Fear, Trauma and Paranoia in Bret Easton Ellis's Oeuvre

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Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter

By

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INTRODUCTION

Bret Easton Ellis (b. 1964, Los Angeles) is one of the most famous and controversial contemporary American novelists. Since the appearance of his *opus primum*, *Less than Zero* (1985), critics and readers have been fascinated by the author's style and topics, which were extremely appealing to the *MTV* generation that acknowledged him as their cultural guru. As a result, an early review of the novel declared, "American literature has never been so sexy."

At the same time as *Less than Zero* achieved immediate and tremendous success, some other young American writers were also publishing their first novels (such as Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz). The members of this heterogeneous group of writers (led by Ellis himself) were all fresh and attractive. Thus, they soon enjoyed cult status with their cold, fast, and uncompromising descriptions of the American *zeitgeist* of the late 1980s and early 90s. As a result, newspapers, magazines, and critics coined the term "literary brat pack" to pigeonhole their novels.

After the success of his first book, Ellis published a satirical novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), that became a bestseller and mesmerized several critics at the same time as it outraged many other readers and commentators.

By 1991 Ellis was already a prestigious writer and the publishing industry was anxious to receive his next novel, *American Psycho*. Ellis' two previous novels had already shown his uncompromising attitude and how powerful, graphic, and shocking many of the passages in his novels could be. Nevertheless, *American Psycho* shocked American critics and public opinion in a brutal manner with its glacial, cinematic, and painful depiction of Wall Street yuppie and serial killer Patrick Bateman. Many critics, scholars, and philosophers acclaimed the novel as a masterpiece, likening it to Dostoyevsky. Consequently, they didn't hesitate to declare Ellis the new Jonathan Swift.

Nonetheless, adverse reviews were equally immediate and fierce. The negative reactions to the novel included public burnings of the text, together with some countries banning (or seriously restricting) the distribution of *American Psycho*.

After the publication of *American Psycho* and the shock it produced, Ellis published a collection of short stories (*The Informers*, 1994) and

three more novels (*Glamorama*, 1998, *Lunar Park*, 2005, and *Imperial Bedrooms*, 2010).

If *American Psycho* was a harsh, uncompromising, satirical depiction of the 1990s in America in the tradition of John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, *Glamorama* shares the satirical, in essence Juvenalian, elements of the previous novel, and must be read as a glossy thriller in the Hitchcock or De Palma tradition.

Lunar Park, on the contrary, is Ellis' own (and highly idiosyncratic) contribution to the horror genre, since it welcomes its readers into a very dark and supernatural fictional universe in which there is a haunted house inhabited by several spirits and a demonic toy. Also in this rich and complex metanarrative horror tale, Patrick Bateman re-appears.

Ellis' last novel to date, *Imperial Bedrooms*, must be defined as his first incursion into another very popular genre, neo-noir.

As this short and simplistic summary of the author's corpus shows, the richness, complexity, and commercial success of Ellis' literary production to the present day deserve detailed critical attention. While some studies have been published (including my own *American Provocateur: la Literatura de Bret Easton Ellis* [2008], along with Sonia Baelo-Allues' *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* [2013] and Naomi Mandel's *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park* [2011]), I'm convinced that some key aspects of his corpus require further investigation.

In this book I will analyse Ellis' novels and collection of short stories, focusing mainly on the role fear, trauma, and paranoia play in these texts. These aspects are fundamental to not only Ellis' literature but also contemporary American literature as a whole (for instance, Don Delillo's, John Barth's, and Thomas Pynchon's novels, just to name some quintessential examples within postmodern American letters, cannot be understood or defined but as fear and paranoia-ridden), and, much more important, American culture and society.

Since the Mayflower arrived in the New World, millennial expectations and hopes of a second garden of Eden were mixed with fears of all sorts: hostile nature, the unknown, the strange local inhabitants, and even supernatural threats (from the mysterious lost colony of Roanoke to the historical and hysterical Salem witch hunting and its aftermath). Modernity, far from dissipating fear, increased it, along with the horror and shock produced by a cruel, long, and fragmenting civil war. Later on, the twentieth century brought with it two horrendous world wars, the disaster of Vietnam, a second witch hunt (in this case, the enemy was hidden communism, always ready to corrupt and disintegrate American

society from within), while the twenty-first century opened with the 9/11 terrorist attacks that proved in the most surprising, cruel, and traumatizing way that the United States was far from enjoying the immunity and eternal safety its privileged economic and military status had granted the supposedly almighty country in the past (or, at least, in a naïve and dangerous way, it was thought to have been granted).

But, before analysing the fundamental role fear, trauma, and paranoia play in Ellis' corpus, it is necessary to examine some preliminary questions. Thus, the first part of the book is divided into two different chapters.

Chapter one aims to look at Ellis' corpus in the context of postmodern philosophy. In order to do so, I compare the author's canon with the philosophical theories of French thinker and postmodern guru Jean Baudrillard, focusing mostly on *Amérique* (1986). In this complex, fascinating, and controversial text Baudrillard visits America, both physically and metaphorically, in order to get a better understanding of a country that fascinates and frightens Europeans. His conclusion is equally exciting and terrifying, since according to Baudrillard America has been doomed since its very genesis. As I will explain in further detail in chapter one, the idea that America has gone from utopia to dystopia as a consequence of its development as a self-fulfilled prophetic utopia is central to Ellis' whole corpus.

In chapter two, I will present two conflicting literary categories in which Ellis has been included in the studies published so far: Generation X and the so-called literary Brat Pack. As I will show, Ellis can be considered as the true founder of both literary sub-genres, but he is, above all, a postmodern writer whose novels feel more comfortable, meaningful, and coherent in the company of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Don Delillo, or Thomas Pynchon than in the presence of Douglas Coupland, Jay McInerney, or Tama Janowitz.

After part one, which is preliminary but indispensable, part two analyses fear, trauma, and paranoia in Ellis' corpus. In order to achieve this goal, each of the author's books (independently of whether they are novels or collections of short stories, and without paying attention to their popularity or critical status) will be studied in an independent chapter. As a result, chapter three deals with Ellis' *opus primum*, *Less than Zero*, chapter four analyses *The Rules of Attraction*, chapter five studies *American Psycho*, and chapters six to nine centre on *The Informers*, *Glamorama*, *Lunar Park*, and *Imperial Rooms*, respectively.

The reason for the structure of this second part, following the chronological order in which the different books were composed rather

than their original date of publication, is due to my conviction that Ellis' narrative encompasses a complete and coherent whole that is evolving as the author matures. For this reason, I consider it essential to follow this particular order (which was not employed in previous books about Ellis).

Taking into account that the author is only fifty-three years old, it is almost certain that his narrative corpus will be (hopefully, significantly) increased in years to come. Consequently, I am well aware of the provisional nature of many of the conclusions contained here. Nonetheless, taking into account that his last novel, *Imperial Bedrooms*, is a sequel to his first text, *Less than Zero*, and that the latest text is signed by Ellis and dated 1985–2005, I cannot help but believe that now is the perfect moment to tackle his corpus. In any case, quoting the closing line of his most successful novel, *American Psycho*: THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

ELLIS AND BAUDRILLARD

Jean Baudrillard, one of the most prominent of the eclectic postmodern philosophers, published *Amérique* in 1986. This exciting book defies conventions and, as a result, is extremely difficult to include within any specific category, since it can be read as philosophical essay and travel book simultaneously. Consequently, *Amérique* is a sort of intellectual road movie in which the French thinker employs seductive and highly poetic language to deal with one of his obsessions: the role of America as a political and military giant, and a metaphor of the new millennium.

Baudrillard's *Amérique* is without doubt a controversial work and, as several scholars have pointed out, the author's enthusiasm leads him to embrace on various occasions an attitude that could easily be defined as dogmatic. It must also be noted that the philosopher's disenchanted post-Marxist beliefs and convictions permeate the whole book, depriving it of a critical distance from which it would probably have benefitted. Nonetheless, I am firmly convinced that these flaws are simultaneously its greatest virtues.

Paradoxical as this statement might be, this inherent contradiction is perfectly coherent in the corpus and ideology of a philosopher who has always defended the uselessness of traditional binary oppositions and, at the same time, devoted some of his sharpest and most acute essays to convincing the reader that fiction might not only be more factual than reality itself, but also a permanent and seminal historical and political engine.

In other words, I am well aware of the existence of other sources that explain and define the *zeitgeist* portrayed in Bret Easton Ellis' America better, or at least in a more aseptic manner, than Baudrillard. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that neither Ellis nor Baudrillard intended to be aseptic or realistic (if we are to accept the conventional definition of the latter term, which is questioned not only by Baudrillard but also by some of the most eminent thinkers of the period, such as Jacques Derrida, Jean François Lyotard, and Michael Foucault). In fact, I do see a clear parallel between the philosophical approach to America contained in Baudrillard's long

essay and the fictional counterpart that Ellis offers us throughout his literary corpus.

From the very beginning of his philosophical and physical journey, which marks the beginning of an intellectual, political, and spiritual quest, Baudrillard affirms that the real reason behind his adventure is not to find the sociocultural or political structures of the American giant, but rather the hope of encountering what he calls "astral America": "I went in search of astral America, not social and cultural America …" (1986, 5). Baudrillard considers that the "astral America" can only be found in the geographical and spiritual void, in the royal deserts where *horror vacui* disappears and the final destination is disappearance. As a result, Baudrillard's desert is simultaneously literal and metaphorical, since the heat of America has been able to melt the two sides of Sapir's coin in a heterogeneous but perfectly coherent manner:

> For the mental desert form expands before your very eyes, and this is the purified form of social desertification. Disaffection finds its pure form in the barrenness of speed. All that is cold and dead in desertification or social enucleation rediscovers its contemplative form here in the heat of the desert. Here in the transversatility of the desert and the irony of geology, the transpolitical finds its generic, mental space. The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance. (1986, 5)

This absolute disappearance of the individual, who ends up being part of the immensity of the desert, becomes the main engine for most of Ellis' characters, as well as with many of the protagonists of the most representative novelists of the period like Douglas Coupland, Jay McInerney, or Chuck Palahniuk.

Baudrillard's affirmation, shared by a multitude of artists and cultural creators of the period, might be shocking, especially if we contrast it with the economic and political panorama of the moment: exactly why would America be heading towards a voluntary and inevitable disappearance in the 1980s when it was experiencing a time of absolute global hegemony, from both political and economic perspectives? We must remember that when Baudrillard wrote *Amérique* the Cold War was virtually finished (or had become one of the philosopher's *simulacra*) and the horrors of Islamic terrorism were still too far in the future to even be suggested.

If the Cold War was, at that moment, merely a gigantic and theatrical excuse to justify weapons spending, even though Americans no longer feared a threatening USSR, if the wounds of the harrowing Vietnam conflict

were starting to heal (at least superficially), and no other external nemesis fuelled Americans' paranoia, what exactly did Baudrillard see in America that led him to affirm that the angst of the country echoed, "the gentle hell of the Roman Empire in its decline?" (17). Why did the French thinker understand the New York marathon as a way of "demonstrative suicide, suicide as advertising" (21)? Why, from his point of view, were joggers, "the true Latter Day Saints and the protagonists of an easy-does-it Apocalypse" (38)?

In short, according to Baudrillard, "this country is without hope" (121); yet when he drives through the American territory, the country's external situation couldn't be safer. Could it be that the internal situation of the country is what induced such an apocalyptic conviction in Baudrillard? If we studied the economic status of America during this period, we would find a country that had forgotten the economic crises of the past and done its best to convince its citizens, and the rest of the world, that America was enjoying a revival of the "happy 20s," with the rise of Armani-dressed yuppies and Wall Street as an almighty ivory tower.

In that case, could Baudrillard have been thinking about America's political situation? The chances are that this is not a valid answer, since JFK's assassination was no longer a daily trauma, and neither was the Watergate scandal. Reagan's presidency, conservative as it might look, brought America a much-needed tranquillity, while the initiatives of mayors, such as Ed Koch in New York, had been able to eradicate gang wars and other meaningful threats in the streets.

All in all, the 1980s for America was a period in which absolutely nothing seemed to foreshadow the apocalyptic future Baudrillard and Ellis saw for the country.

According to Baudrillard—and from my point of view Ellis shares these ideas completely—American society is heading towards disappearance as a result of its own foundational myths: "Utopia has been achieved here and anti-utopia is being achieved: the anti-utopia of unreason, of deterritorialization, of the indeterminacy of language and the subject, of the neutralization of all values, of the death of culture" (97).

The idea that the United States was the result of a utopian schema started in Europe long before the American continent had in fact been discovered by white men in 1492 is not new at all. Malcom Bradbury and Richard Ruland formulated this very idea in 1991: "millenarian and utopian expectations were already attached to this new land" (1991, 5). On the other hand, the fatalistic vision that Baudrillard links with the utopian creation of the country is not new either; as Samuel Coale points out, "the apocalyptic tradition is as old as human language, and its Americanization through

Calvinist doctrine and others occurred within the very fabric of the founding of the United States" (2004, 20).

Nonetheless, the reasons why Baudrillard considers America's identity as both utopian and dystopian differ radically from those of previous historians and philosophers. The most general interpretation of this paradoxical nature is generally presented in terms of Hegelian binary opposites: in order to fulfil its utopian plan of becoming the dominant country on Earth, America would need an equally formidable nemesis.

For Baudrillard, on the contrary, the apocalyptic seed inbred in the very fabric of America's creation, development, and ultimate disappearance is not a result of a clash of binary opposites, but rather the consequence of the self-fulfilled nature of America's utopia. Baudrillard considers that the United States had already achieved its full potential by the time he visited the country. Consequently, if the main engine behind the country's evolution is the will to fulfil its projected utopia, once it has been achieved there is no further motivation to keep evolving. Using a metaphor from pop fiction that seems particularly adequate for Baudrillard's philosophy, America is like one of those messages in spy films that, once deciphered, self-destruct.

The French philosopher resumes this idea in the following rhetorical question: "What do you do when everything is available—sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death?" (1986, 30). This is exactly the same question Ellis presents to the protagonists of his novels. What can they hope to achieve, get, or buy when they were born in such a rich and privileged background that all effort has become unnecessary, redundant, and ultimately ludicrous? In fact, they cannot aspire to anything other than what became the title for Ellis' *opus primum*: *Less than Zero*. As a consequence of this postmodern paradox, those individuals who enjoy absolute economic wealth feel the anxieties of deprivation since they can no longer aspire to anything genuinely valuable. The same applies to beauty: countless hours in the gym, tanning sessions, and the most exquisitely designed pieces of clothing and jewellery do not make them shine at all among the circles they inhabit, which are populated by equally rich and beautiful young people. Therefore, the economic elite of 1980s America that populate Ellis' novels live in a constant void and perceive themselves as lacking any individual identity. What can you wish for when everything is available to you?

The characters in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* decide to drive to the desert to simply wait for extinction; those in Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted* disguise themselves as beggars in order to distance themselves from their fellow rich acquaintances; Ellis' characters often decide to build their own identities by possessing the only thing money cannot (and should not) buy:

control of other people's lives and bodies. Thus, "snuff" movies and humiliating acts of sexual aggression are frequent *leitmotifs* throughout the literary corpus of the author, and are precisely the reason why Patrick Bateman (the protagonist of *American Psycho*, the author's most controversial, complex, and successful novel) becomes a mass murderer and serial rapist. Bateman commits the most atrocious crimes because he is firmly convinced that behaving in such a monstrous way is the only possible alternative to the constant alienation he suffers as a result of his material richness and the wealth of those with whom he interacts on a daily basis. Nonetheless, an eternal paradox that accompanies postmodern characters soon becomes evident, preventing Bateman from any satisfaction or individuality: since his actions are so abject, immoral, and illegal he must keep them secret. And if he cannot make his colleagues know what makes him so special, so different from them, then he cannot help but feel that his role among them remains anodyne. He is rich, just as they are. He is beautiful, like the rest of them. He is a sociopath who does what many would not even dream of doing. But since he cannot make these individual actions public, he feels that he is not perceived as different, unique, or individual at all. And we cannot forget that Bateman does not really aspire to be unique, only to be perceived as such.

Returning to Baudrillard, in a game of Derridean etymologies the philosopher explains that America cannot halt the process that is leading it to both the consummation and consumption of its utopian roots. For Baudrillard, America's message has already been delivered (the nature of the message remains unclear, since in postmodern philosophy concepts such as truth or falsity become obscure due to the extreme instability of the language by the means of which these concepts are not only transmitted but also conceptualized), and once the message is delivered the messenger becomes useless. Therefore, America now faces an agonizing countdown towards a final ceremony of spontaneous combustion that will be more than mere simulacrum: "America is neither dream nor reality" (1986, 28).

Ellis, whose novels are permeated by a constant feeling of anxiety, fear, and undefined threat, also transmits Baudrillard's conception of America as apocalyptic. As a quintessential example, I would like to quote the opening from *Less than Zero*:

> People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles. This is the first thing I hear when I come back to the city … Though that sentence shouldn't bother me, it stays in my mind for un uncomfortably long time. Nothing else seems to matter. (1985, 9)

It is extremely symptomatic that the very first sentence Ellis includes in his first novel includes the word "afraid," together with the affirmation that "nothing else seems to matter." As a matter of fact, fear becomes the key to accessing the whole of Ellis' corpus, since his characters live their paranoiac lives through a constant state of anguish and panic from which they cannot escape except by consuming high dosages of drugs (both legal and illegal), or by becoming the agents of agony and fear themselves.

This fear is, in the majority of occasions, existential: the intimate fear that is produced by feelings of loneliness, isolation, and the absolute inability to interact with other people in a significant manner. At other times, this fear is related to their professional careers. These privileged characters are afraid of losing their status and prestige, their Armanis and Ferraris. Or, even worse, they're afraid to retain the material richness but of losing their *raison d'être*. In a puritanical society that values work and effort among other social virtues, many of these yuppies hold positions that offer them an exorbitant salary but very few real obligations to the company (being the son of the CEO of the company and visiting the luxurious offices are usually more than enough for them to keep their job and get periodic raises of both salary and prestige within the company). But the fear Ellis' characters (and readers) experience can also be physical, and ranges from "snuff" movies to terrorist attacks, or even diabolical doppelgangers.

As well as considering that American society is doomed, Ellis shares Baudrillard's concept of America as a self-fulfilled utopia that has turned into a demented suicidal dystopia. Ellis' characters are therefore (pre)destined to fail, but not because they lack the ability to fulfil their objectives or expectations. Quite to the contrary, the inexistence of objectives and expectations prevents them from success. They have been given everything beforehand, and therefore concepts such as money, beauty, prestige, and success lack authentic meaning. They have never felt the necessity to work hard, to make any major effort in order to become fundamental parts of the American economic and social elite. But nevertheless, they are well aware of the absolute dependence their country has on them. As *American Psycho* accurately expresses in its opening chapter: "'I'm resourceful,' Price is saying. 'I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence, what I'm saying is that society can*not* afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*'" (3).

Neither does the sexual sphere offer them any source of the authentic. As a result of their social status, they are raised in a climate of absolute amorality in which promiscuity is absolute. Therefore, sex is guaranteed to a group of rich, handsome men, either via automatic (and immediate) seduction or via monetary payment.

As we see, Ellis' characters are like the joggers in Baudrillard's metaphor: they keep moving without any fixed destination and their only and ultimate goal is extenuation. Once they have reached this terrible point, only two options remain viable. The first corresponds to the example proposed by Baudrillard: becoming "zombie joggers" that assume their own vacuity and, as a result, devote their money and time to letting themselves die, excess by excess, drink after drink, line of cocaine after line of cocaine, and Prozac after Prozac. The outcome of this behaviour is easily predictable: sooner or later, their heart (or any other organ) will stop working, transporting them to an eternal vacuum that won't be so different from the emptiness they experienced while running towards the finish line.

Dark and sombre as this first option may appear, the second is even worse. Another set of Ellis' characters judge that patient suicide is not the best way and instead opt for a running journey that involves making other people suffer. These characters know that they are exempted from any moral and social responsibilities (they lack morals and are well aware that money and the right contacts can buy almost anything in the American judicial system) and decide to fill their own emptiness with the tears and blood of innocent people. In their circle, a Platinum Visa, a Porsche, or tanned skin aren't admired or envied. Therefore, they long for what their companions do not have: the possibility to gang rape a child, the ability and means to watch a nauseating "snuff" movie, the possibility to torture, mutilate, and kill fellow human beings, not to mention the tremendous moral and psychological damage they can inflict on those who do not possess their status or money.

Obviously, the route of mayhem is not a viable escape either. *American Psycho* ends with the following terrible inscription, written in ominous capital letters: "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (561). As it becomes evident in this novel, characters like Patrick Bateman are victims of their own moral depravity, who inflict torments at the same time as they receive them, in a way that echoes Charles Baudelaire's poem "L'Héautontimorouménos."

As I have proven in this chapter, Baudrillard's *Amérique* helps us to more comprehensively understand the angst and *zeitgeist* of the America in which Ellis wrote the best novels within his extraordinary corpus. These concern a generation that Ellis feels compelled to criticize, employing the most caustic of ironies, becoming a contemporary Aristophanes or Jonathan Swift. We cannot forget that Ellis is never a sadistic or pornographic author who feels pleasure in showing horrendous acts of depravity and denigration. Quite the contrary—as with the Marquis de Sade, Ellis is a deeply moral author who considers it his duty as a writer to show his readers their own reflections in a horrible, convex mirror.

Surprisingly enough for a post-Marxist philosopher like Baudrillard, the ideas expressed in *Amérique* are not so easily applicable if we separate ourselves from the high-class characters that populate Ellis' narrative. In this essay, the French thinker seems to forget about the American middle class (those known as "blue collar" workers), not to mention the lower class or some of the marginal communities that can be found in America that range from "rednecks" and "white trash" ghettos to Chicano or aboriginal communities. As a result, it would be a complex and not especially productive task to analyse work such as John Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939) or Charles Bukowski's *Post Office* (1971) (writers who centre their attention on the less-wealthy members of the multicultural and eclectic American melting pot) and apply this author's ideas. On the contrary, as Ben Agger points out, becoming familiar with Baudrillard's *Amérique* will significantly help us in deciphering the literary corpus of Ellis:

> The disenchanted postmodernism of the French theorists facilitates the degeneration of postmodern theory into a commodity and cultural postmodernism, even if these are not identical movements. Bret Easton Ellis writes novels, not theory. But he is made possible by the antipolitical stance of the theoretical postmoderns, who have legitimized antipolitics in their posture toward Marxism as the prototypical grand narrative of the day. (1993, 36)

CHAPTER TWO

GENERATION X OR BRAT PACK?

Generation X

Since the appearance of his first novel *Less than Zero* (1985), which was published when the author was only 21 years old, Bret Easton Ellis has become an indispensable figure within contemporary American literature. The author's cold, naked prose, which is almost telegraphic at times, has inspired countless (not always positive) reactions among critics and readers. The first reviews of *Less than Zero* immediately proclaimed that Ellis was the most talented and exciting writer within the young generation of American novelists that tried to capture the *zeitgeist* of the 1980s. But highly negative reactions didn't take long to emerge, either. Those critics who didn't accept Ellis as a genuine master of irony defined him as a mere *provocateur* that employed shocking language and images in order to gain favour from readers too used to "glossy" literature to appreciate more delicate pieces of writing.

Ellis' advocates, on the contrary, defended the idea that the young and talented *enfant terrible* of American literature was destined to become a modern-day Jonathan Swift. They didn't hesitate to affirm that the characters from *Less than Zero* better defined the angst of an apathetic and nihilistic generation—which didn't identify with the mainstream establishment and yet didn't feel sufficiently strong (or motivated enough) to take any action against it—than any other literary creation. In this sense, we must consider Ellis as the genuine father of a literary generation that has since produced equally rich and controversial works; a generation that is defined by its eclecticism, diverse influences, and reluctance to be pigeonholed within any particular critical category. In other words, as the father of the literary "Generation X."

The term Generation X, which was first applied to the field of sociology (Morton 2003), includes Americans who were born between 1965 and 1978, immediately after the Baby Boom generation. After Generation X we find the so-called Generation Y. Within literary studies the term became popular after the publication of the novel Generation X

by Canadian writer Douglas Coupland. Owing to the novel's success, many critics defined Coupland as the father of the literary Generation X. Nonetheless, I consider this fact erroneous, since Coupland's novel appeared in 1991, a date by which a majority of the novelists usually included within this category had already published their first (and, in some cases, best) works. What is more, authors like Jay McInerney or Tama Janowitz had not only published novels that can be considered as representative of Generation X, but also started experimenting with other narrative strategies and techniques. Consequently, I consider that it was Ellis who started Generation X with *Less than Zero*, and Douglas Coupland who finished it.

In any case, it becomes evident that it is almost impossible to define the literary Generation X or give a list of authors who are part of it. Thus, Pula M. Poindexter explains that the tag "Generation X" has been used to include a set of authors that had very few elements in common and that could, in fact, appear to be clearly incompatible from both stylistic and thematic perspectives.

Nonetheless, I defend that the category is, as Poindexter thought, obviously artificial, although there are some key elements that allow us to study the majority of writers that were catalogued as members of Generation X in unison. The first, and probably most obvious, connection between Ellis, McInerney, and Janowitz is the existential apathy that haunts the vast majority of their characters who, in all cases, are young, high-class, ambitious people who feel disenchanted, void, and absolutely deprived of any meaningful connection with their relatives or colleagues (I do not dare use the word "friends" in this specific context). Characters from the Generation X novels do not identify themselves with the system at all, but neither is their attitude defined by revelry (as was the case with the beats or punks), but rather by indifference. As a seminal and quintessential example, Ellis' characters in *Less than Zero* are a set of young rich people who no longer hold the more conservative ideals of their parents nor dream of an ideal future of harmony and solidarity. They understand that their society is utterly sick, but they take no action to change it. Instead, they prefer to embrace an absolute existential lethargy, like the Latter Day Saints joggers in Baudrillard's *Amérique*.

As a result, these characters refuse to become active members of the society that surrounds and nurtures them, yet at the same time they also neglect the possibility of building (or even conceptualizing) any alternative system of social organization that might eventually be healthier or fairer. Thus, it would be a mistake to consider them as examples of any sort of counter-cultural movement. They are simply acultural and,

therefore, concepts such as citizenship, social justice, or solidarity are incomprehensible to them. This exact thing occurs with Coupland's characters in *Generation X*, who decide to abandon their hated jobs—not in search of better goals (and not even as a sign of social demonstration), but rather to (literally) escape to the desert. Once they have deserted society, they devote themselves to a permanent drowsiness that is not pleasant but coma-like. That way, they become hermits in an infinite universe of sand and nothingness. As Baudrillard points out in *Amérique*, for them, the desert becomes both metaphorical and literal.

As we see, thematically, on almost all occasions, Generation X deals with young and utterly apathetic characters. From an aesthetic point of view, this literary movement is characterized by a fast rhythm that not only produces a feeling of speed but also of absolute loss of control. This poignant rhythm, which vividly reminds us of the new journalism and gonzo movements, is perfectly coherent with the mass media in America during the 1980s. During this time, the American MTV channel started its successful trajectory at the very same time that Ellis published his first novel. The influence of MTV on Ellis, Janowitz, McInerney, and many other writers of the group is so evident that they have frequently been referred to as "the MTV generation."

The last element that gives internal cohesion to the literary Generation X is the brutal satire that emanates from all the novels in this category. The writers' approach to satire is definitively more Juvenalian than Horatian, and in some cases it even approaches a Menippean attitude.

It is also important to take into account that, from Ellis' seminal *Less than Zero* to Coupland's crepuscular *Generation X*, the so-called literary Generation X evolved in some meaningful ways. First of all, Coupland's text demonstrates a style that is still fast and agile, but at the same time manifestly elegant and self-contained. On the other hand, the style in Ellis' first novel is openly frantic, but (maybe as a result of the speedy rhythm) is not as well balanced or planned as Coupland's. From my point of view, this fact demonstrates that Ellis started the movement while Coupland took it to its latest (and most polished) evolution.

An even more important difference between Ellis' and Coupland's novels is related to the level of graphic violence and explicit brutality both authors incorporate. From the very beginning, Ellis' texts portray scenes in which gallons of blood and other bodily fluids literally flood the page in an extremely crude, graphic, and realistic manner. As a result of this brutal approach, the publishing house that had originally signed a contract for *American Psycho* decided not to publish the text Ellis finally handed over, even at the coast of a significant advance of one million dollars. What is

more, when the novel appeared through Picador Books, not only the author but also the company's executives received countless angry letters and even death threats. Consequently, Ellis became the protagonist of an everlasting controversy, which has only increased with the publication of subsequent novels. If Ellis does not hesitate to inundate his stories with scenes of physical and psychological torture, mayhem, and murder, he is also not shy when portraying sex in extremely graphic, direct, and explicit manners (Ellis' catalogue of sexual practices includes heterosexual, gay, and bisexual sex together with many sexual deviations). Coupland, on the contrary, has never been inclined towards radical scenes of violence or sex.

Another difference between Ellis (and the first bunch of Generation X writers such as McInerney) and the later and more mature Coupland is related to their catalogue of characters. Ellis' focus never diverges from the highest sections of American society. As a result, his satirical eye deconstructs and destroys the hippie myth with a baroque, over-the-top, and Menippean set of young men who exhibit their *bon vivant* attitude at parties and other social gatherings, where they can wear their obscenely expensive clothes and equally elitist manners. Coupland, on the other hand, prefers to populate his texts with members of the middle class that are exhausted and bored to death by their tedious jobs and homogeneous IKEA-furnished houses.

A final and very important difference between Ellis and Coupland emanates from technology. While the hippies in Ellis' books do not show any natural tendency or ability towards technology, Coupland's are experts in this field. In Ellis' corpus, technology is only important insofar as it is expensive and becomes a sign of exclusivity and social status. As a prominent example, his characters exhibit their mobile phones all the time, but hardly ever use them with any other intention than contacting their drug dealers. At the opposite extreme, Coupland's characters are frequently engineers or software designers that devote their time, talent, and (meagre) ambition to solving technical riddles (quite frequently both useless and unrelated to their professional obligations).

By inhabiting his texts with "techies" or "nerds," Coupland is able to portray, analyse, and criticize the hyper-technological American society of the 1980s and 90s. According to Coupland's neo-luddite attitude (which is in fact related to the cyberpunk movement of authors like Philip K. Dick), the technological advances of the last decades of the twentieth century have not contributed to a constantly connected and globally solidary society, but rather a generation of disenfranchised young men and women that do not interact with other people if the act of communication is not

mediated by a technological layer of any sort (in this sense, Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum becomes fundamental again).

The Brat Pack

As I have shown in the previous section, Ellis' membership of the literary Generation X can be quite problematic. As a result, some critics have preferred to place the author within a different category. This new category is much easier to define and fits Ellis' work better than Generation X, basically because it was created *ex professo* and with Ellis at the very centre of the new group of writers. I am obviously referring to the "Brat Pack," a critical tag that didn't originate in academic circles but rather in the mass media, and became mainstream in "pop" magazines such as Playboy.

In 1984, a very young and completely unknown writer published a sensational novel that achieved immediate critical attention. At the same time, it became an instantaneous bestseller. I am referring to Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. McInerney, who'd had the opportunity of working with and learning from Raymond Carver at *The New Yorker*, shocked the very foundations of American literature with his witty, ironic, and utterly nihilistic portrayal of New York society. Only one year later, Bret Easton Ellis (who was equally young and unknown to both readers and critics) transformed one of his creative writing class assignments into the sensational novel *Less than Zero*. As I have explained above, this novel became a cult classic from day one, and from that moment on Ellis was able to maintain the attention and favour of a legion of followers that turn all his novels into bestsellers.

Once *Bright Lights, Big City* and *Less than Zero* had achieved tremendous success (especially among the young readers that gave these novels the same level of attention and cult status that *The Catcher on the Rye* had received years earlier) and became ubiquitous in glossy magazines and TV shows, a third young writer joined the group. She was the first and only woman of the group, Tama Janowitz, who published a collection of short stories, *Slaves of New York* (1986). The stories contained in Janowitz's book offer a dark, gritty, and apocalyptic vision of New York that was extremely coherent with both McInerney's and Ellis' counterparts. As we see, the founding members of this Brat Pack were young, iconoclastic, and pessimistic. Often, some other writers who also exhibited these features joined the group, like Mark Lindquist with *Sad Movies* (1987) and Susan Minot with *Monkeys* (1986).

As well as sharing many aesthetic and stylistic points (speedy rhythm, a tendency towards Menippean satire and excessive scenes, etc.), Ellis, McInerney, and Janowitz also had something in common that greatly contributed to extending their popularity and success but had little (or nothing) to do with their literary works: they all considered themselves pop stars and therefore demanded to be treated as such. Consequently, it was not unusual to find them on the cover of magazines such as *GQ*, wearing extremely expensive and fashionable clothes, drinking Scotch, and smoking.

The term Brat Pack was, after all, a mere echo of the Rat Pack, "directed" by Sinatra himself, and including Peter Lawford, Sammy Davis Jr., and Dean Martin. It might be surprising that the term "rat pack," which referred to a group of actors that reached their moment of maximum popularity during the 1950s and 60s, was still known and attractive to the readers that enjoyed Ellis' novels. Nonetheless, this fact is not so surprising if we consider that David Blum, a very popular critic from *The New Yorker*, in 1985 applied the term "Brat Pack" to a bunch of actors who were extremely popular at the time like Emilio Estevez, Anthony Michael Hall, Andrew McCarthy, Judd Nelson, Demi Moore, Rob Lowe, and John Cusack, among others.

In *Lunar Park* (2005), Ellis himself describes how the term brat pack was coined:

> I became a founding member of something called the Literary Brat Pack. The Brat Pack was essentially a media-made package: all fake flash and punk and menace. It consisted of a small, trendy group of successful writers and editors, all under thirty, who simply hung out together at night, either at Nell's or Tunnel or MK or Au Bar, and New York as well as the national and international press became entranced … and we were in hyperdirve. Every door swung wide open. Everyone approached us with outstretched hands and flashing smiles. We did layouts in fashion magazines, the six of us lounging on couches in hip restaurants, wearing Armani suits and in suggestive poses. (9)

As is evident, Ellis considered the category as artificial and as a mere marketing strategy. Ellis continues to reflect on the genesis of the Brat Pack in the following terms:

> It was the beginning of a time when it was almost as if the novel itself didn't matter anymore—publishing a shiny book-like object was simply an excuse for parties and glamour and good-looking authors reading finely honed minimalism to students who would listen rapt with slack-jawed admiration, thinking, I could do that, I could be them. But of course, if you

> weren't photogenic enough, the sad truth was you couldn't. And if you were not a supporter of the Brat Pack, you simply had to accept us anyway. We were everywhere. There was no escaping our visages staring out at you from the pages of magazines and TV talk shows and Scotch ads and posters on the sides of buses, in the tabloid gossip columns, our blank expressions caught in the dead glare of the camera flash, a hand holding the cigarette a fan was lighting. We had invaded the world. And I was on display. Everything I did was written about. The paparazzi followed me constantly. (9)

As we see, Ellis is well aware of the commercial dimension of his success and his status as a high-profile celebrity; at the same time, he feels that the very factors that contributed to the rise of the literary Brat Pack could affect the literary quality of their next publications in an extremely negative way. What is more, Ellis seems to know that the Brat Pack's reality as a marketing product had condemned them from the very beginning with an expiration date that was, in fact, coming soon. Warhol had predicted that, "in the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes," and Ellis was very clear about that, in relation to both the future of American literature and the short span of his own celebrity.

In order to say when the Brat Pack ceased being considered as a group, or behaving as such, we must first consider to what extent the different members of this group felt they belonged to it. In this sense, it is evident that Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis were at countless social gatherings and even posed together for the cover of magazines. As a matter of fact, during the mid-1980s Ellis and McInerney appeared together so frequently that the media named them "the toxic twins." Nonetheless, the rest of the writers usually included within Generation X who were not close friends did not appear together frequently, or felt that their relation to Ellis or McInerney was simply coincidental (if it existed at all). In this sense, Janowitz (who enjoyed their company on a frequent basis) affirms the following:

> You know, I never knew those guys really until *Slaves* came out and *Slaves* was reaching a big audience and their books [Ellis's *Less than Zero* and McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*] were reaching a big audience, and so we were all lumped together, and I'd see them at parties. For a while we all had the same agent.
> (http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0899/janowitz/interview.html)

If Janowitz affirms that she was never a real member of Generation X, McInerney states that his connection with Ellis had been quite bad for his literary career, to the point that the tremendous success of Ellis' *American*

Psycho shadowed his own works and even his personal figure. In the following quotation, McInerney expresses his boredom with the whole Ellis-relation and Generation X in the following terms:

> I met my girlfriend Anne out here, which makes the whole thing more bearable, and last night I went to read at a place called Dutton's. My friend Bret Ellis had preceded me there, where he was promptly mistaken for me by the bookstore owner. That seems to be our fate, to be mistaken for each other for all eternity. I'm constantly getting thanked for my big Christmas party, which is actually Bret's big Christmas party, even by people who ostensibly know me. So, it was sort of strange and wonderful having my doppelgänger there.
> (http://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/mcinerney/los_angeles.html)

In any case, it is important to remember that on the terrible morning of the 9/11 attacks, McInerney immediately called (and visited) his neighbour Ellis, as he recalls in "Brightness Falls," an article he published in *The Guardian* only days after the attacks:

> We managed to get our friend Bret Ellis on the phone; he lived nearby and had sounded, Jeanine said after she called him earlier, as if he was having a serious breakdown. Now we were in his neighbourhood. Jeanine told him we would bring him a burger. We walked up to Bret's building in the East Village. By this time another phase had set in among the pedestrians, who seemed to be realising that they had survived a catastrophe. People were smiling again, although the smiles and gestures were somewhat exaggerated in the manner of restaurant patrons who are in the presence of a celebrity and are eager to mask their interest and assert their own vivacity.
> At Bret's apartment, we watched CNN for half an hour. We kept telling each other we couldn't believe this. I noticed an invitation to a book party on Bret's kitchen counter. "I'm glad I don't have a book coming out this month," I said—a selfish and trivial response to the disaster, but one I thought he would understand. Nobody was going to be talking about fiction this week. "I was just thinking that same thing," he said, with obvious relief. "I don't know how I'm going to be able to go back to this novel I'm writing," I said. The novel is set in New York, of course. The very New York which has just been altered forever. "I know exactly what you mean," he said. After half an hour, he walked out with us to see what was happening on the street. When we said goodbye, he lost his composure. He turned away when he started to cry. (McInerney 2001)

If Janowitz and McInerney had quickly shown their dislike of the Brat Pack category, Ellis himself never did so until *Lunar Park*. What is more, Ellis had frequently referred to McInerney as "Jayster," and he himself

used the "toxic twins" label. Ellis' relation with Janowitz was never as close, but his connection with McInerney, both professional and personal, is so important that McInerney became a character in two of Ellis' novels: *Glamorama* and *Lunar Park*.

After studying both Generation X and the Brat Pack, it is still very difficult to decide in which category, if any, one should place Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, and some other writers of the 1980s that are so important to Ellis' corpus. *Newsweek* referred to them as "the divine decadent," *Vanity Fair* preferred to name them "the young and the wasted," while Adam Moss from *Squire* highlighted their differences and affirmed that:

> the only thing they have in common is they all had the good fortune to have written first books that caught the public imagination at a time when publishers and media were very eager to give young people a chance. (Finke 1987)

As a tentative conclusion I would like to affirm that, independently of whether they all belonged to Generation X or the Brat Pack (and whether they liked this fact), Ellis, McInerney, Janowitz, Lundquist, and some other young writers from the 1980s do share many elements in common and are the result of the *zeitgeist* and powerful elements of it. In other words, literature can—as Derrida, Hillis Miller, Bloom, and other prominent deconstruction philosophers and critics affirm—both represent and create reality. And the same applies to this group of young, ambitious, and tormented writers who portrayed America in the 1980s in a quintessential manner at the same time as they contributed to the dissemination of the very lifestyle they despised.