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The Nothing that Emerges: Žižek and Baudrillard as Readers of Bret Easton Ellis

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There is an epistemological imperative to approach nothing not as blankness (*tabula rasa*) but as a space of withdrawal and resistance. That is, if nothing were simply blankness, we could have no knowledge of it. Bearing this in mind, the scene of nothing is an intriguing one from which we may view some of the fundamental concepts of Jean Baudrillard's and Slavoj Žižek's theory. At the scene of nothing, we glimpse the teasing overlap and agreement in their thought, as well as seeing some of the basic differences that have largely kept the two thinkers apart in academic discourse.

Offering helpful context for analysis—and for setting the scene of our discussion of nothing—is the literary work of cult American novelist Bret Easton Ellis. Ellis's irruptive 1985 debut novel *Less Than Zero* frequently posits “nothing”

as having positive value, a stance that allows one (in Ellis's text, it is the main character Clay) to adopt a worldview that challenges the landscape of misrepresentations, lies, and appearances that saturated the Los Angeles and Hollywood culture machine of the mid-1980s. Of equal interest is *Imperial Bedrooms*, the sequel to *Less Than Zero* published in 2010. *Imperial Bedrooms* catches up with the characters from *Less Than Zero* twenty-five years after that novel's publication. In an unexpected narrative twist, Ellis has the characters in *Imperial Bedrooms* aware of both the publication of *Less Than Zero* and the Brat-Pack film version released in 1987. The effect of this metafictional turn is seismic. Clay, the disengaged and seemingly affectless narrator of *Less Than Zero*, is dramatically redrawn in *Imperial Bedrooms* as a depraved, nearly evil Hollywood screenwriter. Ultimately, Ellis's interrelated texts form a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a text written over an original text, and in the case of Ellis, we can see how this act of overwriting causes a void to emerge in the gap of the missing original. The first text is necessary because it provides a point from which nothing can emerge. We need something in order to understand nothing, and understanding how nothing emerges is the fundamental theoretical project. With *Less Than Zero* as a touchstone, we can move to see the orienting role of nothing or the void in Ellis's writing, and, indeed, how a notion of the void in Ellis only arises through conceiving his texts as a palimpsest.

The trajectory from *Less Than Zero* to the misrepresentative 1987 film adaptation to the self-aware sequel *Imperial Bedrooms* leads us on a theoretical path from one conception of nothing to another, and as a result, this trajectory reveals the connection between Baudrillard and Žižek. It is not simply that we move from Baudrillard to Žižek as we move from the first novel to the film and ultimately to the later novel. Instead, *Less Than Zero* shows how Baudrillard and Žižek might overlap in their conceptions of nothing, while *Imperial Bedrooms*, seen in the light of the filmic misrepresentation, illustrates how Žižek's politics of nothing opens up more theoretical space than that of Baudrillard's.

Critically, Bret Easton Ellis has come a long way since his work was routinely branded as "effortless self-indulgence," "high melodrama and angst,"

and “a rather juvenile attempt to capture the sense of purposelessness that seems to afflict so many young people these days” (collected in Sahlin 24: 1991). In more recent years, Ellis’s novels have been used to consider such serious scholarly issues as: postmodern affect, satire, pornography, 21st century violence, “poverty” and “value” in late capitalism.¹ This turn in how Ellis has been received critically allows his work to act as a rich site for the comparative analysis of Baudrillard and Žižek.²

Less Than Zero is a text that, among other things, brings Baudrillard’s *The Perfect Crime* and Žižek’s *Less Than Nothing*—works that represent important moments in the articulation of each philosopher’s thought—into helpful conversation. Ellis’s novel focuses on Clay, a young college student with wealthy and absent parents, who has returned to his hometown of Los Angeles for Christmas break. Mixed in with infrequent but important reflections on his past, Clay’s sparse and controlled narrative voice guides readers through a gradual separation from his longtime friends and his disillusionment with the excessive (and often dangerous) LA party scene. At one point late in the novel, Clay claims he just wants to see “the worst” in society, in people. Over the course of *Less Than Zero*, Clay witnesses the unveiling of a snuff film, watches the gang rape of a thirteen-year old girl, and sees his friend Julian perform sex for money. That is to say, he *does* manage to see just about the worst the world has to offer and, unsurprisingly, he extricates himself from the symbolic and leaves L.A. at the end of the novel seemingly for good.

Ellis’s novel anticipates Žižek’s call for “nothing” as a form of radical disengagement from the prevailing situation and is illustrative of Baudrillard’s idea of the “continuity of nothing,” the trace that betrays the world’s secret (that reality has been murdered). In all three texts, “nothing” is a productive moment, granting access to knowledge that appears as a gap in appearance. According to Baudrillard, the perfect crime, like ideology, has no history. It has no perpetrator, no clear motive, but it is insidious nonetheless. Indeed, *The Perfect Crime* shows us a Baudrillard in seeming agreement with many fundamental concepts of Žižek’s philosophical edifice. Take, for example, the emphasis on subtraction:

“What we have forgotten in modernity, by dint of constantly accumulating, adding, going for more, is that force comes from subtraction, power from absence” (2008: 4). The perfect crime removes all traces of itself, so that we can find no indication of the original illusory world that existed before the crime. But Baudrillard rejects the perfect crime as impossible. Because the crime is never perfect, as Baudrillard notes several times, we have a chance to notice that a crime has indeed taken place, which is where the theoretical and political task converges. This is also, fruitfully, where nothing raises its head in his thought.

The imperfection of the crime is Baudrillard’s way of formulating the incompleteness of the symbolic order. But it remains difficult to access, and recovering the nothing requires a specific political act. The way that we evince our responsibility to the trace of nothing or the gap in language is the act of withdrawal. As Baudrillard writes in *The Perfect Crime*, “perhaps the function of disappearing is a vital one. Perhaps this is how we react as living beings, as mortals, to the threat of an immortal universe, the threat of a definitive reality” (2008: 41). Baudrillard sees the call for disappearing as a vital function in the face of an immortal universe or, to put it in other terms, an oppressive symbolic field. It is at this point that the coincidence of Baudrillard’s project and Žižek’s comes into view. In the face of this immanent threat, as Žižek writes of Bartleby, the only response left that challenges the system is to withdraw and negate.

One of the basic schemas for understanding Žižek’s “less than nothing” is subtraction after negation. It is not enough simply to negate the oppressive symbolic field. One must also withdraw from its coordinates and thereby expose the field itself as a nothing. We see something approximating this in the figure of Clay. Clay, whose pale complexion Ellis notes repeatedly in *Less Than Zero*, moves through L.A. like an apparition, a nothing. The phrase “Disappear Here,” first seen on a billboard by Clay, is woven throughout *Less Than Zero*, a suggestion, command, or injunction that seems to speak directly to Clay’s emotional and mental state. While using “Disappear Here” as a jumping off point to talk about Clay as a passive character has become something of a critical commonplace, we need to grasp the opposite of this oft-repeated claim.³

Clay's affect in the novel is one of withdrawal rather than passivity. Colin Hutchinson in "Cult Fiction: "Good" and "Bad" Communities in the Contemporary American Novel" notices much the same when he writes, "Clay is disturbed by the apathy of his mother towards his younger sisters' consumption of cocaine and pornography, and by his father's dispensation of large cheques in lieu of parental involvement" (1994: 39). Hutchinson is right. Clay's attitude toward his friends, family, and Los Angeles in general is not one of *tabula rasa*. He does not simply "accept" what is written in the space of Los Angeles. He processes it and ultimately rejects it.

Clay's reaction to the symbolic through attempts at withdrawal—even in this supposedly withdrawn and emotionless depiction of Los Angeles—surprises and upsets his friends. Clay's distance in this novel is particular and produces affective responses in other characters. When he sees quasi-love interest Blair for the last time, she asks him: "What do you care about? What makes you happy?" Clay responds, "Nothing. Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing" (1985: 205). This response only makes Clay *more interesting to Blair*, as she calls him before he leaves L.A. to try to convince him to stay. Clay's final act of withdrawal is to leave Los Angeles entirely, and this is an ethical act of withdrawal, removal, disappearing.⁴ Clay's affirmative and honest "I like nothing," in *Less Than Zero* is a gesture of pure subtraction. Clay is *not* saying that he "doesn't like anything," he affirms, rather, that he likes "nothing." Whereas Žižek has Bartleby affirming a non-predicate—"I would prefer not to"—Clay's affirmation moves a step further and brings into the symbolic the specter of the void itself. Clay's is an act of identification with the real, the impossible point in the symbolic field. In short, in this world full of *something*—drugs, lavish parties, movie premieres, video arcades, expensive restaurants, endless sexual hook-ups—what Clay is able to conjure is the emergence of nothing, a decidedly radical political intervention given the prevailing situation.

The standard reading of *Less Than Zero*'s main character and the famous phrases that follow him around is elucidated nicely by Mike Grimshaw: "*Less Than Zero* begins with the now emblematic line 'People are afraid to merge on

freeways in Los Angeles.’ This aphorism is the core of Ellis’ output, this ‘failure to merge’ gaining the internal force of Forster’s “only connect” as a maxim to live life by. Ellis’ horror of his generation’s ‘failure to merge’ is also represented by references to a billboard with the troubling message ‘Disappear Here’” (2004: 3). Clay cannot enter or merge into the symbolic structure of Los Angeles. There is something that repels him, something he cannot bear to incorporate into his resistant persona. While simply being unable to accept the symbolic demands does not instantly transform one into a political figure, this inability takes on a political valence when it becomes subtractive.

What should be a nearly heroic act of resistance and withdrawal—Clay’s leaving Los Angeles at the end of *Less Than Zero*, a “getting out” every bit as triumphant (though less political) as George Willard’s in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*—is undermined in *Imperial Bedrooms*, the sequel to *Less Than Zero* written twenty-five years later.⁵ *Imperial Bedrooms* begins, strikingly, with the following lines: “They had made a movie about us. The movie was based on a book written by someone we knew” (2010: 3). On the first page, Ellis tells us everything we need to know about *Imperial Bedrooms* and why it will be different from *Less Than Zero*. The sequel to *Less Than Zero* will *not* pretend that the original story was turned into a Hollywood film. It will separate the book from the film and carve out its own distinctive space, *while* incorporating the film and the book (and reader/viewer expectations of *Imperial Bedrooms* based on both) into its diegetic reality. Ellis also establishes early on that the Clay of *Imperial Bedrooms* is different from the Clay the reader thinks they know. While Clay is, again, the novel’s narrator, he clearly demarcates the Clay of *Imperial Bedrooms* from the Clay of *Less Than Zero*. The Clay of *Less Than Zero* is now referred to as “the writer” who was *friends with* the Clay of *Imperial Bedrooms*. In fact, it is implied that Clay—“the writer”—is Ellis, who “in his second novel [*The Rules of Attraction*] . . . parodies Clay” (2010: 5). *Imperial Bedrooms* Clay goes on to note that *Less Than Zero* was “for the most part an accurate portrayal” of those four weeks in Los Angeles in 1985. That “a twelve-year-old girl really had been gang-raped” in a West Hollywood mansion (2010: 3). The terrifying events of the first

novel are all real; “the worst”—the things Clay wanted to see—all happened. The “original illusion,” in this case *Less Than Zero*, is blurred while it is confirmed, rejected at the same time it establishes the world of *Imperial Bedrooms*. *Less Than Zero*, and the political act of subtraction—causing the nothing to emerge—are, as Baudrillard might contend, completely lost.

The Clay of *Imperial Bedrooms* goes on to delineate key differences between what *he* felt during the winter of 1985 and what was portrayed in *Less Than Zero*: “I was in that room . . . with the writer, who in the book noted just a vague reluctance on my part and failed to accurately describe how I had actually felt that night—the *desire*, the shock, how afraid I was of the writer, a blond and isolated boy whom the girl I was dating had halfway fallen in love with” (2010: 3). *Desire* is here the active term. Again, what Ellis is staking out here is crucial. The initial pages of *Imperial Bedrooms* are all about what was *not* captured in either *Less Than Zero* the novel or the film. Desire, a term never mentioned or discussed in the first novel—a nothing—returns, emerges out of the palimpsest of *Less Than Zero* (the book and film) to “re-quilt” the way we understand Clay in *Imperial Bedrooms*. Desire here re-writes the original text and suggests not just an alternative reading, but introduces an alternative history, a history that only exists insofar as the original text has been erased. The palimpsest is the *sine qua non* for the revelation of this absent past. The way we read Clay must be altered to account for this intertextual and metanarrative shift.

The imperative to re-read Clay doesn’t start with *Imperial Bedrooms*, however, it starts with the 1987 film version of *Less Than Zero*. In *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay delivers a hilariously blunt review of the adaptation process of *Less Than Zero*: “The movie was very different from the book in that there was nothing from the book in the movie” (2010: 7). Besides that quick evaluation of the transfer of intellectual material from page to screen, Clay is given occasion to pause and reflect earnestly: “I couldn’t help but recognize a truth while sitting in that screening room. In the book everything about me had happened. The book was something I simply couldn’t disavow. The book was blunt and had an honesty about it, whereas the movie was just a beautiful lie” (2010: 7). So it is the

film version of *Less Than Zero*, which features a charming and compassionate Clay (played by then teen idol Andrew McCarthy) tirelessly working to save his friend Julian (Robert Downey Jr.) and reconnect with his lost love Blair (Jami Gertz), that creates the context for Clay to set the record straight in *Imperial Bedrooms* (and, in an ironic twist, have Julian—the friend Clay spent the film version of *Less Than Zero* trying to save—killed).

I find it unlikely that Ellis would return so exactly to the world of *Less Than Zero* were it not for the wildly misrepresentative Hollywood film adaptation. Characters in Ellis's fiction always have ties to characters in other novels. The effect is intensified in *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, however, as the narrator is redoubled and doubt is cast on the authenticity of the original. The 1987 *Less Than Zero* film causes a rupture in the closed circuit of Ellis's textual universe. Clay's ethical act of withdrawal, his Bartleby-like act of refusal and subtraction, is compromised irreparably by the future actions of the Clay character in *Imperial Bedrooms*. The *Less Than Zero* film so undermines the source material that another novel had to be written in order to course correct it, but in the process the radical political potential of the original is lost.

All is not lost, however, just the original (or the fantasy of the originary). Foregrounding nothing enables us to intensify claims of Ellis as a subversive author by providing a way of understanding his use of intertextuality. Just what constitutes Ellis's text needs definition. Few authors can boast an oeuvre as committed to intertextuality as Ellis. All of Ellis's novels feature characters who are friends with or related to characters from other novels (Sean and Patrick, the Bateman brothers who take center stage in *The Rules of Attraction* and *American Psycho*, respectively), or who are direct or indirect avatars for Ellis himself (many critics see *Less Than Zero* as an autobiographical novel and *Lunar Park* is a mock memoir featuring Ellis himself as the main character). *Imperial Bedrooms*, while sourcing itself firmly in the world of *Less Than Zero*, is distinct from the original. Stylistically, *Imperial Bedrooms* is more heavily reliant on plot. As with *Less Than Zero*, the novel takes place over Christmas and begins just after Clay has arrived in LA from the East Coast. This time he returns as a disengaged

though lecherous mid-level Hollywood screenwriter. After falling in love with a young actress (Rain Turner), Clay becomes enmeshed in the lives of his former friends, a suspicious death, and a highly off-the-record prostitution ring run by his childhood friend Julian.

If *Less Than Zero* is all about subtraction, or “how to disappear completely,” *Imperial Bedrooms* is about appearing and emergence. There is a marked presence in the shadows of the L.A. of *Imperial Bedrooms*. The appearance of the void is littered throughout the novel, as characters, cars, and paranoia emerge quite literally out of the darkness of the perceptible field. The constant presence of the void—and characters and things fading into or emerging from it—is introduced early on in the novel and continues throughout. To cite a few prominent examples, Ellis writes, “The blue Jeep starts following us on the 405 somewhere between LAX and the Wilshire exit” and “Then the smile freezes and quickly fades as she glances behind me. I turn around and squint at the woman heading toward us . . . when I turn back around the girl’s walking away, her silhouette enhanced by the glow of the pool, and *from somewhere in the darkness* there’s the sound of a fountain splashing, and then the girl is replaced” (2010: 10, 19). The novel’s final lines crystalize this aesthetic and reveal something so *real* about the character of Clay: “The fades, the dissolves, the rewritten scenes, all the things you wipe away—I now want to explain these things to [Blair] but I know I never will, the most important one being: I never liked anyone and I’m afraid of people” (2010: 169). We cannot doubt the sincerity in these lines, and sincerity implies a depth of character—not a blank surface. Furthermore, while Clay becomes an even more alienating and detestable character in *Imperial Bedrooms* (becomes more of a something), he still emerges, in the end, as a nothing. Despite the plot, the expansion of character and action, despite all the “something,” what again emerges in Ellis is nothing. As Blair notes talking about Clay’s face at the end of *Imperial Bedrooms*, “You don’t look like anything has happened to you . . . and you are so pale” (2010: 169). The layers of experience Clay has accrued fail to touch him, to mark his body. What emerges out of this stack of experience, this palimpsest is, ultimately,

nothing. Clay is a nothing that emerges out of something.

Yet, in regard to this intertextuality, Baudrillard's system cannot support these conclusions. As is well known, for Baudrillard, our culture is the result of a belief in and acceptance of the simulacrum. This inheres nothing less than the loss of reality. Simulation comes into play as it "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1995: 1). When the original is covered, we have lost it for good (and the illusion it offered that kept us in touch with it). So for Baudrillard, the existence of *Imperial Bedrooms*—and its reordering representation of Clay—means we have lost the original. *Imperial Bedrooms* covers the cracks in the *Less Than Zero* story that were opened up by the misrepresentational film. Since *Imperial Bedrooms* in many ways *rewrites the original*, it means that the original is forever marked in a way that it heretofore had not been. The mere presence of *Imperial Bedrooms* changes the content of *Less Than Zero*. A "Baudrillard Palimpsest" would insist on the original illusion of *Less Than Zero* disappearing under the authority of the new text, the Virtual, the perfect crime, *Imperial Bedrooms*:

This is what is at stake in Virtuality. And there can be no doubting its absolute ambition. If it were brought to completion, that radical effectuation would be the equivalent of a perfect crime. Whereas the 'original' crime is never perfect and always leaves traces . . . future extermination—that extermination which would be produced by an absolute determination of the world and its elements—would leave no trace. We would not even have the time to disappear. (2008: 36)

I certainly think there is value in reading palimpsest this way, and reading the trilogy of *Less Than Zero* (novel and film), and *Imperial Bedrooms* in this manner. But we have to challenge the primacy that Baudrillard gives to the notion of the original or the originary in his system.⁶

Here we can turn back to Žižek to see the fundamental divide that separates the two thinkers. Discussing the *clinamen*, Žižek perhaps has a response to Baudrillard and his concern over the loss of the world's original illusion: "let us take the notion of the *clinamen* in all its radicality: it is not that there are first atoms, which then deviate from their straight path (or not)—atoms

are nothing but their *clinamen*. There is no substantial ‘something’ prior to the *clinamen* which then gets caught up in it; this ‘something’ which deviates is created, emerges, through the *clinamen itself*” (38: 2010). In other words, *it is the distortion in the original that constitutes the original as such*. No “prior to” this distortion exists, and this is what Baudrillard refuses to countenance.⁷

There is, in Baudrillard’s system of thought (particularly in *The Perfect Crime*), a notable nostalgia for the original. For Baudrillard, the Virtual covers the Real, or what is reality is actually a reality *effect* that causes us to lose touch with some prior state or situation.⁸ Žižek dismisses this in rather clear fashion: we can only grasp something once it has moved, once something has happened to it. In short, we are only aware of an original state after some divergence, meaning any nostalgia is nostalgia for what we never had (which oftentimes is *exactly* the kind of thing that supports nostalgia in the cultural imagination). For Žižek, any reconstruction of the “original” entails a retroactive fantasy for a non-lacking state that did not exist.

We have come, finally (and again), to the territory of palimpsest. Žižek only uses the word palimpsest one time, and even then the word is used to describe not to theorize.⁹ The word is not common in the psychoanalytic writings of “The Big Three” (Freud, Lacan, and Žižek), but it is there conceptually and literally (call this “CTRL+F Scholarship”). While Freud was given to treating all of his writings—particularly *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*—as texts to be rethought and written over, the word palimpsest itself appears only twice in all of Freud and never as a direct use (though his discussion of recollection and memory in “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad” comes very close). They occur via quotation, with the significant mention coming from James Sully in a footnote added to *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1914 (the other comes via Henrich Heine in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in a context not worth quoting). Freud writes: “...nothing in the literature of the subject comes so near to my hypothesis as a passage in James Sully’s essay ‘The Dream as a Revelation’... ‘we may say that, like some palimpsest, the dream discloses beneath its worthless surface-characters traces of an old and precious

communication” (2010: 160-161). Freud made it a point to highlight those final two lines of quotation, clearly believing them especially apropos of his own theory of the subject.

Lacan uses the word palimpsest three times in the writings collected in *Écrits*, with the most compelling being found in “Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching,” where he speaks of “the subtle bond that links the text of the palimpsest to the text which, underneath it, staining the ground, alters [*reprend*] its forms and shades” (2005: 381). Given Lacan’s description and Freud’s own commitment to writing on/ over his previous work, it is surprising that we do not find a strong working over of the term palimpsest in psychoanalytic texts.¹⁰ If nothing else, the term furthers the psychoanalytic notion of the barred ground and possibly even a groundless ground. The idea provides a useful way to bring Freud’s dream theory to other contexts as well. Furthermore, the notion of condensation already in psychoanalysis is quite close to the fuller notion I am pushing us toward. We bridge one of the gaps between Freud’s and Lacan’s theory here and grasp a consideration of the real that is both seemingly already in Freud (the “old and precious communication” of the real under the symbolic surface) and is absolutely crucial to any notion of palimpsest. While Freud knew nothing of Lacan’s real, he too saw the necessity of an “underneath” to the palimpsest that indelibly and unremittingly complicates the surface. (Žižek’s singular notion of parallax is not just useful but necessary here, as we will see.)

With Ellis, we have license to construct a model for palimpsest that perfectly exhibits the agreement, disagreement, and tension between Baudrillard and Žižek. Not layers on top of one another, as Baudrillard’s system must have it, but a single deep text connected and inflected by a unifying thread that resists and withdraws from the whole, a thread that marks the void that coheres the text (like the toothpick that keeps together a club sandwich or a messy burger). Baudrillard is too quick, in my view, to disregard this underneath. He has no concept of the void. His concept of nothing is similar to Žižek’s, but, since it disbars the order of the real, we must conclude that they are speaking different

languages. When Žižek goes beyond the (less than) nothing, we see the Real that Baudrillard disavows. This is their fundamental and unavoidable difference.

As we have seen, it makes perfect sense to turn to fiction—these fictions—for a discussion about the murder of reality. Why? Because the reality of *Less Than Zero* was murdered by the film version, a “perfect crime” that occasioned *Imperial Bedrooms*. In this movement we can grasp the necessity for a project that reads Žižek and Baudrillard together—with and against each other—needing Ellis's own distinctive fiction to make. While temporally speaking Ellis is a postmodern writer, placing or designating Ellis's fiction as “postmodern” is perhaps a reductive miscategorization (just as it would be for Baudrillard's and Žižek's thinking). Thomas Heise, in “*American Psycho*: Neoliberal Fantasies and the Death of Downtown,” notes that the “affectlessness” of Ellis's fiction exemplifies Frederic Jameson's diagnosis of postmodern literature (Heise 158: 2008). We should be careful about branding Ellis's characters as “affectless,” however. They have an affect, but that affect is subtraction, which Heise simply doesn't recognize as an affect. Marco Abel sees in Ellis a writer pushing *back* against postmodernity, rather than endorsing its hallmarks. Abel writes, “such works [as *American Psycho*] can be deemed without affect only if we reductively conceive of affect in terms of a subject's emotions and feelings” (2008: 50). Abel prefers to look at “affective intensity” and the move away from binarism (affect/affectless) is a profitable one for looking at Ellis's text.

An appreciation of this notion of “affectivity intensity” is useful for seeing that, as a nothing, Clay is not blankness. We need palimpsest to see how nothing can have depth, can rise from something.¹¹ In thinking the Clay character, it is easy to demarcate, as *Imperial Bedrooms* tries to do, the difference between the Clay of *Less Than Zero* and the present narrator Clay of the later novel. We could talk about the characters as two distinct people, or as a parallax of the same character. Žižek's notion of parallax is helpful for understanding Clay, but it will be apparent that there is still a further move necessary in considering Ellis's rich text and the differences between Žižek and Baudrillard.

A parallax is the apparent displacement of an object caused by a change in observational position. Žižek takes this basic truth of perspective and adds a twist: “the observed difference is not simply “subjective,” due to the fact that the same object which exists “out there” is seen from two different stances, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently “mediated,” so that an “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself” (2006: 17). The gap separating these points is a liminal space where no synthesis is possible. Crucially, however, the parallax *gap* is not only a shift between two different perspectives of one object, it is the pure, minimal difference that even divides one perspective or one object from *itself*.

Parallactic relations define both the Ellis Palimpsest (the *Less Than Zeros* and *Imperial Bedrooms*) and how we need to conceive it. In viewing Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, the Hollywood film, *Imperial Bedrooms*, and, for sake of conversation, the audiobook read by Andrew McCarthy, star of the *Less Than Zero* film, as themselves constituting a palimpsest, or a single metatext, we can see clearly how Žižek’s notion of parallax can explain it. Simply put, to read or develop a theoretically robust notion of palimpsest, we need parallax to probe the gaps, the impossible points of articulation in the symbolic structure that are constitutive of its composition. This puts Žižek and Baudrillard in direct conflict, but it is this conflict that illuminates Ellis’s text.

Žižek’s focus in developing his reading (and usage) of parallax shows us the constitutive aspect of the incommensurable gap in our world. We do not have, in our being in the world, a set of a few paradoxes that threaten the stability of reality. We have, rather, a radically contingent reality that *is constituted by internal contradiction*, not threatened by it. Here, a postmodernist notion of the fragmentary subject—or the text as a volatile whole collapsing on itself—is not helpful. Beginning with the idea that no stable interpretation is possible due the sliding and endless conflict of signifiers does less to illuminate the text than we might hope (we slide here into pure relativism). We simply cannot say that *all*

interpretations are valid. This view mistakes the *lack*, or void, or parallax gap at the heart the Ellis Palimpsest as a blank space. *Tabula rasa* puts us in a position of *acceptance*, we have to accept whatever is written on it and permit all interpretations. Conversely (and crucially), the void is a position of *resistance* and *withdrawal*. For our purposes, that blank space—that “nothing”—is Clay. As scholars we need to resist the temptation to read Clay as a literal (or literary) *tabula rasa* (his friends frequently remark how “pale” his skin looks, and his name connotes that which has no shape, or that which can be molded).

Marco Abel, writing on *American Psycho*, elides just this sort of parallax when he argues, “Not coincidentally, the novel relentlessly shows us that identity is nothing but a series of masks, which are not defined by originary Lack but by their specific, nonlacking, *effective* reality. In contrast, the film insists that underneath the [beauty] mask we see Bateman peel off in front of his bathroom mirror there exists a “true,” stable identity—even if this identity is described as nothingness, as Bateman’s recognition that “There is no real me. [. . .] I simply am not there” (emphasis in original 2008: 58). A similar statement could be made regarding *Less Than Zero*, and it would be just as false. This is an argument for *tabula rasa* we cannot accept. As readers of *American Psycho* know, Patrick desperately wants us to believe in *tabula rasa*, for a belief in the philosophical blank slate marks out a position of acceptance, meaning one *has* to accept whatever is written on that space as true or valid (for Patrick it means we have to believe that he *really commits* all the acts of violence in the novel, the only thing that makes him a unique person in that world). For readers of *Less Than Zero*, Clay is, at first glance, presented to us as a disaffected flaneur, a floating nothing. It is up to us as readers to see the surface for what it is (as Žižek would tell us).¹² What Ellis brings to the surface of his fiction is void.

The void marks a position of *resistance* and *withdrawal*. Patrick and Clay are not simple nothings. They are emblematic of the void—“a dimension without limits”—that structures the surface.¹³ Žižek is particularly instructive here:

It all depends on what, precisely, we mean by zero, nothing, or the void. First, there are two zeroes, the zero of measure (like a zero degree, the point of reference chosen to establish a quantitative difference, which is

arbitrary . . .) and zero as the neutral element, like 0 in addition and subtraction . . . This distinction between the neutral/ absorbing zero and the zero of measure is not to be confused with another distinction which also relates to the psychoanalytic practice: the distinction between *nothing* and the *void*. Nothing is localized, like when we say ‘there is nothing here,’ while the void is a dimension without limits. (2012: 67-68)

This void as a dimension without limits is vital for understanding what separates Žižek and Baudrillard (and how Ellis usefully complicates “nothing” and “void” with his fiction). Žižek, as he is wont to do, turns to quantum physics for his philosophical support. For him the Higgs field—or the fundamental and nearly immanent field in particle physics that has an almost constant value of “non zero,” which breaks several laws of symmetry—allows us to properly conceive the movement from nothing to something, as the Higgs boson is a “something” that is, for conceptual purposes, nothing. For this to occur, the original “nothing” must be negated.

Since we must be able to explain the very formation of concepts, an understanding of how concepts can emerge *ex nihilo* is critical. This puts Žižek finally and irremediably in conflict with Baudrillard. In Žižek it is not possible to access an originary moment (as the example of the *clinamen* shows). Baudrillard’s notion of the perfect crime is totally predicated on an originary moment, an original that is covered, a real (and a complementary illusion) we have lost and can no longer consider. While for Baudrillard the failure of the symbolic (Virtual, in his parlance) bespeaks that the real no longer exists, it is, for Žižek, the failure of the symbolic that gives us access to the real. This productivity of the symbolic *depends* on the incompleteness of being *itself*.

What Ellis shows us is a further move, a consideration of the beyond that Baudrillard’s system forecloses and Žižek’s welcomes: that is the nothing that emerges from something (this is our scene of nothing). Baudrillard is scandalized to see that we have “nothing rather than something” in the contemporary world, but it is precisely this nothing or void that requires articulation. Whether we are engaging in Bartlebyan politics or literary analysis, the way nothing can emerge from any text or context posits the complex interplay of resistance and

withdrawal, a consideration we need to be acutely aware of in order to advance any radical notions that challenge symbolic interactions and the prevailing situation.

Notes

¹ In order of topic, see:

La Berge, Leigh Claire. (2010) "The Men Who Make the Killings: *American Psycho*, Financial Masculinity, and 1980s Financial Print Culture," *Studies in American Fiction* vol. 37.2: 273-296.

Peter Hutchings in "Violence, Censorship and the Law" extends Marx ('the criminal produces crime, criminal law, the professor who lectures on crime') and Foucault ('the prison produces delinquency') to write that the censorship of pornography and violence, observed in the case of Ellis's *American Psycho*, has been remarkable in proliferating pornography and violence (1994: 205).

Bret Easton Ellis's approach to violence, for Marco Abel in "Judgment is not an exit: Representation, Affect, *American Psycho*," is akin to a Deleuzian 'frontier of knowledge' and this is what draws him to *American Psycho* (2008: 56). Abel writes: "it is precisely the novel's "excessive" violence that overwhelms, frustrates, annoys, upsets, and even sickens; it is this overkill that provokes readers to throw away the book, to tear it apart, to spit at it, and, potentially, to talk or write about it. In other words, if nothing else, the value of the book is that it forces its audience to encounter the undeniably visceral response they have" (2008: 48).

Interestingly, while Ellis leaves it open as to whether the violence in *American Psycho* is real or imagined, Bertold Schoene, in "Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*," offers that it ultimately does not matter as "the only difference between the normal subject (the psychic killer) and the pathological one (the psycho killer) is the passage from fantasy to act" (2008: 398). He continues, "Serial killing is a typically male violence directed against anybody perceived as a threat to modernity's myth of masculine autonomy; in this respect, it can be seen as a vehicle of epistemological hygiene and psychic cleansing or, quite simply, a lethal, "grossly sensual" and "ritualized" manifestation of instance after instance of culturally propagated sexism" (ibid).

John Conley, in "The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis," places Ellis's composition of *American Psycho* in the context of the New York Police Department's systematic "eviction" of the homeless from Tompkins Square Park in the early 1990s. Conley writes, "Bret Easton Ellis is not a writer of the glittering fantasies of consumer society, nor is he a writer of excruciating violence or graphic sex: rather, he is first and foremost a writer of capitalism, which is to say, he is first and foremost a writer of poverty" (2009: 119).

Naomi Mandel neatly establishes the topic of value with regard to Ellis in her recent book length study of Generation X literature and culture *Disappear Here: Violence after Generation X*: “I do not want to suggest that his work has value hereto unappreciated or unacknowledged. To do so would be to assume that beneath the cool, disaffected, violence-is-chic ethos to which he appeals lie more conventional literary depths. Ellis is both trashy and disposable and innovative and deep. His work does and does not have value. In this way it elicits questions about the nature of value—literary, market, and moral. Precisely because of the dubious nature of Ellis’s value and values, and because the literary value of his fiction does not go without saying, his novels set the stage for questions about violence: its relation to value, to judgment, and to the reality in which it figures” (2015: 112).

² With “Into the Void”: The Hyperrealism of Simulation in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*,” for example, Martin Weinreich wagers that Ellis “deliberately” adopts Jean Baudrillard’s stance critical of postmodern consumer capitalism and brings to the narrative level his concepts of hyperreality and simulation to offer a compelling social critique in composing arguably his most famous—and infamous—novel (2004: 65). As Weinreich writes, “In the postmodern city, labor in the traditional sense has vanished, and the mode of production has been surpassed by what Baudrillard refers to as ‘the structural revolution of value.’ *American Psycho* portrays the city after this shift from production to consumption; the city as ‘the zone of signs, the media and the code.’ Consequently ‘metallurgy,’ workforce and labor, has become semiurgy, ‘the operation of code’”(2004: 66). What *American Psycho* does, for Weinreich, is exemplify Baudrillard’s “dictum of proper socialization,” which asks simply that one *become socialized* (ibid). One is not asked to “do” or contribute much of anything to postmodern society; in fact producing *too much* is bound to raise suspicion (as any perspicacious schoolchild can attest). Importantly, Weinreich agrees with previous scholarship that the murderous character of Patrick Bateman, is “simply a gap, a vortex into which the structural environment would collapse were it not upheld by the consensus of value relations that maintain it” (Busonik qtd. in Weinreich 2004: 72). While I agree that Patrick Bateman—and many of Ellis’s seemingly disaffected characters—are a kind of nothing or void, I do not contend that they are the points where ‘structure would collapse.’ It is quite the opposite; characters like Patrick are the impossible points in the symbolic that cohere and order the system. Reading in terms of Baudrillard strictly prohibits us from acknowledging this point because we must disavow Žižek’s real.

³ *Less Than Zero* has frequently drawn comparisons to J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Critics see clear lines connecting Clay to Holden Caulfield. The comparison is ultimately ill-fitting, however, as Sonia Baelo-Allué notes key differences in *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction Writing Between High and Low Culture*: “Clay is a completely *passive* character, whereas Holden Caulfield is in a state of permanent rebellion against a society of adult hypocrites . . . Even though critics such as Hugh Barnes, in *The London Review of Books*, openly embraced the comparison by stating that Clay’s *disaffection* and enveloping *ennui* is reminiscent of Holden Caulfield’s, other critics such as Alix Madrigal found that Caulfield’s refusal to be corrupted, together with his innocence and pain, had nothing to do with the *emotionless* and *passive* Clay” (emphases mine 42-43: 2011). “Emotionless,” “passive,” “disaffected,” these are the words often used to describe Clay in criticism. While he may be distant, we cannot conclude with critics that Clay is apathetic, or that his passivity—a passivity I’m tempted to call “active passivity”—disqualifies him from being viewed as a radical political figure.

⁴ But what do we do about Clay's withdrawal in the scene where a 13-year-old girl is being gang raped? His complicity in the act as a spectator is confirmed, however, when he voices an objection to a friend without actually intervening. Here, we might say that Clay confuses withdrawal with passivity, which usually doesn't occur in the novel.

⁵ For an excellent reading of *Imperial Bedrooms* in light of Sloterdijk (and Žižek to some extent) see Matthews, Graham. (2015) "Cynicism and the Cultural Imaginary: Bret Easton Ellis's *Imperial Bedrooms*." *College Literature*, volume 42, no. 1, Winter: 62-88.

⁶ Baudrillard, in *Fragments: Conversations With Francois L'Yvonne*, discusses the perfect crime, the real, the reality effect, and Lacan (44-47 Routledge, 2004).

⁷ In keeping with a Žižekian reading of character, the 'fades, dissolves, and re-writes' referenced above do not "reveal" an "authentic" Clay that was always there, but the *movement* of fading, dissolving, and re-writing is what constitutes the character as such. We don't have an original that is covered up, needing "fades and dissolves" to reveal it. What we have, rather, is *clinamen*. As Žižek's logic would have it, there is no 'substantial character that is Clay' *prior* to his final declaration to readers that he has "never liked anyone" and is "afraid of people." The Clay we understand from this sincere admission is *nothing but* this admission; an admission he can never speak. He is *nothing but* this nothing, this impossible utterance. The logic of the *clinamen* in Žižek's formulation is how we can view Clay both as possessing sincerity that makes manifest a depth of character—he is not just a blank surface, a mound of "clay," as the traditional view of him holds—and as "constituting" (a) nothing, upturning any uncomplicated conception of this character.

⁸ This statement may seem to conflict with the Baudrillard of *Simulacra and Simulation*, particularly when he writes, "The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (1995: 19). Implicit in Baudrillard's system is the idea that *there was once an original* and we've lost it. Even through the suggestion of its impossibility, Baudrillard accepts a notion of the original—the real is *no longer* possible, meaning it *once was*—that is at odds with Žižek, as we have seen. This is especially viewable in Žižek's formulation of dialectics, whereby the second term retroactively creates the first; there is no original, there is only *clinamen*. Furthermore, this critical disagreement evinces the split in a fundamental binary we can attribute broadly to each thinker: Žižek is concerned with the Symbolic/ Real as understood by Lacan. Baudrillard is concerned with something we might call The Fake/ Barred Real, or Illusion/ ~~Reality~~. The Lacanian Real—and thus half of Žižek's philosophical inheritance (the other being Hegel)—cannot be admitted in Baudrillard's system.

⁹ In *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek uses the word "palimpsest" to discuss Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colors* trilogy (2001: 82).

¹⁰ The most substantive working through of palimpsest in psychoanalysis would, of course, come from Derrida's famous treatment of "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" in *Writing and Difference* (this, perhaps, explains why the term is more useful and present for Derrideans than it is for Lacanians or Žižekians).

¹¹ There are clear moments in *Less Than Zero* where we see Clay really feeling things. In an italicized vignette temporally separate from Clay's Christmas vacation in Los Angeles depicted throughout the novel, Clay tells us, "During the end of my senior year one day, I didn't go to school. Instead I drove out to Palm Springs alone and listened to a lot of old tapes I used to like but didn't much anymore, and I stopped at a McDonald's in Sunland for a Coke and then drove out to the desert and parked in front of the old house" (1985: 44). Clay is here clearly wrestling with nostalgia, with a loss of something, some feeling he didn't realize he had access to until it left. "The old house" meant a lot to Clay. The new house his family bought is lacking all character and memory (Clay refers to it as "okay, but it wasn't the old house"). He concludes, "I guess I went out there because I wanted to remember the way things were. I don't know" (ibid). Nostalgia—literally the pain for homecoming—is what Clay goes out to Palm Springs to *feel*. Clay, clearly, is an affectively complex character.

¹² As John Conley has it, "Ellis writes a world in which it is possible to literally "slide down the surface of things"—but not, because Ellis is simply another "postmodern" writer preoccupied by surface" (2009: 120). Conley is right here; with Ellis we are not given simply surface. We are *relentlessly* given surface and nothing else. The interminable sections of *American Psycho* where narrator Patrick Bateman lists in excruciating detail all of his possessions come to mind, for they show that the surface is vacuous, a void (many readers simply skim those sections hoping the plot advances).

¹³ Abel's preference for Deleuze/ resistance to Lacan manifests itself here: "[Žižek's] notion of symptom, however, crucially differs from Deleuze's in that for Žižek everything begins and ends with the Lacanian notion of constitutive Lack—the impossible nonobject of desire that, for Lacanian psychoanalysis in its best form, defines the process of subject, and thus social, formation. In contrast, Lack—representation—plays no such role in Deleuze's thought. It is precisely this conceptual aporia between Deleuze and Jacques Lacan that, despite their thoughts' many seeming convergences, marks the irreducible difference between them" (2008: 36-37). This is in no way a bad reading of Žižek or Lacan, but the difference between Lack and Void is crucial here and I feel Abel is a little quick to move past that.

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