BEING HELLE

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CREATIVE WRITING AT THE NEXUS OF FICTION & THEORY: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN FICTION & CRITICAL PRAXIS

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Dissertation Abstract:

Being Helle + Creative Writing at the Nexus of Fiction & Theory

This project is comprised of a novel, <u>Being Helle</u>, and an accompanying dissertation.

<u>Being Helle</u> explores in fictional form a number of ideas relating to the uneasy relationship between the individual, digital media and late-capitalism that emerge after undertaking a reading of the fiction of Don DeLillo and Bret Easton Ellis alongside the critical theory of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson.

<u>Being Helle</u> interrogates Baudrillard's contentious notion that the hegemony of capitalism undermines the autonomy of the individual subject. This is evident on a number of levels, both stylistically and thematically: the novel explores and reflects how late-capitalism's pervasive digital media affects the writer, the individual and the shape, form and scope of fiction writing.

Following the life of photographer Helle Dahl, who has recently moved to Copenhagen, <u>Being Helle</u> ultimately challenges the limits of Jean Baudrillard's theoretical position as regards the influence of capitalism on the individual subject. Although the essential self may well be under attack in an era of rabid capitalism, <u>Being Helle</u> considers whether there are ways and means of formulating some kind of resistance to this, especially through artistic endeavour.

The accompanying dissertation, <u>Creative Writing at the Nexus of Fiction & Theory</u>, is a case study analysis of the interaction between reading and creative praxis, focusing in detail on the kind of reading and thinking that took place in the production of <u>Being Helle</u>. In this way, the critical component of this project documents how when a writer engages in reading critical theory alongside fiction a "possibility space" is established which allows for a critical-creative "cross-over" to occur. In the dissertation I posit that a writer who's methodological approach to novel writing embraces the reading of critical theory and fiction in tandem establishes a useful basis from which an informed cultural debate in the form of a novel can occur.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Creative Writing at the Nexus of Fiction & Theory:

A Case Study Analysis of the Interaction Between Fiction & Critical Praxis

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Introduction

Our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known.
André Breton, <u>The Surrealist Manifesto</u>

Focusing on some of the key texts that I read as part of the research for my novel <u>Being Helle</u>, this dissertation is intended as a case study analysis of the interaction between critical reading and creative praxis. It is my contention that a critical-creative 'cross-over' occurs when a writer engages in a reading of the cultural stories told by fiction and critical theory. In other words, a writer who enters into a critical cultural dialogue through reading fiction and critical theory in tandem, creates a 'possibility space' from which material for a novel can emerge.

The decision to read fiction and critical theory as research for a novel has its origins in my desire to approach novel writing from a different angle than I had in the past. My first novel, <u>College.com</u> (1999) —the story of an obnoxious group of British university undergraduates caught up in the vagaries of student life— was written in a way that involved working through things I had experienced and felt during my own life as an undergraduate, as well as crafting ideas and observations collected in my diaries and notebooks. My methodology had been to conjure fiction out of personal experience, similar to the model noted by Michael Spindler in <u>Extending the Professional Writer Project</u> (1999):

- Experience into Expression, i.e. making notes and keeping a journal
- Journal into Draft, i.e. taking material from a notebook or journal and transmuting it into one of the major genres —poetry, story, or play

- Draft in to Final Form, i.e. rewriting and revising the piece until it seems to reach fruition; and
- Final Form into Print, i.e. the presentation of the script for publication. (23)

College.com, set at a British university in the mid-nineties, is a satirical attack on student life. A group of first years arrive at UEA campus (where I was also an undergraduate) desperate to start three years of shagging, studying and socialising. There's slick Nick, an egotist with an eye for the ladies; anorexic Andie; Daniel and Blair, both wrestling with their sexuality; and Joanna, anxious to prove her street cred with a high intake of drugs and men. Meanwhile, Finn is at his computer busy writing a medical dictionary in homage to Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland. Written in the form of multiple diary entries, College.com aims at capturing the loneliness, amusing one-upmanship and triviality of campus life played out against the thriller sub-plot of a serial rapist on campus.

With hindsight it is possible to see how reading fiction played a role in my approach. Primarily, my understanding of the novel form must have drawn on a lifetime's close reading. This was undeniably aided by my degree in Literature which gave training in scholarly analysis. As part of my formal literary studies I had learned to read stories —complex and yet undeniably magical objects— closely, and in the process learned through critical scrutiny how to better treat plot, pacing, structure, and characterization.

A number of novels in particular influenced College.com: Douglas Coupland's Microserfs (1995), Jesper "69" Green's En Storbydrengs dagbog [Diary of a Big City Boy – my translation] Bret Ellis's The Rules of Attraction (1987), Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting (1994), Gary Indiana's Rent Boy (1994), and

Donna Tartt's The Secret History (1992), Although it is difficult to illustrate objectively how important these novels were to College.com, they might be said to have both inspired and "taught" me how to write. Certainly, the comic relief in Microserfs inspired Finn's obsession with Douglas Coupland and worked as a point of reference when I looked at ways of augmenting the tension in the narrative by relieving it with comic effect. Similarly, Trainspotting and The Rules of Attraction, fragmented narratives that rapidly shift the focus onto different characters, inspired me to employ a similar approach to College.com after completing a loose first draft centred on a single protagonist. This narrative strategy helped me depict more effectively the wide group of characters that I wanted in the novel, necessary to reflect the communal aspect of university life.

As well as redeploying narrative strategies gleaned from reading, College.com also owes much to the style and thematic focus of the work of a group of young American writers that includes Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInernery, Dennis Cooper, Gary Indiana and Tama Janowitz. In Shopping in Space (1992) Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney refer to this group as the "Blank Generation" — a term that "conveys something of the flat, stunned quality of much of the writing" (vii). These authors write about the disaffected lives of terminally bored and wasted young Americans. The characters in College.com are equally vacuous and Nick in particular, with his taste for consumer goods and disposable relationships, would not be out of place in an American "Blank Generation" novel. Similarly, Finn emails some friends saying, "Has anyone noticed the illustrator for Douglas Coupland's 'Generation X' is none other than Paul BATEMAN? A cousin of [American Psycho's] Patrick [Bateman]

perhaps?" (Buscall 176). Furthermore, the unnamed stalker who considers cutting off the face of a girl with a scalpel is a close cousin to Patrick Bateman (Buscall 2). The character of Lilly, an American exchange student prepared to sleep her way around campus to get on, has a similar outlook on life to Jay McInerney's Alison Poole from Story of My Life (1988).

Therefore it is no surprise that Alistair Gentry, who reviewed College.com, noted the influence of Blank Generation: "College.com crosses Microserfs, American Psycho and the UEA prospectus".[1] Nevertheless, in spite of the American influence, College.com is very much a British novel in its discussion of what it is like to be young and British and at university; it also savagely attacks those children of the Thatcher years who grew up not giving a damn about anyone except themselves. Perhaps Amber Cowan, reviewing for The Times, picked up on this when she declared College.com to be "essential reading for every undergraduate".

In spite of the positive responses to College.com, there are number of issues regarding the writing of the novel and the text itself that, to my mind, remain unsatisfactory. First and foremost, during the two years it took to write, I was often unsure as to what I actually wanted the novel to say. My recollection is that my approach was basically a fragmented exposition of ideas, impressions, experiences, without any conscious unifying overview. Of course, it is difficult to be objective about the writing of a book, and I am cognisant that my recollections are just that: recollections and not necessarily facts. But it is impossible to trace every feeling, impulse or idea that goes into the writing of a text. Nevertheless, it is only with the critical distance that time allows that it has

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[1] This is taken from the back cover of College.com. Alistair Gentry is the author of two critically acclaimed novels: Their Heads Are Anonymous (1997) and Monkey Boys (1999).

been possible for me to arrive at a better understanding of <u>College.com</u>. A post-structuralist reading, for example, identifying the consistent images of displacement, fragmentation, identity and alienation in the novel, makes it possible to argue that the central theme is psychological and physical violence. This is certainly evident in the way the characters treat each other. The fact that the unidentified stalker is never revealed or apprehended may well have irritated some readers, but it is also the novel's way of showing that no character inhabits the moral high ground; each one is arrogant, malicious and egotistical, with perhaps the exception of Daniel —the only character in the novel capable of empathy. Because I had not yet begun to associate reading and thinking about cultural and literary theory with novel writing this interpretation did not occur to me at the time of writing.

The problem with reading <u>College.com</u> in this way is that such a reading is always, for the author, post hoc rationalization. Yet at the time of writing, I was fumbling in the dark. There; a rare admission: I didn't have a clear notion of what I wanted to say. I was aware that there were certain things that I had experienced at university that I wanted to fictionalise, but to my mind, in spite of whatever a post-structuralist reading might allow me to interpret in the novel today, <u>College.com</u> lacks a central focus and remains somewhat superficial because in part I was not conscious enough of what was trying to be said during the act of writing it. I also think I allowed the unconscious processes of writing to dominate the final manuscript: I instinctively chose certain narrative strategies and events simply because they *felt* right although they were not particularly thought through.

My clumsy candour is necessary because it relates specifically to the starting point of wanting to write a novel as part of a doctoral program in Imaginative Writing: I wanted to ascertain whether it was possible to write a novel with a clearer understanding of the issues I wanted to raise from the outset. Could a writer, through an inquisitive, questioning, self-conscious approach to reading fiction and critical theory, establish a conscious and overriding idea that would form the basis of an entertaining, engaging novel? And could this idea be sustained through the lengthy process of writing?

The reasons why a novelist turns to other novelists' work for inspiration and guidance are perhaps understandable. The work of Coupland, Ellis and Welsh certainly gave me some of the ideas that permeate College.com and influenced its narrative technique. This became even more evident with hindsight. When it came to starting my second novel, however, it seemed important to include critical theory alongside fiction in my methodology as an attempt to establish both a source of inspiration and a clearer understanding of the cultural issues that would underpin my fiction writing. This approach was, as the Greeks might say, one of *episteme* and *techne*. *Episteme* is knowledge of the system and its elements. Through a reading of fiction and critical theory I sort to interrogate and clarify my understanding of the system in which I lived; namely, a culture of rapid changes in electronic media, and the expansion and seeming proliferation of consumer capitalism in the Western world. In the pursuit of *episteme* I gained *techne*: knowledge of how to apply and adapt the elements of the system (my culture; fiction writing) into a novel.

During the time I have spent as a doctoral student, Creative Writing tutors like Joe Amato & H. Kassia Fleisher and Lance Olsen have called for

students of Creative Writing to do more reading, and more reading about reading (i.e., "theory").[2] This is partly a consequence of Creative Writing faculty having to legitimise the status of Creative Writing as an academic discipline. It is also a way of encouraging fledgling writers and teachers of writing to think more critically, and engage in a far more informed cultural and political discussion. As this study will testify, reading critical theory alongside fiction is an important source of inspiration and may well help a novelist define the goals and central ideas that inform a novel-in-progress.

Writing in Electronic Book Review's special edition on "Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy" Lance Olsen —finalist of the 1995 Philip K. Dick Award and former Professor at the University of Idaho— refers to a graduate course mysteriously entitled "Narratological Amphibiousness" he taught in his final semester at the University of Idaho which offered:

> an experimental space to explore what might occur, on the one hand, at the nexus of various kinds of written text (theory, science fiction, mystery, drama, romance, slipstream, magical realism, transgressive, etc) &, on the other, at the nexus of various kinds of written texts & other creative modes (film, hypermedia, music, painting, sculpture, assemblage, collage, dance, performance, etc).[3]

Although Olsen is not specific, frustratingly keeping quiet about how he actually used painting, sculpture and so on in his teaching, he notes that his aim with this approach was to create a "possibility space" where students could engage with a wide variety of textual discourses, generating ideas for poetry and fiction.

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[2] Joe Amato & H. Kassia Fleisher and Lance Olsen contributed to the Electronic Book Review's (EBR) special edition on "Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy", calling for Creative Writing pedagogy to embrace cultural and critical theory as an important discourse for creative writing students. April 2004<http://www.altx.com/ebr/riposte/rip2/rip2ped/index.html>.

[3] September 2003 <http://www.altx.com/ebr/riposte/rip2/rip2ped/olsen.htm>.

Unfamiliar with Olsen's position at the start of my research period, I can see with hindsight that this was exactly what I was trying to create for myself: a "possibility space" that exists at the nexus of fiction and theory. I had a few ideas about the novel I wanted to write: I decided to set my story in Denmark having lived there for a number of years; I was also intrigued by the effect electronic media, and primarily television, was beginning to have generally as well as on novels, novel writing and writers themselves. Nevertheless, rather than immersing myself in personal observation or fictionalizing my experiences as I had done in the past, I created a "possibility space" for myself as a writer by researching the relationship between the individual, electronic media and capitalism in Western cultures as told in fiction and critical theory. In other words, instead of taking my notebook and looking for inspiration in a café, a high street or the faces of friends and strangers, I travelled the rugged terrain of fiction and critical theory gathering *episteme* and *techne*.

The focus of the initial stage of my research was to read a range of fiction by British, American and Scandinavian writers as well as the work of theorists like Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. There is a distinction to be made between reading as a scholar, and reading as a writer of fiction: after all, both work with different discursive models. The fiction writer is constantly on the look out for material, or those ideas that merit the time and energy it will take to explore them through writing. Consequently, my investigation into critical theory and fiction was undertaken as a writer looking for knowledge and inspiration, with a view to engaging in a specific cultural issue in the form of narrative fiction. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that as I began my investigation I did not strive to censor out the unconscious processes

that fed into my writing. On the contrary, I followed both my heart and my head, walking a fine line between writing from an informed position, and allowing my inner voice to bubble to the surface and shape the nature of my writing.

As the following chapters of this study record, an important critical-creative "cross-over" occurred reading a selection of critical theory and fiction. Whilst thinking about Western culture as depicted in the texts read as part of the research for this project, I was inspired to write a novel that engages with the notion of the catastrophe of the authentic self in a postmodern capitalist era. Specifically, this focused on a question I formulated regarding the problem of authorial presence and absence. I arrived at this questions via Jean Baudrillard's account of the growing power of the world of objects over the individual subject in a capitalist social system, which is discussed in detail in Chapter One. Because of Baudrillard's account of capitalism (and specifically capitalist media) it seemed possible to question the very nature of novels like Douglas Coupland's Generation X (1991) and Microserfs and Bret Easton Ellis's Less Than Zero and The Rules of Attraction, and even College.com. On the one hand these texts could be regarded as novels, yet ontologically they seemed to have more to do with digital media in their fragmented, pastiched narrative forms, their use of the present tense and obsession with capitalist ideology.[4] Reading Baudrillard alongside Bret Easton Ellis's American Pycho (1991), which the mass media seemingly misread, confusing protagonist Patrick Bateman's misogyny with that of the author Bret Easton Ellis, I began to consider whether,

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[4] "Ontology" here is taken to mean the very form, or essence that makes something what it is. Thus, the ontology of TV would be electronically transmitted moving pictures and sounds, progressing in (an apparently) linear fashion.

given the scenario Baudrillard sketches out regarding the loss of the authentic self, it was possible to read <u>American Psycho</u> as "authorless". Reading the novel first through Baudrillard's theory, as discussed in depth in Chapter Three, as well as some additional ground work on postmodernism in the form of Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernity, I came to consider that the novel could be regarded as "authored" by the hegemony of capitalism.

Thereafter, playing devil's advocate, it seemed possible to also read <u>American Psycho</u> as a satire, especially as the novel itself seemed to indicate this with chapters on the musical merits of Whitney Houston and Huey Lewis and The News. As I did so I found myself conscious of a distinct authorial voice in the text, critiquing capitalism that could arguably be attributed to Ellis. Although I am not suggesting that Bret Easton Ellis's (or any writer in fact) was not involved in the actual mechanics of writing a novel, it struck me that the novel and critical theory were suggesting conflicting things: that on the one hand it was possible to regard the ontological uncertainty of <u>American Psycho</u> as reflecting the agency of capitalism, reflected in the novel's penchant for mirroring the forms, textures and strategies of commercial television; but on the other, a distinct authorial presence seemed to be critiquing the hegemony of capitalism.

Herein lies the moment of critical-creative "cross-over" in my research. I had found a central focus: to write a novel that interrogated the paradoxical nature of identity and authentic authorial voice in a postmodern capitalist era.

From the outset, it should be noted that my intention as regards the novel-part of my project was to write "research fiction": i.e. a text that explores various cultural issues grounded in a reading of fiction and critical theory taken

up in a narrative form that, as Eva Sallis notes in her essay "Research Fiction", "is

essentially entertainment, even at its most intellectual".[5] Indeed, I was wary of

falling into the trap of writing ficto-criticism —"literary theory written in the

form of fiction". This is not because I object to theory being written in the form

of fiction per se, but it does seem that setting out to fictionalise a purely

theoretical position in novelistic form as Gerd Brantenberg does in Egalias døtre

[Egalia's Daughters] (1977) where she writes following the notion of écriture

féminine, attempting to subvert all the patriarchal prefixes and suffixes in the

narrative words as well as inverting the Male/Female, Positive/Negative binary,

would be to bring a somewhat prescriptive and reductive approach to creative

writing and one that many writers would feel incapable of following. To

advocate a creative writing methodology that at its simplest level is merely a

prescriptive approach to fictionalising what a theorist or theory says, seems

incredibly dry. Moreover, it works against the wonderful freedom of novel

writing: writers will always bring something unconscious, something unique and

intangible to a story. That is why an idea for a story is transformed by the very

act of writing. As far as possible, I have tried to remain conscious of this in my

approach to Being Helle.

In spite of my reservations about ficto-criticism, my desire to engage

with critical theory was more than just a way of challenging myself to explore a

different approach to writing; it was also an opportunity to engage with

important and documented issues that concerned both myself and the culture in

which I live. This comes in part from my belief that fiction writing is of cultural

importance. Literature tells us something about who we are and where we

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[5] September 2003 <http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/oct99/sallis.htm>.

come from. In my own way, I wanted my novel to take up an important cultural issue, and recognizing what was important came largely from my critical reading. To that end Being Helle —the story of Helle Dahl, whose autonomy turns out to be an illusion, created by an older artist/novelist— is partly a meditation on the nature of contemporary authorship. It is also a discussion in novelistic form of how writers and artists exist in a social system of contemporary capitalism—theorised by the likes of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson— and the way that artistic endeavour appears to be shaped and controlled by the mechanisms of capitalism. Nonetheless, Being Helle also draws upon the personal, the autobiographical and the intangible, but I choose to leave those elements unvoiced: I do not wish to interrogate the construction of my own self in my writing; instead I prefer to explore the research that underscores the writing process of Being Helle.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The following chapters trace in detail the reading of critical theory and fiction that led to the genesis of Being Helle. My approach is not one of cause and effect: I do not situate a particular theoretical position and take up at great length how it is treated in my novel. However, I do show in detail the extent and nature of my thinking about theory and fiction before I started writing my novel. As such I am making clear, by foregrounding the kind of critical and creative thinking that took place around my project, the seriousness and scholarly approach that underscores the creative impetus of Being Helle. This dissertation is therefore meant to be taken as partial documentation of the journey I took as I established the ground beneath my feet. I acknowledge that my documentation can only be partial in that no exegesis can trace every

impulse, every element or unconscious influence reading has in the creative thinking that feeds the writing of a novel. Nonetheless, this dissertation offers a case study analysis of the interaction between reading and creative praxis, focusing in detail on the kind of reading and thinking that took place in the production of <u>Being Helle</u>.

Chapter One foregrounds a reading of the cultural theory that inspired <u>Being Helle</u> — primarily Jean Baudrillard's account of the growing power of the world of objects over the individual subject in a capitalist social system. This chapter focuses in particular on how Baudrillard seems to suggest that human identity can be viewed as deeply permeated (or even controlled) by capitalist ideology via the communication networks of the media. My reading of Baudrillard alongside that of the work of Fredric Jameson shaped my understanding of the contemporary cultural scene, and specifically prompted me to think about the problematic notion of authentic authorial discourse in an era where the strategies and ideology of late capitalism seem apparently so pervasive.

Chapter Two considers how two novels read in the early stages of my research drew my attention to the extent to which some novelists have taken up the question of the escalating power of TV in contemporary society. Centred on Don DeLillo's <u>Libra</u> (1988) and Bret Easton Ellis's <u>Less Than Zero</u> (1985) this chapter considers how two writers seem to be grappling with the notion that late-capitalism sustains and maintains its ideology through the dominance of the TV in the Western cultural scene. Although <u>Less Than Zero</u> was published first, they are examined in reverse chronological order as DeLillo

—a generation older than Ellis—address in <u>Libra</u> the very moment of the postmodern epoch and its relation to the authenticity of the individual subject.

There are, significantly, a number of parallels that exist between the kind of cultural stories DeLillo and Ellis tell in their fiction and the work of Baudrillard. In <u>Libra</u>, DeLillo identifies TV as a powerful object in America, and suggests that TV is responsible for the erasure of the authentic self. Similarly, Bret Easton Ellis seems to consider the imposing significance of TV in America in <u>Less Than Zero</u>, identifying the cable music channel MTV as a major force which structures and shapes the superficial and disaffected lives of young Americans. Both these novels inspired <u>Being Helle</u> in that my novel takes up the way capitalism and the pursuit of financial success draws the protagonist Helle Dahl away from her intended career as an artist. Moreover, <u>Being Helle</u> shows a novelist rejecting the traditional text-based object for a click-flick, or visual fiction, that seems more in keeping with the current zeit.

Synthesizing my ideas about capitalist culture, the commodification of the self and my interest in the question of postmodern authorship, Chapter Three, focusing on Bret Easton Ellis's contentious novel <u>American Psycho</u>, asks whether it is possible to regard capitalism rather than Ellis as the authorial "voice" in the novel. Given my interest in capitalism, authors and the ontological status of novels, <u>American Psycho</u> seemed an ideal choice: Ellis has received death threats, and vitriolic attacks from the media for the depiction of acts of violence against women contained in the novel. In short, Ellis was being attacked because people thought that the narrative voice and the protagonist's misogyny was Ellis's own.

Part of my work in writing <u>Being Helle</u> has been to question the grounds for the ethical responsibility of the artist. However, I suggest on the basis of my interpretation of Baudrillard's theory that it may be possible to argue that the logic of capitalism permeates a text like <u>American Psycho</u> to the extent that the individual authenticity of a writer is undermined.

Despite my theoretical positioning and the absence of an authentic individual author in <u>American Psycho</u>, the remainder of Chapter Three takes up a contradictory stance by suggesting that in spite of the theoretical discussion of authorial absence, Ellis creates a distinct sense of authorial presence in the novel through his use of satire and intertextuality.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I consider how, in writing <u>Being Helle</u>, I adopted a methodology comprised of creative praxis based on reading fiction and critical theory. Ultimately, I posit that when writers engage in reading critical theory alongside fiction a "possibility space" is established which allows for a critical-creative "cross-over" to occur. Hereafter, the writer of the novel in question can engage in an informed cultural debate in the form of his/her own novel.

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The Critical Move: Dialoguing with Critical Theory

The work of the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard proved an important stepping stone along the path to writing Being Helle because his work connects with my interest in the relationship between technology, the media, contemporary capitalism and the fate of the authentic individual subject in society. Although a self-confessed "intellectual terrorist" prone to such provocative declarations as The Gulf War Did Not Take Place, Baudrillard is regarded, Douglas Kellner notes in Baudrillard: A Critical Reader (1994), as "one of the most important and provocative writers of the contemporary era" (1). His work over the last thirty years has touched on a variety of strands including reworking Marxism, exploring the shift from modernity to postmodernity, and considering the role and effect of technology and media in Western capitalist economies. His work is complex and often rather contradictory. I do not propose an extensive critique of Baudrillard's work — Douglas Kellner and Richard J. Lane have already undertaken worthwhile cogent studies. My intention in this chapter is to discuss those theoretical ideas advanced by Baudrillard that I grappled with as part of the critical-creative move that underscores the writing of Being Helle. In particular I focus on Baudrillard's notion that in contemporary capitalist society the individual subject and the real have disappeared in contemporary social formations. Where necessary, I

supplement my reading of Baudrillard with Fredric Jameson's account of the "death of the subject" and the cultural logic of late capitalism in his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society".

From the outset it is important to note that although Baudrillard is often categorised as writing critical theory, given the nature of his work — as considered in this chapter— I regard Baudrillard as something of a cultural storyteller. Although offering an important insight into the nature of capitalist culture in a media age, his work is like a collection of provocative cultural stories that sit uneasily within the realms of academic writing. As this chapter notes, Baudrillard's reading of the postmodern break with modernity against the backdrop of an emerging cultural capitalistic scene may be theoretically grounded; however, his work is often elusive and problematic because the narrative is rather ambiguous and at times contradictory. As Douglas Kellner notes in Baudrillard: A Critical Reader, "it is undecidable whether Baudrillard is best read as science fiction and pataphysics or as social theory" (18). And as Kellner goes on to point out, even Baudrillard himself has said his "reflections on America are 'basically a fiction'" (18). Nevertheless, Baudrillard is a critical thinker whose first three works The System of Objects (1968:1997), The Consumer Society (1970:1998), and For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972:1981) take up the need for the classical Marxist critique of the political economy to be renegotiated by semiological theories.

Marx theorised the commodity in Capital: A Critique of Political Economy as something carrying "use-value" and "exchange-value". Use-value arises from the act of production to construct something that fulfils a need, for example clothes or shoes, whilst exchange-value —an expression of the labour-

power necessary for the production of a commodity— is an "abstract"
expression because it does not relate to the commodity itself but to the cost of
the labour necessary to make the commodity (Lane 67). According to Marx,
both use- and exchange-value relate to the system of production. The worker is
alienated from the objects s/he produces because s/he does not benefit from
the full exchange-value of the object. Marx also critiques the process whereby
the worker comes to regard her/himself as "just" a cog in the machine, as part
of a production line and no longer a skilled craftsperson, giving rise to feelings
of alienation.

Marx divides the worker's consumption into two elements: productive
and individual consumption. Productive consumption is where the worker
expends her/his energy to make a part of something in the factory production
line. But it is the owner of the production line (i.e. the capitalist) who benefits.
Individual consumption is where the worker purchases essential goods (food,
clothing, shelter, etc) to maintain her/his place in the workforce. Again, the
capitalist benefits from this as the workforce expends its own energy for the
benefit of the capitalist's production line, and consumes its goods to keep
working for him. Ultimately, Marx's theory of capitalism focuses on use-value:
the worker buys a commodity to fulfil a need that ultimately benefits the
capitalist and not the worker.

In his early works Baudrillard suggests that later capitalism has shifted
from the earlier stage of competitive market capitalism that Marx was writing
about to a stage of monopoly capitalism (between the 1920s and 1960s) where
increased attention has been placed on "demand management" and the
augmentation and steering of consumer needs and desires (Kellner 3).

Capitalism's need to intensify demand reflected the desire to lower production costs and augment production. Baudrillard points out that in this period the capacity for mass production and consumer consumption —reflecting newer production techniques and lower production costs— prompted the "necessary" production of prestigious goods, and thus produced a regime of "sign-value". Whereas the traditional Marxist analysis of alienation regards the object as divorced from production (the craftsperson is replaced by the industrial worker and is no longer involved in the production from beginning to end the consumer good), Baudrillard sees the object divorced from the mode of production, and loaded with "sign-value". The expression and mark of style, prestige, luxury, power, difference, and so on, becomes for Baudrillard an increasingly important part of the system of capitalist consumption. In other words, the person who desires social status might buy an impressive car or house. However, in a discussion of the huge American cars of the 1950s with massive "tail fins", Baudrillard notes in The System of Objects that the object is not necessarily related to its utilitarian function (fins represent speed, but actually result in diminished aerodynamics):

> Tail fins were a sign not of *real* speed but of a
> sublime, measureless speed. They suggested a
> miraculous automatism, a sort of grace. It was the
> presence of these fins that in our imagination
> propelled the car[.] (The System of Objects 59)

Taking this further Baudrillard perceives that the rupture between the object and its utilitarian function "opens the door to a whole world of functional delusion, to the entire range of manufactured objects in which a role is played by irrational complexity, obsessive detail, eccentric technicity or gratuitous formalism" (The System of Objects 113). This is not to say that objects cease to

have any function, but that for Baudrillard objects become associated with their perceived value and status. A present day example of this would be those people who readily trade their three year old mobile phones in for a newer, brighter, shinier, slimmer model although their old phone has the same function as the new machine). Thus, the consumer item is regarded as an object which does not function according to clear logical reason but the fragmented personal mythologies of the individual: in other words, the person believes they have to trade up their phone or laptop because of what the newer, brighter, shinier image represents rather than because it offers some major increase in functionality.

Baudrillard's approach in these early works is largely influenced by Roland Barthes' work on sign-value and the fashion system in <u>Système de la Mode</u> (1967). A semiotician and literary critic, Barthes builds on the paradigmatic (metaphorical) and syntagmatic (metonymical) axes of meaning in literary criticism to extend the concept of "trope" or figure of speech to the system of signification, emphasising the importance of the play of difference in the creation of meanings, "because both metaphorical and metonymical tropes rely on contrasts of difference" (Gottdiener 27). In his analysis, Barthes identifies the system of fashion as an ideology maintained by the clothes industry (and related advertising & media) to control appearance for the specific purpose of selling commodities. The fashion system works above and beyond the dress code system to control individual decisions about what to wear for the purpose of selling more commodities. Baudrillard is less concerned with the power of ideology than Barthes, and more fascinated with understanding the meanings invested in the objects of everyday life such as the power gained from

identifying with a car while driving, and the structural system through which the objects were organized (i.e. the "sign-value" or prestige of driving a sports car) The System of Objects 59). As Kellner notes, Baudrillard's critical explorations of the system of objects and capitalist consumer society in these early works "allows one to perceive how objects are organized into a system of objects that in turn produces a system of needs which integrate individuals into the consumer society" (5).

Continuing my reading of critical theory, I became intrigued by the next stage of Baudrillard's work which identifies a further shift in the nature of capitalism —a shift in western culture whereby modernity is replaced by a new postmodern condition of simulation, implosion and hyperreality. This is taken up in The Mirror of Production (1973: 1975) and Symbolic Exchange and Death (1976:1998). The shift occurs when modern societies —organized around the production and consumption of commodities— are succeeded by postmodern societies —organized around simulation, the play of images and signs.

Returning to tackle the Marxist reading of use-exchange, Baudrillard declares in Symbolic Exchange & Death, "The end of labour. The end of production. The end of political economy" and ultimately modernity itself (127). We are, he claims, now in a new era of simulation in which *social reproduction* (information processing, communication, knowledge industries, the media) replaces production as the organizing principle in society. Baudrillard posits that work and labour now has very little to do with capitalist production: instead, it has become a sign of the individual subject's social position. Wages no longer relate to the worker's actual job but one's place in the system. Furthermore, as Kellner notes, political economy is no longer the "structural reality in which

other phenomena can be interpreted and explained"(7). Instead, the subject

lives in a "hyperreality" of simulations in which images, spectacles and the play of

signs replace the logic of production as the main feature of society. In other

words, the speed generated by the tail fins on the American 1950s car is

"absolute": that is speed which can never diminish into the real because it

belongs to the abstracted hyperreal (the sign-value *speed*).

In Symbolic Exchange Baudrillard implies that the television, "the black

box of the code" (140), is the key object involved in the production of the

hyperreal. However, frustratingly Baudrillard does not consider the possibility

that the "digital and programmatic sign...whose structure is that of the

micromolecular code of command and control" can be resisted (140). Clearly, if

I were to move out to a remote island in the Stockholm archipelago and live

without a television, I would certainly reduce the amount of contact time I

would actually have with this particular object. However, I do not deny that on

a mass level exposure to TV occurs almost certainly on a daily basis.

Furthermore, although there no doubt are individuals who do not own

televisions, I would imagine that for the majority of individuals it is difficult to

resist TV. After all, even if you do not own one, newspapers and billboard

advertisements generate, promote and sustain interest in TV; they also tend to

propagate the same commercial ideology.

Baudrillard regards the "hyperreal" as the third level of simulation visible

in contemporary capitalist societies: the first level is that of the obvious copy of

reality (e.g. a realist portrait); the second level is a copy so good that it blurs the

boundaries between reality and representation (e.g. someone captured on

video); and the third level is a simulation that produces a reality of its own

without being based upon any particular part of the real world (e.g. a computerised figure like Lara Croft in the console game <u>Tomb Raider</u>, which is a world generated by computer languages and code). Noting the individual's increasing fascination with the increasingly prevalent simulacra —created and propagated by the ubiquitous television— Baudrillard suggests that in a society of simulation, identity itself is constructed by the appropriation of signs and codes, and models come to dictate how the subject perceives her/himself. In other words, whereas a painting like Van Gogh's *Peasant's Boots* represents a pair of boots, a pair of Nike trainers are simulacra: hyperreal objects that have no reference to reality. They are expensive street-cred sportswear that as well as their practical usage signify the images and lifestyles attributed to the product as a consequence of advertising. This logic of simulation thus replaces the logic of production, permeating all levels of society such as the social, political and cultural.

By being involved in a process of symbolic exchange, the subject believes s/he will benefit pseudo-spiritually (in terms of happiness, feelings of status, power, importance, etc) from the objects s/he purchases: commodities like a sports car or a boat are thus bought just as much for their symbolic-value (status) as use-value (a means of transport). However, the purchase of a new laptop or car or mobile phone is not likely to bring lasting happiness. Rather than critiquing the system that elicits the expectation, the object is blamed and the process is continually repeated, where more products are consumed and dispensed with and consumed repeatedly. Lane notes that "the processes of consumption are experienced as ... magical" largely because the signs of happiness and satisfaction and so on, have replaced "real" or "total satisfaction"

(71). Moreover, the signs of happiness —projected at us from the seemingly ever-present TV screens that have rapidly invaded private and public space— are used to "invoke the endlessly deferred arrival of total satisfaction" (71). Conscious of TV's unnerving power and influence, Baudrillard notes in Consumer Society how the TV thus divorces the social process of production from that of consumption, reinforcing the magical quality of the appearance and significance of the consumer object (32-3). However, Baudrillard seems content to observe this without formulating this as an overt critique of capitalism. The result is that his text comes across as blankly uncommitted to anything other than observing the cultural scene. This narrative strategy is not dissimilar to that of the novels of Bret Easton Ellis, considered later in this study.

Taking up the role of technology and the media in the logic of simulation, Baudrillard regards the postmodern universe as one of "hyperreality". As a result of the proliferation of the media (or "communication networks"), entertainment, information, the realm of the hyperreal (computer games, amusement parks, TV sports, etc) has come to be more real than real, and the signs and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behaviour: thus for Baudrillard watching, say, a Premier League football match on TV would produce an experience more "real" than playing football in the park because the sign "football" no longer relates to the actual game (played in the park) but the multinational corporate industry. Because of the ubiquitous nature of TV in both public and private space, creating and sustaining and promoting more hyperreal images, the individual subject is thus confronted with an intense spectacle of images, codes and models which invade and shape thoughts and behaviour. The result is that individuals flee "the desert of the

real" for the ecstasy of hyperreality and the new realm of computer, media and technological experience (Kellner 8). Baudrillard thus comes to regard the individual within a capitalist postmodern terrain of experience governed by simulation, implosion and hyperreality.

Consequently, modernity's "logic of representation" —where images represent reality and truth— is replaced with a postmodern "logic of simulation", where people are caught up (or rather, stupefied) by the play of images and simulacra of media and consumer society which have a diminishing relationship to an external reality. A prime example of this is cited by Paul Patton in his introduction to Baudrillard's The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1991:1995), where he recounts the absurd moment in the reporting of the war when the American news channel CNN switched to a group of journalists "live" in the Gulf to ask them what was happening only to find they were watching CNN to find out themselves (2). This lamentable incident reveals the detachment from the real, and the production of reality with third-order simulation: news is generated by news, or the source of the news is the news. No wonder Baudrillard views the subject's consciousness as media-saturated: the saturates individual subject is fascinated with the play of images and spectacles in culture (here, the implication is that it is on the TV screen), to the extent that "actual meaning" or "reality" is replaced by the a logic of simulation and hyperreality.

In his influential essay "The Ecstasy of Communication" Baudrillard notes that the individual subject is caught up in a mass communication circuit, like a "term in a terminal," where identity itself is erased by the mediascapes and networks of communication (126). This "pornography of information and

communication" (126), as Baudrillard calls it, invades the mind of the individual subject, ejecting all interiority, and injecting the world of TV and information. Once more Baudrillard allows no room for resistance and, in dramatically Sci-Fi tones, describes this as "a new form of schizophrenia...[the] state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches invests and penetrates without resistance" ("Ecstasy" 132). Even the body cannot resist the hegemonic tide of connections and as such there is an end to private space. The body is no longer a body but a "terminal site", the home no longer a home but a "lunar module", whilst the individual subject becomes a "pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" ("Ecstasy"133). Both inside and outside this "module" advertising invades *everything* so now both public and private space disappear. The meltdown of distinctions between spaces and individuals can be read, following Baudrillard, as one of the defining characteristics of what Baudrillard regards as an "entropic world" where contemporary capitalism's "logic of simulation" now governs society and identity.

Because Baudrillard's discourse in "The Ecstasy of Communication" is stylistically eclectic, mixing the Sci-Fi —with its talk of "lunar modules" and "pure" screens— with popular culture and academic discourse, Baudrillard's text itself seems to embody the fragmented, decentred stylistic ventriloquism of media discourse. This style is typical of his work: no wonder critics like Bryan Turner regard it as "offensive to academics, especially serious academics". As far as Turner is concerned, Baudrillard's work is "politically uncommitted, whimsical, and depthless" (152). It is important to recognise that Turner is not dismissing Baudrillard here, but instead reading Baudrillard like a cultural

storyteller who like "[Jack] Kerouac [is] involved in a "reading" of the society through the flashing vision of American culture as [...] seen through the car screen, the rear mirror or the subway [...] The passenger, like the viewer, is passive, indifferent, entertained and perhaps over-stimulated by the flashing trivia of the landscape and scene" (Rojek & Turner 153). As if blinded by the spectacle of the scene he witnesses, Baudrillard gets caught up with observing the stupefaction of the individual subject, and his discourse increasingly turns to hyperbole. Consequently, he fails to consider the possibility that the individual might seek to distance himself from the network of communications; or might even exist (either by choice or not) outside the network by, say, refusing to own a television. After all, when "Ecstasy" was written the networks were not as developed as they are today; there was no G3 network showing media clips on mobile phones, no internet and no widespread satellite TV in Europe. Moreover, the TV was not an ever-present object in high street fast food stores as it seems to have recently become. In Being Hellle, one of the tensions at work in the narrative is the nature of the network that Helle Dahl is embroiled in. Helle is part of a network of communications that include mobile phones, digital cameras, weblogs and the internet. As the novel shows, this network is not just about constructing and empowering her own sense of identity; it is also erasing it.

In Fatal Strategies Baudrillard moves towards metaphysical speculation where he presents a "bizarre metaphysical scenario concerning the triumph of objects over subjects" due to the obscene proliferation of an object world so completely out of control that all attempts by the subject to understand, conceptualize and control it falter (Kellner 15). In his discussion of "Ecstasy and

Inertia" (Selected Writings 185-198), Baudrillard notes that objects and events are becoming increasingly hyperbolic, growing and expanding in power at an ever increasing rate in contemporary society, primarily through the medium of the TV networks. The "ecstasy" is the proliferation and expansion of the objects to the superlative: "the beautiful as more beautiful than the beautiful in fashion, the real more real than the real in television, sex more sexual than sex in pornography" (Kellner 15). Ecstasy is thus the form of obscenity —where nothing is hidden— and of the hyperreality Baudrillard described in his earlier works, albeit now even more prolific than before.

Baudrillard's vision of contemporary society is thus one of hyperbolic growth and excrescence (croissance et excroissance): more goods, services, information and so on are produced and rapidly dispensed with. The situation has reached such an extreme that contemporary society is saturated by capitalism. It is this particular aspect of Baudrillard's version of culture that presents a true catastrophe for the individual subject. Objects and their image (TV, cars, etc.) take over from a "saturated" subject, and the subject's fascination with the play of objects no longer remains. Instead, the subject becomes apathetic, stupefied, totally dazed, as the culture — TV being the central mechanism propagating this— bombards the scene with more and more consumable objects at an unnerving rate so "the ecstasy of excrescence is accompanied by inertia" (Kellner 15). To my mind the scenario Baudrillard first articulated twenty-five years ago has intensified considerably. Nowadays the Western world is connected to a capitalist "network" —subtly and not so subtly urging us to consume— via our broadband internet connections, 3G phones and iPods.

Because of this bombardment of consumer goods via the communication networks, the individual's fascination with the play of objects turns to apathy, stupefaction and entropic inertia. Yet we continue to purchase goods, conditioned by a system that generates new waves of products and which leads us to believe in the implicit promise of consumerism; that if we buy *this* we will be truly happy. The object therefore becomes, for Baudrillard, the subject's "fatality", leaving the individual subject defeated, no longer master of the object. Instead the supremacy and dominance of the "more shrewd, more cynical, more brilliant object" succeeds. Hereafter, the stupefied individual now sides with the strategies, form and ideology of the object, living in an era where the object reigns.[6]

In this account of the post-industrial object's hegemonic position in Western culture, I discern a problematic issue concerning the authorial position and the authenticity of the aesthetic work in a consumer, media-dominated society. With the invasion of the networks, and the "schizophrenic proximity of it all", the individual subject falls prey to the apparatus (and thus ideology) of capitalist society whereby the subject is defeated by the object.

Baudrillard's social theory and metaphysical speculations suggest the rather contentious possibility that a writer or artist cannot speak outside the framework of the dominant system —namely, capitalism. After all, the dominant ideology behind sign-value is one of consumption: new goods are produced and consumed at an extreme rate by a system that works on the commodification of the sign.

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[6] As I will consider in the next chapter, there is clearly something of this in the lives of Clay and the other young adults depicted in Bret Easton Ellis's Less Than Zero. Despite an abundance of wealth and material goods, Clay, along with his peers, seems to be consuming himself to death.

This kind of thinking revisits the Barthesian question of "who" or rather "what" speaks. Roland Barthes viewed text as "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and class [...as] a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Image-Music-Text 146). Roland Barthes took up the very nature of language, and in particular the problematic nature of semiotic meaning. According to Hans Bertens in The Idea of the Postmodern (1995), Barthes' attack on representation, was in itself "an important political act" but one that paradoxically made the question of subjectivity and authorship (or rather agency) important (7): if texts (or representations) do not, and cannot, represent the world, but only texts and intertexts, then all representations become political in that they cannot help but reflect the ideological frameworks within the social system in which they arise (7). In that case Barthes' proclamation concerning the 'death of the author' turns back on itself and leads, according to Brenda K. Marshall in Teaching the Postmodern, back to the question of "Whose story gets told? In whose name? For what purpose?" (4).

Whereas Barthes seems to ignore the question of who is speaking (or writing), Baudrillard suggests that the object represents the source of influence at a more societal (and in terms of novel writing, textual/authorial) level. Literally, reading Baudrillard in this way one can consider the possibility that the strategies of the television (the key object for Baudrillard) impact upon the ontological certainty of the book itself: on an unconscious level fiction writing is "raided" by, and inscribes, the hegemony of capitalism. Accordingly, the writer and writing itself can be viewed as hyperrealities: simulacra that have very little to do with the act of writing and language itself and more to do with the logic of

simulation and commodification: i.e. being a writer is less about crafting words, stories, narrative, and more about being identified as the accepted producer of a commodity —namely, a book).

Having written College.com, and knowing full well the considerable personal effort and commitment that goes into the completion of a manuscript, it is hard to take Baudrillard's theory without a pinch of salt. After all, the scenario he describes seems reminiscent of a science fiction novel, whereby a novelist's head is taken over by the covert messages of the television. More seriously, if he is right it would be impossible for Baudrillard himself to speak outside the framework of capitalism unless one regarded his theory as merely another permutation of capitalism, perhaps as some kind of built-in safety valve meant to give the appearance of critiquing capitalism to calm any detractors. Because Baudrillard seems content to problematize and interrogate the system without ever offering a fundamental alternative, or positing a radical solution to the scenario he outlines, I began to ask whether the individual can still elude the "fatal" strategies of capitalistic mass-mediated discourses and images that negate the self? Isn't there scope for the individual's thoughts and feelings to mingle with the consumer desire induced by capitalistic images which postpone fulfilment indefinitely by sliding into other images, and so on? For example, what of the writer who embraces isolation and avoids watching television? Doesn't a writer make some deliberate choices about what to include in a text? Is the very craft of writing governed by the dominant order?

Seeking to clarify this position, my research turned to the work of Fredric Jameson who, in his influential account of postmodernity "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", provides a further account of the

"death" of the subject. Moreover, Jameson discusses the erasure of the author as the site of origin in contemporary cultural texts. This is best evidenced in Jameson's distinction between parody —associated with modernist cultural texts— and pastiche (or "blank parody"), which Jameson regards as the dominant features of postmodern texts ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 2001:1965-6). Literary modernists like Virginia Woolf or T.S. Eliot all had a "personal style" or "signature", claims Jameson, in an age which still believed in a subject, and an ego, albeit alienated. This style ("think of the Faulknerian long sentence or of D.H. Lawrence's characteristic nature imagery" could be imitated because of its uniqueness and, as Jameson suggests "the general effect of parody is —whether in sympathy or with malice— to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 2001:1963). Thus, a critique could be mounted through satire. However, for Jameson —who sounds rather moralistic— parody and satire rely on the existence of a "healthy linguistic normality", as in the realist or modernist period, for a discernible distinction between a normal and "abnormal" discourse to be made. Where no such normality exists —that is, in a culture subverted by the logic of simulation where images and signs have multiplied, cannibalistically reappropriating different styles— there is only pastiche, neutral mimicry and mere imitation of dead styles: "nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 2001: 1963-4).

Like parody, pastiche imitates styles, but unlike parody it has, according to Jameson, no satirical impulse, no critical position. Consequently his discussion of contemporary capitalist culture identifies, like that of Baudrillard, a universe of communication and simulation where a distinct proliferation of

media styles has occurred bringing about a "linguistic fragmentation". The "norm" or individual "style" has now been eclipsed, reduced to a "neutral" or "blank" media speech.

Extending Baudrillard's metaphor of the subject rendered schizophrenic by the absolute proximity of objects (and the associated spectacle and commodity fetishism propagated via the communication networks and media channels), discourse/writing, seen in Jamesonian terms, thus becomes schizophrenic stylistic ventriloquism —blank parody without objective positioning.

The problem with Baudrillard and Jameson is that they both sound rather fatalistic, as if lamenting the demise of a golden modernist era. The demise of the individual subject (or rather, the crisis of the individual autonomous subject) is mirrored for Jameson in the textuality of the postmodern. No more the modernist aesthetic's organic affiliation to a unique self or private identity; no more authorial signature, rather stylistic cannibalization of the past, random stylistic allusion, an unavailability of personal style, and only a perpetual present in which no discernable critique can be made. ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 2001: 1963)

Like Baudrillard, Jameson identifies the ideology of capitalism as a pervasive destabilizing force in contemporary culture. The aesthetic of our consumer society is not the subversive, oppositional art of classical modernism; thus Jameson's account of the postmodern condition leads to a questioning of the critical value of cultural production. In these terms fiction or art no longer appear to be a site of criticism, rather a mere casualty of the hegemonic spectacle of a postmodern condition. As Jameson himself has said: "It is no

longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 1983: 15). Nevertheless, following Baudrillard's reading of the individual subject as stupefied, fascinated and caught up in the capitalist system of sign-value and logical of simulation, it seems possible —if you accept the paradox— to suggest that writers and artists are incapable of speaking outside the framework of the dominant system which is capitalism. The trouble with this is that, indeed, if the scenario Baudrillard is outlining is true; where is he in his own text? Or where am I in College.com for that matter? A Baudrillardian reading of my first novel might well argue that College.com owes as much to the ontological strategies of capitalism with its ideology of consumerism running both thematically and stylistically throughout the text: the characters metaphorically consume one another and the narrative is intended to be rapidly consumed by the reader, written in short segments, racing towards an ambiguous ending which resists closure. But the lack of sympathy and empathy associated with each character in the novel might also be said to manifest some kind of critique of the pervasive capitalist ideology each character emits. And if that is the case, then that could possibly be attributed to a voice at least able to critique it, at points outside the capitalistic system, if not that of the author himself? In other words, in spite of the cultural scene Baudrillard identifies, is the author entering through the back door? Moreover, isn't Jameson's nostalgia for a supposed objective, linguistic normalcy the weary cry of someone not quite coming to terms with the contemporary scene. After all, for all its stylistic ventriloquism, fragmentation, and postmodern pastiche, College.com can still be read as a critique of egocentrism.

Having explored some of the work of Baudrillard and Jameson in their attempt to comprehend the contemporary capitalist era (together with the role of the media and technology), telling cultural stories about the loss of the subject and dominance of the object, the problem of language and the logic of simulation, I began to conceive of writing a novel that took up the issue of the lack of individual autonomy and the invasion of the networks of communication in a capitalist society. It seemed to me that to set out to interrogate Baudrillard's notion of the individual's fatality at the hands of the cultural force of objects and images in the form of a novel, might be the right kind of textual arena to explore the tensions that exist in a theory that paradoxically suggests a catastrophe for the individual self (author) whilst embodying an individual self through the very act of writing.

In as much as it is possible to examine the workings of a novelist with hindsight, herein lie the foundations of <u>Being Helle</u> — or rather that aspect of this novel that investigates the problematic notion of authorial identity. By reading the work of Baudrillard and Jameson, and beginning to position myself against their reading of culture, I was shaping the direction my novel would take. However, before beginning my novel, it seemed important to explore what other fiction writers were saying about capitalist society, the so-called networks of communication and the crisis of the individual autonomous subject. In this way I was looking to develop my understanding of this issue and to explore some of the ways in which fiction engages with it both thematically and stylistically.

- II -

Reading Cultural Stories:

Don DeLillo's <u>Libra</u> & Bret Easton Ellis's <u>Less Than Zero</u>

"The twentieth century is on film. It's the filmed century."

Don DeLillo *The Names*

Whilst researching <u>Being Helle</u> the emphasis of my reading of fiction was not on "learning" how to write as it had been when writing <u>College.com</u>, when I had turned to novels for ideas and strategies for constructing a narrative. Instead, the reading I undertook for this project constituted an investigation of the cultural stories that were told by novels. Because of its beautiful deceptions, its artful lies, fiction is an immensely valuable source of cultural knowledge. I thus read novels partly as a writer seeking those murky, significant, tenuous ideas that can ferment and inspire narrative fiction; nevertheless, I also examined what fiction says about the nature of capitalism and its effect on the individual subject before entering into a dialogue with these cultural stories in the form of my own novel.

As a cultural phenomenon, storytelling is vital partly because it ruminates on who we are and what we think. In the fiction that I read I began to notice the way consumer capitalism seems to permeate the codes of TV: for example, consumer goods are advertised, TV shows are advertised via the "coming up next"-mechanism, both inviting the viewer to "consume". Writers

such as Gary Indiana, Dennis Cooper, and Douglas Coupland were particularly

cognisant of the relationship between capitalism and TV. Jesper 69 Green's En

Storbydrengs dagbog [Diary of a Big City Boy, my translation] (1992) —whose

protagonist Atomic Playboy commits suicide in front of his "TV alias Terror

Vision" (11), works hard with its use of graphics and bold headlines like ">

PLAY, II STILL" and "ZAP ZAP"— made me think about the merging worlds of

TV and reality. Similarly, Douglas Coupland's Generation X, and especially the

first "coffee-table" book edition cut to the size of a magazine with its images,

advertisements and subtle commentary, also made me think about the

emergence of what might be referred to as "TV textuality" —novels that reflect

the ontology of TV on the page.

In order to document in more detail my reflections on fiction while

researching Being Helle, I will now consider Don DeLillo's Libra and Bret Ellis's

Less Than Zero, although they represent a fraction of the fiction I read. It is,

nevertheless, Being Helle itself which best testifies to the critical praxis that

emerges from this approach.

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Don DeLillo's Libra is a significant novel that touches the very heart of

American culture, linking a discussion of the awesome power of TV to the loss

of the authentic self, set within the context of the life of JFK's alleged assassin,

Lee Harvey Oswald. A meditation on the nature of media power and its

consequences for self-identity in America, Libra traces Lee Oswald's journey

from alienated political agitator to gunshot victim. In tracing Oswald's journey,

DeLillo seems to be partly situating the postmodern epoch with Kennedy's

assassination but also, and perhaps more importantly, demonstrating the

dangerous consequences for a society where TV and the media are involved in creating, shaping and erasing identity.

DeLillo arguably views the key event of November '63 *not* as the assassination of Kennedy, but instead the moment of Oswald's death. This is because in Libra Oswald becomes aware that a tangible *Lee Harvey Oswald* will live on as a shadowy figure in the TV re-runs, just like JFK— the president who "looked like himself, like photographs" (392).

Unlike other accounts of the Kennedy assassination, Libra is not concerned with offering another take on the "truth", focussing instead on the nature of media and power in America.[7] The title Libra refers to the measuring-scales in the sign of the zodiac. Throughout the novel parallels are drawn between Oswald and Jack Kennedy: both their wives were pregnant at the same time, they both had bad handwriting, they both did military service in the Pacific. But Libra further problematizes the question of identity by showing that two "Oswalds" exist. One is the "Lee Oswald" that his friends and family knew. The other is the slow emergence of *Lee Harvey Oswald*. Within the novel, DeLillo creates a definite sense of tension through the impression that the CIA are scripting "a patsy" known as Lee Harvey Oswald; but DeLillo ultimately reveals that the true author of Lee Harvey is the media itself.

Libra prepares for this from the opening chapter: as Oswald rides the subway, he becomes conscious of his own reflection and begins to talk about himself in the third-person:

> The kid quits school the minute he's sixteen. I mean
> look out...The kid gets a job in construction. First
> thing, he buys ten shirts with Mr.B. collars. He saves

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[7] Oliver Stone's film JFK (1992) and James Ellroy's novels American Tabloid (1995) and The Cold Six Thousand (2001) are notable examples.

> his money, before you know it he owns a car....the
> car gets him laid. Who's better than the kid? (9)

Here, as Frank Lentricchia notes, DeLillo's Oswald projects his desires onto a third-person-self pitched by, and to, the audience of the first-person ("Don DeLillo" 16-18). It is as if the televisual paradigm of audience and viewer has permeated his consciousness. This becomes even more significant when Oswald later watches Sinatra on TV playing President Eisenhower's would-be assassin in the film *Suddenly*. At this point Libra draws a connection between the media and the assassin, showing Oswald merging with the figure on the TV screen:

> [He] felt a stillness around him... He felt connected to the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals and broadcast bands, the whole busy air of transmission...They were running a message through the night into his skin. (370)[8]

Fascinated by the stories he watches on TV, Oswald also projects himself into the film, We Were Strangers, about John Garfield, a revolutionary in Cuba who dies a hero. "This is what feeds a revolution" (370) thinks Oswald, reacting to the TV as if it were reality itself. Oswald then relates this feeling to the key months of October and November in his past. But as Frank Lentricchia notes, somewhere between the subway journey at the start of the novel and this moment, Oswald seems to have found some new kind of identity for himself staring back at him from the TV screen ("Don DeLillo" 18). The romanticised Marxist ideology that took him to the Soviet Union has come unstuck and been replaced by the "theatre of self" or what Baudrillard would regard as the logic of

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[8]This is reminiscent of the kind of "medium is the message" paranoia that Marshal McLuhan brought to our attention in Understanding Media, central to Thomas Pychon's paranoid vision of America, as experienced by Oedipa Mass, in The Crying of Lot 49 - and as Pynchon noted in Gravity's Rainbow "Everything is connected" (708).

simulation.[9] Oswald's feelings are actual and tangible, but are brought about by a fiction, a fake, or what Baudrillard regards as the hyperreal. It is almost as if DeLillo is alluding to Oswald's lack of (or potential lack of) autonomy, taking instruction from the TV.

What makes Libra so shocking is not DeLillo's account of the events that led up to Kennedy and Oswald's deaths, nor is it his depiction of a supposed killer as a slightly gawky family man; it is the fact that DeLillo depicts Oswald as fully aware he will ultimately find meaning amid the endless re-runs on the TV, and not as he had thought in terms of the classic Marxist directive, as he wrote to his brother Robert (used by DeLillo as the inscription to the novel):

> Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general.

DeLillo's vision of Oswald takes this as a point of departure when he shows the collapse of Marxist ideology — social change through class struggle. DeLillo has said elsewhere that Oswald's desire is "to get out of the room and get out of the self and merge with history."[10] Initially Oswald tries to conform to this precept; but like his sojourn in the Soviet Union, his agitation and Marxist endeavours fail. The media's rebaptism and inscription of Lee into the figure Lee Harvey Oswald occurs after his arrest, although passages throughout the novel which show him connecting with TV are key steps along this path. Whilst in his prison cell:

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[9] Cf Frank Lentricchia "Don DeLillo" Raritan 10, number 3 (spring 1989): 16-18 for a discussion of the "theatre of self" in DeLillo's work.

[10] Don DeLillo "American Bood" 1988, Rolling Stone Magazine, December 8: 21-2, 24, 27-8. 74.

> He heard his name on the radios and TVs. Lee Harvey
> Oswald. It sounded extremely strange....They were
> talking about someone else. (416)

With his arrest Oswald becomes part of the same media circus as JFK and shares his ontological status, as JFK: a world in which the relationship between the sign and the object has been drastically altered. *Lee Harvey Oswald* —the name uttered in full by the media— not only rebaptises him, but creates a simulacrum, arguably more real than the *real* Lee Oswald. When the American public sees pictures or news footage of him, the "reality" of the self is replaced with hyperreality. Oswald becomes a one-dimensional simulacrum, disappearing beneath the spectacle of media reportage. He is the other side of the scale to Jack Kennedy's JFK — distinct, separate, reified, more real to American culture than the real thing.

Strikingly, Oswald seems to grasp that identity is not a matter of one's fight in a political struggle, but a question of media exposure. The build-up throughout the novel to this moment of realisation which begins once he is arrested and finally becomes clear in the moment of his death is such that it allows DeLillo to implicitly critique the dwindling cultural power of the written word compared to that of visual media. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through the incorporation of Oswald's actual writing collated by the Warren Commission into the fictional narrative: Oswald's "Historic Diary" is used in Libra to indicate Oswald's insubstantial grasp of the 'real' world. With its unruly orthography, broken syntax, and numerous malapropisms, Oswald's writing conspicuously displays a tenuous grasp of language. He is literally unable to write himself into existence as the political and social commentator that he wishes to be — that route belongs to a past age of men like Hegel, Marx and

Lenin. The written word, <u>Libra</u> implies, is dead although this is a clear paradox given that DeLillo is foregrounding this very notion through the words of a novel. Shut in a police cell DeLillo's Oswald recognises this: "His life had a clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald" (435). DeLillo draws attention to the fact that Oswald notes: "He [Oswald] and Kennedy were partners" (435) —part of the same game.

Following Baudrillard, DeLillo seems here to be implying that Oswald is no longer Lee Oswald but hyperreal Lee Harvey Oswald. Accordingly, <u>Libra</u>'s most significant climax is not the shooting of JFK, the shooting of Oswald, the burial of Oswald, nor the actual ending when his mother speaks his name as "Lee Harvey Oswald," (in so doing she downplays her status as mother, acknowledging the genealogy of his media birth); instead, it is the moment just before Oswald is shot by Jack Ruby. Oswald looks above the spot where Ruby is standing and sees the television cameras and imagines himself on the news. Then Ruby shoots and Oswald "could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV" (439). In this instant Oswald is cognisant of the nature of the media-created self: thus, "[Oswald] knew what it meant to be in pain. All you had to do was see TV" (340).[11]

DeLillo situates the dying Oswald within a tradition of media baptised "selves": Oswald thinks of another celebrity rebaptised by the press, U2 spy plane pilot "Francis Garry Powers," who was shot down and captured by the Soviets;[12] Oswald imagines his own future fame in the memories of those who

[11]This is something that DeLillo has also explored elsewhere in his 1984 novel <u>White Noise</u> where Jack Gladney needs to hear the radio reports about the Toxic Event to know that it has occurred. The implication here is that the media is seen as the source of credibility, meaning and knowledge.

[12] In May 1960 Francis Garry Powers was flying a U2 spy plane over the Soviet Union and was shot down and captured. This incident sparked one of the biggest international crises of the Cold War period.

will have seen his death on TV. In fictionalising Oswald's death in such a way

DeLillo seems to be invoking the collective memory of the public and indicating

the phenomenal power of the media given that many readers will share

Oswald's recognition of the media's fondness for enunciating one's full name:

Francis Garry Powers, Lee Harvey Oswald and John F. Kennedy.

As consciousness is failing, Oswald imagines himself "in a darkish room,

someone else's TV den" (440). Thus, as Libra tells it, Oswald has transcended

the modernist world for a performative postmodern hyperreality in which a

media-created self finds existence.[13] In short, DeLillo shows Oswald grasping

the awesome power of the TV image and thus he identifies the postmodern

epoch. From now on, TV will become a major force in the rapid establishment

of a commodified reality which creates and shapes identity. DeLillo confirms

this when, a few pages later, in the home of the wife one of the CIA

conspirators, Beryl Parmenter watches the shooting. In the endless re-runs of

the newsreel Beryl spots:

> something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera
> before he was shot, that put him here in the audience,
> among the rest of us...He is commenting on the
> documentary footage even as it is being shot. Then he
> himself is shot, and shot, and shot, and the look
> becomes another kind of knowledge. (447)

Like the Oswald who "saw himself in the reception room at Life or Look,

his manuscript in a leather folder in his lap" (206), the dying Oswald is capable

of stepping outside himself to see his actions in the third-person pitched by, and

to, the audience of the first person.

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[13] I use the word "performative" following Ihab Hassan's schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism. "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism". The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction. Ed. Paula Geyh. Fred G. Leebron. Andrew Levy. New York. Norton, 1998. 586-595.

Libra is a provocative novel, not because DeLillo offers a new or stunning conspiracy theory or a plausible account of the death of JFK, but because as he tells it, Oswald, like all humans, searches for meaning in his life. In an era of growing visual hegemony he finds it in the form of a new self in contemporary society's powerful object: TV. No wonder then that Oswald's narrative voice occasionally slips into filmic dialogue: the voice of John Wayne spoke inside him as he practises shooting his rifle: "Take'em to Missouri, Matt." Jean Baudrillard would regard such behaviour as "peak experience", typifying the postmodern condition, where the individual self succumbs to the "networks of influence" (capitalist media hegemony) ("Ecstasy" 133).

To my mind, Libra is research fiction, exploring the cultural history of the emerging power of TV/media. It is also social commentary: without assuming a didactic position it seemingly foregrounds the social and political agenda of late-capitalism which seems to have led the everyday American, unable to come to terms with the reality of his or her existence, into projecting the self into the cultural mirrors of our society. For DeLillo, we may all be Librans, hovering between the scales of contentment and a possible apocalyptic fall into the violence that re-emerges as news on TV-screens across the globe. Oswald is the negative Libran who falls the wrong way; but Libra shows he is only one of potentially many. Gazing into a department shop window Marina Oswald —Lee's wife— sees "something so strange she had to stop and stare, grab hard at Lee. It was the world gone inside out...She was on television...She kept walking out of the picture and coming back" (227). Here, Marina discovers herself as an image and is seduced by its power, the theatre of the created self, walking back into the picture to give audience, as Lentricchia suggests, "to her

own charismatic self" (Introducing 207). Similarly Jack Ruby, "miscast" (436), imagines himself merging with Oswald and comes out of the crowd to shoot him "seeing everything happen in advance" as if on TV (437). The newsreels that have told the story of Kennedy's assassination will now tell his story.

Libra is an unnerving novel because it links an everyday American's search for signification and meaning with the unnerving power of the TV screen.

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Like Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis is concerned with the position of media culture in America, and particularly with the role of the TV. As he himself has noted: "My generation is really the first to have grown up in the shadow of the video revolution".[14] Ellis's novels Less than Zero, American Psycho and Glamorama (1998) all, to a considerable extent, depict a problematic relationship between individuals and capitalism. Like DeLillo, Ellis seems to imply in Less Than Zero that TV destabilizes the self.

The growing significance of TV, and specifically MTV —the first non-stop rock & pop video channel, launched in the USA in 1981— was something Ellis first explored in Less Than Zero —the story of a bunch of drug-taking, party-going LA rich kids.

MTV, the brain-child of Robert Pitman, fits clearly with Baudrillard's reading of the TV as the hegemonic capitalist object of our culture and as a universe of simulation and hyperreality. During its first eighteen months, MTV reached over twenty-eight million American households, earning seven million dollars in advertising revenue alone (Kaplan 1), promoting recording artists under the legitimate banner of "entertainment". Its effect on viewers is

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[14]Bret Easton Ellis with Robert Love; an interview in Rolling Stone, No.601, April 4, 1991, 45-6, 49-51.

paradigmatic of the "fatal" situation Baudrillard outlines in his discussion of the hegemony of the object. Furthermore, viewers are locked into a postmodern hyperspace by what is, if you like, the televisual equivalent of the Bonaventure Hotel, LA, which Fredric Jameson, in his now seminal essay "Postmodernism and consumer society" (1983) notes transcends the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map a position in a mappable external world. MTV is a never ending web-like flux, continually reinventing itself, and resisting closure (note how the VJs' prime function is to act as a "coming-up-next" device). It projects a continually flowing narrative of hyperreal images that celebrate the "look" —where image is everything— and the surfaces and textures of texts. Capitalist ideology is ubiquitous. The self is presented as a commodity embodied by the persona of the rock star (Madonna, Michael Jackson, etc), and advertising, or rather commodification, is all-pervasive: even the boundaries between the video-promos, advertisements and advertisements for the channel are blurred to the extent that they strongly resemble each other. The very ontology of the channel is advertising and consumption.

MTV also literally makes everything the same —de-individualizing— because the aesthetic form of the station effaces the boundaries between historical periods, present, past and future, undermining the way the rock and pop world has traditionally addressed distinct historical adolescent communities (rockers, mods, punks, etc of the the 50s, 60s, and 70s) and their varying stances towards the establishment. Since its inception MTV has eroded this by violating linear progression, re-shaping and consuming in forms of mimicry and postmodern pastiche all musical and aesthetic forms hitherto. Videos like Jimmy

Ray's "Are you Jimmy Ray" blur 50s rock n'roll imagery, 80's hip-hop with the 90's cool, desensitizing and de-individualizing specific rock forms in the name of consumer capitalism. The early 80s witnessed one time protest singers such as Bob Dylan and Jefferson Airplane, re-packaged alongside the pretty boys and girls, the Duran Durans, Whams, and Madonnas, but this time with an added dose of nostalgia thrown in. The worst case of this was surely Woodstock 2 (broadcast live on MTV) where so called stars like Joe Cocker, Crosby Stills and Nash, who had originally performed at Woodstock in the name of peace, love and protest, appeared now in what was an obvious attempt to revive flagging music careers remarketed to appeal to all age groups (Kaplan 10).

Right from the start of <u>Less Than Zero</u>, when the narrator Clay returns to LA for the Christmas vacation and turns on MTV, TV is foregrounded as a dominant feature in these characters' lives. It seems omnipresent; when Clay's friend Daniel calls to say that his girlfriend Vanden might or might not be having his [Daniel's] baby and that he is unsure whether to try and contact Vanden, Clay —his eyes on MTV— admits he is surprised at how much strength it takes for him to care enough to urge Daniel to get in touch with Vanden. Similarly, when Blair (Clay's ex-sometime girlfriend) calls on Christmas Eve to tell Clay that she misses him, Clay, reluctant to talk about starting over, keeps looking at MTV (with the sound turned off). A girl Clay has sex with after they meet at a bar, turns on MTV (<u>Less Than Zero</u>, hereafter <u>LTZ</u>, 12) as soon as she has climaxed. Rip, another of Clay's peers and arguably the novel's most odious character, gets his kicks watching snuff-videos and gang-rapes, and taking narcotics, but whatever he's doing, MTV is playing loudly close by (<u>LTZ</u> 110).

Less Than Zero shows that the lives of young Americans are not only "framed" by (M)TV, they are governed by it: Clay finds his best friend Julian —addicted to cocaine, and now a high-class rent-boy— lying on his bed in a wet bathing suit watching MTV; the room in Julian's Bel-Air house is dark: "the only light coming from the black and white images on the television" (LTZ 103). Here the text shows the TV world encroaching upon the "real" world —the artificial ousting the real— blurring the distinctions between both worlds.[15] Julian's drug-induced stupefaction in this novel, where consumption is a *raison d'être* and watching MTV a way of life rather than a pastime, suggests his very self is under attack from the spectacular fast-moving images on the screen. In short, the novel seems to be suggesting he is overloaded with the permutation of capitalism that underscores Baudrillard's notion of the logic of simulation, consumption and the hegemony of the TV object over the individual subject outlined in "The Ecstasy of Communication". For Baudrillard:

> this electronic "encephalization" and miniaturization of circuits and energy, this transistorization of the environment, relegates to total uselessness, desuetude and almost obscenity all that used to fill the scene of our lives...[T]he simple presence of the television changes the rest of the habitat into a kind of archaic envelope, a vestige of human relations whose very survival remains perplexing. As soon as this scene is no longer haunted by its actor and their fantasies, as soon as behavior is crystallized on certain screens and operation terminals, what's left appears only as a large useless body, deserted and condemned. The real itself appears as a large useless body. (129)

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15 DeLillo's White Noise is similar in blurring the distinctions between these "real" and "TV" worlds: "Upstairs a British voice said: 'There are forms of vertigo that do not include spinning'" (DeLillo 1985:56); "The voice at the end of the bed said: 'Meanwhile here is a quick and attractive lemon garnish suitable for any sea food'" (DeLillo 1985:178).

Julian, along with all Ellis's young Americans and like DeLillo's Lee Harvey

Oswald, has no "real" feelings. Everything is mediated in terms of what is playing

on the screen. There is too much MTV, too much information, too many

products to choose from. Nevertheless, consumer ideology has not brought

these Americans happiness; in fact, they appear consumed by boredom and by

apathetic dissatisfaction. They crave bigger and brighter experiences: "I wanted

to see the worst", Clay says as if desperate to actually feel something, *anything*

(LTZ 172). But consumption produces at best alienation and isolation: at a party

Clay spots a zombified boy "lying in an overstuffed couch smoking a joint and

watching MTV" (LTZ 152). At the same party:

> Everyone in the room is looking up at a large
> television screen...There's a young girl, nude, maybe
> fifteen, on a bed, her arms tied together above her
> head and her legs spread apart, each foot tied to a
> bedpost...The camera cuts quickly to a young, thin,
> nude, scared-looking boy, sixteen, maybe seventeen,
> being pushed into the room by this fat black
> guy...[who] ties the boy up on the floor, and I wonder
> why there's a chainsaw in the corner of the
> room...And he takes out an ice pick and what looks
> like a wire hanger and a package of nails and then a
> thin, large knife and he comes toward the girl and
> Daniel smiles and nudges me in the ribs. I leave
> quickly as the black man tries to push a nail into the
> girl's neck. (LTZ 153)

In what is perhaps the novel's most horrific and frightening vision, Clay

witnesses the violent torture and gang rape of a twelve-year old girl at another

party in Palm Springs. Clay manages to ask, "Why, Rip?" (LTZ 189) and Rip

responds "Why not?" When Clay wonders if it's right Rip replies: "What's right?

If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do

something, you have the right to do it" (LTZ 189). Although Clay assures Rip:

"You have everything" (LTZ 189), Rip simply tells him, "I don't have anything to

lose" (LTZ 190). Rip's conviction, his arrogant self-justification, epitomizes the absolute greed that results from the commoditisation of American life that is engendered by the ever-present TV set.

Many of Ellis's characters are de-individualized consummate consumers. Indeed, one of the running features of the novel is that they are known only by their firstnames, which is perhaps comparable to the brand names of pop stars such as "Robbie" and "Kylie." Only a few come close to being rounded personalities. Mostly, they are ciphers, flickers on a screen: Clay (Be anything to anybody?), Rip (R.I.P.? Rape), Finn (shark?), Blair (moans?). As Elizabeth Young notes, they are so indistinguishable that no one can remember who they've slept with (29): as Clay says, "I realize for an instant that I might have slept with Didi Hellman. I also realize that I might have slept with Warren" (LTZ 28). Nevertheless, the blank manner in which Clay reveals this shows how unconcerned he is by this.

Fuelled by their unquenchable consumer desires, Ellis's characters ultimately tend towards a sense of dramatic projective participation with MTV (and its simulations) or TV in general. TV seems to have whipped their desire for romance, adventure, excitement, style and risk to the point of frenzy. But such desires, are fictive as these are the desires of romance, adventure, excitement, and so on, are as seen on TV. Perhaps this is why Ellis's Americans never form lasting relationships. This is exemplified by Clay's relationship with Blair. He remembers spending a week in Monterey with her. The first day they make love, walk on the beach, light candles and discover a crate of champagne, but by the end of the week they are drinking heavily and "all we did was watch television" (LTZ 61). This despairing, bleak vision of contemporary life

permeates the book. Clay and Blair (like Rip, Trent, Finn, Vanden, Daniel) are young, rich, educated and beautiful; they have everything one could materially wish for, but life still seems to bore them. They need the ever-present TV to sell them more and more of the very same dreams they are chasing. But is Ellis teasing us here? Isn't the scene in Monterey, complete with resplendent beach, moonlight and crashing waves, the very stuff of an 80's pop video or commercial?

Although Ellis establishes the mechanism to critique this world of manic consumption, presenting Clay as an obvious outsider —he isn't "tan" like his friends; he attends college on the East Coast, and he is strikingly observant— Ellis's attitude to consumer society and the generation which populates the novel remains largely unvoiced through the lack of critical commentary in Clay's narrative. Nevertheless, critics like John Richy, who labelled Ellis as "the voice of a generation", got it wrong: Ellis does not celebrate the lifestyles of people who are rich, pretty and vacant; he merely shows them for what they are.[16] Only at the very end of the novel does Clay get anywhere near to recognizing the world he lives in for what it is: a world of rabid greed and consumerism. In the final entry he says:

> There was a song I heard when I was in Los Angeles by a local group. The song was called "Los Angeles" and the words and images were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days. The images, I later found out, were personal and no one knew I shared them. The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun. These images stayed with me even after I left the city. Images so violent and malicious

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[16] John Richy, The LA Times Book Review, May 26, 1985. 1,11.

that they seemed to be my only point of reference for
a long time afterwards. After I left. (LTZ 297-8)

Although this is a particularly despairing entry, embodying Clay's apparently
new-found understanding that he cannot change things, Clay can check out any
time he likes, but —like the Eagles' "Hotel California"— he can never leave. In
Baudrillardian terms he is condemned to remain in capitalist America, unable to
escape the system of signs and logic of consumption. Nevertheless, even this
entry is spurious because it is not sure whether the sense of apocalypse
embodied here, and elsewhere in the novel, represents Ellis's *actual* reading of
LA or just a mirroring of the apocalyptic world displayed on MTV.

Many pop and rock videos from the early eighties such as Michael
Jackson's tongue-in-cheek "Thriller" (1984), Peter Gabriel's "Shock the Monkey"
(1985) and Duran Duran's "The Wild Boys" (1985) depict apocalyptic visions of
society. Duran Duran's "Wild Boys" is very Sci-Fi; the band appears in a
wrecked, post-holocaust world. The sun does not shine, screaming monsters
prowl the stage, unexplained explosions take place all around Simon Le Bon
—the singer— who is strapped to a spinning wheel, and John Taylor —the bass
player— tied to an upturned car. Similarly Nick Rhodes sits encased behind a
towering bank of computers. These images, like those of other videos of the
period, remain unexplained, subverting the traditional filmic narrative
convention of cause and effect.

Ellis's narrative is equally ambiguous, and seems to display some of the
same. Less Than Zero's narrative lurches forwards, more often than not,
without any (let alone clear) reference to the passage of time. One segment
ends "When I fall asleep, it's Christmas Eve" for the next to begin "Daniel calls

me on the day before Christmas" (LTZ 63). It is as if the text is intent on (or

couldn't care less about) blurring the linear time-frame. It is arranged as a series

of striking textual segments without the conventional markers of chapter

divisions. Incongruous narrative sequences are linked solely by being on

consecutive pages. This kind of narrative, allowing the 108 narrative segments

(as I counted them!) to stand at times as separate incidents in Clay's story, is,

albeit in word-form, like an MTV video: think of Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer"

(1986). Filmed in "stop-motion technique to produce a disorientating, jerky

series of images", it strays from the traditional narrative devices of cause-effect,

time-space, and temporal continuity; "the instability of objects becomes the

norm" (Kaplan 74).

The link between Less Than Zero and MTV, blurring Los Angeles with

the world of pop and rock videos, is reminiscent of what Brian McHale, in

Constructing Postmodernism, calls an "ontological pluralizer" —a stylistic device

or narrative motif designed to introduce a secondary world within the world of

the fiction, or to split and multiply the primary ontological plane (125). Thus, it

could be argued that the ontology of the music video encroaches upon the

narrative form of Less Than Zero to produce a kind of TV textuality —text that

is permeated with the ontology (metaphysical nature) of television.

Read this way, it seems possible to ask if the form of Less Than Zero has

succumbed just like Ellis's characters to the brighter, more attractive forms of

the TV? Inspired by Baudrillard, the issue I am teasing at here is whether or not

Ellis, like his characters, has lost his individual voice. Is fictional discourse, like

the lives of these Americans, generated and controlled at all levels by TV and

the underlying ideology of capitalism? When Clay observes a boy watching an

episode of <u>The Twilight Zone</u> "on a *huge* screen" [my italics] (<u>LTZ</u> 172) at a party, it is as if Ellis is commentating on the balance of power: the world of the screen appears bigger and brighter, more enticing than the so-called real world. But is Ellis retaining a measure of authorial control, or is this just a pretend critique? Although in the outsider Clay, the novel has the potential capacity to observe and critique the lives of these vacuous young adults, the distance at which the text keeps its reader surely engenders stupefaction, not social commentary. Given the ontology of the narrative and capitalist era we live in (following Baudrillard), the reader will gaze at the novel in a manner that mirrors that of Baudrillard's schizophrenic, media-saturated individual. Arguably, the blankly deadpan narrative delivered in the present tense is likely to reinforce this response.

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My critical reading of <u>Libra</u> and <u>Less Than Zero</u> did not focus on their narrative strategies, although there are obvious connections between these works and <u>Being Helle</u>: for example, <u>Less Than Zero</u> is written in the first-person as is a fair portion of my novel. In the early stages of writing <u>Being Helle</u> I experimented with both first and third person narrative and initially settled on the first person, writing several drafts of the entire novel in this form because it seems to stress the performative aspect of Helle more intensely. DeLillo's third person narrator, external to Oswald, views him with cool regard but I initially felt that for my own novel the performative aspect of first person narrative would better stress my notion (formed from reading the likes of Baudrillard, Ellis and DeLillo) that capitalist ideology leads individuals today to live their entire lives "as if seen on TV". Writing in the first-person also allowed the

central focus of the narrative to be placed on Helle, blurring Vig/Lykke's involvement in the story. However, in the final stages of my research I shifted large sections of the narrative into the third person to evoke Helle's fragmentation and alienation. By creating a tapestry of voices (third person, first person diary and first person weblog) I realised I could better problematize the nature of Helle's own identity in a cultural scene that seems to undermine the stability of the authentic self.

Ellis's short sharp chapters, starting scenes as late in the action as possible and exiting quickly, inspired me to work with shorter segments of text. This strategy has two major purposes in <u>Being Helle</u>: firstly, it aims to encourage the reader to rapidly consume each chapter, driving the narrative forwards; secondly, it acts as an ontological pluralizer, fast-forwarding or zapping like a TV control through Helle's story. In this way the novel is intended to reflect the strategies of the postmodern condition, foregrounding Helle as the archetypal Baudrillardian subject. However, having established this framework I also set about exploring how the existential subject can resist the hegemonic tide of simulacra. One of the central tensions in <u>Being Helle</u> concerns whether Helle Dahl is or is not able to distance herself from the postmodern condition Baudrillard seems to identify.

By using the ".jpg" suffix and including excerpts from Helle's weblog "iLife" I was also attempting to reflect the clickable aspect of reading online. After <u>College.com</u>, where e-mail comprises a considerable proportion of the narrative, it would perhaps have been interesting to write <u>Being Helle</u> for the Net. Hypertext and New Media fictions are gaining greater currency as is shown by the likes of Nottingham Trent University's annual symposium on New

Media Writing[17]. However, broadband was not widely accessible at the start of my project and, moreover, I did not possess the necessary programming skills. During the last year, however, I have worked increasingly with online fiction and poetry on my website, and this is something that I hope to explore in the future. Clearly, one of the interesting things is seeing how the dot-com generation of writers inscribe the cultural forms of the Net in fictional form. Nick Montfort and Scott Rettberg's serial novel Implementation (2004), printed on sheets of stickers that are distributed in monthly instalments around America and Europe and then photographed, and displayed on the Net, is a prime example of how writers are merging novel writing with blogging and the Net[18]. Admittedly not as technologically adventurous as Montfort and Rettberg's work, College.com and Being Helle might still be regarded as iLit: literature engaging with the information era, although written in a traditional "Lo-Fi" format.

Reading Libra and Less Than Zero alongside the work of Baudrillard and thinking about questions of capitalism, television and the fate of the authentic individual, suggested to me just how important these topics were. As a methodological move, reading fiction alongside theory marked an important stage in my research because it showed how cultural debate permeates a variety of discourses. Arguably, reading Baudrillard brought a deeper, more critical awareness to my reading of Ellis's and DeLillo's novels.

Working at the nexus of fiction and theory impacted on Being Helle in a number of ways. In particular, my novel reflects how artistic endeavour figures in such a visually driven, commercial era. There is something of Libra's Lee

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17 April 2004 <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/>.
18 April 2004 <http://nickm.com/implementation/>.

Harvey Oswald's desire for signification in Helle Dahl's desire to become a successful "face"; to be recognized and appreciated for her work; to play the fame game. Early on in the novel when she spots the artist Minna Lehtinen surrounded by a TV crew she takes this as an indication of Lehtinen's currency as an artist, compared to her own apparent failure. Helle, conditioned to think in capitalist terms, automatically associates artistic success with commercial success. Thus when her artistic career fails to blossom at the same time as her journalistic career is beginning to take off, Helle willingly abandons her pursuit of an artistic career because commercial success is more immediate through the media. Her self-worth cannot survive the troubled existence of being a struggling artist so she jacks it in.

Another issue explored in Being Helle that arises from my reading of Libra, Less Than Zero and Baudrillard is the extent to which people are prepared to participate in the commodification of the self. Helle clearly draws the line at using her own physical attractiveness or subverting her sexual orientation to further her career with the likes of Jens Christian Erikson. But she is prepared to participate in the commodification of others, photographing The Noise and allowing Siri to use her pictures of Daniel. Helle even begins to exhibit herself on the Net through the weblog she keeps, aware that displaying herself in public is one of the ways in which she might attract attention. A cruel echo of this is that she eventually discovers that DEX and Johannes Vig/Poul Lykke have broadcast the intimacies her life on the Net, further shifting the boundaries of her life to a digital arena.

As the savvy reader will note, the fame Helle encounters as the subject of Vig/Lykke's work has a limited shelf-life. Moreover, as Helle watches herself

on the iMac after the opening of Lykke/DEX's show, we —along with Helle—recognize that "no matter where you click, there is no real me" (317). Like DeLillo's Oswald, Clay and his LA "zombies", Helle, DEX and Johannes Vig will rapidly become footnotes in the commodity process.

Johannes Vig/Poul Lykke, like DeLillo's Lee Harvey Oswald, recognises the immense power of the visual media, choosing to reveal that his long-awaited novel is a visual text: a click-flick, filmed for the web for the generation that gaze at the screen. As Mads says, "Poul Lykke and DEX declare the novel 'dead'. From now on what constitutes fiction *must* and will be taken online into the realms of the digital" (304). Vig/Lykke, who says he has grown "bored" with the novel, explains how "this fiction took a living woman and turned her into a character to be controlled at the whim of her creators" (305). Here he is testifying to the diminishing use-value of the book as a cultural object to reach a wide audience. Moreover, by embracing digital technology, Vig/Lykke demonstrates the rising hegemony of the visual object, echoing Baudrillard.

The question remains whether Vig/Lykke actually has any power or even authentic identity himself in a contemporary scene which, following Baudrillard, bears witness to the erasure of the individual authentic self at the hands of the hyperreal object. Baudrillard's claim that the authentic self has disappeared is likely to leave Bret Easton Ellis and Don DeLillo out in the cold — and Jon Buscall for that matter. Of course, it may well seem theoretically possible to deny the author's selfhood, but clearly this is a highly problematic notion, especially —as I have noted— that in order for Baudrillard to state his own position, he must retain some element of autonomy. If not, then his theory can be reduced to a further expression of the logic of simulation he identifies and

that seems to err on the Sci-Fi: the system hijacking the author to speak through him.

As a novelist I was cognisant that it might be interesting to explore the problem of authorial identity post-Baudrillard through the writing of a novel. However, in order to clarify my critical position I chose first to consider at length Bret Easton Ellis's <u>American Psycho</u>, as discussed in the following chapter. This was partly because the issue of authorial responsibility was so closely associated with the novel after Bret Easton Ellis had been vilified in the press after many readers confused the misogyny of the novel's protagonist with his own. However, on closer inspection <u>American Psycho</u> connected with my research into Baudrillard's account of the failure of the individual subject. Upon reading, it seemed to me that the novel revealed something of the paradoxical and problematic nature of authorial identity. On one level the text appeared, through its ontological uncertainty, to diminish the identity of the author; however, there was also an identifiable authorial presence in the novel's satirical impulse. Although <u>American Psycho</u> —like <u>Less Than Zero</u>— tends to engender stupefaction in the reader because of its narrative form, its savage and brutal nature is more overtly satirical than Ellis's debut novel. Thus, by prolonging my research at the nexus of fiction and critical theory, my project gained increased critical awareness and creative impetuous.

- III -

American Psycho & the Individual Subject

The focus of this chapter is a reading of Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho within the context of the work of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, which enabled me to narrow down some of the key issues that were subsequently explored in my novel Being Helle. Primarily, I am referring to the way in which my novel problematizes the question of essential identity, and the autonomy of the individual subject in an era of media capitalism. In Being Helle, the possibility of whether or not Helle, Johannes Vig and even the novel itself are lost to the hegemony of capitalism is considered. In particular, Helle Dahl's autonomy seems to be under attack as she slowly but surely begins to emit signals that suggest that, like Baudrillard's individual subject —lost to the communication networks— her essential self is under erasure. The novel, however, ultimately comes to suggest through the way that both Helle and Vig embrace art for art's sake, distancing themselves from the media game, that it is possible to resist the hegemonic tide of capitalism, and assert some kind of individual autonomy. In this way, Being Helle rejects Baudrillard's position.

I arrived at this point by means of the two conflicting readings of Bret Easton Ellis's contentious novel American Psycho that form the basis of this chapter. The first part constitutes a reading in the light of Baudrillard's account of media hegemony and takes up the notion that the authorial identity of Ellis is

destabilised in <u>American Psycho</u>—that the author's voice is somehow lost amidst the logic of capitalism. The second part takes a contradictory position, reflecting my unwillingness to shake off my belief in the individual subject, and that writers are involved in their own text, despite what theory suggests. Thus in this section I uncover an element of authorial satire that cuts through postmodern pastiche. Consequently, the position I arrive at is one whereby it seems possible to talk of the way in which the individual subject and art itself may appear lost to the hegemony of capitalism; yet through the act of writing one is literally able to write oneself into existence, signalling the self.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Bret Easton Ellis received death threats for writing <u>American Psycho</u>. The furore began when <u>Time</u> published extracts in October 1990. R.Z. Sheppard condemned them as "the most appalling acts of torture, murder and dismemberment ever inscribed in a book".[19] Under the glare of the media, Richard E. Synder, the then chairman of Ellis's publishers, Simon & Schuster, promptly announced he was cancelling publication and waved goodbye to the $300,000 advance. Vintage Books promptly snapped it up and published it. A bitter and vociferous debate ensued in the press regarding censorship, the violent nature of the material in the novel, and an author's right to publish material of his choice. Ellis was deemed by many to be, amongst other things, a pornographer and a misogynist.

When Gloria Steinem, speaking on the <u>Larry King Show</u> in March 1991, suggested Ellis would have to take responsibility for any women tortured and killed in the manner described in <u>American Psycho</u>, Ellis was forced to take

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[19] <u>Time</u>, October 29, 1990.

defensive action and declared rather banally, "This is a work of fiction and should speak for itself... Bateman [the protagonist] is the monster, I am not on the side of that creep" (The New York Times, March 6, 1991). However, as Joan Smith recorded in The Guardian, in New York some people were suggesting that Ellis sat in his apartment, month after month, imagining original ways of torturing women, dogs, gays and homeless people, as if he were some demented psychopath and not a novelist at all (April 1991).[20]

Although it is remarkable that American Psycho should be singled out for such attention in what was a boom year for fictional serial killers, it is not surprising that, with his name on the cover, Ellis was held responsible for the content of his novel.[21] After all, he *is* the author. However, in the light of Jean Baudrillard's radical account of the hegemony of late-capitalism's "networks of communication", it seems possible to suggest that his theory undermines the notion that Ellis is the ultimate source of responsibility for the text. Clearly, I am not suggesting that Ellis was *not* involved in the actual mechanics of writing and composing the novel; but the powerful ideology and ontological form projected from the communication networks via the TV screen is read, according to Baudriallard's theory, as a catastrophe for the authenticity of the self, whereby the culture of late-capitalism, not the author, assumes an authorial position. By maintaining that there is nothing outside the system Baudrillard creates a binary opposition whereby the essential self is erased. However, this is surely reductive. The individual subject is a component of various social, cultural and biological elements that come together in the moment of writing.

[20] Melvin Bragg also comments on this in the ITV profile of Ellis shown on The South Bank Show, August 1998.

[21] Thomas Harris's The Silence of the Lambs (1991) and Dennis Cooper's Frisk (1991), equally violent novels, were published in the same year as American Psycho.

Baudrillard's questioning of the autonomy of the essential subject and its impact on narrative is important because —following Barthes— representations cannot represent the world, but reflect ideological frameworks within which they arise. In this way all representations is "inevitably...political", forcing the debate full circle back into a question of *who* or rather *what* speaks (Bertens 7). Although Baudrillard does not make particular reference to literary analysis or the role of the author in his work, the dominant issue of his account of contemporary society —the notion of the growing power of the world of objects over the subject, as discussed in Chapter One— seems applicable to literary analysis as it provides a way of registering the effect of electronic tele-communications (the paradigm object here being TV) on authors and their work.

As an object in itself, American Psycho is strikingly ontologically unstable as it is not so much a novel as a comic-book, a would-be-confession; a New York Story; a detective story; a yuppie novel; a piece of music criticism, a "snuff movie" and yet none of these. At times it reads as if Bret Easton Ellis sat down and copied large chunks of text from GQ, Vanity Fair, Stereo Review, or the script of Brian De Palma's film Body Double. Throughout, the narrator, Patrick Bateman, is blankly committed to each narrative style in turn. This is of particular importance to the discussion of authorship as the text here appears to undermine the agency of authorial voice.

Fredric Jameson's account of "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" is worth considering when formulating a critical perspective on this kind of narrative technique because he notes a periodization of the cultural dominant of late capitalism. Like Baudrillard, he sees a causal relationship between

developments in western capitalism and the rise of the postmodern. Multinational late capitalism is characterized by new consumption patterns, by an ever faster turnover in the areas of fashion and styling, by planned obsolescence, by the ubiquitous presence of advertising and the media (particularly TV): by the explosion of suburbia, by the demands of standardization, by the arrival of automobile culture, and so on. It is this moment in the post-war development of capitalism that has given rise to postmodern culture, the formal features of which "in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular system" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 1983: 125).

The logic of capitalism, pervasive in contemporary culture, together with its key element of perpetual change (to necessitate consumption), leads to what Jameson persists in regarding as "the disappearance of a sense of history" in culture. He is unable to see this anything other than a pervasive depthlessness in postmodern art, trapped in a "perpetual present" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 1983: 125) from which all memory of tradition has disappeared. This surfaces in the form of pastiche and schizophrenic discontinuity. Ominously, Jameson notes:

> [w]riters and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds —they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already. ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 1983: 115)

The artist or writer is thus, for Jameson, condemned to write self-reflexive art: art that is essentially about itself, and more specifically about its own failure. This is possibly evident in American Psycho on numerous textual levels. Firstly,

the narrative, with its continual flux of material signifiers, appears analogous with the ontology of TV with its constant stream of fragmented hyperreal images which do not attempt to reflect a concrete reality. It is a case of "TV textuality". This is not entirely surprising as the novel was written at the end of a decade which witnessed the invention of the VCR, and the birth and rapid success of MTV amid the wider expansion of 24-hours-a-day cable and satellite channels. Undoubtedly, American Psycho seems to be going through some kind of identity crisis in terms of its own ontological status. Indeed, it is perhaps a schizoid fiction *par excellence*, reflecting what Baudrillard referred to as the "too great a proximity of everything" ("Ecstasy" 132) by means of the networks of communication. It is as if the ontology of TV structures the very thought process behind the literary work, rendering absolute notions of individual authenticity problematic.

The proximity of the communication networks seems to also manifest itself in American Psycho on a number of occasions in the discourse of the protagonist Patrick Bateman. On numerous instances the style resembles 'media speech', indicative of what Jameson calls pastiche —or "blank parody". Notice the tone of Bateman's speech made at a dinner held at the apartment of his girlfriend Evelyn. Commenting on US foreign policy, it is as if he is speaking the word of a TV party political broadcast:

> [We] have to end apartheid...And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger. Ensure a strong national defense, prevent the spread of communism in Central America, work for a Middle East peace settlement, prevent U.S. military involvement overseas. We have to ensure that America is a respected world power. (American Psycho, hereafter AP, 15)

Also illustrative of the novel's propensity for this "dead" media speech are the three chapters on the music of Genesis, Whitney Houston and Huey Lewis & The News which appear to be nothing more than AOR music journalism. Notably these are preceded by chapters of extreme violence. "Genesis" follows (or rather "jolts" after) the murder of an innocent tramp in "Tuesday" (AP 126-132), whilst "Whitney Houston" (AP 252-256) follows "Thursday" (AP 247-252) where Bateman has sawn off an old girlfriend's (Bethany's) left arm:

> which is what finally killed her, and right now I pick it up, holding it by the bone that protrudes from where her hand used to be (I have no idea where it is now: the freezer? the closet), clenching it in my fist...I bring it down on her head. It takes very few blows ... to smash her jaw open completely, and only two more for her face to cave in on itself. (AP 252)

Yet on the very same page, literally no more than ten centimetres further down, the narrative reads "Whitney Houston burst onto the music scene in 1985 with her self-titled LP which had four number one hit singles on it...". In each of these three chapters, no mention of Bateman is made, although the continuation of the first person narrator implies that it might be Bateman speaking, although this is not entirely evident. Nevertheless, the manner in which these shifts in style take place intimates a lack of authorial presence, gesturing strongly towards the "schizophrenic" proximity, in Baudrillardian terms, of the networks of communication as the text's structuring consciousness. In a sense the narrative appears unable to distance itself from the style of the media-generated cultural production of music journalism and in so doing, the text significantly destabilizes the position of the author. The blurring of styles into a blankly commercially-driven idiom, moreover, makes the distinction between an authorial and non-authorial signature problematic.

Bateman's insistent habit of identifying people by the designer labels on their clothes also represents a pastiched media discourse. From the outset he records a litany of designer brand names paraded daily in the media: "Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and the same pair of silk-satin d'Orsay pumps Courtney has on" (AP 9). With dogged intensity that mirrors the strategies of the advertising industry this manner of characterization continues throughout the novel:

> Price and I walk down Hanover Street...He's wearing a lined suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Ike Behar, a silk tie by Bill Blass and cap-toed leather lace-ups from Brooks Brothers. I'm wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds. Once inside Harry's we spot David Van Patten and Craig McDermott at a table up front. Van Patten is wearing a double-breasted wool and silk sport coat, button-fly wool and silk trousers with inverted pleats by Mario Valentino, a cotton shirt by Gitman Brothers, a polka-dot silk tie by Bill Blass and leather shoes from Brooks Brothers. McDermott is wearing a woven-linen suit with pleated trousers, a button-down cotton and linen suit with pleated trousers, a button-down cotton linen shirt by Basile, a silk-tie by Joseph Abboud and ostrich loafers from Susan Bennis Warren Edwards. (AP 31)

This device irritated critics because they found it boring, but in its decontextualized form it clearly resembles the litany of consumer items which punctuates media discourse. As a technique it is uninspired, but it nonetheless foregrounds the latter's invasive power. Bateman makes similar reference to the consumer goods he so keenly notes in others and these intrude upon his account of his daily life:

> I get dressed to pick up groceries at D'Agostino's: blue jeans by Armani, a white Polo shirt, an Armani sport coat, no tie, hair slicked back with

> Thompson mousse; since it's drizzling, a pair of black waterproof lace-ups by Manolo Blahnik; three knives and two guns carried in a black Epi leather attaché case ($3,200) by Louis Vuitton; because it's cold and I don't want to fuck up my manicure, a pair of Armani deerskin gloves. Finally, a belted trench coat in black leather by Gianfanco Ferré that cost four thousand dollars. (AP 161-2)

It is in this same blank media inflected tone that Bateman narrates the acts of extreme violence that angered readers:

> I stretch her arms out, placing her hands flat on thick wooden boards, palms up, and nail three fingers on each hand at random, to the wood by their tips...the fingers I haven't nailed I try to bite off, almost succeeding on her left thumb which I manage to chew all the flesh off of, ... then I mace her, needlessly, once more. (AP 245-6)

The violence appears like a transcript of some of the acts from the "snuff movies" Bateman avidly watches —"I reach for *Body Double* —a movie I have rented thirty-seven times" (AP 111)— and again implies that televisual spectacles dictate the form of the narrative, undermining the authentic individual authorial identity, and implying the ontological uncertainty of the text. The text seems to make this an aspect of Bateman's psychosis: giving the impression that the theme and form of the novel are closely related. Perhaps this implies that the responsibility for the novel's incongruity lies with TV, but this is never certain due to the levelling tendency of the narrative.[22]

From the opening line of the novel, "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER" (AP 3) —which ominously signals the macabre nature of much of the novel— to the final line "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (AP 399), the text is

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22 A similar absence of overt critical commentary in also found in DeLillo's Libra and Ellis's Less Than Zero.

frustrating and ambiguous. The sixty chapters —or rather fragments— which

make up the text are often not clearly linked. For example, the time shift

between Chapter Thirteen "Video store then D'Agostinio's" and Chapter

Fourteen "Facial" reveals a narrative shift from evening on one day to late

afternoon on a different day but it is not clear whether this is a linear shift or

retrospective shift: in either case the tense is always the present. This is

illustrative of the manner in which <u>American Psycho</u> abuses the principles of

Cause and Effect, Time and Space, and contiguity. Fredric Jameson's description

of postmodernism's "peculiar way with time" ("Postmodernism & Consumer

Society" 1983:118) is particularly useful here. Jameson follows Lacan's view of

schizophrenia as a language disorder. Lacan posited that the unconscious is

structured as a language, applying Saussure's linguistics to explain how the mind

comes to be structured and inserted in a social order.[23] Rejecting Freud's Id,

Ego and Superego model, Lacan argues for a structure of the Imaginary, the

Symbolic and the Real, representing the stages of human psychic maturation.

For Lacan the unconscious functions by signs, metaphors, and symbols "like" a

language, but only comes to exist *after* language is acquired. Lacan gives a

linguistic version of the Oedipus complex in which Oedipal rivalry is described

in terms not of the individual subject who is the rival for the mother's attention,

but "by what he calls the Name-of-the-Father, paternal authority...considered

as linguistic function" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 1983: 118). For

Lacan, psychosis and schizophrenia results from the subject's failure "to accede

fully into the realm of speech and language" ("Postmodernism & Consumer

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[23] Jacques Lacan. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytical Experience" & "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious", <u>The Norton Anthology of Theory</u>. Vincent Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie Finke, Barbara Johnson. New York: Norton, 2001. 1278-1310.

Society" 1983:118). Jameson suggests that since it is through language that we experience temporal continuity, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity, this failure leads to an absence of the experience of temporal continuity in the patient who is thus condemned to live in a perpetual (although continually fragmented) present. Seen in these terms, Bateman's narrative appears "schizophrenic", both structurally as I have suggested in its unmediated time shifts, and at the level of discourse too:

> I say, staring at her, quite clearly muffled by "Pump up the Volume" and the crowd. "You are a fucking ugly bitch who I want to stab to death and play around with your blood," but I'm smiling ... Paul Owen, who is handling the Fisher account, is wearing...". (AP 60)

The reader becomes fixated on the detached signifier because the point of reference in the narrative keeps shifting. It is difficult to ascertain what is important or significant. This violates the act of reading because everything becomes significant as one attempts to position oneself and glean some deeper meaning. The reader is thus isolated in the present moment from which there is no escape. There is again a parallel to be made here with the ontology of contemporary TV through which a never-ending series of texts moves laterally. As when watching TV, the reader has the *illusion* of being in control of the "window" of the narrative frame. Notice how the chapters of the book often have blandly factual titles: "Lunch", "Office", "Nell's"; others are more intriguing: "The Best City For Business", and "End of the 80's". Either way, these chapters never add up to much, just disturb the hierarchy of meaning. Like advertisements that are indistinguishable from actual TV programmes, they engage the reader in the pleasure of the spectacle but seem to lack a context.

Even more alarming for the reader with conventional expectations are the chapters which begin to blur into each other. There is a striking similarity between the events in "Tunnel" (AP 52-63) and "Date" (AP 70-81) set in a night-club. On both occasions INXS's "New Sensation" segues into "Devil Inside", followed by Belinda Carlisle's "I Feel Free". Twice Bateman does some cocaine in the loos, on the first occasion with Price and on the second with Patricia. However, either could be a variation of each other; the running joke in American Psycho is that nothing is as it seems. Notice how Price and Patricia could be one and the same (their names are similar, and they do similar things with Patrick) and there are myriad mistaken identities throughout the novel: "Luis Curruthers waves over at Timothy and when Timothy doesn't wave the guy … realizes it's not who he thought it was (AP 5), "Some guy who looks exactly like Christopher Lauder comes over to the table" (AP 48); "Hey there's Teddy" … "No, that's not Madison …that's *Turnball*" (AP 55); and so on. This becomes a feature of a murder-mystery plot after Bateman murders a business associate Paul Owen in chapter twenty-seven, (AP 214-221). However, Owen has continually mistaken Bateman for one Marcus Halberstam. Thus when Owen had dinner with Bateman he had noted down in his diary that he was to have dinner with Halberstam. But when Detective Kimball, investigating Owen's disappearance, spoke to Halberstam, his alibi was that he was having dinner with Craig McDermott, Frederick Dibble, Harry Newman, George Butner and none other than *Patrick Bateman*.

This raises a number of questions about who Bateman really is and whether Bateman is telling us the truth about the murders. Although he claims to have murdered Paul Owen and pretends that Owen has gone off to London,

Detective Kimball later hears "that Owen really *is* in London, that someone spotted him twice in the lobby of Claridge's, once each at a tailor on Savile Row and at a trendy new restaurant in Chelsea" (AP 301). Later, one of Bateman's friends, Harold Carnes, claims to have had lunch twice with Owen in London. Consequently, like the people he meets in the bars and restaurants of New York, Bateman's own identity remains problematically ephemeral. I suggest this acts like the *coming-up-next* mechanism of a TV channel, keeping the reader consuming the text, driving on towards the end of the narrative, seeking closure. Bateman tells us that he is twenty-six and we know where he works, but he also veers between the "boy next door" (AP 11) that Evelyn talks of who "will probably end up marrying" his secretary Jean "who loves me" (AP 64) and the psychopath who confesses to "thirty, forty, a hundred murders" (AP 352).

For Bateman also read *Batman*. In chapter Twenty-Two, "Killing Dog", Bateman kills a sharpei dog and its owner. As he leaves the scene, we are told; "I'm running down Broadway, then up Broadway, then down again, screaming like a banshee, my coat open, *flying out behind me like some kind of cape*" (AP 166, my italics). Or is he Dracula at this point? In any case, the suggestion that Bateman could be some grotesque Batman-like character is further implied when Francesca in chapter twenty-six, "Nell's", screeches "Daisy, what in god's name are you doing with a [stud] like *Batman?*" (AP 206, my italics). Or is this a typo? Alternatively, for Bateman or Batman read: *Bates*, as in Norman Bates. Certainly, the title <u>American Psycho</u> owes something to Hitchcock's <u>Psycho</u> (1960) and its macabre anti-hero.[24] As serial killers who prey on the unsuspecting and innocent, both appear everyday yet are totally psychotic.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film <u>Psycho</u> explores what happens when a young female embezzler arrives at the Bates Motel where she encounters killer Norman Bates.

However, Bateman's credibility as a serial killer lacks the psychological insight of Hitchcock's film, which dabbles in Freudian psychology.

The point I am making here is that instead of reading <u>American Psycho</u> as a reflection of some external reality, the narrative —in its associations with both Batman and Norman Bates— can be seen as imitating commercial art. As such the plot appears like a fake, pointless exercise leading nowhere: even Bateman remarks, "I am something unreal, something not quite tangible... an obstacle of sorts" (<u>AP</u> 71). Thus the text seems to propose itself as an obstacle to meaning.

This narrative playfulness of Ellis's fiction is not limited to *American Psycho*. Moreover, it seems that Ellis's early fiction is geared up to confusing the issue of Bateman's identity. As <u>American Psycho</u>'s last line informs us, this is "NOT AN EXIT" (<u>AP</u> 399). The novel is part of a tight fictional loop, consistently free in its many intertextual associations, although nothing is ever acknowledged, simply incorporated. This is further evidence of the novel's propensity for what Jameson calls pastiche and again points to the self-reflexive artificiality of a postmodern literary production ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 2001:1962-1965) —even though Jameson fails to consider that art is always aware of its own artificiality. Bateman's New York is a product of Ellis's own fiction, and also that of other "brat-pack" writers such as Tama Janowitz and Jay McInerney. Bret Easton Ellis's <u>The Rules of Attraction</u> displayed the beginnings of this intertextual game-playing.[25] One of its protagonists, <u>Sean</u> Bateman, is a college friend of <u>Less than Zero</u>'s protagonist, Clay. Moreover, <u>Patrick</u> Bateman appears non-murderously in <u>The Rules of Attraction</u>. Similarly,

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[25] A common feature of the work by acclaimed and so-called serious postmodernist writers like Paul Auster, Steve Katz and Kurt Vonnegut.

in American Psycho Sean Bateman reciprocates Patrick's presence in The Rules

of Attraction by dropping in for dinner. Intertextual references continue in

Ellis's next novel The Informers *(*1994) where Sean Bateman is the implied

recipient of Anne's "Letters from L.A.", whilst Tim Price appears in The

Informers story "In the Islands" as a tormented adolescent before he goes off to

Wall Street to appear as an obnoxious associate of Patrick Bateman in

American Psycho. Likewise Tama Janowitz's 'Stash' from the collection Slaves of

New York (1986) appears in chapter one of American Psycho whilst Jay

McInerney's protagonist Alison Poole from The Story of My Life (1988) turns up

in "Nell's" in chapter twenty-six as a girl Bateman "did...last spring" (207). Brian

McHale discusses this intertextual device, the use of *retour de personages* in

fiction; that is, the borrowing of a character from one text for use in another.

McHale suggests that when an author uses this technique across a body of

work, as Ellis does, it "destabiliz[es] rather than consolidat[es] fictional

ontology" (Postmodernist Fiction 57).

Although this narrative playfulness is intriguing and at times humorous,

the novel remains content to offer a series of images of who Bateman might be

without making any one level more believable than the other. It is possible to

see this narrative technique as gesturing instead to the strategies of "play" or

"trip" of Baudrillard's privileged post-industrial object, the TV. Like the flux of

simulacra on the TV screen, the narrative appears as an entropic mass of styles

and discourses, and as a result the reader cannot recognize boundaries nor

differentiate between past and present. In short, the reader exists in what

Jameson calls the postmodernist, schizophrenic state, fixated on the detached

signifier, isolated in a present from which there is no escape except possibly closing the book.

In the light of Baudrillard's account of contemporary culture, <u>American Psycho</u> appears in its narrative construction to theoretically destabilize notions of authorial responsibility as the author becomes no more than an agency for the discourse of the dominant ideological framework. The ontology of TV and other cultural productions, inferred by means of pastiche, a "peculiar way with time" and narrative incongruity so evident in this text can be taken as an indication of the manner in which the text destabilizes the boundaries of fiction.

The kind of interpretive approach taken here undoubtedly provides an insight into exploring the relation between contemporary technocracy and literature, cultural products and authorship on a purely textual level. Moreover, this potentially provides Ellis with a much more lucid defence than his own assertion that "Bateman is the monster, I am not on the side of that creep." (<u>The New York Times</u> March 6, 1991).

<p style="text-align:center">*　　*　　*</p>

In spite of the incongruous nature of <u>American Psycho</u> with its mixture of styles and strong gestures, as a writer I cannot ignore the fact that writers do, indeed, write their own novels. Therefore, I will now consider how, in spite of my Baudrillardian reading, there is a significant authorial presence in <u>American Psycho</u>.

The obvious foregrounding of the very fictionality of the text makes it evident that <u>American Psycho</u> is meant as satire. In particular, the narrative relentlessly draws attention to its fictional status through its protagonist and narrator Patrick Bateman. Bateman's literary heritage (his non-murderous

appearance in <u>The Rules of Attraction</u> visiting brother Sean) is itself a strong indication of his fictional status. So too is his association with other fictional characters like McInerney's Alison Poole, Tama Janowitz's Stash and Tom Wolfe's Sherman McCoy from <u>The Bonfire of the Vanities</u>(1987). When Bateman speaks with Stash or Alison (characters known and recognized from other fictions) he is literally *talking with fictions*, extending the ontological boundary of the novel to a pluralized fictional level. Furthermore, Bateman cannot really be taken as a serious representation of how serial killers are because of the sheer unlikelihood of the events he narrates. The chapter "Chase, Manhattan" is paradigmatic of this. Bateman kills an Iranian taxi-driver, some policemen and a doorman. A police helicopter appears, a SWAT team pursues him, the New York skyline is lit up by police flares, Bateman calls Harold Carnes and leaves a message on his answer machine confessing to "thirty, forty, a hundred murders" (<u>AP</u> 352) but as the police close in on him the chapter ends and "night turns into day so fast it's like some kind of optical illusion..." (<u>AP</u> 352). Two chapters later he is, without explanation, in bed with Courtney. The narrative is so implausible that this almost becomes a metafictional gesture.

Bateman, in true self-reflexive fashion, goes on to declare, "there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory...I am a noncontingent human being" (<u>AP</u> 376-7). Although these words are partly a dialogue with his secretary Jean, and might be interpreted as symptomatic of his overall psychosis, potentially they direct the reader to regard Bateman as of purely fictional status.

The heavy-handed manner in which Bateman's fictionality is stressed is not restricted to him alone. Tim Price, whom Bateman regards as the "only interesting person" he knows (AP 22), and whose scathing remarks early in the text mark him out as a potentially significant character, disappears down some train tracks in the nightclub "Tunnel" only to reappear "for the sake of form" (AP 383) near the end of the novel. The subtext here is a satirical comment on the expectations of the reader and the omniscience of the traditional author, but I also read it as satirising how disposable the individual is in consumer society. This forms one of the major satirical impulses in the text.

The central textual mechanism for satirizing the loss of the individual is the obsessive way in which Bateman inscribes everyone in terms of brand names. Ellis is not depicting the metonymic excess of a schizophrenic, although Bateman's penchant for recording brand names may be seen as such. Nevertheless, this strategy works to considerable satirical effect, leaving Bateman and his fellow yuppies inscribed in the moment, defined from the outside inwards by a media mantra of fashion items and designer names. By adorning characters with media logos, the narrative implies that they are composed of inauthentic commodity desires, media-generated lifestyles and attitudes. They are literally "nothing", just like the products of capitalist culture, whose fashionable status is manufactured, contrived and dispensed with more frequently than the seasons. Similarly, these characters are as doomed to fragmentation, disintegration and are as depthless as the hyperreal images on the TV screen. I initially felt tempted to use the same technique in Being Helle. As a device it would have been a good way of indicating the global nature of capitalism, given that the majority of brand names found in Denmark are familiar

to a British reader. However, I decided that it dates a novel too quickly. Helle does talk of using her "iBook" or "Ixus" instead of computer and camera, but I believe there are other aspects of the novel that take up the issue of consumerism: for example, the way Helle sells her pictures of Daniel for her own gain.

In American Psycho the only serious debates are to do with issues of style and fashion. Ellis's characters earnestly ask questions about clothes and discuss issues of style as if they were important or serious: "Hey Bateman...Is it proper to wear tasseled loafers with a business suit or not? (AP 31)"; "'You should match the socks with trousers,' Todd Hamlin tells Reeves" (AP 86). Just as these characters deny "real" issues, the narrative denies them any "reality" in the text, ridiculing them in its narrative form. They appear merely momentary incarnations, deindividualized entities, constructed in the same way consumer capitalism constructs our identities. Thus, the fiction satirizes contemporary notions of individualism by showing just how ephemeral individual identity can be.

The underlying effect of the satire is to jeer at the reader because, we too, by implication, are as fragmented and divided by the insane consumerism of capitalism as these "psychos". However, American Psycho resists criticizing society directly by mixing the very mechanism with which the text satirizes society with a psychotic, unreliable narrator whose entire incongruous story may be read as symptomatic of his overall psychosis. Therefore, the narrative is open to misinterpretation by those who fail to pick up on the satirical nature of the text. Gloria Steinem's public castigation of Ellis on The Larry King Show (March 1991) seems to be a prime example of this careless reading.

Although Bateman's narrative might be interpreted on one level as the

text's affinity with other cultural productions, namely the hegemony of TV,

destabilizing the independent authorial self, there is also a strong satirical tone

in the narrative which satirizes and ridicules the very source of this kind of

discourse. Bateman makes incessant references (I counted over forty) to The

Patty Winters Show which covers such topics as: Dwarf Tossing, Teenage Girls

Who Trade Sex for Crack, Princess Di's Beauty Tips, Has Patrick Swayzee Sold

Out. These titles satirise the way in which consciousness is fragmented by the

media and are not just a means of depicting the behaviour of a psychopath.

Although we might laugh at the ludicrous title of each show or Bateman's

regular insistence that he not miss a particular show (like "Stupid Pet Tricks" AP

26), the reader is implicated by the narrative here as such shows DO command

considerable audiences. Ruth Rosen, for example, in her study "Soap Operas",

notes how one avid soap fan in the US asked to know the outcome of a

particular storyline before she went to the electric chair![26]

Using satire, Ellis takes this one step further as Bateman reveals his

inability to distance himself from televisual images:

> I'm imagining myself on TV, in a commercial for a
> new product—wine cooler? tanning lotion?
> sugarless gum?—and I'm moving in jump-cut,
> walking along a beach, the film is black-and-white,
> purposefully scratched...Now I'm looking into the
> camera, now I'm holding up the product—a new
> mousse". (AP 372)

The subtext here is clearly satirical. Bateman is not Bateman: he negotiates his

consciousness through a media image. This satirises his individualization and

goes some way to ridicule capitalist ideology itself. The capitalism of Reaganite

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[26] Cf Rosen, Ruth. "Soap Operas". T. Gitlin. Ed. Watching Television. New York:Pantheon, 1987. 43-67.

America has traditionally been associated with promoting individualism, but as American Psycho presents it, individuals are perceived and perceive themselves in terms which rub out their autonomy.

This notion ties in with Baudrillard's contention that the individual is doomed to fragmentation by the mechanisms and apparatus of capitalism itself. However, as a writer myself, aware of the human element in writing, I would suggest that the satirical tone of a novel like American Psycho implies an authorial presence. The overabundance of references to TV, its influence on the ontology of the narrative can be read as a satirical comment on the sheer hegemony of contemporary TV. Ellis thus appears to pose his own criticisms of contemporary society, but expresses them in a problematic manner which makes it hard to distinguish between the satirical impulse of the text and the ontological form of late-capitalism that Baudrillard talks of. Much of this relates to the *spatiality* of the narrative, which in Fredric Jameson's terms positions the reader in a schizophrenic stance, unable to formulate critical distance. Jameson talks of the contemporary individual caught in a postmodern hyperspace like John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel, "unable to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 2001:1971).[27] This is symbolic, says Jameson, of the individual's incapacity to "map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught" ("Postmodernism & Consumer Society" 2001:1971). However, just as Jameson fails to take into account those employees of the Bonaventure Hotel who are likely to gain an insight into the

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[27] John Portman (b.1924). The Bonaventure Hotel, Los Angeles, opened to the public in 1977. The *Bonaventure Hotel* is a modern landmark in downtown Los Angeles. The 35-story Bonaventure is a futuristic structure, and LA's largest hotel. Made up of five cylindrical, mirrored-glass towers, it looks like something straight out of a science fiction movie, with glass elevators shooting up through the roof of the lobby and racing up the sides of the glistening high-rise.

workings of the building, and may consequently orientate themselves to its hyperspace, readers of American Psycho who take on board the absolute fictionality may discern some critical distance from the narrative.

Bateman is thus surely not meant to be a realistic representation of a psychopath. Instead, he is more of a clone, a literary device, whose main purpose is satirical. He is a typical yuppie: he has his hair slicked back, wears non-prescription glasses by Oliver Peoples and carries a Tumi leather attaché case. He works at Pierce & Pierce on Wall Street and hell is *not* getting a reservation at Dorsia's. Bateman insists that his possessions are the newest, brightest, and most expensive possible. He is also a *typical* killer, constructed from an assortment of real-life killers whom he has apparently researched. His eclectic taste in victims and varied MO is such that he comes across as embodying two distinct, almost contradictory types: the murderer who kills en masse like, for example, Charles Whitman or James Huberty, and the serial killer, who is usually sexually motivated like Ted Bundy, or John Wayne Gacy, and often remains free for some considerable time. Even Bateman's excessive murderous psychosis further undermines his credibility as a "realistic" psychopath (Young 115).

Bateman reduces everything to the level of commodity; clothes, music, food, people, and embodies the very worst of the eighties' *zeitgeist.* Nevertheless, the parallel between Yuppie and Killer is both humorous and satirical, implying that the latter is a grotesque extension of the former. Both denote consumer excess: yuppies excessively consume goods (food, narcotics, sex), whilst killers consume and dispose of people.

There is a strong thematic association between the satirical nature of the narrative and eating out. This appears to be one of Bateman's favorite pastimes; that is, when not working out, killing people or writing bland music criticism. The food he and his peers consume is *always* expensive and fashionable, and often a bizarre concoction of flavours.

> I order, as an appetizer, the monkfish and squid ceviche with golden caviar...the gravlax potpie with green tomatillo sauce...Price orders the tapas and then the venison with yoghurt sauce and fiddlehead ferns with mango slices. McDermott orders the sashimi with goat cheese and then smoked duck with endive and maple syrup. Van Patten has the scallop sausage and the grilled salmon with raspberry vinegar and guacamole. (AP 40)

In contrast to this yuppie excess the narrative includes starving homeless people on the pavements of Wall Street and the surrounding district. The collocation of these worlds as seen from the yuppie perspective is often grotesquely hilarious. Outside *Pastels*, Tim Price tosses a napkin "at a bum huddling outside the restaurant, feebly holding up a sloppy cardboard sign: I AM HUNGRY HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME" (AP 40). Having earlier concocted some kind of amusing game by counting the number of homeless beggars he encounters on one day in New York, Price declares: "That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today" (AP 4). Later, Van Patten "waves a crisp one-dollar bill in front of [a] homeless bum's face, which momentarily lights up" before he pockets it and disappears inside a club (AP 64). Initial readers of American Psycho who during the course of the eighties internalized many of the attitudes of the era are likely to have found such antics amusing. However, Bateman uses

the same blank tone as the above to narrate the brutal torture of a homeless man:

> "You want some money?" I ask gently.
> "Some...food?" The bum nods and starts to cry, thankfully.
>   I reach into my pocket and pull out a ten-dollar bill, then change my mind and hold out a five instead. "Is this what you need?...Why don't you get a job?...Get a goddam job," I say earnestly... "Do you know what a fucking loser you are?" He starts nodding helplessly and I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina...Calmly I whisper. "There's a quarter. Go buy some *gum*, you crazy fucking *nigger*". (AP 131-3)

Bateman's malicious attack is entirely unprovoked, and is likely to repulse the reader who might well have laughed at the previous comments and actions of Price and Van Patten. This illustrates the way the text uses juxtaposition to form a critique. I suggest that Ellis's method is the brutal technique of the satirist. Having elicited laughter the narrative now becomes provocative, illustrating Ellis's didacticism, and as such foregrounding a sense of self. As a term, didacticism is often burdened with negative connotations and derogatorily used as synonymous with propaganda. But, as M. H. Abrams notes, there is a strong didactic element in satire. Satirical texts are didactic "in that they are designed, by various devices of ridicule, to alter the reader's attitudes towards certain types of people, institutions, products and modes of conduct" (45). By juxtaposing the actions of Price and Van Patten with the gratuitous violence of Bateman, Ellis is posing a serious critique of "yuppie" America attitudes. However, the text does not preach substitutive truths or possibilities; it merely invites us to state our own position. Bateman's actions, as the dominant fictional

construct of the narrative, simply extends Price and Patten's unnecessarily spiteful actions to grotesque proportions. As such, the text creates a discomfiture. It seems impossible to laugh at one incident and not the other. Are we hypocrites or are we forced to distance ourselves from what is simply a more grotesque playing out of the same critical notion? Clearly, all three actions imply that the homeless do not count. The fact that Bateman never comes under suspicion for such an attack further suggests this. However, the same applies to his other victims: not even middle-class, educated white female victims are missed, whilst Paul Owen's blood-stained apartment is simply cleaned up and covered up for re-sale purposes. The narrative seems to be suggesting that notions of consumer consumption are so integrated that even individuals have been reduced to nothing more than a commodity, for some kind of momentary pleasure.

American Psycho raises some important issues about the effect of fiction itself. Do we take pleasure in the treatment of its characters —the homeless as a source of amusement, women as sexual toys— because the narrative extends our own attitudes to extreme proportions, leaving us secure in the knowledge that its all just fiction anyway? Or does it provoke a certain discomfiture when it ceases to restrict itself to "acceptable" levels of humour? In a sense, American Psycho manipulates the reader, ensnaring us in a position whereby we are likely to appear hypocritical: we laugh, but then assume the moral high ground and deride Ellis for the sheer depravity of Bateman's actions. What is the difference? Both are morally unsound. Alternatively, we might enjoy the sheer spectacle of the violence, anticipating the debauched nature of Bateman's story, because "it's only fiction" and therefore does not count.

The satirical nature of <u>American Psycho</u> is significant because it demands that we re-examine our own attitudes when reading it. This is contrary to Fredric Jameson's somewhat moralistic notion that postmodern cultural productions cease to have a teaching function, unlike the modernist aesthetic which critiques the modern world. Paradigmatic here is Edvard Munch's <u>Skreik</u> [Scream], embodying the "great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation" (<u>Postmodernism</u> 11) and Brecht's political modernist-aesthetic proper, highlighting the teaching function of art. However, postmodernism, with its unprecedented levels of commodification and commodity fetishism, the loss of reality in a culture of simulation, is simply complicit with the world. Unlike modernism, postmodernism mounts no apparent critique of the contemporary world, according to Jameson. Jameson notes that Andy Warhol's "great billboard images" (<u>Postmodernism</u> 9) of Coca-Cola bottles and tins of Campbell's soup can foreground commodification and commodity fetishism, but do so without any apparent political or critical edge. These aesthetics "ought to be powerful and critical statements" (<u>Postmodernism</u> 9) about late-capitalism; according to Jameson, they are not.

Although it lacks the overt critical stance of modernist authors, <u>American Psycho</u> still manages to pose numerous questions about contemporary morality, coming deep from within the postmodern movement. Read in this way, Ellis's novel is clearly very much concerned with issues of deindividualization, consumer excess and the way capitalist culture leads us to treat each other.

In conclusion, I would argue that <u>American Psycho</u> is written in a narrative mode that seems to both negate and promote the identity of the author. On the one hand, it is a postmodern object that reflects capitalism's logic of simulation and hyperreality —as Baudrillard might put it; on the other hand, it attempts to assert some kind of critique through the satirical nature of the narrative. Even though the novel can be seen as a manifestation of the way capitalist hegemony allows and incorporates critiques into its system, I choose to see it as an individual assertion of a writer's autonomy. Despite my earlier Baudrillardian interpretation, I read <u>American Psycho</u> as a textual gesture which ultimately remains the work of its writer. Ellis's narrative craft, his satiric impulse and his sense of play drives the novel forward to reaffirm the significant position of writers as tellers of cultural stories. With some aplomb, Ellis has written a text that is stylistically in keeping with other postmodern aesthetic works, but in a manner which attempts to retain something of the critical function of art and reflects the writer's critical view of capitalism, expressed through the text's satirical impulse. The conflicting positions in the narrative, nonetheless, remain infuriating. By levelling the narrative into a single blank tone, Ellis never overtly signifies which reader-response is being elicited. The apparent lack of authorial guidance deceptively encourages us to take pleasure in the sheer spectacle of the novel, in the same way, for example, that TV parades a hyperbole of images, blending war footage with ads for coffee. As such, this humorous and spatial narrative —encouraging us to laugh with Bateman, Price and Van Patten as they taunt the homeless, women, gays, children and each other within a narrative form that resists closure— might take us dangerously close to revelling in a spectacle of violence. This gives the

text a strongly coercive power and there is a danger that the reader might just go along with Bateman. All the same, the narrative seems to offer us a moral choice, re-emphasizing the issue of the individual subject's responsibility. This is ironic for a novel which so systematically problematizes the loss of individuality.

- IV -

Creative Writing at the Nexus of Fiction & Theory

The Critical-Creative 'Cross-Over'

"The only time I know the truth is at the point of my pen"

Norman Mailer

Up until the writing of <u>Being Helle</u>, my approach to Creative Writing was not based on research. Instead, I tended to fictionalise my own experiences and work through ideas and thoughts collected from my daily life. My prose fiction consequently often lacked critical engagement and self-awareness. With hindsight I have come to regard <u>College.com</u> to be fragmented and thematically uneven. By turning to fiction and critical theory, my aim was to form a deeper level of critical and cultural awareness and thus establish a more solid foundation for creative praxis. As the preceding chapters document, researching at the nexus of fiction and critical theory created a "possibility space" in which a critical-creative 'cross-over' occurred: I conceived of writing a novel that explored my reading of the cultural scene of rabid consumerism discussed by Ellis, DeLillo, Baudrillard and Jameson.

Before I began to write <u>Being Helle</u> I set about narrowing down my ideas, posing questions in my Journal like:

- To what extent can a writer exist under capitalism?
- Can I write when my very identity, the authenticity of my voice is brought into question?

- Is it the logic of capitalism or the writer that speaks?

I tried to clarify my thoughts, noting:

> It appears impossible to identify a discourse outside the post-industrial, late capitalist universe of communication and simulation, such is its proliferation. Individual identity appears generated and controlled at all levels by the apparatus of the dominant order, leaving it open to question whether it is the individual or the system that speaks. In spite of this seemingly gesturing towards the Sci-Fi —a society where the organic is succeeded by the artificial— this is perhaps more applicable today than it was when Baudrillard was first writing: rapid changes have occurred in home computing in the last ten years; the emergence of the internet —further propagating capitalist ideology via a textuality that includes pop-up advertisements, and screen to screen advertising banners— and the mobile phone industry have extended the communication networks so they reach further a field, invading both the private and the public. For Baudrillard, therefore, the networks of communication embody the logic of late-capitalism and thus become the site of authorial agency, shaping, creating and controlling both individual identity and cultural production.

Cognisant of how involved I was in the production of my own text, and having recognized a distinct authorial voice in <u>American Psycho</u> that critiques capitalism, I began to think about specifically exploring the tension between my own belief in the authorial voice of a writer and Jean Baudrillard's account of the individual subject's "fatality". Thus, I set about formulating a number of key issues that formed the basis for my writing. My novel would:

- reflect the hegemony of capitalist digital media on the level of narrative form

- interrogate the notion of the catastrophe of the individual subject

- consider and explore how a writer/artist (including myself) might exist in an era of late-capitalism as depicted by Baudrillard

- explore how and/or whether it is possible to resist/undermine the cultural scene of capitalism identified by Baudrillard.

Formulating key questions and issues like this enabled the writing of Being Helle to remain more thematically focused than College.com. It also provided a critical framework to which I could return when inspiration wavered, as it does in the writing of a novel over a number of years. The writing of Being Helle is, perhaps, best characterized as a process of writing and rewriting, paying attention to both the ideas that inspired me, drawing on my research, as well as the issues that crop up when writing a novel. Often the focus of my writing shifted as it was necessary to weave between issues of plot, style, characterization, structure, and theme and back again, struggling to find the right rendition of a story that lives upon the page and succeeds as a reading experience, as a novel. Because of this it became clear early on that it was important not to become too fixated on establishing a cast-iron theoretical position to be fictionalized: my intention was to write a commercial literary novel, after all, which engaged with some of the ideas I had formulated through my reading, not doctrinaire fiction. Nevertheless, my research shaped and guided the form of my emerging novel.

To give an indication of the kind of interplay that took place between my critical reading and creative writing praxis, a few points regarding the narrative form and theme of Being Helle will now be discussed. It should be noted, however, that I am wary of providing a "How to Read" guide to my novel. I do not want to "reinforce what the reader might have missed" as Creative Writing

exegeses tend to do, nor do I want to limit or shape the responses a reader might have. [28]

Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of western capitalist society clearly permeates much of Being Helle, both thematically and in terms of narrative form. Helle Dahl's dream of artistic endeavour is an example of this. She is incapable of thinking about art for art's sake. Similarly, Helle's friend Mads seems to get caught up with "playing" at being an artist, rather than actually expressing any real commitment to the nature of art. Even Johannes Vig claims to have abandoned the novel for a visual "click-flick", both a testament to his belief in the commercial potential of working in a visual form and the diminishing status of the novel in a predominantly visual digital culture.

To further reflect Baudrillard's notion of the catastrophe of the individual subject, one of the central tensions of the novel is how Helle begins to "speak" like Baudrillard's postmodern schizophrenic, in the idiom of the dominant order, the more caught up she gets in the commercial world. Her consciousness increasingly becomes imbued with capitalist ideology, and she seemingly comes to embody the postmodern condition: she lives connected to the networks of communication, defines her own identity largely through financial success, and is constantly reinventing her desires, never satisfied. Even her sense of self is weakened as she is manipulated by the people she meets. Art, Helle's initial *raison d'être* at the start of the novel, is not a potential form of resistance or critique: she only values art (and being an artist) for its commercial worth, and the photographs she takes are valued solely for their ability to further her career. This impacted on the plot of the novel and it

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[28] The dangers of this is noted by Tess Brady "A Question of Genre: de-mystifying the exegesis". In Text. Vol 4 No 1.

seemed fitting for Helle to become a paparazzo —albeit with some resistance for the purpose of credibility and generating some narrative tension— because the paparazzo's photograph is a hyperreal image *par excellence*: pictures of The Noise are not just pictures of four musicians: they turn The Noise into simulations, images, models through which consumerism is masked as something cool, dangerous, sexy and commercially desirable. The potential Helle has to be an artist and whether or not she will be able to resist the hegemonic tide of capitalism's communication networks is another source of implicit tension in Being Helle.

Throughout the majority of Being Helle Helle is depicted as "lost" to the system, reflecting Baudrillard's notion of capitalism penetrating without resistance and where the object becomes the subject's "fatality", leaving the individual subject defeated, no longer believing itself to be the master of the object ("Ecstasy" 132). For Baudrillard the stupefied individual sides with the strategies, form and ideology of the object, living in an era where the object reigns. The individual is no longer an autonomous subject but a "pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" ("Ecstasy" 133). It was initially decided that the present tense would be an ideal choice to convey this, as this seemed best suited to reflecting a culture of *croissance et excroissance*: incidents could be rapidly narrated by Helle in the form of tightly paced, "digital clips", foregrounding the possibility that her consciousness is undermined or structured in part by the ontology of capitalism's digital media. However, in the end I decided not to write the entire novel in the first person in order to undermine Helle's self and foreground the sense of her fragmentation and alienation. The final tapestry of voices that constitutes the narrative

problematizes the nature of Helle's own identity in a cultural scene that seems to undermine the stability of the authentic self.

By constructing the narrative as a series of loosely linked .jpgs, diary and blog entries, <u>Being Helle</u> signals its own ontological uncertainty. These tightly paced clips of Helle's life echo the urgency of commercial TV or the haste with which web-pages might be read. Of course, the reader of a novel is unable to zap or click away like the viewer of a TV channel or web-page. Nevertheless, <u>Being Helle</u> attempts to reflect digital culture within the confines of the traditional novel, positioning the reader as textual consumer constantly pursuing closure which is in turn deferred. This owes something to my reading of Bret Easton Ellis's fiction, but where <u>American Psycho</u> seizes the reader's attention with the constant promise of humour, gratuitous sex and violence, <u>Being Helle</u> employs the narrative devices of the mystery or detective thriller: a mysterious stranger appears and then disappears; events occur that cannot quite be explained; somewhere something strange is taking place that Helle cannot quite figure out; the narrative voice shifts at regular intervals. Moreover, by contrasting Helle's first-person narrative with an intrusive third-person narrative, the narrative constantly problematizes the question of who or what is speaking.

As well as undermining the grounds of Helle's consciousness through the way the narrative gestures towards the ontology of capitalism's digital media, <u>Being Helle</u> foregrounds the catastrophe of the self by revealing that she has been the unwitting subject of a click-flick, scripted by Johannes Vig (with the assistance of art-collective DEX). Writing parts of the novel in the first-person made this possible as it allowed Helle to be the focualiser, blurring Vig/Lykke's

involvement. Moreover, even the third person narrative views Vig/Lykke externally, drawing him into the novel without overstating his role as the pivotal force behind the events Helle becomes embroiled in. Initially Vig's text and Helle's lack of autonomy seems to be related to the commercialization of art: DEX and Vig (now posing as reclusive novelist, Poul Lykke) achieve considerable media attention: at Galleri Die Werkstatt "all around [Helle] there are people she recognises; A and B list celebrities from all over Scandinavia; the journalists and photographers she's met on jobs with Siri, and other journos with laminated press cards attached to their lapels: the list is endless" (300). But in spite of the public nature of Vig's "masterpiece", Vig's purpose is not solely media attention nor commercial success.

Vig —unlike Helle, Mads, and Jens Christian Erikson, whom Vig notes have thrived on the media acclaim (305)— is more interested in stretching the form of the novel to include visual culture, thus responding to an age where "writers and artists are becoming one as they utilise sophisticated digital media to create new art forms" (306). Vig blurs his own identity, revealing his click-flick under the guise of Poul Lykke although he can arguably be read as reflecting the Baudrillard's capitalist system, surreptitiously permeating Helle's world, undermining her authenticity, creating her as a hyperreal simulation of her former self. In doing so Vig seems to distance himself from the media circus that kicks in where an archetypal reclusive writer re-emerges. Furthermore, as he reveals in a letter to Helle, art, for him at least, is a personal and meaningful expression of selfhood: Vig has tricked the publishing world and the ambitious art-collective DEX, by producing a text in the guise of his half-brother, Poul Lykke. Even if Vig, by producing a click-flick, seems to unwittingly embrace the

ontology of capitalist media he is also reintroducing the autonomy of the self, using art for a purpose identifiably his own. At the same time as art becomes an expression of selfhood for Vig, by showing that he and Lykke are interchangeable, he also undermines and reinstates the idea of selfhood through artistic expression.

This is further heightened because Being Helle does not end with Vig/Lykke's media event at Galleri Di Werkstatt; instead, Johannes Vig attempts to manipulate Helle with the revelation that he has tricked the world about his own identity. In choosing to end the novel in this way, Being Helle foregrounds the depths of a writer or artist's desire for control. Vig does not solely seek commercial gratification or revenge: his actions imply that he discerns a sense of self, of authorial identity through the act of writing, shaping and controlling characters in a text.

The ending of Being Helle also reaffirms that, in spite of the hegemony of capitalism, both Vig and Helle have the potential through their actions to resist the dominant order. For Baudrillard, there is no barrier, no possibility to resist the hegemonic tide of capitalism and I see this as one of the major problems with his approach. Clearly, if what he says is true, then he cannot speak outside the dominant order. However, Being Helle suggests that even though people (and texts) are embroiled in the dominant ideology of capitalism, erased to a certain extent by its ontologies, resistance —and by association non-essentialist identity— *is* possible through the act of textual production. After all, even though Baudrillard is ambiguous as to whether he is critiquing the hegemony of capitalism, the body of his work actually implies some kind of critical stance or resistance.

In <u>Being Helle</u> both Helle and Vig distance themselves from capitalism at the end of the novel. The first indication of this for Helle comes at the point of saturation, when she loses sight of her individuality and experiences herself as a simulation of her former self caught up in Johannes Vig's click-flick:

> Me
> Again and again.
> Again and again.
> Wherever I click, me.
> Again and again and again.
> Quick Time, Real Time it doesn't matter. Specify your connection. Dial-up modem, ADSL, T3, it's all the same: the scene is Mads and me at Louisiana last August. Amongst the other gallery visitors I spot Loretta in dark glasses talking with Jens Christian, Siri wearing a black wig. They glance at me, say something, laugh then move on. I'm too busy talking to Mads to notice [...]
> Camera zoom in. Pick me out. The image wobbles. This is not Hollywood standard, but it's viewable.
> Where was the camera? Hidden in someone's jacket? A bag maybe?
> Looking at Mads.
> Looking at me.
> But the funny thing is, no matter where you click, there is no real me. (317)

At this moment Helle begins to distance herself from the simulacrum, and the unease foregrounded in the quoted section develops into active resistance when she ignores Vig's invitation to carry on playing the media game by disclosing how he has tricked DEX. Although Baudrillard regards the individual as displaced within a capitalist postmodern terrain of experience governed by simulation, implosion and hyperreality, <u>Being Helle</u> shows how Helle comes to feel the postmodern condition. Unlike Bret Easton Ellis's characters who remain caught up in entropic stupefaction, <u>Being Helle</u> fictionalises potential resistance. Thus, Helle reasserts her autonomy by not

playing Vig's game: she rejects reentering the media spotlight. The end of the novel sees, instead, Helle having fled Denmark for Italy, not working as a paparazzo, grappling with questions of her own identity through art. This foregrounds the possibility that she has resisted any desire she might have to play the media game, although no indication is given as to whether this is a conscious rejection or not. For dramatic effect it seems better to leave it as something that it is hinted at. Nonetheless, Being Helle distances itself from Baudrillard's version of culture that presents a true catastrophe for the individual subject and one that does not suffer from the ambiguity of Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho. Whereas Baudrillard sees objects and their images taking over from a saturated subject, leaving the subject as apathetic, stupefied, totally dazed as the culture bombards the scene with more and more consumable objects at an unnerving rate, Being Helle considers the possibility that media saturation, epitomised by Helle's "fifteen minutes" of fame, actually serves as a wake up call for the self. Helle (as autonomous subject), made cognisant of the loss of the self, triumphs over hyperreal Helle. Moreover, reclaiming the self is directly associated with artistic pursuits at the end of the novel: Helle is out taking pictures. In spite of the hegemonic tide of capitalism, the artist/writer who engages in art for art's sake, as Being Helle implicitly suggests, retains some sense of an authentic self. In other words, through textual production, the cultural stories we tell not only reveal something about our culture; they also reveal something about us.

As the author of Being Helle, writing in the *parole* of capitalist culture like Johannes Vig, my consciousness annexed by the capitalist culture I am raised in— I am reaffirming my individuality through the act of artistic creation and

control. Perhaps that's why the name "Johannes Vig" seemed so appropriate. Taken from Martin A. Hansen's novel <u>Løgneren</u> [The Liar] (1950), Johannes Vig, if said quickly becomes Johan Svig —literally, Jon the Fraud. On the surface <u>Being Helle</u> does gesture strongly towards the postmodern condition Baudrillard identifies. But I am a fraud: a fake. I am an author pretending to write in the voice of capitalism, making my text ontologically unstable. However, the novel, dressed in the guise of capitalist culture, enables me to pose a critique against the hegemonic tide of capitalism and testify my own subjective position regarding the cultural moment within which this novel emerges. Helle and Johannes Vig maintain a sense of self by choosing to step outside the system through their art works. Thus by dialoguing with the cultural logic of capitalism, <u>Being Helle</u> —written in a form that comes from deep within a postmodern capitalist culture, cognisant of its ontology and cultural and literary heritage— positions itself as a work of resistance.

The means to achieve this critique comes largely from an approach to Creative Writing that embraces the need for cultural awareness. By increasing my cultural and critical awareness through reading fiction and critical theory, my creative praxis moved beyond the tried and tested method of observing the world; creating ideas and stories out of notes furiously scribbled in journals and notebooks. Reading fiction to learn about characterization, point of view, setting, plotting and narrative structure is important; but, whilst writing a novel as part of a university research programme I have come to realise that the critical-creative cross-over that occurs when working in a "polyvocal" space that includes fiction and critical and cultural theory is highly productive. By reading widely and critically, writers enter into an intellectually stimulating space full of

creative possibility. As this project shows, considerable inspiration was found by adopting an approach that formally required me to ask questions about the culture in which I live and write about before starting work on a novel. Through close critical inquiry, synthesizing fiction and theory, a particular problematic was discerned —the paradoxical status of the authentic individual subject. This gave me the idea to write a story about Helle, who is caught up in a cultural scene similar to that identified by Baudrillard, and a mysterious reclusive writer who strives for some semblance of control over his text and his subject. Helle (the text) is a subject who is objectified by Vig and his artist endeavour is a way of controlling and manipulating her. In a way, Vig tries to take on the position of a controlling deity. But ultimately, Helle resists Vig, asserting some aspect of her own essential identity, no matter how fragmented that identity is.

Working at the nexus of fiction and critical theory thus provided the critical awareness and creative impetus essential to the writing of <u>Being Helle</u>. My novel explores and ultimately challenges the limits of Baudrillard's theoretical position. As <u>Being Helle</u> tells it, the essential self may well be under attack in an era of rabid capitalism, but there are still ways and means of formulating some kind of resistance. Writing a novel is one of them.

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