noted above, there is a tendency for Young (and other defending scholars and theorists) to go to the opposite extreme to make their point. If the mass media feminists ignored or rejected the novel’s postmodern aesthetics but focused on the sexually violent scenes, then the theoretically based postmodern defences tended to minimise the significance of the sexually violent scenes and mimetic aspects of the novel and to focus exclusively on the novel’s aesthetics. In addition to Young, Buscall, Riquelme, Blazer, King, Mandel and Phillips all make this error.

Some scholars even argue that the postmodern aesthetic

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103 Young, 97-8.
104 Young, 101.
qualities of the novel more than made up for the misogyny, and counter it, for example, Young, Freccero, Kauffman, Brusseau, Blazer, Mandel, Sahli and Storey.  

Most problematic is the way the novel’s postmodern characteristics make the mass media feminist critique disappear in Young’s hands. As a result, it is as if the misogynistic violence does not happen in Young’s version of the novel. Even when Young addresses more mimetic and “thematic” concerns she concentrates on finance, not on misogyny. For example, Young’s analysis of Ellis’s language focuses on his use of the symbols of money, blood and destruction. Young only mentions misogyny once and in a general way. The violence towards women does not perform an important function for Young, but is subsumed by the novel’s postmodern aesthetics. Its chief significance lies in its contribution to the riddle of Bateman’s unreliability and impossibility as a character; it is not about eroticising or conditioning the reader.

This thesis argues that, contrary to Young, the true function of the sexual violence is to hook the reader through horror and ambiguity and to maintain their attention by involving them in a guessing game. The reader wants and tries to assemble Bateman into a believable character and the story into a coherent plot, but cannot. American Psycho employs neither plot nor character in a conventional realist way, thus the sexualised misogyny plays a key role in holding the reader’s attention. By failing to critique the novel’s misogyny, by minimising its presence, scholars like Young appear to implicitly condone patriarchal values and the sensationalistic marketing of literary fiction. Counter to Young’s analysis, it is argued here

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109 Young, 94-8.

110 Young, 99.
that content is of central importance in compelling the reader and must not be reduced to form.

While Young’s postmodern defence aesthetically celebrates the novel, she nevertheless finds it to be flawed. Young argues *American Psycho* is overly fictionalised and uncompromisingly postmodern to the point where it imprisons the reader: “It is an extraordinarily fictional text, an over-fictionalized, overly structuralized book.”\(^{111}\) Between the postmodern beginning and ending, there is no way out, the text is a “closed system.”\(^{112}\) Thus, Young argues the postmodernism is excessive.

Also problematic is Young’s praise and interpretation of Ellis’s aggression as an author (which complements Hissom’s claim that the novel parodies pornography by reproducing the victim/aggressor dynamic in the reader/author relationship).\(^{113}\) While Young does note the impossibility of Bateman’s character—a serial killer/mass murderer, or ambiguously fantasising/non-fantasising character—and notes that both are unbelievable, she does not make enough of the excessive ambiguity in the novel and fails to link this with the overly aggressive confident author. Thus Young under-values the effect of Ellis’s aggression on the unsophisticated reader: the novel is so ambiguous the reader cannot make sense of it.

While numerous scholars have written variations of Young’s defence, Murphet and Baelo-Allué’s analyses are worth citing briefly. Thus Murphet, like Young, identifies a number of postmodern tropes in *American Psycho* which centre on Bateman’s lack of character, and Murphet’s defence makes the feminist critique disappear. Unlike Young, Murphet analyses the sexualised misogynistic scenes as reification and in stylistic terms.\(^{114}\)

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\(^{111}\) Young, 93. [Italics in original.]
\(^{112}\) Young, 93.
\(^{113}\) Young, 93; Hissom, “Exit,” 37.
Reification refers to the process whereby relations between people become relations between things.\textsuperscript{115} Thus the women, Murphet claims, are only in the sexually violent scenes because they are being paid. (This is not true, however; Bethany, Daisy, and Elizabeth are not being paid.) For Murphet, the sex scenes are an extreme form of reification in which the women have literally become products and sex is reduced to an economic function.

While Murphet adds there is no “relation” between the sexes, there is no emotion or intimacy in these scenes, this thesis counters that there is a relation between Bateman and his victims and partners, although it is one of humiliation and degradation, which descends into hideous violence.\textsuperscript{116} There are no sex scenes in the novel that do not involve either sexual violence, or emotional degradation and humiliation: where there is no humiliation or violence, there is no sex.

Thus, scenes interpreted above as postmodern parodies of romance, Murphet reads as sexual reification. For example, Murphet claims conversation between the sexes is reduced to lists and is part of a “siege and domination” modality with each sex only capable of viewing the other in terms of “preconceived and fixed expectations.”\textsuperscript{117} Murphet reads sex relations only as critique and neglects to observe the complicit celebration within these scenes. Murphet also reads the list-conversations as part of Ellis’s failed satire of the heterosexual yuppie world (which again equates them with critique).\textsuperscript{118}

Murphet’s aestheticization of the violence is deeply problematic. While Murphet concedes that “The most disturbing thing about Bateman’s sexuality… is… that it segues into the excruciating violence of the book’s most notorious passages,” Murphet then proceeds to

\textsuperscript{115} Murphet, 37.
\textsuperscript{116} Murphet, 40; Clark, "Violence," 27. Clark later restates Murphet’s point.
\textsuperscript{117} Murphet, 31.
\textsuperscript{118} Murphet, 31.
compare the sexualised violence perpetrated upon Bethany with the murder of Paul Owen and to read these scenes in purely formal terms (unlike the present study). While he notes Bethany’s assertiveness, Murphet claims that Bateman is primarily effected at the level of language: “Bateman’s language is nowhere more pointedly in crisis.” Murphet argues that Bateman’s linguistic incompetence is the most significant aspect of the scene and that the language is the key factor in all the violent scenes. The ultimate significance of the violent passages lies in their formal qualities: reading the “appalling acts” mimetically has little significance in Murphet’s analysis. Thus, Murphet reduces the sexualised misogynistic violence to just another part of the novel’s postmodern style: “The violence in the book should be understood as an act in language, the attainment of a certain kind of literary flair.”

Again, contrary to what is argued here, Murphet claims that the most significant murder in *American Psycho* is the murder of Paul Owen because of the formal qualities of the scene. Murphet focuses on Bateman/the narrator’s linguistic competence during this scene, and the way point of view and voice do not work mimetically with the language Ellis employs in the scene and argues that this is further evidence of the scene’s significance. In the Bateman/Paul Owen scene, Ellis’s prose finally becomes driven: the “effect [of the violence] is to launch these passages on to a different stylistic plane... the violence is not simply a matter of content; it is very much a matter of form and style.” For Murphet, the Paul Owen murder fully engages the reader stylistically. The language is finally free from “oppressive” repetition, and “tips over from weightless indistinction into driven, compulsive

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119 Murphet, 41.
120 Murphet, 41.
121 Murphet, 41.
122 Murphet, 45.
123 Murphet, 45.
124 Murphet, 45-6. [Italics in original.]
syntactical constructions." The significance of the violent scenes for Murphet are all about language and style. (Baelo-Allué counters that the voice is stylistically the same throughout the novel.) On the contrary, the sexual violence is not only about what Ellis does with the language, it is primarily about the content of these scenes: form does not neutralise content. Murphet makes the violence disappear through literary formalism: like Young and Freccero, Murphet subordinates content to form.

It is argued here that the shift away from a political towards a postmodern formalist and aesthetic analysis as performed by postmodern defenders like Young and Murphet is a mistake. When read entirely as postmodernism, *American Psycho* remains deliberately ambiguous about whether the violence is fantasy or reality, the distinction remains unclear. However, the ambiguity ultimately becomes a “cop-out” and a cheat because the reader must still read the violent scenes, whether they are Bateman’s fantasies or not, and by doing so the violent scenes become legitimised for readers. Again, as noted above, this element of cheat suggests Ellis does not play “fair,” in Hutcheon’s sense.

Further, Murphet’s section titled “Politics” does not focus on violent misogyny. Indeed, misogynistic violence and feminism barely get a mention. On the contrary, when Murphet interprets the violent scenes mimetically it is to argue they are symbolic representations of the Reagan era: “the new ruling class of Reagan’s America was inflicting all kinds of violence on workers, homeless people, ethnic minorities and women.” In Murphet’s analysis, the sexually violent misogynistic scenes are subsumed within Ellis’s critique of 1980s New York and are not specifically about sexualised violence towards women or misogyny.

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125 Murphet, 46.
128 Murphet, 54.
Scholars like Baelo-Allué similarly argue that the sexualised violence primarily performs an aesthetic function, although in her case the novel deconstructs the serial killer genre. Conventionally, readers look for patterns in the killings: they are encouraged to ignore the ethical aspects of violence and look at their “aesthetic” properties instead.\textsuperscript{129} Further, Baelo-Allué links the aesthetic aspects of the violence with Joel Black and his argument that murder has aesthetic properties, as well as his notion of the murderer as “an artist”: Black draws upon De Quincey’s essays and links them to Nietzsche to argue the case for an aesthetic critique of morality: for De Quincey, murder is “an art form.”\textsuperscript{130} While Baelo-Allué acknowledges “[t]he idea that crime has aesthetic implications may be considered socially unacceptable,” she counters that this is nevertheless what readers do.\textsuperscript{131} To cite another example in recent scholarship, Gomel argues \textit{American Psycho} is not about violence, it is about “fashion,” it is not concerned with “ethics” but “aesthetics.”\textsuperscript{132}

Such claims are consistent with Ellis’s (albeit contradictory) alleged intentions of having a primary interest in aesthetics, not emotional connection (or realism):

What moves me usually has nothing to do with character, nothing to do with plot or feelings at all. I am moved by how well an author’s or film-maker’s intention comes to fruition within the work. I can be moved by something as simple as how they crafted a paragraph, and amazed by how dead-on some dialogue can be. To me, it’s about aesthetics and style. People crying in books and hugging each other and some glorious epiphany tying it all together—usually I’m not moved by that.\textsuperscript{133}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{129}{Baelo-Allué, \textit{Controversial}, 113.}
\footnotetext{130}{Black, \textit{Aesthetics}, 16; Baelo-Allué, 114.}
\footnotetext{131}{Baelo-Allué, 114.}
\footnotetext{132}{Gomel, "Soul," 50.}
\footnotetext{133}{Blume, "Portrait," \url{http://www.theatlantic.com/past/doc/unbound/bookauth/ba990210.htm}}
\end{footnotes}
While ambiguity will be discussed further below, given the fact it works in the novel as a postmodern trait, further comment is required here. To refer back to commentary made at the time of the novel’s publication: Teachout argues the problem with the novel lies in the fact that the realist elements of the text lack coherence: the novel is written in a naturalistic style but utterly lacks plausibility. Teachout is right here to critique Ellis for the ambiguity surrounding his aesthetic choices: the sections he reads as naturalism, others read as postmodern parody. It is argued here the text does not reconcile the differences.

Gardner also notes the ambiguity surrounding the realist elements in the novel especially the lack of closure. While Gardner agrees with Young that *American Psycho* is postmodern, he claims *American Psycho* fails as a postmodern novel because the ending is too ambiguous:

> there are problems with the book. More often than not its violence is gratuitous; 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, even if we accept that it is supposed to end on a note of irresolution.

Despite the fact that Gardner contextualises *American Psycho* within a history of European transgression which includes Euripides’s *Bacchae*, and works by Marlowe, Webster, the Marquis de Sade, Huysmans, and Céline, Gardner argues the ambiguity in *American Psycho* is excessive, even for a transgressive avant-garde novel. Teacher and Gardner have an important point. The novel is excessively ambiguous.

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Unlike commentators, scholars tend to applaud the novel’s ambiguity and celebrate it as evidence of anti-aesthetic postmodernity. The first scholar to note the excessive ambiguity in *American Psycho* and its relation to the novel’s postmodern aesthetics is Freccero. Freccero defends the novel on the basis that its aesthetics are *postmodern, not realist*, and argues in favour of the extreme ambiguity, claiming it forces readers to confront violence as violence.

Freccero concludes critics of *American Psycho* are really critics of “antihumanism.” Contrary to what is argued here, Freccero claims the novel succeeds because of its ambiguity, because it does not try to resolve violence within a moral framework. Freccero’s argument, however, rejects NOW’s position and equates it with the mass media feminist critique. In doing so, Freccero makes no allowance for the daily reality of the reader, their capabilities as well as their experience in the world. Some readers, indeed as many as one in four women, experience the male perpetration of sexualised misogynistic violence as part of their daily reality.

In terms of the novel’s ambiguity, Murphet confers with the argument here, the subtleties and ambiguities of the novel are easily missed by what he calls simplistic readings—by what this thesis calls mainstream readers—which instead focus on the sensationalistic aspects of the text; the subtleties of the text mean it is all too easy for *American Psycho* to “be reduced to sensationalist exploitation.”

In sum, the present study challenges the postmodern defence. First of all and as a minimum requirement, it argues that scholars must present *American Psycho* from both perspectives, the mass media feminist critique and the postmodern defence, for their work to

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136 Freccero, “Historical Violence,” 52.
137 Freccero, 56.
achieve a sense of balance, complexity and fairness. Secondly, it claims that that the novel must be analysed in both realist and anti-realist terms. It is not enough to reduce the content to its form. In addition, context is also important here. Thus, this thesis claims that, counter to most scholarly postmodern aesthetic defences who neglect the “social” and “political” context of Ellis’s novel, the backlash, and feminist discourse are crucial contexts for the reception of American Psycho. Further, to defend an author and a novel that owe their notoriety and scholarly appeal to feminist discourse without acknowledging the centrality of this discourse is cynical indeed. The one in four women who have experienced sexual violence in their daily lives and for whom feminist discourse speaks are again violated, this time by word, not deed. When the sexualised violent misogyny is over-looked or minimised, it becomes all too easy for interested parties to reap commercial and cultural benefits from an ongoing erasure of women’s daily lives—the very daily, often violent and misogynistic reality which underscores feminist discourse—and which plays an important role in the creation of meaning in the ambitious but flawed novel, American Psycho.

Finally thirdly, the present study argues that the postmodern trope of ambiguity is employed excessively in the novel. In particular, it is argued that the degree of ambiguity and the novel’s capacity for resisting closure are excessive when readers are the mainstream readers originally targeted by publishers. But it is also excessive in the sense that Ellis lost control of his material. In support of this claim, the thesis notes that American Psycho is inconsistently ambiguous within Ellis’s oeuvre, and adds that Ellis’s biography suggests there may be good reasons as to why Ellis lost control of such personally resonant material.

Finally, as was seen to be the case with a postmodern parodic reading of the novel, the lack of clear authorial signalling in terms of how the realist, and formalist/anti-realist

139 Annesley, “Blank Fiction,” 7-9. Annesley also critiques theoretical approaches to Ellis's work.
properties of the text ought to be integrated is another important factor which contributed to the scandal. Thus, while some scholars argue that the most interesting thing about the book are its anti-realist formalist aspects, that these cancel out the realist misogynistic violence, and that the lack of closure is a deliberate and successful strategy, the present study disagrees. It is argued here that the anti-realist formalist elements of the text contribute to the novel’s profound ambiguity, and adds that the ambiguity goes too far.

In addition, the present study concedes that the postmodern defence delivers a blow to the mass media feminist critique in the sense that it suggests feminists employing a realist filter may have misunderstood the novel. But the mass media feminist critique is reinforced by the argument that the postmodern criteria employed by scholars and theorists are not criteria mainstream readers are familiar with. Mainstream readers are more likely to read the novel as nihilistic cynicism, and postmodern in the historical, stylistic sense. This thesis argues that it is unlikely such readers would read the novel as deliberate formalist experimentation, or as an exercise in postmodern anti-aesthetics. While the postmodern defence unnecessarily makes the violent misogyny disappear, the current study argues that any scholarly analysis must place the reader’s emotional/moral response to the sexualised misogyny in American Psycho at its centre in order to account for both the way the novel is read by readers today and for the way it was read at the time of publication, and to address the way the four problematic scenes distract from and dominate the rest of the novel.

3: The Affect Defence

The affective defence is a third defence based on the work of French post-structuralist theorists Deleuze and Guattari. Employing concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari such

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140 Vegari, "Violence, Immediately," 124-6. Vegari claims the unresolved realism/formalist ambiguity is deliberate in the novel and revolutionary.
as “affect” potentially simplifies the incorporation of the mass media feminist critique what is also a defence. Unfortunately, however, few scholars employ affect in this way.

Wilson’s article is the first to employ affect in relation to American Psycho. Unlike other affect defences Wilson makes the role of literary institutions central to his critique in a way that complements the argument here. Wilson claims that the sexualised misogynistic violence ensured the novel was read in a sensationalistic way by mainstream readers and accuses publishers of cynicism with his observation that the very sensationalism mass media feminists and other critics complained about ensured the novel’s commercial success.

For Wilson, the affective properties of the sexually violent scenes function as mere entertainment: “to the degree to which they remain affective as pornography, they simply entertain.” Further, while the novel sets out to shock and produce the affect of moral repulsion, its pornographic elements ensure it simultaneously produces transgressive thrills. The novel creates affect by mixing the conventions of horror and pornography. Because of the extremity of these scenes they provoke the taboo “prohibition in the form of revulsion.” Wilson adds that Ellis’s strategy is risky however because aesthetically there is no difference between these scenes and scenes designed to thrill readers: “The aesthetic means of producing transgressive thrills and moral revulsion are exactly the same.” Thus, Ellis’s novel is ambiguous, it thrills and repulses equally and simultaneously and cannot ever straightforwardly awaken revulsion. Wilson’s position contains echoes of Wolf’s critique: Ellis ostensibly attempts to shock readers with horrific sexualised misogyny into a moral response, but the fusion of pornography with horror thrills the reader even as it shocks.

141 Deleuze and Guattari, Thousand Plateaus, xvi.
143 Wilson, 476.
144 Wilson, 477.
145 Wilson, 477.
For Wilson, Ellis’s book is a success because it generates moral affect “across the spectrum,” not because it makes a moral point. While responses range from feminist outrage to aesthetic defences, in American Psycho’s case the production of moral affect is inseparable from cynical publishing wherein publishers deliberately withheld descriptive information about the novel’s content and postmodern parodic aesthetics in order to generate and increase sales as a result of the subsequent moral outrage the novel caused.

Thus in terms of its ability to explain the commercial success of Ellis’s flawed novel, Wilson’s analysis is exemplary: no other scholar so correctly identifies why the novel is so successful. However, it must also be said that Wilson argues that under capitalism, generating feminist outrage is the object for successful novels. Wilson’s position ultimately counters the idealism of Wolf, Eberly and the mass media feminist critics: the object of literature is not serious public debate. In conclusion, Wilson’s work supports the claims of commentators who argue American Psycho is an exercise in cynical publishing.

While Abel, who also argues an affective defence, agrees with Wilson that American Psycho is a profoundly affective novel, Abel argues that it is diminished if read in terms of representational criteria. Abel argues that the realist and mass media feminist critiques, as well as the satire defence, diminish what is new and exciting about the novel. By contrast, when read affectively: “What readers discover [in American Psycho] is that... there indeed exists ‘no exit’…. no way out from the endless onslaught of the different but resonating affective registers of violence.” Abel’s work suggests representational interpretations provide readers with an exit to the text by turning the violence into a question of truth and representation. This exit is what Abel wants to prevent. For Abel, American Psycho is a profoundly anti-realist text.

146 Wilson, 478.
147 Abel, "Affective," 143.
Abel’s notion of affect requires brief mention. Firstly, Abel argues that the ambiguity surrounding the violence in *American Psycho* is the novel’s strength. Commentators who were “concerned with whether violence is good or bad, rather than with what it does,” miss the novel’s point.\(^{148}\) Reading the novel as a satire—in terms of representation and truth—means agreeing violence and 1980s capitalism are wrong: the violence “functions merely as a metaphor for capitalism’s cannibalistic cruelty.”\(^{149}\) It also means refusing to use the novel’s violence to provoke debate about the nature of violence.\(^{150}\)

Further, echoing Corliss’s point that “the tedium was the message,” Abel conceives of the affective properties of the novel in terms of an oscillation between boredom and horrified revulsion: the oscillation becomes the novel’s point.\(^{151}\) Thus boredom functions “as a major stylistic strategy” which has the affect of making the reader “long for some action.”\(^{152}\) The violence, however, especially for (unsophisticated) readers who miss the hints, comes as a complete surprise. This shock causes the book to speed up, but in such a way that “readers sooner or later begin to long precisely for that from which they have wanted to escape: the boring itineration of consumer goods, shallow observations, and senseless activities.”\(^{153}\) Either way, whether assailed by boredom, by the violence Ellis does to prose, or by the violent scenes, the reader experiences the novel as being assailed.

There are, however, problems with Abel’s reading of affect. Firstly, many of the scenes Abel calls boring, for example Bateman’s morning beauty ritual, or the description of his lounge room, are also funny, not just boring. Thus, humour is a form of affect not mentioned in the above but which is very important. Secondly, there is only one extended

\(^{148}\) Abel, 141.  
\(^{149}\) Abel, 142.  
\(^{150}\) Abel, 143.  
\(^{151}\) Abel, 143.  
\(^{152}\) Abel, 143.  
\(^{153}\) Abel, 143.
section of such a “boring” description, on pages 24-30, so the novel does not repeatedly oscillate between two registers. Finally, contrary to Abel’s analysis, the violent sections affect the reader through suspense: they create questions in the reader’s mind, is this really happening? Did Bateman really rape torture and kill those women, or imagine it? These questions do not make the reader long for the boring sections, but increase the reader’s suspense to find out what actually happened, and what will happen next. Yes, the reader experiences longing, but it is plot-related, not just affective longing. Another problem with Abel’s analysis is his insistence that there are only two affective registers in American Psycho. The present study counts at least five: Bateman’s day-to-day life; the misogynistic sexual violence; the non-sexual violence; the record reviews; and the mass murderer sequence.

In addition, Abel fails to incorporate the reader’s gender or competence into his analysis, thus the affect of the novel would be different for individual readers, in particular, for female and male readers intolerant of misogynistic violence, or for readers who lack the necessary competence and sophistication. To acknowledge the effect of the misogyny would be to read the novel representationally and Abel is determined not to read American Psycho representationally. This chapter argues, however, that Abel’s reading is incomplete without addressing the novel’s mimetic elements. Again, Abel’s affective defence makes the eroticised misogyny disappear. Clearly Abel is not concerned with the sexualised misogynistic violence in American Psycho, on the contrary, Abel argues that the affect of the violence is what makes the book unique and worthy of literary recognition.

By insisting the novel needs to be read affectively, Abel opposes his interpretation of the novel to mass media feminists who engaged in a representational reading of the novel, and who addressed the novel’s representations of sexualised misogyny and critiqued their
conditioning effects on readers. And yet, Abel’s analysis is useful in that it argues for the importance of the novel’s affective qualities. Abel argues that the affective properties of the novel are the point, and not its content:

it is precisely the novel’s excess of violence that overwhelms, frustrates, annoys, upsets, and even sickens; it is this (literal) overkill that provokes readers to throw away the book…. the value of the book is that it forces its audience to encounter the undeniable visceral response they have.

On the contrary, the present study argues the reader is only forced to confront the violence at the end of the novel when it fails to resolve, and then only in a vain attempt to resolve the plot, because there is not enough closure. Further, while Abel and Wolf agree the violent scenes affect the reader, they conceive of this affect in vastly different ways. Abel makes no mention of the oscillation pattern having any conditioning, legitimizing affect on the reader.

Most valuable about Abel’s argument is that it keeps the focus on American Psycho’s ability to hook the reader (though this chapter disagrees with Abel’s interpretation of the effect produced). While Abel argues the reader oscillates between being bored and repulsed, Wolf argues the reader is seduced, then horrified and annihilated. By asking what the novel does, Abel articulates the question Wolf’s analysis answers: American Psycho conditions and naturalises the reader into being aroused by violence to women, to equate sex with violent misogyny.

The first affective theorist to argue in favour of a balanced form and content/mimetic and formalist/realist and postmodern reading of the novel, is Messier. Messier’s early analysis discusses the sexually violent scenes in terms of both form and content: “the sex and

\[154\] Abel, 144.
violence can be analysed concurrently both structurally and contextually, in form and content." Messier’s idea of pushing the reader’s tolerance is important to the mass media feminist critique: feminists argue the novel pushed beyond their tolerance. Further, being pushed beyond one’s “tolerance” is what compels the reader to read more to find out: did Bateman do that? What is this book about? Thus, Messier’s reading potentially links an affective analysis with the mass media feminist critique (Messier’s later work argues contradictorily that the affect is primarily about consumerism, not misogyny).  

Finally, Ellis himself retrospectively claims affect as an intention with American Psycho in his interview with Blume.

Violence is a way for some people to break out of a flat, affectless world and try to find some approximation of meaning. I always thought that Patrick Bateman’s violence in American Psycho was a reaction to the overwhelming dullness of a society where people couldn’t tell each other apart, where everything was stripped down to product placement and status symbol.  

While most scholars and commentators would agree that the sexually violent scenes in American Psycho affect the reader, what is open to debate is how. Wolf argues that the affective properties condition the reader toward accepting misogyny, while scholars employ Deleuze and Guattari in diverse arguments ranging from those that focus on the speed of

155 Messier, "Violence, Pornography," 82-3.  
156 Messier, 81.  
reading (Abel), to those that argue the novel’s affect ensured its sales. Wolf’s critique, while it does not mention affect by name, is largely concerned with this aspect of *American Psycho*. Regrettably, most affective analyses ignore the mass media feminist critique.

Affect is associated with *American Psycho* less often than satire or postmodernism by scholars. While Wilson, Abel, Messier and Heyler all perform affective analyses of the novel, Serpell most fully accommodates the mass media feminist critique in her study.\(^{159}\) Affective defences centred on the feminist critique are the most able to deliver a balanced study of *American Psycho*. That is, an affective analysis is preferable to all other analyses with the exception of the present study because of the way it can potentially be employed in order to pinpoint the single most outstanding aspect of the novel: its affective ability to provoke outrage in its feminist readers. In practice, however, theorists have tended not to incorporate the feminist critique in their affective analyses: the mimetic aspect of the content tends to disappear in affective defences.

In conclusion, while much of the mass media feminist critique was intertwined with an aesthetic/moral debate, it is necessary to disentangle the feminist critique from the other debates because of the way these debates contribute to further denial and minimisation of the novel’s misogynistic properties. For example, the argument that the novel and the horrors it depicts would have been more acceptable if the novel were better written, or less ambiguously written, only serves to distract from the main points made in the mass media feminist critique. That is, that the scenes are excessive and unacceptable.

With Ellis hinting that *American Psycho 2* is under way, “1:00 AM in L.A. and sitting at my desk finishing a script and suddenly I’m making notes on where Patrick Bateman’s

now and maybe he could...”, the author’s postmodern pattern of recycling his own material—“self-plagiarising”—seems firmly entrenched. However, given the literary poverty of Imperial Bedrooms, Ellis’s “sequel” to Zero, it remains to be seen whether Ellis can produce anything further of commercial interest or literary merit by recycling Bateman. While Lunar Park is a successful example of postmodern self-plagiarism on the American Psycho theme, Imperial Bedrooms makes tedious reading. Even Baelo-Allué complains, “this spiralling approach also runs the risk of becoming too suffocating for creative energy to flourish.”161 It is tempting to speculate what role corporatisation may play here in terms of the increasing pressure on authors—authors being the most important factor in the branding of novels, a system whereby readers first encounter novels as mediated by the constructed image or brand of an author—to conform to an artificially constructed brand to guarantee sales.162 When Ellis mentions all his previous novels at the beginning of Lunar Park—thereby encouraging any readers who have not read his oeuvre so far do so—he not only inter-links his work but encourages and promotes sales of his backlist.163

161 Baelo-Allué, 190.
162 Squires, Marketing Literature, 87.
163 Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 175. Baelo-Allué also notes Ellis mentions all his previous novels at the beginning of Lunar Park.
CHAPTER 5

THE PROOF AND THE PUDDING: AMBIGUITY AND THE HOMOSEXUAL SUBPLOT

SLOW. UNRELIABLE NARRATOR WORKING.¹

‘will you always be the quintessential faggot? Will you only pant after the blond-tan-good-body-stupid-goons?’²

‘Dennis Cooper is gay and writes about homosexual men doing things to homosexual men, so it’s kind of ghettoized in that way.’³

The excessive ambiguity in American Psycho uncannily mirrors the ambiguity that surrounds Ellis’s sexuality: in literary criticism about American Psycho, both topics tend to remain questions without answers. While an analysis of the way the implied author, implied reader, unreliable narrator and gaps operate in the text can create a deeper understanding of the novel’s ambiguity, it is only by comparing the two ambiguities, the textual ambiguity in American Psycho, and Ellis’s ambiguous behaviour in interviews, that an answer to the riddle

¹ Udovitch, “Intentional,” 66.
² Ellis, Rules, 234.
posed by the novel begins to emerge. The present study challenges much of *American Psycho* literary criticism by asserting the textual and biographical ambiguities are linked.

### 1: Ambiguity and the Unreliable Narrator

Rimmon-Kenan, whose work is influenced by Booth, Iser and Perry, defines the implied author in formalist terms as a “governing consciousness” and the “source of the norms” of the text.\(^4\) Being able to differentiate the implied author from the actual person who writes and argue that the implied author is more intelligent or more moral than the actual author possessing different “ideas, beliefs,” and “emotions” is of great value to the present study.\(^5\) Again, distinguishing the stability of the implied author from the inconsistency of the actual author is also relevant here, given the way this challenges purely autobiographical readings of Ellis’s novels and supports claims that Ellis lost control of his material.

Applying Rimmon-Kenan’s definition to the *American Psycho* scandal, it becomes possible to differentiate Ellis, the actual author, from the implied author. In much of the *American Psycho* literary criticism, many commentators and scholars confuse the two terms or use them interchangeably. Following Rimmon-Kenan’s formalist definition in this respect, it will be argued here that Ellis and the implied author are not equivalent and have different values and morals. This tool can be used to explain why Ellis often seems at a loss to explain the text, and also to argue that he lost control of his material.

Thus, Ellis initially denies *American Psycho* is autobiographical, but changes his mind in recent interviews to claim, “Patrick Bateman is based on me.”\(^6\) This later admission, which

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\(^4\) Rimmon-Kenan, 86.  
\(^5\) Rimmon-Kenan, 87.  
\(^6\) Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 50; Wyndham, Dymocks.
comes after years of denying the autobiographical aspects of the novel, significantly alters most defences of *American Psycho*. Ellis is, however, more consistent when speaking of his intention to write an ambiguous narrative: “Because I never step in anywhere and say, ‘Hey, this is all wrong,’ people get upset.” Ellis repeats this assertion in subsequent interviews: Ellis claims he will “‘never commit,’” as to whether the violence in *American Psycho* is fantasy or not. More recently still, Ellis claims he intended the novel to be read as an exercise in suspense, “‘In a novel that isn’t exactly plot driven... what keeps the reader engaged is, probably, a gradually intensifying sense of dread.’” Thus, Ellis alleges to employ ambiguity to create suspense; it is the main strategy he acknowledges he employs to keep the reader interested in the novel. This thesis argues that while Ellis’s intentions as expressed in interviews cannot be the sole interpretative basis for analysis, an interpretation that takes this material into account must be supported by further evidence in the form of either biographical facts, or by evidence suggested by the text’s relation to Ellis’s oeuvre.

Unlike the present study, many scholars base their analyses on Ellis’s inconsistent intentions and support their arguments with examples from the novel. For example, Young, Murphet and Baelo-Allué’s analyses all work this way. Thus, Young bases her analysis on Ellis’s denials of misogyny and his assertions that Bateman is the actual “monster”; but that he is not. In Young’s thinking, the implied author forms a “counter-point” that opposes the novel (and that is identical with the actual author’s intentions). Young cites “clues” that undermine the story (and indicate unreliable narration) as evidence of the implied author’s disapproval of Bateman’s actions and insists Ellis and the implied author have the same

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7 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 46; Ellis, interview in Klein, 
12 Young, “Beast,” 94.
views (which unilaterally condemn Bateman’s actions). Baelo-Allué also bases her analysis on Ellis’s alleged intentions. For example, when Ellis claims young people are unshockable by violence because they are bombarded by it in the media, Baelo-Allué argues the violence in *American Psycho* is not about violence per se, but about society’s desensitization to violence: “Nowadays, violence has to be excessive to be noticeable.”

While some scholars argue the ambiguity is deliberate (in which case Ellis’s contradictory remarks in interviews may not be intended to resolve the ambiguity at all but instead to keep the reader hooked on the unresolvable mystery), as a methodology, basing close readings of *American Psycho* on Ellis’s alleged intentions becomes increasingly difficult post-*Lunar Park*. By collapsing his life into his fiction in this novel, Ellis implies the two are inseparably (if ambiguously) linked.

Unlike Young, Murphet and Baelo-Allué, scholars such as Serpell and Mandel agree with Ellis’s intentions on some points, but not on others. While Serpell refuses to allow the misogynistic violence to disappear (and challenges Ellis’s denial on this point), both Serpell and Mandel argue that the ambiguity forces the reader to confront violence (and that the ambiguity is deliberate and successful).

Thus, Serpell cites the ambiguous point of view at the beginning of the novel as evidence of the implied author. Ellis introduces Bateman, his narrator, as mediated by Price’s point of view: Bateman is the first person narrator, but we are first introduced to Bateman as a “You.” That is, Price says “‘I...’” and refers to himself, and then says

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13 Young, 96-7.
14 Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 69; 121.
15 Serpell, “Repetition”; Mandel, “‘Nowheres.’”
16 Serpell, “Repetition, 59.
“‘You’ve’” referring to Bateman.\textsuperscript{17} (A more conventional, less ambiguous beginning would have been for Bateman to have identified himself as “I” in the first paragraph.) For Serpell, the implied author intends ambiguity (so the violence confronts the reader).

Like Serpell, Mandel argues that the beginning reveals the implied author’s intention of ambiguity. Mandel cites the confusion of literal and literary blood as evidence in the text, and notes the way the confusion between Tim and Bateman’s point of view is not resolved.\textsuperscript{18} Mandel further claims the novel undermines distinctions such as good and evil, and moral and immoral, which are the prerequisites for judgement (the resulting confusion forces the reader to confront the violence).\textsuperscript{19}

Buscall, who also argues American Psycho is a profoundly ambiguous text, has a most unusual conception of the implied author: for Buscall, television becomes a proxy author of the novel. American Psycho so faithfully reproduces contemporary media it makes it difficult to distinguish Ellis as the “writer”: it is impossible to tell where Ellis’s writing begins and ends and where the parody of television takes over.\textsuperscript{20} It is in this blurring, in the lack of authorial signalling, that Buscall locates the ambiguity: “The text here appears to deny any authorial voice in favor of some other source of agency.”\textsuperscript{21}

The present study argues that the postmodern parodic structure of American Psycho is evidence of the implied author: the postmodern parody acts as a system of norms that govern the text. Further, while the implied author wrote a postmodern parody, the actual author alleges the novel is a satire (and makes contradictory remarks about the novel’s postmodernity).

\textsuperscript{17} Ellis, American Psycho, 3.
\textsuperscript{18} Mandel, “‘Nowheres’” 9.
\textsuperscript{19} Mandel, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{20} Buscall, “Whose Text?” 201.
\textsuperscript{21} Buscall, 201.
Commentators prove more adept at challenging the intentions of the actual author and separating the author from the implied author. Writing at the time of the scandal, many commentators based their reading of the novel on the implied author. Thus, Corliss suggests it is the implied author who fails to comment morally on Bateman’s actions: because *American Psycho* is written in the first person, which does not allow for the implied author to directly condemn his crimes, Corliss claims the novel will “shock some readers.” In *American Psycho*, the actual author claims he condemns Bateman, but the implied author, the system of norms (in this case the use of the first person narrator), prevents this. Mass media feminists dismiss Ellis’s intentions (as denials of misogyny) and claim the actual author fails to fulfil the intentions of the implied author. For example, Sheppard and Stiles claim the novel is badly written, that is, the system of norms fails; the author fails to realise the implied author’s intentions in the writing.

Following Iser, who defines the implied reader in terms of the process of discovering “the meaning in the text,” Rimmon-Kenan defines the implied reader as a construct and as distinct from the actual reader and narratee. In the case of *American Psycho*, implied readers are distinct from actual readers. Thus, mainstream readers, the actual readers at the time the novel was first published, were not the readers implied by the text. On the contrary, the implied reader is familiar with difficult postmodern parody and is a sophisticated and highly competent reader. The actual readers in 1991 were drawn to the novel by its sensationalistic aspects and may not have been able to perform close readings, nor may they have been familiar with postmodern parodic, and other literary tropes, such as the unreliable narrator. While it is true, today’s readers may be more sophisticated than the readers at the time of the scandal because they tend to encounter Ellis’s novel while completing their

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22 Corliss, “Vidiocy,” 56.
tertiary education, this thesis challenges the idea that today’s sophisticated readers are as desensitised to sexualised misogynistic violence as Ellis and many of his defenders have claimed.

Curiously, while commentators read American Psycho in relation to the actual readers, scholars read the novel as if it were written, marketed to and intended for the implied reader. Mass media feminist critics read the novel with mainstream, that is actual, readers in mind. The inability of scholars to assess the novel in relation to its actual readers problematises their defences.

Rimmon-Kenan defines the unreliable narrator as one whose version of the story “the reader has reasons to suspect” (here Rimmon-Kenan follows Booth who defines an unreliable narrator as one who does not act “in accordance with the norms of the work”). Further, Rimmon-Kenan identifies degrees of unreliability, which means the unreliable narrator can be very difficult to detect (as it relies on indications in the text).

Bateman is an example of a difficult to detect, extremely unreliable narrator; indeed it is impossible to determine the degree of reliability. Careful readers come to suspect Bateman’s version of the story and wonder whether the sexualised misogynistic violence actually happens or whether it is just a fantasy, with the never-ending suspense keeping them wondering until the end because the content is so provocative. For example, when Bateman sees a cheerio on The Patty Winters Show, the reader asks: did Bateman see it, or hallucinate it, or pretend to see it to confuse the reader; it is impossible for the reader to decide based on the narrator’s account of the events. While the unreliable narrator contributes to the novel’s

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25 Ellis, American Psycho, 386.
success, what ultimately makes *American Psycho* compelling is the way Ellis employs the outrage the reader feels about the sexual and racist violence in combination with Gothic techniques and an unreliable narrator.26 (*American Psycho* is not Ellis’s first novel to employ an unreliable narrator: Paul in *Rules* is also unreliable.27)

While few commentators employ the term “unreliable narrator,” many note the novel’s problematic ambiguity and imply its use.28 Thus, Sheppard, Corliss and Mailer all imply the term.29 Sheppard complains that Ellis’s strategy of writing superficially about superficiality is muddled, and complains that Ellis places the onus on the reader to make sense of the ambiguity.30 Corliss implies unreliable narration with his comment: “The most daring and perverse thing about the book is its trust that the reader will get it.”31 Mailer implies unreliable narration by describing Bateman as a “cipher” and complaining that it is impossible to determine whether the novel is badly written, or literature.32 Mailer also links the ambiguity to the confusion the novel creates between author and protagonist.

Phillips’s scholarly analysis most complements the present study, arguing it is “impossible” to determine whether Bateman is reliable or not.33 Further, Phillips argues that the unreliable narrator is covert and cognitive, and concludes Bateman is so ambiguous it is not even possible to conclusively describe him as unreliable.34 For Phillips the discrepancies in the text do not definitively indicate unreliable narration, the subtle hints could equally be read as signs that Bateman is fallible in his reporting of events and unaware of the reactions

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26 Freccero, “Censorship,” 48; Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 1; Sharrett, review, 67. All note the appeal of the content.
27 Freese, “Entropy,” 81; Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 75. Freese and Baelo-Allué also note the ambiguity in *Zero*.
28 Udovitch, “Intentional,” 66. (See epigraph.)
30 Sheppard, 100.
34 Phillips, 61-2.
of others. Again, the text is impossibly ambiguous. While Phillips correctly calls *American Psycho* an unanswerable question, she neglects to note the effect of the ambiguity on the mainstream reader. (Phillips nevertheless departs from the argument here when she claims the question of whether the sexualised violence happened or not is less important than what these events tell us about the character.)

According to Rimmon-Kenan there are three causes of unreliability: “the narrator’s limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme.” Few scholars or commentators (with the exception of Phillips) specify what kind of unreliable narrator Bateman is. The current analysis argues that Bateman is unreliable in all three senses. In terms of knowledge, Bateman may actually be insane; and in terms of personal involvement, it is impossible to determine Bateman’s level of involvement in the violent scenes (that is, are the sexually misogynistic violent scenes fantasies or not)? However, Bateman is most obviously an example of the third kind of unreliable narrator; it is his misogyny, racism and general value scheme, his lack of morality, that suggest unreliability.

A number of scholars have implicitly or overtly observed the ambiguity in *American Psycho*, argued that its nature as problematic, and identified impossible unreliable narration: examples include the work of Hissom, Young, Kooijman and Laine, Brusseau Blazer and Buscall. Thus, while Kooijman and Laine overtly see Bateman as an unreliable narrator, Hisom implies it in his observation that the novel “demands an almost unprecedented suspension of disbelief,” and in his complaint about the novel’s lack of closure.

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35 Phillips, 61; 64.
37 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 100.
39 Hisom, 43; Kooijman and Laine, 8.
Commentators like Love link the novel’s moral ambiguity to Bateman’s insubstantial character, and attribute moral ambiguity to the implied author.\(^{40}\) On the other hand, Weldon attributes ambiguous morality to the actual author.\(^{41}\) Ellis himself claims the moral ambiguity is intentional and offends readers because the evil in the novel goes “unpunished.”\(^{42}\)

*American Psycho* also contains numerous gaps which exist “between the norms of the implied author and those of the narrator.”\(^{43}\) While a gap, or discrepancy between the facts and the narrator’s views suggests unreliability (for example, when the response of other characters contradicts the narrator’s version of events, or when a character’s views clash with the narrator’s), it is difficult to establish the facts.\(^{44}\) For example, there is a gap in values between Bateman and the implied author: the present study argues the implied author simultaneously critiques and condones Bateman’s behaviour, whereas Bateman (with scant exceptions noted above) only condones and even celebrates it. Thus, Bateman has misogynistic values and the implied author has ambiguous values. At the same time, however, it is impossible to even make this claim with certainty.

Gaps are also indicated when events prove Bateman “wrong.”\(^{45}\) For example, in the scene with Bateman and the bargirl at Tunnel: Bateman flirts with her but she rebuffs him. Then he says, “‘You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab to death and play around with your blood,’” but she does not react.\(^{46}\) Thus, the outcome seems to prove the narrator “wrong,” and the reader begins to doubt Bateman’s version of events. Thus, the reader must

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\(^{40}\) Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 50.
\(^{41}\) Weldon, “Squeamish,” C01.
\(^{42}\) Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 50.
\(^{44}\) Rimmon-Kenan, 101.
\(^{45}\) Rimmon-Kenan, 101.
also wonder, is Bateman just telling us this deliberately to confuse us? Is he just speaking “behind the narrator’s back?”

Two further important examples of gaps wherein the response contradicts the narrator’s version of events are the Bateman/Carnes scene, and the scene with the real estate agent. When Bateman confesses his crimes to the lawyer, Carnes, the reader can tell from Carnes’s reaction that what Bateman claims to have done did not really happen. Carnes does not believe or hear Bateman. For the reader, this is puzzling and confusing.

In “The Best City for Business,” Bateman is initially puzzled by the lack of newspaper reports about the two prostitutes he killed in Paul Owen’s flat, by the different appearance of the building, and by the fact that his keys no longer work in the security door. While the apartment also looks different “it doesn’t make me forget what I did to Christie’s breasts,” Bateman asks the real estate agent if Paul Owen lives there, but his version of her response implies she knows he is the killer: “She’s noticed the surgical mask I’m gripping in a damp fist.” Then she tricks him by asking if he saw the advertisement in the Times—he says no then yes—before she adds, “There was no ad in the Times.” Bateman has made two more mistakes, (the first is in the “Chase Manhattan” chapter), but even though she catches him out she hushes it up for the sake of the business transaction (the sale of Paul Owen’s flat): “Don’t make any trouble,’ she says,” and repeats it on page 370. Bateman trembles, blushes and is speechless: “All frontiers, if there had even been any, seem suddenly

47 Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction, 101.
48 Ellis, American Psycho, 388.
49 Ellis, 368-9.
50 Ellis, 369.
51 Ellis, 369.
detachable and have been removed, a feeling that others are creating my fate will not leave me for the rest of the day."

Thus *American Psycho* relies strongly on the gaps in hermeneutic code (the process the reader goes through of sensing gaps, discovering clues, forming questions and plausible explanations). Indeed, the novel is structured around one central gap, the question of whether or not Bateman is a serial killer, or a misogynistic fantasist? Because it is impossible to reach a finalised hypothesis, this constitutes a permanent gap in the story: “the information is never given.” Bateman and *American Psycho’s* “plot” are unsolvable ciphers: we never find out if Bateman really commits the murders.

*American Psycho* also contains “double-edged images” and “internal contradictions” that further complicate the process of detecting unreliable narration. For example, in the Jean scenes, Bateman’s narration on page 377, “I simply am not there,” and “This confession has meant nothing...” contradicts the rest of the narrative (as well as Bateman’s insights on the previous page and subsequent pages). That is, how can a person who is not there experience an epiphany or a flood of reality; if the narrative means nothing then why does Bateman confide his idea of civilisation?

Further, Bateman’s account of the violence is undermined by the gaps in narration: the violent scenes and the sexualised misogyny become indistinguishable as reality or fantasy.

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52 Ellis, 370.
54 Rimmon-Kenan, 129.
55 Rimmon-Kenan, 101.
While Rimmon-Kenan’s definitions are useful for clarifying confusion in literary criticism about *American Psycho*, more recent developments in scholarship about unreliable narration are also relevant to the discussion here. Nünning’s cognitive approach attempts to solve the difficulty of determining unreliable narration by arguing unreliable narration is not just determined in relation to the rhetorical strategies of the text, but is chiefly determined by the reader’s involvement: any definition of the unreliable narrator must combine the apparently divergent arguments made by rhetorical and cognitive theorists. Further, Nünning argues the implied author (in relation to which unreliability is determined) only exists in the reader (thus Nünning challenges Booth’s definition which retains the idea of a flesh and blood author in its conception of the implied author). The solution, according to Nünning, is seeing the unreliable narrator as an “interpretive strategy of the reader.” Thus, a misogynist reader or a reader completely desensitised to sexualised misogynistic violence would not find *American Psycho* offensive: and when viewed from Nünning’s perspective, Ellis’s inability to understand the mass media feminist critique could be interpreted as an indication of his misogyny (Ellis is like the reader who is unable to detect the misogyny in his novel). On the other hand Phelan, given Nünning’s privileging of the reader in his redefinition of the implied author, argues for both the resurrection of the implied author and the text, as well as the incorporation of the reader (thus Phelan combines both Booth and Nünning’s approaches).

Applying Phelan and Nünning’s work to the present study, it becomes clear that the reader’s ability to detect the unreliable narrator is of equal importance with the textual

59 Nünning, 95.
60 Nünning, 97.
discrepancies that may signal its existence. Again, it is argued here that mainstream readers may not be able to detect or make sense of the impossible unreliable narrator. However, even when readers employ Phelan’s approach and consider the novel from both a rhetorical and cognitive perspective, *American Psycho* remains an example of an impossible unreliable narrator.

Incorporating Phelan’s revised definitions, the following analysis of the non-sexually violent scenes will focus on the reader. Bateman’s attack on Al, a black homeless man, is the first violent scene the reader witnesses directly, and on first glance seems unmotivated, that is, without cause. Close reading however reveals the attack is foreshadowed by Price’s racist tirade on black homeless people that takes place at the beginning of the novel, and then by frequent racist references to black homeless people throughout. Price claims, “‘That’s the twenty-fourth one I’ve seen today. I’ve kept count.’”62 As Price elaborates on this theme, it becomes clear black homeless people have no value, or rights, and that Price is deeply repulsed by what he perceives as their masochism: “some crazy fucking homeless nigger who actually wants—listen to me, Bateman—wants to be out on the streets.”63 Price cannot believe that the homeless woman wants to keep living on the streets; that she wants to stay. The racist taunting continues when, upon arriving at Evelyn’s brownstone, Price instructs Bateman to ask another homeless black man:

‘if he takes American Express.’

‘Do you take Am Ex?’

The bum nods yes and moves away, shuffling slowly.

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63 Ellis, 6.
It’s cold for April and Price walks bristly down the street toward Evelyn’s brownstone, whistling ‘If I Were a Rich Man.’

Other taunts and insults (in addition to the Al scene) can be found on pages 38, 39, 51, 52, 85, 113, 162-3, 199 and 385.

Even so, aside from a generalised context of racism, the precise cause of Bateman’s attack upon Al remains unclear to readers. While Bateman obviously despises the black and homeless, the outraged reader cannot help but wonder what drives him to such extreme violence. This dilemma represents a gap that the novel never resolves. However, close reading suggests the following as a possible explanation for the competent reader.

It is possible Bateman kills to surpass Price and his friends: Bateman does not just taunt blacks, he attacks and kills them, he takes aggressive racism to its logical conclusion. However, it is equally likely that Bateman attacks to fit in: an outsider, Bateman wants to fit in with the heterosexual yuppie males who run Wall Street and who, by implication, run the world. It is clear Bateman’s male friends hate women, Jews, blacks, the Japanese and homosexuals: significantly Bateman chooses the same types of people as victims. And yet, no matter how excessively Bateman tries to prove his allegiance to his Wall Street peers—by killing those they hate—this chapter argues Bateman can never belong.

When Price’s taunts are read according to the primacy effect, Bateman, Price and their friends clearly hold black homeless people in contempt. When it is read according to the recency effect, racist hatred becomes rewritten by and fused with racial violence (Bateman’s attack on Al).

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64 Ellis, 7.
65 Ellis, 237.
An alternative reading, again one that employs the recency effect, suggests Bateman’s attack on Al is related to his need to dominate Evelyn, an assertive woman who, like the sexually assertive Courtney, reduces Bateman to utter passivity and ultimately to rage. Significantly, Bateman’s attack on Al is directly preceded by a date with Evelyn wherein she attempts to cajole him into marrying her, and also by a meeting with Courtney who wants to spend the night with him.\textsuperscript{66} Bateman is incapable of saying no to either woman and takes out his rage at their assertiveness on helpless victims such as Al. Thus, racist violence becomes fused for readers with passivity around and hatred towards assertive women. Again, yet another reading suggests itself post-\textit{Lunar Park}, a reading based on the homosexual subplot. However, at \textit{American Psycho}’s conclusion, ambiguity overrides all interpretations: the reader doubts whether the murders actually have taken place, guesses they may be part of Bateman’s desperate fantasy world wherein he is an aggressive, ruthlessly dominating heterosexual man who belongs, but ultimately cannot decide. It is impossible, even employing scholarly tools such as close reading and recency, to determine Bateman’s degree of unreliability with any precision.

In sum, when analysing unreliable narration in \textit{American Psycho}, Rimmon-Kenan’s notion of an “ambiguous narrative” is a useful descriptive term.\textsuperscript{67} Ambiguous narratives make it impossible for the reader to decide if the narration is reliable, leaving the reader in “constant oscillation.”\textsuperscript{68} \textit{American Psycho}’s ambiguous ending—wherein the realist aspects do not adequately resolve—leaves the reader oscillating between different versions of the text; the novel lacks a “‘finalised’ hypothesis.”\textsuperscript{69} Thus, when the reader finishes \textit{American Psycho} they cannot decide whether Bateman is a serial killer and committed the crimes;

\textsuperscript{66} Ellis, 124-5; 127.  
\textsuperscript{67} Rimmon-Kenan, \textit{Narrative Fiction}, 103.  
\textsuperscript{68} Rimmon-Kenan, \textit{Narrative Fiction}, 103.  
\textsuperscript{69} Rimmon-Kenan, 121.
whether Bateman hallucinated or fantasized the crimes and is disturbed; or whether Bateman does not exist as a conventional character. There are two (or more) mutually exclusive versions of the story and the novel does not provide grounds for the reader to distinguish between them (the ending is open): “Instead of closure there is perpetual oscillation between two possibilities.”

Blazer captures the impossibility of Bateman’s character with his notion of “a mask covering a void,” and claims that Bateman is “ultimately unfathomable.” Further, in keeping with the notion of multiple, mutually exclusive hypotheses and an oscillating reader Blazer argues there are four possible ways of reading the novel, as noted above. Blazer’s analysis highlights the fact that no matter how the reader may try, they cannot resolve the ambiguity.

Ellis’s claim that readers are offended because “I never step in” suggests the unreliable narration is covert, and cognitive, that the reader has to discover the narrator’s unreliability on the basis of certain clues. Bateman does not overtly say, “I am a liar”: in Ellis’s words “‘I don’t think you can explain someone like Patrick Bateman—at least not within the context of a novel where the character is talking to you, narrating to you—without cheating.’”

In sum, American Psycho is an extremely ambiguous text when it is examined according to definitions of the unreliable narrator. Indeed, Bateman is an impossible narrator: covert, cognitive, and ambiguous. Rimmon-Kenan’s concepts of delay and gaps are also useful, specifically when applied to American Psycho’s plot, and given the way Ellis employs suspense to keep the reader’s attention, as is Phelan’s conception of unreliability. Scholars

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70 Rimmon-Kenan, 121.
72 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 51.
like Clark and Gomel support the argument here (Gomel also employs Rimmon-Kenan to analyse the text’s unreliable narrator, and Clark similarly finds the narrator unreliable).  

In addition, a number of scholars argue ambiguity is the point of the novel because the ambiguity forces the reader to confront the violence and reflect upon it. While Messier relates *American Psycho*’s profound ambiguity to Freud’s concept of “The Uncanny,” an aesthetic property that confuses the reader, and argues that ambiguity is a form of authorial control, (Abel will similarly argue ambiguity is a fundamental part of the novel’s affective strategy), Heyler argues ambiguity is the point of the novel.

Serpell agrees *American Psycho* is an unsolvable puzzle: for the feminist/realist, Bateman “is evil,” for the defending theorists, Bateman “doesn’t exist.” The novel’s profound ambiguity means both positions are true. Thus, Serpell argues ambiguity is central to Ellis’s strategy of “repetition” as “juxtaposition” rather than “combination.” It is the juxtaposed repetition that causes the affect. On the micro level, Serpell notes Ellis’s use of puns, which do not work to combine two meanings, unlike most puns, but to contrast or juxtapose them. On the macro level, Ellis generates a sense of uncertainty about the violence by changing it each time it repeats and keeping the reader in suspense (and unresolved ambiguity). The repetition both underlines the certainty of Bateman’s world—it works like “habit”—but also “undermines the stability of identity.”

Baelo-Allué argues Ellis’s strategy of using violence to critique violence (and consumerism to critique consumerism) of itself creates ambiguity (and ongoing debate).

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75 Serpell, “Repetition,” 50.
76 Serpell, 54.
77 Serpell, 56.
78 Serpell, 58-9.
79 Baelo-Allué, *Controversial*, 121; 199.
The present study challenges scholars who argue ambiguity is the point with the question: is *American Psycho’s* excessive ambiguity really deliberate, or is it a “cop out,” a means whereby Ellis has his cake and eats it too? That is, Ellis employs provocative content to attract a mainstream reader, then refuses them closure. On the other hand, if the novel were clearly misogynistic (without the ambiguity) some mainstream readers would not buy it. For whatever kind of reader, mainstream or literary, it is argued here that the ambiguity is excessive.

If what many critics say is true and Ellis did indeed lose control of his material, clearly what he lost control of was the degree of ambiguity, and the relation between the unreliable narration and the sexualised misogyny. As a result, Bateman is an impossible unreliable narrator who leaves the mainstream reader with few options other than to employ Ellis’s autobiography to explain the novel.

The present study suggests Ellis intended some ambiguity, enough to mask Bateman’s sexuality, say, but not so much that the reader could not attain some degree of closure. All Ellis’s other novels have more closure than *American Psycho*. Further, this thesis argues literary institutions took advantage of the novel’s excessive ambiguity and sensationalistic contents for marketing purposes, selling the novel to mainstream readers at the time of initial publication who may not have been able to detect the unreliable narrator, let alone conceive of an impossible unreliable narrator. It is also worth noting that Ellis’s assertions that the ambiguity is deliberate also enable him to deflect accusations of misogyny (at the same time as he arguably manipulates feminist discourse for sensationalist effect). The excessive ambiguity also means that both the mass media realist critique and scholarly postmodern defences are wrong in isolation: the novel is ambiguous and neither realist nor postmodern aesthetic dominates the text.
The first step in determining why *American Psycho* is such a profoundly ambiguous novel lies in distinguishing the sexual from the non-sexual violence. The present study argues the formal ambiguity is linked with the mimetic content in a specific way: thus, the outrage the reader feels after witnessing Bateman’s violence motivates them to attempt to solve the unsolvable riddle of the text’s ambiguity. While most scholars argue there is no answer to the riddle posed by the text, and that Bateman remains forever a cipher, it is argued here that the answer to the riddle of the novel ultimately lies in Ellis’s biography.

2: Autobiographical Readings and the Homosexual Subplot

Given the plethora of autobiographically-based readings of *American Psycho* by commentators and scholars, Ellis’s recent revelations about his sexuality, and his assertion about the autobiographical nature of *American Psycho*, are of great consequence, significantly altering typical authorial portraits of Ellis, and autobiographically-based interpretations of his work. While this thesis argues that autobiographical readings of *American Psycho* cannot be definitive, the prevalence of such readings by scholars and the implications for the feminist critique requires further comment here.

A re-examination of literary criticism about *American Psycho* in the light of Ellis’s later revelation of his homosexuality reveals that Ellis actually initiated speculation about homosexuality in *American Psycho*. Ellis’s remark in his interview with Love, “Would it be as upsetting to you, would you be as outraged by this book, if Patrick Bateman were a gay

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Wyatt, “Mirror,” 2.1; Wyndham, Dymocks.
serial killer?” is a curious admission as it is unprovoked by any question by Love (and yet it suggests Bateman’s homosexuality).81

Further, early speculation about Bateman’s sexuality includes Coates’s description of the shower scene as “Inadvertent camp,” (in the days before the metro-sexual, Coates suggests no heterosexual man would know so much about beauty products), however it is Tyrnauer who first highlights the fact that Ellis refuses to clarify his sexuality.82 Ellis tells Tyrnauer that while he realises people do not know whether he is gay, straight or bi, he likes to keep up “‘the mystique.’”83 (Curiously this interview is also the first time Ellis admits to the autobiographical aspects of *American Psycho*, a significant step in terms of salvaging the novel’s reputation.)

Will Self overtly links *American Psycho* with Ellis’s sexuality in *Exit* when he claims Ellis works out issues to do with his sexuality in the novel. *Exit* also includes Candace Bushnell’s “public outing” of Ellis as homosexual (with McDonald also “outing” Ellis in her interview).84 When Bushnell suggests that Ellis has never had a woman, Ellis retorts “‘I have!’” defensively, to which Bushnell responds emphatically, “‘We all like men!’” (a later remark refers to Ellis’s enjoyment of fisting).85 While Ellis admits to lying in interviews, this thesis argues that information substantiated by others, such as Bushnell’s playful acknowledgement of Ellis’s homosexuality, and biographical facts, can be employed as an alternate basis for interpreting *American Psycho*.

With the publication of *Lunar Park*, Ellis publically confirms his homosexuality, with implications for his other novels. Ellis’s protagonists (and indeed, many of his male

81 Love, “Psycho Analysis,” 49.
82 Coates, “Shocking Bore,” 5.1
83 Tyrnauer, “Who’s Afraid?” 97; Moran, *Star Authors*, 55. Note Moran asserts mystique is a key feature of literary celebrity.
characters) are, with the apparent exception of Bateman, homosexual or bisexual. For example, Clay in Zero, Paul and possibly Sean, in Rules, Victor in Glamorama and Bret in Lunar Park are all bisexual or gay. With the publication of Lunar Park, Ellis admits to having had a long term relationship with Michael Wade Kaplan, finally (apparently) resolving speculation about his sexuality. At the same time, Ellis claims his admission of homosexuality was “intended to be grandiose and flippant, and it confirms nothing at all,” and recent comments represent an attempt on Ellis’s part to recapture his lost “mystique.”

Presumably, however, the existence and death of Ellis’s long-term boyfriend constitutes a biographical fact.

The present study argues the reception of Lunar Park is a key moment in terms of autobiographical readings of Ellis’s work, particularly in relation to his sexuality. Thus, the novel is dedicated to Kaplan “who Mr. Ellis said was his best friend and lover for six years, and who died, in January 2004, at the age of 30.” Commentators note the way Lunar Park capitalises on Ellis’s greatest talent: his ability to attract readers to his novels as a result of the (unkempt) promise of autobiographical revelation. Wyatt contextualises Ellis’s reluctance to answer questions about his sexuality in terms of the autobiographical way his early novels were read,

Since the publication of Zero, in which the main character engages in both heterosexual and homosexual affairs, Mr. Ellis has deflected questions about his own sexual orientation. Even after a documentary called This Is Not an Exit referred to his homosexuality, Mr. Ellis always kept the public record decidedly vague. Until now.

86 Wyatt, “Mirror,” 2.1.
88 Wyatt, “Mirror,” 2.1.
89 Wyatt, 2.1.
Thus, Wyatt claims Ellis attempts to recoup the *American Psycho* scandal and the ambiguities around his personal life caused by autobiographical readings of this work as part of the plot of *Lunar Park*:

It is not the first time that Mr. Ellis, 41, has tried to refract the events of his life through those of his characters while at the same time evading attempts to tie the two together.90

Heath’s interview similarly demonstrates the way Ellis wants to employ his sexuality to create interest in his work but refuses to clarify whether he is heterosexual or homosexual.91 The candidate’s own review begins with a discussion of Ellis’s sexuality and the way Ellis has used evasion to increase interest in and sales for his books. Noting Ellis’s technical virtuosity in creating “textual ciphers” and “literary labyrinths,” the candidate advises readers not to waste their time trying to solve the riddle of Ellis’s sexuality as neither his press clippings nor his novels will reveal anything he does not want the reader to know.92

The candidate argues Ellis’s strategy in *Lunar Park* is to seduce his readers with the promise of confession, only to deliver more obscurity.93 The candidate speculates in her review that the recycling of his previous work and the criticism that surrounds it is deliberate; Ellis flirts with the reader’s desire to know the intimate details of his private life and the secret inspiration of his work.94

Ellis’s own interest in self-plagiarism, which comes to the fore in *Lunar Park*, illustrates Moran’s claim that celebrity authors like Updike, Roth, DeLillio and Acker tend to

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90 Wyatt, 2.1.
91 Heath, “Bret,” 117.
93 Ettler, 8.
94 Ettler, 9.
write obsessively about their own celebrity and to embrace self-reflexivity in their fiction. Thus, in *Zuckerman Unbound*, Roth explores in fiction the effects of his sudden real-life notorious celebrity post-*Portnoy’s Complaint*. Roth’s celebrity resulted from the explicit sexual content of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, and in *Zuckerman Unbound* Roth’s alter ego, *Zuckerman*, reflects he found his sudden and sex-related notoriety as baffling as if it were a misfortune. *Zuckerman* is constantly confused with Carnovsky, the character from his bestselling novel *Carnovsky*, much to *Zuckerman*’s irritation.

Bret, Ellis’s alter ego in *Lunar Park*, similarly reflects upon his notoriety after the publication of *American Psycho*, describing it as “the year of being hated,” and then blaming his notoriety upon his character, Bateman, who he claims, forced him to write the novel, despite Ellis’s reluctance. On the other hand, Ellis’s self-reflexivity in *Lunar Park* is more extreme and formalist than Roth’s in *Zuckerman Unbound*.

One topic Ellis’s self-plagiaristic novel recycles is the mass media feminist critique. In *Wyatt*, Ellis appears to concede ground to the feminist critique:

while working on *Lunar Park*, he [Ellis] re-read the earlier book and saw it in a new light. ‘When I got to the violence sequences I was incredibly upset and shocked,’ he said in a surprising public retreat. ‘I can’t believe that I wrote that. Looking back, I realize, God, you really sort of stepped over a line there,’

though Ellis’s claims cannot be taken at face value.

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97 Roth, 122.
99 Wyatt, “Mirror,” 2.1.
While Wolcott’s interview claims Ellis has a “deep aversion” to women and that “there was a homoerotic component to this overidentification with fashion divas,” the most telling remark, in terms of the question of Ellis’s sexuality and its relation to the *American Psycho* scandal, appears in Ellis’s interview with Grove.\(^{100}\)

When *American Psycho* was published, and everybody thought I was this horrible misogynist who wanted to rape and dismember women, I suspect that could have been the time to come out and say, ‘I’m gay’—and then maybe solved everything. But I wasn’t going to do that. My theory about this whole thing, and the reason I’ve been so coy, has basically been one of style and aesthetics. It’s not political at all. I’ve wanted to protect some kind of integrity in my fiction.\(^{101}\)

Scholars appear reluctant to explore Bateman’s potential homosexuality. The first scholar to link the riddle of *American Psycho*’s “plot” with homosexuality is Young. Young observes that after his confrontation with Luis, Bateman becomes increasingly unhinged which suggests homosexuality *may be the* key to Bateman’s character.\(^{102}\) Murphet speculates “there is a possibility Patrick is actually gay,” and describes the meal Bateman eats as Marcus Halberstam with Paul Owen as a “date.”\(^{103}\) Writing about Ellis’s real life ambiguity, Hawryluk asserts that ambiguity about Ellis’s “floating and enigmatic sexuality” is central to his public persona.\(^{104}\)

*Post-Lunar Park*, Phillips employs examples from *American Psycho* to link the possibility of Bateman’s homosexuality with unreliable narration.\(^{105}\) Phillips claims the scene

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102 Young, “Beast,” 111.
103 Murphet, *Reader’s Guide*, 44.
104 Hawryluk, “Call Waiting,” 410.
wherein Bateman tries to strangle Luis demonstrates the discrepancies in the narrative: what Bateman reports as a violent attack, Luis interprets as a solicitation. Phillips speculates: how can Bateman’s grip be tight enough to choke Luis, but still loose enough to let Luis turn around? The discrepancy suggests that what Bateman narrates may not be what occurs: “It is possible to assume that Bateman did not approach Luis to attack him, but to solicit him.” Phillips further argues Bateman’s running away from Luis may be evidence of his “homophobia.” Yet Phillips neglects to take her reasoning to its logical conclusion and speculate that Bateman may be homosexual.

While Gomel interprets Bateman as a homophobic heterosexual, Nielsen links the ambiguity surrounding Ellis’s sexuality with the ambiguity in his novels. Thus, while in *Lunar Park* Ellis appears to admit he is homosexual—he leaves Jayne to pursue a gay relationship and the novel is dedicated to Kaplan, his “partner of six years,”—his novels increasingly employ doubles, strategies of “elusiveness,” and “mutually exclusive characterizations.” Nielsen also notes the way Ellis creates connections between his “identity as an author” and his work. Thus, *Lunar Park* embodies as plot the way the reader’s knowledge of Ellis’s persona from interviews constructs meaning in his novels (in a kind of feedback loop).

Baelo-Allué reads the homosexual subtext in the novel in terms of the historical context of AIDS—homosexuals in New York were linked to AIDS during the 1980s—and suggests that the “smudge” on Price’s head is an early symptom of the disease. While

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106 Phillips, 65.
107 Phillips, 65.
109 Nielsen, 132, 133.
110 Nielsen, 132.
111 Nielsen, 136.
Baelo-Allué is content to speculate about Bateman’s possible homosexuality and implies a connection between his homosexuality and inability to kill Luis, she stops short of reading Ellis’s work in relation to his potential homosexuality: “Bateman’s sexual identity may even be unclear: we have already mentioned his incapacity to kill Luis when he confesses to being in love with Bateman.” However, Baelo-Allué does concede Ellis uses his sexuality “at the same time denying he is using it”; thus, Ellis refuses to clarify his sexual preference but simultaneously confides numerous “intimate details about it.”

In sum, while literary criticism about *American Psycho* contains numerous references to Ellis and Bateman’s homosexuality, it is also full of references to, and complaints about, *American Psycho*’s excessive ambiguity. The present study suggests Ellis’s refusal to be open about his sexuality is linked to the excessive ambiguity in *American Psycho* and will explore the link between the two.

In contrast with most scholars who claim Ellis is a master at publicity (Hawryluk, Phillips and Baelo-Allué), the current analysis asserts Ellis is a master at creating suspense and mystery, both in his novels and in his interviews. Thus, neither Ellis’s characters nor his public persona add up, both are unreliable. (Further, Ellis employs his celebrity in the media to hook the reader through ambiguity, and to create suspense to sell his books.)

While Phillips’s analysis of *Lunar Park* mentions Ellis’s revelation of his homosexuality, she fails to link this with Ellis’s strategy of apparent “self-disclosure.” Phillips’s description of Ellis’s strategy otherwise concurs with the present study: while

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114 Baelo-Allué, 137.
Lunar Park appears to be a memoir, closer examination reveals the novel obscures as much as it discloses about Ellis’s life.\textsuperscript{117} Phillips agrees with the candidate’s review which states that Ellis intends to hook the reader by blurring fact and fiction: “Although Ellis refuses to demystify the text, one of the purposes of inserting himself into the text is to trap readers in this very game, and to confuse fact with fiction.”\textsuperscript{118} Ultimately though, unlike some scholars, Phillips stops short of claiming that Ellis’s technique of drawing the reader in through ambiguity, both in his novels and in his life, is to ensure and increase sales. Phillips also refers to Wyatt’s interview and notes the contradiction between Ellis’s apparent apology for the violence in American Psycho and his admission of lying, and concludes the apology “may not actually be an apology at all.”\textsuperscript{119} (Baelo-Allué counters that Ellis’s realisation of the extremity of the sexually violent scenes is genuine.\textsuperscript{120})

Significantly, then, the point at which Ellis publically admits his homosexuality is also the point at which he confesses to lying in interviews (and thereby re-casts the very doubts his confession is designed to allay). Thus, Ellis first admits to lying in interviews in the conversation with Bushnell wherein she “outs” him as homosexual. Ellis’s repeated admissions of dishonesty will be recounted briefly. Ellis lying in interviews means his denials of misogyny in American Psycho must be further scrutinised (as must any analyses of Ellis and his work that equate Ellis’s claims in interviews with fact).

Thus, Ellis admits to lying in MacDonald and Wyatt, and to putting on a front in Thomas.\textsuperscript{121} In Wyatt, Ellis justifies his behaviour by blaming journalists:

\textsuperscript{120} Baelo-Allué, Controversial, 187-8.
\textsuperscript{121} MacDonald, “All Cut Up,” 1; Wyatt, “Mirror,” 2.1; Thomas, “Obsession,” 13.
'And that’s when, well, do you lie?’ he [Ellis] asks. ‘To preserve what you think, as the author of this book, is its purity? I think this might be a day-by-day situation. Or it’s going to be based on how I feel about the journalist I’m talking to. If I sense they have an agenda, if I sense they don’t like the book, they’re out to get me, then sure I’ll lie. But if they’re nice and they’re accepting, they like the book, I’d love to tell the truth.’

Given that Ellis has admitted to lying in interviews, everything he says must be questioned, including, paradoxically, even his admissions of dishonesty. Ellis’s admission of his homosexuality, while confirmed by real life events, must therefore be subject to scrutiny. As Ellis’s homosexuality appears to be based on fact, it begs the question: why does Ellis confess his homosexuality and dishonesty in 1998? Is it another attempt to create interest in, or controversy around, his image in order to generate sales?

In *Lunar Park*, the fictional Ellis, Bret, reinforces what the actual author says in interviews: “I was a mystery, an enigma, and that was what mattered—that’s what sold books, that’s what made me even more famous.” This implies Ellis deliberately seduces the reader through the promise of self-revelation to increase sales.

Given the ambiguity and inseparability of Ellis’s persona and characters, the following close reading of *American Psycho* will be informed by Ellis’s biography, but will concentrate on homosexuality as it appears in the novel. Another possible interpretation suggested by Ellis’s biography but outside the concerns of this thesis is a reading of the novel as a symbolic satire of both the corporate publishing industry that came to power in 1980s New York, (not a literal satire of Wall Street or commodity culture, but a symbolic satire of

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corporate literary culture), and of the increasing celebrity of literary authors and their
dependence on mainstream, sensationalism-hungry readers.

The present study argues there is an answer to the riddle of American Psycho, a
solution to the excessive ambiguity that has frustrated and alienated innumerable
commentators, scholars and readers of American Psycho: American Psycho is really a novel
about a closeted gay man who works in the fiercely homophobically heterosexual world of
Wall Street. The novel’s extreme misogyny—as Self suggests—can thereby be partially
explained in relation to the author’s unresolved issues to do with his sexuality.

Dyer notes that heterosexuality is still the privileged form of sexuality today: “the act
of sex is seen as the way to understand the worth and nature of the most privileged of human
relationships, the heterosexual couple.”\(^{124}\) Thus, being heterosexual is idealised in our society
in such a way that the individual’s identity and sense of value are closely tied to their sexual
lives. Paraphrasing Foucault, Dyer writes “sexuality is designated as the aspect of human
existence where we may learn the truth about ourselves.”\(^{125}\) What then does American Psycho
tell us about sexuality?

There is support for arguing American Psycho has a homosexual subplot in Ellis’s
oeuvre. Ellis’s interest in sexual ambiguity beings with Zero. In addition to Clay’s
bisexuality, the novel contains a scene wherein a middle-aged married man who works in real
estate hires Clay’s friend Julian who is a male prostitute for the night (like Bateman, this man
is in the closet).

Similarly, the plot of Rules hinges around the alleged bisexuality of Sean: Paul who is
gay (though he also apparently has sex with women) claims he and Sean have sex and hopes

\(^{124}\) Dyer, Heavenly Bodies, 24.
\(^{125}\) Dyer, 23.
this will lead to a relationship with Sean, but in Sean’s account of the same events Paul and Sean do not have a sexual relationship. Like Bateman, Paul is an unreliable narrator. The sections narrated from Paul’s point of view, which mostly concern his relationship with Sean, “the next weeks I was only with him,” cannot be believed. Further, Paul asserts that Sean is from “the South” and on “financial aid,” however, the sections narrated from Sean’s point of view counter Paul’s claims: Sean is not poor, or from the South (Sean travels to New York to see his dying father where he visits the Four Seasons, uses a limousine, and stays at The Carlyle). Paul’s relationship dysfunction, a gay man who is attracted to and has fantasy relationships with unavailable, straight men who might reject him for women (like Mitchell), is evident in the epigraph.

It is worth speculating whether the frequently noted lack of critical and commercial success of Rules is linked to its more overt bisexual/homosexual plot; and to wonder if Ellis adjusted his writing in terms of his characters’ sexuality—is Bateman in the closet to protect sales (as Ellis’s epigraph suggests writing openly as a homosexual novelist like Dennis Cooper means that your work may be “ghettoized”)? While all Ellis’s protagonists at least occasionally have sex with men, Paul is the only narrator who is openly and primarily driven by his desire for a man.

Significantly, a homosexual subtext is also present in Glamorama. Thus, the single pornographic scene in Glamorama is a threesome with two males and one female wherein the male-to-male anal sex is the most controversial aspect of the scene. In addition, the plot hinges around the issue of Victor’s sexuality: while Victor thinks he has oral sex with Marina on the QE2, really he is given a blow job by Bobby, who is in disguise, and the novel

126 Ellis, Rules, 88.
127 Ellis, 91; 231-3.
suggests Victor chooses not to notice that it is not really Marina. Victor’s bisexuality and possible homosexuality are also hinted at during his flirtation with the German on the cruise. Further, during the threesome scene, when Victor has sex with Jamie, the language is pornographic, for example, “I suck her clit into my mouth as I fuck her with two then three fingers and then I move my tongue into her asshole.” When Victor has sex with Bobby, the language is less pornographic and more realistic: “my upper lip is buried in his pubic hair and my nose is pressing against his hard, taut abdomen, his balls tight against my chin.” This suggests the sex between Victor and Bobby is less textual, less of a parody of a pornographic scenario than when Victor has sex with a woman.

The homosexual subtext is alluded to in Ellis’s interview with Blume who asks,

‘Everybody in this book, [Glamorama] straight and gay, speaks a kind of gay dialect. Why?’

‘There are a couple of gay reporters who have taken the book to task on this as well [Ellis replies]. Maybe there’s something at work that I’m not conscious of.’

Before analysing the homosexual scenes, it is first necessary to briefly summarise the differences, in quality and quantity, between the violence perpetrated upon men and the violence perpetrated on women in American Psycho (in order to link the current discussion with the mass media feminist critique). There are three scenes depicting violence towards men: Al, the gay man and Paul Owen. The violence takes various forms: physical, verbal and psychological.

129 Ellis, Glamorama, 222; 424.
130 Ellis, Glamorama, 192.
131 Ellis, Glamorama, 335.
132 Ellis, 337.
Al is subject to more abuse than any other male character in the novel. He is verbally abused; psychologically abused (by having to watch his dog tortured, maimed and possibly killed); and is physically attacked and tortured. For example, psychological abuse is evident when Bateman, who first appears to be offering him assistance, ‘‘You want some money?’ I ask, gently. ‘Some... food?’” suddenly switches to verbal abuse: “‘Do you know what a fucking loser you are?’” The verbal abuse directly precedes the physical abuse and the physical attack is also followed by further abuse and taunts,

I throw a quarter in his face, which is slick and shiny with blood, both sockets hollowed out and filled with gore, what’s left of his eyes literally oozing over his screaming lips in thick, webby strands. Calmly, I whisper, ‘There’s a quarter. Go buy some gum, you crazy fucking nigger.’

Al’s physical abuse also involves torture. Thus, Bateman pops the retina of Al’s eye with a knife,

I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina.

Bateman then cuts Al’s other eye,

I grab his head with one hand and push it back and then with my thumb and forefinger hold the other eye open and bring the knife up and push the tip of it into the socket, first breaking its protective film so the socket fills with blood.

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135 Ellis, 129.
136 Ellis, 131.
137 Ellis, 131-2.
138 Ellis, 131.
then slitting the eyeball open sideways, and he finally starts screaming once I slit
his nose in two, lightly spraying me and the dog with blood.\footnote{Ellis, 131.}

The physical abuse also involves repeatedly stabbing Al in the stomach and hands.

Al’s physical abuse, Bateman cutting Al’s eyes, is similar to Bateman’s abuse of
Tiffany (as noted above, he burns Tiffany’s eyes with a lighter until they burst), however Al’s
physical abuse is not as severe as Tiffany’s. Compare Al being stabbed in the stomach with:
Tiffany having a dildo nailed and hammered into her anus, having her mouth first cut out and
then widened with a power drill, and having Bateman reach down her throat and pull out her
innards, and then rip her stomach open with his bare hands.\footnote{Ellis, 305.} Nor does Bateman sexually
abuse Al—there is no anal rape with an instrument, Al is not castrated, nor forced to swallow
his own penis, for example. Also, while Al must watch his dog physically tortured, Tiffany
has to watch Torri tortured, killed, and her decapitated head raped. Having to watch another
human being tortured, killed and raped is worse than Al having to watch his pet trodden on.
(This is not to say that racist violence, or cruelty to animals are less offensive than
misogynistic sexual violence, but rather that Ellis has devoted more violence, detail and page
space, as well as more variation within the abuse, to the latter.) When expressed in
quantitative terms, Al’s physical abuse takes two thirds of a page, while the racial, and
psychological abuse that precedes it take half a page.

The next violent attack upon a male is Bateman’s attack on a middle-aged gay man
who is out walking his dog.\footnote{Ellis, 164-166.} Again, while the gay man is forced to watch his dog dissected
alive, Bateman’s attack on the gay man and his dog is still less cruel than Bateman’s attack
on Al, and considerably less violent and cruel than his sexualised attacks on women.
I push him back, hard, with a bloodied glove and start randomly stabbing him in
the face and head, finally slashing his throat open in two brief chopping motions;
an arc of red-brown blood splatters the white BMW 320i parked at the curb,
setting off its car alarm, four fountainlike bursts coming from below his chin.
The spraylike sound of the blood. He falls to the sidewalk, shaking like mad,
blood still pumping, as I wipe the knife clean on the front of his jacket and toss
it back in the briefcase and begin to walk away, but to make sure the old queer is
really dead and not faking it (they sometimes do) I shoot him with a silencer
twice in the face and then I leave.\textsuperscript{142}

The physical abuse only takes a few lines and then Bateman shoots him to make sure he’s
dead. The gay man is not physically tortured before he is attacked (though he similarly is
made to watch his dog attacked), nor verbally or psychologically abused.

The final attack on a male is Bateman’s murder of Paul Owen. In this case, there is no
torture, no verbal or psychological abuse, Owen’s head is cleanly chopped open with an
axe.\textsuperscript{143}

The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping
sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up. Paul’s eyes look up at me, then
involuntarily roll back into his head, then back at me, and suddenly his hands are
trying to grab at the handle, but the shock of the blow has sapped his strength.
There’s no blood at first, no sound either except for the newspapers under Paul’s
kicking feet, rustling, tearing. Blood starts to slowly pour out of the sides of his
mouth shortly after the first chop, and when I pull the ax out—almost yanking

\textsuperscript{142} Ellis, 166.
\textsuperscript{143} Ellis, 217-8.
Owen out of the chair by his head—and strike him again in the face, splitting it open, his arms flailing at nothing, blood sprays out in twin brownish geysers, staining my raincoat. This is accompanied by a horrible momentary hissing noise actually coming from the wounds in Paul’s skull, places where bone and flesh no longer connect, and this is followed by a rude farting noise caused by a section of his brain, which due to pressure forces itself out, pink and glistening, through the wounds in his face. He falls to the floor in agony, his face just gray and bloody, except for one of his eyes, which is blinking uncontrollably; his mouth is a twisted red-pink jumble of teeth and meat and jawbone, his tongue hangs out of an open gash on the side of his cheek, connected only by what looks like a thick purple string. I scream at him only once: ‘Fucking stupid bastard, Fucking bastard.’

This act is indisputably brutal, but involves no torture and no other form of abuse. Paul only takes five minutes to die. (The Chinese delivery boy’s death on page 180 is the swiftest of all male deaths, over in just a line, “when I slit his throat.”)

When compared with the sexually violent scenes it becomes clear the men are subjected to less cruelty and violence than the women. While the Christie/Sabrina scene, which involves some physical abuse, is impossible to assess, due to an ellipsis, the Elizabeth and Christie scene, while two ellipses complicate an assessment of the abuse, is easier to assess. 145 The physical abuse, which follows an extended one and three quarters page long pornographic section which also involves verbal abuse, takes a page for both girls. 146 Viewed from a purely quantitative level, there is significantly more physical abuse than that involved

144 Ellis, 217-8.
145 Ellis, 176.
146 Ellis, 289-91; 288-9.
in the murder of either the gay man or Paul Owen, and more than was involved in the most physically abusive scene with a man, Al. In this scene, two women are physically and sexually abused, whereas in the Al scene only one man is physically, but not also sexually, abused. At a purely quantitative level, the abuse of the female characters in *American Psycho* is more extreme than that of the male characters.

The abuse is also more extreme on a qualitative level. Elizabeth’s feet are sliced with a butcher’s knife, her neck is slashed from behind severing her jugular, then she is punched in the stomach and stabbed five or six times. After she goes into her death throes Bateman masturbates on her face:

Her mouth fills with blood that cascades over the sides of her cheeks, over her chin. Her body, shaking spasmodically, resembles what I imagine an epileptic goes through in a fit and I hold down her head, rubbing my dick, stiff, covered with blood, across her choking face, until she’s motionless.  

Christie, on the other hand, is tied up and gagged with jumper cables attached to her breasts from a battery. Bateman drops lit matches onto her stomach, he kneads her breasts “with a pair of pliers,” and then “mashes them up,” until she dies. We do not see exactly how she dies, though after an ellipsis, Bateman offers the following as clues to both girls’ fate:

Christie’s battered hands are swollen to the size of footballs, the fingers are indistinguishable from the rest of her hand and the smell coming from her burnt corpse is jolting and I have to open the venetian blinds, which are spattered with burnt fat from when Christie’s breasts burst apart, electrocuting her, and then the windows, to air out the room. Her eyes are wide open and glazed over and her

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147 Ellis, 290.
mouth is lipless and black and there’s also a black pit where her vagina should be (though I don’t remember doing anything to it) and her lungs are visible beneath the charred ribs. What is left of Elizabeth’s body lies crumpled in the corner of the living room. She’s missing her right arm and chunks of her right leg. Her left hand, chopped off at the wrist, lies clenched on top of the island in the kitchen, in its own small pool of blood. Her head sits on the kitchen table and its blood-soaked face—even with both eyes scooped out and a pair of Alain Mikli sunglasses over the holes—looks like it’s frowning.148

In the Torri and Tiffany scene, the pornography goes for three quarters of a page, and the physical abuse goes from the bottom of page 303 to the bottom of 305. That is, for two full pages. The violence is horrendous (cited above) and culminates in Torri’s decapitation (Bateman masturbates with her head), and Bateman tears Tiffany’s stomach open with his bare hands.

In the “Girls” scene, the pornography lasts a page and includes verbal and physical abuse. For example, Bateman slaps one of the girls and calls her a “‘fucking whore bitch.’”149 He then punches her on the mouth at which point she tries to leave. As with the other girls, Bateman then Maces her, nailguns her, then, smearing her vagina with brie, he inserts a Habitrail inside her and coaxes a starving rat to climb into her vagina.

The rat doesn’t need any prodding and the bent coat hanger I was going to use remains untouched by my side and with the girl still conscious, the thing moves effortlessly on newfound energy, racing up the tube until half of its body disappears, and then after a minute—its rat body shaking while it feeds—all of it

148 Ellis, 290-1.
149 Ellis, 326-7.
vanishes, except for the tail, and I yank the Habitrail tube out of the girl, trapping the rodent. Soon even the tail disappears. The noises the girl is making are, for the most part, incomprehensible.\textsuperscript{150}

\textbf{Bateman} then chain-saws her in half and again uses her sawn open chin as a sex aid. In this scene, there are two and a third pages of torture, rape and torturous slow death. Even more violent than the Torri/Tiffany scene, this scene is again more violent in both a quantitative and qualitative way than the violent scenes towards men.

Finally, while the Bethany scene does not involve pornography before the physical abuse, Bateman does use her mouth as a sex aide.\textsuperscript{151} Again, Bateman Maces her, nailguns her, chews her fingers, cuts her nipples off and cuts out her tongue. He also verbally abuses her with taunts, “‘Scream honey... No one cares. No one will help you,’” and, “‘Dumb bitch.’”\textsuperscript{152} The physical abuse, which is extreme, lasts two pages.

It is clear from the above that the sexualised violent scenes are more extreme than the violent scenes involving men. There is a quantitative difference in terms of physical abuse with most female scenes taking up more page space than the scenes with men (contrast the Bethany scene with Paul Owen, or the Torri and Tiffany scene or the Girls scene with the Al scene). Furthermore, all scenes with women involve sexual, verbal and psychological abuse in addition to the physical abuse. The Al scene, which is the only scene with a male victim of approximately equal horror, nevertheless pales in comparison with the horrors experienced by Bateman’s female victims.

Having established a clear difference in the extremity of violence along gender lines, further analysis of the homosexual scenes is illuminating. The homosexual/homophobia

\textsuperscript{150} Ellis, 329.
\textsuperscript{151} Ellis, 246.
\textsuperscript{152} Ellis, 246-7.
scenes are foreshadowed by numerous references to homosexuality. Thus, from the beginning of the novel, homosexuality is signalled as another valueless identity (like blackness) by Price who recounts a news story wherein a homosexual TV game show host kills two boys as “‘Droll.’” 153 Again, the revelation that Luis is homosexual is foreshadowed by indications of his otherness, such as his submissiveness and tasteless dress-sense. 154 Significantly, Luis is the first case of mistaken identity. 155

Homophobia and the mockery of homosexuality continue as riffs in the novel—see pages, 36, 68, 139, 179, 205 and 240—and in the scenes leading up to the solicitation scene, Luis’s homosexuality is constantly hinted at and laughed about. For example, Bateman narrates on page 69 that Luis recommended a personal trainer but that he came on to Bateman; and on pages 107-8 during a board meeting Luis flirts with Bateman, asking him out, and then tries to touch Bateman’s tie. Most significant is Bateman’s response to a “‘Gay Pride Parade’” on page 139 which makes Bateman’s stomach crawl; he notes with horror, that “‘There’s a place for us,’” is playing, and confesses to a “traumatised fascination.”

Bateman’s passivity around heterosexual men (which may be linked to the homosexual subtext) surfaces in the next scene. Despite the fact that Armstrong is extremely boring, Bateman cannot assert himself and leave. Instead he engages in a fantasy in which he self-harms, “I imagine pulling out my knife, slicing a wrist, one of mine.” 156 Thus, Bateman is passive around Armstrong, he cannot leave, nor can he change the subject of conversation which bores him.

153 Ellis, 6.
154 Ellis, 31; 158.
155 Ellis, 5.
156 Ellis, 140.
Significantly, the second act of violence in the novel is perpetrated on a gay man and his dog. Using the recency effect, this scene can be re-read in relation to what precedes it: the first Luis/Bateman scene, wherein Bateman attempts and fails to murder Luis, his in-the-closet gay friend (who mistakes Bateman’s hands around his neck for a solicitation and declares his attraction for Bateman). Bateman is compelled to kill the openly stereotypically gay man and dog because Luis has confronted Bateman with Bateman’s repressed homosexuality by declaring an attraction for Bateman. Bateman’s passivity in response to Luis’s advance triggers his violence. Thus, immediately after the scene with Luis, Bateman packs “three knives and two guns carried in a black Epi leather attaché case,” before going out and killing the anonymous gay man and his dog.

This pattern of interaction—Luis’s advance, Bateman’s passivity and then aggressive rejection—is repeated three times, which suggests theirs is an important relationship: indeed, it is argued here that the real romance in *American Psycho* is between Bateman and Luis. Further, the fact that Luis is the only person Bateman attempts to kill but cannot kill, suggests Bateman does have feelings for Luis, even if he denies them, and that this is why he cannot kill Luis when he tries. Given that Bateman’s attack on Al is partially caused by Bateman’s obsession with “fitting in,” it seems likely that while Bateman is repulsed by Luis’s masochism, he is equally incapable of accepting his own homosexuality because it will prevent him from “fitting in.”

Just before Bateman follows Luis into the toilets, he speculates whether Courtney would like him better if Luis was dead and adds:

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157 Ellis, 160.
158 Ellis, 161.
Why, for that matter, do I want to please Courtney? If she likes me only for my muscles, the heft of my cock, then she’s a shallow bitch. But a physically superior, near perfect-looking shallow bitch, and that can override anything… Would I ruin things by strangling Luis? If I married Evelyn would she make me buy her Lacroix gowns until we finalized our divorce?  

However, given Bateman is an unreliable narrator and the discrepancy in the Bateman/Luis scene, Bateman’s thoughts here may merely be a screen, the mask of his denial.

Thus, when Bateman approaches Luis in the toilet to kill him (Luis is whistling Les Misérables), Luis mistakes Bateman’s hands on his throat for a come on and kisses Bateman’s hand which leaves Bateman “paralysed.” Bateman’s paralysis continues while Luis runs his hands through Bateman’s hair: Bateman remains mute and staring at a sign that reads “Edwin gives marvellous head.” While Bateman realises he cannot strangle Luis, when Luis whispers “‘I want you… too,’” Bateman storms out. Luis then gives chase, wanting to know where Bateman’s going, and Bateman gives his usual passive reply, the same sort of reply he gives to assertive women, “‘I’ve gotta return some videotapes.’”

Bateman’s inability to accept his homosexuality drives him to assert an overly aggressive heterosexuality; a hyper and hetero-normative masculinity (it may also explain his extreme acts of sexualised violent misogyny). Thus, Bateman kills the gay man and dog because he cannot kill Luis; and he cannot kill Luis because he has feelings for him; feelings he cannot honour but feelings he cannot, no matter how he tries, squash. When read in terms

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159 Ellis, 157-8. [Italics in original.]
160 Ellis, 159.
161 Ellis, 159. [Italics in original.]
162 Ellis, 159-60. [Italics in original.]
163 Ellis, 160.
of the recency effect the novel conditions the reader to sexualise violent homophobia: homosexuality fills Bateman with violent homophobic rage.

Using recency again, the scene wherein Bateman murders the gay man and his dog rewrites the Luis scene, and both are reinterpreted in relation to Bateman’s later attack on Christie and Sabrina. The violent homophobic rage that results from the fusion of Luis with the gay man and dog are then fused during the Christie/Sabrina scene with the violent sexualised misogyny. Thus the text creates extreme ambiguity around Bateman’s sexuality which it fails to resolve, even obliquely. The reader wonders: Bateman’s reactions to Luis are so extreme he must be gay? On the other hand, he must be straight because of the constant dates and his relationships with women. Then again, Bateman is an impossible unreliable narrator. Significantly, the text does not resolve Bateman’s sexual ambiguity in any overt way.

The second Bateman/Luis scene is again foreshadowed by homophobic references. After the Christie/Sabrina scene, Bateman is inundated with references to homosexuality. For example, *The Patty Winters Show* is about “women who married homosexuals,” on page 178; then in Bloomingdales Bateman murmurs to the young faggot working behind the counter, ‘Too, too fabulous,’ while fondling a silk ascot. He flirts and asks if I’m a model. ‘I’ll see you in hell,’ I tell him, and move on.

As a result, Bateman breaks down and has to take “three Halcion.”

One motivating force for Bateman’s violence is his determination to fit in, which means in this case to be heterosexual. On the other hand, from a homosexual Bateman’s point

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164 Ellis, 179.
165 Ellis, 179.
of view, women may represent competition (they may like the same men, as Bushnell quips in Exit and Paul complains in Rules). Significantly, Bateman claims to be having sex with Courtney, Luis’s fiancée.

The second Bateman/Luis scene, from pages 222-4, is directly preceded by Evelyn assertively asking Bateman for a date. Bateman again cannot say no to Evelyn’s request, and immediately after he is surprised by Luis in Paul Smith. Bateman is passive around Evelyn, and then is incapable of attacking Luis. In this second confrontation, Luis invites Bateman for a drink to “‘talk about… us,’” and Bateman refuses and leaves, with Luis following behind.\(^{166}\) Finally, Bateman threatens Luis with knife, “I jab it threateningly” and “hiss at him.”\(^{167}\) Again, it is significant that Bateman does not, cannot, attack or kill Luis. This scene is immediately followed by Bateman’s dinner with Sean, which itself precedes the horrendous Bethany/Bateman scene.\(^{168}\) Bateman is passive around Sean, and extremely violent towards Bethany.

The third Luis/Bateman scene occurs directly after the extremely violent misogynistic Christie/Elizabeth scene in a chapter titled, “Confronted by Faggot.”\(^{169}\) Bateman narrates that Luis is stalking him through Barney’s. When Luis confronts Bateman, Bateman ignores him, (repelled by Luis’s stereotypically gay clothing “jaguar-print silk evening jacket.”\(^{170}\) Luis again pursues Bateman and confronts Bateman with his homosexuality but Bateman is repulsed by Luis, and images of “fags clustered around a baby grand, show tunes” flood his mind.\(^{171}\) The stereotypical gay lifestyle repulses Bateman (Dyer observes many gays do not identify with representations of homosexuality in the culture) although it could equally be

\(^{166}\) Ellis, 223.

\(^{167}\) Ellis, 223.

\(^{168}\) Ellis, 224-30; 230-47.

\(^{169}\) Ellis, 291.

\(^{170}\) Ellis, 292.

\(^{171}\) Ellis, 292.
further evidence of Bateman’s denial. Luis again confronts Bateman, “‘I know you feel the same way I do,’” and Bateman “hisses” back at Luis (the hissing may be a gay behaviour in itself), and again denies him. When Bateman threatens to kill him, Luis has thrown himself to the ground and Bateman threatens to “‘slit your fucking throat,’” Luis does not care and wants to die because of Bateman’s rejection. Luis grabs Bateman’s ankle and Bateman kicks him off.

The reason Bateman threatens Luis with violence but fails to act three times (there is emphasis in repetition), is because Bateman does care for Luis; he knows Luis is right, Bateman has feelings for him. As an unreliable narrator, Bateman’s version of events are suspect: it seems likely, given Luis’s behaviour, that Bateman has at the very least been flirting with Luis, if not having a relationship with him (and not doing all the other heterosexual things he has been claiming to do).

The scenes building to the Carnes confession scene, and which follow the final Luis scene, are significant as Bateman’s behaviour becomes increasingly erratic. Directly after the third Luis scene Bateman narrates, “‘Nearby a mother breast-feeds her baby, which awakens something awful in me.’” Bateman could not assert himself with Luis, again he failed to act, and the confrontation with his homosexuality precipitates the urge to kill which grows until on page 298 Bateman kills a child at the zoo. Watching the child die, he enjoys the mother’s pain. Could Bateman’s violence be motivated by envy, as being a parent is something that Bateman cannot do? (This death is relatively unexplained by scholars in literary criticism about American Psycho.)

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172 Dyer, Images, 3.
173 Ellis, American Psycho, 293.
174 Ellis, 295.
175 Ellis, 297.
Later, when Bateman’s friends suggest inviting Luis to dinner, Bateman’s reaction is hysterical: “Luis cannot come,” and “If Luis comes I’ll kill him. I swear to god I’ll kill him. I’ll fucking kill him.” Again, Bateman’s disproportionate response suggests his narration about his relationship with Luis is unreliable.

In the next chapter, Bateman takes home two prostitutes and perpetrates extreme misogynistic sexual violence upon them (the rat scene). From this point Bateman’s violence escalates and builds until the “Chase Manhattan” chapter where there is a change of person from first into third. This chapter, the least convincing from a realist point of view, when read in terms of the homosexual subtext becomes yet another attempt by Bateman to over-assert heterosexual masculinity in an extreme way. Significantly, this chapter concludes with Bateman’s first attempted confession to Carnes. It is argued here that Bateman’s confession of his crimes to Carnes is symbolic of his coming out as homosexual. What Bateman is symbolically confiding to Carnes is his homosexuality, however Carnes neither believes him nor cares about Bateman’s confession. (The scene with the real estate agent is symbolic of coming out in a similar way: this time the real estate agent symbolically tells Bateman to conceal his homosexuality for the sake of business.)

Read in this way, the novel suggests a process whereby a closeted homosexual tries to confess his homosexuality to his colleagues and employers but they refuse to hear his confession and encourage him to stay in the closet for financial reasons. Thus Bateman’s confession of his crimes to Carnes is symbolic of his coming out as homosexual. However, in the supremely heterosexual world of Wall Street, Carnes neither believes him nor cares when Bateman confesses.

176 Ellis, 310; 311.
177 Ellis, 352.
178 Ellis, 369-70.
The novel’s last scene, wherein Bateman and his friends wryly observe Reagan’s lies, can further be read symbolically in terms of the homosexual subplot as a parallel to Bateman’s denial of his homosexuality (like Reagan, Bateman lies to keep business going).\textsuperscript{179} Again, the otherwise ambiguous meaning of the last words of novel—THIS IS NOT AN EXIT—can also be explained: hiding in the heterosexual world is not a solution for Bateman (as the plot of \textit{Lunar Park} will later demonstrate). Further to this last point, the ending of \textit{American Psycho} is also foreshadowed in an earlier chapter which employs the word “Exit” at its conclusion, on page 199. In the preceding paragraphs, Bateman unsuccessfully tries to fit in with blacks in a downtown nightclub—they reject him as a “Yuppie.” The foreshadowing emphasises the importance for Bateman of fitting in and its failure as a solution.

While the plot of \textit{American Psycho} revolves around the question of whether or not Bateman is a serial killer and his desperate attempts at heterosexual relationships, the subplot revolves around whether or not Bateman can face his homosexuality. Read in this way the sexually violent murders become hetero-normative overcompensations to cover up Bateman’s insecurity about being homosexual and explain why both Bateman’s relationships with women and confrontations with homosexuality trigger him into violent rage. In the end, Bateman is neither caught out nor recognised as homosexual in the rigidly heterosexual world of Wall Street. Again, Bateman’s identity as a heterosexual serial killer can be read as his cover.

While it is tempting to speculate whether there would have been a scandal to the same degree if Ellis had been open about his own homosexuality back in 1991, (Ellis’s remarks in \textit{Love and Grove} suggest not), care must be taken not to simplistically equate Bateman with

\textsuperscript{179} Ellis, 396-7.
Ellis. Thus, the current reading limits itself to Bateman’s repressed homosexuality in order to argue that sexuality is the answer to the riddle posed by the ambiguity of the text. The subplot does nevertheless suggest a possible explanation for the mystique Ellis creates about his sexuality in the media: he wants to succeed as a celebrity author in a homophobic world.

Momentarily setting aside the many layers of ambiguity in *American Psycho*, what remains clear is that heterosexual sex fills Bateman with sadistic, extremely violent, misogynistic rage. At the same time, the prospect of a relationship with Luis, an available gay man, repulses and terrifies him, and a chance meeting with a stereotypically “feminine” gay man walking his dog also fills Bateman with violent rage. It is significant that both heterosexual and stereotypical homosexual relationships enrage Bateman: neither offer a solution.

The conflict in the novel arises between Bateman’s repressed homosexuality and his ambitious need to fit in to the homophobic culture of Wall Street. Crucially, of all Bateman’s victims, Luis is the only person in the novel Bateman attempts but fails to kill. This detail is of enormous significance to the present study. Bateman’s confrontations with his repressed homosexuality drive him into misogynistic heterosexual behaviour. Bateman attacks to outdo his friends, but in an exaggerated attempt to fit in to a world he can never belong to, because he is gay.

The homosexual subplot also provides an explanation for the snuff pornographic aspects of the heterosexual sex scenes: because Bateman is not heterosexual, the scenes are necessarily based on *Playboy* and *Penthouse* (which lends another dimension to the argument that the murders and sexualised violence never really happen, they are fantasies). Reread from the perspective of the homosexual subplot, the scenes of misogynistic sexual violence appear more clearly to be hate fantasies/acts, because Bateman does not desire sex with
women, he competes with them for men. This however does not make the scenes any less horrific, nor does it prevent them from dominating and undermining the rest of the novel.

Reading *American Psycho* in terms of its homosexual subplot means the riddle of the author’s intentions can at last be made congruent with the interpretation of the otherwise impossibly ambiguous novel. Thus, Ellis’s contradictory behaviour in interviews can partly be partly explained by commercial considerations: withholding the truth about his sexuality from his readers makes commercial sense in a society that can still be intensely homophobic. Ellis claims his refusal to disclose his sexuality is motivated by the desire to protect his novels on an aesthetic level, but this thesis counters that Ellis has lied to protect the sales of his novels, as well as attain and preserve celebrity literary status. Such a reading contradicts the work of many scholars. In particular, it challenges accepted scholarly thinking about the Paul Owen and Bethany scenes.

When read in terms of the homosexual subplot, the Paul Owen scene is best understood in terms of what precedes it: a scene wherein Luis confronts Bateman with his homosexuality. Perhaps Bateman kills Owen because Owen (whom Bateman tells Kimball is gay on page 271) rejects him?

Absent from most analyses of the Bethany scene is Ellis’s emphasis on the fact that Bateman’s verbal attacks on Bethany centre on accusations of the homosexuality of her boyfriend, Robert Hall. This begs the question, is Bateman jealous that Robert likes Bethany, and not him, remembering Paul’s problem in *Rules*? Bateman’s extreme violence towards Bethany is triggered by the way she represents everything Bateman as a gay man can never have. Ultimately, preserving his heterosexual facade is everything in Bateman’s eyes even if it can only be achieved by destroying Bethany’s: Bateman inflicts the most violent insult he
can think of upon Bethany, the accusation that her boyfriend is gay, and symbolically destroys her.

Close examination of the violent and sexually violent scenes reveals that Bateman’s sexual violence is driven by: the misogynistic rage heterosexual sex induces in him; his denial of his homosexuality; his rage that as a homosexual he will never fit in and fears that he will not succeed; the rejection of the straight men he desires; his attempts to outdo his heterosexual Wall St friends; and his hatred of minorities. The answer to the riddle at the centre of the deep and problematic ambiguity in *American Psycho* lies in the novel’s subplot which is concerned with Bateman’s repressed homosexuality. The present study is a response to new information resulting from Ellis’s admissions in interviews about his sexuality and the autobiographical content of the novel, as well as his admission of his tendency to lie to journalists. In particular, this last section is informed by facts about the author’s biography, a recourse necessitated by the novel’s profound and problematic ambiguity, as well as Ellis’s inconsistency in interviews.

While *American Psycho* does not directly state that Bateman is a repressed homosexual, it strongly implies it. That being said, it is equally important to remember that *American Psycho* itself clearly states nothing: its ambiguity is profound, excessive even, to the point that Bateman’s sexuality constitutes a permanent gap in the narrative. The combination of both an amoral narrator who celebrates his misogynistic and racist violence, with an implied author whose critique of Bateman’s behaviour is compromised by complicity, (evident in the novel’s complex parodic formal properties), and with the narrator’s impossible unreliability means that while a biographically based interpretation is necessary, it can also only ever be one source of the text’s truth. Given the prevalence of autobiographically based interpretations of Ellis’s work—such as Young and Murphet’s
seminal analyses—and the presence of the new and relevant biographical information, the above biographically and textually inspired interpretation is offered as a new resolution to the mystery of the excessive ambiguity of *American Psycho*.

As Young complains, in order to understand *American Psycho*, the critic is forced to seek closure in its author’s interviews. While Ellis’s remains inconsistent in interviews, specifically about his homosexuality and the autobiographical content of the novel, Ellis recently claims *American Psycho* is autobiographical and admits that writing it was a form of therapy: “I write books to relieve myself of pain.”\(^{180}\) While Ellis’s remarks clearly cannot be taken at face value, there is enough evidence, both factual, and textual, to suggest that in the sense of Bateman being a homosexual, Ellis’s remarks are, in this case, true. That is to say, the excessive ambiguity in the novel allows Bateman to remain in the closet (just as Ellis’s contradictions in interview allow the author to elude sexual categorisation). Later novels feature more overt homosexual subplots: in subsequent novels, it is as if Ellis has gradually brought Bateman out of the closet.

*American Psycho* and Ellis’s novels in general have been interpreted as fictions about paternity, with some scholars linking paternity with Bateman’s sexual violence: Bateman “kills because he rages for order, because he was not parented and cannot fit into the symbolic world.”\(^{181}\) Thus, Baelo-Allué argues father-issues are central to Ellis’s work.\(^{182}\) Ellis’s concern with paternity is also intrinsically linked with his technique of doubling. Significantly, Victor’s double in *Glamorama*, unlike the real Victor, is someone that his father would approve of. The real Victor secretly loves sex with men, and wastes his life in the superficiality of celebrity culture; the double Victor is doing a law degree, is heterosexual,

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and has given up his partying lifestyle. Ellis’s fascination with father issues and the link between these and doubling and homosexuality means paternity is relevant to the present study (though further comment is not possible here).

It must also be said that Ellis’s behaviour seems to be motivated by his “ambitions.” It is as if Ellis has taken Mark Twain’s Trademarking ambitions to heart given his commitment to self-promotion (as Ellis’s frequent and voluntary participation in Twitter makes evident). Indeed, Ellis’s attachment to his own celebrity, evident in his ongoing strategy of creating ambiguity and suspense in both his novels and interviews, is excessive, as the subject matter of both Glamorama and Lunar Park demonstrate (the latter of which, according to Annesley, is about the writer as a commodity, and about Ellis’s status as a “brand-name” author). While Annesley finds Ellis’s fascination with his own brand status in his work to offer “complex insights,” this thesis counters that Ellis merely employs such metafictional devices to create interest in his back list and to sell books. Ellis mystifies (and yes, deceives) his readers about his sexuality employing parodic and metafictional devices to this end and thereby attempts to “exonerate” and “protect” his celebrity status and novels. The present study does not object to commercial literary fiction, but it does object to the gratuitous manipulation of readers for undeclared commercial ends.

Significantly, the fact that Ellis changes the way he writes of sexualised violence in his post-American Psycho novels is most convincing proof of the novel’s misogyny. Thus, analysing American Psycho in terms of Ellis’s oeuvre is illuminating. While Ellis’s other

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185 Glass, “Trademark Twain,” 671.
187 Annesley, “Brand Ellis,” 152. Annesley contradicts the above analysis.
novels are also ambiguous (though less ambiguous than *American Psycho*) and lack a full sense of realist closure (though they also have more of a sense of closure than the flawed *American Psycho*), no subsequent novels contain scenes depicting misogynistic sexualised violence towards women, and no latter novels create scandals.

If scholars are going to continue to analyse *American Psycho* without critiquing the novel’s blatant misogyny, the present study argues that such studies remain open to accusations that they are implicitly supporting patriarchal values. It could be argued that the mass media feminist critique was, given the above reading of the novel, a false debate in certain respects: false because in the absence of Ellis’s disclosure of his sexual preference, commentators could not help but misread the impossibly ambiguous novel. However, this thesis wonders whether Ellis’s disclosure of his homosexuality would have changed anything? On the contrary, while Ellis’s disclosure of his sexuality may have shifted the subject of the debate from heterosexual misogyny to repressed homosexuality and its relationship to misogyny, without Ellis also removing the four problematic scenes the novel would have remained scandalous. The fact remains, Ellis did not honestly disclose information about his sexuality (to do so would have risked the commercial failure of *Rules* again with *American Psycho*), nor did he remove the four problematic scenes. This thesis argues Ellis hid both his character’s and his own sexuality at the time of publication for commercial reasons.

Unlike the work of scholars (who tend only to comment on the novel’s formal properties), the mass media feminist critique focuses discussion of the novel upon its content. Honouring the mass media feminist critique—commentators may have got some things about the novel wrong, but they could not all have been that wrong—the present study has analysed the novel in relation to both its misogynistic content and its postmodern parodic form and
acknowledges that neither a formalist nor mimetic analysis of the novel is on its own complete. The present study combines both kinds of analysis and refocuses discussion of the novel upon modes of its reception and in particular, raises the important question of the reader and her relation to the novel. Further, while mass media feminists employ a realist filter, and scholars employ postmodern and theoretical filters, only a methodology that combines various approaches—including one that focuses on the reader—can address all the aspects of this complex novel in a satisfactory way. In its analysis of the scholarly response to the mass media feminist critique, this study primarily contests the cynical manipulation of feminist discourse for undisclosed political, cultural and commercial gain.

Finally, having discussed the homosexual subplot, the centrality of sexuality at both the level of plot and subplot necessitates further comment on the novel’s heterosexuality. *American Psycho* equates women’s sexuality with misogyny, victimization, pornography and death, and female assertiveness with violent sexual abuse. One commentator describes the novel as giving “substance to a woman’s worst nightmare.”188 This is true in the novel for emancipated assertive female characters like Bethany and Elizabeth, both from Bateman’s own upper middle class, and for women from more modest backgrounds, the numerous uneducated prostitutes he similarly violates.

While Gothic novels historically equate female characters with masochism and victimisation in relation to a sadistic male perpetrator, the broad coverage of the scandal by the mass media suggests broad societal interest in the following issues: is sexual violence towards women bad; is victimised sexuality essentially female; is female sexuality intrinsically linked with violence?189 Further, the mass media feminist critique of *American

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188 Downey, “Every Woman’s Nightmare,” G1.
Psycho testifies to the visibility of the discourse of feminism in America in the 1980s and 1990s. Whether a result of the backlash or of the popularity of postfeminism, few recent and no current studies of American Psycho focus on the topic of female sexuality and its relation to misogynistic violence and feminist discourse. By placing the mass media feminist critique at the centre of its study of the novel’s formalist and mimetic properties, this thesis has begun to redress the imbalance in scholarly literary criticism (which focuses almost exclusively on aesthetic issues) and to reintegrate actual women into the feminist discourse surrounding the publication scandal. While it has not been possible to arrive at a balanced analysis of the novel, its flaws mean the four problematic scenes ultimately dominate the novel as a whole and tip the balance over, it has been possible to propose a solution to riddle at the heart of the novel’s excessive ambiguity, and to place its problematic content back at the centre of literary debate. The daily lives of real women do matter, contrary to the theoretical excesses of some postmodern analysis. As one feminist scholar argues, “historical narratives” cannot be dismissed as “pure fictions”:

Historical narratives are constrained by the historical facts, even if there is literary license in the precise weaving of the facts. While they may be described in many ways, certain states of affairs did or did not obtain. Either Kennedy died or he did not.

Just as the Intentional Phallacy has been taken to an extreme, theoretical deconstructions of the subject tend also to be extreme. The lives of actual authors and actual

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190 Justine Ettler, “Intervening in a Male-Dominated Field: The River Ophelia, the Brat Pack and Social Realism,” Hecate, 21, no. 2 (1995): 61. Ettler writes here that her novel The River Ophelia (1995) was intended as an intervention into the misogynistic elements of Ellis’s novel and was partly inspired by the question: who are the female victims in American Psycho, and how does it feel to be such a victim?

women constitute historical narratives consisting of facts, though as historical narratives they remain ever open to contestation and interpretation.
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