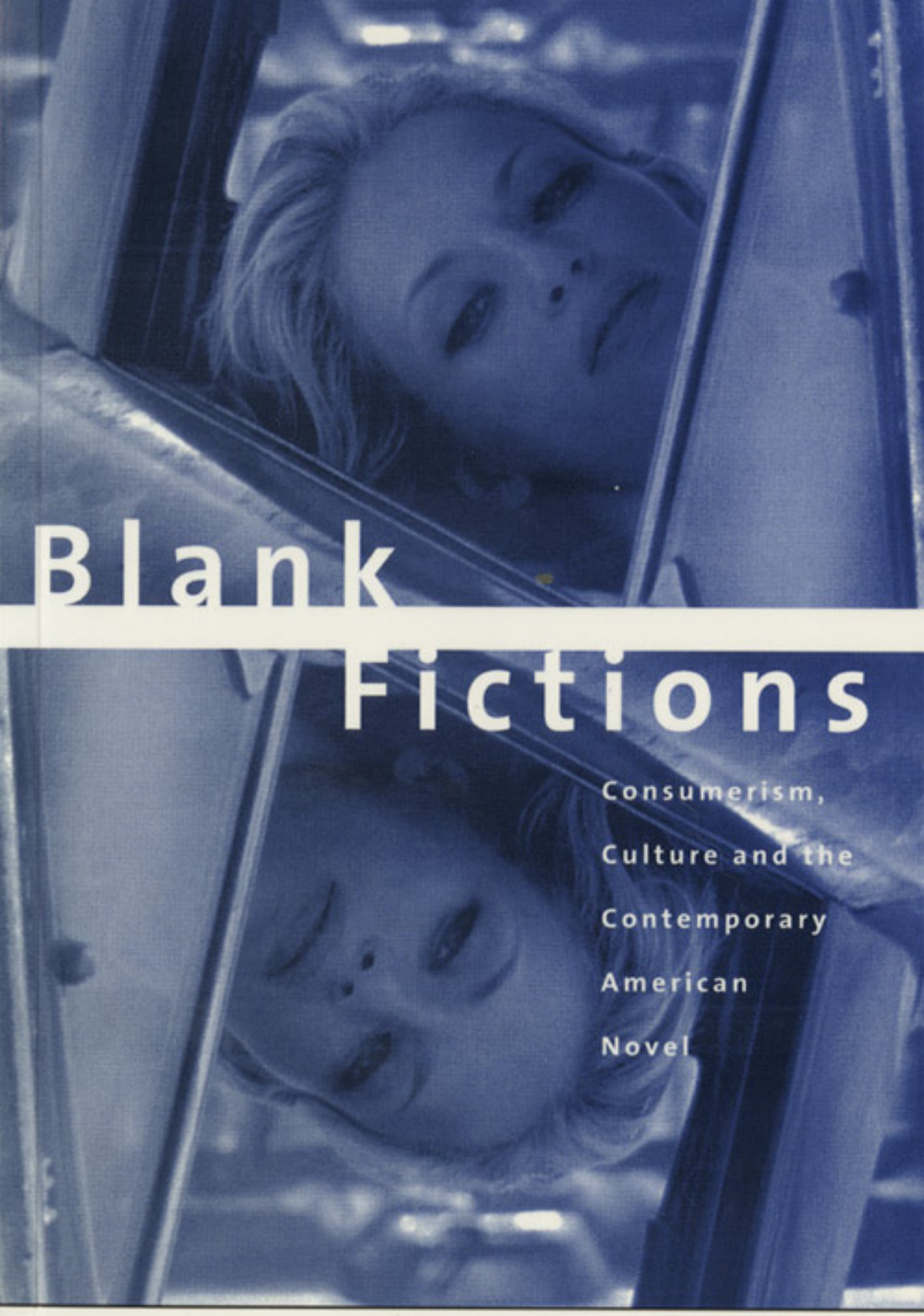

Blank Fictions

Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel

JAMES ANNESLEY

BLANK FICTIONS

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text's range and flexibility. If, as Ellis's argument seems to suggest, the objectifications of consumer society are responsible for Bateman's behaviour, then this novel in a sense shadows that process of objectification in both its fixed view of New York society and its endlessly detailed portraits of consumer objects, acts of consumption and, most importantly, violent murder. Ellis himself seems to offer a frozen, or reified image of the contemporary, a literary strategy that reflects the mechanisms of commodification itself. *American Psycho* can thus be read as a text that participates in the processes of commercialisation and objectification that were the very forces it set out to satirise.

In *American Psycho* Ellis offers violence as a metaphor for the processes of commodification that are infiltrating, objectifying and cutting up the social body of late twentieth century America. The proliferation of media simulations throughout contemporary society is seen to encourage these violent acts, with the novel's implication being that commercial culture, in all its manifestations, is dangerous and destructive. What makes Ellis's work particularly interesting is the extent to which other writers can be seen to share his vision of a brutalised society. *American Psycho* is not an aberrant text, but one that has clear parallels with a number of contemporary American narratives. In, for example, Brian D'Amato's novel *Beauty* (1993), a similar sense of malaise is generated through the novel's concentration on images of bodily violence. Though *Beauty* concentrates on the controlled medical violence of cosmetic surgery rather than the random destruction of the serial killer, both novels use the image of the brutalised body as a metaphor for a society that is being mortified and carved up.

D'Amato's *Beauty* tells the story of Jamie Angelo, a New York sculptor who forsakes the art world to become an unlicensed cosmetic surgeon. Angelo is a dealer in beauty, an individual whose career shadows that of Ellis's murderous broker. Bateman and Angelo inhabit the same kind of world, the Manhattan of cocktail parties and new restaurants and coke in the washrooms. Throughout the novel, Angelo experiments

with new and untested techniques that allow him radically to alter the faces of his female customers. As the narrative progresses, his skills develop to the point where he is able to give his girlfriend, Jaishree, a face that brings her work first as a model and then as a supermodel. This dreamlike progression turns sour when the side-effects of his operations begin to take effect and his creations turn on their creator. At the end of the novel D'Amato's Frankenstein is forced to confront the rage of the monstrous beauties he has fashioned.

The significance of beauty in D'Amato's novel is central to the meanings generated by the text. The focus on the body's aesthetic establishes a series of links between the individual human body and the economic body. Beauty is both a received judgement on the body's appearance and a means of putting an economic valuation on that appearance. When Angelo transforms Jaishree's face, he dramatically increases her earning power. The complex functioning of the idea of beauty thus positions the body within the exchange system and provides the means through which it is transformed into a commodity.

Traditional interpretations of beauty have tended to focus on its links with spiritual well-being. Ralph Waldo Emerson described it as the 'mark God sets upon virtue', while John Keats identified a link between beauty and truth.[27] Veblen, however, challenged these romantic readings of beauty with a materialist account that connected the 'ideal' of feminine beauty to 'pecuniary strength'.[28] In Mark Seltzer's terms, 'Veblen's theory ... anticipated ... the notion of the female body as a sort of leading economic indicator of consumer culture'.[29] It is this intersection between economic forces and the corporeal that provides the focus for D'Amato's text and generates the tensions between the self and the social that are established in its representations of the surgically altered body. These slickly performed procedures represent brutalisation. Jamie Angelo attacks the flesh, penetrates it, cuts it and moulds it into new shapes. Despite the controlled violence of these operations, D'Amato is at pains to emphasise the quality of the results achieved. Angelo does not perform minor alterations, he completely restructures faces. The crude cosmetic surgery of silicon and liposuction is replaced by a fantasy surgery that

can transform the human frame. Central to the narrative is the sense that cosmetic surgery provides a means of marketing and commercialising the body's appearance. Beauty, supposedly 'free' and 'natural' is, as a result of cosmetic surgery, transformed into a product that can be bought by those with sufficient financial resources. D'Amato's text describes a situation in which beauty is put up for sale in absolute terms. The fantasy operations D'Amato depicts are freed from the constraints imposed on real cosmetic surgery by factors like age and bone structure. The only thing *Beauty*'s surgical procedures need is money.

It is, of course, important to acknowledge that the connection between money and beauty is not unique to a world in which the kind of complete transformations described by D'Amato are possible. Cosmetic surgery is nothing new. The histories of foot-binding and infibulation, for example, give a sense of the antiquity of practices intended to adjust the body's appearance.[30] More importantly, the cultural norms that define the beautiful face must be read in terms that appreciate the formative role played by the taste of dominant power groups. Veblen see these links in particularly clear terms, recognising that in

> the constricted waist which has had so wide and persistent a vogue in the communities of Western culture, and also the trained foot of the Chinese ... are mutilations of unquestioned repulsiveness to the untrained sense ... Yet there is no room to question their attractiveness to a society into whose scheme of life they fit as honorific items sanctioned by the requirements of pecuniary respectability.[31]

For Veblen, the aesthetic perception of the female body responds to wider forces of economic authority and social hierarchy.

It is possible, however, to argue that the kind of practices described in *Beauty* establish links of unprecedented strength and directness between economics and the body. The situation D'Amato creates is one in which the body, and specifically the female body, is totally fetishised. The perceived balance between the natural and the social represented by the body is

thus upset by processes that see the body being increasingly controlled by the forces of commodification. In the conditions envisaged by D'Amato the body is overwhelmed by economic concerns. These processes echo Marx's reading of commodification and offer a very precise image of the dehumanising consequences of commodity fetishism.

> The mysterious character of the commodity form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of things.[32]

Marx's position finds a specific resonance when read alongside D'Amato's text, prompting recognition of the ways in which his novel represents cosmetic surgery as a process of dehumanisation that is both abstract and physical. In *Beauty*, what D'Amato calls the 'tyranny of aesthetics' is such that identity is made to hinge on appearance with the result being that it becomes more dependent on the physical form than on its lived dimensions.[33] In the same way that labour finds itself solidified in social terms, identity is frozen in the body's image. The fetishisation of the body's aesthetic appearance is such that it dominates lived experience and transforms them into 'objective characteristics'. For Marx, the objectification of labour takes place on the level of social psychology. In D'Amato's text this abstract process is translated into a corporeal event. The narrator is seen operating on his customers, literalising the fetishising process by converting their bodies and objectifying their identities in ways that have a specific price. These processes are dramatised in a scene that shows Angelo spending the night with the newly transformed Jaishree and finding himself 'seized by a wave of revulsion, as if I was sleeping with a dead thing'.[34] The 'dead thing' is, quite literally, a commodity, frozen and stripped of its human dimensions. The dehumanising impact of fetishisation is thus exactly paralleled by the dehumanising effects of surgically brutalising the body. All the consequences of commodification identified by Marx are thus present in this system. In his terms, the consequences of the commodifying process is that

the 'social relation between men themselves ... assumes ... the fantastic form of the relation between things'.[35] The difference is, however, that in D'Amato's text this economic process involves an added level of dehumanisation that takes place in a way unforeseen by Marx. *Beauty*'s bodies are commodities both on an abstract level and in literal terms.

D'Amato's representations of cosmetic surgery's economic penetrations into the body thus offer an image of an increasingly commodified world. Cosmetic surgery is one of the branches of 'body maintenance' that, according to Mike Featherstone, provide 'an expanding market for the sale of commodities'.[36] In this way the novel offers a representation of the increased intensity of economic activity, the heightened levels of commodification, that characterise the late capitalist period. Like Mandel, both Featherstone and D'Amato seem to recognise that late twentieth-century economics depend upon an acceleration and extension of the market and place a particular emphasis on the ways in which those principles have reached into and commodified the body. In Jameson's reading of late capitalism, he argues that this period is defined by a 'prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas'.[37] This 'expansion' involves a colonising, penetrating process in which, as Jameson suggests, 'the last vestiges of nature which survived into classical capitalism are at length eliminated'.[38] In this description of the economic encroachment into the 'last vestiges of nature' lies a very precise image of exactly the kinds of mechanisms depicted in *Beauty*, processes that see cosmetic surgery as a dehumanising, brutalising procedure that commodifies the human frame.

The relationship between this economic model and D'Amato's text can be developed by considering the central role played by aesthetics in the promotion of products. D'Amato dramatises this function in his portrayal of Angelo's search for the supposedly perfect face. His energy is concentrated on an attempt to construct a composite image of different looks using the already commodified images of fashion models and film stars. In one episode he sifts through a 'batch of color laser Xeroxes of beautiful women from painting and sculpture through the ages', while in another he is shown scanning pictures from *Vogue*, *Glamour* and *Elle* and

using them to produce a template of a 'make-believe woman' whom he hopes 'could really represent all Woman'.[39] He takes these airbrushed, idealised images of beauty as the models for his own creations, transforming them into a new kind of commodity. This triumph of commodification means that these advertising devices become products in their own right. D'Amato's artist-surgeon thus takes advertising images and turns them into realities in the faces he constructs. A perfectly commodified system results with the product and the promotion melding into one. Capital, in D'Amato's world, instead of selling through advertising, now sells advertising itself. The circle closes completely when the women who have been transformed using images from fashion and the cinema become themselves fashion models and film stars. In one scene, D'Amato captures this circularity in graphic terms by describing Angelo's visit to a department store and his encounter with mannequins that have been modelled on one of *his* surgically transformed women. He writes:

> One day I went shopping in Barney's ... there was a whole gang of her there, unmoving, five garishly swim-suited, variously wigged clones, staring down at me with lifeless eyes through the window. Apparently a mannequin company had made a head design based on her; kind of an interesting reverse switch, I guess, but I kind of lost interest in shopping that day.[40]

This is not a case of life imitating art, but a case of life imitating advertising with that imitation then being transformed once more back into promotional material.

The importance of beauty to the processes of product promotion has long been established. In *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, W.F. Haug identifies the 'aesthetic illusion' as the key element in the marketing process and argues that 'within the commodity system of buying and selling, the aesthetic illusion – the commodity's promise of use value – enters the arena as an independent function of its selling'.[41] In D'Amato's novel the women who have had their faces transformed are not just the products and the customers, but are also the advertising. A cosmetic surgeon's clients are living

advertisements for that surgeon's skills. In Haug's view, this cycle of commercialised images is a central part of the marketing process. His suggestion is that 'aesthetic innovation, as the functionary for regenerating demand, is thus transformed into a moment of direct anthropological power and influence'.[42] Rachel Bowlby offers a similar kind of interpretation when she argues that 'the commodity makes the person and the person is, if not for sale, then an object whose value and status can be read off with accuracy in terms of the things he has and the behavioural codes he adopts'.[43] The commodity's transformative potential is, in Bowlby's terms, associated with the aesthetic illusions supplied with the commodity. This transformative potential is made real in D'Amato's text which represents the 'anthropological power' of the advertising image in a way that sees those images being themselves anthropomorphised.

One problem with this reading is, however, that it relies on assumptions that figure the body in ways that contradict more established critical positions. The suggestion here is that the penetration of the body represents a diminishment of human experience. Corporeal limits are signalled as precious and the breakdown of those limits marked in negative terms. This contradicts the orthodox line which places the piercing of the body's limits in a positive light by arguing that such denaturalisations disrupt the body's perceived unity and undermine positions that draw their strength from biologically determined reasoning. Recent criticism has made a great deal of, for example, the significance of the female cyborg, interpreting her as a figure that dramatises the artificiality of the construct of the body.[44] A cyborg's prosthetic organs are read as an expression of her ability to define herself and her own body rather than having her body defined for her. These approaches do not, however, work well when linked to the denaturalising effects of cosmetic surgery represented in *Beauty*, where the surgical processes seem to enforce dominance rather than deconstruct it. In the kind of procedures described in *Beauty*, the penetration and transformation of the body work to reproduce cultural norms. The women created are not cyborgs, but mannequins. Rather than breaking up culturally

constructed ideas about the female body, this kind of cosmetic surgery carves those constructions deeper into the skin.

The interrelationships D'Amato constructs between the commodity, the commodity's image, the consumer and the body thus offer a perspective on the complex functioning of the economic in late twentieth-century society. D'Amato's text represents the body as a site in which a number of conflicting forces meet. It is the consumer and the consumed, the selling point and the product. The fact that the dehumanising consequences that attend the body's commodification take effect in ways that allow the objectified body to become an aesthetic illusion and thus complicit in its own objectification is one of the most striking twists in D'Amato's argument. The roles played by violent transformation, brutalisation, exploitation and commodification in D'Amato's text make these twists even more interesting and provide a link between the kind of deadening effects described in *Beauty* and *American Psycho*'s images of objectification. Both novels see late twentieth-century society as a place characterised by heightened levels of commodification, an intensification which carries violence and dehumanisation in its wake.

Beauty's brutal representations of cosmetic surgery and *American Psycho*'s descriptions of a murderous broker establish a range of clear connections between violence and consumerism. Opportunities for interpreting the depictions of bodily violence in Dennis Cooper's novel *Frisk* seem, in contrast, much more limited. Cooper's writing, like that of both Ellis and D'Amato, combines slick stylistic surfaces with resolutely violent material. Unlike them, however, *Frisk* lacks the overt emphasis on consumerism.

Based in Los Angeles, Cooper's work first appeared in local 'zines and small magazine publications like *Between C & D* and *Bomb*. The publication of *Frisk*, *Closer* (1992) and *Try* (1994), brought him a much wider American readership and increased both his profile and his influence. *Frisk* focuses on the lives of a group of young, gay, Californian men. The novel describes them sleeping with each other, acting in porn films,

matter' in economic terms (the commodity), in psychological terms (excrement) and in real terms (murder).

This sense of the relevance of Brown's ideas can be developed by considering the ways his argument moves towards a reflection on what he identifies as the fundamental human need to produce objects that are both 'alien' and 'dead'. Brown writes:

> Excrement is the dead life of the body, and as long as humanity prefers a dead life to a living, so long is humanity committed to treating as excrement, not only its own body, but the surrounding world of objects, reducing all to dead matter and inorganic magnitudes.[51]

Brown's understanding of humanity's commitment to treat 'as excrement ... the surrounding world of objects' gestures towards a parallel between his position and Marx's interpretation of commodification's objectifying impact. The problem with this relationship is that Brown's work is resolutely ahistorical. His argument reads this tendency to reduce everything to 'dead life' along essentialist lines and suggests that there is 'something in the structure of the human animal which compels him to produce superfluously'.[52] The ahistoricism of Brown's stance can be broken down, however, by putting a historical slant on his attempt to locate history's meaning in individual psychology. Brown's suggestion that surplus is produced in response to an essential human impulse can be projected onto a historical axis and reinterpreted as a manifestation of the intrinsically overproductive character of capitalism. The historicisation of Brown's thesis thus creates an opportunity to develop these ideas on death, excrement and the body into a wider reflection on the dehumanising and objectifying forces of commodification. This approach enables *Frisk*'s representations of coprophilia and violence to be viewed in a way that illuminates the increasingly dehumanising conditions generated by the intensified levels of commodification in late capitalism. The parallels between Brown's argument and the imagistic scheme employed by Cooper prompt a recognition of the economic dimensions in *Frisk* and thus provide a framework for interpreting the text's repeated

emphasis on scenes that involve the transformation of living matter into dead.

The opportunities for reading *Frisk*'s representations of the body in these economic terms can be extended by examining the text on a more straightforward level. Like the commercial focus developed in *Beauty*'s descriptions of cosmetic surgery, *Frisk*'s depictions of pornography and prostitution are full of commercial resonances. In *Frisk*, as it was in *Beauty*, the aesthetic illusion of the commercialised body is both an economic valuation and a corporeal attribute. Once again evaluation of the body's physical appearance and assessments of its beauty are seen to lock the human frame into a network of commercial relationships. In porn acting the beauty of the body marks the value of the performer. In a similar way, the aesthetics of the body determine the worth of the prostitute. Pornography and prostitution are not, of course, new types of commercialisation and it is difficult to argue that they, in themselves, represent an intensification of economic activity in the contemporary period. What is important in *Frisk*, however, is the way these professions dominate. Everybody sells their body in the accelerated flesh-market Cooper portrays.

This reading of the violent imagery in *Frisk* must be tempered by an appreciation of the fact that the murders described are in fact nothing more than the product of Dennis's imagination. His letter is a fiction and nobody really gets hurt. Even the 'snuff' photograph that has such a significant effect on his imagination is shown to be a fake. In this respect *Frisk* appears to be a novel that gestures towards familiar postmodern concerns about the ontological status of fiction. The consequence is that the material perspectives offered in this analysis seem to be at odds with a text that is apparently intent on interrogating the whole problem of the relationship between materiality and representation. This is the line Elizabeth Young takes in her essay 'Death in Disneyland':

> Cooper's central concern is something that has obsessed postmodern theorists. Faced with a seamlessly hyperreal society, apparently invulnerable to negation or political change, theorists have struggled to articulate a 'real' that escapes representation.[53]

dynamics which are, in many respects, too dark and disturbing to be fully comprehensible. The result is a tension between the smooth, slick surfaces of Cooper's writing and the brutal realities they depict. In these terms Elizabeth Young is right to link Cooper's work with Barthes's sense of *'jouissance'* and correct to identify the extent to which his texts are, in Barthes's terms, 'fresh, supple, lubricated, delicately granular'.[57] The looping fantasies in *Frisk*'s early chapters and the interlocking narratives that mix the narrator's imaginings with a description of his own experiences create the impression of a text that is running beyond its limits into the kind of blissful freedom conceived by Barthes. The only problem with this emphasis on the text's shimmering membrane is, however, that it fails to grasp the bloody realities protruding through this stylistic skin.

The logic of *Frisk* suggests that death is 'strictly a sexual fantasy, a plot device in certain movies', but the reader is constantly forced to question these dismissive perspectives.[58] The result is a narrative that produces a powerful disjunction between its slick, depthless style and its relentlessly material subject matter. In these terms the novel's representations of the body can be seen to play a crucial role in the process of breaking through the surface of the text and exposing the violent, material experiences lying underneath. Thus, in his violent descriptions, Cooper finds a way of connecting his fluid style onto a material framework. According to Barthes, the pleasure of the text develops as 'it granulates, it crackles, it grates, it cuts, it comes' and in many ways Cooper would appear to agree.[59] The key difference is, however, that Cooper uses this style as a process that allows him to disclose the presence of the material in violent moments that rupture the text's blissful surface.

This approach differentiates Cooper's work from that of both Ellis and D'Amato. Where Ellis, for example, finds himself describing the violence of commodification using a literary technique and narrative voice that seem to have been reified, Cooper develops a much more subtle and slippery kind of approach. Unlike Ellis, he is not intent on taking a strong satirical line, but determined instead to explore contemporary conditions with an inquisitive eye. This tone is sustained by

the complexities of Cooper's textual organisation, a structure that creates narrative loops that are in turn contained within further loops. Cooper's tone is consistently casual. The text skims over details and is littered with dismissive phrases like 'this part's a blur' and 'Oh, who cares anymore'.[60] It is Cooper's focus on violence, however, that provides a very obvious connection between his work and that of both Ellis and D'Amato. All of them share anxieties about reification in its different forms and all of them have a sense of the ways in which the body is being incorporated and commodified.

These readings of violence are thus located within a framework of ideas linked to the analysis of commodification in late capitalism. *Frisk*, *Beauty* and *American Psycho* employ images of the brutalised body to develop a wider perspective on dehumanisation, objectification and reification. This interpretation of the blood-letting depicted in these three novels gestures towards the possibility of establishing a wider perspective on modern American narrative's general preoccupation with violence, an understanding that sees in this preoccupation a reflection on the relationships that connect violence, commodification and the body. The representations of violence offered by these three authors are thus read in terms that move away from a straightforwardly literal interpretation. Violence in these novels is not read in direct relation to violence in American society, but considered in abstract terms and taken as a metaphor for the deadening impact of commercialisation in the late twentieth century. The following chapter's examination of the representation of sex in blank fiction will extend these ideas and consider the ways in which this emphasis on commodification can be used to explain, not only the proliferation of violent imagery in recent fiction, but also its increasing emphasis on acts of extreme sexuality.

found in an understanding of the ways in which Moore's sharp, declarative prose pins the image of the body down on to the page in a manner that again reflects Mulvey's vision of the frozen figure of the female. This discussion of the objectifications of the visual elements in Moore's novel can be extended by relating it to *In the Cut*'s thematic engagement with issues related to reification. This emphasis on objectification does not, however, necessarily gesture towards a link with patriarchy. An alternative view can be offered by suggesting that these forces depend as much on capitalism as they do on the male gaze. Legitimation for this approach can be found in Mulvey's own work. 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' is an essay that employs a terminology drawn from writing related to commodity theory. In her argument, the gaze turns the body into 'the fetish object', a transformation that suggests the existence of a link between these objectifying processes and commodification.[20] Her use of a language borrowed from commodity theory makes the two approaches compatible, a symmetry that provides the foundation for an argument that sees the fetishising gaze as a function, not of masculinity, but of contemporary capitalism. The suggestion is that these visual objectifications have as much to do with the commodifying processes of late twentieth century economics as they do with the mortifications of patriarchy.

In this way, the kinds of sexual activities described by Susanna Moore are read as elements that have specific economic resonances. The text's representations of the reifying effects of the gaze seem to construct a vision of a commodified sexuality. It thus appears that the novel's sexually explicit elements can be interpreted in terms that owe more to materialist perspectives than they do to gender criticism. This materialist approach can be placed in a wider context by considering how the ideas raised in the discussion of this particular novel can be interpreted in terms of a general understanding of the links that bind the visual to the economic. The suggestion is that the connections established between graphic depictions of sexuality and commodification in Moore's novel be regarded as images of the way in which it is possible to regard the act of visualising and the act

of looking as forces that are fundamental to the functioning of capitalism itself.

As the discussion of Brian D'Amato's *Beauty* has already made clear, the visual facilitates the general operations of capitalism by promoting demand. Just as the visual constructs the social, it can also be seen to organise and produce consumer behaviour. The appearance of a product, as Haug's *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* suggests, is a crucial element in the process of product promotion. The visual provides a driving force behind the production of a desire to consume and thus, by prompting consumption, adds fuel to the whole process of production itself. If these processes are important to capitalism in general then there is a case for arguing that they must be even more important to late twentieth-century capitalism. This is a period in which economic processes are operating at their 'highest pitch'. Levels of commodification are accelerating and new markets being penetrated with an increasing frequency. With these conditions in mind, it is possible to suggest that the intensifying levels of commodification in the late capitalist period must be partnered by a growing emphasis on the visual. The strength of the relationship between the act of looking and the act of consuming means that if consumerism increases then that increase must be both shadowed by and, to an extent, dependent upon a concomitant growth in the significance of the act of looking. The 'frenzy of the visible' can thus be tied to the frenzy of late capitalist consumerism.[21] This sense of the links that bind the commodity to the visual is, of course, central to the analysis of contemporary conditions developed by commentators like Guy Debord. For Debord economics meets the visual in the society of the spectacle, a frozen life world of objects that are made to be seen and consumed simultaneously. Debord offers a vision of a world that has 'been turned into a gigantic spectacle in which the visible form of the commodity totally occup[ies] everyday life, uniting production and consumption in one monstrous system'.[22] The capitalist spectacle creates conditions in which the 'totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece'.[23]

Debord's insight into the relationship between the commercial and the visual provides crucial background for the

be filled by a term that has been weighed, measured and assessed over time and applied with the benefit of hindsight. Though, at this stage, the work of writers like Ellis, Cooper and Tillman seems likely to endure, at least for the time being, other novels considered here, particularly D'Amato's *Beauty* and Coupland's *Generation X*, appear, even now, to be ageing badly. It is appropriate, with these concerns in mind, that while the shape and character of this type of writing still seems mobile and prone to fashionable variation, the space allowed for labelling must, for the time being at least, remain blank. This discussion's dependence on fashion does not, however, devalue its conclusions. On the contrary there seems to be something particularly appealing about producing a fashionable study about fictions that are themselves so intimately concerned with fashion, the vagaries of consumerism and the fluctuations of popular culture.

Though the directions blank fictions might take in the future are unclear, what is certain is that this kind of writing is reaching an expanding audience and becoming a more and more important part of contemporary American culture. Ellis and McInerney have already found themselves a place in the hierarchy of American literature and with long careers still ahead of them they will continue to consolidate their positions. Dennis Cooper's profile is also growing. With his name now established in Europe as well as America and a mythical reputation fuelled by his publishers, style magazines and rumour, his next novel is sure to be his most successful to date and will almost certainly establish him as a major writer on the contemporary American scene. Like Cooper, Evelyn Lau, Susanna Moore, Sapphire and Lynne Tillman are also continuing to write and continuing to receive favourable critical attention. The work of these writers is being supported by an increasing number of new novelists writing in terms that echo and develop the preoccupations of these earlier blank fictions. The increasing reputation of Dale Peck, who followed his first novel *Fucking Martin* with the acclaimed *The Law of Enclosure* (1996), is one example. The success of Jennifer Belle's *Going Down* (1996), a *Slaves of New York*-style journey through New York high-life and low-life is another. Many other recent writers have followed in a similar vein: Sin Soracco's *Edge City*

(1993), Benjamin Weissman's *Dear Dead Person* (1994) and Linda Yablonsky's *The Story of Junk* (1997) are works that suggest that the first generations of blank writers are being supplemented by the arrival of the second and the third.

Interest in one area has, however, declined. The instant success of Coupland's *Generation X* has not been sustained. In response Coupland has moved away from issues raised in his first novel towards work focused on the relationship between individual identities and personal computers. Coupland's trajectory has been shadowed by Douglas Rushcoff whose *The Ecstasy Club* (1997) is set in a 'virtual community' and peopled with the 'screen-agers' who inhabit the world-wide-web. Coupland's slacker-cohort, Richard Linklater, has also moved on from his days as an X-er with his most recent films providing more general commentaries on youth culture. Narratives in the style of *Generation X* and *Slacker* are, however, still being produced. Jeff Gomez's *Our Noise* (1995) is one obvious example, as are the films of Kevin Smith: *Clerks* (1994), *Mallrats* (1995) and *Chasing Amy* (1997). The mainstream success of Cameron Crowe's Hollywood-financed slacker-movie *Singles* (1993), a film that stands as an emblem of the way in which the slacker ethos has been compromised, commercialised and professionalised, does, however, suggest that this particular strand of blank fiction has run its course.

Though this type of writing may be fading from view, there is no doubt that the influence of blank fiction in general is continuing to grow. The publication of Rosa Liksom's Helsinki-based series of blank stories, *One Night Stands* (1993), the emergence of Will Self and Helen Zahavi in Britain and the phenomenal international success of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) suggest that blank fiction can no longer be regarded as a uniquely American mode. Welsh's writing in particular seems firmly indebted to the concerns that typify American blank fictions and has opened the door for a whole range of new British writing in this vein. The expansion into Europe has been partnered by developments that have seen it find an increasingly secure position in the American cultural mainstream. The success of the sitcom *Friends* is one sign of this consolidation as is the rise of new Hollywood directors like Quentin Tarantino and Robert Roderiguez. Speculation about

Blank Fictions

The "blank fiction" of young American writers like Dennis Cooper, Lynne Tillman, Bret Easton Ellis and Susanna Moore represents a shift away from the postwar obsession with dense plots, political subject-matter and academic philosophising. These writers appear to value superficiality over complexity, mass culture over high culture and youth over experience.

In the first scholarly critique of blank fiction, James Annesley assesses a wide range of recent American writing and identifies their principal unifying characteristics. Challenging conventional postmodernist approaches, Annesley reveals the dynamic of blank writing to be tied to the dominant economic forces of contemporary capitalism. This contextual analysis concentrates on the relationship between blank fiction and consumerism and positions the writing within the wider currents of contemporary American culture.

This is a welcome and much-needed introduction to a new direction in contemporary literature.

James Annesley lives in London and lectures in English and American Studies.

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