Byronic Bateman: the Commodity Vampire, Surplus Value, and the Hyper-Gothic in *American Psycho* (1991)

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Introduction

In a chapter dedicated to twentieth-century gothic — or, more accurately, the death of gothic by the end of the twentieth century — Fred Botting attributes the success of gothic terror and horror to 'things not being what they seem'.[1] The irony of this reasoning when read alongside the apparent death of gothic is crucial. To apply Botting's logic to his own argument, perhaps gothic has not died by the end of the twentieth century, but reformed into something else. By not appearing as classically gothic at first glance, this revision may in fact promise a horror or terror that will be inherently effective specifically because of this disguised gothicism, because of it not being what it seems. This promise is delivered by the fiction of Bret Easton Ellis. Ellis has not been canonised as a gothic writer alongside Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, or Stephen King; however, the critical and popular reception of Ellis's novels indicates a chain of gothic themes and motifs underwriting his work. Both Joanne Watkiss and Maria Beville discuss the centrality of *Lunar Park* (2005) to postmodern horror as an emerging subgenre; Barnes and Noble warn their readers against Ellis's ability to 'shock and haunt us' with *Glamorama* (1998); and Michael Thomson calls the 2000 cinematic adaptation of *American Psycho* (1991) 'the best monster movie in years'.[2] It is thus clear that certain elements of Ellis's work adhere — or, at very least, tip their hat — to established tropes and images within classic gothic.

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[1] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 170. In the 2014 second edition, Botting has since acknowledged the existence of 'globalgothic' in which the gothic mode is applied to the multimedia, technologically inter-connected, and financially fragile modern day. See *Gothic: Second Edition* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), p. 19. However, I will draw on Botting's original conclusions regarding twentieth-century gothic throughout this article, as they are contemporary to the publication of *American Psycho* and thus contextually relevant to an emerging gothic subgenre.

[2] Joanne Watkiss, *Gothic Contemporaries: The Haunted Text* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 83; Maria Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), p. 171; product description for '*Glamorama*', <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/glamorama-bret-easton-ellis/1100619411?ean=9780375703843> [accessed: 6 August 2014]; and Michael Thomson, '*American Psycho* (2000)', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2000/11/30/american_psycho_2000_review.shtml> [accessed: 6 August 2014].

Yet gothic as a mode is generally understood as highly decorative, decadent, and rooted in archaic settings and emotive terror.[3] To classify Ellis's novels as specifically gothic texts is, then, to contradict the accepted critical approach to his writing as part of what is known as 'blank fiction', which is, by definition, emotionally disconnected, prosaically minimalist, and quintessentially postmodern. James Annesley explains blank fiction or 'Generation X' writing as variously 'the response to an "apocalypse culture"'; an 'atomised, nihilistic worldview' articulated by 'slackers'; and 'the product of a postmodern condition' which reflects 'the material structures of late twentieth-century American society'.[4] That said, the implication of a literary movement that expresses pessimism towards the end of the century and is, simultaneously, concerned with the materiality and social hierarchy of that age, is that this almost directly reflects a number of key factors that define classic gothicism. Catherine Spooner's research specifically acknowledges the relationship between gothic and end-of-century concerns, highlighting a resurgence of interest in gothic themes upon the approach of the millennium.[5] Furthermore, the preoccupation of gothic with class structures is long established within the canon, from Poe's Prince Prospero sacrificing peasants to save himself in 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1847), to Bram Stoker's Count Dracula (1897) as a specifically titled monster of European aristocratic heritage. Conversely, elements of the gothic can be traced throughout the blank-fiction canon; this is particularly evident in the ritualistic violence of Dennis Cooper's *Closer* (1989), the threat of the urban in Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), and the psychological demons examined by Gary Indiana's *Three Month Fever* (1999). Blank fiction can thus be read as the evolution of the gothic within a commercial age, in which the economic and social hierarchy of aristocratic villains translates as a focus, and in some cases a dependence, on a highly commodified and globalised culture. That these villains appear, as a result, to be part of our own society rather than archaic throwbacks subsequently makes them more relatable and therefore, more effective as gothic villains enacting the uncanny as both recognisable and alienating entities. This raises questions of the gothic's adaptability and its place within modern culture. Thus, if blank fiction is related to the gothic, Ellis, as arguably the most prominent and dominant of the Generation X literary 'brat pack', and *American Psycho* (1991), as his most infamous

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[3] Allan Lloyd Smith, 'Postmodernism/Gothicism', in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) pp. 6–19 (pp. 8–9).
[4] James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 3.
[5] Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 22.

novel to date, are at the forefront of a turn in the gothic tradition as it reacts to — and against — the contemporary world.[6]

It is here that this study turns to discussions by Jacques Derrida, Richard Godden, and Paul Crosthwaite, on the conceptualisation of finance as spectral, to suggest that *American Psycho* as representative of contemporary gothic literature is in fact haunted by fears surrounding modern financial systems and, more specifically, late capitalism. Fredric Jameson's definition of late capitalism underwrites the superficiality, fragmentation, and marketability of the postmodern experience with the globalisation of a purely referential and increasingly electronic financial system in the latter decades of the twentieth century.[7] Following the close of the gold window in 1973, the American dollar was no longer exchangeable for its equivalent value in gold; instead, the bearer presenting a ten-dollar bill to the bank would receive in its place an identical ten-dollar bill. The transition of American currency from a representation of a tangible commodity into a purely promissory speech act meant that money became, in Annesley's words, 'derealised', both a social reality and materially insubstantial in its lack of reference to anything solid or 'real'.[8] This idea of finance as being dually there and not there — in essence, being phantom-like — is read by Godden and Crosthwaite as the gothicisation of American finance. Godden's discussion of money as rendering the reality of production and labour 'invisible' implies a ghostlike quality undermining or haunting both paper and electronic monetary systems.[9] Crosthwaite goes a stage further in likening 'cybercapital' to monsters, vampirism, and necromancy in its ability to destroy lives, to maintain value and vitality across time, and in its self-resurrection from plummeting markets and depression.[10] In both cases, the initial link between finance and the gothic is attributed to Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, in which Marx's image of 'the spectre of communism' haunting Europe is used to argue that capitalist finance and the figure of the ghost work from the same ontological position of absent presence.[11] That, for Crosthwaite, this spectralisation of finance becomes further exaggerated by the computerisation of financial systems, links back to Jameson's discussion of the referential quality of the

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[6] Annesley, p. 2.

[7] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. xviii–xix.

[8] Annesley, p. 17.

[9] Richard Godden, 'Fictions of Fictitious Capital: *American Psycho* and the Poetics of Deregulation', *Textual Practice*, 25.5 (2011), 853–66 (p. 855).

[10] Paul Crosthwaite, 'Phantasmagoric Finance: Crisis and the Supernatural in Contemporary Finance Capital', in *Criticism, Crisis and Contemporary Narrative: Textual Horizons in an Age of Global Risk*, ed. by Paul Crosthwaite (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 178–200 (p. 186).

[11] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

electronic, postmodern world that he defines as late capitalism. With money now existing as 'mere electronic pulses' with 'no material instantiation at all', Jameson's portrait of a shallow, commodified existence powered by a superficially representative market suddenly evolves.[12] If the financial system of late capitalism is structured upon ghostly, monstrous, and vampiric representations of money that, in their lack of material referents, effectively haunt the post-gold-window economy, then the postmodern society reflective of late-capitalist finance must also be haunted by similarly gothic figures of superficiality and phantom existence.

Ellis is, then, a writer of postmodern blank fiction which is interpreted as exhibiting gothic characters and effects. As such, he appears to counter-answer Botting's claim of the gothic's death after the release of Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* in 1992. Through investigation of the gothic and financial elements of the novel, this study proposes that *American Psycho*, and the contemporary American gothic of the 1980s-90s brat pack by extension, is not merely haunted by fears surrounding the financial. More importantly, it will suggest that the presence of specifically financial fear actually accelerates the qualities of the gothic, resulting in an intensified subdivision of the genre. This subgenre, which here will be called 'late-capitalist hyper-gothic', translates as an exaggeration of classic gothic tropes and effects that, as a direct result of the referentiality of late-capitalist finance, are articulated through a Baudrillardian hyperreality. This hyperreality emerges as a specifically gothicised blurring of fantasy and reality that stems from the materiality of modern life juxtaposed with phantom financial structures which are at once there and not there, and which therefore serve to haunt and undermine these material structures. The result is a branch of gothic that is both elevated to an extreme and communicative of a highly mediated realm created by late capitalism that is reflective of postmodern hyperreality. In exploring this proposed hybridity, the consumer habits of Patrick Bateman, and criticism surrounding the apparent insubstantiality of his character, will be assessed alongside stereotypes of the vampire in order to establish Bateman as a late-twentieth-century gothic villain. With reference to both Bateman's violent attacks on his commodified environment and the detrimental effect of this environment on Bateman as it steadily progresses into hyperreality, this study demonstrates the relationship between gothic convention (here exemplified by the figure of the vampire) and late-capitalist commercialisation. It is as a key example of this late-capitalist hyper-

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[12] Crosthwaite, p. 186.

gothic that this study presents Ellis's *American Psycho* as central to the cultural evolution of a contemporary American gothic created by the blank-fiction brat pack.

American Psycho

The vampire, as stock character of gothic narratives since the early nineteenth century, owes its most recognised traits to John William Polidori, whose 1819 tale *The Vampyre* set a number of stereotypes that have since been embodied by many subsequent literary vampires. Polidori's Lord Ruthven, infamously based on Lord Byron, rejects the dark, overweight, bestial creatures of European folklore in favour of pale, attractive, aristocratic rakishness.[13] A nobleman, Ruthven is characterised by his 'winning tongue', 'irresistible powers of seduction', and the 'sensation of awe' he triggers in others.[14] Coupled with a hypnotic gaze and what is identified by Conrad Aquilina as a 'paradoxical obsession with destroying the object of his desire', Polidori establishes the Byronic vampire as a figure externally emblematic of social and sexual desirability, while internally corrupted by a compulsion to degrade, dehumanise, and eventually destroy his victims.[15] Described in these terms, it is not difficult to place the protagonist of Ellis's *American Psycho* within Polidori's parameters of the gothic vampire. Although not specifically titled, Patrick Bateman's wealth and elevated social status, resulting from his role on Wall Street, puts him in an equivalent aristocratic position above the poor and homeless of 1980s New York. Furthermore, the doubling of Bateman's character as 'at the same time, both wealthy executive *and* brutal killer, seemingly "charming" date *and* sexual partner from Hell' (emphasis in original), recalls both the attractive and threatening sides of Ruthven's personality.[16] Bateman's slaughtering of women with whom he has had sex just moments before similarly demonstrates the need to destroy the desired victim that is at the heart of Polidori's gothic monster. Bateman is thus 'every inch the romantic hero: handsome, with a fit, toned body and impeccable taste', who is then gothicised by the demonic compulsions lurking beneath the desirable façade.[17] The shared economic privilege of Ruthven and Bateman is key to their dually gothic/romantic status, as it allows both to transcend the social boundaries of their respective environments, a recurrent

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[13] Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[14] John William Polidori, *The Vampyre; A Tale* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1819), pp. 29, 37, 27.

[15] Conrad Aquilina, 'The Deformed Transformed; or, from Bloodsucker to Byronic Hero: Polidori and the Literary Vampire', in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the Present Day*, ed. by Sam George and Bill Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 24–39 (p. 28).

[16] Ruth Helyer, 'Parodied to Death: the Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 46.3 (2000), 725–46 (p.741).

[17] Helyer, p. 728.

element of both romantic and gothic characterisation.[18] Ruthven, as a titled villain, is not subject to the rules of his house but is able to set, and therefore bend, these rules as he wishes. While Bateman cannot create his own laws outside of those already in place within 1980s New York, he does have enough economic power to buy his way around these laws without getting caught; having money to pay for power tools, a second apartment, and the silence of infrequent survivors is key to his predatory success within the novel.

Simultaneously a '*total GQ*' playboy (emphasis in original) and the nocturnal predator of New York streets, Bateman functions as an 'anti-Batman' who attacks rather than saves the city's destitute and vulnerable.[19] In a curious coincidence, the actor Christian Bale, who would go on to play Batman in Christopher Nolan's 2005 revision of the franchise, played Patrick Bateman in Mary Harron's 2000 adaptation of *American Psycho*. Given this, the impression granted to cinema-goers might be that the two characters are indeed alternate personalities within the same body. This motif of the dual personality is inherent within Ellis's novel itself, in which Bateman's public persona, the equivalent Bruce Wayne side of his identity, is not constructed out of any individual attributes but solely based on brand power. He is understood — and understands others — not by his behaviour but based on the products he uses and the labels he wears:

> Price seems nervous and edgy and I have no desire to ask him what's wrong. He's wearing a linen 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. (pp. 30–31)

Here, the comparison of labels serves as a replacement for any emotional inquiry into Price's behaviour. Bateman feels no compulsion to read into his friend's mood and is instead satisfied reading the labels of his own clothing. Accordingly, Alex E. Blazer argues that the public version of Bateman 'is nothing more than an advertisement, an illusion, a mask under which no human character dwells'.[20] Emotionally robotic and often mistaken for others, the lack of humanity, personality, or individuality beneath the commodified surface of Bateman's character is, for Blazer, demonstrative of a superficiality made extreme. Bateman is two-

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[18] Botting, *Gothic: Second Edition*, pp. 89–90.
[19] Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), p. 90 (further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text); and Bert Oliver, 'Foucault and Individual Autonomy', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 40 (2010), 292–307 (p. 295).
[20] Alex E. Blazer, 'Chasms of Reality, Aberrations of Identity: Defining the Postmodern through Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*', *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*, 1.2 (2002), n. pag.

dimensional with 'no layers [or] sense of depth', his identity solely constitutive of brand labels that, as commodified symbols, do not refer to anything substantial or 'real'.[21]

This depthlessness is, for Smith, both characteristic of the décor and decadence of gothic stereotype, and symptomatic of the postmodern condition.[22] Just as the gothic monster is simply a foil to the protagonist without any psychological explanation given for the monster's behaviour, Smith interprets the image culture of the postmodern late twentieth century as being without reference to anything real. This constitutes a purely superficial reality based on surface aesthetic rather than ontological depth. Jameson claims that this surface aesthetic is the product of the intense commodification of late capitalism.[23] At the point where almost every aspect of modern culture is marketed and purchasable, Jameson argues that the value of the brand exceeds the value of the product itself, resulting in a desire for representation rather than the marketed item. In this way, Bateman's public identity, constructed of and defined by the empty symbols of late-capitalist brand fetishism, is reflective of his surrounding culture and therefore, a performance or masquerade of the emptiness of late capitalism. The desirable surface of Bateman's character is thus a front constructed from superficial branding assumed for the benefit of others. That this front hides Bateman's lack of personality — read by Blazer as a lack of humanity — again aligns him with the split personality of Polidori's Byronic vampire, the charismatic exterior put in place to disguise the inhuman monster beneath.

Bateman himself is made aware of his own superficiality each time he is misrecognised as a different character in the novel, such as when he notes, 'Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam […] he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses' (p. 89). Having religiously followed the trends dictated by the media, the fashion industry, and his contemporaries, Bateman is subsequently unable to construct successfully an individual, recognisable identity from commodified brands. Any persona he attempts to create does not reflect Patrick Bateman but is repeatedly misread as Marcus Halberstam, Simpson, Hamilton, Davis, Baxter, and numerous others throughout the text (see, for example, pp. 89, 141, 48, 179, 195). Derrida's reading of the commodity as a mirror that, in no longer communicating a labour value equivalent to market value, 'does not reflect back the expected image' is crucial here.[24] For Derrida, the commodity-as-mirror distorts the onlooker who, expecting to see a representation of their own labour and therefore their

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[21] Blazer, n. pag.
[22] Smith, pp. 8–9.
[23] Jameson, pp. ix–x.
[24] Derrida, p. 195.

position within the market, 'can no longer find themselves in it'.[25] In other words, the commodified brand, as an empty symbol, does not reflect the labour input of the product itself but is instead representative of a figurative lifestyle or ideal, and therefore does not reflect the reality of the product it claims to signify. Correspondingly, Bateman, as Martin Weinreich argues, aims his 'consumerist gaze' at the 'signifier rather than the signified',[26] basing his identity on the empty symbol of the brand name rather than his personal use of the actual product. This means that he essentially looks to create his public persona from his reflection in the commodity-as-mirror, which is itself devoid of reflective truth or meaning. Despite Bateman's highly detailed descriptions of the branded items that constitute his external appearance, the fact that he is continuously misrecognised means that others are unable to see Bateman's true self reflected in the commodity-as-mirror. Thus, Bateman is effectively, like the gothic vampire, without a reflection, a motif that becomes literalised during Bateman's morning routine: 'I urinate while trying to make out the puffiness of my reflection in the glass that encases a baseball poster hung over the toilet' (p. 26). Here, looking into an advert for a sporting event, Bateman is unable to see an accurate image of himself reflected back. This at once demonstrates his vampiric insubstantiality and, additionally, highlights Bateman's failure to achieve Jacques Lacan's mirror stage in which the individual recognises and identifies their reflection as a representation of themselves and is thus granted 'mastery of his bodily unity'.[27] Bateman is therefore denied bodily unity by his inability to perceive his image reflected in the commodity-mirror, and is subsequently a perverse shadow of the Byronic identity that, in becoming commodified through Polidori's text, culturally obscured the true personality of Byron himself.[28]

That Bateman records himself murdering one woman and subsequently watches the tape as he murders another later in the novel, can then be read as an attempt to compensate for this lack of reflection by 'watching himself perform, over and over again, almost as if through a mirror'.[29] As Bateman describes the event,

> I've situated the body in front of the new Toshiba television set and in the VCR is an old tape and appearing on the screen is the last girl I filmed. I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest by

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[25] Derrida, p. 195.

[26] Martin Weinreich, '"Into the Void": The Hyperrealism of Simulation in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*', *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 49 (2004), 65–78 (p. 71).

[27] Elisabeth Roudinesco, 'The Mirror Stage: An Obliterated Archive', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 25–34 (p. 30).

[28] Aquilina, pp. 27–28.

[29] Helyer, p. 735.

someone Italian and I'm kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating the girl's brain. (pp. 327–28)

It is not clear here whether Bateman is describing the version of himself on tape or what he is wearing as he watches the tape. The creation of a replicated self-image through video thus acts in place of the reflection he lacks as a purely commodified identity, and demonstrates Bateman's awareness of his own insubstantiality. That this replacement reflection is created not just with a video camera but a specifically named 'Toshiba' again demonstrates Bateman's reliance on branded commodities for the validation of his fragmented, depthless self. Bateman's conscious use of the commodity in the construction and attempted confirmation of his identity is, then, to return to Blazer's analysis, comparable to the blood that nourishes the vampire of classic gothic texts. If, in Blazer's reading, Bateman is without humanity because of his lack of identity, his attempts to counteract this through the consumption of commodities — in order to construct identity — then mirror the vampire's drinking of blood to sustain life, or the appearance of humanity. Bateman's feelings of anticipation and abated desire leading up to and following his consumption of branded items underline his vampiric dependency on the commodity. Just as Stoker's Count Dracula appears 'as if his youth had been half restored' once his thirst has been quenched by 'gouts of fresh blood',[30] Bateman cures the 'existential chasm' within himself by going 'toward the Clinique counter where with my platinum American Express card I buy six tubes of shaving cream' (p. 179). Here the question of Bateman's existence is answered by purchasing commodities (typically with anti-aging properties) in the same way that Dracula's human appearance is restored by drinking blood: 'the cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath'.[31] Rob Latham understands the vampire in contemporary contexts as 'literally an insatiable consumer driven by a hunger for perpetual youth', whether this be through the physical consumption of human fluids or the purchase of multiple anti-aging facial products.[32]

However, Bateman's vampiric consumption of commodities is not limited to his wardrobe, favourite restaurants, or morning regime. Alongside the branded items he relentlessly catalogues, Bateman treats women as purchasable goods, leaving a barmaid a 'big tip' purely because she is 'hot-looking' (p. 56), and buying the services of escorts and

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[30] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 67.
[31] Stoker, p. 67.
[32] Rob Latham, *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 3.

prostitutes: 'I dial the number for Cabana Bi Escort Service and, using my gold American Express card, order a woman, a blond who services couples' (p. 170). For Bateman, the classic gothic heroine, whose virginity is interpreted as sexually alluring in the eyes of predatory villains, is transformed into the figure of the prostitute who, rather than merely representing sexual attraction, actually makes a business by selling it. The sexual tension between Dracula and Lucy Westenra, who is found 'unclad', 'half reclining […] her lips parted', breathing 'long, heavy gasps' following her encounter with the vampire, is not only more explicit in Bateman's world but is also inherently tied to financial transaction.[33] He tells the reader, '[Sabrina's] hair is *brownish* blond, not *real* blond, and though this infuriates me I don't say anything because she's also very pretty; not as young as Christie but not too used up either. In short, she looks like she'll be worth whatever it is I'm paying her by the hour' (p. 171). Bateman is therefore not merely a sexual predator and consumer of women but a purchaser of commodified flesh; in other words, a customer. In each instance, Bateman's vampiric consumption of the entity that — temporarily — restores his identity is inextricably linked to marketability and financial exchange. He is therefore a late-capitalist revision of the classic gothic vampire, what will be termed here the commodity vampire: a creature not only constructed of but sustained by the power of the brand label as empty signifier.

Bateman's performance of this role is evident in his adoption of advertising rhetoric and compulsion to catalogue the products he uses. In the chapter 'Morning', the excessive number of beauty products used by Bateman to maintain a youthful appearance is reminiscent of the uncanny agelessness of the vampire and additionally, for Ruth Helyer, reflective of 'the over-ornamentation so characteristic of earlier Gothic writing'[34]:

> Vidal Sassoon shampoo is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airbourne [*sic*] pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older. […] Never use cologne on your face, since the high alcohol content dries your face out and makes you look older. […] Then apply an anti-aging eye balm (Baume Des Yeux) followed by a final moisturizing 'protective' lotion. (pp. 26–28)

The 'relentless commodification' of late capitalism and its effect on 'all levels of social life' is made clear here through Bateman's internalisation of the language of brand advertising.[35] This additionally demonstrates the intense hunger for these commodities that is ever present within Bateman; not one product but thirty are needed every morning to prepare him for the

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[33] Stoker, p. 113.
[34] Helyer, p. 736.
[35] Annesley, p. 8.

day. The fact that this extensive list of facial and hair products is devoid of any description of Bateman's actual appearance again reinforces Blazer's interpretation of his lack of humanity and lack of reflection, a result of his purely commodified exterior. Like the vampire, whose gothic villainy is defined by his blood-drinking, Bateman is monstrous specifically because of his commodity consumption, while simultaneously unable to recover any sense of humanity from this consumption. He is thus trapped in a perpetual cycle of his own late-capitalist monstrosity, his vampiric hunger abated but never cured by his consumption of the commodity. Bateman's ability and desire to consume so excessively are interpreted by Annesley as an assertion of ownership over the commodified environment and, subsequently, Bateman's own commodified identity.[36] The ability to purchase and therefore stake claim over almost every aspect of late-capitalist culture means that Bateman is able to solidify his dominance over the otherwise empty symbols that constitute his public persona. Consumerism thus becomes, for Bateman, an oxymoronic validation of the identity made questionable specifically because of his commodity consumption. Just as the vampire asserts his power over his victims by satisfying a dependency on blood that, in itself, highlights the creature's weakness, Bateman's thirst for the commodity brand and the commodified body underlines the cyclical nature of his identity crisis. If Bateman's existence is, on the one hand, problematised by his internalisation of the commodity and, on the other, generates social dominance through continuous commodity consumption, at what point does Bateman's vampiric thirst for the brand become satisfied?

It is at this point that the intensifying effect of late-capitalist finance on the gothic becomes clear. The presence of the ever-hungry Bateman in a culture in which everything, from toothpaste to the human body, has been commodified, translates into a perversely purchasable buffet to which there is no end. Furthermore, that Bateman is unhindered by time or financial restraints means that his consumer desire can run riot without limitation. Spending his time in the office watching *The Patty Winters Show*, reading sports magazines, and booking tables at high-end restaurants, Bateman is rarely shown actually working, yet is still able to afford the items and experiences that satisfy his consumerist compulsions: 'I put a Paul Butterfield tape in the cassette player, sit back at the desk and flip through last week's *Sports Illustrated*' (pp. 65–66). Ernest Mandel describes this imbalance as 'surplus value', created by either an increase in productivity, an increase in labour intensity, or the ability to produce the 'value-equivalent of wages […] in a smaller fraction of the working day' with no

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[36] Annesley, pp. 13–14.

additional effort from the labourer.[37] Arguably, Bateman's position at Pierce and Pierce — a triple pun on sexual penetration, violent stabbing, and the vanquishing of the vampire by multiple staking — falls into the final category, providing him with a steady inflow of money without demanding an equal labour output. Bateman is thus left with plenty of free time to spend roaming the city in search of victims; this would initially suggest that his thirst could be easily quenched, given the opportunity to consume ever-available commodities at all times. However, the construction of his identity from commodities makes his personality so fragile that it demands constant reaffirmation and, therefore, continuous consumption in order to keep it alive. Devoid of any labour-identity, Bateman's 'reflection' in Derrida's commodity-mirror — itself already inaccurately representative — is doubly distorted and therefore increasingly undermined by the vacuity of the labels used by Bateman to construct a public self. The presence of surplus value, along with the prevalence of the commodity in late-capitalist culture, subsequently destroys any sense of achievable end-point or limit to consumption. Bateman's vampiric thirst is thus almost unquenchable and therefore an extreme intensification of that experienced by Polidori's gothic creature or Stoker's predatory Count.

Subsequently pushed to the margins of acceptable social conduct in search of satisfaction, Bateman's vampirism finds expression by taking his consumerist impulses to the absolute extreme. This is evident in Bateman's dismemberment of the victims he had previously purchased based on the value of their commodified appearances. These episodes see him literally reduce his sexual conquests to their component parts, taking late-capitalist consumerism and commodification to its most brutal extreme: '[w]hat is left of Elizabeth's body lies crumpled in the corner […] she's missing her right arm and chunks of her right leg. Her left hand, chopped off at the wrist, lies clenched on top of the island in the kitchen […] her head sits on the kitchen table' (p. 291). Bateman's mutilation of his victims is, for Georgina Colby, a division of the already commodified whole 'into a multiplicity of parts […] effectively increas[ing] the number of commodities that surround him and hence his dominion by those objects'.[38] Not satisfied by merely using women as purchasable objects, Bateman is compelled to commodify further the already commodified body, in an attempt to assert a personal dominance over the items that define his identity. This can then be read as evidence of the hyper-gothic within Ellis's text. Bateman's violence becomes extreme here in

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[37] Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 147–48.
[38] Georgina Colby, 'Repressive Desublimation and the Great Refusal in Bret Easton Ellis's Fiction', *Textual Practice*, 26.2 (2012), 319–45 (p. 332).

direct response to his lack of labour identity, itself a result of his position within brand-driven late-capitalist culture. The effect of this specifically financial element of Bateman's identity is the exaggeration of his villainous trait, that is, his vampiric need to consume and control. That Bateman goes on to eat the girl, literally consuming the reduced component parts of her body and drinking her blood, demonstrates the insatiability of his appetite for the commodity, while literalising the gothic vampire's hunger for human fluids: 'I want to drink this girl's blood as if it were champagne' (p. 334). In reaching this extreme in reaction to late-capitalist commodification, 'the word consume is thus used [by Ellis] in all of its possible meanings: purchasing, eating and destroying'.[39] Furthermore, the detailed descriptions of violence mirrors Bateman's endless cataloguing of product features and designer brands; the interchangeable dead-pan tone used by Ellis in either scenario demonstrates that Bateman is 'unaware of the difference between commodities and human life'.[40]

Thus driven to commit murders that are fuelled by a seemingly unlimited financial capacity for escorts, alcohol, and power tools, and become progressively more horrific, Bateman literalises the desire of the Byronic vampire to degrade, dehumanise, and destroy. Bateman's victims are not only treated as objects but are quite literally degraded into non-human entities through dismemberment to become mere parts, any sense of individuality or identity lost in the physical deconstruction of the commodified human body. In response to the explicit detail of Bateman's narration of his crimes, Helyer claims that Ellis's text 'removes many unknown elements and defuses much of the mystery of violent death'.[41] For Helyer, the removal of the psychological mystique that characterises much of the classic gothic canon creates an intensified sensationalism that subsequently heightens the gothic threat in Ellis's text. In providing every gory detail of his victims' deaths, 'Patrick replaces the Gothic dark passages and castle rooms with female internal organs and genitalia',[42] leaving the reader with no illusions about what Bateman is doing, and therefore providing nowhere to hide from the violent horror of the scene. The intense detail provided within these passages serves to increase the reader's ability to visualise the action (thus appearing to make it more realistic), and simultaneously distorts the reality of the scene by providing an over-magnified perspective. As a dually real and unreal portrayal of heightened gothic violence, Bateman's murders again exemplify hyper-gothic. Bateman's extreme *re*-commodification of the body, an attempt to assert a sense of identity denied him by the commodity-as-mirror,

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[39] Annesley, p. 16.
[40] Annesley, p. 13.
[41] Helyer, p. 733.
[42] Helyer, p. 733.

thus acts as an accelerant to the gothic within the novel. The surplus value available from the reduced labour demand of Bateman's Wall Street position intensifies his purchasing power in an environment where everything, including the human body, is purchasable. Bateman's vampiric consumerism — the source of the gothic within the novel — is subsequently allowed to become extreme in a commodified environment 'rapidly approaching overload'.[43]

This overload translates in the novel as a movement from gothic terror to gothic horror. As Beville explains, 'terror, unlike horror, is regarded as bearing only a suggestion of the grotesque. In its obscurity, it stimulates the imagination, causing simultaneous fear and fascination.'[44] The extreme obscenity of Bateman's crimes, described in immense detail, eliminates any obscurity regarding the state of his victims' bodies. The bombardment of the reader with highly gruesome images subsequently transforms the feeling of terrified fascination commonly associated with classic gothic texts, into a horrified desensitisation that echoes the distortion of reality triggered by the postmodern hyperreal. Reduced to mere body parts — and thus made into symbols of human life rather than constituting subjects in and of themselves — Bateman's victims become specifically grotesque bodies, defined by Spooner as 'a body in progress: a bizarre, exaggerated, hyperbolic body, fragmented and dismembered, distinguished by its protuberances and orifices'.[45] The classification of the grotesque body as definitively rather than merely suggestively grotesque — and therefore indicative of the presence of horror over terror — is thus dependent on its mutilation. Whereas the vampire's nocturnal attacks hold an element of mystery and therefore intrigue the reader of the gothic, Bateman's total dismemberment of the human body to the point of non-recognition repulses and subsequently repels Ellis's reader. The resultant horrified — rather than terrified — reaction demonstrates that the gothic has been made extreme through the intense commodification of the human form. Furthermore, that Bateman does not just increase the number of orifices in the human body through his mutilation but, in one instance, actually collects them ('in my locker in the locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I've attacked in the past week' (p. 370)), again demonstrates Ellis's presentation of the body as specifically rendered grotesque because of its commodification and purchasability.

The marketability of late-capitalist culture thus serves as an accelerant to the gothic within Ellis's novel. Were it not for the unrestricted ability to consume, coupled with pressure

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[43] Helyer, p. 733.
[44] Beville, p. 26.
[45] Spooner, p. 66.

to do so in all aspects of life, Bateman would not resort to butchering and eating the flesh of prostitutes in order to confirm his own humanity, nor would he store disconnected body parts in a locker as if they were suits in his wardrobe. Bateman is therefore emblematic of the vampire figure as constituted through the hyper-gothic, his actions conforming to vampiric stereotypes but made extreme on all levels to the point where he loses all self-control. Annesley's discussion of Ellis's fear of a world devoid of humanity as a result of mass commodification is subsequently bizarrely prophetical when read in terms of Bateman's vampirism.[46] Driven to murder due to his inability to reconcile his highly commodified identity, and allowed to do so because of his unlimited financial backing, Bateman's destruction of the human body would indeed lead to a decrease in available human victims if left to continue unrestricted, and to a literal loss of humanity. Thus, as Annesley summarises, 'Patrick Bateman's murders are crimes for which an increasingly commercial and materialistic society must take ultimate responsibility.'[47]

Conclusion

To read Ellis as a writer of late-capitalist hyper-gothic is to recognise his revision of classic gothic settings and characters, in conversation with some of the most influential texts of the gothic canon. By making his vampire feed on commodities, Ellis not only ensures that his gothic production is relevant to the late-capitalist reader but, significantly, strips back the archaic decoration that overshadows much of classic gothicism. By doing so, he reveals the threat at the centre of his fictional character; this threat is therefore given far more focus within Ellis's text and appears more concentrated within Bateman's character as a result. Ellis's monster is not shrouded in darkness, disguised behind veils, or hidden in a subterranean dungeon, but is out in the open, at the centre of attention, looking just like everyone else, and is more frightening as a result. Furthermore, the financial context of Ellis's gothic means that this fear is made extreme, in line with the intense marketisation of contemporary culture. Behind every transaction, valuation, or advertisement lies the threat of the gothic that is at once uncontainable due to its spectrality, and reproducible on a global scale. Indeed, the prevalence of gothicism across Ellis's text demonstrates the ubiquity of this exposed fear and underlines its position within the contemporary gothic canon.

Furthermore, that the novel plays with the presentation of reality is crucial to its definition as hyper-gothic, and again situates it as a product of and response to the

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[46] Annesley, p. 19.
[47] Annesley, p. 13.

postmodern age. The alleged survival of Paul Owen — who is 'murdered' by Bateman, only to be reported alive and well by other characters later in the novel — implies the possibility that the events of *American Psycho* are imaginary and that Bateman's world view is entirely hallucinatory (p. 338). Botting's characterisation of gothic fear as 'things not being what they seem' is thus exemplified by Ellis's work as hyper-gothic.[48] The power of Ellis's financial references, as accelerants to the scope and intensification of gothic in the novel, push this manifestation of the gothic beyond the boundaries of the apparently realistic setting it initially portrays, until all previous restraints on the plausibility of gothic fear dissolve. The result is a gothic which, on the one hand, attempts to replicate the reader's reality to such an extent that every clothing label is named individually; and on the other, manipulates this reality to the point where nothing, not the subjectivity of the human body nor an individual's perception of their own life, is what it seems. The effect of this is then, according to Botting's theory, the successful creation of gothic horror and terror that directly follow the pattern established by the preceding gothic canon. In this way, Ellis does not merely incorporate the gothic within his work but is in fact central to the progression of American gothic literature into the twenty-first century.

Botting's assertion that the gothic dies at the end of the twentieth century is thus answered by Ellis in his sourcing of fear from modern finance. While the notion that Ellis was consciously redefining modern gothic may be somewhat presumptive, it is clear that, in centring his gothic on spectral finance and the mediated postmodern world that can be read as Baudrillardian hyperreality, Ellis adjusts classic gothicism to fit the contemporary context. In doing so, he contributes to a newly emerging and distinct subgenre of gothic literature — that is, late-capitalist hyper-gothic.

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[48] Botting, p. 170.