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Copycat: duplication and creation in *American Psycho* and *Lunar Park* by Bret Easton Ellis

Summary

As the hypotext of *Lunar Park* (2005), *American Psycho* (1991) provides many interpretative keys to Bret Easton Ellis's pseudo autobiographical work. In harmony with the playful spirit of postmodernism, the diegetic author behaves like the conjurers who disclose the tricks of their trade without destroying the essence of their magic. His universe is greatly identical to that of his fiction and the summaries of his preceding books duplicate the same text, thereby questioning the nature of creation. This paper starts by bringing to light Ellis's conjuring tricks, before considering the relevance of a commodified *persona* in the context of a *fin de siècle* dominated by the emblematic figure of the yuppie as a grotesque dandy. The last part uses the final image of *American Psycho* and its transparent reference to one of Magritte's most famous paintings in order to draw a parallel between Ellis's creative process and the painter's.

Keywords: Ellis, Magritte, autobiography, persona, commodification, trick, duplication, dandy, creation.

Posnemovalec: podvajanje in ustvarjanje v *Ameriškem psihi* in *Luninem parku* Breta Eastona Ellisa

Povzetek

Kot hipotekst *Luninega parka* (2005) *Ameriški psiho* (1991) ponuja mnoge interpretacijske odgovore na Ellisovo psevdobiografsko delo. Diegetični avtor se v igrivem duhu postmodernizma vede kot čarodej, ki razodene svoje ukane, ne da bi pri tem okrnil bistva njihove skrivnostnosti. Pisateljev svet je domala istoveten s svetom njegove fikcije in povzetki njegovih prejšnjih knjig se podvajajo v istem besedilu, kar postavlja pod vprašaj samo naravo ustvarjanja. Članek uvodoma osvetli Ellisove čarovniške prijeme, nato pa preide k bistvu komodificirane *persone* v kontekstu *fin de siècle*, ki ga obvladuje figura yuppija v podobi grotesknega dandyja. Sklepni del se pomudi ob poslednji podobi Ameriškega psiha in njeni nedvoumni navezavi na eno izmed Magrittovih najslavnejših slik ter izpostavi vzporednice med Ellisovim in slikarjevim ustvarjalnim procesom.

Ključne besede: Ellis, Magritte, avtobiografija, persona, komodifikacija, ukana, podvajanje, dandy, ustvarjanje.

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1. Introduction

Lunar Park,¹ Bret Easton Ellis's latest novel, starts as an autobiography coupled with metatextual comments on Ellis's previous works. The first pages include extracts from the *incipits* of four earlier novels; Bret Easton Ellis thus presents himself as the author of his latest creation. He claims he is now aiming at recovering his original formal simplicity, arguing that what is at stake is not only a literary issue. His self-criticism is ruthless; he provides summaries of his novels that prove almost identical and suggest that the failure of his personal life is reflected in that of his creation. *Lunar Park* starts out as a truthful autobiographical work, but veers into obvious fiction as serial killer Patrick Bateman, the hero of Ellis's *American Psycho*,² shows up at the author's home.

In *Lunar Park* Patrick Bateman appears as an avatar of Ellis's father, but this Patrick Bateman (who, revealingly, appears one Halloween night [55]) does not really look like the protagonist of *American Psycho*. For the author – himself dressed up as... Bret Easton Ellis and looking very much like his own guest (122) – is led to recognize his hero through his physical likeness with Christian Bale, the actor who plays the lead in the movie adaptation. From then on, the writer progressively turns into a *persona*, and eventually becomes a mere character: "Bret Easton Ellis" may well have committed the horrors that fill *Lunar Park*, duplicating the ones of his psychopathic hero. The world of concrete reality is thus greatly identical to that of the fiction, just as the summaries of the preceding books indefinitely reproduce the same text. *Lunar Park* seems to demolish the body of work of an author who, in every respect, fits the image of the superficial diva conveyed by the hype that has been surrounding him since the very beginning of his career.

It turns out that, in harmony with the playful spirit of postmodernism, the diegetic author of *Lunar Park* behaves like the conjurers who disclose the tricks of their trade without destroying the essence of their magic. Such manipulation partakes both of desecration and of mythical construction. The words actually betray the author-*persona*'s avowed intention, suggesting that the key to the thematic concern of his latest novel lies in *American Psycho*, which makes up its hypotext. That is why this paper will eventually use the final image of *American Psycho* and its transparent reference to one of Magritte's most famous paintings in order to draw a parallel between Ellis's creative process and the painter's, for whom "writing is an invisible description of thought and painting is its visible description" (Noël 1976, 32).³

2. The *persona*'s conjuring tricks

"You do an awfully good impression of yourself" (*LP*, 3) – the very beginning of *Lunar Park* emphasizes the question of the representation of the self. The autodiegetic narrator

1 Referred to as LP in the upcoming quotations.

2 Referred to as AP in the upcoming quotations.

3 "L'écriture est une description invisible de la pensée et la peinture en est la description visible" (My translation).

parallels this opening sentence with that of his debut novel (*Less Than Zero*, 1985), to praise its “stripped-down minimalism” (*LP*, 5) and castigate what he claims is the verbose affectation of the *incipits* of his earlier books. In quite a different context, John McGahern defines style as “the expression of personality through technique”⁴; it is in the very same spirit that the narrator states his ambition to make *Lunar Park* a medium whose aesthetic nature encompasses intimate stakes:

As anyone who had closely followed the progression of my career could glimpse—and if fiction inadvertently reveals a writer’s inner life—things were getting out of hand, resembling something that according to the New York Times had become “bizarrely complicated . . . bloated and trivial . . . hyped-up,” and I didn’t necessarily disagree. I wanted a return to that past simplicity. I was overwhelmed by my life, and those first sentences seemed reflections of what had gone wrong. It was time to get back to basics [...]. (*LP*, 5)

Lunar Park opens with what reads like pitiless self castigation. After celebrating the qualities of the *incipit* of *Less Than Zero*, he thus summarizes the novel:

It detailed a wealthy, alienated, sexually ambiguous young man’s Christmas break [...] and all the parties he wandered through [...] and all the friends he passively watched drift into addiction, prostitution and vast apathy [...]. It was an indictment not only of a way of life I was familiar with but also [...] of the Reagan eighties [...]. (*LP*, 6)

Here is an extract from the summary of his second novel:

The Rules of Attraction [...] detailed the sex lives of a small group of wealthy, alienated, sexually ambiguous students [...] during the height of the Reagan eighties. We followed them as they wandered from orgiastic party to orgiastic party [...]. (*LP*, 14)

A few pages on, *American Psycho* is presented as

a novel about a young, wealthy, alienated Wall Street Yuppie named Patrick Bateman who also happened to be a serial killer filled with vast apathy during the height of the Reagan eighties. (*LP*, 17)

That poorly inspired work is the fruit of the imagination of the *persona*, who happens to be at once the creator and the creature. By asserting its autobiographical quality, *Lunar Park* heralds a break with such artistic emptiness thanks to the dismissal of former recipes and the pursuit of formal purity.

As the plot unfolds, however, *Lunar Park* becomes increasingly fictional. “Bret Easton Ellis” appears just as outrageous as his characters and his book submits to formal conventions that only incidentally

4 Quoted from personal notes taken from a video transmission of a nationwide scholarly debate conducted in 1994 for CNED, the French national distance learning program.

fall within the province of artistic genius: it openly uses the well-known dramatic springs of popular horror and of B movies,⁵ and follows the *Zeitgeist*.⁶ The author first seems to be telling about himself and then builds his entire narrative around a grotesque *persona*. All things considered he does not reveal much about himself; his disclosing only a few of his secrets leaves the remaining narrative tricks/mysteries even more impenetrable. In accordance with the postmodern perspective, he treats the creative process as diegetic material, seeming to forget all about the original issue. *Lunar Park* sets out to lay bare the essence of creation, and then becomes a new novel, a new item in the corpus, adding to the mystery and maintaining its solution out of the textual context.

Postmodernism has a lot in common with those illusionists whose trick consists in disclosing the ropes of their very conjuring. The manipulation thus revealed is not exposed as deception; it is part and parcel of a performance that aims at creating a pleasure renewed from age-old recipes. The audience is first invited to attend a mysterious trick, performed in a traditional way; they will derive pleasure in taking part in the trick by understanding its technical facets. Since that laying bare is usually executed in playful manner, such pleasure rests on both the successful outcome of an intellectual process and the purely aesthetic appreciation of the artistic performance that made it possible. In other words, an artist who discloses his technical secrets remains a true artist, whose know-how goes beyond the mere accomplishment of a perfectly coded trick. The belief of the audience switches from the superstitious type (*i.e.* the belief in the artist's all powerful creative power) to the educated admiration of the perfect mastery of the codes brought to light. From a creator, the artist becomes a manipulator: one marvels at his ability to appropriate traditional techniques in order to make a truly personal creation. In short, one admires his style.

Let us for instance consider the classic circus clown act which consists of a succession of identical conjuring tricks where bottles seem to disappear in empty cylinders. After a while, simulating clumsiness, the artists let their legerdemains show through, letting the audience understand their clever technique, but thereby ending the magic of the moment. In the course of the number the audience's reaction usually starts with laughter at the comic situation whose workings they do not understand, then at themselves when realizing the trick of which they have been the jubilant butt. Laughter may then focus on the clowns, who keep performing the same sleight of hand as though the audience were still unaware of the artists' handlings. In the end, the clowns slightly modify their legerdemain, which can obviously no longer be explained by the technique they had let the spectators discover. The new technique will be kept mysterious; once more the audience laugh at themselves, for having been fooled anew by characters whose expertise they had underestimated.

⁵ Ellis often cites Stephen King as one of his major literary inspirations:

Q: What are your all time favorite books?

A: [...] If I had to go with when I was younger and the books that really obsessed me when I was a teenager, I'd definitely put down Salem's Lot by Stephen King [...]. It was a book I was obsessed with for a year. When that book came out [...] I was about 11 or 12, and, literally, it may have been the only book I read that year. I read it 12, 13, 14 times.

Jaime Clarke. An Interview with Bret Easton Ellis. Mississippi Review, 1999. http://home.c2i.net/ajohanne/frames_jamieclark.htm/ (accessed October 10, 2008).

⁶ Among many others, the plot resembles that of Mark Z. Danielewski' *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), in which a psychotic narrator also composes the metatextual account of a house that is haunted too, and with an ever changing appearance.

The iconoclastic revelation of the repetitive technical foundations of an artistic creation seems intended to destroy the *quasi* divine nature that might otherwise be attributed to it.⁷ In major artistic modes of expression the impact of that revelation is twofold: it denotes the rejection of the sacralization of the creative process while contributing to building the mythical aura of the latter, which is shown to express the spirit of a unique conscience. True to the spirit of postmodernism, *Lunar Park* unveils some of its compositional conventions so as to question the validity of the choices and of the appropriateness of those conventions. It does away with the sacred aura of the novel in the context of the authorial corpus (and, by the same token, the banality of the whole corpus), while making the latter the cornerstone of the psychology of “Bret Easton Ellis.” The critical process called for by the relation between the two texts and merely initiated by the narrator at the beginning of *Lunar Park* is bound to be continued by the reader. For the shifting status of the implied author from critic to fictitious character calls to mind that, *a contrario*, the ignorant yuppie of *American Psycho* readily used the rhetoric of a music critic (Bateman’s lengthy, empty presentation of the band Genesis covers the whole eponymous chapter pp. 128-131 and concludes with the stereotyped “Genesis is still the best, most exciting band to come out of England in the 1980s.” [p. 131]). The musical culture of “Bret Easton Ellis” is quite reliable and expressed in much more personal fashion; his critical blindness towards his own text, however, still reflects his character’s verbiage:

Teenage Pussy [his next novel] would contain endless episodes of girls storming out of rooms in high-rise condos and the transcripts of cell phone conversations fraught with tension [...]. Chapters were titled “The Facial,” “The Silicone Queen” [...] The book was all about the hard sell [...] but it was also going to be poignant and quietly devastating and put every other book written by my generation to shame.” (*LP*, 102, 105)

The author-narrator as critic is unable to realize that the text he is currently working on is nothing but a pornographic production. This denotes the uselessness of the very notion of criticism, as well as that of the *persona*’s own narrative choices, for “Bret Easton Ellis” does not conceive that authorial paternity in no way conveys any control over the reception of his creation. In this case the author even finds himself possessed by his creation, up to the point when he hires a team of exorcists,⁸ thereby becoming a character submitted to the perverse logic of the psychopathic hero of *American Psycho*.

3. A commodified existence: grotesque dandies

At the diegetic time of *American Psycho* the musical “Les Misérables” was a huge success in Broadway. Bateman and all his Yuppie acquaintances were ecstatic; the posters and the merchandising were omnipresent and the music score was monopolizing the radio stations. Without any qualms, the bombastic show reified poverty into a highly lucrative, kitsch commodity, exploiting Hugo’s revolutionary spirit to consolidate the values of dominant capitalistic conformism.

⁷ Isn’t the creator of “Don Giovanni” called “the divine Mozart?”

⁸ Three whole chapters are devoted to the “cleansing” of the house and its aftermath (372–405; 420–34).

Belonging to the real world, Manhattan is supposed to compose the nonfictional counterpart of the setting of the musical. However, the streets are swarming with bums and homeless people and look surprisingly like Hugo's famed shady *Cour des Miracles*; this New York microcosm duplicates that of "Les Misérables," thereby making up a play within the play in which the two spectacles prove identical. The society's rejects are part and parcel of that setting and are treated like props by the Yuppies, who keep using them for their amusement. In its absurdist way the New York pageant, costumed by the greatest fashion designers, exemplifies the soundness of the founding Shakespearean concept – "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players" (*As You like It*, act 2, sc. 7).⁹ Yet the Shakespearean world picture postulates a divine transcendence which sets the individual within the frame of a natural order. In a perverse evolution, the social Darwinism of the Reagan years substitutes the order of things for the order of objects. The nature of that transformation is utterly narcissistic; an expensive, fashionable object has become the only way for the individual to get not only a sense of identity through the recognition of his peers, but also an ontological sense of his existence. Baudrillard alludes to the perverse consequences of the compulsive acquisition of such commodities:

Its [the object's] absolute singularity [...] arises from the fact of being possessed by me – and this allows me, in turn, to recognize myself in the object as an absolutely singular being. This is a grandiose tautology, but one that gives the relationship to objects all its density – its absurd facility, and the illusory but intense gratification it supplies. [...] What is more, [...] the relationship with objects has one characteristic that can never be found in the intersubjective realm: no object ever opposes the extension of the process of narcissistic projection to an unlimited number of other objects; on the contrary, the object imposes that very tendency, thereby contributing to the creation of a total environment, to that totalization of images of the self that is the basis of the miracle of collecting. For what you really collect is always yourself. (Baudrillard 1996, 90–1)

Purchasing different objects amounts to endlessly reiterating the identical pattern of buying the very same object, in the vain subconscious attempt at building up a unified sense of the self. In the consumerist environment of *American Psycho*, this attitude commodifies the experience of existence to the point of substituting the individual for his status symbols and, ultimately, of transforming the others into expendable objects devoid of any individuality. In this case the tautology alluded to by Baudrillard also lies in the fact that, by duplicating the act of always purchasing the same object (*i.e.* oneself), the individual will duplicate himself to the point of becoming one with the other objects (*i.e.* the others) he so desperately needs to differentiate himself from.

Mammon does not prove to be a structuring deity; its devotees find themselves enslaved by the fickle dictatorship of conspicuous consumption. Unlike the cultured, tasteful dandy, whose wish was "creating oneself afresh each day as a work of art" (Calloway 1997, 51), the Yuppie is a frivolous character defined by his very frivolity. The refinement of the top executives of *American Psycho* is mostly limited to brand awareness. They are grotesque dandies, psychopathic conformists

⁹ Defined by its very superficiality, this Manhattan may be viewed as a "new-look" Shakespearean stage, as the expression, said to originate from New York magazine Harper's Bazaar in 1947, was especially designed to refer to Christian Dior's distinctive style.

– human oxymora seeking to assert their distinctive identity by subscribing to commonplaces. Despite appearances, their refinement is mere mimicry, quite a far cry from the dilettantes they call to mind and whose seemingly shallow behavior was often akin to rebellion:

The dandy-aesthetes of the *fin-de-siècle* period above all honed their senses and cultivated the rarest of sensibilities; they made the perfection of the pose of exquisiteness their greatest aim and they directed all their languid energies toward nurturing a cult of aesthetic response that begins beyond ordinary notions of taste, that lies beyond mere considerations of fashion, and operates quite outside the dictates of all conventional canons of morality. (Calloway 1997, 34)

Their obsessive quest for difference being totally conventional, the affluent characters of *American Psycho* end up looking like mirror reflections of each other—so perfect that the Yuppies regularly fail to recognize one another in public places, which have become so many halls of mirrors:

“What in the fuck is Morrison wearing?” Preston asks himself. “Is that really a glen-plaid suit with a checkered shirt?”

“That’s not Morrison,” Price says.

“Who is it then?” Preston asks, taking his glasses off again.

“That’s Paul Owen,” Price says.

“That’s not Paul Owen,” I say. “Paul Owen’s on the other side of the bar. Over there.”

Owen stands at the bar wearing a double-breasted wool suit. (35)

Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam. (86)

These executives are Dorian Grays of the next *fin de siècle*, concerned only with the present and totally dedicated to the cult of youth,¹⁰ in a state of euphoria that Barthes analyzed in *The Fashion System*. Hedonist though it was, Dorian’s quest was tinged with spirituality, expressed a reaction to the conformism of his times and yearned for sublimity *hic et nunc*: “Fashion, by which what is really fantastic becomes for a moment universal, and Dandyism, which, in its own way, is an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty [...]” (106) As for Manhattan’s stylish business people, they are content with sheepishly following the trend. As “a device that foregrounds the discursive foundations upon which meaning depends” (Annesley 1998, 85), intertextuality is part and parcel of all literary creation and constantly enriches our apprehension of any given novel. In many ways, “Ellis’s transtextual focus” (Annesley 1998, 84) in *American Psycho* reflects *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and foretells the problematics of duplication that informs the very nature of *Lunar Park*. Among the manifold echoes, let us note the example of Bateman’s apartment, full of the most expensive, ultra modern equipment, denoting the owner’s total lack of artistic taste and composing a grotesque reproduction of the exquisite home of a highly cultured Dorian. Here is the telltale beginning of Bateman’s description:

¹⁰ Patrick Bateman seems to live in the ideal world wished for by Lord Henry, Dorian Gray’s mentor: “Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!” (Wilde 1890, 19). As he realizes the horrors of his ways Dorian definitely throws himself into the perversity of such superficial ethics: “Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins – he was to have all these things.” (86)

this is what the living room of my apartment looks like: Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It's a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, sitting on a chaise longue watching MTV, the backdrop a Martian landscape, a gleaming mauve desert scattered with dead, gutted fish, smashed plates rising like a sunburst above the woman's yellow head, and the whole thing is framed in black aluminum steel. The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame) [...]. (23, 24)

In itself, the remarkable length of the description of the apartment (over four pages) is reminiscent of the exhaustive evocation of Dorian's precious fads right at the center of Wilde's novel: intertextuality does not raise only the question of subject matter, but also that of form.¹¹

Whatever their topics of conversation, Bateman's colleagues adopt the stereotyped rhetoric of mainstream opinion, conveyed notably by fashion(able) magazines, and naturally endorse their intrinsic values. That *doxa* holds the final victory of an eternal, tyrannical present, for "Fashion experiences itself as a right, the natural right of the present over the past; defined by its very infidelity, Fashion nevertheless lives in a world that it wants and sees ideally stable, totally filled with conformist outlooks."¹² Bateman lives in a purely materialistic universe where each object becomes an image of oneself and where, logically, the individual sees himself everywhere. The characters of *American Psycho* are described minutely and obsessively, but their depiction is exclusively limited to their clothes:

He's wearing a linen suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Ike Behar, a silk tie by Bill Blass and cap-toed leather lace-ups from Brooks Brothers. I'm wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds. Once inside Harry's we spot David Van Patten and Craig McDermott at a table up front. Van Patten is wearing a double-breasted wool and silk sport coat, button-fly wool and silk trousers with inverted pleats by Mario Valentino, a cotton shirt by Gitman Brothers, a polka-dot silk tie by Bill Blass and leather shoes from Brooks Brothers. McDermott is wearing a woven-linen suit with pleated trousers, a button-down cotton and linen shirt by Basile, a silk tie by Joseph Abboud and ostrich loafers from Susan Bennis Warren Edwards. (*AP*, 29)

Annesley labels Ellis's works as "blank fiction," where "the vision offered is a gloomy one. Contemporary culture is dominated by commodification, a process which leads, it seems,

¹¹ The Picture of Dorian Gray itself quite often echoes *A rebours* by J.-K. Huysmans (1884), particularly in the very passage mentioned. Wilde himself admitted that *A rebours* was the novel he had in mind as the "poisonous book" given to Dorian by Lord Henry (Wilde 1890, 103).

¹² Barthes spells fashion with a capital letter; his "Fashion" does not concern stylish clothes, but the written discourse on the cultural phenomenon they constitute.

"la Mode se vit elle-m me comme un Droit, le droit naturel du présent sur le passé ; définie par son infidélité m me, la Mode vit cependant dans un monde qu'elle veut et voit idéalement stable, tout pénétré de regards conformistes." (304, my translation.)

to freezing, objectification and in many cases death.” (1998, 53) As the preceding quotation from *American Psycho* exemplifies, the individual is indeed totally reified in his appearance of the moment.¹³ Nineteenth century aesthetes had already been through a similar experience: “Striving to become an art object, the dandy dehumanizes himself in order to make his social spectacle” (Garelick 1998, 66). That alienation is of a deadly essence; in the words of Barthes, “that absolute, dogmatic and vengeful present when fashion prevails” results from “the murder it commits on its own past” (Barthes 1967, 304).¹⁴ That metaphoric murder heralds the ultimate victory of the pleasure instinct, and Bateman ends up killing because of his inability to grasp the metaphorical nature of the discourse that molds him.

4. The betrayal of images and the betrayal of words

Bateman’s confusion makes his narration unreliable; the facts may not always be told from psychotic fantasies, for the character can distinguish neither desire from reality nor physical objects from mental images. That is why his final vision at the end of the novel takes on exemplary value. He finds himself in a bar, delirious, and thus concludes his story:

above one of the doors covered by red velvet drapes in Harry’s is a sign and on the sign in letters that match the drapes’ colors are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. (*AP*, 384)

Let us note that the sign matches the drapes, which suits Bateman’s aesthetic tastes, and makes it appear totally normal: it is an integral part of the setting. The inscription is a transparent allusion to Magritte’s emblematic painting, displaying “*ceci n’est pas une pipe*” (“this is not a pipe”), but whose title is actually “*La trahison des images*” (“the betrayal of images”).¹⁵ Draguet says that at that moment, “Magritte does not place himself in the vein of painting. He has entered that of the image, which is resolutely mental.” (Draguet 2003, 84)¹⁶

Bateman prides himself on owning works of art, but to him they are ordinary objects of which he knows only the market value; as for the sign, it is a real ordinary object, but that echoes a work of art. Just as the painting, it suggests that appearances are too subversive to be trusted. Such a sign [“This is not an exit”], placed above a door, may *a priori* indicate only an exit; the final surprise rests on the strict appropriateness of the linguistic sign to a situation whose abnormality seems created only by the message. Which is the very essence of Magritte’s avowed intention: just as the representation of an object is not that object, the sign may not be an exit, since it is a sign. In that

¹³ In his analysis of literary minimalism, Rebein stresses the pitfalls of such narrative choices at the level of the reception:

Clothing gets a lot of play here, as does hairstyle and the names of specific companies or products [...]. None of this is done in the name of specificity or depth, but on the contrary to underscore the commonness of the situations and the superficiality of the narrative consciousness. [...] there is something deadening and depressing about seeing such trivia take the place of significant action and detail in fiction. At best, the practice strikes the reader as a failed shortcut and a cheapening of literary art. At worst, it seems neurotic and obsessive and [...] vaguely insulting. (2001, 40)

¹⁴ “ce présent absolu, dogmatique, vengeur, o la Mode parle [...] du meurtre qu’elle commet sur son propre passé.” (My translation.)

¹⁵ Magritte produced several versions of that painting but the most famous dates back from 1929, the year when the stock market crash seemed to be tolling the knell of the omnipotence of Wall Street brokers—of whom Bateman and his fellow speculators are the direct heirs.

¹⁶ “Magritte ne se situe plus dans le registre de la peinture. Il est entré dans celui, résolument cérébral, de l’image.” (My translation.)

case, Bateman's deviant vision (it is very hard to imagine such an indication in a bar) becomes the expression of common sense.

Draguet states that, in "the betrayal of images," "what is said not to be a pipe does not find any other alternative formulation ('If it is not a pipe, what is it, then?')" (84).¹⁷ At a strictly literal level "This," as the grammatical subject of "This is not an exit," is definitely not an exit. Likewise, that story, made up of words, and of which "This" constitutes a synecdoche, is nothing but a mental spectacle based on the play on the possible and the real. Eventually this inscription, which composes the literal exit of the book and which displays its nature as a linguistic sign, reminds the reader that the magic of writing is only an illusion – *i.e.*, an image.

Such illusion is inherent to literature, which fosters mental images prompted only by the artist, but whose interpretation is left to the reader alone, who reflects himself in his subjective apprehension.

Besides, on the very diegetic plane, Bateman may well be a young man with a perverted imagination who fantasizes his murders – and who might even not be Patrick Bateman¹⁸ (to rephrase Draguet, "but what is he, then?").

About another Magritte painting, Noël points out:

As soon as the object of "Les Vacances de Hegel" has become ambiguous enough to function no longer in relation to the things that make it up, but to the contradiction in those things that it solves, it has become a mental object, which materializes nothing else than Magritte's thoughts. (22)¹⁹

"THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" may thus be considered as the reification of Bateman's thought process. It turns out, however, that the (no) exit sign composes the mirror image of the entrance sign that opens the novel (which also appears in capital letters):

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical bank near the corner of Eleventh and First (*AP*, 3)

Obviously, that message does not belong to the tangible world, and it is very unlikely that it could originate from an ignorant Bateman, living only in the present, probably unable to recollect literary references, and even less able to ever equal Dante's poetic genius.

¹⁷ "Si ce n'est pas une pipe, qu'est-ce alors ?" (My translation.)

¹⁸ The Bret Easton Ellis of *Lunar Park* himself alludes to that possibility (182). Ironically, he is at that moment becoming a double of his hero, casting doubt on the soundness of his metafictional insight: "I felt like an unreliable narrator, even though I knew I wasn't (182-3)."

¹⁹ " partir du moment o l'objet des Vacances de Hegel est devenu assez équivoque pour fonctionner, non plus par rapport aux choses qui le composent, mais par rapport leur contradiction qu'il résout, il est devenu un objet mental, qui ne matérialise rien d'autre que la pensée de Magritte." (My translation.)

5. Conclusion

The mirror structure of *AP* is aptly and artificially conveyed by the presence of the two signs studied above, which denotes that of artistic creation in general, as well as its irreducible capacity to express the coherence of the universe. Such coherence is not necessarily reassuring; in this case, the (no) exit of *American Psycho* opens up on *Lunar Park*, whose near-homonymy with Luna Park puts it under the influence of the moon, between festival and madness, and which duplicates Bateman's psychotic universe.

At the same time, the shallow yet painstaking descriptions of characters and settings in *American Psycho* underline the fundamental sameness of individuals and of their environments, showing obvious similarities with Warhol's series of (quasi) identical icons of lowbrow, popular culture. Ellis's style, especially in *American Psycho*, partakes of minimalism, which sets him in tune with some of the characteristic aspects of pop art. Rebein notes that in

literary minimalism [...] there was the feeling that what the old-fashioned realists had called "milieu" had been replaced by brand names and other "surface details" that clearly came not from the individual artist but from a "nonartistic source"—the world of the television sitcom and the shopping mall, for example. (33)

More importantly, Ellis's open use of reproduction calls to mind the tricks of Warhol the egocentric, which often liken his talent to that of a photocopying machine, blurring the distinction between person and *persona*: "Warhol imagined that he was a machine, suggesting that he felt his life as well as his art was manufactured" (Kuspit 2004, 151).

As appears in the two novels under scrutiny, Ellis's aesthetic universe is the one of repetition of the identical, in an ambiguous relation between introspection and narcissistic reflection, between acknowledged artistic influence [debt?] and plagiarism. Just like Warhol, the author of *Lunar Park* has become "a social illusion – a shallow image, a more or less theatrical surface." (Kuspit 2004, 152) The other side of that image is Bret Easton Ellis, who builds up in an epitext written by others and which reads like his novels. His pathetic image might well become emblematic of what Kuspit calls the end of art.

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