

KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

Part 1: Essay

Why is everyone not falling in love?

Love and sex in the neoliberal era as seen through the lens of Bret Easton Ellis' *Less*

Than Zero, The Rules of Attraction, The Informers and American Psycho

Part 2: Novel

Relations

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Why is everyone not falling in love?

Love and sex in the neoliberal era as seen through the lens of Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction*, *The Informers* and *American Psycho*.

Introduction

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says to Romeo, "the more I give, the more I have."¹ But under neoliberalism, Slavoj Žižek argues, 'the logic of balanced exchange is disturbed in favor of an excessive logic of "the more you give the more you owe", or the "more you possess what you are longing for, the more you are missing and thus the greater your craving", or the consumerist version, "the more you buy the more you must spend."² It would seem then that love in its classical depiction is at odds with the way neoliberalism operates.

What then, is the function of love within such a configuration? Anthropologist Helen Fisher's 2006 TED Talk *Why we love, why we cheat*³ warns of a world without love being a deadly place and certainly, in some ways, a deadly world we have come to inhabit. Moreover, it appears the only alternative to neoliberalism that anyone is eagerly taking up is fundamentalism. One can advance through the ranks until one is a terrorist, a suicide bomber, to merging with others in death rather than in life or love. 'Make love, not war,' 1960s hippies used to say, but can love really save us from the violence of the world. Or is it too late?

¹<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-superego-and-the-act/>, accessed 26/10/2014.

²ibid.

³http://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_tells_us_why_we_love_cheat?language=en, accessed 27/01/2015.

Methodology

Notions of love and sex are rewritten by every era but this essay concerns itself with the period of 1980s and 90s neoliberalism, as seen through the texts that make up the early oeuvre of Bret Easton Ellis, namely *Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction*, *The Informers*, *American Psycho* and their film adaptations.

I began my research by examining various notions of love, from Plato all the way to the 90s pop culture classic *Clueless* (dir. Amy Heckerling, 1995), and eventually narrowed my focus to three distinct and opposing theories, which I will describe as romantic love, love as use of erotic capital and sex as liberation, which I found in Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love*, Catherine Hakim's *Honey Money* and Wilhelm Reich's *The Sexual Revolution*. These frameworks were chosen in accordance with my decision to examine love under the specific conditions of neoliberalism, following the study of such theorists as the already mentioned Slavoj Žižek, as well as David Harvey, Renata Salecl and others. It is from this juncture that I began to write a novel that explores love and sex through a layered approach, where meaning is accumulated through structural and stylistic choices as well as plot and character development. It soon became apparent that a writer who examines love in the throes of disintegration as a result of the assault of neoliberalism and whose emphatic use of style to critique this system I drew on most closely was Bret Easton Ellis.

What is love?

From the times of Plato and Aristotle to the writings of Nietzsche and Freud, love, and what to do with it, has been a hot topic. In the *Symposium* Plato's speakers argue that love is variously something which makes us feel complete because we are two parts of a separated whole, something which is aroused by beauty and through it transcends the lover from a superficial relation to things to a higher understanding, and, lastly, will bring out the best in an individual, thus inspiring virtue and wisdom.⁴ Love in the *Symposium* is, on the one hand, seen as something that will lead the lover to a higher intellectualisation, as in the case of homosexual love between an older, wiser man, and a younger, still learning, pupil, and, on the other, as something that opens one up to beauty otherwise unseen and only through love made clear. However, like any skill, love requires training and must be 'continually developed if it is ever to flourish.'⁵

Aristotle was an exponent of friendship-love or *philia*. This notion sees love as something that is conditional on several factors, first of all, the lovers' likeness to one another, and their capacity for virtue. However, in Aristotle's view it is not enough to be virtuous; the lovers must be virtuous in the same way; that is, their character must be similar for love to be successful. In his vision of love, a man and a woman are not compatible for friendship-love because men and women are opposites. Although arguing for a completely different notion of love, Aristotle agrees with Plato that love is essential for man to flourish, as 'he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.'⁶ The human species needs love to understand itself. Without knowing an other, there is no hope for self-knowledge.

⁴Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 40.

⁵*ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶*ibid.*, p. 65.

The Roman poets Lucretius and Ovid have much less lofty ideals. Due to his belief in the dangerous nature of love, Lucretius was a practical guide on how to love without getting hurt. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Lucretius sees love as inescapably linked with sex, and warns of over-indulgence. At the same time, he does not advise abstinence. Instead, the lover is instructed to gratify the sexual appetite, but not go over the top. Like a good agony aunt, Lucretius dishes out advice to the lovesick. Love can be solved by such remedies as contemplation, marriage or promiscuity. Marriage will make the lovers see each other not as perfect gods, but real people with flaws. If one is lovesick for a particular person who does not reciprocate the feeling, sleeping around is seen as the cure. Lucretius advises rejected lovers to seek release wherever they can find it.⁷

Ovid is much more celebratory of love. He ‘gleefully probes love’s opposites: attraction and contempt; tenderness and spite; trust and jealousy; the craving of our flesh for someone whom our reason condemns.’⁸ For Ovid, the pleasure is in the experience. Falling in and out of love is to be enjoyed for its capacity to create delight, beauty and style, not a means to an end, culminating in finding the perfect partner. Like Lucretius, he sees love in simply material terms. However, ‘unlike almost all other naturalists...they do not...see love and its trials as figuring in a narrative of redemption: in other words as making possible a supreme good which overcomes or justifies life’s suffering and evil.’⁹

Let us now turn to some Western philosophers. In *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* G. W. F. Hegel argues that, ‘(l)ove means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not in isolation by myself but win my self-

⁷ibid., pp. 69 – 80.

⁸ibid., p. 75.

⁹ibid., p. 79.

consciousness only through the renunciation of my independence and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me.’¹⁰ Nietzsche, following on from Aristotle, believes in love-as-friendship. It is a ‘much rarer love “in which (the) possessive craving of two people for each other gives way to a new desire and lust for possession – a *shared* higher thirst for an ideal above them.”’¹¹ He turns away from Platonic/Christian ideals of love that consider it as a stepping stone to attaining a higher sense of consciousness. For Nietzsche, the here and now is important, and a love which takes us away from our material world is really just a hatred of our circumstances, of the world in which we live. Real love is self-love, not narcissism, but an acceptance of ourselves and the world around us. It is recognising beauty in that which is ugly, accepting fate and looking at it in a positive light. Again, like Aristotle, Nietzsche believes that real love is learnt; even self-love requires skill and practice, and, therefore, ‘real’ love does not come easily.

For Freud the outlook is grim. He believes that love is an expression of sexual energy that can never be satisfied. The lover will always want to possess the loved and, because such possession is never fully possible, love must always end in pain, failure and disappointment. But Freud sees light at the end of the tunnel in the form of sublimation, which involves ‘a channeling of love’s energy towards higher, more creative, more refined ends, such as art and thought, or political and social organization.’¹² In other words, what is good in the world is a product of the channeling of erotic desire. Love also has another positive purpose, that of creating who we are. With each failure of love, first our love for our mother, then father, then erotic relationships, our personalities are formed. However, when we are in love, we

¹⁰G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 162.

¹¹May, *ibid.*, p. 196.

¹²*ibid.*, p. 201.

experience a regression. We feel we are at one with the loved one and that our love will last forever. This feeling can only last a certain amount of time before it is coloured by our need to possess the other, and through failure to do so our love turns to hate. The bigger the love, the bigger the potential for hate. Freud ‘goes further than any other writer in suggesting that lovers not only cannot create a cocoon in which they are safe from humanity’s murderous impulses, but inevitably nourish these very horrors within the confines of their intimacy.’¹³

Neoliberalism

‘Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.’¹⁴ Otherwise known as free-market capitalism, neoliberalism is widely agreed to have begun in the 1980s with the Reagan, Thatcher and Deng administrations, preceded by a bloody trial run in Chile in 1973.¹⁵ ‘Competition – between individuals, between firms, between territorial entities (cities, regions, nations, regional groupings) – is held to be a primary virtue.’¹⁶

In America, having won the presidency and keen to keep to his promise of change, Reagan and his administration were quick to implement his campaign

¹³ibid., p. 214.

¹⁴David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁵Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner, “Introduction: Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Subjectivities, Publics and New Forms of Resistance” in *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema*, ed. Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 2.

¹⁶Harvey, ibid., p. 65.

promises with a budget which was consistent with supply-side theory and rolled back the role of government.¹⁷ Signing the largest tax cut in American history with the Economic Recovery Tax (ERTA) on August 13th, the president was hailed by *The Wall Street Journal* as giving hope for a brighter economic future, while other press accounts concluded that Reagan had ended fifty years of liberal government.¹⁸

However, recession soon hit and Reagan's popularity plummeted. But he would not budge. 'Reaganism emphasized the long view. In this respect, Reagan followed the method used by cold war liberals in their heyday - keeping his eye firmly fixed on principles and ultimate goals but, in the short term, remaining willing to use flexible tactics and accept incremental progress.'¹⁹ Reagan, uncharacteristically for a Conservative, was an optimist. He believed in his country, his people and in the American Dream. The tax cutting continued. 'The 1981 tax cut became the abiding symbol of Reaganism, even a turning point in American political history, for later Republicans made tax cutting the *raison d'être* of their party.'²⁰

Although tax cuts were his first priority, Reagan also had other goals such as deregulation, which by the end of the 1970s had been blamed for the slowing down of the economy.²¹ Veteran columnist Joseph Kraft argues that Reagan had a unique ability in being able to make the country feel good about itself. 'Reagan gleefully distinguished between Republican and Democratic psychology, claiming the two parties represented "two fundamentally different ways of governing – their government of pessimism, fear, and limits, or ours of hope, confidence and

¹⁷John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 54.

¹⁸*ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁹*ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

²⁰M. J. Heale, *Contemporary America: Power, Dependency, and Globalization since 1980* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 68.

²¹*ibid.*, p. 71.

growth.”²² Thus despite the ballooning budget towards the end of Reagan’s first term, the Republicans managed to stay in power.

Globalisation, a term coined in the 1990s, described ‘a process that arguably had been underway since the age of Christopher Columbus²³ and its acceleration during the 1980s led to neoliberalism’s grip not only over America but the whole world. It is a system arising from the interchange of economic, cultural, social and political networks of interdependence such as trade, capital, knowledge and migration of people.

By the mid-1990s global capitalism had fully developed the features of a neoliberal economy: free trade and open markets, financial liberalization, deregulated corporate and financial sectors, priority given to speculative capitalism...privatization of lands and resources, the international financial and regulatory institutions...with the power to force nation-states to comply with free-market policies and ideologies.²⁴

Americans voted for personality over policies and Reagan may have been a man who believed in the superiority of America, but by the time he left office the ideology of neoliberalism was firmly ingrained into the world order and his successor George H. W. Bush only continued with this thread.

‘The concept *neoliberal sovereignty* emphasizes that neoliberalism, far more than a purely economic system, is also a world-historical configuration of governance and biological and social life premised on the belief that the market is better than the state at distributing resources and managing social life.’²⁵ In the 1990s globalisation made America more prosperous with the growth of the economy thanks to increased consumer spending and the rise of the stock market, allowing for businesses and

²²ibid., p. 74.

²³ibid., p. 147.

²⁴Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence In The New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 39.

²⁵ibid.

households alike to borrow against their assets.²⁶ The focus on spending led to the financialisation of everything, including daily life.²⁷

In tandem with the sweep of globalisation, Bush's 'presidency was dominated by foreign affairs, most notably the disintegration of the Soviet Empire and the successful Gulf War of early 1991.'²⁸ But with the deficit growing Bush had to focus his attention back to what was going on at home and, although he did not want to raise taxes, he eventually had to in 1990. 'True to his patrician values, Bush's decision on taxes reflected his willingness to put the public interest first, and later, in 1998 when the budget deficit was eventually eliminated, he felt vindicated by analyses citing the 1990 compromise as the first step toward that end.'²⁹

Bill Clinton's administration's homage to globalisation was 'enlargement'. This idea had to do with increasing the number of nations open to free-market capitalism, which had a positive effect on the security and economic interests of the United States. 'Enlargement was posited to be closely linked to domestic renewal because of the synergistic relationship between markets and democratization and the positive effect of each on the U.S. economy.'³⁰ By the close of his first term in office, Clinton had managed to shift the focus of American foreign policy from military and ideological with nation states still embracing communism to economic competition.³¹ Globalisation encompasses now ever more ideological factions such as democracy and the war on drugs and the war on terror. 'As in the case of war on poverty, here

²⁶Heale, *ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁷Harvey, *ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸Heale, *ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁹*ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁰Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), p. 237.

³¹Donald T. Phillips, *The Clinton Charisma* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 103.

too the enemies are posed not as specific nation-states or political communities or even individuals but rather as abstract concepts'.³²

The ideology, like a virus, has spread and seeped into every aspect of life. Quoting David Harvey, Deborah Tudor writes that '[d]uring the neoliberalization of the 1970s, "ruling elites moved, often fractiously, to support the opening up of the cultural field to all manner of diverse cosmopolitan currents. The narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality, and identity became the leitmotif of bourgeois urban culture."' ³³ The doctrine propagates that that society will be improved 'by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.'³⁴ In other words, under neoliberalism every aspect of human existence can be bought and sold. Everything is a commodity.

Characterised by notions of freedom and choice, the neoliberal world claims that we can apparently be who we want to be, changing our identity as we go. Like the iconic scene in the 90s classic film about young love, *Clueless*, where the main character Cher (Alicia Silverstone) goes through endless combinations of clothes on her computer before finally selecting the perfect outfit to pull from her wardrobe, we appear to be able to swap and change who we are through the plethora of identity creating aides now available. Mirroring this selection process is the way love is approached. We can have whomever we want and the choice is endless. It is a miracle when anyone does make a commitment. And even then, everyone knows that the choice can be undone.

³²Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 14.

³³Deborah Tudor, "Twenty-first Century Neoliberal Man" in *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema*, ed. Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 59.

³⁴Harvey, *ibid.*, p. 3.

But are we as free as we think we are? And can choice make us happy? Žižek argues that '(o)ur Post-Modern reflexive society which seems hedonistic and permissive is actually saturated with rules and regulations which are intended to serve our well-being (restrictions on smoking and eating, rules against sexual harassment).'³⁵ Neoliberal subjects are therefore a paradox, on the one hand, free to choose from a plethora of options, while, on the other, inmates of a prison which has not only taken away any real agency, but has perhaps put them in solitary confinement.

Bret Easton Ellis

'Cultural texts, as Marx explained, help explain capitalism in ways that economic treatises cannot' and Ellis' whole oeuvre is dedicated to deciphering and critiquing neoliberalism. But his works are also known for their controversial depiction of relationships. One can argue that their unique portrayal of disaffected youth in the throes of trying to make sense of their lives and each other is the main reason why they immediately gained popularity in the 1980s. Indeed, Ellis is exceptional in showing how the effects of neoliberalism have 'penetrated "into the sinews of our bodies and the machinations of our hearts"'³⁶ and this is perhaps why his books continue to attract readers to this day.

Although a self-proclaimed non-literary writer³⁷, Ellis can also be said to follow in the great American tradition of writing about the American Dream. He is different from writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, who embraced materialism and

³⁵<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n06/slavoj-zizek/you-may>, accessed 26/10/2014.

³⁶Kapur and Wagner, *ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6127/the-art-of-fiction-no-216-bret-easton-ellis>, accessed 9/01/2015.

ambition, in that many more of his characters are already rich rather than amassing wealth as the aim of their existence, and therefore there is nowhere for them to go in economic and social terms. ‘The characters’ affluence and lifestyle—all Porsches, jacuzzis and cocaine—places them in a context that is closer to that of the musician than of the usual pop consumer.’³⁸ However, both Fitzgerald and Ellis show the Dream also to be a nightmare. Like Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* Ellis’ characters are conmen, their wealth acquired in illegitimate ways, mostly through their parents, selling drugs, or getting rich on Wall Street. In that sense, Ellis is a writer who criticises neoliberalism, the despair most apparent in *American Psycho*, with scenes such as ‘Patrick Bateman’s terrible, despairing cry in the video store – “*There are too many fucking movies to choose from*”.’³⁹ In Ellis’ novels ‘(t)here is no space, no time for humanitarian behaviour or emotional connections.’⁴⁰ Ellis explains that

American Psycho is a book about becoming the man you feel you have to be, the man who is cool, slick, handsome, effortlessly moving through the world, modeling suits in *Esquire*, having babes on his arm. It’s about lifestyle being sold as life, a lifestyle that never seemed to include passion, creativity, curiosity, romance, pain.⁴¹

Certainly, lifestyle choices are similar throughout the novels, the most obvious one being drug-taking. ‘Only something which is entirely itself, entirely predictable and entirely immune to being drenched with words and images can hope to satisfy, which is why the use of hard drugs is so omnipresent in advanced consumer societies despite all the rhetoric, so hypnotic in other fields, directed against them.’⁴²

³⁸Graham Caveney, “Notes Degree Zero: Ellis Goes West” in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American “Blank Generation” Fiction* by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London and New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), p. 124.

³⁹Elizabeth Young, “Vacant Possession: Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*” in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American “Blank Generation” Fiction* by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London and New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), p. 29.

⁴⁰Young, *ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴¹*ibid.*, accessed 9/01/2015.

⁴²Young, *ibid.*, p. 36.

The correlation between neoliberalism and the act of taking hard drugs really comes as no surprise if one agrees with Slavoj Žižek, who argues that in today's neoliberal market we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property. Coke without caffeine and sugar, salami without fat, etc.⁴³ The same scenario is at play with Ellis' characters. They are like the products of neoliberalism in that their core essence is missing and, when we as readers engage with them, we are left wanting more. They themselves are 'driven to extremes in their efforts to experience *something*. To feel.'⁴⁴ 'His characters are consumed by boredom, by apathetic dissatisfaction...They are unable to see that their desires can never be fulfilled because these are artificially created in response to commodity relations.'⁴⁵ In a quest to experience something authentic, the extremes of their behaviour are ever more drastic, climaxing with the psychopath of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. And like the sugar-free Coca-Cola, each book leaves the consumer more thirsty, with every subsequent plot of the first three books being a more skeletal version of the previous one, ever-less sugary, culminating with a collection of loosely connected short stories in *The Informers*. Ellis ensures readers stay hooked through keeping his characters similar. People reappear in subsequent novels, like the increasingly essence-less new versions of existing products or at times they are so indistinguishable from each other that they may as well be the same characters, highlighting neoliberalism's drive towards conformity.

Such a trend in Ellis' work echoes wider tendencies within the arts. Žižek writes that

⁴³<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-superego-and-the-act/>, accessed 27/10/2014.

⁴⁴Young, *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁵*ibid.*

culture is less and less a specific sphere exempt from the market and more and more its central component. What this short circuit between market and culture entails is the disappearance of the old modernist avant-garde logic of provocation, of shocking the establishment. Today, more and more, the cultural economic apparatus itself, in order to reproduce itself, has not only to tolerate but to directly incite stronger and stronger shocking effects and products...the domain of sexuality, perversion is no longer subversive: the shocking excesses are part of the system itself. The system feeds on them in order to reproduce itself.⁴⁶

And in *American Psycho* Ellis depicts the apocalypse – capitalism eating itself and becoming a monster. Thus Ellis' fiction is a wonderful contradiction, on one hand scathing about the neoliberal era that it describes, and, on the other, being the perfect neoliberal consumer product. Ellis' characters illustrate the effect of the endless choice neoliberalism provides, and therefore also how difficult it is to make decisions regarding one's sex and love life. In Ellis' reflection of neoliberalism lovers are seemingly plentiful, sex is a commodity to be bought and sold but people are unable to fall in love and enjoy sexual relations. Although such an appraisal is to be found in all of Ellis' texts, they are presented on a scale of increasing crisis. To illustrate this my analysis of the texts falls in line with the chronology of the books' releases, with my focus on the first three and their film adaptations; the novels *Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction* and the short story collection *The Informers* before going into a discussion of his most famous novel *American Psycho*, to show where neoliberalism reaches its climax – the point of no return. In all these books the reader can find plenty of scathing critique of the moral and sexual climate of the 1980s and 90s, but in the early texts also instances of where love still flourishes and where sex can be subversive. However, in all these works, neoliberalism is always the central character.

⁴⁶<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-superego-and-the-act/>, accessed 27/10/2014.

Drawing on the monograph *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* by Georgina Colby, I assert that contrary to the argument of early critics who said that Ellis' work was complicit with late capitalism, Ellis, through the process of underwriting, critiques this political system. But in opposition to Colby, I suggest that his view of sex and love within this system is not as bankrupt as she would have her reader believe. Rather, in his early novels Ellis presents a world on the cusp of change, where anything can still happen. So while in *Less Than Zero* characters are in the main 'afraid to merge on freeways' as goes the motto of the novel, repetition is used artfully and Clay still has enough distinctiveness to keep the attention of the same girl, Blair, and vice versa. In *The Rules of Attraction* experimental narration is used to illustrate that there is still escape to be found from neoliberalism. The campus of Camden is used as a metaphor for a utopia where transgressive sexual politics can exist outside the strict parameters of neoliberalism. Ellis uses his characters' monologues to illustrate that through love and sex identity is formed, and as opposed to the later *American Psycho*, where it is difficult to distinguish between characters, here through despair at lost lovers and contrast between sexual satisfaction and disappointment, there is still potential for love and sex to build relationships and create identities. Ellis' belief in love's creative potential is so strong that he even uses the love letter as the form of a whole short story in *The Informers*, "Letters from L.A.". However, by *American Psycho* Ellis' stylistic choices show how bankrupt the neoliberal project has become. 'Nothing and no one in *American Psycho* connects; everything and everyone function in parallel, including the text and the reader.'⁴⁷ Puns are used as a way to show the distance between

⁴⁷C. Namwali Serpell, "Repetition and the Ethics of Suspended Reading in *American Psycho*", *Critique: Studies In Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 51, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 47-71, p. 55.

characters, with people continually misunderstanding each other, as in the famous ‘murders and executions’ line being mistaken for ‘mergers and acquisitions’. The fact that *American Psycho* is such a unified text, with repetition running through every fibre of the novel, from the characters, to scene structure to the phrases and leitmotifs which are repeated so relentlessly that the novel is almost unbearably annoying to read, is testament to the fact that there is no room for something as random as love to occur. An example is Bateman’s relentless recounting of his routines, such as his toilet. For example, he tells us in the second chapter entitled ‘Morning’ exactly how he gets ready for work, including how he brushes his teeth: ‘I pour some Plax anti-plaque formula into a stainless-steel tumbler and swish it around my mouth for thirty seconds. Then I squeeze Rembrandt onto a faux-tortoiseshell toothbrush and start brushing’⁴⁸. He does not fail to mention his teeth when he is getting ready to murder some prostitutes in one of the chapters entitled ‘Girls’ either, saying ‘(a)fter flossing and changing into a pair of silk Polo boxer shorts and a cotton Bill Blass sleeveless T-shirt, I walk into the bathroom’⁴⁹. Bateman’s incessant list-making is perhaps the most obvious repetition at play and accentuated by the novel managing to run to close to 400 pages, while Bateman succinctly sums up all his interests in a list of things he wants to achieve before Christmas:

(1) to get an eight o’clock reservation on a Friday night at Dorsia with Courtney, (2) to get myself invited to the Trump Christmas party aboard their yacht, (3) to find out as much as humanly possible about Paul Owen’s mysterious Fisher account, (4) to saw a hard-body’s head off and FedEx it to Robin Barker—the dumb bastard—over at Salomon Brothers and (5) to apologize to Evelyn without making it look like an apology.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London and New York: Picador, 2006), p. 25.

⁴⁹*ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵⁰*ibid.*, p. 170.

So while in *Less Than Zero* there is a more general repetition in the form of similar parties, the recurring phrase ‘people are afraid to merge on freeways’ and similar sentence structures are used to echo the sense of boredom experienced by Clay and his friends, by *American Psycho* repetition is literally everywhere: ‘(r)epeated habits (exercise performed, fittingly in “reps”; watching The Patty Winters Show), repeated locations (the gym; the video store; restaurants), repeated actions (shopping; eating; murder), repeated verbal tics (“probably,” “I have to return some video tapes”)⁵¹ to the point that, ironically, ‘the most repeated condemnation of the novel is that it is mindlessly repetitive.’⁵² Finally, Ellis repeats himself almost entirely by reintroducing the whole cast of *Less Than Zero* in *Imperial Bedrooms*.

Here, the neoliberal world Ellis first brought to our attention in his debut novel is even more extreme in its assault. Writing about *Less Than Zero*, Graham Caveney says that ‘(t)he co-existence of ominous portents and plush materialism suggests that the key to the myth of LA is to be found in its fears.’⁵³ Ellis hones in on this notion of fear in *Imperial Bedrooms* by making it a neo-noir. ‘There’s a dead body, a dangerous blonde, a late-night intruder. There are threatening texts, rumours of vampires and Mexican drug cartels, secret death cults and dead bodies in the desert.’⁵⁴ The neoliberal monster lives on in the form of an undead, a zombie. And, in staying true to formula, *Imperial Bedrooms* shows that in the neoliberal era, culture, like products, is constantly remarketing itself.

A *New York Times* review tells us that the book shows neoliberalism’s continuing acceleration to be visible in a multitude of ways. For a start, there is even

⁵¹Serpell, *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵²*ibid.*

⁵³Caveney, *ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁴<http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2010-07/06/gq-books-bret-easton-ellis-interview/page/3>, accessed 11/11/2014.

more choice. While in the first book the characters watched porn on Betamax, leafed through magazines and developed anorexia, in its sequel there are even more ways to be unamused. The article lists these as watching porn on iPhones, multitasking in the shape of snorting cocaine whilst watching *The Hills*, and stalking possible love interests online to decide on their unsuitability through their poor career history on the imdb.⁵⁵ It is now easier than ever before to cast people aside as unworthy of our interest, love or sex, based on the smallest of particulars. But, as Renata Salecl asserts in *The Tyranny of Choice*, having so much to choose from makes people far from happy: '(c)hoice brings a sense of overwhelming responsibility into play, and this is bound up with a fear of failure, a feeling of guilt and an anxiety that regret will follow if we have made the wrong choice.'⁵⁶ Whilst in *Less Than Zero* people were afraid to merge on freeways, people are now afraid to merge in love, are afraid to merge at all. Moreover, they are destroying each other in increasingly illustrious ways, as *Imperial Bedrooms*' ode to the technology-age illustrates. Clay, the once good guy, is now the bad guy, 'a sleazy, exploitative liar who uses his position to sleep with young girls.'⁵⁷ In the Ellis scripted 2013 film *The Canyons* (dir. Paul Schrader, 2013) the main character Christian (James Deen) muses on the ending of his relationship with Tara (Lindsay Lohan), who is leaving him, saying, 'I loved you, in my own way.' The declaration comes with a warning that she must never again see her true love Ryan (Nolan Gerard Funk), or else Christian will kill him, having already killed someone else in his revenge. If he cannot own Tara, then she cannot be owned by anyone else either. Love is doomed, Ellis seems to be declaring in ever more postmodern a fashion, as this punkish comedy thriller illustrates.

⁵⁵http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/24/books/24book.html?_r=0, accessed 26/07/13.

⁵⁶Renata Salecl, *The Tyranny of Choice* (London: Profile Books, 2010), p. 7.

⁵⁷<http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2010-07/06/gq-books-bret-easton-ellis-interview/page/2>, p. 11/11/2014.

In a January 2015 *Guardian* article, Irvine Welsh says that in *American Psycho*, '(t)here is no suggestion that either love or faith can save the day. All that remains is the impression that we have created a world devoid of compassion and empathy, a fertile breeding ground for monsters to thrive while hiding in plain sight.'⁵⁸ The fact that Ellis seems to have given up writing novels indefinitely, concentrating now on film scripts and television pilots, with plots about shark attacks his preferred subject matter,⁵⁹ might be seen as a sign that the author is finished with writing about neoliberalism, that there is nothing more to say, and nothing to be done, aside from waiting for the end of the world, in as comfortable surroundings as possible, a point substantiated by the fact that since giving up writing books Ellis has moved from the literary New York to the movie-land that is Los Angeles. Thus, in light of this continuing of neoliberalism's ascent and destruction, perhaps Ellis' early oeuvre needs to be reconsidered as a time of last possibilities for love and sexual revolution. Rather than portraying a world in the full throttle of apocalypse, Ellis' first three books show characters who are on the verge of being enslaved to the neoliberal project, but are not quite there, are hanging onto wholesome dreams of love-conquers-all and revolution-through-sex, though sex-as-capital is rearing its head also, and it is in this confused daze that they traverse the corridors of Ellis' stage, just about still trying to find something.

Romantic love

⁵⁸<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/10/american-psycho-bret-easton-ellis-irvine-welsh>, accessed 10/01/2015.

⁵⁹<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6127/the-art-of-fiction-no-216-bret-easton-ellis>, accessed 23/02/2015.

‘There are not many public discussions of love in our culture right now,’⁶⁰ wrote bell hooks in 2000 in *All About Love: New Visions*, arguing that there are more conversations about love’s irrelevance and meaninglessness than its importance. She quotes Harold Kushner, who writes in *All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*, “‘I am afraid that we may be raising a generation of young people who will grow up afraid to love, afraid to give themselves completely to another person, because they will have seen how much it hurts to take the risk of loving and have it not work out.’”⁶¹ Over a decade later, not much has changed. In his 2012 book *In Praise of Love* Alain Badiou calls for a reconsideration of love in the neoliberal era and engages with the concept as if to ‘save it’ from the onslaught of neoliberalism. He believes that neoliberalism promises love without risk and on the other hand, deems it to be of little importance. He therefore contends that, ‘it is the task of philosophy, as well as other fields, to rally to its defence. And that probably means, as the poet Rimbaud said, that it also needs re-inventing...Risk and adventure must be re-invented against safety and comfort.’⁶² But, in a society obsessed with the individual, is there any space for anyone else other than ourselves? If we live in a culture ‘which so emphatically promotes self-love’ then ‘loving someone else has become increasingly difficult, even if one still hopes to be loved by others.’⁶³ At the same time, love as god has been in ascent ‘since the end of the eighteenth century’ to ‘fill the vacuum left by the retreat of Christianity.’⁶⁴ Therefore as a warring partner to neoliberalism, it makes for a strong opponent. Badiou, however, feels the time for the fight in nigh, as he fears love has been reduced to a commodity like everything else and argues that it

⁶⁰bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), p. xviii.

⁶¹ibid.

⁶²Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2012), pp. 10-11.

⁶³Salecl, *ibid.*, p. 72.

⁶⁴May, *ibid.*, p. 1.

should not be condensed to the buying and selling of sexual favours. Moreover, there should be an element of chance involved in any love relationship. In love ‘the risk factor can never be completely eliminated.’⁶⁵ For him, ‘love involves a separation or disjuncture based on the simple difference between two people and their infinite subjectivities.’⁶⁶ ‘Love isn’t simply about two people meeting and their inward-looking relationship; it is a construction, a life that is being made, no longer from the perspective of One but from the perspective of Two.’⁶⁷ By the same token, he opposes the neoliberal approach to love as epitomised by Internet dating websites that sell their services on the promise of finding a perfect partner for their customers. Badiou believes that love is irrational and cannot be bought and sold. However, he also concedes that a union between two people is no longer the desired outcome for lovers in the neoliberal era. ‘Although fear of commitment may hardly be new, of late it seems to have been elevated to the level of an ideal. Plurality of possibility increases the belief in this ideal, and partnership is pushed back further and further into the future.’⁶⁸

The pursuit of an ideal love seems to be a desire for a fiction that is outside the real of everyday experience. However, Foucault argues that all experience is in fact fiction, given that we appraise and begin to understand it only after it has occurred. Thus ‘an experience is neither true nor false, it is always a fiction, something constructed, which existed only after it has been made, not before; it isn’t something that is “true”, but it has been a reality.’⁶⁹ This notion of experience as narrative is expanded by Slavoj Žižek who sees it as part of a grander undertaking of

⁶⁵Badiou, *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁶*ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶⁷*ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁸Salecl, *ibid.*, p. 93.

⁶⁹Foucault quoted in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Bataille* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 17.

storytelling which forms our collective view of the world and gives experience meaning. But

(p)roblems arise when an unexpected shattering turn of events – an outbreak of war, a deep economic crisis – can no longer be included into a consistent narrative. At that point, it all depends on how this catastrophic turn will be symbolised, on what ideological interpretation or story will impose itself and determine the general perception of the crisis.⁷⁰

If love is a crisis in our personal narratives, or an event which then has to be aligned to a specific fiction, then what ideology and narrative will win in shaping its meaning? In the neoliberal era ‘(w)eighed down by hopes, love seems to slip away because it is idolized by a society focused on the growth of the individual. And as it is laden with more hopes the quicker it seems to vanish into thin air, bereft of any social ties,’⁷¹ write Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim in *The Normal Chaos of Love*, echoing the view propagated by Renata Salecl. At the same time, whilst ‘[i]ndividualization may drive men and women apart...paradoxically it also pushes them back into one another’s arms. *As traditions become diluted, the attractions of a close relationship grow. Everything that one has lost is sought in the other.*’⁷² Perhaps then love can flourish even under the harshest of conditions.

But even if love is possible under neoliberalism, it still requires a certain attitude from its subjects. The psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller argues that ‘(t)o really love someone is to believe that by loving them you’ll get to a truth about yourself. We love the one that harbours the response, or a response, to our question “Who am I?”’⁷³ What happens when subjects do not ask this question though? What happens when there is no narrative, when events are stripped of meaning? For Colby,

⁷⁰<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/02/slavoj-zizek-what-authentic-political-event>, accessed 10/03/2014.

⁷¹Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 2.

⁷²Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷³http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?page_id=263, accessed 18/02/2014.

the chance for love for Ellis' characters has long passed precisely because there is no desire for such answers. She argues that melancholy in his early novels is related to the loss of subjectivity as 'a result of the systemic violence of neoliberalism'⁷⁴ and that '(t)o read *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* is to enter this narrative of the dissolving subject in the final stages of its dissolution.'⁷⁵ If Colby is correct, then even what looks like love affairs, what feels like romantic entanglements between the characters of Ellis' novels are only their ghosts, devoid of any substance or real meaning. Without the ability to create narratives about themselves and others, the characters are not only unable to love but unable to grasp their identities. Indeed, one reading would suggest that a rejection of love is at the heart of *Less Than Zero*. After all, Clay does not follow through with his feelings for Blair. Instead, he goes back to college and the relationship comes to a halt.

Lacan used to say, "To love is to give what you haven't got." Which means: to love is to recognise your lack and give it to the other, place it in the other. It's not giving what you possess, goods and presents, it's giving something else that you don't possess, which goes beyond you. To do that you have to assume your lack, your "castration" as Freud used to say. And that is essentially feminine. One only really loves from a feminine position.⁷⁶

Such an understanding of love certainly supports the apparent failure of the romantic relationship between Clay and Blair; the fact it rarely goes on beyond sex after parties, the fact that he never thinks of her as his girlfriend. Clay does not see a lack in himself. He has everything and he wants to be nothing; but 'less than zero' is still zero. Clay's ideal position is to be neutral, to feel numb. If he truly became 'less than zero', went beyond this point of neutrality, he might actually be able to fall in love in this understanding of the notion.

⁷⁴Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 25.

⁷⁵ibid., p. 26.

⁷⁶http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?page_id=263, accessed 18/02/2014.

However, I see the sheer endurance of Clay and Blair's relationship as a marker of love; the fact that despite the endless other options on offer, they come back to each other time and again. Colby, quoting Marx's proposition that 'the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual (but) the ensemble of social relations,'⁷⁷ argues that Clay is unable to find a connection with people, and therefore is unable to love. But his ensemble of encounters with Blair shows that the opposite is true. The following touching conversation they have on the eve of his going to college illustrates the point.

'Don't go,' she says.
'I'll only be gone a couple of months.'
'That's a long time.'
'There's always summer.'
'That's a long time.'
'I'll be back. It's not that long.'
'Shit, Clay.'
'You've got to believe me.'
'I don't.'
'You have to.'
'You're lying.'
'No, I'm not.'⁷⁸

The narrative is full of their meetings, and Clay has plans to meet up with Blair at the next opportunity as well, even if it is, in her eyes anyway, a long time from the present. The above is even more miraculous given the various dalliances that both Clay and Blair engage in. Although they are not traditionally faithful to one another, their ongoing bond is evidence of a kind of monogamy. Alain Badiou asks, '(i)sn't the meaning of fidelity much broader than the simple promise not to sleep with someone else?'⁷⁹ and, to even acknowledge their union as a relationship, Clay and Blair's union has to be viewed in the broadest terms of fidelity, and yet two final exchanges between them confirm they have a strong bond. After asking Clay if he still cares

⁷⁷Colby, *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁸Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London and New York: Picador, 2011), p. 193.

⁷⁹Badiou, *ibid.*, p. 45.

about her Blair hears that Clay does not want to care about anything. But, as she is about to leave he tells us that, ‘I suddenly don’t want to leave Blair here. I almost want to take her back with me.’⁸⁰ Weighed down by angst and distrust, the relationship seems doomed to fail at the beginning of the narrative, but somehow it carries on to the end, and beyond: ‘(i)n love, fidelity signifies...extended victory: the randomness of an encounter defeated day after day through the invention of what will endure.’⁸¹ Clay tells Blair he will be back in the summer, and, although she does not believe him, the promise is there. What this conclusion shows is that, rather than being completely emotionally dead, Clay has gained the love of Blair, despite all the odds.

By Ellis’ second novel love is presented as unquestionably a condition to be avoided. Differently to *Less Than Zero*, which is Clay’s narrative, *The Rules of Attraction* is a campus novel with a plethora of characters, each with their own bit of disjointed story. The novel begins mid-sentence, signifying a world that is in flux. Colby states that ‘Ellis highlights the isolation of the subjects narratologically through his use of the monologue, trapping the reader within the confines of his first-person narratives.’⁸² But I believe the opposite is true, an impression the author creates through the quick changeover of characters and their monologues, sometimes even on the same page, making the narrative seem promiscuous, as well as showing a community of likeminded individuals. The stylistic choice of so many monologues creates an impression of an abundance of new lovers, and although their stories are often almost exactly the same, or slightly differing versions of the same events, they are not ‘interpellated as blanks,’ with ‘voices that are indistinguishable’,⁸³ as argues Colby. Testament to the differences between them is the reappearance of Victor and

⁸⁰Ellis, *Less Than...*, p. 192.

⁸¹Badiou, *ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

⁸²Colby, *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸³*ibid.*, p. 36.

Lauren in *Glamorama*, characters whom Ellis himself believes to be individualistic enough to take through to another novel.

The narrative is a repetitive cycle of sex, parties, the consumption of food, drugs and alcohol and the occasional lecture, with nearly everyone changing his or her major every five minutes, or simply failing or not showing up at classes. Roommates come and go, people leave the university, then reappear with the characters all seemingly knowing each other, either from sex, parties, or the cafeteria. The setup is akin to a commune, with everyone sharing their bodies with their fellow students. When a girl falls pregnant and an abortion is discussed, there is doubt over whom the father is, although Tim claims responsibility. “How do you know its yours?” asks Tony... “But how do you *know*? The bitch could be fucking you over,”⁸⁴ Later, the group decides it does not even matter, as ‘(t)he table, including Tim, has already lost interest in this already old (known since last night, for latecomers, lunch) piece of gossip, so other conversations ensue, about other important subjects.’⁸⁵

Ellis’ focus on characters that partake in such behaviour suggests that he valorises the neoliberal world that they inhabit. Indeed, ‘(m)any early readers of Ellis read his work as complicit with late capitalism’⁸⁶, claims Colby, but she argues that Ellis’ early novels are actually critical of this system. I believe this argument to be true of *The Rules of Attraction*. Here, the neoliberal project is somewhat suspended. Sex is abundant, always available, and free. Nearly everyone is good-looking. What emerges is a utopia, with the characters rejecting the outside world, which is presented as a frightening and dangerous place. After a conversation with her mother, Lauren announces that ‘(i)t depressed me so completely that I could only walk around in a

⁸⁴Bret Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (London and New York: Picador, 2011), p. 42.

⁸⁵Ellis, *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸⁶Colby, *ibid.*, p. 1.

stupor and smoke cigarettes until I came down to the studio.’⁸⁷ When Paul speaks to his mother, she tells him ‘that her Cadillac had been stolen while in the parking lot of Neiman Marcus,’⁸⁸ a sign that the consumerist culture only leads to loss. Lauren’s new fling Franklin tells her, ‘“(d)id I tell you I was strip searched in Ireland?”’⁸⁹, another sign that the outside world is where the characters lose their liberty and basic human rights are at danger. When forced to take a trip out of Camden, Paul reacts with violence, telling us he ‘slammed my fist against the wall and stormed out of the booth’⁹⁰, and once on a bus out to Boston he becomes paranoid about how he will be perceived saying, ‘I started feeling completely self-conscious and thought, god I must look pretentious, sitting in the back, Wayfarers on, black tweed coat ripped at the shoulder, chain-smoking, faded copy of *The Fountainhead* in my lap.’⁹¹ Any outsiders are also viewed with suspicion by the characters, such as the gatecrashers of a party, described as ‘asshole frat guys from Dartmouth’⁹², the overwhelming impression being of a closed-off community, making up their own sexual politics. When other basic needs such as food, shelter and the need for sex are taken care of, love can have fertile ground to flourish.

One would therefore believe that such a commune as Camden would be the perfect breeding ground for romance. But, in actuality, those who fall pray to it are those who are most punished, most prominently Lauren and Paul. Amongst the plethora of monologues is also an anonymous character, her story different from the others as she has no name and her narrative is presented in italics. Hers is a tale of utter obsession, and she is perhaps the most punished of all. Throughout the novel she

⁸⁷Ellis, *The Rules of...*, p.55.

⁸⁸ibid., p. 111.

⁸⁹ibid., p. 128.

⁹⁰ibid., p. 113.

⁹¹ibid., p. 134.

⁹²ibid., p. 76.

leaves love notes to Sean, who mistakes them for letters from Lauren. After a prolonged planning of their meeting, the girl is devastated when she sees Sean go home with Lauren at ‘The Dressed To Get Screwed’ party. Immediately afterwards, she commits suicide. Having stripped her of a name, therefore identity, Ellis shows that being lovesick is a complete loser’s game. Reflecting on her death, Sean tells us, ‘Frank and I laughed and said it was probably because she didn’t get screwed.’⁹³ A person devoid of sexual pleasure is one who is devoid of life. Someone with so little erotic capital she is unable to even get noticed is a person who cannot survive.

In comparison, the film version of the book (dir. Roger Avery, 2002) leaves ample room for love to develop, and, with sex only hinted at or disappointingly presented only through a close-up of a character, usually the unconvincing James van der Beek playing Sean Bateman, there is much more time devoted to the feelings of the characters rather than their carnality and actions using their bodies. Paul Denton (Ian Somerhalder), a central character in the novel, is reduced to a whining queen, his most memorable scene being his trying on of half a wardrobe of clothes for the date with Sean that never happens. When we do actually see people having sex, like Lara (the screen name of Lauren’s roommate, played by Jessica Biel) having sex with Sean or Lauren losing her virginity to a random townie, it is with their clothes firmly on. Similarly, the anonymous lovesick character from the novel through adaptation to screen receives an identity, the colour of the love notes she leaves for Sean also used for the captions and for the film’s title imbuing her with an importance she lacks in the book.

Sean’s sense of conscience is proven when he asks, ‘(d)o I really want to destroy her innocence?’ and when he describes Lauren to his friends as ‘sweet’,

⁹³ibid., p. 203.

‘pure’, ‘innocent’ and ‘a virgin’, descriptions so sickly and infantilising they ask him ‘how young is she?’ The only moment in the film when Sean, who never quite escapes his ‘good boy’ Dawson-from-the-creek charm⁹⁴ actually looks like he might have a bit of ‘bad boy’ in him occurs when he punches Lara in the face towards the end of the film. But the scene is short and fleeting, and it is soon forgotten when Sean goes back to brooding over his lost-love Lauren, who is in love with Victor (Kip Pardue), a boy, who, upon returning from Europe, does not even remember who she is. It is during his speeded up narrative, where in the space of a few minutes viewers find out all his exploits abroad, that it is possible to see some fun being had. Only Victor, and not the other lovesick characters, knows how to have a good time, taking in sights, girls, drugs and lots and lots of sex. This appendix is a little too late to redeem the movie from its depths of lovesickness, and Sean’s momentary violence from him being nothing more than his character from *Dawson’s Creek’s* summer project. What this film shows is that Hollywood is unable to give anything other than monogamous love a chance. The meaning of the film seems to be that if you cannot find a mate, or if they do not want you, you are out of luck. As Lauren and Paul walk out onto the snowy lawn at the end of the film, they are both in the depths of grieving partners who might have been, but never were.

A characteristic of Ellis’ oeuvre is recurring characters and a *BuzzFeed* article entitled “This Is How All The Bret Easton Ellis Novels Fit Together”⁹⁵ comprehensively discusses the links, so much so that on his Twitter account, Ellis playfully reposted it with the caption, ‘I’ve never seen anything quite like this

⁹⁴Thespian baggage he acquired playing teen heartthrob Dawson Leery in Kevin Williamson created American teen drama television series *Dawson’s Creek*, which ran from 1998 – 2003.

⁹⁵<http://www.buzzfeed.com/louispeitzman/this-is-how-all-the-bret-easton-ellis-novels-fit-together>, accessed 27/08/2013.

before'.⁹⁶ The journalist lists the connections any discerning reader will already be conscious of, for example, that Sean Bateman from *The Rules of Attraction* is Patrick Bateman's brother from *American Psycho*, that Detective Donald Kimball, who investigates the murders committed by Patrick Bateman, later pops up in *Lunar Park*, and so on. But less well-known recurrences are also discussed, such as the connection between the short story "Letters from L.A." and the aforementioned anonymous girl from *The Rules of Attraction*. Here, she has a name, Anne, and a life, one that she describes in great detail in her letters to Sean. The first line, '(g)uess you didn't expect to hear from me'⁹⁷, imbues her with a confidence she lacks in *The Rules of Attraction*, the book and the film. Her new life away from the university is a glamorous stream of meeting movie stars, taking drugs and having sex with boys so young she has to pretend she is younger than her twenty years, telling people that she is variously sixteen and eighteen. As well as taking Class As like cocaine and prescription drugs like Valium and Secondal, she pursues a healthy lifestyle in the form of popping vitamin pills and taking an aerobics class with a model friend. All in all, it transpires she is better off in L.A. than at college, although she begins by telling Sean that all she 'did those first few days was chainsmoke Export A's and look at the pavement and wish I was back at Camden.'⁹⁸ Soon she is going to parties, working in her grandfather's movie studio, and 'seeing a lot of really nice English boys.'⁹⁹ However, love continues its grip on Anne, and, as the number of unanswered letters grows, so does Anne's anxiety about Sean's opinion of her. 'I'm dreadfully sorry if my little infatuation bothered you. I get so caught up in things that I simply lose all

⁹⁶<https://twitter.com/BretEastonEllis>, accessed 27/08/2013.

⁹⁷Bret Easton Ellis, *The Informers* (London and New York: Picador, 2009), p. 150.

⁹⁸*ibid.*, p. 150.

⁹⁹*ibid.*, p. 167.

perspective'¹⁰⁰, she tells him in one, and '(c)an you forgive me for whatever it was I did?'¹⁰¹ in a subsequent, while later still she says, '(p)lease, please, I'm begging you – write me? Okay, Sean?'¹⁰² Of course Sean never replies to Anne's letters, and in her last one she finally seems to be over him saying, '(d)oesn't it seem like a long time since I've written you? I guess I'm not much into it anymore.'¹⁰³

The change in Anne is also evidenced in her writing. A studio executive she makes friends with appraises her earlier stuff as good but not commercial. In the last letter Anne writes to Sean she tells him she has been working on a screenplay and that she has 'shown part of it to my grandmother. She liked it. She said with was commercial.'¹⁰⁴ The change in Anne from a non-commercial writer to a commercial one and from a girl desperately in love to one over the obsession implies that, in the neoliberal era, being in love will lead to no success. To be commercial and therefore successful one needs to be focused on oneself. In L.A., she writes, '(m)y relationships...with people aren't tense or trying because no one requires a whole lot of serious emotional investment at all.'¹⁰⁵ People who make money have no time for friendship or love, and Anne admits, 'sure I feel kind of anxious and depressed because of them sometimes' but then concedes that 'I'm happy with people out here.'¹⁰⁶ Having no strong bonds is safer, especially for a girl like Anne, who she tells us Sean described as 'a very sad, affected girl.'¹⁰⁷ Ellis is warning us that love is only suitable for the strong. The weak should avoid it at all costs or they will end up like Anne's other incarnation, the girl who kills herself in *The Rules of Attraction*.

¹⁰⁰ibid., p. 153.

¹⁰¹ibid., p. 154.

¹⁰²ibid., p. 168.

¹⁰³ibid., p. 173.

¹⁰⁴ibid., p. 176.

¹⁰⁵ibid., p. 161.

¹⁰⁶ibid., p. 162.

¹⁰⁷ibid., p. 159.

Another way of seeing this decline in the value of love from Ellis's first book, through to the second and then the short story collection is to understand it is a slow disintegration in line with neoliberalism's progression. Whereas in *Less Than Zero* love was still evident in its most traditional sense in the relationship between Clay and Blair, in *The Rules of Attraction*, where there is time for romance, there is only unrequited love, a chance for a meaningful connection spoiled by the array of bodies available for a casual hook-up. There is so much choice, however, no one is willing to make a decision and commit to a monogamous relationship. Everyone is keeping his or her options open. In *The Informers* things have progressed even further, to love as commodity and sex as a bargaining tool, which takes us to Catherine Hakim and her theory of erotic capital.

Love as use of erotic capital

Mamoon Azim, the main character in Hanif Kureishi's 2014 novel *The Last Word*, declares that 'when you end a relationship and say you fell out of love, you actually mean you were never really in love. The past is a river, not a statue.'¹⁰⁸ If this opinion is the case, if love is of no worth when it is finished, if, in fact, it is like it never even existed, then what is the point of romantic love?

The term 'erotic capital' was first used by Catherine Hakim in her 2012 book *Honey Money* to describe the fourth type of personal asset, the other three being economic capital, cultural capital and social capital, terms first introduced 'in 1983 by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.'¹⁰⁹ The theory is no surprise, given the long sexualisation of Western society. In *One-Dimensional Man* Herbert Marcuse states

¹⁰⁸Hanif Kureishi, *The Last Word* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 75.

¹⁰⁹Catherine Hakim, *Honey Money* (London and New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 18.

that ‘advanced industrial civilization operates with a greater degree of sexual freedom – “operates” in the sense that the latter becomes a market value and a factor of social mores.’¹¹⁰ Erotic capital, then, can be seen in the context of the changing relationship between the private and the public sphere, which is regarded as an important characteristic of neoliberalism. Hakim describes it as ‘a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts.’¹¹¹ She argues that erotic capital can be used like any other form of capital and therefore her theory is closely linked to neoliberalism, because, as David Harvey argues, under this system any kind of good can be turned into an instrument of economic speculation.¹¹² In particular, under such circumstances erotic power might be as profitable an asset as monetary capital. This commercialisation of the erotic has profound consequences for all strata of society. The rich can multiply their monetary capital by using their erotic capital, for example by wooing their clients, while the poor are sometimes in so precarious a position that they have no other option than to engage in sex work, often risking their health or even lives.

Hakim is not the only writer to have noticed this shift. Quoting the French psychoanalyst Jean-Pierre Lebrun, Renata Salecl writes that ‘sexuality is becoming more and more “a matter of competitive rivalry and consummation, it does not concern anymore a choice of stable object. It is primarily a matter of seduction.”’¹¹³ If long lasting love has been replaced by the art of seduction, erotic capital can arguably be defined as the most powerful type of capital. Indeed, capitalism thrives on our

¹¹⁰Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 77.

¹¹¹Hakim, *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹²Harvey, *ibid.*, pp. 160-62.

¹¹³Salecl, *ibid.*, p. 87.

desire for sex, lots of it, and with different partners. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips write in their book *Intimacies* that Foucault

recognises the importance of desire as constitutive of a modern subjectivity, but he defines the desire produced by specifically modern exercises of power as the subject's desire *to know his desire*. The peculiarity of this extended moment in the history of power (our moment) would not have anything to do with the nature or content of the modern subject's desires, but rather with the subject's acquiescing to the view (promoted by power) that his desires (in particular, his sexual desires) are the key to his being.¹¹⁴

In other words, capitalism makes us believe that we need sex to be valid human beings and to prosper in the world. Indeed, the plethora of books available on how to improve one's sex life echoes this point: '(t)he idea is that if one works at improving one's sexual performance, learns new tricks and then practices them relentlessly, there are no limits to the satisfaction a person can achieve.'¹¹⁵ Therefore, being good at sex, thus having erotic capital, is imperative to survive in today's society. Moreover, sex is now seen as a way for us to get to know the world. In an opinion piece in *Vice* magazine the author writes of the merit of having many sexual partners: '(t)he way I see it, dating people is the easiest way to explore the world without travelling. Every single person I've dated has taught me things about culture, class, aesthetics and the viscosity of bodily fluids without even having to get out of bed'¹¹⁶ Thus erotic capital is a gateway to education too.

Sex as a bargaining tool in everyday life is present in almost any book Ellis writes. For example, in the short story "Water from the Sun" in *The Informers* Danny, the lover of the main character, Cheryl Laine, is staying at her house, and she questions him about his intentions:

¹¹⁴Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 64.

¹¹⁵Salecl, *ibid.*, p. 89.

¹¹⁶http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/things-girls-talk-about-876, accessed 28/08/2014.

I ask, almost dutifully, 'why are you here?' and he says, 'because my father kicked me out of the house' and I ask 'why?' and Danny says 'because my father asked me "why don't you get a job?" and I said "why don't you suck my dick?"'¹¹⁷

Danny does not want to get a job. Instead he has sex with Cheryl in exchange for food and shelter. Such an exchange is typical to most of Ellis' characters. Whether between lovers, children and their parents, teenagers and their drug dealers, sex in one form or another is used as a form of capital. Colby, quoting Harvey, claims that 'the process of neoliberalization demanded the construction of "neo-liberal market-based popular culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism"'¹¹⁸ which programmed individuals to act alone and believe they are the managers of their own bodies. It is therefore no wonder that using sex as a form of capital became Ellis' characters' first choice as they embrace the individualist culture which surrounds them. However, unlike Colby, who asserts that Ellis, through the process of underwriting, condemns the practices he describes, I believe he shows the deployment of erotic capital to be a powerful choice and asset for the characters to get what they want.

That Ellis' characters are often rich in erotic capital shows through the fact that nearly all of his works have been adapted to Hollywood films. Such a high amount of adaptations can also be regarded as a sign of his embracing rather than opposing the dominant ideology, as Hollywood films epitomise mainstream culture.¹¹⁹ Even *The Informers*, which makes for an often disjointed, plot-less and style-over-substance movie, has been adapted. Why? Because erotic capital sells, both in reality and in representations in the novels and films. In films this value of

¹¹⁷Ellis, *The Informers*, p. 96.

¹¹⁸Colby, *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹¹⁹In reality Hollywood films are more ideologically varied and nuanced. Nevertheless I accept such a generalisation.

erotic capital is especially high, because of their mimetic quality – when we watch films we not only imagine sexy characters, but actually see them, as performed by actors. Robert Stam¹²⁰ writes that actors bring a thespian baggage to the films in which they play, with audiences attaching characteristics from previous roles to their current ones. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the kind of actors who were chosen to be Ellis’ protagonists. It goes without saying that they are more or less all uniformly good looking, but the actors’ other roles confirm that they were chosen for their erotic capital as well as, if not as much as, for their acting credentials. *Less Than Zero* (dir. Marek Kaniévská, 1987) stars 80s Brat Pack heart throbs Andrew McCarthy (playing Clay) and Robert Downey Jr. (playing Julian) with McCarthy starring in 80s romantic comedies *Pretty in Pink* (dir. Howard Deutch, 1986) and *Mannequin* (dir. Michael Gottlieb, 1987) and Downey Jr. in *Weird Science* (dir. John Hughes, 1985) and *The Pick-up Artist* (dir. James Toback, 1987). As mentioned previously, the main role in *The Rules of Attraction* went to 90s pin-up James van der Beek of 90s mega-hit teen drama *Dawson’s Creek* and the most recent adaptation, *The Informers* (dir. Gregor Jordan, 2008), has Amber Heard playing the beautiful model at the heart of the story. What these films illustrate is that Ellis’ work, whilst not always translating well to film, boasts characters who do, characters who are oozing sex appeal, and the actors who are chosen to play them mirror these qualities.

The characters of Ellis’ novels are thus rich in erotic capital but they are also preoccupied with monetary capital to be made from erotic capital. Reading the early novels, one gets the impression that every member of Ellis’ cast is a hustler. Whether a rich 40-something male movie producer or a drug-peddling school kid, they are all seemingly selling sex. It is not surprising to find the drug-addicted Julian from *Less*

¹²⁰Robert Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation” in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athelone Press, 2000), pp. 54-76.

Than Zero prostituting himself to pay off his dealer as the younger characters are able to command a lot of bang for their buck. What is more telling is the way the older characters deploy their erotic capital and how, used in conjunction with other forms of capital, it can still be a powerful asset across class and age. However, ‘links between erotic capital and other forms of capital are contingent; they are not predictable and reliable (and) this gives erotic capital its maverick, subversive, wild-card character.’¹²¹ This unpredictability of erotic capital is evident in “Water from the Sun”. Here, the aforementioned Cheryl Laine, a news anchor, is hassled by her ex-husband, William, whilst she is involved with a younger man, Danny. Although her age is never stated, there are signs that Cheryl is older and more sophisticated, for example, her choice to drink wine from a glass whilst in the bath, while her younger lover swigs it from a bottle while smoking a joint sitting on the toilet. That Cheryl is an ‘older woman’ is further confirmed by the casting of Winona Ryder in the 2008 movie version. Whilst it is possible to read the character of Danny to be primarily attracted to Cheryl for the fact she provides him with somewhere to stay, with the young man ultimately dumping Cheryl, her erotic capital is confirmed by his suggesting that she hook up with his friend Biff as he ‘thinks you’re hot’¹²². Here, we can clearly see the contingent nature of the relationship between erotic capital and other forms of capital. Ultimately for Danny, Cheryl did not have enough of either, and yet there is still a chance of romance with a younger man for Cheryl, as through being ‘hot’ she has attracted the attention of another young male.

In the penultimate scene of the story Cheryl visits William and they have an uncomfortable debate about the age of her lovers.

“And, uh, this person you’re with is?” he asks, an edge in his voice.

¹²¹Hakim, *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹²²Ellis, *The Informers*, p. 118.

“I don’t know. He’s” – I stammer – “nice. Nice. Good for me.”
“He’s ‘good’ for you? What is he? A vitamin? What does that mean? He’s good in bed or what?” William raises his arms.
“He can be,” I mutter.
“Well, if you met *me* when I was fifteen – ”
“Nineteen,” I say, cutting him off.
“Jesus Christ, nineteen,” he spits out.¹²³

William’s reaction to Cheryl is telling of the way erotic capital decreases with age. William is aware that he too had more sexual prowess and therefore erotic capital when he was younger. At the same time, his strong physical reaction shows that Cheryl has the advantage. Hakim writes that ‘the principle of least interest and excess male demand for attractive women greatly increase the value of women’s erotic capital’¹²⁴. Yet, William denies Cheryl’s need for sex, likening her younger lover to a vitamin tablet. Hakim writes that ‘from its very origins 3,500 years ago, patriarchy was concerned with controlling displays of women’s erotic capital in public spaces as well as controlling women’s promiscuity.’¹²⁵ That may be the case, but ‘Foucault’s genealogies demonstrate the specific historical contextuality of, and the interests invested in, all truths. Genealogies, as much as authorised histories, are interested and partial. This characteristic of genealogy should be particularly appealing to some feminists because of the emphases on subjective experience and limited truth claims.’¹²⁶ Therefore, whilst at first glance it appears that William has the upper hand, and always will do, with thousands of years of patriarchy behind him the stability of that truth is questionable. Cheryl and William are both subjects of a particular power structure specific to a particular historical moment, and, therefore, Cheryl’s localised resistance is doubly important; ‘women’s bodies, with partial interested truths – as

¹²³ibid., p. 118.

¹²⁴Hakim, ibid., p. 40.

¹²⁵ibid., p. 78.

¹²⁶M.E. Bailey, “Foucauldian feminism: Contesting bodies, sexuality and identity” in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 103.

opposed to bodies read solely or primarily around the objective truth of a fixed sexuality – allow for fragmented identities, partial strategies and specific, interested resistances.’¹²⁷ It is therefore wholly understandable that Cheryl mostly relies on her erotic capital to get what she wants, as it is her biggest asset. The story ends when she returns home and begins watching herself on the eleven o’clock edition of the news. Rather than a sign of narcissism, watching herself is a sign of her resistance and an even bigger yielding of her erotic capital. She is watching to see how she can improve on what she already has, how to better enhance her performance of her identity as a sexy woman with bucketful’s of erotic capital at her disposal.

Let us now go back to *Less Than Zero*’s main protagonist Clay. The famous first line is ‘(p)eople are afraid to merge on freeways’¹²⁸ and Colby argues that Clay’s ‘preoccupation with the statement shows a troubling inability in Clay to merge with the exterior world.’¹²⁹ And yet he becomes preoccupied with it because it is uttered by his on/off girlfriend Blair, who picks him up from the airport, and with whom he is having a conversation. Whilst Colby seems keen to dismiss Clay as a character who fails to even narrate,¹³⁰ what strikes a chord is that despite his ‘melancholic state’¹³¹ Clay manages to persuade Blair to pick him up, in spite of his lack of commitment to her. However, that his erotic capital is inextricably linked to monetary capital is shown through a telling episode when Clay and his friends are at After Hours nightclub. Included in the milieu is Blair, but Clay goes home with another girl, who asks that he wear suntan lotion and a pair of Wayfarers as they have sex in her parents’ house. Clay attempts to take the sunglasses off, but she insists he keeps them

¹²⁷Bailey, *ibid.*, p. 107.

¹²⁸Ellis, *Less Than...*, p. 1.

¹²⁹Colby, *ibid.*, p. 32.

¹³⁰*ibid.*

¹³¹*ibid.*

on until he leaves. Afterwards, when Clay gets into his car he tells the reader, ‘there’s a note on the passenger seat that says, “Have a good time?” and I’m pretty sure it’s Blair’s handwriting and I drive back home.’¹³² The fact that the way people look takes up so much of the narrative testifies to the importance Ellis’ characters attribute to their appearance, as a marker of erotic capital. The girl Clay has sex with insists he wear the fashionable sunglasses and oil his body with the *Bain De Soleil* showing that she wants Clay when he is the best version of himself, when he looks just like a model from the *Vogue* that he leafs through after they have finished up. And yet the note from Blair suggests that she is still interested, despite the fact he has just had sex with someone else. This episode mirrors that of Cheryl’s case in “Water from the Sun”. One door is closed, but another remains open. What these incidents illustrate is that erotic capital is the gift that keeps on giving, with new opportunities arising when others are no longer available. The repetitive nature of Ellis’ narratives acts as a reassurance that, when other forms of capital have run dry, one can always rely on one’s sex appeal.

When Julian’s pimp Finn is recruiting new boys to prostitute he reassures them that ‘(t)here’s nothing to worry about. You don’t have to do that much. Not with these guys. Just typical studio execs, that’s all.’¹³³ Then later, ‘(a)nd if you have to do anything...well, hey, you make the money babes.’ This rosy view of prostitution is one which is also propagated by Hakim who writes that ‘men who buy sexual services are not deviants but ordinary, normal people’¹³⁴, and that ‘there is a popular misconception that women who work in the sex industry have low ability and few

¹³²Ellis, *Less Than...*, p. 111.

¹³³*ibid.*, p. 167.

¹³⁴Hakim, *ibid.*, p. 178.

other options.’¹³⁵ (I assume she would say the same of men in the sex trade.) I would go further to argue that prostitution and promiscuity are vital tools for keeping people from committing more serious crimes. As the Ancient Greek poet Lucretius wrote,

Keep off imagination and frighten away
Whatever encourages love; turn your mind elsewhere,
Get rid of the fluid in any body you can
Instead of keeping it for a single person
Which is bound to lead to trouble and end in grief.¹³⁶

However, while Ellis’ characters have no problems in exercising promiscuity, prostitution is less easy. As Hakim argues, ‘patriarchal men stigmatise selling sex, by imposing the Madonna/whore dichotomy on women, thus preventing women from slipping in and out of commercial sexual services’¹³⁷ and it appears to be the case in *Less Than Zero*, when, following Julian’s selling of his body, Clay finds the following graffiti in a nightclub toilet, ‘Julian gives great head. And is dead.’¹³⁸ There is no life possible for Julian after he has committed the ‘crime’ of selling sex; he is tarnished for good and may as well be no longer living.

What Ellis seems to be showing is that the characters are never able to transgress the strict patriarchal shackles that bind them to a certain moral code, even if at the same time they are taking part in debauched activities, such as the rape of a 12 year old girl later on in the novel. Rip, the owner of the child sex-slave, tells Clay ‘(w)hat’s right? If you want something you have the right to take it. If you want something, you have the right to do it’¹³⁹, echoing the individualistic attitude of neoliberalism described by Harvey. Through attributing the words to perhaps the most loathsome character of the novel, Ellis appears to be confirming Colby’s argument

¹³⁵Hakim, *ibid.*, p. 172.

¹³⁶Lucretius quoted in Simon May, *ibid.*, p. 74.

¹³⁷Hakim, *ibid.*, p. 172.

¹³⁸Ellis, *Less Than...*, p. 180.

¹³⁹*ibid.*, p. 177.

that he condemns the neoliberal project. And, because of the shocking nature of this episode, it is rather easy to dismiss all sexual encounters in the novel as exploitative and evil, but it is important to see this scene in the context of the whole text. After all, this is a shocking climax to a narrative which is otherwise littered with scenes showing how one can gain both in terms of monetary advantages and pleasure by making the most of one's erotic capital. Indeed, the plot's preoccupation with characters' looks and the way sex provides a means for them to get out of difficult or dangerous situations shows Ellis' understanding of the value of erotic capital.

Sex as liberation

My third approach is taken from the works of Wilhelm Reich, the former pupil of Sigmund Freud and lifelong researcher of human sexuality, whose theory was particularly influential in the 1960s and 1970s, the time marked by the development of the welfare state and the hippie movement. Reich promoted free promiscuous love as a tool of personal and social liberation; '(i)f one represses one's own sexuality one develops all kinds of moralistic and esthetic defenses.'¹⁴⁰ 'Genital gratification (is) the decisive sex-economic factor in the prevention of neuroses and establishment of social achievement.'¹⁴¹ Popular with such key figures of the 1940s and 50s as Norman Mailer, JD Salinger, Saul Bellow, Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Dwight Macdonald and William S Burroughs,¹⁴² Reich 'proclaimed that only free and unmitigated satisfaction of mature genital sexuality could be genuinely healthful and

¹⁴⁰ Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution* (London: Vision, 1972), p. 6.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jul/08/wilhelm-reich-free-love-orgasmatron>, accessed 15/06/13.

liberating for the individual. And only by liberating individual sexuality, Reich argued, could the authoritarian behavior structures of class society be eliminated.¹⁴³

Although, as I argue earlier, Ellis valorises the concept of erotic capital, he equally gives credence to the ideas of Reich, endorsement of which is most evident in *The Rules of Attraction's* sexual utopia of the Camden campus. Here, a cut-off community of like-minded individuals is forging their own sexual politics. One of the main characters of the novel is bisexual Sean, who we are told by Paul, his on/off lover, is a son of farmers from the South. On financial aid, he has to shoplift because he does not 'have enough money.'¹⁴⁴ In one of his monologues Sean describes his short affair with a female rich hippie. He says how she looks, 'the skin smooth as brown marble,' how she speaks, "'(n)one of your beeswax'", "'(t)his is really mellow chili'", how she eats, bringing 'her own chopsticks to every meal' and the name of her cat, Tahini,¹⁴⁵ thus letting us know that she is the opposite of him, and they are not well suited; '(t)he hippie kept telling me that I was stiff, too uptight'¹⁴⁶, and that she was 'always tripping, which bothered me too.'¹⁴⁷ And yet, despite their differences, he keeps on with her for a long time, when compared to the length of the other characters' relationships, as 'the sex was terrific.'¹⁴⁸ Sitting in her room smoking pot with her friends, Sean tells us that as he held her she said, "'(t)he world blows my mind.'¹⁴⁹ Then he announces, '(a)nd you know what? I fucked her anyway.'¹⁵⁰ This exchange is telling, as despite their seemingly completely different outlook,

¹⁴³James Roy McBean, "Sex and Politics: Wilhelm Reich, World Revolution, and Makavejev's WR", *Film Quarterly*, Vol.25, No.3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 2-13, p. 4.

¹⁴⁴Ellis, *The Rules of...*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁵*ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁴⁶*ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁷*ibid.*

¹⁴⁸*ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁹*ibid.*

¹⁵⁰*ibid.*

demeanor, dress sense, interests and friends, Sean and the hippie are united in their rejection of the outside world, and they transgress its rules together through their love of sex. The affair ends when Sean leaves the hippie at a party, where she is so high that she does not seem to realise that he has left her, and for good. Perhaps she never will, but if she does it seems she probably will not care. There are no hard feelings, no anguish. What united the rich hippie and relatively less well-off Sean was their mutual appreciating of sex, and, through it, they both transgress the shackles of class.

Like class, Reich believes that family is also a constraint to be overcome in the pursuit of sexual contentment. In *The Sexual Revolution* he argues that

in general, people are incapable of sexual independence; they are bound to their partners by loveless, sticky ties and therefore incapable of separating from them; they are afraid that in case of losing a partner they might not find another. This fear is always based on infantile attachments to mother, father or older siblings.¹⁵¹

He asserts that for a fully functional and happy sexual relationship the family has to be replaced by communal living. 'If the family were replaced by the collective, the formation of such pathological attachments would not occur.'¹⁵²

One such pathological attachment in the novel is that of Lauren to Victor. With Victor in Europe and the relationship seemingly over, Lauren is heartbroken, her monologue consumed by her obsession with her former lover. In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* Roland Barthes writes:

the clinical fear of breakdown is the fear of a breakdown which has already been experienced (*primitive agony*)...Similarly, it seems, for the lover's anxiety: it is the fear of a mourning which has already occurred, at the very origin of love, from the moment when I was first 'ravished'. Someone would have to be able to tell me: 'Don't be anxious any more – you've already lost him/her.'¹⁵³

¹⁵¹Reich, *ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁵²*ibid.*

¹⁵³Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 29/30.

From the outset of her narrative, Lauren is mourning Victor, obsessing over a relationship that is already dead, yet one she denies to herself has extinguished, thus prolonging the anguish. Victor, somewhat cruelly, does not mention Lauren at all in his monologue, so we are told about the relationship only from her perspective and it comes across as a rather romantic affair. Her mourning takes on a typical character, with reminders of him everywhere: ‘I hear a song that I remember listening to when I was seeing Victor.’¹⁵⁴ She is also fixated on memories of his physical appearance, ‘Victor’s hands. Victor’s leopard-skin pants. Ripped army boots and...his pubic hair? His arms. Watching him shave. At the Palladium, how handsome he looked in a tuxedo. Making love in his apartment. Brown eyes.’¹⁵⁵ Lauren is distraught, unable to concentrate on her work and on her current partner, Franklin. Waking up from a yet another dream about Victor she says, ‘I look around the room. Franklin is gone. The things around me depress me, seem to define my pitiful existence, everything is so boring: my typewriter – no cartridges; my easel – no canvas; my bookshelf – no books.’¹⁵⁶ Lauren and Paul are the novel’s characters who most attach themselves to their sexual partners. They are also the ones who we witness engaging with their families, Lauren on the phone with her mother, receiving cheques from her father, Paul also on the phone with his mother, and then forced to go on a trip with her. From his hotel room he makes a desperate call to Sean before ‘The Dressed To Get Screwed Party’, jealously questioning Sean about who he is going with:

‘With who?’ I ask. ‘With Patrick?’
‘What?’
‘With who?’ I ask again.
‘I thought you asked me that,’ he says.
‘Well?’

¹⁵⁴Ellis, *The Rules of...*, p. 39.

¹⁵⁵*ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁶*ibid.*

‘The person who’s been leaving notes in my box,’ he says loudly, laughing.¹⁵⁷

Fearing he has already lost Sean, Paul says in the last sentence in this chapter, ‘I hang up too, then touch my face, and drink another beer; wonder why Richard’s late.’ Richard, a former lover and the son of his mother’s companion on the trip, is an immediate romantic replacement in Paul’s mind, who, like Lauren, is unable to accept the possibility of several simultaneous, satisfying sexual partners.

In comparison, Sean appears to be sexually free. He has sex with both men and women and has sex for the sheer pleasure of it, who the partner is being of minor importance, as long as he is able to orgasm. When having sex with a girl called Susan he says ‘(a)nd I come – spurt spurt – like bad poetry and then what?’¹⁵⁸ The girl wants some intimacy, but Sean is unable to give it: ‘(s)he tries to hold me, but I just ask for some Kleenex.’¹⁵⁹ When she starts to cry Sean says, ““(w)hat? What’s wrong?” I ask, alarmed. “Wait. I told you I came.””¹⁶⁰ For Sean, orgasm is the only fulfillment needed, and he does not understand Susan’s tears. It is telling that he is the character most detached from his family, surviving on financial aid rather than provisions from parents, like the other characters. He also appears the happiest. For him, the Camden community is his family, and because it is he can be liberated from traditional family relationships and commitments, having free time to pursue other interests such as playing video games, shoplifting and riding his motorcycle. Also noteworthy is the fact that Sean’s brother is Patrick Bateman, the serial killer from *American Psycho*, as if Ellis is warning us that blood family is bad news, and Sean is only safe in the commune that is Camden. Another sign of family being portrayed

¹⁵⁷ibid., p. 156.

¹⁵⁸ibid., p. 126.

¹⁵⁹ibid.

¹⁶⁰ibid.

negatively is the freshman band being ‘called The Parents – that’s enough to send out some message to people’s feelers that something wrong is going down.’¹⁶¹

Ellis continues to illustrate the danger of long-term attachments that mimic the longevity of family ties through the ongoing sadness experienced by Lauren and Paul at the absence of their loved ones. Prior to the ‘The Dressed To Get Screwed’ party Sean tells the reader that he is going to have sex with Lauren, which seems unlikely as before the party, she has no intention to have sex with him. Yet, after trying and failing to get through to Victor on the phone, Lauren tells us that she hooks up with Sean after refusing the advances of another boy, Reggie. Why does she choose simple Sean, the reader might wonder? Aside from good looks he does not have much going on. He is not intelligent like her previous lover Franklin and is not a patch on Victor, who, currently travelling in Europe, is the epitome of sophistication and elegance, as well as beauty. Sean manages to seduce Lauren because he is giving out the right signals. In a sea of characters who are supposedly all the same, as argues Colby in her analysis of the novel, he stands out as he ‘has no compulsive morality because he has no impulses which call for moral inhibition,’¹⁶² making him a perfect lover for the sexually sick like Lauren and Paul, whose ‘capacity for sexual gratification is always greatly reduced if not entirely destroyed.’¹⁶³

But even Sean is not completely immune from the conditions imposed by neoliberal society. Reich writes that ‘(w)e have to be quite clear about the fact that today there are no people with a solid, fully developed sex-affirmative structure, for all of us have gone through an authoritarian, religious, sex-negative educational

¹⁶¹ibid., p. 212.

¹⁶²Reich, *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶³ibid., p. 4.

machine.’¹⁶⁴ Although he was writing in 1936, his words ring true for the characters of *The Rules of Attraction*. When Lauren falls pregnant Sean offers to marry her. They leave Camden and stay with friends in New York, but soon realise their plan is a bad one. A road trip with no destination ensues as they stay in motels, taking coke and not talking. Eventually Lauren has an abortion, and they both return to Camden. It is here that Sean starts feeling good again. At a party he ends up having sex with four different girls and tells the reader, ‘(t)his was when it all came together. This was where I wanted to be.’¹⁶⁵ The safety of Camden is reaffirmed when, following visiting his dealer, to whom he owes a lot of money, he is chased by a truck-full of townies. As Sean’s car speeds into the Camden grounds, the security gates shut and the townies are kept out. Ultimately though, the utopia must end. It is Christmas break, and everyone leaves. Sean does not have anywhere to go, but on his way out he picks up a townie girl, and the narrative ends mid-sentence, like it began.

Sex, Ellis asserts through Sean’s narrative, is therefore a way to escape the dangers of the world, whether they be class, family or the individualism propagated by neoliberalism. This is because, as Catherine Waldby writes in her essay “Destruction: Boundary erotic’s and refigurations of the heterosexual male body” in *Sexy Bodies*, ‘(e)rotic pleasure arguably requires a kind of momentary annihilation or suspension of what normally counts as “identity”, the conscious, masterful, self-identical self lost in the “little death” of orgasm’.¹⁶⁶ In this understanding, the act of sex is a rebellion against individualisation and signifies a chance of an escape. Such an argument makes clear why Sean is the character with the most troubled sense of

¹⁶⁴ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶⁵Ellis, *The Rules of...*, p. 308.

¹⁶⁶Catherine Waldby, “Destruction: Boundary erotic’s and refigurations of the heterosexual male body” in *Sexy Bodies*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 266.

self, who engages in the most sexual encounters. However, toward the end of the novel our perception of his identity is thrown into question. As he leaves Camden to visit his father in hospital, Sean is revealed not to be a poor boy from the South, but actually someone from a wealthy New York family, who spent his previous birthday celebrating by eating at The Four Seasons, shopping at Barneys and Gucci, watching musicals and partying at the Trump Tower.¹⁶⁷ Now, picked up by a limousine, Sean meets his brother Patrick in the waiting room of the hospital. Patrick interrogates Sean over his lack of direction, accusing him of being a disappointment to their father. ‘You know he was always upset about all the football scholarships you threw away.’¹⁶⁸ Sean says, ‘(w)ell, what do you want? A lawyer? A priest? A neurosurgeon?’ ‘What *you* do?’¹⁶⁹ The italics seem to signify that Patrick’s profession of a banker is the worst of all, and thus we come to understand that Sean is the epitome of the opposite of neoliberal individualised man. Rather, Sean is the site of the biggest resistance to the forces of neoliberal power. He is everybody and nobody, changing his identity as he goes along to best suit his interests in a given situation and illustrating that ‘(s)exual power, like other forms of power, exists as a relation between all strands of a given social web, and does not necessarily take the form of a prohibition, refusal, denial.’¹⁷⁰ Sean does not conform to any rules, neither identifying himself with heterosexuality nor homosexuality and having sex with nearly everybody. He does not want to be a student, nor does he want to have a profession. He escapes labels with an identity that is transgressive and fluid, thus resisting the power structure thrust upon it, and, in this way, he has the best chance of survival. This position is reiterated by the fact that it is Sean’s monologue with which

¹⁶⁷Ellis, *The Rules of...*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁶⁸*ibid.*, p. 276.

¹⁶⁹*ibid.*

¹⁷⁰Bailey, *ibid.*, p. 110.

the novel ends. He is thus the character who leaves the longest lasting impression on the reader.

We can find many similarities between Sean's monologue and Reich's writing. Reich shows us that through the correct nourishing of one's sexual urges one can transcend the shackles of family, class and indeed mourning, but even for those most skilled, it is a continuous struggle as the rules of the neoliberal world are always encroaching, even in supposedly safe havens such as the utopia of Camden. Therefore, to uphold the values of sexual liberation one must be always on guard and this work is why most of Ellis' subjects do not manage to be liberated for any significant length of time.

Conclusion: love, death and the creation of self

In the second to last story in *The Informers*, entitled "On the Beach", we watch the slow HIV death of a young girl, collapsed into the model Christie in the film version, as told by her boyfriend. Here, there appears to be a degree of responsibility on the part of the virus carrier: '(i)t was later, at the party after the prom, on Michael Landon's yacht, after the coke had ran out, while we were making out in the cabin below, that she broke away, said there was this problem.'¹⁷¹ The girl's deteriorating body does not go unnoticed:

"She used to be totally hot," I shouted at Mona when I was packing a bag, ready to leave last Sunday. Tall (she still looks tall but more like a tall skeleton) and blond (for some freaky reason she bought a black wig when she started losing it all) and her body was supple, carefully muscled, aerobicized, and now she basically looks like shit. And everyone knows too.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹Ellis, *The Informers*, p. 247.

¹⁷²ibid. p. 248.

The girl is not fighting against her impending death. She stops shaving her legs, takes up smoking. Although still alive, it is as if she is already gone – ‘(s)he doesn’t say anything, might as well be dead’¹⁷³ echoing the fatalistic approach to AIDS in the 1980s and 90s. Deeming her already a lost cause, incapable of giving him any more pleasure, her boyfriend decides it is time to leave her: ““(i)t’s like a movie I’ve seen before and I know what’s going to happen.””¹⁷⁴ When questioned by another friend about whether he loves the dying girl, the narrator says, ““(n)o, but so what?”” I ask. ““What would that fix?”” I ask. ““If I did – that’s going to help?””¹⁷⁵ Here, Ellis seems to be marking the death of the power of love and sex. With AIDS came the end of possibility. The hot girl with HIV is no longer hot, reduced to a breathing skeleton in a crass wig, left out on a beach to die alone. A warning is being issued: in the neoliberal era, everyone is a loser in the end. Love and sex may be able to bring satisfaction and financial capital for a while, but, in time and in line with other facets of neoliberalism, they destroy the individual.

However, if neoliberalism creates only monsters, is death such a bad thing? Writing about the recent subculture fashion for barebacking amongst homosexual males, Leo Bersani illustrates there might even be some fun to be had in death. The practice involves men engaging in unprotected sex with others whose HIV-status is unknown to them or actively seeking out sexual partners who are HIV-positive for the thrill of not knowing if they will contract the disease. Shocking as it may seem, the practice shows how far the world has come since the 1980s and 90s when HIV was still in its infancy and was a death inducing comedown of the sexual freedom of the 1960s and 70s. Bersani evaluates the practice, interpreting it variously as a death-

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 250.

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*

drive, as akin to impregnation, where the ‘gift-giver’ impregnates the ‘bug-chaser’ with the seed of the virus and, most positively, as a symbolic transference of the values of the homosexual subculture. Whilst conceding the practice is highly controversial and dangerous, he lays down a theoretical deconstruction of the reason for the growing number of barebackers, arguing, ‘what could be more fantasmatically explosive for the bug-chaser than to feel the infected gift-giver’s orgasm as an anticipatory shattering of his own biological life *and* the murder of the “baby” itself by virtue of the fatal properties of the reproductive seed?’¹⁷⁶ There are thrills to be had in death, as Ellis himself illustrates on several occasions, most illustriously in *American Psycho*.

But if people are only victims of political systems or the weapons of the waves of their resistance, then, as Sartre argues, ““there is no such thing as man; there are people, wholly defined by their society and by the historical movement which carries them along.””¹⁷⁷ Individualism is at the heart of the historical movement that is neoliberalism and central to Alain Badiou’s argument of why people are unable to partake in long-lasting love relationships. Yet, the paradox of neoliberalism is the fact that whilst its central doctrine is the emphasis of ‘me, myself and I’, identity is destroyed through the commodification of every aspect of life. Moreover, ‘Ellis manipulates pronouns in such a way as to heighten this destabilized identity.’¹⁷⁸ The repetition of people also destabilises the notion of selfhood. But so strong is the cult of individualism under neoliberalism that even as identity is destroyed, it is created anew, and this is perhaps the juncture at which love can flourish.

¹⁷⁶Bersani and Phillips, *ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁷⁷Michael J. R. Cross, *Communities of Individuals: Liberalism, Communitarianism and Sartre’s Anarchism* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), p. 39.

¹⁷⁸Serpell, *ibid.*, p. 58.

To believe this, however, one must make the assumption that identity cannot be formed without outside forces. This is by no means a unanimous assumption, however. Kant, for example, believes the ““antecedently individuated” self is not dependent upon any social or other circumstances. The individual’s capacity to autonomously choose its ends is not one amongst many equally valuable capacities but it forms the essence of that person’s identity and is, therefore, the most fundamental value, to be protected above all others.’¹⁷⁹ To some degree John Rawls furthers this idea in *A Theory Of Justice*, which in turn, is disputed by Michael J. Sandel who argues that

on Rawls’s conception of a person a person’s ends are always things to which he chooses to become attached and from which he may, presumably, choose to become unattached. However, this voluntaristic view is not the only way of characterising the relation between the person and his ends. For example, instead of an act of will the relationship could be regarded as an act of understanding, a process of self-reflection whereby the commitment to an end is a manifestation of some deep understanding about the good life. Thus the relation between a person and his ends becomes an act of discovery rather than an act of choice.¹⁸⁰

If we see a person’s ends as the act of being in a relationship and, if it is an act of discovery rather than an act of choice, then love, which in the above reading is the destruction of identity, is a force which creates and recreates the individual. Indeed, in *Sharing the World* Luce Irigaray writes, ‘(w)e often give in order to receive, not necessarily from an other, but rather as an effect of our gesture upon ourselves – to feel greater, more open and noble.’¹⁸¹ In that case, it can be argued that giving, whether through sex or love, enriches our identity; we feel alive through the act of giving.

¹⁷⁹Cross, *ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁸⁰*ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁸¹Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London and New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. 24-25.

American Psycho presents a situation where this is no longer possible, where the only way to feel alive is through the act of taking. As stated above, Patrick Bateman, the serial killer at the centre of the narrative, first makes an appearance towards the end of *The Rules of Attraction* as the brother of one of this book's main characters, Sean. In *American Psycho* the spotlight is firmly on him, highlighting the individualistic tone of the neoliberal era. Working as a Wall Street banker, he spends his life drinking, taking drugs, having sex, but, most prolifically, killing people. The murders get more elaborate and brutal as the book goes on, as do the lists of things Bateman owns, from CDs to clothes, to grooming products and everything in-between. Neoliberalism's commodification teaches us that everything can be owned, that the goal is to have as much as possible. Opening ourselves up to another means we give up some of our property. This exchange, for Bateman at least, is an impossibility. He hires prostitutes then kills them, as if safeguarding that they do not take anything away from him, from his money, to some essence of himself. This violent protection of his capital is a progression of sorts from the first three books Ellis wrote. Whilst the characters in *Less Than Zero* do virtually nothing, with violence as a reason to exist, a goal, only hinted at towards the end, in *American Psycho* this agency is presented as the only viable form of life. Death replaces sex as the saviour of self, but here it is others' death that is attractive.

In his focus on death in *American Psycho* Ellis also illustrates what Freud sees as the natural progression of a love relationship, that is, one that ends in destruction of the other. In Patrick Bateman the reader finds the kind of jealousy that ends unions. Indeed, '(t)hroughout the evolution of Freud's thought, Eros always has an antagonist. In his earlier theory the antagonist is self-preservation, or the ego-instinct; in his later

theory the antagonist is the death or aggressive instinct.’¹⁸² Freud argues that there are three types of death drive: homeostasis, the ‘getting rid of tensions and attaining inactivity’¹⁸³ or Nirvana; repetition-compulsion, ‘a general instinctual tendency to restore an earlier state of things, ultimately derived from a tendency in all organisms to return to the inorganic or dead level out of which life arose’,¹⁸⁴ and sado-masochism, ‘a primary masochism directed against the self’ with sadism being ‘an extroversion of this primary masochism.’¹⁸⁵ Julia Kristeva continues this thread when discussing depression following the loss of a loved object. ‘According to classic psychoanalytic theory (Abraham, Freud, and Melanie Klein), depression, like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object’¹⁸⁶ which leads to a hatred of oneself for one’s feelings for it. ‘The complaint against oneself would therefore be a complaint against another, and putting oneself to death but a tragic disguise for massacring an other.’¹⁸⁷

Such a narrative of love is present in the work of Elizabeth Wurtzel, a contemporary of Ellis who began her career with the 1994 memoir *Prozac Nation* and made her fortune deconstructing relationships within the neoliberal era of the 90s. Twenty years later, in an article entitled ‘Getting Married is Easy’ she remembers being the ‘crazy ex-girlfriend’ to many an (un)lucky man, confessing ‘I would swallow half a bottle of tranquilizers over a misunderstanding.’¹⁸⁸ Wurtzel eventually went on to have a happy relationship and married aged 46, but only once she stopped taking the antidepressant drugs which accompanied her for most of her career.

¹⁸²Brown, *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁸³*ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁸⁴*ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁸⁵*ibid.*

¹⁸⁶Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 11.

¹⁸⁷*ibid.*

¹⁸⁸<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/opinion/sunday/elizabeth-wurtzel-why-i-will-be-wed.html>, accessed 15/10/14.

Wurtzel's experience shows concurrency with Fisher's argument in *Why we love, why we cheat*. Recounting the modern American antidepressant epidemic, Fisher argues that serotonin-increasing drugs suppress the dopamine circuit, dopamine being associated with love. Not only this, they also kill the sex drive and thus deny people of orgasm. Orgasm releases the rush of dopamine that is key to romantic attachment. Fisher warns of tempering with brain systems, arguing that when one is tampered with, so is another.¹⁸⁹

Ellis' characters are similarly dependent on drugs. They get wasted and shed their identities, thus avoiding acts of connecting. It would seem then that the identity-forming mechanisms of old have been eroded. So from where is one to form a new identity? And what kind of identity will be formed in the subject which has no Other to model itself on?

Sociopaths have accepted what we refuse to accept: that our symbolic has reached a dead end. They persist without the Other, seemingly without regard for the inconsistency that this failure of the superego ushers in. What is ushered in is precisely the creation of a new man. Not the Nietzschean Last man, but a subject that is rooted in an inescapable nihilism, and who, "is neither subject to guilt nor able to rely upon a critical free will" (Dufour, 167).¹⁹⁰

Such a man is Ellis' Patrick Bateman. But, like his obsessive listing of items he possesses or music he is an expert on, death is an addiction that masks and precludes any form of agency. 'Grammatically, as is the rule with all of Ellis' works, the book is presented almost uniformly in a first person, present tense voice in the indicative mood. This is fundamental to Ellis' effects of boredom.'¹⁹¹ All Bateman can do is keep on killing until he is caught or dies in the process. There is no possibility for

¹⁸⁹http://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_tells_us_why_we_love_cheat?language=en, accessed 27/01/2015.

¹⁹⁰<http://danieltutt.com/2012/07/29/neoliberalism-and-the-symbolic-serfdom-of-man/>, accessed 15/10/14.

¹⁹¹Julian Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho* (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), p. 24.

anything revolutionary or unexpected to happen and the behaviour keeps neoliberalism in place. Kristeva describes such ‘narcissistic individuals’ as people for whom

sadness is really the sole object; more precisely it is a substitute object they become attached to, an object they tame and cherish for lack of another. In such a case, suicide is not a disguised act of war but a merging with sadness and, beyond it, with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere, such as the promises of nothingness, of death.¹⁹²

Perhaps this is the reason why in his last book Ellis returned to the characters of his first novel. These are the characters who still possess some capacity for love, for intimacy, and merging on freeways and elsewhere.

Thus rather than joining one of the opposing camps who either see Ellis as a writer who valorises neoliberalism, or critiques it, I propose that his body of work needs to always be examined on a scale and in the context of the acceleration of neoliberalism’s destruction. In retrospect there is always less to be shocked at and more to appreciate in Ellis’ work, as has been the tendency of the critical appraisal of *American Psycho*, with much early negative commentary leading to ongoing appreciation. Nevertheless, neoliberalism’s obliteration of people’s capacity to form relationships is apparent from the first page of his first novel, but Ellis also weaves solutions to the problems he presents with each subsequent book, thus showing us that he is an optimist. So whilst in *Less Than Zero* people are finding it difficult to connect, in *The Rules of Attraction*, Ellis presents us with a utopia where they might still find ways to merge with each other, this time in sex. The re-emergence of characters, such as the nameless girl from *The Rules Of Attraction* in *The Informers* shows us too that despite the obstacles presented by love, sex and neoliberalism, people find ways to resist, retaliate and reincarnate. Still, he unblinkingly shows the

¹⁹²Kristeva, *ibid.*, p. 12.

human condition to be people who are more willing to destroy themselves and others than to fall in love, and neoliberalism makes this increasingly easy, to the point that Patrick Bateman gets away with all the murders he commits in *American Psycho*. Whether any of them are real is irrelevant as the fact that committing them either in actuality, or in his imagination takes up so much of Patrick Bateman's time, shows that this political system has created a world where there is finally no space for love. But like the red letters of the sign hanging above a door in Harry's restaurant at the end of *American Psycho* which say, 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT', so too, Ellis seems to be declaring throughout his oeuvre, is love's exit not really an exit. Rather, it is a chance for it to disappear to remerge, anew.

Creative process

My novel centres around Elaine, John and Kat; a wife, her husband and their niece respectively, who spend a month together in Elaine and John's family home in suburban Manchester, when Kat comes to visit them and their two children from London.

The action takes place exclusively within and around Elaine and John's house, creating a stifling atmosphere, accentuated by my use of short sentences, often repetitive in structure. These two stylistic decisions combined convey a sense of diminished quality of life resulting from a marriage at its end and love which has become a mechanical routine of unceasing dividing up of labour, be it moneymaking, sex or childcare, with no room for intimacy or selfless empathy. An example of this lack of understanding or willingness to compromise is the first time the reader

witnesses Elaine and John having sex. Afterwards, Elaine goes to the bathroom, but John follows her to fulfill a fetish she does not share:

Elaine closed the door behind her but a moment later John was in the doorway, his eyes boring into her as she sat down on the toilet. Elaine looked down at the floor, the small grey tiles with black grouting a focal point for her eyes. Looking up at her husband she said, ‘I can’t go with you watching me.’
‘You mean you won’t,’ John said.¹⁹³

The narrative is almost continuous with each chapter the following day in one month, which illustrates the monotony of cohabitation, a common hallmark of Western marriages or romantic relationships. I counteract this oppressive structure and style with pared back narration focused on dialogue to imbue the text with an almost cinematic quality. Avoiding inner monologue and detailed physical description of the characters, I create a mood of confusion, misunderstanding and strangeness:

‘Was the panic attack to do with your mum?’
Kat didn’t reply, her face blank.
‘Was it to do with what you said about Michelle yesterday?’
‘I didn’t say anything,’ Kat said.
‘You told me that...’ Elaine said then trailed off, noticing the change on Kat’s face.
‘Told you what?’ Kat challenged.
Elaine didn’t say anything, going over to the fridge to get the milk instead. She was starting to get a headache.¹⁹⁴

The desired effect of these stylistic choices is to produce layers of ambiguity in the otherwise linear narrative that takes place in a recognisable domestic setting. My aim is to create an impression of what it is like to experience love and love’s loss in the neoliberal era – experiences which I see as simultaneously familiar yet frightening, repetitive but unpredictable. Like Ellis, I use ‘*parataxis*, or in other words the refusal of the prose to construct complex sentence formations’ which lead to ‘an effect of

¹⁹³Kamila Rymajdo, *Relations* (2016), p. 95.

¹⁹⁴*ibid.*, p. 87.

absolute desperation, acceleration and disintegration.’¹⁹⁵ Similarly to *American Psycho*, where inconsistencies and discrepancies are used to ‘create the slightest of gaps between Ellis and his narrator Bateman—enough of a gap to allow terms like unreliability, satire, and allegory into the discussion’¹⁹⁶ I use Kat’s unreliable narrative, doubted by Elaine and John, but also the reader through the consistent lack of evidence for its truthfulness, to create an impression of the neoliberal subject as one whose identity is in flux at best and void at worst. This acts as a metaphor for the role imagination plays in love too.

Indeed, in *Why Love Hurts* Eva Illouz suggests that ‘(b)oth ordinary experience and a vast corpus of philosophical and literary writing attest to the fact that when loving another, the imaginary invocation of the beloved is as powerful as its presence and to the fact that when in love, to a large extent we invent the object of our desires.’¹⁹⁷ Or, like ‘(i)n *American Psycho*, there is no love...men and women in this textual world exist on parallel, untouching and opposed planes of reality; each sex satisfies for the other only preconceived and fixed expectations, within a general campaign of siege and domination.’¹⁹⁸ It therefore might be obvious to Kat and the reader that Elaine and John’s relationship is in reality defunct, but it is not obvious to the couple, who do not perceive or ignore the accumulating evidence. It is only when they are together in their bedroom that they come face to face with their true selves, and at these points it becomes obvious even to them their love for each other has, to a large degree, passed. Still, with a family comes responsibility and the admittance of defeat is in turn slow, thus plot development could not be the main driving force of

¹⁹⁵Murphet, *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁹⁶Serpell, *ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹⁷Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2002), p. 200.

¹⁹⁸Murphet, *ibid.*, p. 31.

the unpicking of love that I set out to create.

Much like Clay in *Less Than Zero* and Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, whose ‘ineffectuality as a central protagonist is extraordinary’¹⁹⁹ all my characters grapple with agency. John is unable to persuade his wife to either join him in therapy or partake in the kind of sexual activity which he finds arousing, while Elaine is unable to rediscover intimacy or leave her husband, living in a sort of limbo where she increasingly does not know how to channel her emotions, resulting in the kind of reification displayed by Ellis’ characters, where ‘relationships between human beings (are transformed) into relationships between things.’²⁰⁰ Kat, on the other hand, is unable to reconcile with her mother, study or find an outlet for her restlessness. The female characters of the novel owe much to the heroines of Jean Rhys’ books too, especially in their financial reliance on other people, or, in Elaine’s case, a man. But while Rhys’ characters, ‘all inevitably travel a downward spiral into despair, penury and isolation’²⁰¹ Elaine and Kat find some solace in each other. Still, like Rhys’ women, they fall victim to ‘middle-class values, such as order, respectability, and strict control of the body in private as well as public spaces.’²⁰²

This control prevents them from overcoming their situations, and on top of the adherence to societal norms, they police each other. Constantly in the house, they are prisoners of their own and each other’s sense of morality, which, although not the same, is in each case critical of other women and thus subscribes to patriarchal

¹⁹⁹ibid., p. 32.

²⁰⁰ibid., p. 37.

²⁰¹Helga Druxes, *Resisting Bodies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), p. 49.

²⁰²ibid., p. 50.

systems of oppression. So when Kat eavesdrop on Elaine having an orgasm in her sleep, she does not let Elaine forget about it:

Was that the first time that's happened?' Kat asked Elaine after dinner. They'd eaten with the children, with John due back late from work. 'Yes,' Elaine said, 'I've never missed picking them up.' 'No, I mean your orgasm,' Kat said from her usual spot at the back door. 'I didn't have an orgasm,' Elaine said, shutting the dishwasher. Kat took a drag. 'I heard you.'²⁰³

Kat, like Rhys' young Anna Morgan from *Voyage in the Dark*, is an almost orphan, at war with her mother, involved with an older man, seeking refuge in a new place, while Elaine, having a husband and money, is less desperate than Rhys' older heroines such as *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie's* Julia Martin or *Good Morning, Midnight's* Sophia Jensen, but she shares with them a certain decline and crisis of identity, having been supported by a man her whole life and now facing a future without a guarantee of this continuing. So while she is increasingly certain that the life she is leading is not one she wants, she does not possess the means or even the imagination to conjure up what she can replace it with, and from this juncture stems her rather masochistic decision to pursue a sexual relationship with Kat, while Kat, it could be argued, enters into the relation to exert some control over a household where otherwise she has no footing.

The kind of relationship that occurs between Elaine and Kat is well exemplified by Rhys in *Quartet*. 'Despite the text's apparent concern with an Oedipal configuration, the narrative reveals another interest, one that draws upon a daughter's rageful feelings about a maternal figure by painting that mother as eminently desirable, as well as withholding and malign.'²⁰⁴ Moreover, 'Rhys uses her protagonist's state of insatiable need as nodal point for an examination of the

²⁰³Rymajdo, *ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁰⁴Anne B. Simpson, *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 69.

interconnected and fraught conditions of deprivation, loss, greed, and envy as these relate to infant phantasies and, in particular, feminine experience.²⁰⁵

These feelings are exasperated in the characters of Elaine and Kat as both experienced a maternal loss. While Kat's mother comes across as distant, preoccupied with her work and love life, seemingly allowing Kat to become exceedingly hedonistic and irresponsible, Elaine experienced her mother's death when she was a young girl. Both Elaine and Kat seem preoccupied with their mothers. Kat repeatedly asks Elaine about Michelle (her mother and Elaine's twin sister), while Elaine spends many moments remembering her own mother, still apparently mourning her death many decades later:

Elaine began on her weeding. She thought of her mother tending to her own vegetable patch in their two-up-two-down terrace in Chester. Like her, her mother didn't work, her father said, too overwhelmed with the responsibility of looking after two children, when she was expecting one. Sometimes, when Elaine was feeling especially down, she wondered if the extra responsibility had brought on her death, but she knew such thoughts made no sense. Her mother had died of cancer, rather than stress.²⁰⁶

Likewise, '(i)n citing powerful, early longings for a bond with the maternal as these create the template upon which later desires will be erected, Rhys's insights parallel those under consideration among her psychoanalytic contemporaries.²⁰⁷ Indeed, in "Female Sexuality", Freud proposed "the possibility that a number of women remain arrested in their original attachment to their mother and never achieve a true change-over towards men".²⁰⁸ According to Adrienne Rich, this 'institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Rymajdo, *ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁰⁷ Simpson, *ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 70.

man, if she is to become what is defined as a “normal” woman—that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards men.²⁰⁹

Given that Elaine has already transferred these feelings towards John, and Kat towards men she has slept with, I create a situation or a sort of utopia that gives credibility to these feelings’ development, or a reversal of the institutionalised heterosexuality, by keeping the characters and the action in the house. Only in this safe space, away from institutions that would deem their feelings and actions taboo can they act on them.

The house also acts as an ever-present metaphor for the dying love between John and Elaine. It symbolises a coffin or tomb, whilst also acting as an echo chamber, where Elaine’s views and feelings are rarely questioned, confined inside the physical walls where only her own taste and ideas are reflected, with John so much out of the house, out of her mind and uninvolved in family life. Moreover, Elaine resists John’s urging to see his therapist and thus face a different view, and it is only as Kat starts to daily question Elaine’s perceived wisdom and her feelings about her husband that Elaine begins accept and voice her true emotions.

In its use of symbols, such as the house being emblematic of the claustrophobia of marriage as well as stylistic devices like the repetition of sentence structures and daily routines of the characters, my novel is indebted to Ellis, who deploys repetition, lack of narrative development and unreliable narrators such as Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* to the point that ‘much of the controversy surrounding the book stemmed from this lack of a reliable guide’²¹⁰ and the tediousness of much of the text. Although my novel is written in the third person, it is Elaine’s point of view that the reader is given. The effect is similar to that which Ellis achieves with first person in

²⁰⁹Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 219.

²¹⁰Murphet, *ibid.*, p. 23.

American Psycho: '(a)n unmodulated voice of this sort necessarily creates enormous resistance in the reader's mind, and the monotonous consistency of Bateman's monologue dispels most of our expectations of "style" from this reading experience.'²¹¹ Similarly to the way that Bateman lists the products he has and the ways in which he uses them, I focus on details of the décor, the various steps of making a cup of tea or cooking dinner, washing clothes or vacuuming to present the reader with an exact depiction of Elaine's life as a housewife. Routine is evident from the first chapter, when Elaine becomes stressed by Kat's arrival, not because the girl might stay longer than Elaine wishes her to or create some scandal, but because she disrupts the stability of Elaine's routine of picking up her children from school at a very specific time, with even a few minutes' change a source of great anxiety to her. Later, a similar panic is observed when Elaine falls asleep and wakes up much later than when the children finish school, even though it transpires that they are safe at the after-school club:

'That's not the point,' Elaine told her. 'They'll be confused. And the school...'

'Will think you're a bad mother?'

Elaine grabbed her keys from the bowl on the sideboard. 'Are you coming with me?'

'No, I'll stay here.'

'Alright,' Elaine said. She left the house and ran towards her car.²¹²

However, my novel's sharp focus on the relationship between the female characters, as defined by their relationship with the man in the novel, owes perhaps just as much to the writing of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on homosocial bonds in *Between Men*. Although I am writing about the relationship between women, similar characteristics come into play. As Sedgwick discusses in her chapter on William Wycherley's Restoration comedy, *The Country Wife*, 'the routing of homosocial

²¹¹ibid., pp. 24-25.

²¹²Rymajdo, ibid., p. 123.

desire through women is clearly presented as compulsory.²¹³ In my novel, without John's character and Elaine's unhappiness with him, the relationship with Kat would not take the course that it does. Their conversations centre around Elaine's feelings towards John and thus Elaine comes to realise what she is to gain in a different type of bond – a bond with a woman.

The Country Wife, Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, illustrates three facets of homosociality: 'the compulsory and double-edged involvement of women in all the male homosocial bonds, the absence of direct genital contact between men, and the cognitively hierarchical, authoritarian, "transcendent" nature of the homosocial bond signaled by cuckoldry.'²¹⁴ 'The bond of cuckoldry differs from at least some social conformations of homosexuality in being *necessarily* hierarchical in structure, with an "active" participant who is clearly in the ascendancy over the "passive" one.'²¹⁵ Although the beginning of my novel depicts Kat as a young woman in distress, seeking refuge after a romantic disaster involving an older man linked to her mother, she leaves having transformed the household into which she came bounding in only a month before. She arrives with apparently little agency, but leaves having affected the course of John and Elaine's relationship, and, within the relationship between her and Elaine, she is the "active" one doing the cuckolding. True to Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory, John in the place of a female character, gives shape to the homosocial bond between Kat and Elaine, but eventually the relationship between the two women develops into a sexual one and the power dynamic shifts.

At this juncture, the union takes on some of the traits of love as described by

²¹³Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 49.

²¹⁴*ibid.*, p. 66.

²¹⁵*ibid.*, p. 50.

Illouz, where ‘the other becomes the object of one’s uncritical attention.’²¹⁶ Quoting Simon Blackburn, she writes that “[l]overs are not literally blind. They do see each other’s cellulite, warts, and squints but the strange thing is that they do not mind them and might even find them enchanting.” So while Elaine still sees Kat’s flaws; her laziness and short temper, for example, her attitude towards these qualities softens. More than that, she finally manages to see the positive intention behind some of Kat’s behaviour, such as her unwavering questioning of Elaine’s feelings towards John. Illouz goes on to argue that, ‘to be in love is to overcome a sense of ordinary invisibility, and entails a sense of uniqueness and an increased sense of self-worth.’²¹⁷ It is from this acceptance of self-worth that Elaine is finally able to release her anger about John’s inability to cope with family life, his sexual preferences which are at odds with her own, and his propensity for self harm, which she sees as a weakness.

Because of this new relationship Elaine’s character undergoes the biggest transformation. At the beginning she is a rigid, emotionally repressed woman, but, under Kat’s guidance, comes to realise and accept that she no longer loves her husband in the way that she used to, and the fact that her desire and sexuality are a lot more complicated than she was willing to believe, as illustrated by her acceptance of the incestuous sexual relationship with Kat.

This crisis of identity that Elaine experiences raises both questions about what love and sexual attraction are, and whether the two can coexist. Elaine still shows some feelings of care and concern towards John’s wellbeing as the novel draws to a close. She gives much thought to what he is going to eat and drink while she is away, while towards Kat she displays feelings of jealousy, when the girl casually

²¹⁶Illouz, *ibid.*, p. 111.

²¹⁷*ibid.* p. 112.

announces that she is in contact with the man whom she fled from before coming to Manchester. I therefore propose that there is unavoidable friction in situations of sexual attraction, that there is a link between desire and aggression, between the erotic and hatred. In this way my writing perhaps most closely links with Freud's notions of love and sexuality, where feelings of possessiveness come to overrule any kind of love, and therefore love must always turn to hate in the end.

The novel's climax, that is the transgression of the taboo of incest cautions against what I see as an unrealistic aspiration towards a Western or romantic notion of love as described by Badiou. It also acts as a warning against what can happen when love is oversimplified or reduced to an exchange of capital as proposed for its success by Hakim. Thirdly, it functions as a foreboding of what can happen if love is contained in a space closed off from the outside world and its moral code, as proposed by the teaching of Reich. Nevertheless, although I reject the idea that any single one of the notions of love I use to examine the work of Bret Easton Ellis is going to lead to a happy union, I imply that there is meaning and beauty in being open to all types of love, even if their outcome is a sort of death of self and a hatred towards the other. Elaine is presented with offers from both John, who tells her he is willing to sacrifice his sense of duty towards Kat for her, and Kat, who, after fleeing, returns to continue the relationship with Elaine. These options, although both imperfect, stem from Elaine's willingness to give and receive love, and, in being open, her life is dually enriched and complicated, because love perhaps must always be one and the other as well.

In light of the above, the tone of the novel is largely ambivalent. It seeks neither to judge the characters or lead the reader to make conclusive inferences either

about what has already happened or what is likely to happen. It does not seek to locate love within a relationship or demand that it reflect societal norms. Neither does it expect it to shape or define society. To do that, the argument of the novel suggests, is too much a burden and too big an expectation of an emotion as unpredictable as love. What it seeks is to show is love's place in the creation and renewal of *identity*, which are needed to shape and progress our relationship with ourselves, other people and the wider world. But because love and sexuality are so complicated, it is impossible to say which type of love we should strive for or which sexuality we should reject. Rather, each case of love and sexual attraction is different. Paradoxically, with individuality being their only definitive characteristic, love and sex are as neoliberal as neoliberalism itself. People, therefore, are continuing to fall in love and have sex under neoliberalism, just differently.

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