IS EVERYTHING DISPOSABLE? BRET EASTON ELLIS, ABORTION, AND CONSUMER CULTURE

By

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The debates surrounding the legality and morality of abortion spark passionate campaigns on all sides of the argument. That being the case, it is no surprise that this debate has bled over into popular culture and representations of abortion in popular media then affect perceptions of the procedure and what it means in everyday life. Women remain, not surprisingly, caught in the middle of this heated debate, and television shows and movies often target them with stories about reproductive choices.

In this respect, the novels of Bret Easton Ellis are no exception. Last summer I bought a copy of Less Than Zero (1985). Within the first few chapters I noticed the mention of abortion. I set out from there to read the rest of Ellis’ books, and see if this happened in all of them. Not surprisingly, it does. I also found that Ellis’ writing has many other recurring themes. For instance, throughout his work Ellis seems to be preoccupied with the excesses of the privileged class. He creates characters who live to the fullest, consuming everything and everyone along the way, thus, Ellis’ critique of
capitalism and consumer culture is apparent. For me, it gets interesting when looked at through the lens of feminist cultural studies. Much has been written about women as consumers, and in his novels, Ellis clearly critiques this notion as well. Capitalist ideology simultaneously insists that women be consumers and positions them as materialist, empty and even treacherous, as a result of their “natural” proclivity for materialism. Ellis’ work lies right in the middle of this strain of thought. In the guise of a critique of a certain privileged class and its relation to capitalism, his work reiterates this point by connecting women (and presumably their “natural” materialism) with the presumed “throw-away” mind-set of abortion, a mentality that pervades the privileged classes. So, women must pay for their transgressions, and they do in Ellis’ novels. In this thesis, I take a closer look at three of Ellis’ books: Less Than Zero (1985), The Rules of Attraction (1987), and Glamorama (1999), in an attempt to uncover some of these answers.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In contemporary US history, the debates surrounding the legality and morality of abortion spark passionate campaigns on all sides of the argument. That being the case, it is no surprise that this debate has bled over into popular culture and representations of abortion in popular media then affect perceptions of the procedure and what it means in everyday life. Women remain, not surprisingly, caught in the middle of this heated debate, and television shows and movies often target them with stories about reproductive choices. For example, I remember watching an episode of the television show *Party of Five* in the mid-1990s in which one character struggles with an unplanned pregnancy. In the end, a miscarriage saves her from having to make a decision regarding abortion. Although this episode made me angry because the show refused to take a stand on a very real issue that women face in everyday life, from that point on, I remained curious about how popular culture functions as a means of changing popular perceptions.

In this respect, the novels of Bret Easton Ellis are no exception. I remember seeing the movie version of his novel, *Less Than Zero*, for the first time in middle school. In fact, one of my friends said it was shown as part of the “Just Say No” campaign in his school. Why would they show a film portraying teenagers partying, doing copious amounts of drugs, and having sex to dissuade kids from partaking in that lifestyle, if not to show the morality inherent in it? I remember thinking about how different the lives of the teenagers portrayed in the film were from me. I remember thinking about how different Los Angeles must be from South Florida, and how I was glad I did not have to
deal with the situations presented in the film. I thought that one day I should read the book to see how it compared to the movie. I didn’t think about Bret Easton Ellis again until 1991 when controversy erupted over his novel *American Psycho*. I read about the brutality of it. I read about the boycott of it, and, again, I thought I should really read that book.

When I moved to Gainesville in 1994 I met a friend who had read all of Ellis’ work, and suggested I do the same. I didn’t actually read any of his work until 2002 when someone brought over a copy of his last novel, *Glamorama* (1999). I read it, enjoyed it, and talked about it with friends, but I did notice something odd in the final chapters; Ellis used abortion to kill off a character. By this time, I had begun working in a Women’s Health Center as a reproductive health counselor. I talked to women about abortion and on some occasions, I was surprised by their skewed perceptions of the procedure we were talking about. Sometimes, the images they conjured seemed more like horror films or sci-fi, than real life. So, when I read *Glamorama*, I noticed in the final pages that one of the characters dies from a massive overdose of RU-486, the medical abortion pill. It struck me that the skewed image presented in the text could be related to the skewed perceptions of the women I spoke to at the clinic, and I knew I had to explore this further.

Last summer I bought a copy of *Less Than Zero*. Within the first few chapters I noticed, again, the mention of abortion. I set out from there to read the rest of Ellis’ books, and see if this happened in all of them. Not surprisingly, it does. Also without surprise, I found that Ellis’ writing has many other recurring themes. For instance, throughout his work Ellis seems to be preoccupied with the excesses of the privileged
class. He creates characters who live to the fullest, consuming everything and everyone along the way, thus, Ellis’ critique of capitalism and consumer culture is apparent. For me, it gets interesting when looked at through the lens of feminist cultural studies. Much has been written about women as consumers, and in his novels, Ellis clearly critiques this notion as well. Capitalist ideology simultaneously insists that women be consumers and positions them as materialist, empty and even treacherous, as a result of their “natural” proclivity for materialism. Ellis’ work lies right in the middle of this strain of thought. In the guise of a critique of a certain privileged class and its relation to capitalism, his work reiterates this point by connecting women (and presumably their “natural” materialism) with the presumed “throw-away” mind-set of abortion, a mentality that pervades the privileged classes. So, women must pay for their transgressions, and they do in Ellis’ novels. Still one has to wonder, given the popularity of these novels, what effects do these scenes have on readers? What did my friends who recommended these books think about these scenes? Did they remember them at all? How did his use of abortion in a critique of privileged consumerism relate to the political climate of the times in which he was writing? Simply, why does Ellis choose to include these images at all? Is he merely comment on political climates? On the insensitivity of the rich? Is he preaching anti-choice rhetoric? Or, is he commenting on the ridiculousness of the whole debate? In this thesis, I will take a closer look at three of Ellis’ books: Less Than Zero (1985), The Rules of Attraction (1987), and Glamorama (1999), in an attempt to uncover some of these answers.

Feminist cultural studies posit women as precarious participants in consumer culture. Jennifer Scanlon notes “females are portrayed as either simple-minded
consumers or the bodies that provide male consumers with attractive consumer accessories,” and these portrayals explicate some of the disempowering elements of consumer culture (Scanlon 7). Interestingly, Ellis’ novels mark women in these exact ways. They either consume wildly and recklessly or they signify male consumption. In *Less Than Zero*, Blair, the protagonist’s girlfriend, both consumes everything around her: alcohol, drugs, bodies, and material goods, but she also exemplifies Clay’s dissatisfaction with the world around him. No amount of goods can make him feel whole, but still he keeps on trying to satiate himself. As Elizabeth Young explains, “At first their [Clay and Blair] holiday in Monterey is idyll: they make love, walk on the beach, light candles, discover a crate of champagne. However, by the end of the week they are both drinking heavily and ‘all we did was watch TV’ and they leave” (Young 37). This cuts to the hunger at the heart of this book, as Young puts it, “the continual sense of agonizing famine in the midst of plenty.” They have everything they could ever want yet happiness eludes them. Blair eventually signifies Clay’s consumed happiness and he must leave her behind and embark on a new quest to satisfy his need. “Contemporary consumer culture addresses primarily not our needs, but seemingly our endless wants” (Scanlon 8). Ellis knows this and clearly critiques it, while at the same time the texts regard women as the most guilty of the participants in this cycle. Implicit hegemonic consumerism pervades the novels. Female characters actively take part in consumption of goods and in their own consumption by male characters. Signifying the worst part of male consumption (the consumption of “the other”), these female characters must be punished, and they are in each of Ellis’ novels.
Bret Easton Ellis wrote several books over a span of more than fifteen years beginning in 1985 with the publication of *Less than Zero*. During that time the ever-evolving abortion debate also went through tumultuous times. Each of Ellis’ novels depicts characters of the upper class who are completely self-absorbed, and consumers to the fullest. For example, in *Less Than Zero*, Clay explains, “I’m sitting in Trump’s with my father. He’s bought a new Ferrari and has started wearing a cowboy hat…He wants me to see his astrologer and advises me to buy the new Leo astroscope for the upcoming year” (Ellis, *Less Than Zero* 144). As mentioned above, Ellis uses abortion in each of his novels to present us with women characters who embody a consumerist, throw-away mindset. In addition to demonstrating a connection between abortion and capitalism, these scenes also illuminate the changing attitudes about abortion and reproductive rights in the United States at the time Ellis wrote each novel. In each of the novels, the characters can get rid of a pregnancy as easily as they can throw out the wrapper from their Big Mac. As time progressed and new debates surfaced about abortion, the images and instances of abortion in Ellis’ novels also change, culminating with the graphic scene involving RU-486 (“the abortion pill”) in the end of his last novel, *Glamorama* (1999).

Ellis published his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, when he was twenty-one (breteastonellis.com). He moved from the West Coast to attend college at a small liberal arts school, Bennington College, on the East Coast (breteastonellis.com). Personally, my years as an undergraduate at the University of Florida certainly developed my political awareness and consciousness. I could only speculate how my consciousness might have changed had I attended a private school similar to Bennington. Ellis has never explained how his college years affect his writing aside from admitting that *Less Than Zero* does
reflect his own life more than any of his other novels. When asked in an interview if the choices the protagonist of *American Psycho* (Patrick Bateman) made ever surprised him, Ellis responded, “Constantly, but I have to say that was also true about writing *Less Than Zero* – which is undeniably closer to my life than this book is” (Love, Rolling Stone 1991). Given that statement, Ellis creates a string of characters in *Less Than Zero* that are virtually indecipherable from one another. In sunny Los Angeles, the main character/narrator, Clay, comes home from college on the East Coast for holiday break, only to discover that nothing has changed while he was away. All of his friends are the same as they were, and he is still one of them. There is a hint of his disillusionment at this, but for the most part he goes along with the crowd, just as vacant as the rest. Upon coming home one morning, Clay tells us, “I park next to a Ferrari. I walk upstairs to my bedroom and lock the door and light a cigarette and turn the television on and turn the sound off and then I walk to the closet and find a bottle of Valium… I lay back, staring at the television hard, because I heard that if you stare at the television screen for long enough you can fall asleep” (39). I remember these kids from my high school, the ones who had it all, but seemed not to appreciate it. In this respect, the novel is very effective, and in reading *Less Than Zero* I realized that Ellis’ writing appeals to a specific audience, and a specific generation. He obviously speaks to people who grew up around the same time he did or just there after. He drops the names of popular bands, books, and clubs that were hip at the time. Given this, I began to understand why it was that my friends and I have all read Ellis, but my mother had never heard of him. It is very much a novel of its time, the 1980s, illustrated by Clay’s incessant party going and drug taking, and listening to stories of his friends wrecking thirty-thousand dollar cars and getting new
ones the next day. Although, the mention of abortion in *Less Than Zero* seems perfunctory, as most things do, it serves a purpose.
CHAPTER 2
LESS THAN ZERO

No character undergoes an abortion in *Less Than Zero*, but that is what makes it so interesting in this novel. The mention of it is used to evoke emotion, more than anything else, in both the characters involved and the reader. At the same time, it highlights the conservative climate of the time regarding abortion. The novel takes place in the early 1980s, at the height of Reagan administration. During that time, there was a major Republican Party push to appoint anti-abortion judges at all levels of the federal court; as Marcy Wilder notes, “In the early 1980s, the number of clinic bombings, arsons, death threats, and acid attacks, aimed at abortion clinics increased dramatically as a growing number of anti-choice activists, enraged at their inability to outlaw abortion, embraced more confrontational tactics” (Wilder 74). In fact, it was not until doctors started being targeted and murdered that anti-abortion organizations spoke up against this violence as a means to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. In an attempt to disassociate themselves from the violence, and present the most “Christian” a persona to the American public, anti-abortion groups began to condemn the bombings and shootings.

In light of this political climate, Ellis sets up a scene of ambivalence toward abortion. Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero*, is approached by his strung-out best friend, Julian, for money. Clay asks, “What for?” and the answer he gets is, “Do you want some fries?” Clearly exasperated, Clay says, “Could you get to the point?” and Julian answers, “For an abortion for someone.” They go back and forth in this way, and the only information we are given is that the abortion is for “some girl…you don’t know
her.” Clay becomes suspicious and questions Julian about the true intentions for the money, and Julian swears it is for the abortion, but he just “doesn’t want to have to sell the Porsche to pay for it” (Ellis, Less Than Zero 92). Obviously, these characters so not call themselves feminists, and as a reader I had to try not to hate them all together. All the ambivalence set up in this scene towards what an abortion actually means startles the critical reader because it emphasizes the attitude of consumption and disposability prevalent in the money driven eighties. The most revealing statements come when Julian admits that the reason he needs so much money is because the “girl” does not want to “just go to one of those clinics;” instead, she wants to go to an expensive (hence, safer) private doctor.

This scene also promotes the attitude that abortion, although legal and performed by trained health care professionals, still remains dangerous. It translates to the state of fear that the characters find themselves living in within the context of the novel, but the scene also attests to the culture of fear that we live in as Americans. Most recently explicated in the Michael Moore film, Bowling for Columbine, which illustrates the issues of gun control in our country stating the reason that majority of Americans own guns relates to “fear” of the unknown. In this context of this novel, Ellis uses this scene to demonstrate fear of the “clinic:” the source of both deaths of the doctors who perform abortions, and deaths of the “youth of America.” Admittedly, in Less Than Zero, Ellis does not write about a woman going to a clinic and obtaining an abortion, it is just talked about. Furthermore, the reader is not even sure that the money is truly needed for a procedure. So, why mention it at all? Clearly the attitude expressed corresponds to the negative feelings surrounding abortion in this country. Abortion signifies the answer to a
problem that no one really wants to face. By giving Julian the money without ever really knowing that the money was truly needed for an abortion, Clay asserts a feeling similar to that of society as a whole, especially at the time Ellis wrote this book. Not really knowing that the money paid for an abortion made it easier for Clay to lend the money. In the back of his head he could tell himself that Julian just got high with the cash instead of the unthinkable other.

In addition, the fact that Julian mentions abortion seems significant. In the end of the novel, Clay figures out that Julian has been prostituting himself to pay for his drug habit. His excessive habits of consumption deem him “dirty” in this novel. Like Ellis’ treatment of women, in this context, Julian equated himself with the female characters by having sex with men to feed his insatiable desire for drugs and excess. Thought about in this way, it makes sense that Julian refers to the need for an abortion. If women signify “simple-minded” consumers, as well as the “attractive bodies” that exist for male consumption, then in this scene Julian wants to punish women by mentioning this ultimate act of disposal. He blames them for his bad behavior. Ultimately though, he too, gets punished. He becomes stuck in the cycle of drugs and prostitution, including beatings from his pimp, and is left for dead to rot there (182-4).
Ellis’ follow-up to *Less Than Zero* serves as his take on the East Coast college world that he inhabited while at Bennington College. *The Rules of Attraction* takes place at Camden College in Connecticut, presumably the school Clay attends in *Less Than Zero*. Written just two years after his debut, critics found the second novel to be less successful than *Less Than Zero* at portraying the lives of privileged college aged kids. Elizabeth Young notes, *Rules of Attraction* “attracted less attention, partly because it was genuinely less arresting, and partly because it was little more than a reworking of the themes in *Less Than Zero*” (Young 40). I agree with Young’s and other critics’ assessments of this to some extent. The characters retain the same vacant, directionless attitudes that characters evoked in the first novel, and Ellis critiques consumer culture and capitalism in much the same ways. In this novel though, his take on abortion progresses from just a mere talking about it in an ambivalent manner, to actually having a main character go through the procedure, thus, more clearly connecting his apparent disgust with capitalism to women’s reproductive choices. The book is made up of the inner monologues of three main characters, and this narrative device proves to be important in regards to how the characters are perceived by the reader (uncaring, selfish), and also in regards to the abortion issue itself.

In 1987, Randall Terry of Operation Rescue (a militant, violent anti-choice group) led the first of many “rescues” (a blockade of a clinic in Cherry Hill, New Jersey) and established Operation Rescue formally the next year (Ginsburg 227). “Under Terry’s
direction Operation Rescue’s unofficial slogan became, “If you think abortion is murder, act like it!” (Wilder 81). With this type of escalation regarding the anti-abortion movement, it is no surprise that abortion takes on a more prominent role in Rules of Attraction. Admittedly, the book is not about abortion, or even about abortion politics, but “part of the effect of visual cultures has been the recognition of the power of the image” (Fuery and Mansfield 100). If it is true that we are living in a post-modern time where the image has over taken the text as the ultimate signifier, then Ellis’ careful use of abortion in Rules of Attraction has to be taken as a very powerful image that highlights one of the most passionate debates in our country’s history. I admit that his work is a text, but more and more the visual images taken up in a text hold a certain amount of power. Furthermore, I would argue that since this book was made into a movie (as Less Than Zero was), as a result, more people read the novel. Thus, the talk of abortion has a greater effect, especially considering that any mention of pregnancy or abortion was completely left out of the movie.

Escalation of anti abortion movements in the United States is mirrored by the escalation of Ellis’ use of abortion in Rules of Attraction vs. Less Than Zero. The connection between abortion and consumer culture becomes clearer also. Like its predecessor, in the beginning of Rules of Attraction Lauren (the female protagonist) makes a passing mention of her roommate having to leave school because she got pregnant and had an abortion. It is portrayed as nothing more than lunchroom gossip (Ellis 40), thus, reminding the reader of the conversation that Clay and Julian have over fries in the food court at the mall in Less Than Zero. The progression from this happens in the ending section of the novel. Lauren becomes pregnant by Sean who then proposes
to her on the spot after she tells him she is going to “take care of it.” After traveling around on a cocaine-fuelled trip through the Connecticut countryside, not speaking to each other the entire way, Sean finally looks at Lauren and says, “I’ll pay for it.” It is here that the narrative device of interior monologue takes on more importance. During their trip the reader is privy to the inner thoughts of each character. Through their inner thoughts, you hear Lauren and Sean contemplating life together, life as parents, and basically, life with responsibility (Ellis, *Rules of Attraction* 255-265). As mentioned above, this is not a story about abortion, but in these few sequences, Ellis connects abortion to his critique of capitalism. In this instance, it becomes clear that Sean has consumed all he can of Lauren and now he can buy his way out by “paying for it.” Lauren ultimately receives the punishment for all their excessive, rash behavior all on her own. She must go to the clinic and have the “problem” removed, freeing Sean from any responsibility. He has used her up, and now he can get “rid” of her too.

Furthermore, Ellis takes the reader even one step further in this novel and brings the reader into the clinic with Lauren. In *Less Than Zero*, there was only mention of going to “one of those clinics,” but here Sean actually drops Lauren off there, and we witness her going through the process of having an abortion. The reader witnesses all the paperwork, and all the feelings. “They give me Valium. Someone explains the procedure to me. Laying on my back wondering vaguely if it is a boy or a girl…the table rises. I moan. Lift the hips please…I can’t help it and gasp…Humming noise. My stomach starts heaving. Sucking noises. It’s over. I sweat. I go to recovery. It doesn’t matter” (Ellis, *Rules of Attraction* 265). Having witnessed it many times, Ellis comes pretty close to how the procedure goes. That tells me that at the very least, he did his
research, but still the scene remains problematic. The clinic is cold and sterile, and the clinic workers portrayed as uncaring. The scene makes the reader well aware of the fact that this unpleasant experience is the price we pay for our immoralities. Interestingly, Lauren’s next monologue is just a blank page. Meaning what? I am not sure, but the feeling you get as a reader is sadness. Lauren takes her punishment and deals with it. Apparently, Ellis did know quite how to relate what she felt.

The movie version of *Rules of Attraction* left out any of the scenes about abortion. In an interview done at the time of the movie’s release, Ellis commented, “I did see *Rules* last night, the final, final cut, and there are a lot of disappointments because the MPAA was tyrannical about this movie and removed a lot of things that are provocative and interesting – I’m talking about images, monologues that were altered” (Shulman 2002). He admits to being disappointed about the changes and also indicates that the scenes that were altered were not ones that contained bisexual or gay content. This leaves me to wonder if Roger Avary (the director) actually shot the scenes where Lauren goes to the abortion clinic, and the MPAA thought these scenes were too controversial. In light of the push by President Bush since he took office to further restrict access to abortion, these images might have been seen as particularly inflammatory. Furthermore, these images would become something other than a college age girl exercising her right to choose. Once viewed they would stand for all women who seek to exercise this right, it would become emblematic of the controversial and often taboo subject of reproductive rights. Conversely, since this image directly correlates to one of Ellis’ main themes- the disposability of everything in the worlds he creates- the abortion clinic scenes in the movie could have had a negative affect on the pro-choice agenda. Without also including
the scenes of contemplation on Lauren and Sean’s part about whether to carry to term or not, one might construe the clinic scene as reinforcing the right to life camps decree that abortion is used as a form of birth control for young women. More people see Ellis’ books turned into movies, than read the actual books. Although, some probably read about the controversy his books ignite, the fact remains leaving the abortion scenes out of the movies illustrates a grave oversight on the part of the screenwriters and directors.
CHAPTER 4
GLAMORAMA

More than ten years after writing *Rules of Attraction*, Ellis published his fifth book titled *Glamorama*. In between the two, Ellis published two novels, *American Psycho* and *The Informers*. *American Psycho* suffered harsh criticism from feminists at the time of its publication in 1991. In fact, the Los Angeles chapter of NOW boycotted the book and its publisher for its gruesome depictions of women being murdered. Its original publisher, Simon and Schuster eventually dropped it, and Vintage/Random House picked it up and printed it. Bookstores everywhere now carry the book on their shelves (Califiia 1991). The book expanded further Ellis’ themes of capitalism and disposability, inventing a character, Patrick Bateman, who murders women in his spare time as a result of all the empty emphasis on possessions and image in the late Eighties. Although there is no mention of abortion in *American Psycho*, it deserves mention here because of its place in the progression of Ellis’ work from *Less Than Zero* to *Glamorama*. The explicit passages of Patrick murdering women he deems “dirty” or “bad” serves as the ultimate example of Ellis’ commentary on women as consumers. For instance, after picking up a prostitute, Patrick watches her bathe and explains, “For a long time my mind races, becomes flooded with impurities—her head is within my reach, is mine to crush; at this moment my urge to strike out, to insult and punish her rises, then subsides” (170). If these women become too wrapped up with themselves and empty possessions, and at the same time continue to serve as a reminder of male need to consume the female “other” then the ax will inevitably fall (as it does in *American...
Patrick Bateman, the consummate white privileged male, will be wielding it. This modern day morality tale enables us to delve into *Glamorama* armed with this knowledge already.

Ellis uses many of the same characters or relatives of these characters (Sean is the younger brother of Patrick the protagonist of *American Psycho*), in each of these four novels stressing the progression of the characters from rich teenagers in Los Angeles in *Less Than Zero* to murdering fashion models in *Glamorama*. It also emphasizes the themes that have remained with Ellis throughout his career: vacant emotion, disposability, self-absorption, etc., which become even clearer in this last novel. Ellis’ use of abortion in *Glamorama* also escalates significantly. This is not surprising considering the twelve years that separates it from *Rules of Attraction*. At the time Ellis was writing this novel, the FDA had begun trials to approve the use of RU-486 in the United States. The drug, sold as mifepristone in the U.S., and commonly referred to as the “abortion pill,” is used in combination with another medication allowing for the safe abortion of an embryo less than 7 weeks. Mifepristone was approved for use in the United States in September 2000, and has become increasingly popular as an abortion method in the years since (plannedparenthood.com, www.fda.gov). Interestingly, negative depictions of its use turned up in books and other pop culture media in the years leading up to approval. Since the majority of Americans do not understand how a medical abortion (one using medications to cause the abortion) works, it frightens me to think of the negative impact of such depictions on the U.S. psyche. For instance, Robert Shapiro’s novel, *Misconception* (2001), depicts a politician who is about to be confirmed as the U.S. Surgeon General when his mistress becomes pregnant. The politician obtains
some of the “French abortion pill” and gives it to his girlfriend who then has a violent miscarriage. The doctor subsequently goes to trial for the “murder of his child” (Metroweekly.com). This story imagines that RU-486 can be obtained on the black market and used for ill will. It also mentions nothing of the other drug, misoprostol, which causes the contractions of the uterus necessary for the completion of the medical abortion process. Clearly, Misconception is an apt title for Shapiro’s novel for more reasons than one. Its misleading use of mifepristone could lead to many misconceptions about the drug, some of which I have already heard while counseling women about medical abortions (i.e. Will I bleed to death?).

Glamorama tells the story of Victor Ward (another throw back to Camden College and Rules of Attraction) and his entrapment in the world of fashion and brand names (and self-absorption) that renders him unable to help being the pawn of supermodels turned terrorists. Ellis saves any mention of abortion until the final chapters of the book. In fact, he does not even mention the word. Like Shapiro’s novel mentioned above, Ellis illustrates a violent and gruesome scene that does not depict the real life use of mifepristone. In the scene, Victor’s girlfriend, Chloe, dies of “massive hemorrhaging due to the ingestion of fatal quantities of mifepristone – also known as RU-486” (Ellis 456). The villain gives her the fatal dose dissolved in a glass of champagne, unbeknownst to her. She begins bleeding, collapses, and then tissue starts pouring out of her in massive quantities. Victor helps her, blood splattering all over him, not really sure what is happening to her besides a knowing glance directed at the granules in the bottom of her champagne flute (Ellis, Glamorama 429). Admittedly, these images are grotesque and an extreme exaggeration of what this drug can do on its own. When I first read this
novel, this scene appalled me. After counseling women about using this method of abortion, I knew the way the drug worked, and I recognized the gross embellishments Ellis put into the scene. I then started to see the scene and the images within it in a different light. It became clear with this blatant use (mis-use) of mifepristone-abortion that Ellis makes a connection between capitalism and consumer culture to abortion and in this case, death.

Throughout the novel, Victor name-drops, mentions labels, and anything hip that comes to mind. It becomes apparent early on that the characters love anything beautiful and expensive, and are not concerned with anything mildly serious or political. As Daniel Mendelsohn puts it, Ellis has “perfect pitch for the way in which the denizens of his upscale, downtown worlds have internalized, to deadening psychological effect, the banalities of advertising and marketing: his characters talk to one another and about themselves in what sounds suspiciously like ad copy” (NYTimes 1999). In the ending chapters of *Glamorama* Victor discovers the terrorist alter-egos of his supermodel cohorts. This revelation makes Chloe’s death by abortion pill that much more suspect. She remains in the world of consumerism- the world that the terrorists now try to subvert with bombings and murders. She represents Victor’s other life, and therefore must die. The way she dies makes it even more interesting because it signifies the power of others over a woman’s body. An overdose of mifepristone would not exactly work the same way in a man. This method of death separates the woman, Chloe, even further from the actual death because the reader becomes sympathetic to the pregnancy. A tactic used by right to life activists when campaigning against abortion in general, but against the approval of mifepristone in particular in this time period (Solinger 221). In this instance,
we do not know how far along the pregnancy is, how much mifepristone was given, and
other facts needed to assess this case from a medical standpoint, but this scene was not
written from a medical standpoint to give an accurate depiction of a medical abortion.
This is a textual account used to evoke emotion and disgust, but I would argue that the
resulting image is not the same as in Shapiro’s novel. Misconception turned out to be a
book about abortion and abortion politics in this country. Glamorama is not. It is a book
that, like the other novels mentioned above, plays on various themes of a capitalist
culture and what that does to the minds of these privileged individuals. Like American
Psycho, the affectlessness of the characters in Glamorama and their need to consume
goods (and people) and then dispose of them creates a neurosis of sorts that drives the
characters to commit these heinous acts.

Since Ellis was writing this before the approval of RU-486 in the United States,
including mention of the drug and using it in such a distorted manner in Glamorama
attests to some knowledge on his part of the numerous campaigns to block its approval.
In a sense he portrays this grotesque scene to almost comical ends, and one could argue
that all the splattering and gushing demonstrate the ridiculousness of the whole debate.
Without actually speaking to Bret Easton Ellis (and getting truthful answers) we could
never truly know. The fact remains that Mifepristone had been available in Europe for
close to ten years prior to its approval in the United States. Interestingly, Chloe’s death
takes place in Europe. This alone underscores the difference between abortion politics in
the U.S. and that of other so-called First World countries. My feelings toward Chloe’s
death scene have changed a bit since first reading Glamorama. At the very least, it no
longer appalls me. I am not sure if this has more to do with the fact that violence in pop
culture seems more naturalized to me on TV and in movies, or the fact that after reading the four novels mentioned in this essay, I now see Ellis’ work as a whole in a different light. He seems to hit the reader over the head with shallowness, self-absorption, beauty, money, sex, drugs, and blood. These themes begin softly in *Less Than Zero* with Clay commenting:

> We have been in Beverly Hills shopping most of the late morning and early afternoon. My mother has spent most of this time at probably at Neiman Marcus, and my sisters have gone to Jerry Magnin and have used our father’s charge account to buy him and me something and then to MGA and Camp Beverly Hills and Privilege to buy themselves something. I sit at the bar in La Scala boutique for most of this time, bored out of my mind, smoking and drinking red wine” (23).

Clay and his sister end up fighting over who can find their own cocaine in the end of this passage. Then this sentiment explodes in *Glamorama* with stream of consciousness passages like:

> The shows we attended today: Gaultier, Comme des Garcons, and—after a stop by the new Frank Malliot on the Champs Elysees, Galliano…and then inevitably Le Baines for dinner…I’m wearing Pravda and mellowing out on immense dosages of Xanax and it’s a big hyped-up bash and I’m saying ‘Hey Baby’ in strained variations to…and when I light a cigarette I am just noticing the thousand francs in my hand (343).

It numbs your senses to what these characters represent, and more so the mention of celebrities and labels over and over normalizes their actions. Much in the way our consumer culture, disposability mindset in the U.S. sometimes just appears normal; the way things should be. Elizabeth Young states, “It is part of the sense of synaptic overload integral to our society. Patrick Bateman’s [*American Psycho*] terrible, despairing cry in the video store-- ‘There are too many fucking movies to choose from’—is the frantic, universal response of the consumer maddened by dizzying excess” (29). Patrick Bateman turns psychotic in that novel and goes on a killing spree to punish people for their excesses. Ellis creates a morality tale, and the reader is supposedly so
disgusted by all of this excess that the violence slips right past them. It reminds me of when I saw Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*. It is full of all this killing and violence, but in an overly comic book type of way. Therefore, I was the only one laughing at some of these bloody scenes (maybe that means there is something wrong with me?), but that is how I now understand this gruesome abortion scene in *Glamorama*.

Ellis really drives home themes of post-modernism, and a feeling of being outside of the worlds he creates. Speaking about *Less Than Zero*, Elizabeth Young states, “Ellis’ text, while lacking some of the more obvious post-modernist tricks – absurdism, fact/fiction combinations or overt authorial intervention – is nevertheless a remarkably pure representation of the experience of post modernity. The book is almost entirely implicit, entirely ‘elsewhere’” (40). She goes on to state that the text is a mere performative of the “frail, depleted lives that it depicts.” That sums up the abortion scene in *Glamorama*. Ellis places the use of mifepristone outside of the traditional use of it and therefore reinventing it in an overtly exaggerated way consequently stripping it of the power the pro-life movement imbues this pill with. The text seems performative. It is aware of itself, and the politics it is trying to subvert. Still, even if one views this scene as performative, the false representation still holds more weight in a popular novel, such as *Glamorama*. As mentioned above, like the novel *Misconception*, the use of RU-486 in such an absurd manner highlights myths about the drug circulated by the conservative right.
CHAPTER 5  
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Without a doubt, there is a lot going on in the work of Bret Easton Ellis. Looking at his novels through a gendered lens presents more than enough material for an entire book about his work. From the gratuitous murders in *American Psycho* to the suicide of a girl whose love is unrequited in *The Rules of Attraction*, his portrayal of female characters leaves something to be desired. Clearly, these books are not concerned with feminist issues in particular. He concerns himself more with the consumerist society attitudes so prevalent in our society. Unfortunately, as we have seen, these attitudes sometimes exist at the cost of women and women’s rights. As Ellis got older, and his political sensibility broadened and solidified, he became better able to approach his characters in such a way that they reified themes in our greater world. For instance, the constant creation of products, whether they be fast food containers or cleaning products, to make our lives easier are all created at the cost of our environment. The attitudes that reinforce this behavior are dominant throughout Ellis’ work. Victor’s incessant name-dropping throughout *Glamorama* makes this clear. Ellis also seems to become more and more aware of the political environment in which he writes with each novel he produces.

The novels approached in this thesis, *Less Than Zero, The Rules of Attraction, American Psycho, and Glamorama*, clearly critique the attitudes and lifestyles of a certain privileged class, and together they mark abortion as a symptom of these excessive habits. Ellis’ work adheres to middle-class capitalist ideology that posits women as the most vain, simple-minded and even treacherous players in the cycle of consumer culture.
In each of the novels discussed, abortion serves as a punishment for this “bad” behavior; a punishment that his female characters experience all on their own. Thus, his novels turn out to be nothing more than conservative morality tales warning women of the horrors that await them when they act out. In addition, feminist cultural theory asserts that women in consumer culture are not only viewed as “simple-minded,” but they also serve as a bodily reminder of male consumption. In this way, the women in Ellis’ novels are not only punished for their own behavior, but also for the transgressions of their male counterparts. In Glamorama, Chloe both embodies the shallow activities prevalent in the privileged world she inhabits, and she exemplifies Victor’s own crimes. In the end, she pays the ultimate price, and her death by abortion in the final chapters of pointedly makes the connection between women, their bodies and consumer culture that Ellis has been getting at throughout the entirety of his work.

Interestingly, the political climate surrounding abortion throughout the span of Ellis’s career also provides some insight into the inclusion of scenarios about abortion in each of his novels. The debate around abortion garners the most passionate and sometimes violent reactions of any other prominent issue in the U.S. In the eighties this debate became particularly volatile with the formation of Operation Rescue, and the various clinic violence that went along with it. Terry Randall, founder of Operation Rescue, called for his followers to “act like abortion was murder,” and they took heed to that call. Employing an “eye for an eye” attitude, some activists bombed clinics, blockaded the entrances to others, and eventually shot and killed clinic workers and doctors in various parts of the country. In the heat of this controversy, Ellis was writing both Less Than Zero and The Rules of Attraction. Needless to say, in that type of
environment, Ellis seems to have paid attention, and included the abortion debate in each of his novels about the affectless and vacant youth of our upper class.

In *Less Than Zero* (1985), he merely mentions an abortion that money is needed for. Total ambivalence is apparent throughout the scene. One suspects that the money is truly needed for drugs, but the true purpose is never revealed. The reader is left with a feeling that these kids can get whatever they want and get rid of whatever they want as long as the money flows freely. A sentiment that is also used by anti-choice activists in their fight against the legality of abortion. The fact that we never truly know what the money is needed for in itself reminds us that abortion evokes emotion in most people. If I say I need the money for an abortion, then they will be more likely to give it to me. Who would want to challenge me? If I say I have a drug problem, the money is going to stay in their pocket. In 1985, with the “war on drugs” in full swing, and the conservative push to restrict access to abortion on full speed ahead, most Americans had these things on their political minds.

Progressing to *Rules of Attraction*, Ellis attempts to take the reader into a clinic, and we see what it is like “on the inside” first hand. We “hear” the sucking of the machine, and see the heaving of the stomach. Through Ellis' narrative device the reader is also privy to Lauren’s feelings and mixed emotions at having to go through this procedure. Her blank page following the procedure, certainly illustrates that abortion remains a difficult decision, and one that no one wants to go through at all. More so, this narrative tactic tells us that she is a blank page. She thinks nothing. We cannot really be sure of his intentions, nevertheless, the scene again makes a clear connection between women, abortion and consumer culture. Abortion is part of the throw away mindset that
Ellis critiques throughout his work, and he uses it here not really to make a stand, but the
to make the point that capitalism and obsessiveness with commodities has driven us so
far that we can get rid of anything. Abortion remains the ultimate example of
consumerism gone out of control, and women gone out of control. The characters use
their spending power to purchase it, and that enables them to dispose of the problem,
while at the same time punishing the female characters.

Published just two years after *Less Than Zero*, the debate over abortion rights was
still just as volatile. Operation Rescue was in full swing, and militant activists were out
to eliminate the right to abortion at any cost necessary. Writing during this political
climate, Ellis produces a very cold and sterile look at a clinic experience. Lauren
ultimately “pays” the price for her and Sean’s transgressions. She remains alone
throughout the scene with only her own thoughts and the sounds of the procedure to
comfort her. Her body has turned into a commodity. The text separates her from the
actual experience of the procedure that she is going through. Similarly, anti-choice
rhetoric separates the abortion procedure from the woman making it solely about the
pregnancy versus the woman.

By the time Ellis was writing *Glamorama*, abortion in the United States was on the
brink of a major change. The FDA had begun trials testing the effectiveness of RU-486
or mifepristone as a method of safely terminating a pregnancy. Ellis’ awareness of this
and the political implications of it are apparent in his depiction of mifepristone use in
*Glamorama*. The absurdity of the scene in which an overdose of mifepristone is used to
murder Chloe sticks to Ellis’ post-modern/performative roots, but at the same time
highlights the political climate in which Ellis is writing this scene. He might have been
well aware of the attempts to block the passage of mifepristone by the FDA, and uses this medium to comment on it. What remains certain is the fact that Ellis again uses Chloe’s death by abortion as an example of what happens to us when we become too concerned with our possessions and our appearances. Apparently, women are the worst perpetrators of this behavior because time and time again he uses their bodies to teach this lesson, thus, commodifying woman’s bodies and experience in a particular way that makes a clear connection between rampant consumerism and the abortion debate. Susan Wills notes, “Commodity fetishism erases production and presents the toy store (or the TV commercial) as the point of origin of the toy” (Willis 24). Similarly, in these texts, production gets simply reduced to the woman’s body, freeing the man from any responsibility. Ultimately, it is she that must pay the final “price” for it.

It is no secret that textual and visual images hold an innate power to meld our perception of societal issues. Maybe they do not exactly have the power to change our minds, but they evoke emotions in us that affect the way we see these same images in our everyday life situations. Bret Easton Ellis is a small author in comparison to many. His impact may not be as great as some, but more popular authors tend to be restricted to not taking a particular stand on political issues so as not to alienate their readers. Ellis may not be pro-choice, I don’t believe he ever mentioned it one way or another. In fact, in every review or article I could find about him, he never mentions the use of abortion in his novels. Even in the feminist critiques of American Psycho, only the treatment of women and the overly grotesque nature of the murders are discussed. Still he tackles more controversial topics than other authors, and in doing so, he makes a statement. In portraying abortion in his novels at all, he makes us aware that these procedures do take
place every day in the United States, but I still have to wonder why he chose this particular issue to illustrate his concerns about consumer culture. Furthermore, Does his mention of abortion in each of his novels really prove that he understands this American debate? I don’t think so. I do think that he sees it on the surface. He sees it as something that you buy. It is something that you pay money for and it helps you rid yourself of something else, a “problem,” and it is this problem which prevents you from participating in the self-centered lifestyle that Mr. Ellis’ characters seem to embrace.

At the time Ellis wrote *Less Than Zero*, other authors around his age tackled similar subjects. Jay McInerney wrote *Bright Lights, Big City*, and Gary Indiana wrote *White Trash Boulevard*. Now they are all grown up. The issues of fast life, excess, and disposability have grown up with them as evidenced in Ellis’ later novels. For me, the interest comes from watching the movie version of *Less Than Zero* when I was in middle school. I became curious about the “Hollywood” lifestyle depicted in the movie. The characters in the movie had nothing to worry about. Drugs, sex, and excess cash were just a way of life, and that life was very far from my own. Ellis’ critiques of this lifestyle make the reader, who is presumably on the outside of this world, feel like they are in “the know.”

Furthermore, a reader can relate to Ellis’ sense of disgust at it because he attempts his critique from a somewhat intellectual and purely pop cultural approach. He drops the names of the cool books, like *On The Road*, or *Siddhartha*, throughout *Less Than Zero* that my friends were reading in high school to seem more high-brow and very liberal, but his main characters really only concern themselves with having these books, not actually reading them. He also zeros in on the pop music prevalent during the periods he was
writing. Speaking of Less Than Zero, Graham Caveney states, “pop music acts like the novel’s Greek chorus…The characters’ affluence and lifestyle—all Porches, Jacuzzis and cocaine—places them in a context that is closer to that of the musician than that of the usual pop consumer” (124). So, in thinking about this as a larger project, I have to wonder, what does this say about Ellis’ books and about those who enjoy reading them? Most of my friends have all read Ellis. We are in our late twenties, and all went to high school at about the same time, the early 1990s. We tend to pride ourselves on our liberal sensibilities and open-mindedness. One thing that still seems peculiar though is that not one of them found Ellis’ work to be particularly anti-choice, misogynist, or problematic in anyway. Why that is, I still have not figured out. Maybe I just "think" about things too much, or perhaps my "suspension of disbelief" capability malfunctioned. Otherwise, I can only presume that they feel like they understand Ellis’ true intentions (as I do at times), and can relate to making fun of and being disgusted by these shallow, brand-obsessed individuals created in the novels themselves. Does that, in itself, make what Ellis writes okay? Does that mean that he can write bloody, brutal passages about women being murdered without anyone batting an eye? It shouldn’t, at least not without an explanation.

In all the interviews I have read, Ellis talks about dealing with provocative subjects, but does just presenting women having abortions, or men having sex with other men mean that he is pro-choice or pro-gay and lesbian rights? Or is just writing about a man on a murderous rampage provocative? The fact remains that Ellis brings these subjects up, but he doesn’t do anything more with them then let the reader know that they are symbols of immorality. He does not take a particular stand other than the fact that he has
issues with consumer culture. Ellis himself states, “The generation that has embraced—or is at least willing not to condemn—American Psycho understands that the outrageous acts of violence, within the confines of a video, a film, a book are exactly that: representations, not reality” (Harper’s Baazar 2000). Does that really get us anywhere though? Can we really believe that these representations do not effect us? Nevertheless, Ellis gives us, at the very least, an interesting read. What made this particular novelist speak to a generation of individuals who have similar music sensibilities, similar politics, and similar middle class roots? That's one question that bothers me still, and I think my next look into his work would have to stem from an ethnography of my friends. Is it something in his writing style? Is it something in the way he seems to "know" what's hip before it's hip? There has to be a reason why my friends care so much about and relate to the attitude Ellis projects in each of his novels. Why did I first set out to defend him? Why is he a "guilty pleasure" for me? I could write these questions all day long, and never truly get an answer. I do know that I enjoyed these books, I saw interesting things going on in them regarding women's bodies, abortion and consumer culture, and now, after all this analysis, I feel almost bad for liking the books in the first place. There's something to that. As a feminist, am I allowed to like Bret Easton Ellis' work?

In retrospect, I have to admit that most of the friends that recommended the books were men, men who identify as feminist, but still coming from a male perspective nonetheless. Maybe my next project should entail figuring out if women can enjoy reading at all. Quoting Judith Fetterly, Patrocinio Schweickart states, "As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose
central principles is misogyny”” (618) as a way of explaining the process of immasculcation (Fetterly 564; Schiewkart 610). If, as females, we become immasculated (identifying with the male point of view) when reading, then I understand why I enjoyed these books. I also understand why now, after breaking out of this immasculcation, my perspective has changed.

Ellis is currently working on a new novel, which he says is about his family, and is mainly autobiographical (breteastonellis.com). I remain curious as to why abortion has been on his mind for so many years. I am not sure that he could have written his novels without the mention of it. That is why I argue that the political implications of abortion in popular culture are great. In addition, I will be the first in line to read that autobiographical work, eager to see if there is an underlying reason why Ellis has this preoccupation with women’s reproduction.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kimberly Helm is completing her Master of Arts degree in women's studies at the University of Florida, and she is the first student to graduate from this department at UF with an advanced degree. Before being accepted into the program, Kim worked as a reproductive health counselor at a local Women's Health Center. Her work there served as the impetus for furthering her education in the field of women's studies. After graduation, Kim is taking a year off to travel the country with her band, and will then continue her pursuit of a Ph.D in women's studies in the Fall of 2005.