



**THE AESTHETICS OF SERIAL KILLING: WORKING  
AGAINST ETHICS IN *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* (1988)  
AND *AMERICAN PSYCHO* (1991)<sup>1</sup>**

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Classical serial killer fiction and films offer their readers or viewers many sources of pleasure: the control over disorder, the pleasure of pattern-discovering, the identification with a strong representative of the law, and of course the enjoyment, from the reader's secure position, of the murders as art or simply as an intellectual game. These narratives have the power of making us forget about ethics and the serious implications of murder, turning serial killing into a kind of aesthetic game that can be enjoyed as simple entertainment. However, what happens when ethics dominates over aesthetics in serial killer fiction? This question will find an answer through the analysis of Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), both dealing with serial killers although in entirely different ways.

In this paper I want to deal with the phenomenon of the serial killer, which is a cultural manifestation prone to be considered under different disciplines. It is a subject treated in sociology, the arts (cinema, literature, photography), the media or psychoanalysis to mention just a few. It belongs to the realms of both reality and fiction and as a consequence of this cultural criss-crossing, on some occasions reality and fiction become mixed and influence each other. Nowadays we witness how, on the one hand, real-life serial killers are "narrativised" by the media by turning their killings into coherent patterns,<sup>2</sup> or how they copy the murders of fictional serial killers;<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, we see how "serious" literature writers of great prestige write true-crime literature,<sup>4</sup> or how fictional serial killers copy the

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<sup>2</sup> See Sara Knox for an account of how the media has turned real-life murder cases into stories fitting the conventions of literary forms such as the gothic tale or the romance, especially in the case of the so-called "Heart Killers" (1998: 79-127).

<sup>3</sup> Joel Black deals with the cases of Mark David Chapman's 1980 killing of John Lennon and John W. Hinckley's attempt on the newly elected President Reagan. Both Chapman and Hinckley were trying to imitate fictional characters. Chapman assumed the identity of Caulfield as the alienated saviour of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Hinckley was trying to perform Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* (1991: 135-187).

<sup>4</sup> See Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song* (1980); Kate Millett, *The Basement: Meditations on a*

deeds of real killers or try to resemble them.<sup>5</sup> The interactions are never-ending and there is no doubt that, as Joyce Carol Oates puts it, the serial killer has become an icon of pop culture (1999a: 233), or rather, of US popular culture. Since there are so many ramifications of the same phenomenon I want to limit the scope of this paper to the case of literature. I will deal mainly with two US books: Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). The comparison between these books is especially interesting because from them two very different conceptions of the serial killer as a literary genre emerge.

Serial killer fiction is a genre that has close links with both the gothic and the detective genre. This fiction takes the chaotic world of gothic and adapts it to the contemporary world through the figure of the serial killer. This kind of criminal does not kill only once, as is usually the case in detective fiction. Serial killers kill over and over and, what is more important, they follow a pattern in the choice of their victims, a pattern that the detective must discover. Thus, in serial killer fiction the world of chaos is recuperated from gothic fiction, while underlining the figure of the detective, who competes with the serial killer for the main role in the genre. For Philip Simpson, Thomas Harris can be considered the creator of the serial killer formula (2000: 70) and, in that sense, *The Silence of the Lambs* serves as a perfect practical example of those conventions. The aesthetics of the novel is designed to offer its readers different sources of pleasure: the command of disorder, the enjoyment derived from discovering patterns, the pleasing feelings of anticipation and repetition provided by the serial murders, the identification with an intelligent detective, and of course the relish for transforming the murders into clues in an intellectual game. These kinds of narratives have the power of making us diminish the serious implications of murder, turning serial killing into an aesthetic game that can be enjoyed as simple entertainment. By contrast, *American Psycho* is an attempt to use the genre as an ethical denunciation, where the reader cannot but face the real horror behind the serial killer phenomenon. Aesthetics against ethics will be, thus, the main topic of this paper.

It is no coincidence that the books that are going to be analysed are US since the United States boasts 74 percent of the world's serial killers, while Europe claims only 19 percent (Jane Caputi 1993: 110). For Mark Seltzer serial killing takes place in a culture where violence has become a collective spectacle. Seltzer calls it a "wound culture", which he defines as "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (1998: 1). This is the kind of culture that favours the transformation of serial killing into a spectacle both in real life and in fiction.

Before further analysing this phenomenon, it might be clarifying to give an "official" definition of it. The FBI defines serial murder simply "as involving an

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*Human Sacrifice* (1979); Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1965).

<sup>5</sup> To illustrate this point we only have to think of the serial killers in the works analysed in this paper. Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (1991) is similar to the real-life serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) resembles Ed Gein. For a further account of the life of Jeffrey Dahmer, Ed Gein and other real-life serial killers see Palacios (1998).

offender associated with the killing of at least four victims, over a period greater than seventy-two hours" (Seltzer 1998: 9). This "cooling-off period" (distributing the murders serially over time) provides the working distinction between serial and mass murder, with spree-killing falling somewhere in between. The term was coined in the mid-1970s by the FBI veteran and ex-Army CID colonel Robert Ressler, who writes:

Also in my mind were the serial adventures we used to see on Saturday at the movies.... Each week, you'd be lured back to see another episode, because at the end of each one there was a cliff-hanger. In dramatic terms, this wasn't a satisfactory ending, because it increased, not lessened the tension. The same dissatisfaction occurs in the minds of serial killers. (in Seltzer 1998: 64)

Ressler's words invite different reflections. First of all, the strong link between reality and fiction that has accompanied the serial killer from its very beginning can be perceived. A cinematic serial influenced Ressler in his creation of a "technical" name capable of defining in real life a manifestation that was already present in fiction. The second important idea that can be extracted from this quotation is the concept of seriality. Under capitalism, seriality has become a principle of production. Seltzer understands the phenomenon of serial killing as the most characteristic form of public violence in our "machine culture" or era of the "information society". In the Network the flood of numbers, codes and letter seems to replace real people, which may bring forth a complete failure of distinction between self and others. This confusion comes as a consequence of "an utter absorption in technologies of reflection, reduplication, and simulation" (1998: 20), which may also account for the serial and repetitive aspects of the killings.

The seriality of serial killers, or at least, the seriality of the myth-like serial killer created through the arts and the media, has similar effects to those produced by different forms of serialised mass culture such as the television serials and series, the film serials, the novels in instalments,<sup>6</sup> or even the newspapers. Repetition makes us understand patterns and know what to expect next time. Thus, after each new instalment the audience is left wanting more, enjoying a mix of repetition and anticipation. In the case of serial killing each new murder becomes a new instalment, a new chapter in the news. People keep "buying" the chapters, craving for a conclusion that may disclose a pattern or may impose an interpretation on the random material. As Judith Halberstam points out, the interpreters of the crime are the police, the tabloids, the public, the detective, the psychologist, the critic... (1995:

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<sup>6</sup> The literary serials may seem something more characteristic of the nineteenth century, however the World Wide Web seems to be reviving this way of publishing in instalments. Stephen King started distributing in June 2000 his on-line serial *The Plant* at the price of one dollar per chapter. In December 2000 he posted the sixth and by now last instalment, promising to continue after a year or two break for working in other projects. Readers felt cheated because even if they love serials they also love an all-embracing conclusion, which King failed to provide. Douglas Clegg's attempt had been more successful in 1999, when he posted the Net's first serial thriller.

172), anyone capable of discerning a pattern that will impose order on an uncontrollable situation. As Richard Dyer argues, people enjoy the posing of questions such as what will happen next? When will he strike next and whom? When will they get him? What have all the victims in common? Is there a pattern emerging out of all the killings? (1997: 16).

This obsession with finding a pattern that allows a self-contained conclusion has also permeated the interpretation of real murders. For Joseph Gixti this fictionalising process takes place since "popular fiction, because of its very generic and formulaic nature, frequently acts as a frame of reassurance which allows us to safely engage in this exploratory process" (1995: 90). The "Atlanta Child killings" is an example of this curious process. The victims were killed in different ways, their bodies found in different places, and they were not even all boys, (two girls died), or all children. In spite of all this evidence, the murders were considered the product of a single man (Knox 1998: 150-1). A more recent example can be seen in the investigation of the killing of two women and the missing of a third one in Perpignan, France. The February 2000 issue of *Vanity Fair* (Burrough 2000: 86-99) speculated about the idea that the killings might have been committed by a serial killer copying some of Salvador Dalí's most gruesome paintings. If the story was included in a selective, high-class magazine like *Vanity Fair*, was precisely because a possible pattern was being imposed on a number of killings. As it has been seen in the case of King's on-line serial, readers love instalments but they also love order and conclusion.

For people to sit back and discern patterns, both in real life and in fiction, they need to forget or at least diminish the role of the victims. They need to forget the ethical implications of the crimes and consider their aesthetic possibilities. Already in the nineteenth century there was a change from an essentially religious or moral consideration of crime to a more aesthetic approach. Thomas de Quincey's 1827 "Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" defended the idea of considering brutal crimes as works of art if viewed from an aesthetic or disinterested amoral perspective. In fact, detective fiction adopted these ideas, although the genre chose to concentrate on the detective rather than on the criminal, creating an art of detection. The idea that crime has aesthetic implications may be considered socially unacceptable. However, this is something people do without noticing when they follow the deeds of a serial killer in the news or when they read in *Vanity Fair* that a serial killer may be copying some paintings of Salvador Dalí. In his informed book *The Aesthetics of Murder*, Joel Black further considers these possibilities and their implications through history. This aesthetisation of crime is also reflected in real life through the words of the former FBI profiler of serial killers, John Douglas: "I always tell my agents, 'If you want to understand the artist, you have to look at the painting'. We've looked at many 'paintings' over the years and talked extensively to the most 'accomplished' artists" (in Seltzer 1998: 121). For Joyce Carol Oates, the enigma of the serial killer, s/he who murders not for money but for its own sake, is the stuff of poetry and art (1999a: 234). She even explains the "aesthetic" attempts of some real serial killers to arrange their victims in "artistic" ways, like the New

York anonymous axe murder in 1985; the "Babysitter" of Oakland County, Michigan, in 1976; or Ed Gein's collection of ornaments made of skulls on bedposts and belts of female nipples (1999b: 255-6). Finding these deeds artistic is somewhat difficult but, in the realm of fiction, where we are not threatened, it becomes one of the pleasures of serial killer literature and cinema.

Another of the pleasures provided by the serial killer is that this phenomenon allows us to locate social violence in the killer's disorder, rather than in ourselves or in the social order. For Carla Freccero:

Serial killers also typify an individual conception of violence, singularly embodied and psychically caused ... Yet the "deformation" of the American dream—that which we *do* recognize and avow—is located not in corrupt government, or economic institutions that exploit us, but in an individual. The solution to the problem of violence then also becomes relatively simple: kill the serial killer and your problem goes away. (1997: 48)

Philip Simpson shares Freccero's point of view since these narratives uphold the patriarchal, law-and-order status quo. For him "they also divert narrative attention away from harmful economic and social policies, which do far more violence against persons than the relatively rare phenomenon of serial murder committed by isolated individuals" (2000: 19). These narratives are reassuring because the serial killer, the only source of disruption, is stopped at the end. People need some kind of social order (the police, the FBI, a detective...) to solve the crimes, and in order to solve the crimes the pattern evolving from them must be understood. Thus, serial killer narrations usually provide control over disorder, the discovery of patterns behind the crimes, the identification with a strong representative of the law and the enjoyment of the murders as an artistic intellectual game. But what happens when these sources of pleasure are not present in the serial killer narrative? What happens if there is no strong representative of the law, if the serial killer is not caught at the end, if there is no pattern to be extracted from the killings (thus, they are not "artistic"), if the seriality goes on and on, always a cliff-hanging (in Ressler's words), and there is never a chance to lessen the tension? These questions will find an answer through the analysis of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and *American Psycho* (1991), two books dealing with serial killers although in opposite ways.

*The Silence of the Lambs* is a bestseller written in 1988 by Thomas Harris, whose 1991 film adaptation directed by Jonathan Demme was a box-office hit and won five major Academy Awards. The success of both the book and the film may hint to us what kind of narratives dealing with serial killers the general reader enjoys most and we will try to see why. *The Silence of the Lambs* deals with two serial killers: Jame Gumb (known as Buffalo Bill), who has already killed several women, and Hannibal Lecter, a psychiatrist and serial killer already imprisoned. The story follows, to a great extent, the characteristics of the genre that have already been described: there are a series of murders that trigger off an investigation. Clarice

Starling, a student about to become an FBI agent, is asked by her superior, Jack Crawford, to interview Lecter in order to find out who is killing these women. The process is clearly aestheticised because Clarice has to discern a pattern out of the bodies of the previous victims, and, to do so, she must forget her feelings towards them, the fact that they were women like her. As Toni Magistrale points out, she must transform the daily anger and outrage she feels as a woman into something useful (1996: 34-5). In some passages of the book this idea is made very clear:

The proximity of madmen —the thought of Catherine Martin bound and alone, with one of them snuffing her, patting his pockets for his tools— braced Starling for her job. But she needed more than resolution. She needed to be *calm*, to be *still*, to be *the keenest instrument*. She had to use *patience* in the face of the awful need to hurry. (Harris 1988: 136. *My Italics*)

As explained in the introduction, for the aesthetic game to be enacted the less it is known about the victims the better. To find out a pattern Clarice cannot think about Catherine Martin (the last captured woman) bound, alone and suffering. Clarice must have calmness, stillness and patience, rational feelings that allow the triumph of aesthetics over ethics and that favour the reader's enjoyment of the narrative. This is also seen in the scene in which Clarice has to analyse one of the corpses. After some seconds of real horror she pulls herself together and proceeds to examine the body, discovering the woman's skinned back and the rare moth introduced in the victim's throat: clues that will become very useful in the course of the investigation. Accordingly, readers can interpret the murders as clues without feeling guilty because they behave like Clarice. They are only being rational in order to discover who the criminal is.

Apart from the pleasures obtained through the presence of a strong detective for readers to identify with, we must also take into account that Clarice is a politically correct detective. A woman fighting against patriarchy who will make a male serial killer pay for his crimes against women. For Linda Badley, this innovation is a reversal of the "woman-in-peril" or the "psycho chases girl", a formula seen in nearly all "slasher" movies of the seventies and eighties.<sup>7</sup> Badley even considers the film a "woman's picture" (1995: 145). Jonathan Demme, the director of the film adaptation, has a similar opinion. As he says: "I did like that *The Silence of the Lambs* was a woman's picture.... I love that he's (Harris) taking some really good pokes at patriarchy while spinning this tale. And I think the movie sort of manages to do that, too" (in Smith 1991: 30). In this way, the film and the book

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<sup>7</sup> In her 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* Carol J. Clover makes an impressive analysis of these slasher movies that tend to place women as victims. The genre seems to have gone mainstream thanks to films like *The Accused*, *Alien*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, *Thelma and Louise* and, of course, *The Silence of the Lambs*. For her, low-budget horror is the formula that most obviously trades in the repressed, becoming itself the repressed of mainstream filmmaking, expressing the things that a politically correct film could never express. Thus, Clover claims that films like *The Silence of the Lambs* are just politically correct versions of the seventies and eighties horror films adorned with 'niceties of plot, character, motivation, cinematography, pacing, acting, and the like' (1992: 20).

became attractive for both genders, recovering a genre that had been widely considered misogynist. As it has already been pointed out, the book became a crossover bestseller since the audience comprised both women and men, while the film was a sweeping success both at the box office and the Academy Awards. However, although both the film and the book obtained many positive reviews, there were some critical voices that attacked them for their portrayal of women and transsexuals. According to an editorial of *The Nation* the film was amoral, politically incorrect and a defence of "sodomasochism, homophobia, misogyny and worse" ("Dark Victory": 507). Jane Caputi agrees with this view and wonders:

Where, we might ask, is the feminist value in thus immortalizing a sadistic cannibal? Moreover, where is the feminist value in featuring a central female figure when she must depend upon, bond with and achieve self-awareness through her interactions with the centennial version of Jack the Ripper? (1993: 103)

In my opinion, it is not fair to blame *The Silence of the Lambs* for being politically incorrect. Compared to earlier slasher movies, it portrays women as victims, but not as passive ones. Catherine Martin tries to save herself by luring the killer's dog into the well where she is entrapped. In the same way, Clarice is depicted as a very competent female detective. For Caputi, she is patronised by Lecter and Crawford but the story is presented as if Clarice, as a woman, were the only person capable of really understanding the victims. She does not hesitate to tell Crawford:

I'm as good as anyone you've got at the cop stuff, better at some things. The victims are all women and there aren't any women working this. I can walk in a woman's room and know three times as much about her as a man would know, and you know that's a fact. (1988: 286)

Clarice is the one that joins the pieces in the puzzle, arrives at the serial killer's house on her own, rescues Catherine Martin and kills Gumb. Her competence cannot be denied.

As regards the portrayal of transsexuals, Richard Jennings, a well-known gay rights advocate, found the film: "an atrocity against women and one more instance of an industry that can't seem to create a positive gay character" (in Donald 1992: 347). In Demme's words this was not the intention of the film:

Also, obviously, we knew that it was important to not have Gumb misinterpreted by the audience as being homosexual. That would be a complete betrayal of the themes of the movie. And a disservice to gay people ... we didn't want people to think he's transvestite. (Smith 1991: 37)

Hannibal Lecter himself affirms that Gumb is not reducible to a transsexual (1988: 158). Indeed, Gumb is furious because he cannot pass the test to be given



transsexual surgery. This fact becomes an important clue in the investigation since they start looking for "a male who will test differently from the way a true transsexual would test" (1988: 162). Not only Gumb is not a transsexual but transsexuals in general are repeatedly defended in the book. Dr Danielson, the head of the Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins, cannot believe Gumb is a real transsexual and says:

It's taken years —we're not through yet— showing the public that transsexuals aren't crazy, they aren't perverts, they aren't queers, whatever that is— ... The incidence of violence among transsexuals is a lot lower than in the general population. There are decent people with a real problem —a famously intransigent problem. They deserve help and we can give it. I'm not having a witch hunt here. (1988: 173)

As these passages show, it is not fair to blame *The Silence of the Lambs* for not being politically correct. Women and transsexuals are not mistreated in the book, and the fact that they are not is another of the pleasures that the narration provides.

In *The Silence of the Lambs* another pleasing aspect of the narrative is the death of the serial killer at the end of the book. As explained in the introduction, serial killer fiction allows the location of violence in an individual. In order to stop all harm and live happily ever after, the serial killer, the one who disrupts all order in a perfectly organised society, must be stopped. On top of this, Gumb is a "classical" monster. In his analysis of horror, Robin Wood claims that the monsters of the genre are the "actual dramatization of the dual concept of the repressed/the Other" (1986: 75). All that our civilisation represses or oppresses reemerges as an object of horror, and the happy ending signifies the restoration of repression. In his analysis of "otherness", (what bourgeois ideology cannot recognise but must deal with), he includes "deviations from ideological sexual norms" as a way of defending sexuality as reproductive and restricted by the ideal of the family (1986: 75). Now we can retake the criticism expressed by some critics against the portrayal of Gumb as a transsexual. Whether we agree that Gumb is a transsexual or not, it is certainly true that he does not belong to the norm. He does not represent a clear sexual identity and is deviant in his need to kill women to become one of them through their skin. The fact that he does not represent a clear sexual identity is something unacceptable in a bourgeois society, so he is made the monster of the film/book. He is to blame for the death of all these young women, maybe he is even to blame for all the oppression that women suffer in society. The ending becomes satisfactory because his death, at the hands of a woman, means the end to his threat, the end to all deviance. The audience can feel relieved again, since all the blame lies with Gumb. The social order is reassured, its ideology restored and Hannibal left free. His life as an actual serial killer was left for a second part called *Hannibal* (1999), whose film adaptation has been released in 2001.

In *The Silence of the Lambs* Hannibal Lecter is not treated as a monster in a classical sense. He is white, probably heterosexual, intelligent, had a liberal profession and is a gentleman. Sure, he is also a cannibal but he is extremely polite

and tasteful, after all he used to eat his victims with aromatic herbs. In the book readers learn that in 1975 Lecter killed one of his patients from his psychiatric practice. From the corpse he took only the sweetbreads: part of the heart, thymus and pancreas. These items appeared on the menu of a dinner Lecter gave for the president and conductor of the Baltimore Philharmonic, a man who claimed that Lecter was known for his excellent dinners and his articles in gourmet magazines (1988: 26). Thus, Lecter is not presented as a savage bloodthirsty man but a selective high-class gourmet. The reader may even like him at the end when he writes to Clarice to tell her that the world is much more interesting with her in it (1988: 351), isn't he cute? He is obviously going to kill the warden of the institution where he was imprisoned but, after all, this man had been cruel to Lecter (doesn't he deserve it a little bit?). If readers go through these conclusions when reading the book, *The Silence of the Lambs* accomplishes a final inversion of morality. It is easier to fall into the trap of aesthetic pleasures in the face of a serial killer who is cultivated, polished and a gentleman. Jane Caputi underlines how Lecter benefits from 100 years of a mythmaking process in which serial killers have been endlessly romanticised. Besides, he is palatable for women because even though he murders men and women, the murders described are those of men (1991: 103). This is De Quincey's theory, which might have sounded so nonsensical at the beginning of this paper, made true. *The Silence of the Lambs* then becomes out-and-out pleasure, pure aesthetics, both in the way people enjoy the film/book by forgetting about the victims as people and simply discerning patterns, and also by the way Lecter subtly lures us to his side. For Steffen Hantke a double attitude towards serial killers can be found in fiction. On the one hand,

we glorify the serial killer as a defender of private space, glory in the autonomy he derives from silence, exile, and cunning. Yet we are to fear the consequences of the sleep of reason, the radical social irresponsibility that perfect isolation from the discipline of the public sphere encourages in the individual. (1998: 188)

In the book both tendencies are represented in the two serial killers: Lecter and Gumb. Gumb's death provides a certain social security, whereas Lecter's freedom may fulfil in Hantke's words the admiration of "silence, exile and cunning". As a source of pleasure and entertainment, *The Silence of the Lambs* does not aim at challenging people's complacency, as Demme puts it:

You don't want to cross the line with people, make people physically ill. You don't want to compromise them to that extent. You want to give them the good old-fashioned kind of shock they paid their money for without mortifying them. (Smith 1991: 33)

By the end of the novel and film people are not mortified since no social criticism has been posed: the enactment of the conventions of the genre, plus the attempt to turn the genre into something a bit more politically correct arouses a feeling of security and removes all threat.

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* also portrays the life of a serial killer, Patrick Bateman. He is a rich white heterosexual yuppie that hides a sexist, racist, xenophobic personality. His victims are mainly women, black people, beggars, children and homosexuals. The novel is narrated by Bateman himself, and this allows us to witness his daily routine, his work, his friends, his love affairs, the television talk show he watches, the magazines he reads, the films he rents or the cosmetic products he uses. The general mood of the book is different from that of *The Silence of the Lambs*. In the latter, the acts of violence are not directly described. As a proof of their existence, the audience only has the corpses of the victims, but the corpses turn into clues in the investigation and not women who were tortured and suffered. In *American Psycho* tortures and killings are narrated in all detail. Whereas Demme offered only a "safe shock", Ellis offers gruesome descriptions of horrible acts that do not leave the reader indifferent. I agree with Linda Kauffman who observes that all Ellis has done is translate what viewers see on the screen in horror films into prose, transcribing the thousands of discrete sights, sounds, and sensations the brain records in each frame of any horror film. The effect is emetic, not arousing (1998: 249).

The book had problems even getting published but finally Ellis's manuscript was accepted for publication and the author was given an advance by Simon and Schuster. Negative pre-publication reviews in *Time* and *Spy* magazines prompted Simon and Schuster to withdraw its offer. Random House bought the publishing rights and the next year the novel appeared in Random House's Vintage series.<sup>8</sup> The critics reacted against the book in very well-known magazines and newspapers such as *Time*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Nation*. Roger Rosenblatt wrote for the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* an article titled "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away with Murder?" where he said:

"American Psycho" is the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore. But that is unfair to sophomores. So pointless, so themeless, so everythingless is this novel, except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products, that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it certainly would be the funniest. (1990: 3)

If Rosenblatt considers the book pointless or themeless is because *American Psycho* is not a book that follows the conventions of the serial killer narrative. The book takes those conventions and plays with them, uncovering their status as conventions. All to be cherished in books like Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*, James Patterson's *Along Came a Spider* (1992) or Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* (1994) and in films like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1995), *Seven* (1995), *Copycat* (1997) or *The Bone Collector* (1999) was aesthetics. *American Psycho*, with its exaggerated usage of some conventions and its complete ignorance of others, causes disturbance and underlines the violence behind the serial killer phenomenon.

<sup>8</sup> For a further account of the story of the publication of *American Psycho* and its analysis as a case of censorship see Freccero (1997) and Zaller (1993).

The portrayal of the serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs* and in *American Psycho* is also very different. Jame Gumb is, following Robin Wood's theory, "the other", somebody oppressed by society because of his "deviant" sexuality. Patrick Bateman does not fit in any of Wood's classifications of "otherness". He is a white, heterosexual man. He is wealthy, handsome, intelligent and powerful. In many ways he resembles Lecter, but he never attains the readers' fondness. In *The Silence of the Lambs* Lecter's direct violence is seen once, whereas Bateman kills a great number of times and every new killing is described in greater detail. What happens when the monster is not an "other" but a leading member of society, the American dream made true? When a man who is perfectly integrated in society, who follows all social rules, and is *the* ultimate consumer in a capitalistic society, becomes a cruel serial killer, the blame cannot be put only on the individual, the blame reaches the whole society, readers included.

This idea becomes clearer when analysing the ending. For a serial killer narrative to be satisfactory, the "bad" serial killer must be caught at the end.<sup>9</sup> As explained in the introduction, this is a way of locating the violence in the killer's disorder, rather than in ourselves or in the social order. Jame Gumb is killed by Clarice at the end, Lecter runs free because he was always portrayed as a help in order to catch the "bad" serial killer. By the end of *American Psycho* Bateman is free. There is no detective capable of stopping him because there is no aesthetic game being enacted. Ellis ignores the convention of a pattern emerging from the corpses. In this way, there is only violence and the boring repetition of the killer's daily routine: his beauty care, his body-building, his drug consumption, his restaurants, his music, his tortures and killings. All is constantly repeated, serialised with no difference in tone between a murder description and a superficial comment:

I've situated the body in front of the new Toshiba television set and in the VCR is an old tape and appearing on the screen is the last girl I filmed. I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest by someone Italian and I'm kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating the girl's brain, gobbling it down, spreading Grey Poupon over hunks of the pink, fleshy meat. (1991: 328)

Here we see Bateman practising cannibalism, but unlike Lecter's case, Ellis makes this attitude disgusting by not saving words in the description of Bateman's acts. He mixes the description of the cannibalistic act with very superficial comments about what Bateman is wearing. Lecter's cannibalism is described in aesthetic terms, he is no savage, he is sophisticated even in what he chooses to eat, only the organs that constitute the "sweet meats", and accompanied by a good wine and herbs. His sense of humour is also remarkable. To explain his next act of cannibalism he says he is having a friend for dinner. This is also a form of superficiality, but in *The Silence of the Lambs* it is part of the aesthetic game. Ellis

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<sup>9</sup> To this I add the exception of those narratives where the serial killer is not caught as a marketing device. This allows a second part: a cliff-hanging ending entices audiences to buy or watch the next part.

denounces that game and shows what a "sophisticated" cannibal looks like. He may be wearing a Joseph Abboud suit but he is still eating a girl's brain.

Ellis's use of violence is highly self-conscious. This use of excessive violence disrupts the whole mechanism of the serial killer narrative. For the narrative to be enjoyable, it cannot be overflowed with horror or superficiality; in this sense, in contrast to *American Psycho*, narratives such as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Seven* or *The Bone Collector* are precisely a "proper" combination of horror and superficiality in a tasteful manner, making an art of murder. Ellis takes all the violence that appears in the background of these narratives and discloses it, which prevents any possible concentration on the murders in objective, game-like terms. It is highly significant that in 1991 the film version of *The Silence of the Lambs* received five academy awards, while *American Psycho* was condemned for its violence. As Demme said in an interview quoted above, he wanted a "safe shock" when filming *The Silence of the Lambs*. Ellis forgets about safety and prefers denunciation:

I thought about juxtaposing this absurd triviality with extreme violence ... If people are disgusted or bored, then they're finding out something about their own limits as readers. I want to challenge their complacency, to provoke them ... *American Psycho* is partly about excess —just when readers think they can't take any more violence, or another description of superficial behavior, more is presented— and their response toward this is what intrigues me. (in Hoban 1990: 36)

The use of excess may become necessary when challenging the complacency of those readers saturated with violence coming from films, songs, TV programs, newspapers or even the daily news. Violence is presented in an over-fictionalised narration and works as a denunciation of its use by part of the mass media. This denunciation is made through Ellis's use of metafictional comments.

*American Psycho* is a book whose first Dantesque words are "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE, scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank..." (1991: 3) and finishes with "...and 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' color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (1991: 399), both being graffiti painted in "blood red" that the narrator sees in the city. The opening letters become a metafictional device that announces, in a very self-conscious manner, that a spiral of violence and death is to follow, while the closing letters imply that no easy escapist ending can be offered. FEAR is another of the words that announces what is to follow. Price's proud words about his value in society are followed by the FEAR graffiti:

"I'm resourceful", Price is saying. "I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society *cannot* afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*". Price calms down, continues to stare out the cab's dirty window, probably at the word FEAR sprayed in red graffiti on the side of a McDonald's on Fourth and Seventh. (1991: 3)

The red graffiti seems to indicate that it is Price's attitude that people should fear. Price's belief in his superiority is also shared by Bateman, who feels entitled to kill "less valuable" people in society. This technique is repeated on other occasions. In another episode Bateman is looking for a prostitute, her description is commented on by another graffiti (also in red) behind her:

She's blond and slim and young, trashy but not an escort bimbo, and most important, she's white, which is a rarity in these parts ... Behind her, in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned brick warehouse, is the word M E A T and the way the letters are spaced awakens something in me and above the building like a backdrop is a moonless sky, which earlier, in the afternoon, was hung with clouds but tonight isn't. (1991: 168)

The word MEAT in red works is a comment on the way women are treated as objects of desire or commodities to be bought and sold. In this way, Ellis does not only show women as objects but comments upon it in an indirect way. Besides, for the whole narration the degrading treatment of homeless people is also commented on by a repeatedly announced musical on buses and hoardings: *Les misérables*. Victor Hugo's "misérables" contrasts with the contemporary "misérables" that fill the book: beggars, the homeless, the insane...

If the self-conscious comments on the violence of the book are taken into account, it becomes difficult to dismiss them as mere excess. This excess is used with a social aim in mind. As Linda Williams puts it, talking about the genres that feature bodily excess (such as pornography, horror or melodrama), to simply dismiss these genres as "bad excess" (masochism or sadism) is not to address their function as cultural problem solving (1995: 156). The use of excess brings forth questions that would not have been addressed otherwise. John Fiske underlines how "norms that are exceeded lose their invisibility, lose their status as natural common sense, and are brought out into the open agenda" (1989: 114). This excess meaning escapes ideological control and can be used to resist or evade it. Unlike in *The Silence of the Lambs*, where violence is hidden behind the intellectual game between Clarice and Lecter, in *American Psycho* violence is underlined, making readers aware of its implications.

In the book, mass culture seems to be the cause of all this excess. Patrick Bateman has watched *Body Double* (Brian De Palma's 1984 semi-pornographic film) thirty-seven times (1991: 112). He has read true crime biographies of famous serial killers like Ted Bundy, Son of Sam, Charles Manson and Ed Gein (92). He is hooked on the TV program *The Patty Winters Show*, which treats subjects like toddler-murders (138), Nazis (156), shark-attack victims (143), or a man who set his daughter on fire while she was giving birth (347). These very serious subjects are opposed to completely banal ones also treated in the program, such as tips on how your pet can become a movie star (291), a machine that lets people talk to the dead (326), salad bars (225), or aerobic exercise (200) among others. This insistence on

juxtaposing the banal with the serious is also reflected in the descriptions of the murders:

As usual, in an attempt to understand these girls I'm filming their deaths. With Torri and Tiffany I use a Minox LX ultra-miniature camera that takes 9.5mm film, has a 15mm f/3.5 lens, and exposure meter and a built-in neutral density filter that sits on a tripod. I've put a CD of the Traveling Wilburys into a portable CD player that sits on the headboard above the bed, to mute any screams. (1991: 304)

The contrast between the banal detailed descriptions of objects and the descriptions of murders discloses their brutality and our own attitude towards them in real life. In more subtle ways than those offered by Ellis, part of mass culture and media bombard people with violence, but some people are so used to it that they do not seem to notice it anymore. Now, violence has to become excessive to be noticeable. Ellis's technique of juxtaposing the banal and the serious, his self-conscious portrayal of violence and his overuse of mass culture, work as means of denouncing the violence that is received through different channels every day.

Denouncing violence through the use of violence can bring about ambiguous effects. Throughout decades there has been a similar debate about pornography, many feminist critics arguing that images of sexual violence directly affect the incidence of actual violence on women. The debate is still open because no casual link has been established yet.<sup>10</sup> The case of *American Psycho* is certainly ambiguous, which is reflected in the conflicting opinions of different critics. For James Annesley the images in the text can contribute to the same destructive process they describe (1998: 21). In the same vein Jane Caputi claims that the novel ignores any gender analysis of the origins or behaviour of the serial killer and becomes itself a work of *femicidal* pornography "clearly aimed at arousing the reader" (1993: 103). On the other side of the debate we find Linda Kauffman. For her *American Psycho* takes the buried message of many television commercials that represent women in slavish positions and "puts the buried message under a microscope, magnifying the commercialization of mass culture by taking it literally" (1998: 244). Once more we return to the idea of excess and how it can function as a denouncer of certain serial killer narrative conventions. In this sense, for Elayne Rapping the elegant portrayal of misogyny as a game in *The Silence of the Lambs* is more offensive and symbolically threatening to women than *American Psycho* (1991: 37). Its being more subtle makes it also more difficult to detect.

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<sup>10</sup> In the US the 1970 National Commission on Obscenity and Pornography could not find a casual link between images of sexual violence and actual violence. In 1986 the Attorney General's Commission reached a more ambiguous conclusion. Even though they admitted that no empirical evidence proves that explicit sexual materials cause sex crimes, the report had a very serious impact. Corporations like RCA, CBS, Ramada Inns, Warner Communications, and the Southland Corporation were identified as distributors of porn. As a consequence the 7-Eleven stores (owned by Southland Corporation) not only removed *Playboy* and *Penthouse* from their shelves, but also *Rolling Stone* and *Cosmopolitan*. For further information see Kauffman (1998: 235-243) and Knox (1998: 25-28).

The ending of *American Psycho* also prompted heated debates. For critics like Norman Mailer, the failure of *American Psycho* is that by the end readers know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others than they know about the inner workings in the mind of an inexpressive actor in an exploitation film. By the end of the novel nothing is known about Bateman's motivations or about extreme acts of violence (1998: 1076). Mailer seems to long for the conventional ending when the killer explains an infancy trauma that has made him "misbehave" (see Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)), or when the detective explains what the link between the different killings was (see *The Silence of the Lambs*). These endings are in a way consoling fantasies. For Philip Simpson, the critical anger directed towards Ellis and films like John McNaughton's 1986 *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* may be explained by the spread of blame among the society that helps create the serial killer (2000: 136). Instead of blaming one isolated person Bateman becomes the reflection of the selfish eighties US society, a decade that saw the increase of the gap between social classes due to the cuttings in the federal budget. For critics like James Lincoln Collier, in the eighties the government adopted as its basic philosophy the ethic of the self, "making selfishness the official policy of the United States" (1991: 239). Bateman is presented as the logical consequence of that society and following that same logic the narrator does not judge him, Ellis simply presents things as Bateman sees them. Carla Freccero shares this view: the negative reaction of the critics was due to Ellis's "failing" to provide a "moral framework" for his tale of the twenty-six-year-old Harvard graduate, and serial killer, Patrick Bateman (1997: 51). However, the "moral framework" is the narration itself. Ellis refuses to present murder as something attractive or game-like. He presents it in all its cruelty, turning *American Psycho* into a perpetual chain of serial killing, where the figure of the serial killer is completely deglamorised.

Although both *The Silence of the Lambs* and *American Psycho* tell the story of a serial killer, their way of doing it is entirely different. The former prefers to use serial killer genre conventions, presenting a reassuring narration that allows readers the pleasure of seeing a detective who, by analysing the bodies of the victims and the circumstances of the crimes, will infer a pattern leading to the killer. It is a "clean" process of analysis and interpretation of clues in which readers enjoy the posing of questions such as why should the killer do this? Will the last victim be killed? Will Lecter say something relevant about the killer? How can his words be related to the clues obtained from the analysis of the bodies? All the questions find an answer through the narrative and especially at the end when all lines are closed. Gumb is dead and order is restored. Lecter may be free and alive, a guarantee that a second part will follow. *The Silence of the Lambs* is in the line of the serial killer books and films that glamorise serial killers, at the same time showing that with enough information and a high degree of competence on the part of the detective, signs can be read and murderers discovered and stopped. The pattern behind the serial murders emerges and leads to its author.

*American Psycho* represents other way of dealing with serial killers. The aesthetic sources of pleasure are diminished. There are no clues, no pattern, no



strong detective and no arrest of the criminal. Ellis plays with the predictability that generic fiction provides so as to undermine it and create in the reader the opposite effect intended by generic fiction. There will be no restoration of the social order. This kind of ending, apart from being a formal break characteristic of postmodernism, also constitutes an ideological break with more traditional narrations like *The Silence of the Lambs*. The chaotic world that Bateman creates with his killings will continue endlessly because the society depicted in the novel has become an accomplice of his crimes. The aesthetics of the serial killer narration are denounced as simple conventions, while ethical implications arouse with each new killing. Horrific and despicable as the narration may seem, it does not leave the reader indifferent and does certainly work against the glamorising and mythologising portrayals of serial killers and their actions.

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