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Blank Power: The Social and Political Criticism of Blank Fiction and Cinema

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Blank Power: The Social and Political Criticism of Blank Fiction and Cinema

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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Dedication

For Mom and Dad and their love and support, for my amazing furry children and their unconditional affection, and for Mike, who has made my life more wonderful than I could have ever imagined.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Signs of Power	2
Blankness, Violence, and Power	7
Project Overview	11
Chapter 2: Historical Context	17
Reagan's America	17
Culture and the New Right	28
Chapter 3: Blankness	43
Blank Fiction	45
<i>Less Than Zero</i>	56
Blank Cinema	69
<i>Full Metal Jacket</i>	74
Chapter 4: The Serial Killer	89
<i>Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer</i>	99
<i>American Psycho</i>	111
Chapter 5: Conclusion	127
The Legacy of Blank Fiction and Cinema	128
Works Cited	142
Bibliography	150
About the Author	End Page

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Abstract

This dissertation explores a style of literature known as “blank” fiction that became popular in the United States in the mid-1980s, focusing on its stark, limited form, its minimal plots, its focus on commodification, and its scenes of graphic violence. The author presents the argument that filmmakers were producing pieces of cinema during the same time period that are similar in both form and content to the works of blank fiction. These films are a part of a style she labels “blank” cinema.

Blank fiction and cinema are politically charged and highly critical of the social and political situation in America during the time in which they are produced. The authors and filmmakers producing blank works interrogate issues of social irresponsibility, rampant consumerism, and the global domination of capitalist values. Blank artists frequently criticize the perpetuation of such issues by the dominating power of white, middle- and upper-class men. The serial killer figure is used by many to represent the “unexamined” threat of those in power.

The use of popular culture references and marketing tags are ubiquitous in blank fiction and film, and it is through the use of such signs that blank artists show their audiences that the power of those that traditionally control cultural

ideologies in America can be manipulated and controlled by anyone, thus giving power to those who may have traditionally felt powerless and submissive to the dominant ideologies of American culture.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The study of blank fiction and blank cinema is crucial to the understanding of the discourse of power in contemporary U.S. culture. Blank novels and films, characterized by their simplistic plots, undeveloped characters, choppy narration, reliance on popular cultural references, and depictions of graphic sexuality and/or violence, are formulated to appear superficially (in the sense that they are a part of popular media with similar tones and plot lines) like the best-selling novels or Hollywood blockbusters of their Reagan-era time period. Critical examination, however, reveals that these works of fiction and cinema mock the superficiality of the works on which they are based. The blank style incorporates the symbols and signs associated with mass culture in an attempt to manipulate the discourse of power, particularly through its representations of violence.

The work that follows argues that though fiction is the only form of art that critics have thus far labeled as “blank,” there are filmmakers who produced works during the same time period that are similar in both form and function and that these works should therefore be labeled as blank cinema. I also argue that these blank forms are representative of a movement in the arts that began in the mid-1980s that was specifically critical of the social and political situation of its time. I begin by discussing what I mean by the discourse of power and signs of popular culture. Following my theoretical discussion, I offer a brief historical analysis of

the Reagan years in order to inform the arguments I make regarding blank art's social and political criticism. Finally, I present an in-depth exploration of four major works of blank fiction and film that will help explicate my overall argument.

Signs of Power

“Power” is a complicated term with endless connotations. For the purpose of this project, I will refer to power as that which implies the possession of ability to wield force, authority, or substantial influence. To have power means to have the ability to control. This control, however, need not necessarily be negative or oppressive. As Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, power is as productive as it is repressive; it is multi-faceted and omnipresent. Power is everywhere and working in all directions (93). He criticizes the "juridico-discursive" conception of power, arguing that not all power is intended to restrict or repress. As my discussion of ideological discourse owes a great deal to Foucault's conception of the discourse of sexuality, it is from his definition of power that I draw my own. What is most important to understand about power in relation to the study of contemporary forms of cultural expression is the relationship between power and ideology.

Karl Marx's basic model for understanding societal structures and human relations is the base and superstructure model. Fundamentally, the base represents the basic, economic platform on which a society is structured. The superstructure consists of laws, politics, and other ruling ideals that deal with

maintaining the basic economic structure. The superstructure also consists of concepts like religion, morals, ethics, and culture. Marx called the formations within the superstructure “ideology.” According to Adam Roberts, ideology for Marx is defined as:

“false consciousness,” a set of beliefs that obscured the truth of the economic basis of society and the violent oppression that capitalism necessarily entails. Various people believe various things: for instance that the fact that some people are rich and some people are poor is “natural and inevitable;” or that black people are inferior. The purpose of these beliefs, according to Marx, is to obscure the truth. People who believe these things are not going to challenge or even recognize the inequalities of wealth in society, and so are not going to want to change them. (19)

Ideology, as it will be defined for the purpose of this work, is that set of beliefs, or “way of seeing,” which appears to us to be “universal” or “natural” but which is in fact the product of the specific power structures that constitute our society. It is a collection of beliefs held by a group that shape their actions. Ideological beliefs can be moral, ethical, political, philosophical, or religious. Marx’s concept of ideology has shaped many critical thinkers’ understanding of cultural ideology. This basic hypothesis has been refined and developed by critics over time, but understanding the fundamental definition is crucial to the reading of other critics like Louis Althusser, Theodor Adorno, Frederic Jameson, and Jean Baudrillard.

French critic Althusser's contribution to the concept of ideology and power is important to discuss as it will inform my own critical response to the ideology of popular culture in general. Althusser recognizes what he calls "Ideological State Apparatuses," or "ISAs," the types of ideals ingrained in subjects' consciousness from birth and the types of ideals, like laws, that infiltrate schools, politics, and cultural representations, which reinforce the power of those controlling the economic structural base. The foundational concept of ISAs relate to the works of critics like Theodor Adorno, who attacked mass culture on the grounds that it was used to control the ideology of the masses. Jazz and Hollywood cinema, for example, products of the "culture industry," held for Adorno the threat of escapist fantasy, which distracted citizens from recognizing their realities and working toward a better system. These escapist fantasies are filled, arguably, with Althusser's ISAs.

Fredric Jameson, whose work on the "waning of affect" and "loss of historicity" helps inform a large portion of this overall project, is typically wary of totalizing philosophies, but his conceptualization of postmodernism, is, in effect, totalizing. He is "usually seen as a Hegelian Marxist, an inheritor of the traditions of Lukacs and Adorno and more or less hostile to an Althusserian approach" (Adams 16). However, Jameson does follow Althusser's concepts on seeing "ideology not just as 'false-consciousness,' but as the structures of thought and feeling that define us as citizens of late capitalist society" (36). Jameson, though typically hostile to the totalizing aspects of Althusserian Marxism, argues in his 1992 work, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, that as citizens of late capitalist society,

our own concept of our ideological system is “already soaked and saturated in ideology” (2). Jameson’s belief that as products of a system we are unable to fully act against the ideological system without being a part of it informs his theories of lack of critical distance and the waning of affect. For Jameson, it is impossible to function outside of the realm of the ideological from which we have developed, implying a systematic acceptance of Althusser’s ISAs. I argue that Jameson’s view is unnecessarily negative and that blank art actually functions as a voice against ISAs, without the implication of being inherently ideologically supportive of the dominant base powers.

French critic Jean Baudrillard’s work is in many ways aligned with Jameson’s, in that Baudrillard’s work on the simulacrum is incorporated into Jameson’s theory of the logic of postmodernism. Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality is clearly echoed in Jameson’s 1991 text. Understanding his approach to ideology will help develop my argument of blank art’s approach to ideological manipulation. While Marx believed that production was the basis of social order, Baudrillard, in the 1960s, proposed the argument that consumption was actually the basis of social order. He argues that “today it’s not just about controlling the code—the process of signification. The elite are not separated from the rabble by purchasing power alone, but by their exclusive access to signs—and by being at the top end” (Horrocks 61). This argument suggests that the initial base/superstructure model is outdated and that Jameson’s “branch” model, in which he implies a reliance on an economic base for modes and relations of production but a semi-autonomous relationship with aspects like

“culture” and “law,” requires, to the degree that it depends upon production, not consumption, updating as well. I believe that though the economic is foundational to the structure of a culture’s ideology, signs of power are not necessarily controlled by modes of production but can in fact be manipulated by products of culture, like mainstream cinema.

I argue, drawing upon Baudrillard’s theory that power is related not to the use of signs but to their control, that the model we should now assume in late capitalist society is a cyclical model. Basing my concept on Marx’s initial model and on Althusser’s concept of ISAs, I argue that whoever holds control over the production of signs of power is able to influence an overall superstructure of ideology. If, as Adorno suggests, the images on Hollywood screens of wealth and privilege are there to distract and to reinforce the image of power being held by few, and if, as Baudrillard suggests, being able to consume is not enough for true power, then who holds the power? The power lies in the production of signs. By trying to take control over the use of signs of power, blank artists represent a new ideal of power and a new model on which to base the production of ideology. It is the actual production of the works themselves, in their entirety, that produces affect and presents the public with the notion that both the superstructure and the base of contemporary culture can be altered by popular artists.

Blankness, Violence, and Power

Blank fiction and cinema incorporate into their narratives an emphasis on actual, tangible signs of power. For example, Bret Easton Ellis's and Jay McInerney's novels focus on individuals with inherited wealth and social status, whose privilege and prosperity enable them the purchasing power to display products, like their designer clothing or designer drugs habits, and engage in activities, like eating expensive meals at exclusive restaurants, that visually imply their social power. Stanley Kubrick's character Joker in *Full Metal Jacket* stands out amongst his fellow soldiers because of his obviously advantageous intellect and education, both symbols of power. The serial killers and perpetrators of violence in films like *The River's Edge* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* display power through physical dominance. However, as Baudrillard suggests, simply displaying an ability to purchase or possess signs of power is not enough to actually control power in contemporary late capitalism. What the authors and filmmakers of blank works produce through their characters' possession of such signs is art that is able to interrogate those individuals who, through our systematic ideological conditioning, seemingly control power. By showing us the "madness" of characters like Patrick Bateman, as Ellis does in *American Psycho*, he allows an entire audience of people to see that the superficial control of signs of power does not necessarily mean that those who possess those signs deserve

to maintain actual power. This exposure to the madness of those with traditional means of power also shows audiences that writers, directors, and other artists whose intent is to address issues of social and political concern can themselves manipulate signs of power. This intent, at its most optimistic, could encourage social revolution and inspire those subjugated by traditional ideologies of power to address their concerns to the “base” of society and change the standard ISAs.

Blank fiction and cinema, in addition to their use and interrogation of tangible signs of power, reveal the controlling power of violence in culture. The controlling power of violence has transformed over thousands of years from a divine right mandated by rule by the likes of emperors or kings over the lives and/or deaths of those they ruled to a systematic necessity of prolonging the life of the many and dictating the death of few. Foucault argues that the West has undergone, since the classical age, a profound transformation of mechanisms of power from a sovereign’s power over life and death to a new system of power over a “right to death” (136). “This death,” he suggests, “that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life” (136). He applies his concept of “right to death” using examples of the state’s ideas of warfare, the death penalty, and suicide. This “bio-power was without a question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (141) The binding of power and control over death, much like the power associated with

society's development and the discourse of sexuality, creates a structure in which the ultimately personal human experience of death becomes a part of a collective ideology. This collective ideology suggests control over death by those in power, which suggests that submission to such powers will make death both logical and potentially unavoidable. By claiming responsibility for the preservation of life, the implication is then that there is some control over death. In terms of ISAs, from childhood, those in contemporary American culture are taught ways to avoid accident, avoid illness, and avoid trauma. Our culture is obsessed with prevention, certain that diseases, perversion, and accidents can be avoided or obliterated through law, order, and other forms of socially controlling power. Thus popular depictions of violence in culture become increasingly important.

The omnipresence of violence in contemporary culture serves as a messenger that reinforces a collective ideology of the importance of life over death. Images of violence, in a culture in which those in power seemingly have the ability to control death and preserve life, become further sharpened tools of didacticism. When the popular news media, which has become increasingly sensationalized and graphic over time, presents news of violence, the questions are always: "Why did this happen?" "Who is responsible?" and "How could this be prevented?" Killers are profiled and their reasons for murdering explained. Accidents are investigated to assign blame or identify mistakes. Images of war are, as they have always been, presented with bias and rationalization. Horror films become clichés: The victims are easily identified, the perpetrators explored,

deconstructed, and explained. Public reactions to crime and disaster are captured in sound bites, and Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, a reality in which the "unreal" of production replaces the "reality" of existence, seems unavoidable as the world becomes more media saturated and we standardized our reactions to and rationalizations for death. The mediation of disaster, for example, transfers the emotional and psychological experience of those intimately involved in a tragedy to the masses. Although we may have not been present at a school shooting or at Ground Zero, the saturation of media images in our lives molded our response in a way that we would not have constructed it ten, twenty, or a hundred years ago. To see the reaction of those who were there, for example, may also arguably contribute to the way we construct our own responses to tragedy, even if this construction occurs only on a subconscious level. The hyperreality of depictions of violence affects our most basic, emotional responses to trauma.

Blank art, however, interferes with the notions that death is controllable, explicable, and best left to those with "power." Blank art challenges notions of control and bio-power in general, presenting unusual depictions of war, as Kubrick does with *Full Metal Jacket*, exploring the reactions of humans to trauma, as Ellis does in both *American Psycho* and *Less Than Zero*; interrogating the media's response to death, as McInerney does in *Bright Lights, Big City*; and challenging the notion of the murderous "Other" as McNaughton does in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. Blank fiction's and film's use of graphic violence takes control away from socially constructed ideals of power and death and forces

audiences to confront their individual reactions to the presence of violence in society. What I hope to prove with the following project is that by taking control of the discourse of violence in their work, blank artists are enabling audiences to confront the accepted forms of power that surround them, to see through the ideology of a right to death, and to challenge the unexamined nature of those wielding power in the United States.

Project Overview

Human interest in understanding violence is universal. Theorists within the humanities, policymakers in governments around the world, and social scientists, for example, all attempt to explore the causality of violence, its attraction, and its impact on different members of their society. To attempt to produce a new exploration of violence and culture is to enter into an already crowded academic arena, one in which great minds like Gandhi, Freud, and Foucault have already contributed groundbreaking ideas. The study of violence, however, is one that can continuously evolve and develop, and therefore new explorations of violence and culture must be produced. The discourse surrounding violence, like, according to Foucault, that surrounding sexuality, is one that represents the shifting power structures of mainstream society. The way violence is presented within a culture shows us what is acceptable, what is Other, what is threatening, and what is expected. The following chapters explore these concepts by identifying the use of violence in particular forms of American

literature and cinema from 1984 to roughly 1992. They discuss how violence is presented within this cultural context and for what purpose.

In 1980, when Ronald Reagan first came to power, America was still dealing with the psychic damage that came with watching our troops fight a long, bloody, painful war on television. Vietnam, Watergate, the Iran hostage situation, and the uncertain trailing off of the unifying power of the Civil Rights Movement left citizens distrustful, demoralized, and, to some extent, apathetic. The cure for our collective ills it seems, according to an examination of popular, cultural norms, came in the form of a happy, positive government headed by an ex-actor who was convinced that if Mikhail Gorbachev could simply see the U.S. suburbs by air, he would renounce communism. Patriotism reigned, and America was once again considering itself a nation of “winners.” As the Reagan era blossomed, so came the death of such movements as the punk scene and its associated violent art and demonstrative rage. In its place sprang a new kind of popular music rooted in technology and a new romanticism. The “pop art” world flourished, and films relied on classic horror tropes and the angst of teen romance. Art in all forms became even more commodified,¹ and money trumped social criticism when it came to artistic inspiration. The debate over the “purity” of artistic expression has, of course, been heated for thousands of years, but as

¹ Commodification or “reification” is essentially the fetishization of products. In a capitalist society, nearly everything can be assigned a monetary or exchange value. Adam Schaff, in his 1980 text *Alienation as a Social Phenomenon*, looks at commodification in late capitalism and offers this more precise explanation:

In the system of commodity exchange, where everything, including people, their capabilities and talents, etcetera, becomes a commodity, there is a tendency, not only to treat everything as a commodity, i.e. as something which is bought and sold; but since things are commodities, there is also a tendency to endow everything with the nature of things, to ‘reification’.

technology developed, so too did the reification of artistic expression, leading to visual, literary, and musical pieces dependent more upon duplication and mass production than on the individualistic endeavor of the artist. As theorists like Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard witnessed the seeming abolishment of critical discourse in culture, they decried the loss of affect, citing technology, late capitalism, and the loss of originality as reasons for a populace immersed in hyperreality, alienated and forced to exist in a society surrounded by culture steeped in superficiality and depthlessness. The popular psychology concept of “de-sensitization” is frequently offered as an explanation for the increasing violence in film and television or as a way of excusing the rates of violent crime in American culture. It is through an examination of the popularity of this idea that one could argue that society has decided that Jameson is correct: We are so divorced from centered selves and constructed ideas of subjectivity (the construction of the “bourgeois ego”) that it is nearly impossible for us to respond in an emotionally correct manner to stimuli. If one accepts the theory of Jameson’s waning of affect, then it is arguable that we need a constant barrage of high-impact stimuli in order to feel anything at all, and this progression is how cultural products lose their individual affect.

Although much of the culture of the mid-1980s works well as a reflection of these theories, emerging alongside the fiction of Stephen King and the Freddie Kruger films was a style of fiction and a style of cinema that conflicts with the idea that all postmodern culture suffered from this waning of affect. The authors of what has now become known as blank fiction (a stark, atonal style of writing

with minimal plots and excessive references to popular culture), such as Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney, and directors, whose films such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* incorporate many of the same attributes of this style of fiction, were creating art that was scathingly critical not just of the style of art being produced during this time period but also of the social, political, and economic forces that led to its production. These novels and films, I argue, are not like the other cultural products of the time, with the intention to stimulate and nothing more. Such novelists and filmmakers mock the shallow, tawdry style of their contemporaries, but the subtext of their work is rich in an effort to tap into the “political unconscious,” as Fredric Jameson names it, of its audience.

The following chapters explore how authors and directors produce work that challenges the theory of the waning of affect in postmodern culture. Ellis, for example, does so by using a literary style that openly mocks the rhetoric of the Reagan era with its use of catch phrases, brand names, and reliance on empty signs. The content of his novels, like *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*, explores the lives of those living the decadent lifestyle encouraged in Western late-market capitalism, interrogating the amorality² of the characters and problematizing the readers’ own consumption and lack of action. The violence of his characters is met with apathy all around, by perpetrators and victims alike, forcing the notion of inappropriate emotional response to the forefront of his

² For the purpose of this project, I will use the terms “amoral” and “amorality” to suggest a state between “morality” and “immorality,” implying a position that neither consents to nor condones the actions of others. The concept of the amoral stance that I will present is one that aims for a position of neutrality that many might call “apathetic.”

work. The violence in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* does the same thing. In response to the onslaught of popular Vietnam War films that helped turn the war from a violent, devastating historical event into a "geographically marginal conflict, a war flattened and emptied out to a basic layer of violence, mixed in with popular culture and TV" (Roberts 132), Kubrick's cinematic techniques create a film that emphasizes humanity and then the inhumane destruction of this humanity in war. His unusual approach to violence within this war film suggests criticism not just of the genre of war films but of the social response to the actual war in Reagan's America. This point will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Blank fiction novelists and their counterpoints in cinema make use of a particular kind of violent figure in their work: the serial killer, whom I discuss in Chapter 4. The serial killer gained celebrity status in 1980s culture, and artists, through works such as *American Psycho* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, were able to incorporate this figure of "evil" into their own work in order to criticize the unexamined nature of white, male power in America, as well as the nation's apathy toward issues of social concern and the glorification of violence.

In order to support the overall argument that blank fiction aims for a manipulation of signs and for a shift in "power," I will prove that blank fiction and cinema are critically aware of their historical location, that they do not suffer from a loss of historicity, and that they can use their awareness of their social, economic, and political situation to shape both the form and content of their work as a means of affecting the political unconscious of their audiences. This

argument is offered in accordance with Jameson's 1981 *The Political Unconscious*, in which he emphasizes the importance of both form and content on a work's political message, but it contrasts with his concept of the waning of affect presented in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the legacy of the work from this time period, identifying trends and new culturally iconic works that borrow and stem from the groundbreaking work of the mid- to late-1980s. I will explore how works such as Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie*, Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*, and the Coen brothers' interpretation of *No Country for Old Men* incorporate the blank style into their own personal styles and what social and political relevance this extension of blank work has in contemporary American fiction and cinema.

Chapter 2: Historical Context

Reagan's America

Blank fiction and cinema began to emerge in 1984, amidst the beginning of the second term of Ronald Reagan's presidential administration. In order to fully understand the social and political impact of blank art and its style in particular, it is crucial to understand the state of the United States during this time period. In the following chapter, I will present an argument that explores why Reagan was able to ingratiate himself so thoroughly with the American populace and how the key issues of his presidency affected culture in the United States.

In America, the 1980s were referred to as the "Reagan Era" even before Reagan left office in 1989. This decade, memorable and outstanding in the collective American psyche, saw economic reform and peacetime prosperity unseen for decades; a change-over from a manual, manufacturing stronghold in the workforce to computer-based, technological jobs dominating the employment market; and the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Presiding over the country during all of these events was President Ronald Reagan. Reagan was popular and well-loved by many, leaving office with a 70 percent approval rating (Pemberton xiv). Yet he also had many critics. People accused him of being a detached, superficial, and ineffective delegator who

focused on general ideas rather than specific details. Joseph Dewey, in his text *Novels from Reagan's America*, accuses Reagan of having plastered over the cracks of real life in the 1980s rather than having solved the nation's problems and of presenting a fun, happy fiction to the American people rather than doing the work of a real politician. He argues that the Reagan Era "began with the conviction that we had reached a critical point of exhaustion—that we needed a break, we needed to play" (Dewey 9). Dewey believes that the best way to understand Reagan is with the image of a corporation in mind, one that offers a product used for escapist relaxation. The best way to approach Reagan, he postulates, is to say that:

Reagan (like Disney imagineers or like any of the innovators of the postmodern novel) is profitably approached as a proprietor, a benevolent monomaniac who directed pleasure and coaxed happiness from a willing audience by creating a self-contained, structurally intricate totalized zone (Reagan's America), an alternate world wholly apart from the press and confusion of the "real world," not an illusion or a myth but rather a seductive world apart that we "visited," whose immediacy (like that of a theme park) we felt comfortably surrounding us, a fantastic-real that succeeded only with our full awareness of its artificiality, our complicity to accept that potentially fraudulent zone as authentic—or, more precisely, as authentic enough. (9)

In this quotation, Dewey, with an obvious debt to Baudrillard's comments on Disneyland and America, compares Reagan's America to a theme park, arguing that Reagan, rather than being a politician, was rather continuing his acting career whilst in office. His leadership helped America fantasize and temporarily escape its real problems, and it made the populace feel good about themselves and their country through their suspension of disbelief.

How did an ageing, storytelling, former Hollywood B-movie actor come to be the most powerful leader in the world? What did America need at the end of the 1970s that Ronald Reagan provided? Although no precise answer can be found, the following points, derived from Reagan followers as well as his critics, offer a general consensus of key reasons for Reagan's initial 1980 election. Understanding the mindset of the country that embraced him will help shape an understanding of the voices of dissent in blank works.

More than anything else, it seems, Reagan's ability to ingratiate the voters and present them with his golden vision of America laid the foundation for his rise to political power. There are hundreds of books written about Ronald Reagan and his political administration, books that cover everything from his personal life to the finer points of "Reaganomics," and many stress the indubitable appeal of his charismatic personality. A typical description of America's reaction to the man sounds much like this:

an America yearning for reassurance about its place in the world
invested great faith in a Hollywood actor turned politician and
suspended judgment on his leadership in the hope that his promise

would be realized. At a time when Americans desperately wanted to believe again, Reagan presented himself as the political wizard whose spell made everyone feel good (Johnson 14).

The many books written on this administration offer varying opinions of Reagan's personality and his policies, but a surprising number of authors agree on one thing: the value of Reagan's vision of America and its future. Reagan worked hard during his campaign:

to present a vision of America—what it had been, what it could be, what it would someday be again. It was a powerful and remarkably consistent vision [and] it resonated with the voters, for one simple reason: it was their vision too, a vision based on the traditions of our country and on the application of some fairly basic rules of common sense. That outlook, and the issues that comprised it, were the very essence of Ronald Reagan as a political leader (Meese 10).

Reagan's ability to communicate and connect with the public led to his moniker, The Great Communicator (Liebovich 127). His acting training and genuinely sincere manner enabled him to draw in his audience in an almost majestic way. Lou Cannon, in his biography of the president, *Reagan*, said that quite simply, "many of Reagan's followers just liked to hear him talk" (14).

Whilst campaigning, instead of "laying out a laundry list of promises, he described his vision of America's future" (Pemberton 86):

Exuding sincerity as he read his skillfully crafted speeches into the TV camera, Reagan brilliantly articulated and wove into a cohesive whole the amorphous fears and longings of millions of Americans. Just as Franklin D Roosevelt was the first president to master the trick of effective radio communication, so Reagan was the first to exploit television to the fullest (Boyer 15).

This “feel good” system was deceptively simplistic. Its roots went deep into the collective American mythology of our country’s ideological system, and “By identifying himself and his policies with traditions, values and circumstances that had great appeal, Reagan guaranteed the popularity of his administration” (Dilys 17). Voters were drawn to his idealism, patriotism, and resolute anticommunism (Cannon 14). He declared in every speech “his loyalty to ‘five simple words’: neighborhood, family, work, peace and freedom” (Boyer 109). In addition to his general vision of America’s future, Reagan’s platform held appeal for many voters, particularly white, middle-class men, those who owned businesses, and those involved in defense. He attacked affirmative action “on the grounds that it violated American principles of equal treatment of all individuals” (Pemberton 85), and he denounced the welfare state by insinuating fraud, waste, and abuse. Indeed, “‘Federal welfare problems have created a massive social problem,’ he insisted. ‘Government created a poverty trap that wreaks havoc on the very support system the poor most need to lift themselves out of poverty—the family’” (Mills 19). He lobbied for tax cuts, particularly for the middle and upper classes, as well as for incentives for businesses. Furthermore, “Internationally, Reagan

preached militant anticommunism. On the rhetorical plane, at any rate, he summoned America to an Armageddon struggle against atheistic communism [and] to back up the tough talk he called for—an got—massive increases in military spending” (Boyer 15).

It appears as though Reagan was certain that America’s problems were in existence merely as a result of poor leadership and that with solid social policies, strong resolve, and good leadership, the country would triumph. He believed “The country and its basic values ... were as sound as ever. If our nation adopted proper policies ... [we] could reverse the record of decline in both domestic and foreign affairs” (Meese xv). Trying to pinpoint the political specifics of Reagan’s platform, beyond his patriotic, anticommunist rhetoric, is extremely difficult. Researching his political campaign uncovers a large void in place of detailed aspects on legislation and party views.

Reagan entered into the 1980 presidential election able to exploit the failures and misgivings of the previous decade’s leadership. The scandal of Nixon’s administration made Reagan’s genial, sincere manner even more appealing. The disaster of the Vietnam War and Carter’s failures in the Iran hostage crisis made his call to restore America’s pride and public image the perfect antidote to the pain the country was feeling. His call for tax cuts, business incentives, and cuts in social program spending resounded like bells in the ears of Americans plagued by inflation and widespread unemployment. It seemed to be agreed that “image was crucial because we needed to see ourselves afresh. Getting rich was justified because it left the nation better off.

Cutting aid to the poor was humane because welfare hurt initiative” (Mills 13). The threat of communist power and the increase in terror attacks on American interests meant that Reagan’s call for increased military spending made the populace feel safe again:

Reagan’s principled stance was ... that of a resolute and proud nation which would reverse the dangerous weaknesses and unpreparedness of the Carter administration. America would again walk tall in the world. This was a favourite Reagan theme in the presidential campaign of 1980. In part, it was an attempt to exploit the frustrations and resentments at a decade in which the United States had lost a war, in which the presidency had been discredited and in which there was a general sense of malaise and decline (Boyer 17).

Reagan’s economic platform is one, if not the only, aspect of his 1980 campaign platform that can be discussed in grounded detail. His economic proposals were based on supply-side economics:

Supply-side proponents advocated a huge cut in marginal income taxes, embodied in legislation sponsored by Representative Jack Kemp (Rep., N.Y.) and Senator William V. Roth Jr. (Rep., Del.) that would cut personal taxes 80 percent over three years. Supply-side activists had deep faith in the dynamics of capitalism and in the self-regulating power of the free marketplace. Some supply-siders believed that the dramatic tax cut would so unleash the power

inherent in the capitalist economy that it would quickly lead to an increase in tax revenue (Pemberton 96).

This economic boom of Reaganomics, as his economic plan became known, sparked a renewed love of spending in the moneyed classes in America. It also left a legacy known as “Reagan’s revenge,” plaguing the George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton presidencies with huge budget and trade deficits. Reagan, however, achieved what he wanted, which was an upsurge of consumer-related bliss in the shape of a nicely packaged, relatively quick (albeit flimsy and temporary) “fix” to the country’s stagnated economy:

The Reagan administration conquered the inflation half of stagflation at the cost of the deepest recession since the 1930s. The subsequent recovery after 1982 covered up a number of problems ... [including] the record budget and trade deficits; an unprecedented increase in consumption expenditures and a decline in savings; a tragic deferral of infrastructure maintenance; the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy with a consequent growth of a two-tiered wage system; and growth of an “underclass” of poor trapped inside the lowest wage sectors of the economy or pushed outside the economy, frequently hungry and homeless (Wilber 7).

The blame for what many see as the negative results of many of his economic policies cannot solely be placed on his administration, but rather, as economists suggest, the decisions made had their roots in the U.S. economic history of the previous twenty years, “in the unwillingness to deal with these

changes in the 1970s, and in the unwillingness to admit their existence in the 1980s” (Wilber 7). And though many argue that his economic decisions were problematic in the long term, Reagan’s economic plans, like his rhetoric in general, inspired confidence in a large portion of the American populace.

Arguably, the political and economic platform on which Reagan campaigned in 1980 could have been used by any Republican candidate, not because of the specific legislation on which Reagan campaigned, but rather because what Reagan was doing was offering policies that the democratic governments before him had not been willing or able to offer the American public:

On the list of reasons for Ronald Reagan’s triumph in 1980, the economic mess of the 1970s probably stands at the top. This mess was no mere reflection of the intellectual or personal weaknesses of Reagan’s predecessors. It represented a long-term crisis of our economic system ... the United States enjoyed economic growth with little inflation for most of the 1950s and 1960s due to uniquely favourable, temporary circumstances. Changes in these circumstances in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s led to the slower growth, higher unemployment and faster inflation of [the 1970s and early 1980s]. Reaganomics [rested] on a shallow view of the crisis of the 1970s, one which scapegoats and misrepresents the complex role of government in the economy; and it [offered] only solutions that look worse than the problems did (Ackerman x).

What brought Reagan to power was his ability to inspire the American people. He exploited the depression and insecurities left behind by previous administrations and came along at just the right time to help the nation out of its melancholy. A true patriot and animated storyteller, Reagan had the populace believing that America really was the best place in the world and that all of its problems could be made better through his positive leadership:

In embracing Reagan, millions of citizens were also embracing a vision of America that seemed increasingly jeopardized by social change, economic transformation, and world upheaval. To give up on Reagan would have been to give up on the vision, and few were prepared to do so (Boyer 17).

The 1984 summer Olympics were symbolic of this hard-pressed desire to maintain domestic patriotism. After the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow games, the 1984 games in Los Angeles proved a frenzy of jingoistic, American ethnocentrism. Emerging from a recession and fuelled by heightening Cold War tensions, flag-waving citizens wore their country's colors and reveled in the expensive, capitalist extravaganza that the Soviet Union and its allies boycotted on the grounds of "chauvinistic sentiments and an anti-Soviet hysteria being whipped up in the United States" (Burns). America, cheered on by the Gipper, was a nation of winners once again. The blank artists of this same decade were able to mimic Reagan's positivism and his structured rhetoric and challenge the very issues that so many of the nation were desperate to accept as true.

Reagan's military stance was particularly important to the psyche of the nation, and blank works are able to exploit his military rhetoric, as I will discuss in Chapter 3. Although foreign policy was tricky for the Reagan administration after Kennedy's Bay of Pigs, the war in Vietnam, and Carter's Iranian hostage crisis, staunch anti-communism fuelled public approval for his Star Wars program, the bombing of Libya, and the invasion of Grenada. This "war" in Grenada, sparked by fears that communist-backed parties were collaborating to build an airstrip on the tiny island nation, led the United States (and the powerhouses of Jamaica and Barbados) to invade the islands and free it from its new leadership under Maurice Bishop. The invasion began at 5:00 a.m. on October 25, 1983, and continued for several days. The total number of American troops reached some 7,000, along with 300 troops from the OECS. The invading forces encountered about 1,500 Grenadian soldiers and about 700 Cubans, most of whom were construction workers. Approximately 100 lives were lost. The maneuver, which "disturbed" even Margaret Thatcher (331), with whom the United States had been in ideological synch ever since she arrived in office, nonetheless won widespread domestic approval. The invasion occurred two days after the bombing of the Beirut barracks of U.S. Marines and was the first major operation conducted by the U.S. military since the Vietnam War, rendering its symbolic significance far greater than any spin related to national security. The United States had finally "won" a military maneuver after Vietnam, and it made us all feel better.

On the home front, Reagan was waging another “war.” The war on drugs, which officially began in 1986, featured Nancy Reagan, who traveled the country telling teenagers to “Just Say No.” The jargon of her campaign mimicked the rest of the rhetoric of the Reagan era in its dismissive, superficial simplicity, addressing the symptoms of a social problem with no direct contact with or discussion of its roots. The jargon of this period is particularly noteworthy, in that it is fully incorporated in the blank style and used to mock the overly simplistic answers that the Reagan administration was offering to difficult social problems.

The crown jewel of Reagan’s time in office was, of course, the fall of the Berlin Wall. Mikhail Gorbachev, leading a nation mired in economic difficulties, officially retreated from the arms race and, making several concessions to the United States and its Allies, began the processes that ended the Cold War in 1989. The leader of the communist superpower rejected a race for world arms domination in favor of focusing on feeding and supporting the basic needs of his countrymen, which allowed Reagan to leave office with his belief in American ideology unchallenged. Blank artists, however, produced work that forces audiences to question this same idealism.

Culture and the New Right

Before offering an in depth exploration of blank fiction works, it is important to define the cultural situation from which these works emerged. The Reagan and Thatcher administrations brought forth what scholars now call the “new right” era, a movement away from social democracy and a shift toward a

reliance on market forces rather than government involvement in social structures and a foundational belief in the strength of a unified national image, “Americanness” in Reagan’s case, “Englishness” in Thatcher’s (During 12). This “Thatcherism,” as Stuart Hall has identified it, or “Reaganism,” as it can be defined for the purposes of this work, was founded on an inherent contradiction: To suggest that market forces rather than a centralized governmental force dictate a nation’s social structures invites transnational relationships and opens a country to both outside influences and the problems of class struggle that would inevitably occur as the gap between rich and poor widened. Yet both administrations consistently hailed the notion of a unified national appearance that scorned division and “otherness” in all forms, both internally (in terms of racial identity, sexual orientation, or intellectual difference) and externally (ethnicity and cultural practice):

New right appeals to popular values can be seen as an attempt to overcome this tension. In particular, the new right gives the family extraordinary value and an aura just because a society organized by market forces is one in which economic life expectations are particularly insecure.... In the same way, a homogenous image of national culture is celebrated and enforced to counter the dangers posed by the increasingly global nature of economic exchanges and wielding national economic divides (During 13).

Encouraging and securing the façade of national unity despite the obviously divisive nature of their economic decisions, the supported cultural expressions of

Reaganism and Thatcherism included depictions of “hard working family life (in the US often oriented towards active Judeo-Christianity), organized through traditional family roles” (During 13) and emphasized the threat of “otherness” present in those outside of this tradition. In a period following decades of fighting for women’s liberation and civil rights, this new era of cultural identification incorporated a significant shift in popular culture that centered on white, middle-class values and unapologetically incorporated the oppression of women, the working class, and people of color.

As this work progresses and my discussion of blank works becomes more involved, it is notable to remember that the goal of the following chapters is not to suggest that there were no controversial, socially conscious American artists during the Reagan era beyond those specific ones explored in detail here. Art has always had the power to be dissident, and always will, and in every culture, there are remarkable men and women whose work is powerfully critical of their society. In the 1980s, Cindy Sherman was producing photographic art questioning the role of women in society, and Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved*, a literary masterpiece with the power to change conceptualizations of race relations. David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* is a film unsurpassed in its unique take on the deviance that exists beneath a bland, suburban façade, and Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* to this day sparks discussions about cultural attitudes toward race. The birth of the hip-hop movement in the late 1980s was an enormous accomplishment for black artists and an amazing response to the appalling treatment of inner-city populations and African Americans during Reagan’s drug

war years. What my work explores in particular, however, are popular arts (specifically, popular fiction and cinema) that are socially/politically subversive and scathingly critical but still able to function within mainstream culture. The focus of this work, as stated previously, is the fiction and film of the 1980s that incorporated the superficial appearance of popular works but manipulated the material, producing a depth of criticism that the works on which it is modeled did not possess.

There were many individual artists striving to make their voices heard above the rabble of typical cultural products, but none were truly able to band together to create the kind of force that had existed in previous decades. The strength of bourgeois, commercialized art in all forms was an overwhelming force in Reagan's America. After 1984, America, unlike in previous decades when it could boast the Harlem Renaissance or the counter-culture "hippie" movement, lacked a strong cultural movement that was both socially and political responsible and powerful enough to gain widespread engagement and appreciation.

American culture was quickly "Reaganized," and commodification and selling power began to drive the cultural industry more than ever before. An air of patriotism was not all that Reagan brought out in the American public. The 1980 inauguration ushered in a new era of opulence. Money was fashionable again, it seemed, and extravagance was expected. With the newly emerging technology sector booming, the young were experiencing unprecedented wealth. As the two-tiered wage system grew, and the discrepancy between the classes became more staggering and appalling, the wealthy got wealthier, and with

Reagan's optimism as their collective mantra, the moneyed classes proudly displayed their status. This new status-based culture stood in stark contrast to the punk scene that was so popular in the late 1970s.

When Reagan came to power in 1980, the American punk scene was in its prime. Young artists were working together to produce music, art, and literature that railed against the establishment. The California punk scene emerged with adolescents raging against the status quo of their suburban, middle-class parents. The D.C. punk scene fought conformity, racism, and blandness. The New York punks struggled with artistic emptiness and commercialism. For many, drugs, sex, and violence were expressions of pent-up hostility and rage at the social and political systems. For others, these acts represented disaffected youth searching for stimulation in what they saw as a banal world that alienated difference. The straight-edge movement, born from the hardcore punk movement, incorporated the ideals of the punk movement but expressed its dissatisfaction through abstinence from alcohol, drugs, and promiscuous sex. All of these expressions came from the same place, however, and as disturbing and different as this scene was to many in mainstream society, its popularity grew and its ideology was widespread (Rachman).

The punk movement was born as the positive energy of the Civil Rights Movement deteriorated. The folk art movements associated with the anti-war movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the political art of groups like the Black Panthers, as well as other socially conscious art, lost their popular momentum as Disco was popularized and the economic pressures of the mid- to late-1970s

dominated American collective psyche. Punks rallied, creating a powerful force that came from individuals and independent artists. Records were made by adolescent rockers staying up all night with copy machines and Elmer's glue, putting jackets together by hand, as the boys from Minor Threat spent hours doing. Performers like Black Flag and Bad Brains, writers like Patti Smith and Jim Carroll, and visual artists like Jamie Reid and Winston Smith commandeered vacant spaces, parents' houses, and low-rent diners to take their art to the people. Themes of angst and rage at suburbia, motifs of physical violence and fighting, and a deep devotion to invention and independence characterized this deeply complex scene. It was a subversive movement that quickly gained a large following, very much like the subversive movements from which it was born. But by 1984, as most early punk artists agree, the movement was no longer the same. The independence and energy was gone, and its music, art, and literature were becoming commercialized (Rachman).

Mass culture in America, due to the birth of new forms of technology, from hand-held video cameras to VCRs and improved stereo equipment, became even more susceptible to fast production and widespread distribution. The specific problems associated with such extremes of production will be discussed further subsequently, but immediately, one must consider the link between a culture's politics and its forms of entertainment. The punk movement died as America settled into a decade of social irresponsibility. The Reagan administration seemingly scorned the poor and working classes for their lack of resourcefulness, and the wealthy of the country, to make a sweeping

generalization (as many economists have), followed suit. Welfare and poor social reform left thousands homeless, but social concern ebbed. Strong social and political messages seemed to disappear from popular culture. Television shows like *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, however, grew in popularity. The phrase “living well is the best revenge,” an idiom that was once a slogan for the disaffected after World War I who chose to live “the good life” as a way of healing their traumatic wounds

had gone from being associated with the anguished withdrawal of postwar hedonists to being tied to the raucous elite of Reagan supporters. Rather than having to do with wreaking revenge on a world that has exposed moral ideals as illusions, the slogan now implied revenge on the poor, who were considered undeserving (Silverman 192).

Popular culture lost any socially conscious edge it may have had in inflation-focused years and now represented pure, unadulterated American opulence.

The following chapters aim to discuss how the blank arts movement works against the superficiality of its time period. Other theorists have, of course, long discussed the problems associated with mass culture’s influence, and for well over fifty years, they have explored the issues associated with, in particular, popular film. In Adorno’s studies of film and American culture, he once remarked that he “seldom came out of a cinema without feeling that he had been made that little bit more stupid” (Witkin 135). Adorno’s criticisms of popular culture are based primarily in a Marxist reading of how elements of popular culture affect the

populace. In his book *Adorno on Popular Culture*, Robert Witkin examines Adorno's investigation of American cinema and television, highlighting his concern with the "pseudo-realism" of film (137). The use of everyday objects, places, and people in films removes these things from their normative position in one's lifeworld, reifying them.³ Thus, "What was once real now partakes of a pseudo-reality that manifests as the siren appeal of the fetish object" (Witkin 137). Adorno noticed how the onscreen "everyday," with its conceptualized image perfected and shining on screen, drew in its audience in a new way:

The appeal of the Hollywood phantasmagoria is a powerful one. Millions have been drawn to the box office, attracted by 'stars' who have been manufactured with even rows of teeth, flawless complexions, formless features, and with the pupils of their eyes enlarged by belladonna. The characters portrayed—gangsters, sweet heroines, bitch heroines, avenging cowboys—are rigid stereotypes and the plots of the film dramas are standardized cliché-forms that deliver calculated and predetermined messages (137).

It is these predetermined messages that most distress Adorno, particularly with regard to the bourgeois, the middle majority of American culture:

³ Reification is "the transformation of a person, process or abstract concept into a thing, and this 'thingification' was part of Marx's diagnosis of the ills of society. Marx noted the ways in which, under capitalism, human powers and creativities seemed to escape human control and take on lives of their own.... These estranged or alienated forces can come to dominate and oppress human existence, just as things themselves—commodities and objects—become treated as if they were important, or even more important than people" (Roberts 39).

Adorno dismissed Hollywood films as instances (in the superstructure) of the repressive economic conditions of capitalist America (the base): it didn't matter which film we might cite, as far as Adorno was concerned they were all part of a malign 'culture industry' designed to fool the masses with empty dreams into ignoring the misery of their circumstances (Roberts 30).

The reification of objects on screen, the carefully constructed messages that encourage conformation to a controlling system of capitalism, and the use of culture as a means of escape rather than education all reinforce the bourgeois state of alienation within a capitalist system. The masses respond to the "pseudo-realism" of film in a "dependent and authoritarian-submissive way"—that is, an audience consisting of alienated members of late-capitalist systems look to films (and television) to reinforce their way of life (Witkin 139). Thus, "the alienated tenets of bourgeois decency, enshrined in filmic clichés, [assumes] an authoritarian relationship to individuals in whom traits of dependency and conformity were continuously reinforced by cultural goods" (138). Those members of late-capitalist systems (not only Americans but also those aspiring to live the "American," capitalist, consumerist lifestyle) are looking to film and its "realistic" portrayal of everyday life (and what is actual "pseudo-reality" according to Adorno) to reinforce what they experience as the reification of everyday objects and the commodification of culture. This creates not just acceptance but adoration of the U.S. socio-political system and makes its citizens more

submissive to the cycle of consumerism. The escapist fantasy of dominating ideology prospered in popular culture as never before.

While punk rock faded and the aggressive punk style of the “downtown fiction” of Kathy Acker and her contemporaries moved past its prime, the synthesizer-based music of the New Romantic movement prospered—a sign of a new phase of culture in the postmodern era.⁴ Although obviously unrelated to fiction and film, the synthesizer stands as a symbol for issues of the hyperreality and simulacrum that I will argue blank works contest. The synthesizer, an electronic instrument capable of producing a variety of sounds by generating and combining signals of different frequencies, is generally shaped like a keyboard and used in music to produce the sounds of other instruments, like a drum set or a string quartet. This machine is a representation of the types of cultural phenomena that were emerging after 1945 and were beginning to truly dominate the arts in the 1980s. Jean Baudrillard’s 1981 text, *Simulacrum and Simulacra*, explores postmodern society’s reliance on the “image” of an object and that image’s symbolic representation, rather than the true meaning of the object itself:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.... A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the

imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference (2-3).

Although based in criticism of postmodern communication technology, his overall theory is that reality no longer emits “signs which guarantee its existence. Signs now construct the real as simulations” (Horrocks 103). The synthesizer, then, is an example of musicians reproducing hyperreal music, rather than artists producing genuine, original music themselves. For Fredric Jameson, a critic “who has throughout his career been wedded ... to one particular version of a surface-depth model—the Freudian-Marxist ‘political unconscious’ where the surface of the text refers to the hidden ‘depth,’ the content of history—this represents the most striking development in postmodernism” (Adams 127). Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum’s command of postmodern culture, and Jameson’s focus on the loss of historicity (and how this loss is exacerbated by the culture of the simulacra), are well-known (though contested) points of postmodern theory. Jameson decries the loss of historicity and the loss of perception of that which is real (replaced by Baudrillard’s hyperreal) and declares that such cultural movements have led to a new “depthlessness” or a “certain emptying out of significance, a flattening” (126) of culture. Using specific references to the visual arts, Jameson explicates his definition of this “new depthlessness” and its causation of what he identifies as a “waning of affect.” In his most well-known example of this phenomenon, he juxtaposes Vincent Van Gogh’s painting *A Pair of Boots* and Andy Warhol’s screen print *Diamond Dust*

Shoes (6). Van Gogh's work, he argues, "draws the whole absent world and earth into revelation around itself, along with the heavy tread of the peasant woman, the loneliness of the field path, the hut in the clearing, the worn and broken instruments of labor in the furrows and at the hearth" (8). The painting, Jameson argues, in line with his discussion of Heidegger's discussion of the same piece, can be taken "as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth" (8). The Van Gogh work represents artistry that lacks alienation and speaks in context with social responsibility and emotional depth. In contrast, Jameson discusses Warhol's screen print of shoes:

Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* evidently no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear; indeed, I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all. Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer.... We are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms (9).

With these visual examples as a foundation, Jameson introduces his concept of the "waning of affect," suggesting that works like Warhol's and the alienation and cultural depthlessness that they represent, are in fact visual representations of the end of the bourgeois ego in postmodern culture:

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego—what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more—the end,

for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primary of mechanical representation). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling (15).

The suggestion then becomes evident that without a centered self to do any kind of feeling, or an ego through which one responds specifically to art, art and culture no longer have any affect, and that to respond at all, humans require increased stimulation, both in psychological and literal terms. Popular understanding of this theory has simplified it and given it such monikers as “desensitization.” It is used to explain increased violence on television, shortened television programming, and an overwhelming barrage of visual images on individual screens of video games, news programming, and the like.

If responsibility and depth of emotional response are in fact removed from culture, depthless, inane, hyperreal culture can easily dominate that culture. Looking at the best-selling popular writers and films of the 1980s supports this idea. Novels by Tom Clancy, Danielle Steele, and Stephen King dominated the best-seller lists of the mid- to late-1980s. *ET: The Extraterrestrial*, *Star Wars*, *Annie*, *Rambo II*, *Platoon*, *Top Gun*, and *Fatal Attraction* were among the blockbuster films of the era. The top-grossing works of fiction and film of the

decade in particular provide solid examples of the cultural condition of Reagan's America. Recent critics, such as Alan Nadel, agree. In his 1997 *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's American*, he opines that "cinema triumphs over economics as the primary producer of social realities" (13).⁵ Looking back at the top popular visual arts, films, books, and albums of the decade, one can easily see how Adorno, Nadel, and corresponding theorists would read the popular culture of the decade as support for a superficial, placid, utterly commercialized social system. What these works have in common is their formulaic, superficial representations of a culture dominated by economic forces. They support both Jameson's and Baudrillard's theories in their loss of historicity and loss of focus on concepts of individual ego. All of these forms of entertainment are steeped in tropes of a capitalist system of social control: clear ideas of black and white based on a moneyed class system, solid control of law over the individual, glorification of the wealthy, and stress on superficial visuals, including special effects and outward appearance in general. The Vietnam films, in particular, exemplify Jameson's concern of the loss of historicity (as will be discussed in Chapter 3). Reagan-era U.S. popular culture very obviously sustains the preceding theories of postmodernism.

I will identify, however, the cultural forces at work within mainstream culture that contradict these theories. There are, of course, movements within U.S. culture that are consistently dissident and working against control of the

⁵ Although these arguments address primarily Hollywood cinema, Adorno's thesis and Nadel's argument can easily be applied to television, popular fiction, and even music, as Adorno's discussions of jazz suggest.

superficial. But in 1984, there emerged writers and filmmakers who were able to infiltrate mainstream popular culture and very publicly and very clearly produce art that was not subject to depthlessness, the waning of affect, or the loss of historicity. These writers and filmmakers produced art that denounced the social and political issues that arose during the Reagan administration and created memorable works that go against these theories of postmodern criticism while attempting to shift control of the signs of cultural power.

Chapter 3: Blankness

Shock value and graphic violence have long been a part of the American literary tradition, and the novels of blank fiction owe a great deal to their literary past, drawing from authors such as Richard Wright who, in 1940, published *Native Son*, a compelling depiction of Chicago's Bigger Thomas and a call for socialist action in America. The novel was shocking, with coarse language and depictions of sexual and physical violence, all intended to motivate a complacent audience and ignite passion in American readers against the injustice faced by their fellow citizens. In the 1950s, Beat authors like Alan Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs followed this tradition as well, adding obscenity and drug use to the list of tools used for fictional dissidence. In the mid-1960s, urban realist authors such as Hubert Selby Jr. produced works like *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, a sexually explicit, graphically violent text. A colorful (but surprisingly positive) 1966 book review, summed up the work by saying

Last Exit to Brooklyn is a disgusting book. There is no other word for it. It deals in violence, pain, cruelty, and perversion, and certain of its pictures hang in the mind: broken, bleeding figures; sailors, drunks, whores raped or beaten up for fun, for the sake of something to do (Wood 25).

A great deal has been written about this piece of literature, largely due to the debate in Britain over its “obscenity,” but also because of its honest, detailed descriptions of violence and pain, as well as mental and physical anguish; Selby spares no graphic detail nor horrifying element in his descriptions. One is subjected to a constant barrage of the grotesque all the way through the book. Moreover, “Selby seems at once obsessively involved in and ironically detached from the world which he is creating” (Wertime 154). A hermeneutic of indifference is created by this technique, lending to the urban realists’ cultural criticism of capitalist detachment.

Although blank fiction does draw upon urban realism’s tradition of violence, works such as Selby’s are more closely related to the art and literary scene of Manhattan’s Lower East Side from the mid-1970s to mid- to late-1980s. Robert Siegel’s 1989 *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* is the first critical work to identify and explore the style of fiction that has come to be called, among other things, “downtown” fiction. He offers close readings of the work of Kathy Acker, Ron Kolm, Lynne Tillman, Joel Rose, and many others, identifying their political and artistic motivations and focusing on the “insurgent” nature of their work. Siegel’s text is clearly devoted to authors and a movement in the arts that remains tied to the ideology of the late-1960s and 1970s—gritty, urban, working-class, angst-fueled protest art. The work of such artists remains, like Wright’s *Native Son* and Selby’s *Last Exit*, transparently ideological, clearly working toward bringing the oppression of those suffering in the economic and social systems of America to light. It is from this tradition that

what has now become known as “blank fiction” emerged. Yet it is also from this tradition of the minimal, graphic, working-class novel that blank fiction has departed. What follows is a discussion of the definition of blank fiction, an exploration of how it differs so remarkably from the literary tradition from which it evolved, and an explication of the movement through a close analysis of one of its first novels, Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*.

Blank Fiction

In order to understand blank fiction, it is helpful to look at it with regard to the “minimalist” fiction of the late 1970s and early 1980s due to the close proximity of the publishing periods and the fact that their styles both diverge in a somewhat similar manner from the other postmodern fiction of the time by well-known authors like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon. In his 1991 article “Minimalist Fiction as ‘Low’ Postmodernism: Mass Culture and the Search for History,” Philip E. Simmons describes minimalism (with key authors such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason) as abandoning “the experimental ethic of high postmodern writers [like Pynchon, Barth and Barthelme], rejecting linguistic flight and ontological self-questioning in favor of a willed simplicity which honors the ordinary” (49). Blank fiction also works in a simpler, more ordinary language, but it maintains its experimental spirit and ontological self-questioning. Whereas minimalist fiction deals with “ordinary, working class and middle class characters,” (50) blank fiction favors more

extraordinary characters of upper- or upper-middle class backgrounds. The main factor binding these two forms of writing together is their similar reliance on brand names, their references to popular products by their designers. Both depend on reference to mass culture and consumer goods, and both create their historical and sociological reference points through the use of such devices. The characters of minimalist fiction drink bottled Pepsi as a luxury, for example, or eat at locally specific diners. The characters of blank fiction eat at “Spago” or at a luncheon prepared by Wolfgang Puck. Blank fiction, similar in many ways from the works upon which it draws, is however a unique movement, standing in stark contrast from other literary movements of its time.

My work will build upon the initial works of those who have begun research into the blank movement. The first comprehensive work to discuss what actually constitutes blank fiction is James Annesley’s *Blank Fictions* (1998). Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney’s 1992 *Shopping in Space: Essays on American “Blank Fiction” Generation* offers critical exploration of various “blank” texts, but Annesley is the first to comprehensively attempt to theorize what brings them all together, though he, Young, and Graham cover similar artists, including Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Dennis Cooper, and Tama Janowitz.

Annesley’s arguments look specifically at literature from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s and center on the theory that issues related to commodification tie blank fiction together. Exploring issues of commodification is important not only as a way of understanding the economic aspects of a late capitalist system but also as a way of understanding the social impact that this

economic system has on the populace. Annesley states that "the reading of blank fiction requires an interpretation of the meaning of commodification, as analysis that both facilitates a contextual understanding of these texts and produces a range of concerns that fit alongside the priorities of the narratives themselves" (6). He suggests that "a focus on the category of the commodity provides a way of interpreting blank fiction in terms that combine a strong sense of the significance of both period and place with a wider perspective on contemporary capitalist structures" (7). Annesley also suggests that by using the commodity as a central focus, blank fiction provides a base for understanding the psyche of its characters. The characters are often depicted as "alienated,"⁶ the Marxist theory that sees humans in capitalist society estranged from their work, their communities, and their companions. This focus also ties together the other qualities that blank fiction texts have in common, including a strong emphasis on extreme violence, graphic sexuality and deviance, drugs, and what Annesley refers to as "decadence" (2). The decadent behavior of blank fiction, I argue, is a motif that shows how the characters function without the constraint of popular moral codes of traditional American ideologies. In his discussion of decadence, Annesley states that "the fictional worlds these texts represent seem clouded by millennial anxieties and touched by the violent, destructive and decadent currents of what has been described as the 'apocalypse culture' of the late 20th century"

⁶ "Alienated man is an abstraction because he has lost touch with all human specificity. He has been reduced to performing undifferentiated work on humanly indistinguishable objects among people deprived of their human variety and compassion. There is little that remains of his relations to his activity, product and fellows which enables us to grasp the peculiar qualities of his species. Consequently, Marx feels he can speak of this life as the 'abstract existence of man as a mere workman who may therefore fall from his filled void into the absolute void.' Alienated man is estranged from everything" (Ollman 134-135).

(108). This point is a potential explanation for the overwhelming sense of hopelessness that pervades many novels of this movement. This “decadence,” however, is used in contrast to the ways novels like Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X* and Rick Moody’s *Garden State* and *Purple America* portray their slacker generation characters cowering in apocalyptic fear and apathy.

The novels of blank fiction concentrate on American youth (teen-, twenty-, and thirty-somethings), typically found in urban settings (108). Their literary style is particularly significant, in that rather than focusing on “dense plots, elaborate styles, and political subjects that provide the material for writers such as Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, and Norman Mailer, these fictions seem determined to adopt a looser approach. They prefer blank, atonal perspectives and fragile, glossy visions” (108). The writing can often appear bare, as though there is not quite enough written on the page. This fiction gives one a sense that it is demanding analysis, even on the first read, that whatever message the pages offer actually remains *unwritten*. The emphasis of blank fiction on things such as brand names and popular culture can give one the impression that the text is being written in code—that the texts’ emphasis lies behind the labels. The depth hidden below the superficiality of the text is fascinating; it has a “way of conceptualizing contemporary conditions and turns the process of saying a little into the act of disclosing a lot” (10).⁷ The minimal use of language makes each word seem a kind of root metaphor, as though the individual words or brief phrases are symbolic of an ideological system. For example, the phrase “people

⁷ It has been referred to as “beer commercial” writing by its critics.

are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles” begins the novel *Less Than Zero* and is repeated throughout the novel. This simple line suggests the cultural emptiness of Clay’s hometown and the alienation of the characters. A more verbose passage would detract from the starkness and insightful nature of this single phrase.

Jay McInerney’s 1984 novel *Bright Lights, Big City* serves as an excellent example of this deceptively simplistic prose style. Written in second person, with an unnamed “you” (as the narrator is to be henceforth referred) as narrator, this novel stands out amongst other early pieces of blank fiction because of this unusual narrative approach. Brian Richardson, in his article “The Poetics and Politics of Second Person Narration,” suggests that writing from this point of view, a technique first developed in the 1950s but still not widely used, is “arguably the most important technical advance in fictional narrative since the introduction of stream of consciousness” (311). Second-person narration can potentially be used as just an alternative way of writing a first-person narrative, but McInerney uses the technique to convey ideas that first-person narration could not convey as succinctly. The first few lines of the novel exemplify this point:

You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreaker or the Lizard Lounge. All might come clear if

you could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching Powder. Then again, it might not. A small voice inside you insists that this epidemic lack of clarity is a result of too much of that already (1).

Second-person narration here introduces the narrator in a way that first- or third-person would struggle with doing. In seven lines, McInerney has introduced the main character, appealed for empathy from the reader for this character (appealing to “you” suggests camaraderie and understanding), and suggested the complication of his narrator’s personality, “particularly revealing a mind in flux. The narrative ‘you’ is especially effective in disclosing the sense of intimate unfamiliarity present in the cocaine-charged brain of McInerney’s anti-hero” (Richardson 327). These opening lines immediately alert the reader to the fact that this deceptively simple novel deserves close observation; the layering of thought and voices alludes to the many levels of the 182-page work.

Authors of blank fiction are profoundly aware of their time and place, and their heavy usage of references to the products, the personalities, and the places that characterize late twentieth-century American life exemplifies this awareness (Annesley 6). The problem with the heavy dependence upon popular reference, however, is that it can often be wrongly interpreted as fiction that is merely a reflection of its time, unable therefore to offer comment upon the world it represents, when, in fact, social commentary is precisely its *raison d’être*. This misunderstanding can be detrimental to how the texts are read and received.

The use of violence, for example, is often misinterpreted as a comment upon actual violence:

Overlooking the basic distinction between art and reality, too many commentators have confused the significance of representations of murder with the meaning of actual murders. What these arguments fail to appreciate is that the relationship between a literary image of violence and violence itself is at best tenuous and at worst non-existent (12).

Rather than being read as ironic and metaphoric, the violence of blank fiction is often misinterpreted as superfluous or unnecessarily pornographic. The authors of such novels rely on irony and context to ensure that their use of graphic violence is necessary and critical and loaded with criticism aimed at those that have dismissed postmodern literature as lacking affect, like Jameson, or those who focus simply on the superficial level of violence, like Michelle Warner does in her article "The Development of the Psycho-Social Cannibal in the Fiction of Bret Easton Ellis," an article that scans the literal behavior of Ellis's deviant characters.

A major difficulty in discussing blank fiction is the large amount of criticism aimed at it by those assuming it to be as superficial as it initially appears or confuse it with the entertainment fiction it often parodies. Critics call it an MTV style, shallow, and typical of a culture of consumption. Josephine Hendin, in her article "Fictions of Acquisitions," suggests that McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* "compresses the novel of manners to an upscale ad, and Ellis's *Less Than Zero*

reduces the novel of initiation to the equivalent of snuff-porn still” (225). The difficulty of dealing with such charges of insignificance, however, actually ties into Annesley’s analysis that the center point that brings these works together is the theme of commodification and the superficiality of commodity culture. Many critics like Hendin or Peter Fresse are taking these works at face value, at first superficial glance, not understanding the depth of meaning that exists beyond the minimal plot and language. Some show concern that novels that choose to comment upon their own time in history lack critical distance. Because the fictions’ form and critical commentary are bound together (the language and structure of the style support the critical nature of the works), some critics have difficulty removing the novels from their context and analyzing them separately, believing that because they are unable to do this, the novels must thus be of little critical value and can therefore be dismissed as superficial works of popular culture. Peter Freese suggests, in his article “Bret Easton Ellis, Less Than Zero: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel’?,” that traditional literary critics are “easily tempted to dismiss the laconically understated first-person narration” of novels like Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* “as just another example of pervasive triviality and cultural decay” (71). Some might argue, as Jameson does, that such cultural commentary, because of its immediate involvement in the surrounding culture, may be “disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which [it] might well be considered a part, since [it] can achieve no distance from it” (*Postmodernism* 49). Blank fiction, however, with its concentration on form and subtext, suggests a keen awareness of historicity as opposed to the contemporary works it parodies.

As will be discussed in detail subsequently, the style of blank fiction mocks the rhetoric of the Reagan Era, proving the argument that this movement is not simply pastiche but able to bypass any limitations of “critical distance.”

When investigating the critical elements of blank fiction, it is important to look beyond Annesley’s foundational arguments, which, though cogent and admirable, do not venture past discussions of the economic. In order to explore the full extent of this movement’s social and political insights, one must look at the issue of “blankness” itself, beginning with the position of the majority of the narrators/protagonists of blank fiction. A vast majority of the fictions’ protagonists are white males, mostly of middle-class standing. The emphasis in blank works on white, middle-class males is key in understanding how the works aim their criticism at the heart of “power” control in America. In Ross Chambers’s essay “The Unexamined,” he discusses “blank” categories of people:

There are plenty of unmarked categories (maleness, heterosexuality, and middle classness being obvious ones), but whiteness is perhaps the primary unmarked and so unexamined—let’s say “blank”—category. Like other unmarked categories, it has a touchstone quality of the normal, against which the members of marked categories are measured, and, of course, found deviant, that is, wanting (189).

Although many central figures in blank fiction are white, heterosexual, middle-class males, there are “others,” homosexuals, for example, who would fall into the marked category of Chambers’s account. Yet in blank fiction, these “others”

still fall into the category of “unexamined,” because, in keeping with Annesley’s theme of commodification and late capitalism, they have enough money and social power to be excluded from the marked category. That is to say, they remain at arm’s length from external questioning, as well as from internal doubt—all of the main characters of blank fiction are relatively free from struggle with regard to their ethnic, sexual, or other demographic identities. They are not struggling with external identity issues, nor are they struggling for social equality or acceptance, as the oppressed characters of urban realism or punk fiction so often do.

The identification of many of the main characters is actually quite “blank” as well, in that it is not personalized. The blankness and interchangeable nature of the characters is often emphasized in these works. In *Less Than Zero*, for example, Clay is often confused as to whom he has slept with and with whom he has not, and in *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman is frequently mistaken for a number of his colleagues, as they all look the same. There is very little character development in blank fiction beyond what occurs as the texts progress. Character pasts are not dictated for audience understanding, and their personalities are often one-dimensional. It is a style full of masked people. In the following sections, I will discuss how this specific characteristic of blank fiction is a particularly effective means of political criticism for the Reagan administration.

The “masked” characters of blank fiction and those surrounding them appear devoid of emotion—or their emotional responses seem somehow

inappropriate. The language is emotionally barren, though anxiety and desire tend to creep into most of these texts. The emotions that do occur within the texts are symptoms of those immersed in a late-capitalist society, and therefore it is surprising that Annesley did not discuss this concept in his argument. These emotions are primarily anxiety, anger, and greed in various forms: anxiety stemming from the competition and uncertainty of a capitalist market, anger coming from constant competition (the need to compete or fail), and greed from a system in which desire for more has no end. The use of such emotional responses, though similar to that which appears in both urban realism and minimalist fiction, is not used in an obvious, didactic way in order to shock the reader but in a humorous, parodic way that mocks the popular notion of the “waning of affect.” The inappropriate emotional response is not suggestive of abuse of power but instead relates to everyone, both perpetrators and victims alike, in the culture of the texts. This emphasis on emotional response will be explicated in the following analysis of *Less Than Zero*.

The novels of blank fiction may *seem*, at first read, to be of little or no political consequence, as the characters never overtly voice political views and the characters engage in activities that challenge notions of traditional morality, but it is the politics of these novels, beyond their particular style, that binds them together. These are novels that, in their understated and minimalist ways, comment on issues such as the “unexamined” white, upper-middle class of America through their portrayals of members of this group murdering, raping, prostituting themselves, taking and selling drugs, and other criminal or immoral

behavior. They also mock the concept of desensitization of the American public to violence. These texts are able to represent their own place and time, yet comment on it critically through the use of irony and the use of the absurd. These factors give the authors the critical distance they need in order to make social criticisms of a world of which many would argue their texts are simply a part. What follows is an analysis of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, an analysis used to explicate the general ideas discussed previously.

Less Than Zero

Turn out the TV,
No one will suspect it.
Then your mother won't detect it,
So your father won't know.
They think that I got no respect,
But every film means less than zero.

—Elvis Costello “Less than Zero”

Ronald Reagan's rise to power was, as discussed in Chapter 2, facilitated by his ability to inspire the American people. His speeches expressed romanticism and his political moves; winning a “war” in Granada, for example, helped develop a cult of denial and idealism. His reign was slogan-filled; from the “trickle-down effect” to “just say no,” most middle- and upper-class

Americans, through their support of the leader, seemed to revel in the simplistic political rhetoric that matched the brand name, consumer-labeled culture that blossomed during the Reagan Era.

Emerging during this jargon-filled era of popular delusion was a style of writing that has become known as blank fiction. The style, beginning in 1984 with Brett Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* and Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, mimics the simplistic, jargon-filled language of its time, but in contrast to the glamour and sheen that typified much of 1980s American culture, blank fiction stands out through its atonal style, stark narratives, shocking content, and angry, bitter characters. What this chapter and overall project will argue is that writers like Ellis have used this particular form of literature to comment on and criticize various social and political issues that were often ignored during the 1980s. Using *Less Than Zero* as the model, I will show how the style of this literature is both a vehicle for criticism and a form of political criticism in itself.

The style of the novel is blank with limited plot, undeveloped characterizations, unemotional language, frequent references to drugs and sex, and an undercurrent of violence. As Annesley argues, Ellis tends to "eschew clear references to fixed times and places in favor of an approach that locates its events in an empty and eternal present" (90). Ellis also fills the novel with labels, referring to items and places by their titles, rather than through descriptions or general terms. For example, Clay (*Less Than Zero's* narrator) has a psychiatrist that drives a "450 SL" and his friends eat at "Spago." Ellis does not substantiate his reference, nor explain them or expand upon them. As Annesley points out,

“in the absence of adjectives, qualifying phrases and points of reference, a crucial emphasis is placed on commercial names like ‘Neiman-Marcus,’ ‘Jerry Magnin,’ and ‘Camp Beverly Hills’” (92). These loaded references and the sparseness of the writing style made *Less Than Zero* stand out even in a period of plentiful postmodern texts whose authors (like Martin Amis, Don DeLillo, and Salman Rushdie) are concerned with *pastiche* and the superficiality of postmodernism. Many critics dismissed this novel at the time of its publication by arguing that Ellis had just taken excerpts from his own adolescence on the West Coast and tried to pass them off as a novel. Ellis, twenty-one years old at the time of publication, may have been a victim of his youth. As Nicki Sahlin argues, in her article “‘But this Road Doesn’t Go Anywhere:’ The Existential Dilemma in *Less Than Zero*,” “one might wonder whether an identical first novel by a middle-aged author might not have received more credit for its art and fewer accusations of artifice” (24). But regardless of *why* Ellis’s novel was disregarded, the fact remains that, as discussed previously, blank fiction in general is for the most part ignored by critics and academics, with the exception of writers such as Elizabeth Young, James Annesley, and Nicki Sahlin. Although openly criticized or simply overlooked, *Less Than Zero* is an important novel. This section will examine Ellis’s work with reference to its time of emergence and will explain why this particular blank novel (one of the very first of its kind) deserves much more attention than it has ever received.

An emphasis on image, appearance, and surface is a key theme in *Less Than Zero*, and, generally speaking, a common theme in postmodern fiction, or

rather, the fiction of postmodernity. Jameson discusses how the postmodern age has seen movement away from parody in the arts to what he calls pastiche, that is, parody without substance. Pastiche, he argues, is inseparable from the period of late capitalism⁸ in which our market currently functions:

Pastiche is not incompatible with a certain humor, however, nor is it innocent of all passion: it is at the least compatible with addiction—with a whole historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudoevents and "spectacles" (the term of the situationists). It is for such objects that we may reserve Pluto's conception of the "simulacrum," the identical copy for which no original has ever existed. Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced, a society of which Guy Debord has observed, in extraordinary phrase, that in it "the image has become the final form of commodity reification" (18).

Pastiche may also occur inadvertently through a lack of critical distance, when an artist attempting to mock through emulation finds himself simply repeating that which he is attempting to mock, producing a piece of art too similar to the "problem," and the irony is lost. For example, a writer that publishes a horror novel in an attempt to parody the desensitization of culture may produce a piece of work that is too similar to the works he is criticizing to seem ironic or didactic.

⁸ See Ernest Mandel's three phases of capitalism in his book *Late Capitalism*, from 1978.

(This concept will be further explored.) Importantly, pastiche represents a lack of the moral hierarchy that remains the key to successful parody. Parody implies a sense of ethical standards, that which mocks being of higher morals or better standards than its chosen subject of ridicule. Parody orders things, suggesting the division between such things as “high” and “low” art. With pastiche, no such moral order is suggested, and a litany of subjects and objects can be mimicked with no regard for standards or hierarchical divisions. Jameson’s argument that pastiche is an inextricable product of late capitalism suggests that authors like Ellis, who are writing in the late capitalist period and whose subject matter revolves around the consumer culture of this period, are in danger of being unable to obtain critical distance, and therefore, their work may fall victim to the ineffectiveness of pastiche.

Less Than Zero is a text flooded with signs, or as James Annesley refers to them (as being one and the same), “labels” (84). Some might argue that through his excessive use of labels and the dependency of the text on a reader’s knowledge of contemporary culture, Ellis’s first novel is merely pastiche, an attempt to parody the state of postmodern existence in Los Angeles that fails to parody but rather shows itself to be as shallow and insubstantial as that which it tries to mock. Annesley addresses this problem. He believes that Ellis’s incorporation of contemporary references and commodity culture (labels) actually helps to portray a layer of depth in society that seems completely superficial:

Though, in some respects, a novel like *Less Than Zero* can seem empty and uncontextualised, a narrative told, like MTV, in an

abstract 'continuous present', the presence of this range of cultural markers gives the novel a very concrete context. The language of the text discloses a specific relationship with the time, space and society of the mid 1980s West Coast America. Instead of regarding the presence of this range of mass cultural reference points as a measure of the novel's banality and an index of its weightlessness, these allusions can be interpreted as elements that root the text firmly to a precise material situation. (91)

Essentially, Annesley is arguing that the use of contemporary references works to symbolize a greater layer of depth below the surface, that they are, in some way, hieroglyphs that help the reader decipher the hidden messages that pass between the characters by way of magazine titles and band reviews. It is an interesting argument, but operating only on one level. To say that Ellis believes that using phrases like "Neiman-Marcus" and "*The Face*" as code for something more substantial is misleading. Annesley is trying to create a layer of substantial depth that simply does not exist. He is completely ignoring the possibility that Ellis's "labels" are purposefully empty signs, mocking simulacra, and that Ellis is using *irony* in order to maintain the critical distance necessary to ensure his text is effective social commentary. That Ellis does not elucidate or elaborate on these seemingly off-hand allusions to consumer culture makes his awareness of the shallowness of contemporary culture all the more evident. Ellis has created a way of criticizing the shallowness of objectification, showing a world in which nearly everything (people, places, and objects) begin and end with their

consumer names or physical appearances. A great deal of detail and painstaking phraseology has been put into *Less Than Zero* to show the extent of postmodern depthlessness.

Ellis emphasizes his interrogation of the shallowness of objectification further through his undeveloped characterizations; for example, “they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them” (*Less Than Zero* 140). Ellis also shows us the lack of communication in the characters’ lives, with scenes such as this one between Clay, our narrator, and his mother:

“You look unhappy,” she says real suddenly. “I’m not,” I tell her.

“You look unhappy,” she says, more quietly this time. She touches her hair, bleached, blondish, again. “You do too,” I say, hoping that she won’t say anything else. She doesn’t say anything else until she’s finished her third glass of wine and poured her fourth. “How was the party?” “Okay” (11).

Beyond labels and intense lack of communication, Ellis also reiterates his understanding of the commodification of modern culture in several ways. The novel is full of quotations emphasizing appearance, such as “you’re a very beautiful boy ... and that’s all that matters” (163). Julian’s prostitution and his wasted youth are dismissed entirely by his pimp and his clients, as they see him as simply a “beautiful boy.” Ellis also emphasizes the importance of appearance to the main characters themselves, not just in terms of market usage, but

detailing even Clay's parents' attempts at keeping their youthful image up to scratch:

My father looks pretty healthy if you don't look at him for too long. He's completely tan and has had a hair transplant in Palm Springs, two weeks ago, and he has pretty much a full head of blondish hair. He also has had his face lifted (34).

These references to casual reconstructive surgery echo blank fiction's emphasis on superficiality and the interchangeable nature of its characters.

What makes *Less Than Zero* particularly outstanding is that Ellis goes one step beyond condemnation of the superficiality of postmodernism and illuminates the void that lies beyond it. His style is particularly illustrative, the book "almost entirely implicit, entirely 'elsewhere.'" The text is slight, attenuated, a performance version of the frail, depleted lives it depicts" (40). Elizabeth Young, in her 1992 text *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Fiction Generation*, supports this concept, arguing that Ellis "suggests the awful emptiness of human disposability and meaninglessness, the misanthropia that licks daily at our consciousness" (29). It is Ellis's emphasis on the void beyond appearances that exposes the heart of the book's criticism.

His emphasis on the void is developed through the setting of the novel in addition to the way in which he has written it. In *Less Than Zero*, Ellis uses the sheen of Hollywood in contrast to the desert that surrounds it. Desert imagery pervades the book, offering a sharp contrast to the swimming pool and tanning bed lifestyle of Clay's fellow characters. The howling winds wreak havoc in the

hills, the stifling heat makes for an uncomfortable Christmas, and roaming coyotes are always a threat. Clay often feels unnerved by these threats of nature, these feelings of insecurity symbolic of his vulnerability to the world of nothingness that surrounds him. In this text, “considerable emphasis is given to the word ‘nothing,’ which often translates as ‘nothingness’” (27). Clay, living on the edge of the desert, surrounded by wild, untamed emptiness, is also standing on the verge of a void in culture. What exists below the shine of commodities, the nothingness, the missing symbols beyond the simulacra—this void is the key theme in the perfectly titled *Less Than Zero*. Discovering the presence of this void in the novel is important, but exploring what it is (in the sense that a lack of something is often something significant) is also crucial. And, like all blank fiction, the focus in *Less than Zero* is on the “otherness” of those within the city limits, not on the traditional idea of natural “otherness” or the strangeness of that which is outside the unexamined tradition.

Most blank fiction tends to focus on the emptiness of its characters’ lives, and Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* is a clear example of such a focus. The disaffected youth in the story, Clay in particular, are on the verge of this emptiness, trying desperately to avoid their feelings of emptiness. They seek constant stimulation and pleasure to stay afloat. The characters are consumed by boredom, by apathetic dissatisfaction. They are “frustrated and powerless. They are unable to see that their desires can never be fulfilled” (Young 33). Through drugs, random sexual encounters, risk behaviors, and, in some cases, such as Muriel’s anorexia, self-destruction, the characters seem to be searching for *something*.

I argue that Clay's and his friends' lives are riddled with fear of the nothingness that surrounds them. Rather than looking at Clay and his friends as trying to reawaken something within themselves, however, one might approach their youthful lives of decadence as means of trying to escape their eventual encounters with nothingness. Sahlin feels that Clay shares with his friends "the symptom of having emotions so anaesthetized that it takes something extreme to interest him or reawaken his feelings" (36). When Clay accompanies his childhood friend Julian to an encounter arranged by a pimp, he goes to watch his friend be sexually exploited by a john so that Julian's drug debts are paid. Clay goes, driven by his need to "see the worst" (175). The characters' obsession with the morbid and the sensational (snuff films, pornography, and violent music lyrics, for example), even their fascination with death ("the frequency of references to death in *Less Than Zero* [is] perhaps fifty, roughly one every four pages" [33]), seems a means of averting their eventual contact with the void that exists beyond the superficial. They seem drawn to mortality; they queue to view a dead body behind a shop, they watch snuff films, Clay collects news stories of murders and fatal accidents. In particular, Muriel's fascination with Clay's argyle sweater with a red patch—"It looks as if you got stabbed or something. Please let me wear it," Muriel pleads, touching the vest" (Ellis *Less Than Zero* 73)—serves as a metaphor for the characters' attraction to their final demise. The characters are finding themselves satisfied less and less with their superficial attempts at fulfillment. Drugs, sex, and consumerism are no longer enough to satiate them. Allowed to immerse themselves in the decadence of Hollywood

and capitalism from a very early age, Ellis's characters, even at the age of 18, are jaded, bored, and restless, searching constantly for more stimulation. Clay's drug-dealing friend Rip brutally sexually assaults a twelve-year-old girl and invites his friends to join him. He defends his actions to Clay in the following exchange:

"Hey, don't look at me like I'm some sort of scumbag or something. I'm not."

"It's..." my voice trails off.

"It's what?" Rip wants to know.

"It's ... I don't think it's right."

"What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it.

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

... "But you don't need anything. You have everything," I tell him.

Rip looks at me. "No. I don't."

"What?" There's a pause and then I ask, "Oh, shit, Rip, what don't you have?"

"I don't have anything to lose" (177).

Clay remains an amoral witness to the scene, upset by the event but not willing to truly intervene. His disturbance in this scene is used to illustrate the void Ellis is trying to describe in *Less Than Zero*, a morally barren, emotionally stunted chasm. The characters subconsciously realize that they have nothing to cling to beyond their materialistic existence. Their inability to fulfill successfully their desires through consumption means that they must either confront their

emotionally distant families, morally degenerated friends, and total lack of intimacy and support in their lives or die. Death, for most of them, seems the comfortable option. *Less Than Zero's* death theme is not representative of a fear of death but representative of a way to avoid the pain of loss that accompanies the realization that consumerism and total superficiality are not sustainable means of satisfaction.⁹ The vibrations of fear that permeate the novel, especially through Clay and his attacks of extreme anxiety, beg the readers to look toward this void, confront it, and consider what lies beyond condemnation of today's commodified, consumer culture.

Theorists like Adorno, Jameson, and Baudrillard concern themselves with the negative impacts of late capitalism, yet they have a tendency to avoid discussion of the impact of the lack of emotional depth or intimacy between people who are products of postmodern culture. Ellis's first novel is attempting to point to this area of concern and its lack of theoretical discussion through the characters' fear of having to possibly address their emotional needs, suggesting that they would rather die. Although the urban realists and minimalist authors that came before Ellis present scenes of exploitation and encounters with the worst sides of human nature, Ellis's work is different in that his work aims to show the other side of life—his articulation of the cultural void draws attention to the idea that there is more to life than that void. Whereas other artists present horror and oppression and apathy as fatalistic symptoms of a cultural crisis, Ellis

⁹ Death, in general, is an important theme in the genre of blank fiction. In this novel, as in others, (*American Psycho* in particular), death is viewed as a means of escaping an encounter with the pain of nothingness. Jay McInerney uses death in *Bright Lights, Big City* as a way of reflecting upon the superficiality of existence in consumer culture, and many blank fiction texts use characters' reflections on death as a touchstone for reality versus the "hyperreal."

presents these images a manner that, oddly, suggests hope and perseverance. If Ellis is able to see through the depthlessness and find substance, then his work might encourage others to do the same.

Ellis's text was published at a time in history when American youth no longer had the punk rebellion of the 1970s to cling to as an outlet for early-adult angst, yet before the yuppie-era of cocaine-enhanced, rabid consumerism of the mid- to late-eighties had fully taken hold of the under-30 generation. Elizabeth Young discusses this gap in her essay "Vacant Possession":

Ellis depicts [the characters in *Less Than Zero*], we now see with hindsight, at a revealing interstice in the early eighties. They are still living the aimless, lightly decadent life of the post-punk teenager. There is, as yet, no mention of the rampant ambition, teeth-grinding greed, remorseless self-improvement and much else that was eventually to characterize the next decade (27).

The characters were created post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, and post Iran-hostage, when faith in government and establishment had been truly shaken. *Less Than Zero* was written at a time when one could no longer realistically paint youth as wild, disaffected, and naïve, but it could not yet portray them as completely self-absorbed, money-hunting "yuppets" feeling the full force of Reaganomics. President Reagan succeeded in Granada in 1983, whereas those before him had failed in Vietnam and Iran. With this farcical military victory, Reagan was able to paint over the excruciating pain that those military disasters had left behind. This simulacrum of success is a prime example of the superficial

style of “feel-good” government, as discussed previously, which was fully taking root in America in 1985. Ellis, in *Less Than Zero*, illuminated the fear of those concerned with what lay beneath the sheen. Where many were quick to criticize its limited depth, few were willing to venture one step further and talk about the dread of what might be lurking just below the surface. *Less Than Zero* led the way for others, yet the books that followed, though spectacular in their own ways, never articulated the fear so accurately as Ellis did in his first book.

Blank Cinema

Emerging alongside the novels of blank fiction, similar in both content and style, were works of cinema that addressed the same social and political concerns. For the purpose of this project, I call these films “blank cinema.” Blank cinema is similar to blank fiction in its style, in that it usually has a minimalist plot; stark, graphic depictions of sexuality, violence, and/or drug use; narrators who are a part of the “unexamined” groups of Americans; characters who respond to events in emotionally inappropriate ways; and key characters devoting themselves to activities outside of a traditional moral code. The films, like the works of blank fiction, mimic the simplistic rhetoric of the Reagan administration, masking the filmmakers’ sociopolitical criticism beneath limited plot lines, simplistic dialogue, and typically inexpensive, stark sets.

Blank fiction parodies many styles of popular American culture, and blank cinema also uses popular American cultural styles as its parodic base. Tim

Hunter's 1986 *River's Edge*, for example, offers a sinister, bleak parody of the teenage angst movies of the period. In *River's Edge*, a group of high school friends discover that one of their own has murdered his girlfriend. "John" presents his dead girlfriend to the group in a dispassionate, apathetic way. Asked why he killed her, he says it was because "she was talking shit." The group responds in kind, more concerned with keeping him out of jail and scoring their next round of party drugs than wrestling with the moral complications of the murder. The film has no true plot but follows the kids as they decide on an action plan and float in and out of school. Aside from one outburst of philosophical rage by the school counselor at the lack of response from the town to the girl's death, the movie remains focused on a sense of amorality and self-centeredness. Drugs, sex, and violence are routine and commonplace, even for 12-year-old Tim, who eventually pulls a gun on his own brother.

This example of blank cinema offers a vision of disaffected youth perpetuating violence and living in a system in which they can never succeed. Shot with heavy use of filters, the film is dark, highlighted by grays and blues, and the setting, a town somewhere close to Portland, is kept anonymous and filmed at night and on overcast days, obscuring specific references, creating an "every town" without the triteness of Main Street or suburban middle America. At a time when films were focusing on the innocence and frivolity of gangs of youths and the *Goonies*, *Stand By Me*, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* were scoring at the box office, *River's Edge* does not allow for youthful indiscretion and redemption.

There is a key difference between blank cinema and other films that attempt to offer messages of social reform or social criticism. For example, some may ask how some films, like *River's Edge*, may be considered blank, while others with seemingly similar messages of social concern, like *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), should not be considered a part of the blank cinema movement. The answer lies in the films' narrative presentation. Urban realism and the minimalist literary movement differ from blank fiction in their use of subtext. The shocking violence of urban realism contrasts with that of blank fiction in that the characters of urban realism are typically both victims and perpetrators and their motives are clearly presented, whereas the perpetrators of blank fiction violence hack away with gleeful abandon, and their actions are never explained away by economic oppression or the need for social reform.

Blank cinema and films like the *River's Edge* are shocking in their lack of a clear social call to arms and their seeming apathy toward death, violence, and moral codes. Films like *Boyz in the Hood* use shock tactics to bring attention to America's underclasses without the subtlety and emphasis on amorality that blank cinema offers. The characters, rather than reacting to a system of oppression, have chosen not to react. The way the films are constructed presents a vision of middle-class, white Americans accepting and perpetuating a system of commodification and objectification as though it were their natural, patriotic duty. Rather than the American Adam of traditional American literature, blank fiction and cinema have produced a standard character that is the bastard offspring of Holden Caulfield and Norman Bates. In *River's Edge*, rather than

producing a coming-of-age film that shows a group of high school friends learning what it means to be just or loyal or strong, director Tim Hunter and screenwriter Neal Jimenez create characters whose major realization is that people are disposable and that accepting deviance cures family rifts. There is never any true differentiation between the child's doll that Tim drowns during the opening shot of the film, the murdered body of John's girlfriend, and Feck's inflatable doll girlfriend that meets her demise at the end of the film, no grieving for the true human tragedy of the film, and no opportunity for redemption at the tale's end.

Whereas Hunter's film offers a blank perspective on the *youth* films of the times, films such as Ken Russell's 1984 *Crimes of Passion* exploit the decadent, lush lifestyles that were so prevalent in popular 1980s American culture on television shows like *Dynasty* and the popular fiction of Danielle Steele. In this film, audiences are exposed to the dark, secret life of a professional, aspiring yuppie Joanna Crane, aka prostitute China Blue (oddly prophetic of Ellis's 1991 *American Psycho*). Although this film, with its murderous plotline and relatively clear antagonist in the form of the psychotic Rev. Shayne, does not necessarily fit the exact definition of blank cinema, as outlined in this project, the moral ambiguity of its characters, its emphasis on graphic sexuality and violence, and its reluctance to explain the psychological issues of the protagonist and antagonist make it a solid example of the type of outsider filmmaking that was making use of a blank style in order to create entertainment as social commentary.

A lack of explanation for a character's "otherness" is a key component of blank cinema and fiction, a way of forcing an audience to confront the deviance of those who seem "normal." For example, Joanna/China Blue's character chooses to spend her evenings as a prostitute, but not necessarily for the money, not to support a drug habit, nor for any of the other reasons typically used as tropes in American cinema to explain female deviant behavior. Director Ken Russell and screenwriter Barry Sandler do not spend expository time explaining a traumatic childhood or unusual psychiatric disorder. Reverend Peter Shayne, though depicted as an alcoholic, rampages through the film on his psychotic mission to kill China Blue without ever explaining his motivation. Although clearly disturbed, his character is never explained as possessed or "evil," and his otherness goes undefined. In contrast to the striking otherness of China Blue and Rev. Shayne, Bobby Grady appears to be the film's representative for moral order. He is depicted as a kind of "everyman": a suburban father in an unhappy marriage with cars, a mortgage, and a challenging struggle to remain in his middle-class position. Grady, however, leaves his wife, seeks out the thrill of a prostitute, and then begins his own mission to save the life of the designer-by-day/mistress-of-sex-fantasy-by-night woman with whom he becomes obsessed. Like the suburban teens of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, the representatives of American normalcy in this film are arguably the most "othered," leaving the audience floundering in its search for a stable moral position from which to observe the film. This destabilization of the audience's judgmental position is a

key component of blank cinema and will be analyzed in detail in Chapter 4 with a close look at John McNaughton's 1986 *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*.

As *Less Than Zero* was used to explicate the key ideas of blank fiction, so an analysis of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* will be used next. Kubrick released *Full Metal Jacket* in 1987, following a long line of Vietnam films. His film, however, as will be explored in detail, criticizes not just the social and political ills of its time but also the ideological manipulation of the war films it mocks.

Full Metal Jacket

I argue that the filmmakers of blank cinema parody popular genres of film in order to strike out at depictions of mainstream ideology in the United States. Cinema is a medium that reaches a vast array of audiences, and as discussed previously, it has proven itself as a perpetuator of late capitalist ideological systems for years. War films, in particular, have typically worked as a form of propaganda, vilifying enemies, extolling the virtues of American soldiers, justifying the nature of wars, and selectively presenting a positive rhetoric of militarism into mainstream culture. World war heroes have made us cry and denounce the enemy for decades, and war films now attempt to humanize the American soldiers that currently represent a difficult war in the Middle East. The way a war film is presented, like all propaganda, moderates popular reaction to the event, and, as critics like William Adams suggest, many war films attempt to

re-historicize events in order to change popular attitudes toward painful war memories. What blank artists like Stanley Kubrick have done is use the basic form and tropes of popular war films but manipulate them with challenging protagonists and interrogative investigations of military ideals and the rhetoric of violence. This manipulation of style enables blank artists to use signs of power in cinema and attempt to put the control of these signs into the hands of those concerned with social responsibility and messages of humanity, rather than those concerned with a perpetuation of violence and status quo attitudes of military power.

It is notable that Stanley Kubrick released *Full Metal Jacket* in 1987, the same year that *Hanoi Hilton*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, and *Hamburger Hill* were released. Their release followed an extensive line of Vietnam-related films, including *Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and *Platoon* (1986), during what many argue is a particularly jingoistic era in U.S. history during the Cold War and Reagan's emphasis on American national pride. To release his blank film at the same time as these popular films is particularly powerful, as Kubrick was able to show a remarkably vast and varied audience a new take on military power. In Gaylyn Studlar's and David Desser's article "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War," the authors offer an in-depth look at the politics of certain "right-wing" cinematic depictions of the Vietnam War:

"History is what hurts," writes Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, "It is what refuses desire and sets the inexorable

limits to individual as well as collective praxis” (102). The pain of history, its delimiting effect on action, is often seen as a political, a cultural, a national liability. Therefore, contemporary history has been the subject of an ideological battle which seeks to rewrite, to rehabilitate, controversial and ambiguous events through the use of symbols. One arena of on-going cultural concern in the United States is our involvement in Vietnam. It seems clear that reconstituting an image—a “memory”—of Vietnam under the impetus of Reaganism appears to fulfill an ideological mission. (9)

Studlar and Dessler argue that the loss of historicity, as Jameson would identify it, in war films, from a psychoanalytic point of view, enables us to luxuriate in “the symptoms of a desperate ideological repression manifested in the inability to speak of or remember the painful past” (16). While some critics, like Studlar and Dessler, look toward such films as symptoms of a culture’s repressed memory, others, like William Adams in his essay “Vietnam Screen Wars,” argue that certain Vietnam films attempt to rewrite the history of the conflict. The phrase “rewriting of history on screen” suggests production of films that are projecting alternative realities to those which actually occurred. For many, presenting films with positive outcomes helps alleviate the pain that negative histories leave in a cultural psyche. Adams claims that in some

unflinchingly conservative Vietnam films of the 1980s—*Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1984), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), and the rabid

Hanoi Hilton (1987)—the allegorical significance of the war is revealed as a crisis of national will (161).

Regardless of the degree to which critics believe that history has been lost on screen in relation to this particular war, all can agree that facts and ideologies are repeatedly manipulated in such films, and they contain the same war-film tropes that have existed in every standard war film ever produced—the clear struggles between good and evil, the redemption of true American heroes, a celebration of fraternal bond, and battle scenes that depict an anonymous “other” as enemy. Such tropes inevitably redeem, at least to some degree, the misdeeds of those depicted as immoral and reinforce the positive messages of war that the United States uses as rationale for force.

Blank art, however, does not suffer from this lack of historicity, and it is the knowledge of their particular place within culture that helps blank films use the signs of popular art to articulate their message of the potential for new ideological concepts of power. *Full Metal Jacket* is a film that does not suffer from a lack of historicity. Ironically, one of the most famous promotion posters for the film boasts that it is “acclaimed by critics around the world as the best war movie ever made,” when, in fact, Kubrick’s Vietnam film should be praised as the best anti-war movie ever made. Obviously inspired by the slew of films produced in previous years, *Full Metal Jacket* parodies such films as *Platoon*, serving as a clear work of anti-war propaganda and an excellent example of blank cinema. What follows is an exploration of this film that will show how it fits into the blank fiction movement and its various levels of socio-political criticism.

Full Metal Jacket, like other blank fiction films, clearly parodies the popular genre films of its time period. Kubrick's use of entirely constructed sets and his use of England as a base serve to exemplify his abilities to mock the issues of historicity and hyperreality to which other films were falling victim. The film begins with the head-shaving ritual of new recruits at Parris Island and follows the young marines through their climactic battle in Hue, a solid basis for a traditional war film, though Kubrick avoids both the issue of jungle warfare and returning veterans, which had become (and remains) standard fare in other popular films. The entire movie, in fact, avoids jungle scenes altogether—it was shot in England at Pinewood Studios and in military barracks. Some scenes of the ruined city of Hue were shot at a dockyard on the Isle of Dogs, London, which was scheduled for demolition. The ruins of Hue in the sniper and final nighttime scenes were shot at the Beckton Gasworks in London's East End. Specific location scenes were either built at the studios or improvised with local help. The rice paddy scene, for example, was shot along a Norfolk Broads canal. Footage of an actual graduation ceremony at Parris Island was used in the film, with an insert from England added to it (Internet Movie Data Base).

Kubrick was clearly aware of and vocal about his own position as a dictator of ideology with his film, a position of strength for a filmmaker making the argument that signs of power can be manipulated and ideology can be shifted toward social responsibility. The scenes related to Joker's position as a battlefield correspondent support this stance. The scenes in the marine paper's conference room, for example, with Lt. Lockhart's "directives" that the troops'

paper contain more stories of bodies and victories and that terms must be changed for affect, such as “In the future, in place of ‘search and destroy,’ substitute the phrase ‘sweep and clear’” and “can we make him [the confirmed kill] an officer?” bring audience attention to the manipulation of facts and ideals.

One of the key components of *Full Metal Jacket’s* “blank” construction is the duality of the Joker character. This duality emphasizes the amoral positioning of key blank characters and the open interrogation of signs and symbols of power. Joker’s helmet, on which he wears a peace symbol and the marine mantra “born to kill,” is a focal point of the film and presents a clear message of ideological manipulation. It is used with irony and spoken about lightly within the film itself, such as in the exchange between Joker and a colonel he meets on at a massacre site:

Pogue Colonel:

Marine, what is that button on your body armor?

Private Joker:

A peace symbol, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

Where'd you get it?

Private Joker:

I don't remember, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

What is that you've got written on your helmet?

Private Joker:

"Born to Kill," sir.

Pogue Colonel:

You write "Born to Kill" on your helmet and you wear a peace button. What's that supposed to be, some kind of sick joke?

Private Joker:

No, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

You'd better get your head and your ass wired together, or I will take a giant shit on you.

Private Joker:

Yes, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

Now answer my question or you'll be standing tall before the man.

Private Joker:

I think I was trying to suggest something about the duality of man, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

The what?

Private Joker:

The duality of man. The Jungian thing, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

Whose side are you on, son?

Private Joker:

Our side, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

Don't you love your country?

Private Joker:

Yes, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

Then how about getting with the program? Why don't you jump on the team and come on in for the big win?

Private Joker:

Yes, sir.

Pogue Colonel:

Son, all I've ever asked of my marines is that they obey my orders as they would the word of God. We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out. It's a hardball world, son. We've gotta keep our heads until this peace craze blows over.

Private Joker:

Aye-aye, sir.

This particular scene emphasizes the social and political responsibility that blank cinema attempts to bestow upon its audience. Within these last four sentences, the movie's ideological message related to the dehumanization of troops and the

unchecked spread of Western, capitalist power are summarized, and by bringing such complicated issues of power forward, it is arguable that certain ISAs of juridico-military power have been exposed. Though short and humorous, this exchange not only highlights the duality of Joker's characterization, but the colonel's last lines also emphasize Kubrick's anti-war, anti-military message: "Son, all I've ever asked of my marines is that they obey my orders as they would the word of God. We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out. It's a hardball world, son. We've gotta keep our heads until this peace craze blows over." At this point in the film, the audience has only Joker with whom to identify (as the protagonist), and without a third party or other voice of omniscience, the audience is then forced to see the Pogue Colonel's use of and understanding of "power" (in this instance, the power is America and its military enforcers) filtered through Joker's eyes. Joker observes the Colonel's notions as illogical and problematic and, thus, so does the audience.

Blank fiction and cinema are socially and politically powerful media, and the blank film *Full Metal Jacket* enters into an arena of well-defined, well-defended popular ideology as a rogue messenger of change. Presenting an anti-war stance through a parody of popular war films is brave and produces an incredibly powerful message. Kubrick chooses to end the film with the remaining troops marching from their battle at Hue off into the darkness of Vietnam, singing the theme from the Mickey Mouse Club. Although some critics read this scene as a mourning of a loss of the soldier's innocence, the fact that Mickey Mouse is

referenced three times in the film, all at critical junctures (once before Pyle shoots Hartman, once during the newsroom conference, and then again at the end of the film), suggests deeper, more important symbolism. For many people, Disney stands as a quintessentially American symbol, a symbol of fantasy, progress, and wealth—the ultimate symbol of capitalist excess. To reference Disney so frequently in a war film immediately correlates the ideas of battle and capitalist excess, suggesting a relationship between the war and American ideology related to wealth and control, not justice or ideals of “rightness,” which suggests a strong anti-Vietnam message and commentary on the motivations for America’s presence in Southeast Asia.

Blank works are notable, as discussed, for their interrogation of commodification and issues of control in late capitalist society. To further investigate the suggestion of commodification and control that the Disney symbolism brings to light in this movie, one must shift from the sing-song ending to the first part of the film at Parris Island. It is in Marine training that the young men of *Full Metal Jacket* are to become “killing machines.” Joker narrates at the end of training that “the recruits of Platoon 3092 are salty. They are ready to eat their own guts and ask for seconds. The drill instructors are proud to see that we are growing beyond their control. The Marine Corps does not want robots. The Marine Corps wants killers. The Marine Corps wants to build indestructible men, men without fear.” The training section of the film intends to show how the men are broken down by Gunnery Sergeant Hartman and “rebuilt” into Marine machines. The emphasis here is on the dehumanization of these men.

This dehumanization is emphasized in the sequences inside the barracks during the drill, when a special lens was designed to keep every single soldier in focus. Stanley Kubrick intended that no one was special and they all had the same treatment (Internet Movie Database). The men are presented as cogs in a machine, and the individual character development is limited. Even the narrator/protagonist is limited to his nickname. Kubrick chooses to focus on the process and the issues related to training, rather than create individual heroes and scenes of fraternal camaraderie. This is most obvious at the end of the first part of the film. Having successfully completed training, all of the men graduate and are prepared to take their posts abroad. On their last night together, Private Pyle snaps and kills Sgt. Hartman and himself. The scene is quintessentially Kubrickian, with an overpowering use of shadows, faces lit from below, and even parallel lines. The three men, Joker, Pyle, and Hartman, are together in the bathroom. The entire scene is colored in white, black, and muted shades of green. The three men are in their underwear with the exception of Hartman's hat and Joker's pants and hat. The setting, the "head," is a place where humans are at their most vulnerable, and Kubrick has his characters gathered there in a state of undress, further emphasizing their vulnerability. Standing among rows of ordered toilets and the straight parallels that Kubrick likes so much, the trio is mismatched and odd. They are disordered. They are not machines, he shows us, but men. Humans. Hartman's hat and his barking tone are his attempts at presenting himself as a figure of power, but in this scene, he loses control entirely as Pyle takes his life. Pyle then turns the gun on himself but spares

Joker after Joker appeals to his humanity by calling him Leonard, his given name. Before the jump cut that leads to the second half of the film (in Vietnam) the red blood of the men stains the white tile room, an omen of the trauma to come. While many films attempt to justify the dehumanizing of troops by showing courage under fire and the creation of national heroes, Kubrick shows us damaged men, men that are not heroic and men that are not invincible.

This exposure of the weakness of America's "defenders" illuminates holes in the ISAs of military power, leaving a question in the minds of audiences, as blank art intends, as to who truly has or should have this particular "power" to affect the world's conflicts. Blank art focuses on internal struggles against otherness and exposing the otherness of those who have been traditionally unexamined and unquestioned in their rights to power. Kubrick, in contrast to the dehumanization of the American troops, humanizes the Vietnamese. Rather than creating a faceless Other in large-scale battle scenes or scenes of "godless" atrocity faced by young, decent Americans, Kubrick limits the battlefield scenes to two, both brief, both free of scowling, plotting enemies. The times the director does show Vietnamese faces, they are either dead or under duress. They flee with their belongings, they dodge American machine gun fire, and they lie dead in mass graves. In one of the film's most shocking scenes, a young dead Vietcong soldier sits, dead, propped up like a rag doll amongst the American soldiers. Even the sniper that caused so much death and pain for Joker's comrades is ultimately shown in a position of vulnerability as she begs for mercy, prays, and suffers an excruciating death. By avoiding the jungle and chaos of

battle scenes, Kubrick is able to shift the focus of otherness from the named Vietcong “enemy” to the internal otherness of traditionally unexplored characters.

Traditional military films like Brian De Palma’s *Casualties of War* (1989) and similar films that attempt to show the internal struggle of soldiers “in the shit,” ultimately, unlike *Full Metal Jacket*, fall back on traditional tropes of American war films and exalt a hero untouched by the evil around him, a true American who can, like young Chris, emerge Christ-like and vindicate the country for which he fights, such that “In spite of all the pain, something like the ‘American character,’ endures in the darkly charismatic, inverted heroes who suffered and ultimately survived the war” (Adams 173). Kubrick, however, in the tradition of blank art, does not offer an American Adam able to extol the virtues of traditional good over evil. Private Joker is our presumed protagonist. He narrates in voice-overs, and the film centers on his movements. He is a clear member of the “unexamined,” a white, middle-class American youth, educated, and intelligent. His wit and ironic insights engage us, and his affection for Pyle and desire to protect Rafterman suggest that he could be the moral center of the film. Yet as the film progresses, the audience is subjected to the ultimate position of amorality that accompany the journeys of blank art protagonists. Joker participates in Pyle’s blanket party, for example, and though he recognizes the darkness of those around him—the door gunner’s murder of unarmed farmers, for example, or the presence of the dead Vietcong soldier—he stands, like Clay in *Less Than Zero*, as a passive witness. He does not interfere, and he does not redeem himself or his fellow Americans. In the climactic Hue City scene, Joker, the “killer,” stands

unprepared for his biggest challenge in the film; his choice to euthanize the young girl is fraught with indecision and, as spectators who have been offered only Joker as a moral center, the audience is forced to emphasize with his choice, whether or not they agree with the one he has chosen.

Blank cinema often employs atypical techniques of perspective that serve to intensify motifs of alienation, disconnection, and confusion, which help further the underlying mission of blank art: shifting traditional understandings of power through the control of popular symbols of power. The scene in Hue City is of particular importance to the discussion of *Full Metal Jacket* as a film of the blank cinema movement with the intent to shift ideals of power holding. There are only two scenes in the film in which the point of view shifts from third person to first person: the sniper scene and the making of "Vietnam: the movie" scene. Both are indicative of the social commentary of the film. The making of the movie scene shows the men speaking to a camera, offering their opinions and answering questions. Vietnam was the first "televised" war, a war that made depictions of bloody, wounded soldiers commonplace in American living rooms and, arguably, a moment in time that helped shift American attitudes toward the need for immediate news. This meta-cinematic scene of a film being created during an active battle suggests the presence of the larger, civilian populace and their desire to consume images, to turn everything into entertainment. While some might argue that this is an off-hand gesture toward Western desensitization, or the waning of affect, it must be argued that for Kubrick to use this scene and to actually present this unspoken argument to the world at large,

he is directly arguing against a waning of affect. He is addressing this issue in a public forum, thereby contradicting the concept of passive indifference. The sniper scene supports this argument. The shift in point of view from the soldiers to the person responsible for their death suggests an argument for audience responsibility. Rather than watching the soldiers writhe in pain from a third-person camera point of view, Kubrick chooses to shift the camera point of view to the sniper, indicting the audience, in a manner of speaking, in the soldier's demise. We see them through her scope, we recognize the horror that will occur before they do, making us recognize our position of power. Kubrick is forcing his audience to consider their own responsibility for the events that affect the lives of young Americans—a very clear anti-war message.

Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, though politically and socially important in its own right, serves as a clear example of the blank cinema movement that emerged at the same time as the blank fiction movement. The social and political criticism of these works of art is a remarkably important field of study that has gone unappreciated. Although blank fiction is beginning to receive the attention it deserves, the study of blank cinema could invite more interest from scholars concerned with recognizing the art forms emerging in the 1980s that contradict the dismissive ideologies of many postmodern critics.

Chapter 4: The Serial Killer

In the blank fiction and cinema movement, there is an emphasis on the “unexamined” character and a focus on the deviance of these characters’ actions and philosophies from the popular, traditional American moral ideology. In this traditional ideology, most adhere to the Judeo-Christian ethic of “thou shalt not kill,” the notion of fear or outrage in response to criminal acts, and, though we may not always follow it, the belief that as a culture we, as our Puritan forefathers before us, look out for our fellow community members and deter criminal acts against them. The deviant protagonist of blank works is frequently offered without a foil, without someone following the traditional moral order with whom the audience might compare him/her and find him/her wanting ethically or morally. The deviant protagonist, like Clay in *Less Than Zero* or Joker in *Full Metal Jacket*, emphasizes the lack of a moral center in blank fiction and film and the amoral subjectivity of the work itself.

American popular culture typically struggles with the idea of a lack of a moral center. Although our American society is extremely culturally diverse, we have basic collective concepts of accepted “normality,” or what we label as normal or abnormal, right or wrong. Our justice system is based on these collective ideals. For example, most of us would agree that murder is “wrong,” and serial killers are “abnormal.” When we see indications of anomalous

behavior in fellow citizens, particularly if this behavior is in any way threatening to us or those we care about, we seek ways of stopping or containing it. What we recognize as abnormal, we label as Other; that which we attribute to being out with our collective moral code we consider to be something that belongs to beings other than ourselves. In other words, we, as “normal” citizens, do not commit heinous crimes, nor can we relate to those who do. In our contemporary U.S. culture, it is arguable that we unconsciously look for ways to confirm this ideology. We watch television shows on which those who commit crimes are referred to as “perpetrators,” “criminals,” and various other labels that reinforce the concept that these beings are Others, not everyday citizens. Watching films or TV shows that repress or exterminate the murderous Other not only justifies our system of beliefs but also makes us feel safe and secure from that which we perceive as a threat. As Phil Simpson writes in his remarkable book on the serial killer in American fiction and film, *Psycho Paths*, the “horror genre can best be defined as that which depicts monsters for the purpose of disturbing, unsettling, and disorientating its consumers, often for the seemingly paradoxical purpose of reinforcing community identity” (9). The Other serves, in all forms of fiction and film universally, as that which both deviates from and defines the “norm.”

Most Hollywood or mainstream horror films offer audiences a sense of security when they portray scenes in which the law prevails over the monster or killer and we see our concepts of right and wrong and good and evil reflected on screen. Within the culture industry, we expect and reward, through popular response, revenue, and marketing, the conformity of commercial entertainment

that meets our aesthetic expectations. Typically, gothic or horror films fulfill these expectations, offering easily distinguishable Others:

Classic examples of Gothic literature deal with characters' fears of the forbidden and their repression of unauthorized urges. They warn against extremes of pleasure and stimulation, which are seen to dull the capacity to reason, and encourage the transgression of social proprieties and moral laws. Archetypes of "civilized" society are used in the narrative to justify the condemnation of unacceptable acts, and likewise feed into our conception of reality (Helyer 726).

Although in the gothic tradition the main character may be one struggling to contain both his "good" and "evil" sides, the didacticism of traditional gothic literature ensures that outside of the struggling protagonist exists a culture of jurisprudence and clearly expressed social and moral ideologies to which the "good" inside the man should aspire, allowing the good to triumph over the deviant Other.

In the mid 1980s, a new Other was making its way onto our screens: the serial killer. There are differing opinions as to why this phenomenon grew during this time. Some scholars, such as David Schmid in his book *Natural Born Celebrities*, suggest that the serial killer gave the populace a face for a new deluge of violent crime reporting that emerged as editorial standards dropped and news broadcasts competed for viewers of shows like *Hard Copy*. Robert Conrath in his essay "Serial Heroes: A Sociocultural Probing into Excessive

Consumption” suggests that the serial killer achieved iconic status during the late 1980s because the killer’s extreme egocentrism paralleled the “money-grubbing ... megalomaniacal likes of Donald Trump and Michael Milken” (150). What I propose, however, is that horror films and novels used this new human monster figure as a way of expressing the fears of Americans who could not identify their source of anxiety during the Reagan Era. The serial killer, I argue, is not simply someone who evokes our fears of being killed, but he/she also makes us fear the Otherness within ourselves as a society and as individuals.

The serial killer figure offered a manifestation of anxiety on which Americans could focus their insecurities during the mid- to late-1980s. During the 1980s, America was emerging from a recession, an oil crisis, and the overwhelming threat of nuclear war. With Reagan’s government doing all it could to create a new, feel-good, capitalist utopia, it was almost impossible for the nation’s common citizens to articulate the source of the country’s underlying anxieties and fears. The Russians were weakening as a threat, communism had been contained, we “won” the war in Grenada, and our president was enforcing positivism in a manner not seen in the United States in decades. America, citizens were being shown through popular media, was a great place to live, and we had no easily identifiable enemies anymore. Yet nations thrive on fear, as fears lead to conquest and serve as a way to distinguish clearly an “us” from a “them.” An Other on which to blame our unease gives us something external to fight and contain. But having these external fears supposedly diminished during in the late 1980s, we were forced to look inward for a monster to conquer. An

increase in American slasher, suspense, and horror movies, I argue, gave us superficial scapegoats to fear and monsters on which to blame our unease. The serial killer, in particular, gave us something real to fear within our own society. Yet this fear is not, simply, that we may be slaughtered in our beds by the quiet man next door. The fears provoked by serial killer films are those fears we have about ourselves as human beings. If our anxieties could not be blamed on an external enemy, then they must originate within—within our own country, thus within ourselves. Like the tradition of the socially conscious gothic novels from which they came, serial killer novels and films suggest a presence of darkness within society. This is not a new idea and the revelation of the struggle within a single being between “right” and “wrong” is certainly not shocking. But what the serial killer works of the 1980s were able to do was allow Americans to shift their focus from a fear of foreign enemies and outsider threats to the threat of that which lurked within their fellow citizens. The rhetoric of the New Right, as discussed previously, emphasized the importance of national unity, a unity that required the alienation of those who differed from the ideals of a conservative nation, whether it be in an economic, sexual, or ethnic sense. Public reactions to the AIDS epidemic and homosexuals and the persecution of young African Americans as an answer to violent crime in urban areas are simply two examples of the kinds of attitudes that exemplify this Othering and desire to eliminate difference. The serial killer represented difference amongst those striving for conformity.

The artists of this time period that were producing blank fiction and film were able to expand upon this new fascination with the serial killer and exploit the new horror genre in the same manner that they were able to parody the various other popular genres discussed previously. The blank emphasis on undeveloped characterization, a lack of moral center, and an emphasis on internal otherness (without a moralizing external source) enable blank artists to use the serial killer figure for a more political purpose. Simpson argues that

this “invisible killer” suits New Right rhetoric,¹⁰ which emphasizes the need for strong law-and-order social institutions to constrain man’s fundamentally corrupt soul. But as earlier leftist and feminist critics discovered first, the same “invisible killer” concept is ambiguous enough that it can be used to level devastating critiques of the violence underlying traditional American values (136)/

Blank artists, whose political statements are steeped in leftist leanings, have capitalized on the serial killer’s natural “blankness.” In “The Unexamined” Chambers explores the unexamined nature of whiteness and the fact that its nature is “unparadigmatic” compared with all that is considered “non-white.” The focus of his essay is on the power whiteness possesses because it remains unexamined, in contrast to the paradigmatic nature of the non-white categories that invite exploration and scrutiny because of their very difference. “Whiteness,” he says, “is not a classificatory identity but just the unexamined norm against

¹⁰ The serial killer figure has most recently been hi-jacked by the resurgence of the New Right rhetoric the United States is experiencing as the war in Iraq wages. The *Dexter* phenomenon has created a superhero out of a vigilante serial killer—the murderer with a heart of gold and the best of intentions.

which such identities are defined, compared, and examined.... Whereas others may have group identities, white people as a group are just the unexamined. But there is more political strength in that than in all the identity politics in the world” (197). Blank artists aim to interrogate this notion of power.

The unexamined quality of whiteness and its alignment with power in Western cultures generally means that there is a void in art and popular culture where stereotypes or other figures intended for representational criticism should be. What Chambers seems to be suggesting is that if a culture treats white men in power as individuals, then dissent against their actions will generally be specific to the man. Whereas culturally we have had a traditionally easier time creating stereotyped bogeymen of various races and ethnicities, what America had been lacking was a figure in art and culture that served as a means to criticize this “unexamined” group as a whole; yet some began to formulate ways of doing this in their art in the mid-1980s. The serial killer figure in particular served as a cultural icon and a means for this criticism. Directors’ and writers’ use of the serial killer in U.S. popular culture of the 1980s began as a way of publicly exploring and criticizing the political power of white men in America with a particular emphasis on the Reagan administration.

Before examining the two keys works I will use to support this argument, Bret Easton Ellis’s 1991 novel *American Psycho* and John McNaughton’s 1987 film *Henry: Portrait of A Serial Killer*, it will be helpful to look at a typical depiction of the serial killer in popular culture and then discuss how blank works contrast with more mainstream examples. Michael Mann’s 1986 *Manhunter* is based on

Thomas Harris's novel *Red Dragon* (the novel before his best-known 1991 novel *Silence of the Lambs*). Using the tropes of traditional horror films, *Manhunter* is an excellent example of a late-1980s U.S. serial killer film that is saturated with phenomenological questions related to life in Reagan's America, but one that, unlike blank novels or films, relies on existing ideological ideas of morality and justice. In *Manhunter*, Mann offers his audience three manifestations of evil lurking behind an "unexamined" face: the serial killers Red Dragon and Hannibal Lecter and the character of FBI agent Will Graham. Red Dragon, the film's primary villain, is on a murderous spree, killing and mutilating white, upper-middle-class nuclear families. He is a serial killer not content to murder prostitutes or other vulnerable victims of the night. His victims are not killed out of retribution, nor are they murdered for the moralizing reasons often seen in slasher films—they are not teenagers fornicating in the woods or drinking in deserted cemeteries. His role as white male killer is advanced to a level of debauchery beyond that of the *typical* white male killer in cinematic history—he is not a gangster or a soldier or a hired assassin. He has not been bitten by a vampire or werewolf, and he is not possessed by aliens or demons. His are purely human acts. His victims, rather than vulnerable creatures of the night or members of America's underworld, are symbolic of those living the American dream.

By exposing the vulnerability of the privileged, as many horror films do, filmmakers working with serial killers are able to approach an audience with fears unassociated with those of their daily lives, forcing them to confront more

generalized anxieties about the stability of their power and their control. His victims are, generally speaking, presented as innocent and unaware that they are being stalked. By invading their homes, Red Dragon is not only destroying their lives, he is destroying the sense of safety assumed by all Americans when they are tucked away in suburbia. His reach extends to the successful and the powerful (his victims are obviously wealthy), a clear reference to the vulnerability that all Americans have at the hand of those in positions of governmental power in the United States, not just the poor and struggling. Red Dragon's crimes are unexpected and seemingly inexplicable and representative of the threat behind that which is unexamined and unknown. Hannibal Lector, the film's secondary serial killer, is "explained" in the movie by FBI profiler Will Graham as being "insane." Lector is locked safely inside of a cell—his captivity, plus his mental condition thus explained, renders him a neutered threat in the plot. His character, however, is not necessarily a representation of the threat of the "unexamined" by itself; Lector is actually used as a way of introducing Graham's capacity for evil. Graham, family man and sensitive, brooding genius who was responsible for catching serial killer Lector, realizes that he must go to Lector and seek his help in finding Red Dragon. In their first discussion in Lector's cell, Lector taunts Graham with the phrase: "You know why you caught me Will? You know why you caught me? The reason is we're just alike." In this scene the distinction between the serial killer Other and the man in the film with whom we are to identify as normal is blurred. Graham is able not only to understand Lector (and other murderers), he is able to identify with him and he shares some of the

same personal and intellectual characteristics. This connection disables the audience's ability to judge and dismiss Lector as entirely Other and Graham as entirely "safe." Graham's dismissal of Lector as "insane" offers some solace to the audience and allows them to formulate some sort of a distinction between the two, but by connecting the hero and villain in the film, the audience is shown how fine a line there is between normalcy and insanity and how pervasive evil is among members of the unexamined group of powerful, white men.

Manhunter is similar to arts of the blank movement, with its focus on white characters' deviance. In this film, Graham struggles with the realization that he is so closely tied to the Other, and we see him unable to rid himself of this disturbance even after he has eliminated Red Dragon. However, regardless of whether or not Graham is aware of and abhorred by his likeness to Lector, Mann ensures that his audience is not only alerted to the similarity but also very aware that this connection does not go away with the destruction of Red Dragon—it remains within Graham even as he plays with his son during the sunset scene at the end of the film. The potential for evil lurks, and Graham's son is a symbol that this menace will remain in future generations if it is not exposed and addressed.

The film touches on many of the same issues as the two serial killer tales that follow, and it is an intellectual step away from the pastiche of exploitation films such as *Natural Born Killers* or the didactic lessons of Stephen King's novels. The Oliver Stone film, which on a basic level appears to be critical of criminal celebrity, lacks the critical distance to achieve any true notion of

criticism. The film was incredibly popular, and its heavy emphasis on justice allowed Stone to offer closure and comfort to those seeking confirmation of the generalized ideology of judicial power and the punishment of deviance. And, though one may be tempted to read Will Graham's character as a deviant protagonist like those in blank art, his judicial training and reliance on protocol, and his keen awareness of his potential difference, make him much more similar to the reformed monster in a gothic horror than an amoral figure of ontological questioning like Clay or Joker. As a whole, the film speaks to the unconscious social and political discomfort that many possessed in American culture of the time, but it does not address the problems as directly as the serial killer works of the blank movement.

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer

To present the argument that the blank movement's use of the serial killer figure is an especially powerful tool for its social and political criticism, I will present a brief analysis of John McNaughton's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), a clear example of blank cinema. It is a cinematic work of phenomenological interrogation of a serial murderer. Now commonly referred to as a "cult movie,"¹¹ the film evoked little serious criticism from scholars. It is a

¹¹ The term "cult movie" was coined by Danny Peary in his 1981 book *Cult Movies*, a text consisting of a series of essays regarding what Peary described as the 100 most representative examples of the cult film phenomenon. Peary defines "cult" films as "special films which for one reason or another have been taken to heart by segments of the movie audience, cherished, protected, and most of all, enthusiastically championed." He argues that, as opposed to most mainstream cinema, cult movies "are born in controversy, in arguments over quality, theme, talent

low-budget, technically simplistic work, but McNaughton's distinctive way of presenting his monstrous protagonist deserves much more critical attention than it has received. *Henry* is a film that creates more questions than it answers; it is a film that forces its audience to question not only its own concepts of ontology but also the entire socially constructed, Western system of what it means to be "normal." McNaughton accomplishes this by keeping his film devoid of references to any construct of moral normalcy and therefore keeping his audience from being able to pass moral judgment on the events of his film. In order to create this lack of moral normalcy, McNaughton removes several standard elements of the horror film from his movie. *Henry* is lacking several key tropes of standard horror genre films, but there are four crucial points worth noting specifically: There is no clear beginning or ending to the narrative, there are no obvious reasons for Henry's choice of victims, there is no clear psychological explanation for his behavior, and there is no foil or contrasting character to which Henry can be compared (most notably, there is no law enforcement character to contrast with our killer).

Blank works do not fulfill the expectations of the genres that they parody. For example, in standard horror films, dramatic tension is built through the narrative of the story. Typically an audience is startled by an initial murder, then introduced to the perpetrator of the crimes, then engaged in a cat-and-mouse game between the killer and those trying to stop him (usually the monster or killer is masculine). The end of the film follows the defeat of the monster by law

and other matters. Cultists believe they are among the blessed few who have discovered something in particular that the average moviegoer and critic have missed—the something that makes the pictures extraordinary.”

enforcement or its symbolic representatives. In *Henry*, however, we are not guided into the film and then surprised by a murder. The opening of the film shows flashes of several brutally murdered corpses. We meet Henry at breakfast, in between murders. There is no dramatic tension in our introduction. The film continues without any real suspense other than, perhaps, who Henry might choose to kill next or how long we can go through the film without Otis doing something repulsive. There is no game of chase and no concern for Henry's capture. The film does not have any closure—it ends as it begins, following Henry through a murderous spree. We are dropped into his life unexpectedly just as we are dropped out of it, reminiscent of the victims he claims throughout the film.

Blank works also fail to offer the kind of closure most popular arts provide in terms of answering questions related to *why* crimes or violence have occurred. Victims of the murderous Other in gore-filled horror or common “slasher” films will often fall victim to the criminal for a reason; often the victim has a previous relationship with the killer or the victim fits into a specific profile to which a serial murderer is attracted. These reasons, of course, never make the murder justifiable, but often they help the audience make sense of the violence. Even in the teen slasher film, we recognize that the kids having sex or drinking in the woods will “get it” because they are doing something naughty in the dark. In *Henry*, however, McNaughton goes to great lengths to show us how senseless and random violence can be. Steven A. Jones, McNaughton's co-scriptwriter for *Henry*, suggests that the reason for the solid X rating that the film received from

the MPAA was because “people want to believe that there aren’t random acts of violence out there.... Well, the real Henry (i.e. Henry Lee Lucas, after whom McNaughton’s and Jones’s character is modeled) went seven years uncaptured. Scary but true. We gave out that message, and it was too emotionally disturbing” (Hantke 10) for general audiences. Although all of Henry’s murders in the film are apparently chosen at random (with the exception of Becky and Otis), there is one chilling scene in particular that demonstrates his morally abject choices. We see Henry sitting in his car outside of the mall. Several women come out into the parking lot and he, as we see through the camera in the switch in perspective from third person to first, eyes them all. For a reason we cannot determine, he chooses one and follows her to her house. He later returns to kill her. Further into the film we see chance at play again when Henry takes Otis out for a kill. They park their car on the shoulder of a tunnel, shooting indiscriminately the first concerned citizen that stops to help. We cannot rationalize the choice in victims, and thus a clear distinction between our concept of normality and the ideology of the murderous others has been blurred.

Popular culture thrives on explanation as a way of abating fears of violence and fears of Otherness, whereas blank works emphasize the irrational, random nature of violence and horror. In typical reports of stories of serial killers, for example, there is usually a dialogue explaining what led the killer to commit atrocities. Understanding why someone does something we consider abnormal helps us rationalize the occurrence. For example, killer tomatoes from outer space are destroying the planet because things *from outer space are weird and*

dangerous. Others from a different world or those that are markedly, absolutely different from us in some way make it easier for us to draw a line between us and them. Usually, the Otherness of the monster has been clearly identified and our concept of ourselves and our collective normality are unchanged. In gothic horror this is evident in the physical presence of the killer—he is an easily identifiable monster. In his article “Monstrosity Without a Body: Representational Strategies in the Popular Serial Killer Film,” Steffen Hantke suggests that the monster’s body is a “signifier in which monstrosity appears directly, unmistakably, palpably, visibly, shockingly” (34). In serial killers films, we know that the monster we are watching is supposed to look normal—we recognize this as one of the things that scares us. But typically his mask of normality slips and we see him clearly for the monster he is (35). Camera angles, horrific facial expressions, and other physical indicators created by the director help us to see this. This slip typically occurs in the presence of other characters, who shriek with fear at the revelation of the monster’s true nature. Yet in *Henry*, this never happens. Henry is relatively attractive and, though frightening to watch while he kills, never appears less or more than the average human.

When investigating the psyche of serial killers, it helps us to know that they do the things that they do because they have a mental disorder or they were abused as children or they are demons from hell. As Phil Simpson suggests, “the killers are coded as monsters, but a tragic personal history of abuse or neglect is also usually fore grounded as a part of the narrative, humanizing them to at least some extent and making them capable of earning our sympathy” (11).

Establishing clear reasons for their behavior also gives us a definite distinction between ourselves and them. In addition to the physical reassurance that our killer is definitely a monster, most films or novels help us rationalize our monster's acts by telling us why he does what he does. Yet in *Henry*, we are left only to guess. McNaughton toys with his audience in this regard. We see Becky, enamored with Henry, question him as to why he killed his mother. Otis told her that Henry shot and killed his own mother and another man. Henry tells Becky that his mother victimized him, making him wear a dress (echoes of *Psycho*, of course) and watch her sleep with various men, beating him when he disobeyed. He then tells Becky that he stabbed his mother. She questions the discrepancy between the stories, and he becomes defensive and seemingly confused. We get the impression that he has told many different versions of such a story to many people, offering to his listeners what he assumes people want to hear. As Hantke suggests, "we must conclude that the personal confession about his own victimization—a standard trope in current narratives about origins of violence—is nothing but a convenient psychological tool for him to subdue his victims" ("Violence" 36). The audience is left with an unreliable explanation—we will never know why he does what he does. McNaughton has left us purposefully epistemologically confused. We cannot understand Henry, and therefore clear line between us and the Other has been blurred. The blandness of Henry's behavior and his seemingly off-hand choices again posit questions of ontology. Normally audiences are traditionally presented with villains gleefully rubbing their black-gloved hands at the prospect of picking their

victim or plotting like some kind of evil genius. Henry's blankness is all the more threatening in its passive, amoral figuration.

Blank cinema, in addition to removing an explanation for crimes or deviance, also removes the comforting notion that there are those in the world who inevitably stand against that which threatens unity and safety. Blank fiction rarely offers a character that can be considered a figure of justice or morality. In many films, even if we are left to ponder why the monster is as extreme as he is, we can at least depend on the other characters in the film to reflect our sense of morality or at least our basic ideals of normalcy—they do not murder people at random or commit other basic atrocities. Yet again in *Henry*, a quintessential blank film, McNaughton has removed this comforting trope. He gives us no characters with whom we might hope to relate. There is no presence of jurisprudence in the film, no steely detective knocking on the door or mismatched police partners solving their emotional crisis through their successful pursuit of a monster. There are really only two other characters in the entire film: Otis, Henry's old cellmate who is now his roommate, and Becky, Otis's sister. Otis, in contrast to Henry, is an unattractive, physical menacing character. He is physically repulsive and completely morally corrupt; he is also an idiot. His outward appearance and mannerisms indicate the inner turmoil of evil. He is a classic murderous Other. We can immediately place him in the category of Other and at no time do his behaviors challenge our assumptions. Becky, on the other hand, appears initially to be our only representative of normality. Hiding from an abusive husband and trying to find work in Chicago, she represents that which

we can at least pity, if not relate to. We then learn of her terrible childhood (what we were hoping to learn of Henry) and her abuse at the hands of her father. Her immediate attachment to Henry is only mildly disturbing, but her worn-down acceptance of her brother's abuse begins to alienate the audience. Incest, a taboo in any film, is put right before us in the relationship between brother and sister. Even Henry objects. Yet Becky's objections are weak, and the situation takes on a culturally unacceptable feeling of permissibility. This awkward depiction of emotional response to abuse furthers this blank work's attempt at undermining notions of conformity and symbols of basic normality.

The removal of morally centered characters from the tale allows blank works to manipulate the concept of those in "power." When power is removed from the hands of those typically considered "just" and "right," audiences are forced to consider the power held by deviant Others. In *Henry*, having to abandon all hope of having a main character to whom we can cling for moral support, we begin to expect the arrival of a detective or other appearance of someone representing order and justice. Someone, we assume, will have to chase Henry, to threaten his spree, to stop him and Otis from killing again. But there are no close calls, no inquiries, no interviews, and no escapes. Henry is never challenged, and we are left on our own with the Other, who, by the end of the film, has become our only hero. Aside from his continuous killing, he is much less upsetting for us than Otis and easier for us to emotionally handle than Becky. And he is so good at what he does it seems almost natural for us to root for him—almost, of course. And after McNaughton has stripped away all of our

comforting tropes that would usually keep us solidly connected to a moral norm, we recognize that we are alone with Henry, and we feel ourselves beginning to relate to him. As we follow Henry through the film, we begin to anticipate his actions. We know he will murder Becky, for example, and when we see him take the suitcase from his truck, we *know* that it contains her lifeless body. As he drives away toward the horizon at the end of the film, we *know* he is headed west to continue his murderous spree. By the end of the movie we are understanding an Other who we assumed we could never, ever understand. That this is possible in the world McNaughton has created, one devoid of reference to “real life,” and one without a moralizing distance, is frightening to our moral ideology.

All blank films have the effect of leaving their audiences emotionally raw and somewhat morally confused. *Henry* is no exception. The violence and subject content are brutal, and there is no respite from the horror of the film. The pressure of the narrative is constant. Devin McKinney, in her article “Violence: The Strong and the Weak,” discusses the relentless tension of the film:

There is a grinding insistence on murder as a mere relief of tension, a dully masturbatory act, and it infuses even the nonviolence scenes with a glowering menace. The life seen here is entirely of a piece with death: there is no ‘real world,’ no normality to return to. What this means in practice is that although the presentation is outwardly neutral, its effect is extreme. Unlike the common run of hermetic, low-budget bloodbaths, *Henry* puts its banality to a purpose. Its very monotony induces paranoia, hypersensitivity to

what was once ordinary. Like all works of strong violence, it leaves its audience feeling dead inside, yet, somehow, more alive than it was before (18).

The “somehow” to which McKinney is referring can be explained as the turmoil of emotions that the audience experiences after watching the film. McNaughton engages his audience, asking questions of us and taking away our comforting reality that we normally carry with us during horror films. In contrast to Hantke, who feels that the movie has a “curious failure to engage the viewer emotionally” (“Violence” 4), most audiences members will find this a compelling film, one that leaves them feeling emotionally exhausted. Most of this exhaustion comes from our knowledge that we have temporarily connected with a serial killer. This connection or moment of relativity means we have recognized the Other within ourselves, a terrifying moment of metacognition when we are forced to face the capacity for “evil” that lurks within us all as human beings.

Had McNaughton left us to our own self-flagellation after we realized that we had stopped judging Henry and begun to understand him, the movie would have still been described as a blank film and still been a challenge to its audience’s concept of reality. However, as blank artists are consistently challenging their audiences’ notions of basic ideological norms, he did not stop there. McNaughton goes beyond this in *Henry* and actually implicates his audience in the perpetuation of the horror of serial murder. Otis and Henry procure a video camera, which they use to record their exploits. Otis becomes fascinated with watching the videotape, and we see the acts of violence repeated

regularly on the screen of the television. We judge Otis for his childlike glee as he watches the horror unfold on his screen. His obsession with viewing the tape over and over repulses us. This repulsion, then, we cannot escape as we realize that we, in a sense, are committing the same acts as we watch Henry kill his victims on camera. The use of the video camera in the film has little to do with meta-cinema and a lot to do with implicating the audience and its desire to see violence on film. How can we judge Otis for doing something very similar to what we are doing by watching the movie ourselves? We then must recognize how much our sense of normalcy overlaps that which we had previously considered distinctly Other. Alternatively, one might begin to ponder, as we are forced to consider when Kubrick turns the camera toward the sniper's victims, what our particular part is in this film, what kind of responsibility we must face for knowing and predicting the criminal's behavior yet watching passively as he "keeps on moving."

In *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, John McNaughton removes the classic horror film tropes that give the audience a sense of distinct separation from that which they fear. No longer are we allowed the security of knowing that we are "normal" and the monsters on screen are "Others." In *Henry* we are left with no clear narrative structure that gives us a sense of closure and distance. We have no way of understanding what makes Henry so different and therefore no way of rationalizing his actions. We are left confused and frightened. Henry is not caught by a representative of our moral code, and we, at the end of the film, watch him drive away with no intention of stopping him ourselves. We see the

barriers between normal and abnormal being torn down within the film, and we feel them being torn down within ourselves. By relating to Henry we are admitting to the Other we have inside ourselves, the Other we have tried to ignore for so long by seeing him caged and contained in classic horror films.

In *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, John McNaughton presents his audience with a study of a killer who is unknown to everyone, yet somehow familiar. Henry is a kind of everyman—he has no outstanding physical characteristics, and he is presented to the audience unmasked and unmarked. Aside from his murderous rampage (which has been going on for an undisclosed amount of time), he appears in no way abnormal. He is articulate and mild-mannered. He is charismatic in an understated way—women are attracted to him, and he asserts his domination over other men with relative ease. In the outside world, Henry could pass easily as a member of the “unexamined” social group. He is therefore an ideal character to represent the threat of the “unexamined.”

Henry, in contrast to the other protagonists of blank fiction discussed thus far, seems incongruous in that he is seemingly illiterate and the son of an abusive prostitute. But Henry, like Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, is a complex character, difficult to define and inconsistent in his tales of his past. McNaughton emphasizes this by dropping the audience into the film with no fixed introduction and ending the film with Henry heading out on an anonymous highway. We are given no real information as to Henry’s actual past or his future plans, and his time in Chicago living with the white trash siblings could easily be

a single act in his multifaceted life. Henry is by far the most blank of the blank protagonists, and though he appears to lack the wealth and privilege of his counterparts in other blank works, his charm and his ability to fit into any situation identify him as a quintessential white, male threat.

American Psycho

The two most aggressive examples of blank works are McNaughton's *Henry* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). These two pieces, with their emphasis on the serial killer figure and their ironic incorporation of the horror genre, are consistently challenging to notions of morality, normality, and, ultimately, to signs of "power." While McNaughton's film produced little popular attention, Ellis's *American Psycho* created a maelstrom of controversy even before its publication. Although popular response is not always necessary to understanding the affect of blank works, exploring the response to this novel should help in explaining the nuance and delicacy of Ellis's criticism of popular culture. His novel has attracted a lot of media attention, and the varying reactions of those expressing an interest in the novel exposes the various levels of social and political criticism expressed in the story.

In contrast to the fact that it is beginning to receive critical, academic attention, when it was first published in 1991, the publication trials and tribulations and the popular, public response to Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* overshadowed the book itself. Stopped at the eleventh hour of its

publication by Simon & Schuster, it was quickly picked up by Random House Publishers. *Time* and *Spy* magazines reported on the graphic descriptions of violence in the text, prompting Simon & Schuster to pull out of its contract with Ellis. When this information was released, public interest was, of course, piqued. Hailed by some as an icon for free speech and deplored by others as a torturer's manifesto, the text itself has been largely overlooked. Its existence as a piece of fiction has even been missed by many who have attacked Ellis himself, confusing him with his serial-killer protagonist Patrick Bateman. The novel (and Ellis) have been labeled anti-woman. But the text is “anti-dog, too and anti-beggar and anti-child” (Wheldon 2). Regardless of how it is labeled, the novel does not fail to shock. In her article “The Aesthetics of Serial Killing: Working Against Ethics in *The Silence of the Lambs* and *American Psycho*,” Sonia Baelo Allué discusses the violent nature of the text in contrast to another popular novel of serial killing, *Silence of the Lambs*. In *American Psycho*, she suggests,

Tortures and killings are narrated in detail. Whereas Demme [dir. *Silence of the Lambs*] offered only a “safe shock,” Ellis offers gruesome depictions of horrible acts.... I agree with Linda Kauffman who observes that [what] Ellis has done is translate what viewers see on the screen in horror films into prose, transcribing the thousands of discrete sights, sounds, and sensations the brain records in each frame of any horror film. (16)

The nuanced, explicit, what many have called “pornographic” violence of the novel is what stimulated the furor surrounding its release. The nature of this

violence and its literary significance will be discussed further, but what must be addressed first are the initial critical reactions to the novel itself.

Many academics, once they are able to look past the gruesome details of maiming and torture, have begun a dialogue that explored the meaning behind Ellis's bloody third novel. The majority of critical discourse has centered on issues of commodification and the material culture of mid- to late-1980s America that the story seems to condemn. It is true that *American Psycho* is typical of blank fiction in that the commodity is a central figure of the work. As in *Less Than Zero*, taking time to understand the interest in commodification is important because, as Ernest Mandel argues, in *Late Capitalism*,

contemporary economics involves a "vast penetration of capital into the spheres of circulation, services and reproduction," a process that operates "by extending the boundaries of commodity production." Relentless commodification, a process that effects almost all levels of social life, characterizes what he calls the "late capitalist" period (Annesley 8).

Ellis, like all blank artists of his time, satirizes the late capitalist world of the late 1980s New York, basing his book around the effects of widespread commodification. His characters are no longer fully fleshed-out people, they are simply "things" in the system of commodities:

In the system of commodity economy, everything, including people, their capabilities and talents, etc, becomes a commodity, there is a tendency, not only to treat everything as a commodity, i.e. as

something which is bought and sold; but since things are commodities, there is also a tendency to endow everything with the nature of things, to reification (Schaff 75).

Ellis's characters are portrayed as things, not as people, and they relate to one another as things—judging one another's marketability and value. Bateman epitomizes this; those in his world have been completely reified and there is no sign of humanity left. The violence in the text centers on the ultimate form of commodification—that of turning a human being into a commodity, not as a form of labor commodity, but as an object. Bateman is the definitive consumer; his life is based around what he wears, buys, and eats (and whom he dismembers, of course). There are numerous examples of such consumption:

Autumn: a Sunday around four o'clock in the afternoon. I'm at Barney's buying cufflinks. I had walked into the store at two-thirty, after a cold, tense brunch with Christie's corpse.... In addition to the cufflinks, I've bought an ostrich travel case with double-zippered openings and vinyl liners, an antique, silver, crocodile and glass pill jar, an antique toothbrush container, a badger-bristle toothbrush and a faux-tortoiseshell nailbrush. Dinner last night? At Splash (280).

Bateman is a consumer with unlimited wealth and “unlimited desires and as such he is unable to distinguish between purchasing a camera and purchasing a woman” (Annesley 14). And purchase women he does, whether it is literally (call girls and hookers) or figuratively, wining and dining and buying presents for his

dates. His violence against them emphasizes his feelings of ownership, and their murders represent not only their total reification (as disposable “things”) but also Bateman’s desire to consume them totally, to take from them all they can possibly give. He takes this even further when he tries to eat them, trying to satisfy both his consumer urges and his corporeal desires (Annesley 16): “I want to drink this girl’s blood as if it were champagne and I plunge my face into what’s left of her stomach, scratching my chomping jaw on a broken rib” (Ellis *American Psycho* 331). Bateman’s desire to consume is insatiable, and the connection between his cannibalism and Ellis’s commentary on late capitalism has been the primary focus of literary critics in their responses to this novel.

The objectification and commodity fetishism of the novel is never so clearly presented as in the scene in which Bateman cruises for prostitutes in the meat packing district, finding one standing alone beneath a giant sign that says “MEAT” in red, capital letters. James Annesley’s entire reading of the novel, in his seminal work on blank fiction, is based on the belief that “Ellis’s point is that the human dimension has been occluded in contemporary society with destructive consequences” (20) and “the madness of Patrick Bateman is the natural product of a society in which rampant consumerism intersects with the hyperreality of a media society” (19). It is undoubtedly obvious that Bateman’s morality has been replaced by consumerism. His ethics have been exchanged for a capitalist mantra: If it looks good and has solid market value, then it is good. When he references Stash’s “cheap, bad haircut” he admits that it is a “haircut that’s bad because it’s cheap” (*AP* 20). He is fanatical about his appearance and

in constant distress that he or his belongings may appear less than perfect. Inadequacy over his business card in comparison to a colleague's brings on a dizzy spell. His grooming products are of equal importance to air and water. Superficial appearance and material possession in *American Psycho* replaces any need for personal depth.

There is a stark lack of characterization and depth in Bateman and in every other character presented in the novel. Alex E. Blazer's article "Chasms of Reality, Aberrations of Identity: Defining the Postmodern through Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*," defines Bateman's lack of depth, suggesting that "he cannot differentiate between products and people, consumption and affect: he's flat, superficial, and ultimately unfathomable." Blazer's article identifies the key problem with the vast majority of critical discourse related to *American Psycho*. Blazer argues:

Postmodern culture, habituated to the velocity of life, takes emptiness as its foundation, and its origin, and is thereby driven by and to images of hyperreality in an exponentially mediated existence. Below the mask is simply another mask, another media. Depth is an image, an image of an illusion. Depth is precisely what Jack Gladney in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* lacks: existing in an age of incessant media bombardment, a virtual reality of sorts, the only epiphany he ... is capable of involves a Toyota Celica, the word as pure signifier, not even the thing itself.

Identifying (as this article does) Jack Gladney as Bateman's contemporary suggests that *American Psycho* is nothing more than extreme example of typical postmodern fiction—a *White Noise* on drugs. But having considered the mode of fiction, blank fiction, that Ellis employs and the degree to which he uses irony and obvious humor to make statements about late capitalism, one must insist that the majority of critical readings of this novel have not yet fully explored the overall, holistic message of the book.

Blank fiction does fall victim to a lack of interpretation by audiences, and as with his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, Ellis is presenting his audience with a satirical, insightful book that has been oversimplified and misinterpreted by critics. Reading *American Psycho* as a criticism of late capitalist culture is to understand it on only one level, but to suggest, as Annesley does, that its violence and graphic nature render it as merely pastiche and make it a part of the problem of media-saturated America is to completely ignore the multi-layered cultural commentary of the novel (21). Although many have denounced this book as a contribution to the degeneration of culture because of its pornographic violence, others have recognized it as satirical commentary on the violent images produced by a late capitalist society. While together these two arguments produce an interesting postmodern debate, to understand the book in either one of these ways is to grossly oversimplify and misunderstand the text.

In the art of the blank fiction movement, there is a void where moral order typically stands in popular culture, and the ideals of justice and law are notably absent. One of the primary reasons that Ellis's book upsets so many people

seems to be the fact that Bateman does not face justice for his crimes. The text “annoyed both left and right, first by gleefully cutting up women and then by getting away with it. (If there’s one thing that disturbs mainstream American more than evil, it’s amorality)” (Dunant 24). Graphic, violent texts are acceptable in America if the line between good and evil is clear and justice prevails. Such balance assures us that the system is working and everything is in its place. That is why, according to critic Fay Wheldon, novels by Stephen King and Thomas Harris are best sellers not banned for indecency. In these texts there has

always been someone to play lip service to respectability: to the myth that the world we live in is still capable of affect. The serial killer gets discovered, punished, stopped. There are people around to throw up their hands in horror, who can still distinguish between what is psychotic and what is not (2).

Alas, audiences are unable to make this distinction in *American Psycho*. As in the film *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, in this novel we only have events through the eyes of the psycho and no one to steer us straight, no straight-talking cop, no psychoanalyst to explain it all to us. Being psychopathic, Bateman is also an incredibly unreliable narrator, which causes even more confusion to the reader—it is difficult to denounce the actions of someone when one is not even sure they are actually occurring. According to Carla Freccero, Bateman’s unreliability and his struggle between his two identities presents “inevitable cracks” in his narration and “allow us to peer into the void beneath” (62).

The blank movement's emphasis on the "blankness" of its characters is clearly illustrated through Bateman and his thinly developed cast of support characters, like Clay and his friends in *Less Than Zero*, who serve to not only criticize the superficial world that helped create them but draw attention to the void over which they have plastered their worldly façades. Bateman's ability to look "like the boy next door" and "totally GQ" means he passes easily as a respectable member of society, not giving any clues to his masochistic streak. Even when he attempts to give clues to reveal himself, no one listens: "Patrick is not a cynic, Timothy. He's the boy next door, aren't you honey?" "No I'm not," I whisper to myself. "I'm a fucking evil psychopath" (Ellis *American Psycho* 19). No one appears to listen to one another at all in the novel. People ignore most of what is said to them, and Ellis portrays them as hearing only what they want to hear. To the world he appears a yuppie prince, and no one wants to dig beneath the surface. "Presenting Bateman not as some horrific aberration, but as a yuppie everyman" (Annesley 19) and having him mix in powerful, wealthy circles unnerves the public consensus that *those* people, those who torture, rape, and murder, are *different* and in some way distinguishable and therefore punishable. Bateman is a member of the "society" of 1980s Manhattan. He has great wealth and, therefore, great power.

The issue of power and the manipulation of signs that so motivates the artists of blank fiction is clearly articulated in *American Psycho*. Bateman's position of undisputed power within his social strata functions on two levels. His wealth (and whiteness) put him into the "unexamined" category, making him, to a

fair degree, above suspicion—his appearance suggests privilege and anonymity, neither of which typically fall into any kind of profiling categories on urban streets. But, should he make too many mistakes and draw attention to himself (which he frequently does), then his money buys him protection. His money “equips him with the tools he requires to commit his murders, the money he needs to buy his victims, and, significantly, the power to purchase the legal protection required to avoid imprisonment” (15). Ellis demonstrates this literally when Bateman talks about financing his defense against rape charges and figuratively when Bateman runs into the Pierce and Pierce building, to the safety of his office, after his gun battle with the police. Bateman’s security in his position of power as a young, wealthy broker who looks the perfect gentleman comments on the stratification of power in the American capitalist system.

The true horror of the serial killer works of blank fiction is in their emphasis on blankness at its most critically powerful. The characters of *American Psycho*, with their likeness and interchangeable characterizations, create a system of irresponsibility:

Even Bateman’s confession, a moment in the novel that teases us with Foucauldian irony, succeeds in revealing absolutely nothing, not because anything remains hidden, but because there is no truth to be revealed, extracted, and expedited in confession. No one is listening to him (he speaks to a telephone answering machine) and, since proper names correspond interchangeably to bodies, no one

can tell who is who; nor does anyone (except the protagonist) notice that fact, and no one, including Patrick, cares. (Freccero 52)

No one seems to care about anything of substance in the novel.

The focus on emotional response in blank art draws audience attention to ISAs, the elements in ideology that are accepted through long-term, subconscious programming and social conformity. Inappropriate emotional response to horror pervades this text: Bateman's ecstasy at dismembering people, for example, or his boredom at his attempt to try and poison his girlfriend with a urinal cake. The only times he emotes strongly are when he feels inadequate or when he feels as though he or others do not appear perfectly turned out. But Bateman is not alone in his bizarre emotional responses, as the other characters show themselves to be emotionally warped as well. The landlady who simply ignores the blood and gore at Paul Owen's apartment and simply tidies it away for a quick sale is a consummate example of the type of behavior that exposes the characters as one-dimensional, superficial creators. The call girl and hooker, who ignore their initial torture session with Bateman and leave "well-paid" also exemplify the bizarre, blunt responses to horror and tie into the text's overall themes of total commodification and de-humanization, but also to the deeper, more important message of a lack of responsibility and a lack of social conscience. In most of blank fiction, the emotional responses of the characters are inappropriate, and the reactions in *American Psycho* are skewed in a similar way. Bateman's reactions of joy to his bloody murders emit a feeling of successful conquest—that he has achieved control and consumption of

another human being. The joyous reactions of those committing violent crimes in urban realist novels like *Last Exit to Brooklyn* emit more a feeling of relief or revenge, as though in some way their crimes make up for all of the times that they themselves had been treated badly. The victims' reactions in each book are also different. In urban realist novels and in most horror tales, the victims are typically unsurprised by what happens to them, even resigned to the fact that it would inevitably happen, whereas in *American Psycho*, most of the victims pretend as though nothing has happened, emphasizing Ellis's underlying social criticism within the novel.

Blank arts often aim directly at the issues of stratification of wealth during the Reagan administration, and Ellis's novel is particularly poignant in this regard. "The spectre of the homeless is constant," as Elizabeth Young suggests, "they hover, *les misérables*, like ghosts on the edge of consciousness a reproach, a reproof, a warning" (109). The presence of the homeless helps highlight Bateman's wealth and power, their helplessness and need emphasizing his authority and control. Ruth Helyer addresses the homeless issue in her article on the gothic in *American Psycho*:

In stark contrast to the interior of Patrick's exclusive apartment, New York is represented as a desolate and dirty urban backdrop, inhabited by penniless beggars, showing the other side of the obscene wealth of the yuppie traders. The streets seem alienating and full of menace, yet ironically it is Patrick who is the threat, not the street dwellers. He delights in taunting the homeless and never

gives them any money. His wealthy companions share his values and priorities, commenting facetiously that one beggar badly needs a facial (738).

At first a seemingly obvious technique in the novel used to criticize U.S. social policies, Helyer deciphers a more complex code of criticism, suggesting that a part of Bateman's hatred for the underclasses is his fear that is "the beggars thrive ... then he will not" (738). By identifying this apprehension of threat, Helyer helps us understand how much more reprehensible Bateman's crimes and his contemporaries' indifference actually are. Rather than simple psychosis or simple self-centeredness, the acts of inhumanity in the novel are colored by an awareness of and responsibility for crimes that help the moneyed classes stay in control.

The stark, atonal style of blank fiction serves to illuminate the social undercurrents of the author's works. Ellis's use of language in *American Psycho* binds the novel together. His blank, empty style and schizophrenic jumping from scene to scene reflect the contents of the book and the demented mind of Patrick Bateman. His writing and content skim along the surface of reality, resulting in a very plastic, cartoon-esque feel of the novel, which in turn emphasizes his message of the commodification and reification of humanity. *American Psycho* is a text with a haunting message, a message Ellis conveys through violent images. The gratuitous violence of *American Psycho* is symbolic and unrelated to actual violence. To read *American Psycho* as simply a graphic display of indecency or to treat it as pornography is to dismiss it completely and miss the entire point of

Ellis's message. Understanding it as a work of art that glorifies freedom of expression is definitely better than denouncing it, but this barely scratches the surface of the novel. Ellis uses extreme examples of grotesque violence, rather than street violence or straightforward knife and gun attacks, to create a psychological effect. Ellis narrates the atrocities Bateman commits in a haunting, painfully graphic way that makes people grimace and turn their heads—it is completely appalling. He needs this affect, however, to illustrate his point. The message of *American Psycho* makes people just as uncomfortable as the violence does. Ellis's Bateman is a reflection of humanity in the Western world. The successful, pretty, all-American businessman is representative of the reader, members of the “unexamined” in particular, and his crimes are the symbolic representation of the crimes committed every day by flourishing members of a capitalist society, a society that can discount humanity for profit, valuing commodities over humans. Bateman's attacks are violent and all consuming, turning human beings into things. Killing a person leaves an unanimated corpse, a dead thing. Ellis uses Bateman's love of torturing and killing people to remind us that the real horror of present day society is the downward spiral of reification, and most importantly, an uncompromising look at issues of social responsibility and self-induced ignorance.

The novelists and filmmakers of blank art use the serial killer figure as a way of expressing their fears and concerns about the group that holds the most power in the United States yet receives the least amount of scrutiny. The rise of the popularity of the serial killer figure in popular culture occurred at a time when

the governmental administration was working its hardest to create an image of an utopian nation—a nation besieged by a series of governmental traumas for the past several decades. Just when the culture seemed unable to see through the paper-thin utopian exterior, writers, directors, and artists emerged to offer to the country a popular character through which they could effectively criticize the powers that had control. When the most powerful nation in the world is being run by an ex-B-movie actor, what better way to express dissent than through novels and films with characters who smile like “the Gipper” just before they are about to slash you open?

The graphic violence that many authors and filmmakers of blank works depend upon in their novels and films should not be considered simply metaphoric, however. Violence, like sexuality, is a cultural system over which those in power have control. By incorporating graphic violence into their works, blank artists are entering into the arena of sign control. Rather than simple mimicry of the types of disposable art that enter into Jameson’s discussion of the waning of affect, these notable artists are taking on systems of power in contemporary culture and engaging with symbols and signs of control, expressing their concern with widespread social acceptance of “power” in the hands of established forces. With their manipulation of genres and their engagement within the discourse of violence, blank artists are showing audiences that those often accepted as “powerful” need not necessarily be trusted or accepted. To expose issues of power control in society exposes the flaws in a dominant ideological system, but rather than just point out the flaws of

the “false consciousness,” blank artists are showing audiences that they have the power to use signs for social and political change, putting, hopefully, the power to do the same into the hands of the masses.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The rise of blank fiction and cinema in mainstream culture was precipitated by the political and social problems of America in the mid-1980s. The artists whose work attempted to express concern with certain Reagan administration policies and issues related to late capitalism offered a dissident voice in a culture saturated with works of escapist fantasy and superficial sensationalism that supported the dominant ideology of those in power. Studying the works of blank fiction and cinema is crucial to understanding the alternative voice of a nation that has been, thus far, underappreciated in the world of academia. To criticize, as the artists discussed in the previous chapters have done, the dominant forms of power in America through their mainstream mediums is a remarkable feat, but that these artists produced works that not only criticized but offered an example of a solution to the problems they identified is extraordinary. By incorporating the typical signs of traditional power into their works and producing fiction and films that show mainstream audiences the threat of unexamined forces of power, blank artists are showing audiences that signs of power can be controlled by anyone and that the dominant ideology is neither static nor impenetrable. If the signs of power can be manipulated and criticized in a mainstream medium, then all of us have the ability to manipulate these signs of power and alter the ideology that they produce. Truly investigating and

recognizing the power of blank works will offer the scholarly community insight into a movement in the postmodern world that counters Jameson's theory of the waning of affect and his theory of a loss of historicity as well as Baudrillard's theories surrounding the hyperreality of contemporary culture. Although blank artists' works present skeletal ideations of works that epitomize the waning of affect, it is the fact that the works have been produced and that they disturb and fascinate audiences that challenges the very notion of waning of affect.

The Legacy of Blank Fiction and Cinema

Studying the foundational texts and films of the blank movement addresses the seminal issues that helped shape the style. However it is by looking at the legacy of blank fiction and cinema that the resilience of this inventive style can be seen, further supporting the necessity of research into the movement. In the pages that follow, I discuss how the form of blank fiction echoes throughout recent socially conscious works, and I illuminate specific elements of the blank style, including limited plot, a focus on characters whose motives are unexplained, the incorporation and manipulation of signs of traditional power, and an emphasis on blankness in these works. Although the works of the mid-1990s onwards are not models of quintessentially blank pieces of fiction and film, there are strong elements of blank works present throughout current popular culture. Joyce Carol Oates's 1995 *Zombie*, Sherman Alexie's

1996 *Indian Killer*, Michael Haneke's 2007 *Funny Games*,¹² and the Coen brothers' 2007 *No Country for Old Men*¹³ serve as examples to illuminate the heritage of the blank style in recent works.

One of blank fiction's most notable attributes is its stark form, its harsh use of brevity and choppy narration that ingrains popular culture references and the narrator's thought patterns completely into its structure. Oates's *Zombie* continues this tradition. The novel follows Quentin P., a homosexual, psychopathic serial killer intent on creating a zombie to fulfill his sexual fantasies and desire for control. Like Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, Quentin exposes readers to his reality and fantasy life in a way that leaves the audience entangled in the deviance of his vision of the world. Without the benefit of a third-person narrator or the reassuring presence of a voice of reason, readers are entirely at the mercy of Quentin's logic, reason, and emotional responses to others. Oates ensures that Quentin's voice remains authentic, as her narrative style mimics the corrupt nature of his fantasies: "a true zombie would be mine forever. He would obey every command and whim. Saying 'Yes, Master' and 'No, Master.' He would kneel before me lifting his eyes to me and saying, 'I love you, Master. There is no one but you, Master'" (49), as well as the adolescent rage of his emotive responses: "I could see the cops still in the driveway—
FUCKERS! Wanted to yell out the window at them FUCKERS! HARRASSING

¹² Haneke's original *Funny Games* was produced in 1997 in German. His 2007 version is a shot-by-shot English remake of the 1997 version. For the purpose of this project, I will focus on the English-language version, though it should be noted how very little difference there is between the two versions.

¹³ The Coen brothers wrote the screenplay and directed this film, and it is their interpretation of Cormac McCarthy's novel, rather than the novel itself, on which I will focus.

me and SCREWING UP my life!” (158). The stunted sentences of Oates’s narrative reiterate the stunted nature of Quentin’s development, and the catch phrases and colloquialisms of his created identity proliferate the text (“I am CARETAKER”), much like the “merge” discussion of *Less Than Zero* and the slogans bantered about in *American Psycho*. Oates’s narrative echoes loudly with the voice of the original blank authors whose work began ten years before the release of *Zombie*.

The starkness of blank cinema, its focus on a basic setting, its use of single-take shots, and the heavy presence of color symbolism can all be seen in contemporary films that borrow heavily from the initial works of directors like Kubrick and McNaughton. *Funny Games*, for example, relies heavily on single-take shots, a simplistic setting, and the metaphor of color; Peter and Paul, the youthful serial killer duo, commit their heinous acts dressed entirely in white. The camera does not move as it follows them from kitchen to living room; the starkness of the white appliances and grey walls offer a striking contrast to the blood spatters from their first kill. Haneke, much like Kubrick does in *Full Metal Jacket*, manipulates the traditional dramatic paradigm, ignoring the three-act structure, reducing his film to a linear nightmare, and shunning the mainstream concept of cutting to continuity. Not much actually happens in the film—like all blank works, *Funny Games*’ emphasis is on subtext while its superficial structure is limited and atonal.

The traditionally austere style of blank fiction is exacerbated by a generally limited plotline; works such as *Less Than Zero* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial*

killer focus on questions of ontology and phenomenology rather than traditional notions of dramatic entertainment. The dramatic paradigm, as discussed previously, is lacking in most blank works. This tradition continues in *Zombie* and *Funny Games*, for example, with stories of psychopaths out for entertainment and satisfaction of bloodlust that focus on small amounts of time and a single purpose. This lack of plot and bleak style can also be noted *Indian Killer* and the popular *No Country for Old Men*, though perhaps many would label these works “thrillers” or “mysteries” that seem to have complex plots. Both works may initially seem to be traditionally genre based, but both exploit the expectations of their genres and manage to create exciting works with minimal plotlines and limited story development. In *Indian Killer*, Alexie initially presents his novel as a mystery, following a serial killer around Seattle as he/she murders and kidnaps “White Men” as vengeance for what Native Americans have suffered in the United States. The story never truly develops, however. Alexie’s novel is one based on static characterization and audience speculation—the killer is never revealed, and there is never any actual chase or dramatic tension. The Coen brothers’ interpretation of *No Country for Old Men* is similar to *Indian Killer* in that it appears to be a thriller/mystery film that is a kind of generic cross-over between drama and western. The movie follows the serial killer Anton Chigurh as he wanders the West killing and maiming and hunting for Llewelyn Moss, who stole money from a drug deal related to Chigurh. Although initially set up as a cat-and-mouse tale of “normal man” versus “evil monster,” the plot never develops beyond the initial premise. The characters are static and undeveloped in the

blank tradition. Alexie and the Coens complicate audience expectations of genre and audience expectations of good and evil, much like the blank works that came before them.

Zombie's Quentin, the *Indian Killer's* mystery killer ("IK"), *No Country's* Chigurh, and *Funny Games'* Peter and Paul are quintessential blank characters. Quentin P. self-consciously constructs his blank identity in order to avoid drawing attention to himself. He introduces and describes himself clearly at the beginning of his story:

My name is Q_P_ & I am thirty-one years old, three months.
Height five feet ten, weight one hundred and forty-seven pounds.
Eyes brown, hair brown. Medium build. Light scattering of freckles on arms, back. Astigmatism in both eyes, corrective lenses required for driving. Distinguishing features: none.
Except maybe these faint, worm-shaped scars on both knees. They say from a bicycle accident, I was a little boy then. I don't contradict but I don't remember.
I never contradict. I am in agreement with you as you utter your words of wisdom. Moving your asshole-mouth & YES SIR I am saying NO MA'AM I am saying. My shy eyes. Behind my plastic rimmed glasses that are the color of skin through plastic.
Caucasian skin that is. On both sides of my family going back forever as far as I am aware (3).

QP's appearance is a major focus of the text; he, like Bateman, is incredibly conscious of how he appears. From listening to news reports and detective shows, as well as from learning what his parents, counselors, and parole officer want to hear, he is able to appear exactly as he "should" at any particular moment in order to avoid suspicion. When going onto the university campus, for example, he knows exactly how to behave and what to wear in order to blend in. "I was walking across the Univ campus.... I was wearing my khaki shorts and loose fitting MT VENON U T-shirt & my aviation glasses & caught some quizzical eyes I believe & some registering of approval. Summer school was in session & the kids in clothes like mine" (116). He is particular about his car, insistent that it needs a bumper sticker and an American flag: "I drive everywhere in my Ford van. It is a 1987 model, the color of wet sand. No longer new but reliable. It passes through your vision like passing through a solid wall invisible" (4). He takes effort to present himself and his belongings as stereotypes. Even his behavior in his job as "caretaker" is perfectly constructed so as not to arouse attention or suspicion. His excruciating self-awareness helps him hide all signs of his deviance. His appearance (both physical and emotional) is the foundation of his murderous master plans.

Alexie's *Indian Killer* is ambiguous in its use of a protagonist. The novel begins with the story of John Smith's adoption from a Native American mother to a white suburban couple; however, though John Smith, with his blank name and struggles with mental stability is in many ways the main focus of the novel, the events that occur in the novel are spurred on by the actual killer, who is never

clearly identified, and, thus, a “blank” character in the literal sense, in that it lacks an identity entirely. The IK is neither a man nor a woman, is neither white nor ethnic minority, is neither human nor spectral, is neither one nor many. The IK passes through crowds unseen and can sneak in and out of homes under surveillance without arousing suspicion. The IK is precise in its murders, but leaves no trail or sign of its identity. The novel introduces a long series of characters, all of whom are in many ways stereotypes of American extremes. For example, Truck Shultz is the angry, loud, conservative talk show host representative of racism and extremism, and Marie Polatkin is a radical Spokane Indian representative of the young, angry Native American population speaking out in social forums. Homeless Indians, narrow-minded rednecks, “wanna be” Indians as Alexie calls them (Caucasians claiming Indian heredity), and various other standards pepper the narrative, all of whom come together to create a blob of a personalities that stand in juxtaposition to the true blankness of the IK.

Haneke's *Funny Games* features Peter and Paul, blank characters straight from the tradition of *American Psycho* and *Henry*. Peter and Paul approach their victims wearing tennis whites, with stylish haircuts and Ivy League accents, well-mannered and soft spoken. They infiltrate the Head of the Harbor community by blending in with its residents, before they begin their reign of torture and terror. The two are reminiscent of Ellis's most deviant characters in their youthful frivolity and blank similarity to each other. They are nearly interchangeable in appearance and refer to each other by different names throughout the film, creating confusion and disorientating the audience. They make veiled comments

about their sexuality, never disclosing a particular preference. Their dialogue suggests that they are highly educated, and their planning and maneuvering is complex and sophisticated. They are ruthless and vicious, yet they can perform sensitivity and thoughtfulness when required. They represent upper-middle-class delicacy and enter the homes of their prey as self-effacing gentry. Like Bateman, Peter and Paul desire control and entertainment and react in an adolescent rage when they are denied either. Like Henry, their smiles, under neutral circumstances, can easily win friends, but their psychosis is unmatched in any other serial killer film.

Traditional blank works emphasize the unexamined nature of their deviant protagonists, and though I argue that *No Country for Old Men* is in many ways reminiscent of traditional blank works, the deviant anti-hero of *No Country* is notable in his Otherness. He is Spanish, with an obvious ethnic appearance and a heavy accent. In every other way, however, he is representational of blankness. Although everyone seems to know his name, no one knows anything about him. Few have seen him and lived to tell about it; even fewer have ever spoken with him. Yet many men in powerful positions know him. He is a sociopath, yet sticks rigidly to a code of ethics only he understands. He is universally feared and nothing seems to be beyond his reach, and he, like the mysterious IK, can maneuver unchecked as though he were a ghost or some kind of spirit. Although not a member of the traditional “unexamined” group of American power, Chigurh exudes the same omnipotence and omnipresence as many traditionally blank serial killer figures that are members of that group.

One of the most frightening, unnerving aspects of blank works is the lack of explanation that writers and directors offer for their characters' disturbing behavior. Mainstream fiction and cinema undermines the threat of Otherness in culture by explaining the drive behind deviance—explaining deviant behavior helps audiences understand it, as discussed in Chapter 4. The legacy of blank works can be seen in the lack of motivation offered for the serial killers in *Indian Killer*, *Zombie*, *Funny Games*, and *No Country*. Although Alexie alludes to the Indian Killer's vendetta against the White Man in his novel, the true identity of the killer is never revealed, and thus, the audience's understanding of the true motivation for the murders is never satisfied. Depending on our interpretation of the novel, the motive could be anything from psychosis to self-hatred. Oates offers a seemingly plausible umbrella excuse of mental illness for Quentin's deviance, but the illness is never specified, and the speed with which all of Quentin's loved ones and caregivers offer generalized excuses for his past misdeeds suggests that perhaps the illness is not legitimate, but another excuse offered by the family to cover up his Otherness.

Like McNaughton's character Henry, the murderous duo of Peter and Paul invent answers to explain their behavior that have obviously been constructed and re-constructed over time, varying by audience. The boys taunt their captives with tales that might explain the root of their evil as the family clutches for a reason for why they have been thrown into the nightmare. Perhaps we were abused as children, one suggests, or perhaps we are insane, chirps the other, undermining any sense of reason and breaking the cinematic fourth wall and

challenging the audience to search for logic behind their deviant behavior. The Coen brothers taunt their audience as well, answering questions about Chigurh's motivation with more questions. The Management men with whom he works are never identified, the agencies with whom he is aligned are never revealed, and his own code, on which the deaths of two people are based, is never explained. Even his sanity is left undefined. He seems insane, but his ability to rationalize and talk with his victims often shifts the focus on sanity from his state of mind to that of those watching. Our inability to follow his train of thought shifts the balance of power from the real (audience) to the fictional (Chigurh).

Underlying the unique style and characteristics of blank works is a function of social criticism. The early works of blank fiction and cinema spoke out against political and social issues in American culture of the mid- to late-1980s, and the echo of this dissident voice can be heard throughout the pieces of fiction and film that resonate today with this style. Alexie's *Indian Killer* manifests an awareness of cultural stereotyping and reader bias through his unwillingness to reveal the true identity of the IK. Allowing readers to assume knowledge of the perpetrator, only to constantly undermine those assumptions, challenges notions of sublimated prejudice and issues of racism in our national ideology. Alexie also gives a voice to those traditionally muted by systems of power in the United States—the mentally ill, the homeless, the desperate, and the revolutionaries—creating images of humanity for those who are regularly dehumanized. Oates's *Zombie* focuses on Quentin's manipulation of the correctional system to criticize the problems with the American justice system in general. Quentin understands

that he can kill the disenfranchised, “junkies,” “drifters,” foreign students, or someone “from the black projects downtown. Somebody nobody gives a shit for” (28), more easily than he can those he truly desires—the young, virile men of the middle class with college educations and caring families. His choice of victims shows the discrepancies in the American justice system, a system that proclaims equality but in reality seems to care more about certain classes and races than it does others. Quentin also manipulates the correctional system, in particular its system of profiling, in a way that enables him to carry out further crimes but remain undetected. The system he manipulates is so institutionalized and so overwrought with legislation that its primary function, that of stopping crime and rehabilitating offenders, does not work. It is a de-personalized system that handles the public as a thing, rather than as a collection of specific individuals. Quentin’s realization of this allows him to assume the persona of a member of the blank group that is generally protected from close scrutiny by the very nature of its blankness. American power systems in general, it can be argued, not just the correctional system, try to legislate most details of their citizens’ lives using predominately capitalist values. Legislation means control, but in order to enact the legislation and gain control, the public must all behave the same in order to fit the mold that the laws envelop. This creates a thing which will be controlled, not individual human beings. Quentin’s zombies represent the reification of the American public, and the violence of this text is based on a want to control and frustration that attempts to completely control are failing, representing the failure of a system whose ultimate goal is the complete control of its subjects.

The blank works of the mid- to late-1980s often focus on issues of commodification and materialism in American culture. These issues are at the core of the blank cinema–influenced *Funny Games*. The victimized family, George, Ann, and Georgie, head to their lake home for a week of golf and sailing. Their exclusive Head of the Harbor neighborhood is complete with personalized docks and fully mechanized electronic gates with unscalable walls surrounding each “cabin’s” compound. The home itself is a display of modern technology and expensive electronic systems. As the film progresses, however, these signs of power and progress are exposed as hindrances and traps, keeping the family from salvation. George and Ann, rather than run for help, spend precious time trying to salvage their cell phones. With the power cut, the couple is unable to easily escape their vacation “bunker,” and the enclosed privacy that the guests insist upon alienates the neighbors from one another, eliminating the possibility of help or concern from those who live across the street. Haneke emphasizes the impotence of technology against the terror that the family faces, and he focuses on their dependence upon cell phones and electricity rather than humanity to survive. The focal point of many of the most violent scenes in the film is the family’s television, which blares NASCAR while covered in young Georgie’s blood. As Ann surveys the decimation of her family, her first act of freedom is to turn off the TV, emphasizing Haneke’s underlying message about the importance of humanity over technology and the worrying consequences of the alienated state of humankind.

Power and the manipulation of signs of power, a cornerstone of blank works, pervade the theme of *No Country for Old Men* and draw our attention to the continuation of this important factor of blank fiction and film. In *No Country*, the figure of “good” is represented by Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, who follows the “evil” figure of Chigurh through dust-blown Texas landscapes, each vying for the soul of the “everyman” Llewelyn Moss. In the generic tradition of the western, Ed Tom would win, saving Moss and vindicating those that Chigurh had wronged. In *No Country*, however, the struggle ends badly, emphasizing Ed Tom’s impotence in the face of danger. In terms of actual signs of power, there is a notable lack of a specific symbol of male power in the film—the gun.¹⁴ The film’s villain uses a captive bolt pistol, a weapon most widely used in the slaughter of cattle to stun the animals before they are butchered, rather than the traditional phallic weapons used by those who oppose him. This could be read, arguably, as commentary on a loss of traditional masculine power or the domination of new forms of power over that of traditional forms. The tradition of moral and judicial law, so ingrained in American ideology, is challenged by this film and shown wanting. This decrease in power for those representing traditional notions of “goodness” is further emphasized by the character of Moss. Moss is a character whose life is built upon a sense of amorality, around the satisfaction of his own needs and his lack of consideration for the humanity of others. As the film begins, Moss, stumbling upon a scene of mass murder, ignores a dying man’s request for water and focuses instead on the satisfaction of his own desires (in the form of money).

¹⁴ In all of the works discussed in this chapter, there is a notable lack of firepower. The killers in these works generally prefer more intimate and creative methods of destruction. This is an aspect of new blank works that calls for further research.

Later that evening, Moss's conscience does impose upon him, and he returns to the scene with water, but hours too late to save the victim. Moss's interactions with the other characters are reactive and filtered through his own needs, illuminating the film's concern with selfishness and a loss of humanity in contemporary America.

The four works discussed in this chapter are simply samples of the kinds of fiction and cinema that have been produced since the mid-1990s that show elemental evidence of having been heavily influenced by the blank works from the mid-1980s and early-1990s. Their form, style, and content resonate with the voices of authors like Ellis and filmmakers like McNaughton, and the social and political issues that the works raise further support a strong link between blank works' critical stance and the historical situation in which they are produced. It is my hope that more academic study of blank fiction and cinema will be encouraged by this project and that the legacy of traditional blank art in particular will be explored further. I am particularly concerned with the tone of the pieces that I have mentioned in this chapter, because though traditional blank works are disturbing and unnerving, the pieces I presented in detail in this project seem to encourage change and offer redemption, whereas the four works discussed here lack any kind of positivism. The overall themes are dark and negative without the didactic nature of previous blank works that could help influence revolutionary ideas. A future project interrogating the political and social situations from which these pieces grew may offer a thesis as to their more chilling nature.

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