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Fast Times at Buckley High: The Assault on 1980s Nostalgia in Bret Easton Ellis's *The Shards*

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Bret Easton Ellis, in novels such as *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *American Psycho* (1991), has vividly chronicled some of the darkest aspects of American society in the 1980s. It is thus no surprise that his return to writing about the 1980s in *The Shards* (2023), published amid a wave of nostalgia for the 1980s in American culture, goes strongly against that wave. The novel is set in the fall of 1981, when its narrator/protagonist—one "Bret Ellis"—is a high school senior in Los Angeles. This character (presumably a younger version of the author) goes out of his way to present the lives of his friends and himself as the virtual opposite of the kind of sweet, innocent fare that has been remembered in the nostalgic recollections of the 1980s that have appeared in recent American culture. These lives are driven by meaningless sex, hard drugs, and a popular culture that seems to consist mostly of things such as sex comedies and slasher films. Meanwhile, the debauchery of these teenage characters occurs against the background of a wave of gruesome serial killings that have targeted high schoolers and that is presented as typical of the texture of American life in the early 1980s. This vision of the 1980s, combined with the highly metafictional nature of Ellis's postmodern narrative, not only provides a vicious rejoinder to the recent wave of 1980s nostalgia in American culture but also illuminates the role of nostalgia in contemporary American culture and politics.

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There is a moment in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* (1998) when a character announces that she might be about to have a flashback to the 1980s, which she fears will give her a panic attack. The book's narrator and protagonist, Victor (a holdover from Ellis's 1987 novel *The Rules of Attraction*), assures her that flashing back to the 1980s would be a good thing. "No, Victor," she tells him. "Contrary to popular opinion, that is most definitely not a good thing" (283). Ellis should know, of course. His work, after all, is very strongly rooted in the 1980s, and novels such as *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *American Psycho* (1991) are among those that have most vividly captured some of the darkest aspects of American society in that decade. One would, therefore, not expect Ellis's return, in *The Shards* (2023), to writing about the 1980s to be particularly nostalgic in tone, despite the fact that it was written and published at a time when American culture in general was riding a wave of nostalgia for the 1980s. One's expectations, in this case, would be correct. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine anything being more spectacularly non-nostalgic about the 1980s than this novel, which (set in the fall of 1981) takes as its central underlying premise the notion that this point in American history was characterized neither by the triumph of a calming Reaganism in politics nor by the sweet and innocent popular culture that has so often been remembered in recent nostalgic visions of the 1980s.

Instead, Ellis presents us with a cynical younger generation steeped in a dark popular culture that has helped foster attitudes that have driven them to take the sex, drugs, and rock and roll thematics of the 1960s counterculture to a new and much more cynical and sinister level. Meanwhile, the activities of the young characters in *The Shards* are set against the backdrop of the activities of a shockingly twisted serial killer who is presented as part of a wave of serial killing that was a key indicator of the texture of American society at the time.

Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, and the 1980s

The specific character of the anti-nostalgic portrayal of the 1980s can be better understood through an appeal to Fredric Jameson's influential theorization of postmodernism. Indeed, Jameson's work would seem to provide a particularly useful framework within which to understand the relationship between *The Shards* and the current wave of 1980s nostalgia, partly because *The Shards* displays so many characteristics that Jameson associates with postmodernism and partly because Jameson's theorization of postmodernism as the "cultural logic of late capitalism" places a great deal of emphasis on nostalgia. Moreover, Jameson's vision of postmodernism was itself originally developed through the 1980s (roughly between his important 1983 essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" and his seminal 1991 book *Postmodernism*,

published the same year as *American Psycho*). For Jameson's most important writings on postmodernism, then, the 1980s are the *present*; moreover, this present is one that he saw at the time as so fundamentally flawed, empty, and broken beneath the weight of late capitalism that its inhabitants were almost desperate for escape, including looking nostalgically to their own past (especially the 1950s) for signs of what was perceived to be missing in the present. For Jameson, postmodern nostalgia is a nostalgia for the present, not the past. That is, it grows out of a perceived lack in the present more than a perceived richness in the past.

The current wave of nostalgia for the 1980s, then, probably has more do to with what we don't have in the 2020s than what we did have in the 1980s. Moreover, that we can now be nostalgic for the 1980s suggests that the maladies Jameson was associating with late capitalism in that decade have, if anything, gotten worse—which is, of course, entirely to be expected given the global post-Cold War evolution of neo-liberal capitalism (unchecked by competition from the Soviet bloc). In the same way, Ellis's ongoing tendency to look back to the 1980s for fictional material, even without nostalgia for that decade, helps to highlight the genuine desperation that pervades American culture in the 2020s, driving it to look to the past even when the past seems an unpleasant alternative.

This neo-liberal "nostalgia without nostalgia" might be seen as the next step beyond the affectless nostalgia associated by Jameson with postmodernism and late capitalism. For example, a crucial part of Jameson's characterization of postmodern culture involves the "nostalgia film," a term he applies to films that stylistically evoke a specific period in the past in a mode that is bereft of the kind of genuine longing for something that has been lost that we typically associate with the emotion of nostalgia. This emotion, for Jameson, is unavailable to postmodern films because of their inability to grasp the historicity of the past (or of the present as the future of the past). The nostalgia film, for Jameson, thus becomes a special form of the "pastiche" that he consistently regards as the crucial stylistic technique of postmodern art, including the novel: unable to generate a genuinely personal style of their own, postmodern artists, for Jameson, simply borrow from the styles of the past, as if choosing them from a cafeteria menu (*Cultural Logic*).

In the case of film, the styles to which Jameson refers are primarily visual, and he argues that the nostalgia film demonstrates "its historicist deficiency by losing itself in mesmerized fascination in lavish images of specific generational pasts" (296). They reflect, not our ongoing ability to connect to our past, but precisely the opposite. For Jameson, such nostalgia films speak to the fact that we had (in the 1980s) become so estranged from our present, demonstrating the "enormity of a situation in which

we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience" (21). Meanwhile, that these nostalgia films would lack the emotional charge of conventional nostalgia is typical of Jameson's vision of postmodern pastiche in general, which he describes as being

> like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of any laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody. (*Postmodernism* 17)

This "blank" character of postmodern pastiche, like the emotionless character of postmodern nostalgia, is a manifestation of the broader phenomenon that Jameson describes as the "waning of affect" in the products of postmodern culture (*Postmodernism* 10). This loss of affect is an aspect of the psychic fragmentation that, for Jameson, is a crucial consequence of life under late capitalism, which takes the basic fragmenting tendencies of capitalism to a new high, disrupting the stability of the classic bourgeois subject and leaving individuals unable to sustain the same level of emotional engagement that they once experienced. Among other things, Jameson concludes that the concept of alienation, once so central to Marxist critiques of capitalism (as well as to modernist art), no longer describes the experience of life under capitalism and should be replaced by this new notion of psychic fragmentation (90).

The Shards, like most of Ellis's fiction, is avowedly postmodern, most obviously because of its genre as a mock memoir, effacing the boundary between fiction and reality, just as its unusual evolution from podcast to novel also has a distinctively postmodern air. Meanwhile, Ellis's fiction, as a whole, serves as one of the leading examples of the waning of affect that Jameson associates with postmodern culture in general. For example, Patrick Bateman, with his psychopathic inability to feel empathy for other people, is almost totally lacking in genuine affect[1]. In general, Ellis's characters, including the ones that are supposedly versions of Ellis himself, are notoriously devoid of genuine emotions[2]. In *The Shards*, Bret notes that he and his young friends looked

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[1] One might note here that James Annesley's notion of "blank fiction" (from his 1998 book of that title) draws upon Jameson's theorization of postmodernism, while using both *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho* as a key example of what Annesley sees as a new form of postmodern fiction that employs an affectless tone to portray the results of contemporary problems, such as rampant commodification and consumerism.

[2] Characters that are versions of the author include the "Bret Ellis" of *The Shards* and the "Bret Easton Ellis" of *Lunar Park*, of course, but many readers have assumed Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero* and a character in *The Rules of*

at everything through a "prism of numbness" (357). Indeed, he describes feelings of numbness in himself or his friends dozens of times in the course of the novel, noting that numbness was also the key to the aesthetic he was trying to achieve in *Less Than Zero*, which he was then writing: "And I wanted to write like this as well: numbness as a feeling, numbness as a motivation, numbness as the reason to exist, numbness as ecstasy" (269).

Ellis employs a similarly affectless style in *The Shards*, whose benumbed characters represent essentially the same demographic as the characters in *Less Than Zero*, except that *The Shards* is presented as a memoir of Ellis's own experiences as a high school senior in Los Angeles. To be more precise, it is presented as a memoir of a young writer with the same name as Ellis (though he is referred to throughout the novel as "Bret Ellis," with no mention of the "Easton"). And this young writer, a senior at the exclusive private Buckley High School in Los Angeles in the fall of 1981, also happens to be working on a novel that will ultimately become *Less Than Zero*, while an opening section that is essentially a prologue set in the early 2020s identifies the narrator as an established novelist who is notorious for having written *American Psycho*. In short, there can be no question that we are supposed to think of the character Bret Ellis as representing, in some way, the author Bret Easton Ellis, as is also the case in his *Lunar Park* (2005), another mock memoir that provides even more details about the background of its narrator/protagonist, there called "Bret Easton Ellis" (and especially haunted—in this case literally—by the legacy of *American Psycho*).

Such elements clearly place *The Shards* within the context of what some have seen as a recent emerging wave of "autofiction" in American literature, though I would argue that Ellis's ironic distance from his fictional manifestation is much greater than is typical of even this new form of autobiographical fiction[3]. Still, given the clear identification of the protagonist of *The Shards* with the novel's author, it is obvious that we are invited to imagine the book as the recollections of a late-middle-aged author looking back on his final year of high school from the perspective of forty years later, which would seem like a perfect opportunity to wax nostalgic. Some passages do, indeed, sound nostalgic, as when Bret comments on the affluence and indolence of the privileged life that he observes around him as a case of "pure empire: careless sunburns and endless sugary soft-serve ice-cream cones from the cafeteria" (47). From the essays in *White*, we know that, in Ellis's lexicon, "empire" tends to refer to the era of American confidence and optimism that was at its height in the 1980s and that he sees as coming to an end

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Attraction, to be based on Ellis. Ellis himself has added Patrick Bateman to this list, claiming that Bateman was "actually a character based on my own anger and frustration set in a very specific place and time" ("*American Psycho* Author").

[3] On autofiction, see Dix.

with the 9/11 bombings, which rang in a new and very confused post-empire era when "there was, and is, no center; our enemies are insurgent and decentralized, our media also decentralized and insurgent" (*White* 210). This comparison between empire and post-empire worlds, though, is not nostalgic at all, because Ellis also points out that the confident vision of the empire era was "like most fantasies, more or less a lie" (*White* 134).

Still, some critics (perhaps reacting more to the memoir form of the novel more than to its tone or content) did interpret *The Shards* as nostalgic. For example, Rob Doyle, reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, seems to see it as nostalgic, but as nostalgic in mostly problematic ways:

> Imagining 1981 from the depths of present-day American disgrace, the nearly-60-year-old author recalls a golden age of quarterbacks and homecoming queens, an era of imperial entitlement when gilded white novelists weren't expected to imagine the interior lives of the Latin help and no one really cared if the country club was racist.

Longing for a time when it was okay to be racist sounds familiar in the age of Trump and DeSantis, but it hardly qualifies as a desire to return to something that was genuinely better. And, while it is true that Bret's best friends in Buckley High are the quarterback and the homecoming queen, these characters are surely introduced with a wink and a nod as pure stereotypes. In point of fact, this look back on the high school days of a character who seems to be a young version of the author of the novel is anything but nostalgic. Indeed, even when the novel introduces material that might *seem* to be nostalgic, that nostalgia is undermined and turned into a parody of nostalgia. For example, when we are treated to a description of young Bret's excited anticipation of the release of the film adaptation of *The Shining* the year before the main action, the focus is on a film that is hardly sweet and innocent. What's more, Bret doesn't enjoy the film—and in any case becomes distracted from it when he spots a mysterious, handsome boy about his own age in the theater, stirring his closeted gay sexuality. And then the boy Bret sights turns out to be one Robert Mallory, who later becomes Bret's schoolmate, as well as someone whom Bret claims must be a serial killer. More overtly, Bret is surely mocking the whole idea of high school nostalgia when he sarcastically evokes homophobic high school stereotypes, noting that "we were in high school, where there were football games and assemblies and prom kings and Homecoming queens and boys didn't fuck each other and everyone was faithful and abided by the laws we set up and conformed to" (245).

The 1980s and American Popular Culture

Given the tenor of Ellis's writing in general, it is no surprise that, in *The Shards*, he doesn't take advantage of the opportunity to wax nostalgic about his high school days, just as it is no surprise (given the legacy of *American Psycho*) that *The Shards* places so much emphasis on grisly murders in a narrative of high school life. Still, the lack of nostalgia for the 1980s in *The Shards*, while consistent with Ellis's earlier novels, gains a special charge from the fact that this novel was produced when so many works of American culture *were* showing nostalgia for the 1980s. Of course, the current wave of 1980s nostalgia has been aimed less at the historical reality of the 1980s than at the popular culture of the 1980s, which has often been remembered as innocent, sentimental, and fun, dominated by kid-oriented fare such as *E.T.* (1982), *The Goonies* (1985), *Stand by Me* (1986), or relatively innocent teen comedies such as Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) or the films of John Hughes. Even youth-oriented films with a bit more edge, such as the vampire film *The Lost Boys* (1987), are nostalgically remembered mostly for their glossy youthful stylishness than for their potentially dark subject matter. In television, some of the most remembered series of the 1980s are things such as *Happy Days* (1974–1984), which is itself already filled with nostalgia for the 1950s. And, finally, some of the music that has been associated most with cultural memories of the 1980s includes bright and bouncy pop hits such as the Bangles' "Walk Like an Egyptian" (1986) or Belinda Carlisle's "Heaven Is a Place on Earth" (1987).

Ellis's fiction, of course, remembers a very different pop culture of the 1980s. One thinks, for example, of Patrick Bateman's penchant for porn or for some of the darker movies produced by Hollywood during the decade. In *American Psycho*, we also see Bateman renting his favorite film, Brian De Palma's *Body Double* (1984), for the thirty-eighth time. *Body Double*, of course, is hardly the kind of sweet, innocent fare that has often been evoked in recent nostalgic memories of the 1980s. *Body Double* is a film with some artistic merit, but we can safely assume that Bateman is interested in it for its more prurient aspects, including inventively graphic violence against women and its dialogue with pornography. Meanwhile, the emphasis on renting (and returning) videotapes in *American Psycho* calls attention to the way the rise of home media over the course of the 1980s revolutionized the pornographic film industry, indicating an interest in the evolution of physical media that has informed much of Ellis's work (as when the texture of 1981 life is frequently evoked in *The Shards* via reference to a key cassette tape).

In addition to its dialogue with pornography, *Body Double* also participates in two of the darker, but most important, cinematic genres of the 1980s. For one thing, it intersects with the cycle of neo-noir films that were so prominent in the 1980s (and

that were key examples, for Jameson, of "nostalgia films"), marking the re-emergence of the dark, cynical energies of film noir. "Neo-noir" has roots that go back at least to *Chinatown* (1974) or even *Point Blank* (1967), but it was particularly strong in the 1980s, including such examples as Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981), the Coen Brothers' *Blood Simple* (1984), and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), as well as De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Blow Out* (1981), and *Body Double*. Meanwhile, *Body Double* also moves into the realm of the slasher films that were a dominant force in American horror in the 1980s (partly propelled by media interest in serial killers during the decade), especially through the great slasher franchises, including *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street*[4].

In addition to such dark works of popular culture in the 1980s, there were also works that directly critiqued the greed and materialism of the decade. Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987)[5] is probably the most prominent of these works, but a wide variety of films, from Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981) to Michael Moore's documentary *Roger and Me* (1989)—not to mention several other films by Stone or lower-profile directors such as John Sayles—called into question the capitalistic ethos of the decade. And, of course, Ellis's own *American Psycho* might be the most vicious of all takedowns of the greed and consumerism of the 1980s.

Though set quite early in the decade, *The Shards* nevertheless evokes many of the darker elements of the popular culture of the 1980s. The teens of this novel still seem to be particularly fond of watching films in theaters, which serve almost as churches, adding to the mystique of films. Thus, Bret declares, "movies were a religion in that moment, they could change you, alter your perception, you could rise toward the screen and share a moment of transcendence" (30). Still, Bret and his circle are also already beginning to partake of VCR culture, the rise of which was a key cultural phenomenon of the 1980s (and a crucial part of the cultural life of Patrick Bateman). Of course, pornography was one of the key elements of VCR culture, and many of the rental video tapes that Bateman is always having to return are porn. Even young Bret in *The Shards* is a consumer of porn on videotape, though this practice is still marginal enough that he mostly acquires porn tapes from a fellow student who is also his favorite drug dealer. Thus, in one rather amusing moment, Bret (whose most important sexual experience

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[4] On the other hand, it is worth noting that the recent wave of nostalgia for the 1980s has been strong enough to sweep up even slasher films, with recent works such as the *American Horror Story: 1984* (2019) drawing heavily upon nostalgic memories of the classic slasher films of the 1980s (as well as the career of real-life serial killer Richard Ramirez, the "Night Stalker," who terrorized Southern California with a series of murders and sexual assaults in 1984 and 1985).

[5] Ellis's vision of the 1980s is so dark, by the way, that he sees *Wall Street* as being excessively positive and optimistic in its view of the tendencies of late 1980s capitalism. He even suggests that *American Psycho* was something of a "surreal corrective" to the vision of *Wall Street* (*White* 72).

is with other boys) notes that he is successfully able to perform cunnilingus on his girlfriend Debbie because he had "watched enough straight porn to kind of know what to do" (484)[6].

Elsewhere, Bret acknowledges that he is a fan of "sex comedies and slasher movies" (116), thus providing a reminder that the pop culture consumed by American teens in the 1980s was often of a darker variety than the recent nostalgia for the decade would suggest. 1981, for example, saw the release of *Porky's* (which was followed by sequels in 1983 and 1985), a hugely successful film that took the teen comedy into the realm of sex comedy. Meanwhile the genres of sex comedy and the slasher film have particular relevance to the content of *The Shards*, which contains so much sex and so many slasher-like killings. Bret, indeed, specifically mentions John Carpenter's 1978 film *Halloween* (the film that is widely credited with having kicked the slasher craze into gear) twice in his narrative. In addition, Bret is a fan of other horror movies, as well. He is a big fan of Stephen King, and especially of King's 1977 novel *The Shining*, one of the books, Bret reveals, that made him want to become a writer—thus his tremendous excitement upon learning that Stanley Kubrick was adapting *The Shining* to film. This 1980 release, he tells us, "became the most anticipated movie in my lifetime" (28). Bret's viewing of the film upon its release then plays an important part in the plot of *The Shards* because of the sighting of Robert, though Bret is disappointed by the film when he finally sees it, because "it was nothing like the book," which is, of course, the reason King himself disliked the film (32). But King has a different investment, and Bret's dismissal of what has gone on to be regarded as one of the greatest horror films of all time seems almost comically bone-headed, suggesting that Ellis might be having some fun with his younger self, or at least with this version of his younger self, or perhaps with us as readers[7].

Of course, Bret is not above watching some of the sentimental favorites of the 1980s: acknowledging that, the summer before the events of the novel, he watched *Raiders of the Lost Ark* "every other week" (120). Indeed, he seems to be a rabid consumer of all

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[6] One of the aspects of the 1980s for which a character like Bret has little reason to feel nostalgic is the fact that he felt at the time it was necessary to disguise his sexuality, though he does suggest that having furtive gay sex had an exciting aspect that made him and his partners feel like "secret agents" (37).

[7] Ellis himself might not be the best judge of film adaptations of novels. He himself attempt (unsuccessfully) to adapt *American Psycho* to film and has long had a mixed attitude toward the film that Mary Harron eventually made from a script written by herself and Guinevere Turner. While sometimes saying positive things about the film, for example, he eventually made it a target of his recent turn toward anti-"wokeness." In an "oral history" celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the release of the film, he thus bizarrely claims that the considerable respect gained by the film over the years was part of a woke campaign against him: "the flourishing of woke-ness in the culture—me being the dark prince of literature, and I write this book that upsets so many people, I need to be put in my place. And what better narrative is there than that two women did it? That's very appealing" (Molloy).

sorts of cultural artifacts. He notes that he is completely alienated from his parents and from the real world in general, instead relating much more to popular culture: "Sex and novels and music and movies were the things that made life bearable—not friends, not family, not school, not social scenes, not interactions" (120). The suggestion here that, for Bret, sex does not involve "interactions" is one marker of the level of his psychic fragmentation Granted, Bret has special access to certain aspects of popular culture because he lives in Los Angeles, and the high level of his engagement with popular culture does suggest a key reason why the 1980s might have become the object of so much cultural nostalgia in the past few years: young people in the 1980s were probably engaged with their contemporary popular culture as never before. It was, after all, a decade of many firsts. In addition to the unprecedented production of high-profile films meant specifically for children and teens and to the revolution in home video, there were also specific events that were especially important for young consumers of culture. Bret notes, for example, that MTV had begun airing in the summer of 1981, just before the events related in the novel (34).

To this extent, *The Shards* could also be seen as reinforcing 1980s nostalgia. However, through its emphasis on darker aspects of 1980s popular, aspects that have seldom figured in recent nostalgic reminiscences of that culture, *The Shards* calls attention to the partial and misleading vision of the 1980s that those reminiscences have entailed. To some extent, the difference between *The Shards* and works such as *Stranger Things* can be attributed to fundamental differences between literature and popular culture. After all, the outstanding literary works set during the 1980s (and written during that decade) are typically skeptical of that decade. *American Psycho* might be the most cynical of all of these works, but key statements by major authors—such as the depiction of consumerism and mediatization in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) or the portrayal of the Reaganite war on drugs in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990)—often have a decidedly dystopian air[8]. *The Shards*, then, is tapping into a completely different tradition than pop cultural works such as *Stranger Things*, which do have works to draw upon that provoke nostalgia, even if they have to cherry-pick these works from a broader matrix.

However, it should be pointed out that a number of recent works of popular culture have also challenged memories of the 1980s as a peaceful time of innocence and harmony. In Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019), for example, dark happenings in the 1980s are revealed to be the source of the horrors that drive the present-day action of the film. An

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[8] On the dystopian aspects of *Vineland*, see Booker (*Vineland*). It should be noted that a film adaptation of *White Noise* appeared at the end of 2022, in the midst of the 1980s nostalgia craze. That adaptation, though, is itself notably not nostalgic for the 1980s (Booker, "Retreating")

even better example would be Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019), a huge commercial hit set in an extremely dark version of the 1980s that draws, among other things, on the Batman pop culture franchise, which reached new levels of darkness (visually and thematically) in the decade in works such as Frank Miller's comic *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Tim Burton's film *Batman* (1989). Indeed, while the temporal setting of *Joker* is slightly blurred (partly because it is set in a fictional world derived from comic books, as well as from the real world), the best estimate of the time of the action is the fall of 1981, which would make it exactly concurrent with the action of *The Shards* (Booker, *No Joke* 64). Meanwhile, despite its links to the world of Batman comics, *Joker* draws extensively on real events of the 1980s, as when protagonist Arthur Fleck's mental illness is clearly exacerbated by a failing mental health care system, something that was a very real part of the early 1980s thanks to the Reagan administration's withdrawal of federal support for mental health care (*No Joke* 132–35)[9].

Even the *Black Mirror* episode "San Junipero" (2016), which contains some of the purest examples of 1980s nostalgia, also contains reminders of the dark side of the decade. Most of this episode involves a utopian computer simulation of the late 1980s into which aging and ailing denizens of the future can escape into healthy, youthful virtual bodies surrounded by the bright and happy pop culture they remember from their younger days. However, this simulation of the 1980s also includes a darker, more dystopian side built around a club known as the Quagmire, "derived from the underground/alternative culture of the same time period, which was a boom time for clubs that provided an escape from the strait-laced rectitude of Reaganite America" (Daraiseh and Booker 159). As Daraiseh and Booker note, the Quagmire has much in common with New York's Tunnel. Tunnel, of course, is one of the clubs frequented by Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, thus providing a link between this episode and the world of Ellis's fiction, which, as a whole, contains some of the least nostalgic depictions in all of American culture, with *The Shards* serving as the culmination of a long-term tendency in this respect.

Bret Easton Ellis's Eighties

In general, Ellis's fiction becomes more and more metafictional as his career proceeds. Nevertheless, his fiction has widely been taken as a reflection of certain trends in American society, and especially of certain trends (toward materialism, toward self-indulgence) in the 1980s. *Less Than Zero* was published when Ellis was only twenty-one

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[9] Like *The Shards*, *Joker* also draws important energy from the fact that the early 1980s were such a peak period for serial killings in the United States.

years old, leading many to assume that its compelling portrait of privileged youth in Los Angeles in the early 1980s must have been based directly on his own experience. Thus, in her contemporary review of the novel for the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani complained that it "ends up feeling more like a '60 Minutes' documentary on desperate youth than a full-fledged novel. Its narrative, told in fast-paced, video-like clips, devolves into a litany of predictable scenes involving sex, drugs and rock-and-roll." Kakutani clearly means this description of the novel's convincing realism as a criticism of its lack of imagination; nevertheless, Ellis and other literary brat-packers (such as his friend Jay McInerney) came to be widely regarded as being among the writers who best captured the spirit of the 1980s.

That spirit, it should be noted, has to do primarily with the experiences of privileged white males (of various sexual orientations) with the "sex, drugs and rock-and-roll" culture noted by Kakutani, and not with the Reaganism that ruled the 1980s politically. Both Ellis and his characters, in fact, seem to have had little interest in Reaganite politics. For example, the college students in *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) seem largely oblivious to the Reagan presidency, though one of that novel's multiple narrators, Sean Bateman, does at one point mock a "hippie" student who "cried when Reagan won (the only other time I'd seen her cry was when the school dropped the yoga classes and replaced them with aerobics)" (96). In addition, late in *American Psycho*, which ends in the early months of the presidency of George H.W. Bush, Reagan appears on a television screen giving a speech. Timothy Price, one of the associates of Patrick Bateman (who happens to be Sean's brother), begins to complain about the ex-president's mendacity, but Bateman is clearly uninterested in the whole topic. (His hero, interestingly, is not Reagan, but a young Donald Trump, and for reasons of style, not politics). The extreme nature of *American Psycho*, of course, made Ellis one of the most despised writers in America, at least to hear him tell it. It also made him one of the most *successful* writers in America, the controversy over its sordid content helping to propel him to sales levels that he has never again been able to match. Of course, it is possible that the controversy over *American Psycho* had something to do with Ellis's subsequent decline in popularity, but one also wonders whether that decline might have had to do with the fact that, as he moved beyond the 1980s in his writing, that writing simply became less compelling.

In his fiction after *American Psycho*, Ellis does little more than mention Reagan in passing, though he does several times refer to the "Reagan eighties," acknowledging that Reagan's presidency was a defining event of the decade. Then, in *The Shards*, narrator/protagonist "Bret Ellis" quite openly declares, "I didn't care that Ronald Reagan had been elected president last November—this meant absolutely nothing to me at seventeen and politics have stayed that way for the rest of my life" (118). Of

course, as with many of Ellis's characters, not much else matters to young Bret, either. He admits later on the same page that he hadn't been very bothered by the murder of John Lennon the previous December, noting that "I pretended it upset me far more than it actually had and acted appropriately melodramatic" (119)[10].

In *The Shards*, Bret and his friends seem to spend most of their energy on the requisite sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll (with movies playing especially big roles in their cultural lives as well), virtually free of any kind of adult supervision. In this sense, the novel serves almost as a prequel to *Less Than Zero*. In this case, however, all the teenage debauchery takes place against the backdrop of a series of horrific killings and mutilations of young people that have disrupted life in the Los Angeles area, eventually impacting Bret's circle directly with the killing of one of his friends, who happens to be Bret's former gay lover, as well. A crucial part of the texture of *The Shards*, though, is that Bret and his circle do not seem particularly terrorized by the Trawler, as this particularly perverse serial killer comes to be known in the popular press. Part of their lack of reaction, of course, is simply part of the general emotional numbness that tends to inform all of their lives. But Bret, in his narration, also stresses that, in the early 1980s, serial killings were becoming so routine that "maybe in Southern California we were burned out by the number of serial killers roaming the landscape throughout the seventies and into the eighties" (203). After all, he goes on to point out, it was a great time for serial killers in America, "a time before video surveillance and cellphones and DNA profiling, when serial killers were allowed to be cavalier and bountiful: the number of murders committed by just one or a duo could hit twenty or thirty, fifty or sixty, during that particular decade. (Mass shooters have replaced them.)" (203–4).

Ellis, of course, has long had an interest in serial killers. Patrick Bateman, for example, is probably one of the most notorious fictional serial killers in recent American culture, even if some or all of his killings might occur only in his own imagination. Meanwhile, the Ellis work that appeared immediately before *The Shards* was *Smiley Face Killers* (2020) a serial killer film (directed by Tim Hunter) for which Ellis wrote the screenplay[11]. This film is based on real events, or at least an attempt to explain some real events. In particular, it is based on the unproved hypothesis that a series of unexplained

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[10] Ellis, who has loved to provoke the Left on social media and who does so with seeming glee in his nonfiction book *White* (2019), refers to the 1980s as the "Reagan era" multiple times in that book. At the same time, he also says there that, while he was writing *American Psycho* in the late 1980s, "I found myself in a world that had swallowed the values of the Reagan '80s as a kind of hope, an aspiration, something to rise toward. I disagreed with the ideology that was being so widely embraced but I was still trying, as Bateman puts it, to fit in" (*White* 226).

[11] *Smiley Face Killers* was released on December 8, 2020. Before its print publication, Ellis began releasing his own recording of the audiobook of *The Shards* in serial form on his podcast on September 6, 2020, so that the film and the novel overlap in terms of their release dates.

drownings of college-age males across eleven Midwestern states from the 1990s to the 2010s were actually the work of a serial killer (or killers). The film runs with this premise, though moving the killings to Southern California and adding a number of particularly gruesome elements (such as the mutilation of the corpses of animals) that seem to serve almost as a sort of rehearsal for some of the grimmer details that can be found in *The Shards*.

Interestingly, the killings that have been attributed to the real-world smiley-face killer(s) began at about the time that the wave of high-profile serial killings that marked the 1970s and 1980s was coming to an end with the conviction of Jeffrey Dahmer in 1992. By looking back to the fall of 1981, Ellis places the action of *The Shards* in the heart of the remarkable outbreak of highly publicized killings that began with the Manson murders of 1969 and ended with the conviction of Dahmer. By calling attention to the fact that serial killings were such a prominent part of the texture of American life in the 1980s, Ellis goes a long way toward undermining the tendency in recent American culture to attempt to revise our collective memory of the 1980s into one of the kind of peaceful, simpler time that people in the actual 1980s often wanted to associate with the 1950s.

Conclusion

In his glowing review of *The Shards*—a novel he views as a "full-spectrum triumph"—Sam Byers believes (without providing any actual examples) that he finds a kinder and gentler Ellis beneath the "blood-spatter and dismemberment," though he grants that the young Bret of the novel is "already nurturing the icy detachment for which he will become famous." Moreover, even Byers acknowledges that "numbness as ecstasy" is largely the style of this novel as well and that, at least on the surface, it "cleaves to Ellis's well-established aesthetic. The dialogue is deadpan, the atmosphere paranoid and tacitly hostile. Sex is graphic and anhedonic; violence is lurid and sexualized."

The key word in all of this description might be "anhedonic"—unable to experience pleasure. Though numbness and anhedonia are foregrounded everywhere in the content of *The Shards*, the real key to its waning of affect and lack of genuine nostalgia is its blatant artifice. Despite all the sex, despite all the confessionals, despite all the violence, *The Shards* is first and foremost a self-consciously metafictional exercise, which Ellis occasionally playfully announces within the novel. For example, his memoir sometimes suddenly transforms into a film, suggesting the heavy impact of watching films on Bret's perceptions. Thus, in one scene, his visual scan of the school parking lot suddenly becomes a shot in a film with a moving camera: "In my tracking shot I watched as Ryan clapped Thom on the back and began walking out of the moving

frame" (511). But the principal metafictional ironies in *The Shards* lie in the fact that the book's narrator is obviously and spectacularly unreliable, despite the conceit of identifying him with the author. Ellis is, of course, a master of the use of unreliable narrators, with Patrick Bateman as the key example here. Indeed, despite the fact that Bateman is such a famous fictional serial killer, it is not clear that Bateman actually commits any murders at all in *American Psycho* because we simply can't rely on his confessions, which is the only evidence of the murders that we have.

This effect surely becomes even more striking when the unreliable narrator is identified with the author himself, as in *The Shards*. This unreliability defeats any attempt at interpretive closure, which is, in itself, a typical characteristic of postmodern fiction. But it also defeats any attempt to interpret this novel as some sort of nostalgic memoir even more than does its dark content. Southern California has certainly had its share of serial killers, but the Trawler is not a real-world serial killer. Other characters in the novel seem to be aware of the activities of the Trawler, though, so it seems reasonable to assume that he exists in the world of the novel, even though the exact relationship between the Trawler and Robert Mallory remains unclear, despite the attempts of Bret to suggest that they are one and the same.

The presence of such a gruesome serial killer certainly undermines any nostalgia that one might find in this novel. In this sense, though, what is most striking about *The Shards* is that it suggests that young Bret might be a violent murderer as well. Nevertheless, the texture of the novel is such that it is very clear that Ellis is just toying with us here. For example, in one scene, Bret's best friend Susan Reynolds is attacked and nearly killed but escapes, partly because she is able to deliver a vicious bite to the arm of her attacker. This attack is one of the few scenes in the novel at which Bret is supposedly not present, though he describes it with a surprising level of graphic detail, including a description of the bite, which, we are told, was a detail not reported to the police. The oddness of Bret's narration of this scene then culminates six days later (on Friday the 13th, of all things), when he visits Susan at her home, where she is still in bed recovering from the attack. While he visits, she suddenly sees a wound on his arm, reacting with shock:

> Susan thought she was looking at a bite mark. She said this out loud.
>
> Susan thought this bite mark was in exactly the same place where Susan had bitten the intruder on Saturday night.
>
> Susan thought the indentations of her teeth were plainly visible. (576)

At first glance, the evidence here that Bret had been Susan's attacker seems very strong, made more believable by the fact that he has just seemingly revealed that he murdered Robert a few pages earlier. But Ellis seems to be teasing us here: he never says that he actually had a tell-tale bite mark on his arm or that Susan saw that mark. All he says is that she *thought* she saw a bite mark matching the wound she had inflicted on her attacker. Meanwhile, she oddly fails to report the sighting of the wound to the police, confiding only in Thom, who apparently doubts her story. Perhaps the best guess as to what is going on here is that there was no bite wound in the first place and that Bret simply tosses in that detail in order to cast suspicion on himself as a sort of literary game, just as he related the death of Robert in a way that seems to implicate him, even though the death is ruled a suicide[12].

This kind of intrusive artifice clearly disrupts any sort of interpretive closure. However, it also disrupts emotional engagement with the text. In this kind of seemingly autobiographical fiction, a key question involves the relationship between the fictional world of the text and the real past world of the author—and it is not uncommon for that question to be difficult to answer. In this case, though, it is impossible even to tell what the world of the text itself is like because Bret is such an unreliable narrator. The resulting text becomes so gamelike that any true emotional investment in it becomes impossible. As a result, any sort of nostalgia for the time period of the action would by definition have to be of the affectless kind associated by Jameson with postmodernism. But *The Shards* also depicts the fall of 1981 as a time when young people wander numbly and pointlessly through a fog of sex, drugs, and popular culture in which the most meaningful experiences are gruesome murders and mutilations. Thus, while the affluent lifestyles of Bret and his high school friends have some of the spectacle-like quality of the nostalgia films discussed by Jameson, *The Shards* ultimately lacks any hint of even affectless nostalgia for the 1980s, suggesting that the historical processes associated by Jameson with late capitalism have now proceeded even farther as late capitalism has morphed into neoliberalism and historical disengagement has become even more severe.

Ellis's career seems to trace very much that same trajectory, both in his increasing turn to metafiction and in his own seeming political turn to the Right. In some ways, of course, Ellis's recent identification with anti-woke politics makes the lack of nostalgia in his fiction (especially in the one novel published since his turn to anti-wokeness) all the more remarkable. After all, the politicians—Trump, DeSantis—who

[12] It is also the case that Bret *does* supposedly have a wound on his arm, having been stabbed there by Robert during the altercation that led to Robert's death, adding more uncertainty by introducing the possibility that Susan mistook this wound for a bite mark.

have been most noted for their opposition to wokeness very often employ a strong note of nostalgia in appealing for support. There is nothing more overtly nostalgic-sounding than the slogan "Make America Great Again," and MAGA-type politicians have typically characterized wokeness as something that has taken away a better time that "we" once enjoyed. Ellis's own lack of nostalgia would thus seem to put him very much at odds with others on the anti-woke front, in this sense at least. However, if one recalls Jameson's comments about the affectless nature of postmodern nostalgia, this seeming contradiction becomes less meaningful. The ongoing intensification since the 1980s of the conditions described by Jameson does not mean that it becomes impossible to even *claim* to be nostalgic. It simply means that such claims become increasingly performative and inauthentic, a case of opportunistic marketing, whether that marketing involve a politician selling themselves or a Hollywood studio selling films. In *The Shards*, Ellis acknowledges this fact and turns it into a satirical resource.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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