

“A maelstrom of lying”: Bret Easton Ellis and himself

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Resumo: Bret Easton Ellis é um dos autores americanos mais conhecidos do século XXI. Tem sete romances publicados até à data e os críticos têm tentado desconstruir e compreender o seu trabalho bizarro e misterioso seguindo as mais variadas abordagens, tais como o pós-modernismo, estudos culturais, estudos feministas, entre muitos outros. Enquanto estes métodos podem ter esclarecido determinados aspetos do trabalho de Ellis, outros elementos que são, a meu ver, essenciais podem ter passado despercebidos. O objetivo deste ensaio é chamar atenção para o ponto de vista individual dos protagonistas de Ellis. Deste modo irei desafiar a fronteira entre a realidade e a ficção, e provar que, ao destacar o espaço emocional das personagens imorais e desequilibradas do escritor americano, os leitores podem vivenciar uma experiência muito mais íntima e intensa.

Palavras-chave: Bret Easton Ellis; emoção; realidade; individual; crítica

Abstract: Bret Easton Ellis is one of the best known American writers of the XXI century. He has published seven novels so far, and critics have been trying to solve his mysterious and bizarre work according to numerous approaches such as postmodernism, cultural studies, woman studies, among many others. Whereas these methods may have enlightened certain aspects of Ellis' work, other elements, which are essential, have remained unnoticed. The purpose of this essay is to call attention to the individual point of view of Ellis' protagonists. I will, thus, challenge the frontier between reality and fiction, and prove that, by bringing the emotional space of Ellis' deranged and immoral characters to light, readers may undergo a much more intimate and intense experience.

Keywords: Bret Easton Ellis; emotion; fiction; reality; individual; criticism

Introduction

As a scholar and lover of literature I have come across numerous types of narratives, writing styles, plots and characters. Some books have changed my way of thinking and have opened doors to completely new realities. Evidently, the influencing factors vary from person to person. There are readers who enjoy straightforward narratives with logical plots and endings, others prefer emotionally strong content like tragic outcomes, violent acts and shocking descriptions. Finally, there are those who rather read insightful and puzzling stories whose endings are ambiguous or divested of any closure. It should be noted that this is only a brief enumeration and isn't restricted to these types of readers. The list of psychological and emotional experiences that readers undergo is, thus, endless due to the fact that each person has his/her own mental structure and personal life events.

So, how do we read or study fiction? As literature researchers, we all have learnt various methods of study. The best example may be the cultural and theoretical approach. Indeed, contextualizing a novel and producing an essay according to the phenomena and the historical milestones in which it is inserted has proved to be very fruitful to the way we see the world. Moreover, the numerous schools of thought, which were created after each age, have also helped us establish some connections between authors and styles and learn more about artistic and ideological patterns. However, as we find ourselves in the year of 2018, we realize that many things have already been said and investigated. Innovative perspectives are needed, or perhaps bringing back an essence that may have been lost among these points of view.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the case of one of the most popular writers of our time, Bret Easton Ellis, who is best known for his highly controversial and crude novel *American Psycho* (1991). His work has been receiving numerous reactions, both negative and positive, from the academic circles, the cultural media and the reading public at large. It is worth exploring the work of this author because it has been creating turmoil and outrage among the readers due to his wide variety of irreverent structures, voices, and perspectives. The number of reviews, newspaper or magazine articles, and academic essays about his fiction is incredibly high. Yet, as we will find out, there is a pattern of points of

view. This will be my starting point, where I will give an overview of Ellis’ criticism to expose the aforementioned pattern. Then, I will propose a different method for reading his fiction, and finally, I will prove that the impact of Ellis’ stories are neither due to the realistic portrayal of historical and cultural aspects, nor to the shocking elements that permeate his novels, but rather to the intense account of personal and emotional experiences the protagonists narrate. All in all, an analysis based on the emotional and psychological space that is formed in each work.

Ellis’ work: a summary/state of the art

Apart from being a screenwriter and being involved in the production of TV series and films, Ellis has published seven novels (*Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction*, *American Psycho*, *The Informers*, *Glamorama*, *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms*). All of them feature a male narrator-protagonist whose reality is summed up as the following: wealthy family and friends, bohemian and improper routines, trying to fit in and its consequences.¹ These characteristics made Ellis one of the emblematic members of the Brat Pack² and, consequently, one of the greatest examples of blank or minimalist fiction. It goes without saying the American writer is part of various studies associated with these two topics.

Although the world that surrounds the protagonists is similar in each novel, Ellis offers the readers a variety of individuals experiencing life at different stages: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, professional life, and, lastly, family life. Despite being constantly surrounded by people and parties, the protagonists’ sense of loneliness and alienation increases and turns either into apathy or a disgust towards human relations. These feelings are transformed into violence and, consequently, the scenes of cruelty or senseless sex reach, progressively, their peak, deeply shocking the readers. These issues received a great deal of attention from the critics, who either struggled to understand or uncover the reasons for such stories, or felt insulted and accused Ellis of being a misogynist, immoral and psychotic man.

Indeed, the number of essays and theses about violence in Ellis’ work makes us

conclude that this is one of the top issues that has been discussed up to the present. Critics have developed ideas such as violence as allegorical and a rhetorical device (cf. Serpell 2010), a transgressive element (cf. Messier 2004); they connected it to the video-horror culture (cf. Rogers 2011), to “serial” consumerism (cf. Martin 2012) and defined it as a consequence of capitalism (cf. Busonik 1993). Due to the great impact and consequences of consumerism, apart from the several essays that discussed it along with the idea of commodification or reification, there even was a comparison between *American Psycho* and *The Great Gatsby* (cf. Szumskyj 2007). Moreover, both the topic of violence and consumerism combined *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* in various research works, perhaps owing to the close date of their film adaptations’ release (cf. Wenley 2011; Hytten 2000; Michael 2009).

Another matter favoured by critics has been the postmodern condition. This was mainly due to the frantic environment of consumption and superficiality, and the resulting identity fragmentation that permeates most of Ellis’ novels (cf. Harma 2014). Moreover, the exaggerated and humorous depiction of certain characters and situations made critics consider Ellis a great satirist of contemporary culture (cf. Matula 2011). Evidently, there is another aspect that made critics look at Ellis as a serious writer: the cultural and historical background.³ The reason is none other than the meticulous and detailed description that Ellis wrote of the eighties and Wall Street, the celebrity world and the nineties, and lastly, the constant reference to bands and brand names. To sum up, although the author’s work has shocked most of his readers, the critics managed to see past and within the gruesome details of sexual violence and the insane obsession with luxury products.

Moving closer, and leaving the cultural and historical aspect aside, another point that has been receiving a good deal of attention are Ellis’ plots. The fact that characters jump from one novel to the other, either as cameos or as protagonists— *Rules of Attraction* as their meeting point— resulted in a focus on the phenomenon of intertextuality (cf. Grindstaff 2013). Glamorama’s immersion in the world of stardom, media, and hallucination made critics use the notion of simulacra and manipulation of image as their research tool or object (cf. ALB 2012; Ouzounoglou 2013). *Lunar Park*’s protagonist, whose

name is Bret, and who has similar friends and experiences as the author himself, gave rise to the idea of autobiography (cf. Hensgens 2006); plus, the fact that this novel involved hauntings led to works focused on ghosts and spectralizations (cf. Peeren 2012). Finally, the most popular protagonist in Ellis’ career, Patrick Bateman, whose narration is imbued in hallucinations, anxiety and grisly crimes that probably didn’t happen, brought up discussions about his unreliability as a narrator (cf. Mannila 2013; Lundberg 2014).

Moving to the character’s level, we can also observe a pattern of analysis. All Ellis’ protagonists are rich, consumerists, often drunk and drugged, immoral or violent. Plus, they are all white and male. This led to several studies which defended the characters as products of society, who are lost in a male crisis of (postmodern) identity (cf. Knight 20011; Storey 2005). Since Patrick Bateman is still Ellis’s most famous protagonist, it is not a surprise that there are several works which examine his traits, such as his double identity as a yuppie and serial killer (cf. Kooijman/ Laine 2003), an anonymous character (cf. Kelly 2002), a monster (cf. Saltzman 1999) and possessing gothic characteristics (cf. Allué 1999).

I must note that, although there is clearly a pattern of points of view regarding the approaches to Ellis’ fiction, there are diverse works that deal with topics “off the beaten track”. Some examples worth mentioning are the study of space and place by Alison Lutton (2012), confession and Christianity by Lanta Reighard (2016), and a retrospective reading of Glamorama’s reception that addresses the danger of focusing too much on context, by Sonia Allué (2004).

This brief state of the art makes evident the common place of criticism regarding Ellis’ fiction. As I have shown, there has been an enormous focus on external elements, namely the context, connections to a wider (cultural and historical) panorama, and a focus on the most visible and shocking aspects of the narrative. Am I trying to say that these perspectives are wrong? Not at all. But perhaps there is something more, a whole different *level* of understanding that we can reach when looking at a novel, far from “the dangers of letting context overflow and overwhelm the interpretation and analysis of novels” (Allué 2004). To my mind, this can be found in the protagonist’s individual point of view and emotional experience. Even though we are sure that the characters from our books are

merely fictional, we cannot forget that they emerged from one person's mind. A novel is nothing more than an individual's life experiences and perspectives fused with creativity. If we look closer and leave all the mentioned external elements aside, we will be able to regard the characters as individuals who possess a particular mind set and life experience. Among all the violence, consumerism and superficiality Ellis' characters have a story to tell: not the one we read in the actual plot, but the one that is hidden in their subjective experience.

Recurrent topics

Ellis' debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, turned immediately into a best seller. Along with other writers such as Jay McInerney and Tana Janowitz, Ellis succeeded in narrating a story about an apathetic boy who roamed from party to party, diner to diner, and reported how the L.A.'s world worked. Critics marvelled at the innovative style and cultural references. However, beneath all that, what Clay tells us is a collage of memories and situations that are both melancholic and tragic. He comes back to L.A. for his Christmas holidays and, subsequently, to a reality that, as he gradually tells the readers, is unbearable. His mother is separated from his father, his younger sisters have inappropriate behaviours and treat people as objects⁴, his friends are drug dealers, prostitutes, drug addicts, and all Clay does is keep going to parties and partake in harmful activities. The young protagonist is, therefore, surrounded by misery and decadence.

At the same time we enter Clay's present, we also have a glimpse of his past. He tells us of times when his family was together, and both him and his friends were young, innocent and happy. However, he realizes that the past cannot be undone, that the people he loved, such as his grandmother, are gone, and his best friend Julian won't stop hurting himself and ruining his life. As a result, Clay develops a state of mind that is dominated by fear, paranoia, anxiety and desperation. Although this fact is made evident by the way he describes his mood or physical state,⁵ the most striking and emblematic aspect is the way he reacts to particular signs. The initial affirmation "People are afraid to merge" (*Less Than Zero* 1) haunts him; he treats his bedroom poster of Elvis as if it was constantly watching

him (*ibid.*: 7); and keeps recalling the billboard sign “Disappear here” at several moments of the narrative. The list of symbols that Clay’s mind creates—and reacts to—is immense, and even includes videogame’s figures (*ibid.*: 186).

The insistence on symbols that are associated with the character’s perception is evident throughout Ellis’ work, and a gradual factor.⁶ Six years after *Less Than Zero*, *American Psycho* narrates the surreal and chaotic experience of a Wall Street yuppie who tries so hard to fit in that his mind collapses. Ellis makes sure to emphasize how Patrick Bateman feels trapped and insignificant in his reality, by opening the narrative with the iconic phrase—based on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*— “Abandon all hope ye who enter here” (*American Psycho* 1) and closing it with “This is not an exit” (*ibid.*: 399).

What’s more, these recurrent symbols go through a very intense evolution: from expressing the protagonist’s perception and feelings, to creating a whole new reality. Bateman’s detailed cinematographic account of his tortures, murders and sexual relationships, for instance, affect significantly how the readers deal with his reality: is it authentic or fake? Later, in *Glamorama*, the author keeps provoking the reader with random elements such as confetti, cold air, flies and the smell of faeces, that only the main character is able to notice. The otherwise story of family conflicts in *Lunar Park* is transformed in a narrative about a man who is stuck in the sorrowful memories of his father, which, in turn, are transmuted into hauntings and other paranormal figures such as mysterious stalkers and moving furniture. Lastly, in his most recent novel *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010), Ellis brings his first protagonist, Clay, back and goes deeper narrating his emotional experience. The former high school student is now a script-writer and his paranoia is stronger than ever. He thinks that he is constantly being followed, and that his relationship with an actress and other old friends is part of a conspiracy plot. Clay ends up as a sadistic man who lives isolated and spends his time torturing and abusing young people.

Thus, symbols that represent positive memories or painful ideas evolve to surreal elements. Their role and weight grows and grows, and affects the whole narrative, creating a shock of reality on readers. We are not just witnessing the emotional labyrinth where the

protagonists are trapped, but are also being pushed to a reality that apparently makes no sense, or seems abnormally surreal. Clay's paranoia and fixation on signs that evoke thoughts of eradication and death, Bateman's extreme awareness of his loneliness, Victor's strange visions and sensations, and Bret's paranormal experiences, all manifest an ability to notice and feel what others don't. This "superior" sensitivity may seem contradictory since all Ellis' protagonists are immoral and deranged individuals. Yet, this is, in my opinion, the author's distinguishing trait. Instead of telling stories about righteous people, Ellis narrates the painful experience of individuals who have committed all sorts of unscrupulous acts, opening doors to empathy or sympathy towards those who are judged and looked down by society.

There have been numerous discussions about the authenticity of these perceptions. Is everything that the protagonists feel, see and hear real? Besides reporting strange events, Ellis' protagonists keep being ignored and no one tries to help them. These unearthly perspectives may highlight—or even be a symptom of—the characters' feelings of emptiness, of belonging nowhere and being constantly misunderstood. These protagonists are stuck in a cruel, egotistical and superficial world that constantly pretends to be confident and flawless. This issue intensifies the disparity between the characters and this world. Even though they are as superficial and bohemian as their friends, Ellis' protagonists expose the feeling of helplessness and despair caused by the heart-breaking indifference that permeates their world.

On the other hand, *The Rules of Attraction* and *The Informers*, which haven't been mentioned until now, mingle diverse experiences and reveal a different level of perception. Both novels have several protagonists who overwhelm the reader with endless inner speeches and completely divergent points of view. In the former's case, we witness young people experiencing college life. Their need for a purpose or an object of desire is so acute, that they hold on to anyone who seems a potentially good partner. Consequently, their perception is shaped by those desires in such a powerful way that they are constantly misreporting their reality.⁷ In the case of *The Informer*, we get to know other characters such as the relatives of Patrick Bateman's colleagues. Parents and their children or couples

report how disparate their points of view are. Moreover, they keep narrating that they actually are aware of how broken and distant their relationships have become, and their inability to heal them.⁸ In conclusion, the characters are trapped in a vicious circle of deception, and despite their constant meetings and dates, the feeling of loneliness grows out of control.

The notion of autobiography

As stated earlier, Ellis’ fiction was examined according to the issue of autobiography. This was due to the detailed cultural background that surrounded his characters. However, this issue acquired a higher focus with *Lunar Park*, which was narrated by a character named Bret who wrote *American Psycho*— the perfect excuse for some critics to address such phenomenon and highlight Ellis’ connection to his violent, sadistic and deranged characters. Thus, the novel was considered the main point of connection between both Ellis’ fiction and our reality, and between his identity as a writer and as a public persona. Yet, to my mind, it is the whole matrix that his novels create that can tell us more about the connection between fiction and reality.

The characters’ perception brings to light different realities and issues. Each novel narrates the emotional experience of an individual at a specific age, and in a particular familiar, social context. Throughout Ellis’ work we can observe, therefore, not only a temporal evolution, but also an emotional and psychological process. Each character conceives symbolic structures that shape the narrative, which go through a transformation and reach a higher level, becoming such strong elements that they interfere with the protagonists’ physical world. Therefore, my argument is: each novel is a piece of a puzzle, that, joined together, forms an emotional and psychological map. This map represents not only Ellis’ fiction as a whole, but also his own self— a hidden self.

Keith Opdahl defended emotion as a mental representation, “or the medium within which we construct and display our internal, imagined experience” (2002: 9). Hogan stated that literature is “first of all and most significantly, human” (2003: 3). In the same way, Ellis highlighted the weight that emotion had on his writing, when he commented on *American*

Psycho: “it stems from an autobiographical impulse (...) it’s about my pain (...) my loneliness and alienation”, and affirmed that *Less Than Zero* worked because it was mood and voice (interview, *booksbookshow*). In addition, he confessed that he didn’t mean to make any kind of sweeping statements about the state of the world (interview, *The Guardian*), and the real focus of *American Psycho* was people’s insecurities rather than Wall Street, which was just the backdrop (*This is Not an Exit: the fictional world of Bret Easton Ellis*, 1999). In view of this, we can confirm the clear connection between emotion, literature and the human condition. Plus, an exaggerated focus on context and divisions, which Hogan considered a disadvantage (2003: 3) and Ellis just an easier way out (interview by Charlie Rose, 1994), may drive us away from this premise which, all in all, may well represent individuality in its most genuine and raw form, or, as António Damásio defended, the body’s own landscape (1994: 16).

Conclusion

To conclude, rather than focusing on the external elements that enfold Ellis’s novels, readers may undergo a much more intimate experience by paying closer attention to thoughts and emotions, in other words, to the inner world (or space) of Ellis’ protagonists. In fact, it becomes even more worthwhile and essential to adopt such perspective when we realize that Ellis’ plots don’t reach a logical ending or closure.

Hence, thought outweighs action. In this regard, I’m not just referring to the character’s thoughts, but to Ellis’ mental structure as well. In fact, the author claimed “everything is autobiographical, every book comes from feeling. From emotion. It’s not logical or pragmatic (...)” (interview by Robert Vuijsje). We roam through this world, guided, undoubtedly, by what we feel. Writing is not an exception, which shared with the world is analogous to “private emotion made public” (Opdahl 2002: 11; Hogan 2003: 12). As a result, this world made of private emotion may be much more revealing and substantial than any other statement that is expressed on public interviews, which in Ellis’s case is a lot. Literature, then, may be human expression encoded and, simultaneously, decoded. The former through the manipulation of language, and the latter through the

creation of microcosmos and personalities free from the restraints of logic. In this way, the reader’s universe is drawn into the spinning writer’s tales, and his “maelstrom of lying” (*Lunar Park* 193) becomes, thus, the ultimate form of reality.

NOTES

¹ Examples of these consequences are apathy (*Less Than Zero*), despair (*American Psycho*), alienation (*Lunar Park*) and violence (*Imperial Bedrooms*).

² This concept was formerly used to describe a group of young actors who participated in films about teenagers and the experience of coming-of-age in the 1980’s. The literary Brat Pack refers to a particular group of young American writers: Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, Jill Eisenstadt and Bret Easton Ellis himself. These authors were brought together to form this concept because of the writing topics and style they had in common: a dispassionate way of portraying life, irreverent and shocking descriptions of sexual or violent acts, and young people experiencing emotional crisis because of how shallow and distant their society is.

³ cf. Albanese III 2014, Grivas 1999, Colby 2011. Most of Ellis’ critique mentions these aspects.

⁴ This behaviour is best represented by the quote “I wonder if he’s for sale.” (*Less Than Zero* 16)

⁵ Throughout the novel we see Clay’s hands shaking as he lights cigarettes (*L TZ* 77). While taking a cold shower, he sits on the floor and lets the water hit him “full on” (*L TZ* 86). During a night at a club, he goes to the restroom, locks the door and cries for “around five minutes.” (*L TZ* 109)

⁶ I consider it to be a gradual factor because the protagonists’ thoughts and perceptions grow stronger from novel to novel and influence what they do. While *Less Than Zero*’s protagonist feels sad, desperate, and acts in an apathetic way, the narrators from *The Rules of Attraction* are stuck in their deceptive discernment and act accordingly to that fake world. *American Psycho*’s protagonist moves through a hallucinatory world (readers are never sure if the tortures actually happened, for instance). *Glamorama* is another kind of dreamlike report, but in a different setting and with different elements. *Lunar Park* mingles psychological and emotional experiences with seemingly supernatural manifestations. Lastly, *Imperial Bedrooms* is about Clay’s perception drenched in paranoia and bizarre conspiracies that seem inconceivable and endless. All in all, each character’s

world has its own recurrent elements and possesses a more intense and hallucinatory atmosphere than the previous one.

⁷ For instance, whereas Paul Denton strongly believes that Sean Bateman is in love with him and interprets all of Sean's attitudes according to this perception, Bateman's account is completely different. He is always flirting with other girls and looking for a new sexual partner.

⁸ The chapter "In the Islands" describes the perspective of Tim Price's (one of Patrick Bateman's colleagues in *American Psycho*) father. The narrator is spending some days in Hawaii with his son (who reluctantly accepted the invitation) and is aware of how sad, frustrated and disappointed he is. However, throughout this narrative the protagonist effortlessly tells readers that he doesn't care about what is going on inside his son's head or what he is feeling.

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