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Perpetration and Performance:
Unlikely Villains and the Ghosting Effect in *Fargo*

***Keywords*:** *Fargo*, unlikely perpetrators, performance studies, ghosting, role-playing, Martin Freeman, Kirsten Dunst

***Abstract*:** Noah Hawley's anthology series *Fargo* (FX, 2014-) has received critical acclaim for its equally humorous and violent depiction of small-town delinquency. Participating in a range of criminal conflicts in and around Fargo, perpetrators are at the heart of the series' thematic interest. However, *Fargo* self-reflexively deviates from classic crime and detective fiction schemes and rearranges generic conventions into a pastiche of cultural references. As I demonstrate in this article, the series' playful rearrangement of familiar elements also affects the depiction of perpetrators. While the series features classic criminal characters such as hitmen and gang members, it is also interested in portraying previously blameless characters who gradually develop criminal potentials—characters who evolve from ordinary citizens to murderers, from oppressed to oppressors, from victims to perpetrators. I argue that the evolution of these unlikely villains is complemented by the choice of actors for the respective roles. The "recycling of the bodies of actors" is part of what Marvin Carlson has termed "ghosting" in theatre studies (*The Haunted Stage* 10). By interspersing reminiscences of some actors' previous roles, *Fargo* deliberately activates the audience's cultural memory to alienate them from established connotations and create new, uncommon villains. In this vein, the series prompts its audience to reflect on their own expectations that are based on cultural conventions and problematizes the issue of role-playing in the evolution of perpetrators both on a thematic and on a performative level.

Noah Hawley's anthology series *Fargo* (FX, 2014-), loosely based on the Coen brothers' 1996 eponymous film, has received critical acclaim[1] for its equally humorous and violent depiction of small-town delinquency. Participating in a range of criminal conflicts in the Midwestern rural areas around the city of Fargo (North Dakota), perpetrators are at the heart of the series' thematic interest. However, *Fargo* self-reflexively deviates from classic crime and detective fiction schemes and rearranges generic conventions into a pastiche of cultural references. In fact, activating the audience's cultural memory and playing with expectations

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based on this memory seems to be one of the series' major concerns. This is, for example, evident in the show's intertextual references and in its misleading paratextual framing as a "true story." In theatre studies, Marvin Carlson has termed the recycling of identical elements in a new performance "ghosting." One of Carlson's proposed elements of ghosting concerns the "recycling of the bodies of actors" (Carlson 10) that guides the audience's reception process, for example with the notion of typecasting or the connotation of an actor with a specific role. As I argue in this paper, *Fargo* makes use of the ghosting effect in order to play with and complicate notions of familiarity in the representation of unlikely perpetrators. While the series features classic criminal characters such as hitmen and gang members, it is also interested in portraying previously blameless characters who gradually develop criminal potentials—characters who evolve from ordinary citizens to murderers, from oppressed to oppressors, from victims to perpetrators. These characters view their new criminal career as a role they actively assume to leave behind their old life as a victim. As I demonstrate here, this switch in roles is complemented by the choice of actors that is rather untypical for the respective perpetrator roles. In this sense, *Fargo* deals with the topic of role-play on two parallel levels when it comes to the depiction of these perpetrators. In this paper, I examine the effects of ghosting on the evolution of unlikely villains in *Fargo*, with a focus on the characters of Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman) in Season One and Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst) in Season Two.

Perpetrator Performance and the Ghosting Effect: Theoretical Considerations

Within the interdisciplinary field of perpetrator studies, a range of essays published in the volume *Perpetrating Selves: Doing Violence, Performing Identity* have addressed the topic of performance when it comes to the conception and representation of perpetrators. The volume conceives of perpetration as both a performative act and as a process that evolves over time, a notion that is also vital in discussing unlikely perpetrators in *Fargo*. As Clare Bielby and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer have outlined, perpetration is to be seen as "a form of 'doing' rather than something that one 'is' ('the perpetrator'). And as something we might 'do' or 'perform' as part of 'doing' or 'performing' our identities more generally" (3). *Fargo*'s unlikely perpetrators reinforce this notion in a double sense. For one thing, the characters in question conceive of their unusual criminal careers as a chance to evade previous roles in which they were victimized, bullied or patronized, performing acts of violence in order to reach a new version of themselves. On the other hand, *Fargo* addresses the intersection of perpetration and performance at the level of acting. At this level, *Fargo* plays with both similarity to and

alienation from the respective actors' previous performances to intensify the effect of an unusual character development in these perpetrators. These two dimensions correspond to Bielby's and Murer's differentiation between performance in a theatrical sense "where there is a clear sense of an actor behind the performance" (6) and performing perpetration "as part of performing one's identity more broadly" (6). In the following part of my article, I utilize Marvin Carlson's concept of "ghosting" to discuss the role of actors' performances in the representation of unlikely villains in *Fargo*.

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson argues that the theater is deeply concerned with the activation of cultural memory through recurring elements in the reception process. The premise of his consideration is that "any theatrical production weaves a ghostly tapestry for its audience, playing in various degrees and combinations with that audience's collective and individual memories of previous experience [in the theater]" (Carlson 165). Carlson explores this phenomenon under the name of "ghosting" that is present in all theatrical productions. The ghosting effect takes multiple forms; among the most important sites of ghosting Carlson discusses are the dramatic text, actors, stage properties, and the theatre space, all of which may create a "sense of something coming back in the theatre" (2). Even though Carlson's study is located in theatre studies, many of his proposed elements of ghosting are equally vital in televisual narratives. In parallel to theatrical productions, TV series present their stories through an audiovisual channel that involves particular spatial settings and the performances of actors. The activation of cultural memory in TV series may, for instance, involve a shooting location that has particular connotations by its iconographic appearance in earlier works. Also, in the case of adaptations, a series may be haunted by the original cultural work it adapts, falling under the category of "retelling […] stories already told" (Carlson 3). Since these parallels allow for Carlson's considerations to be applied in television studies, I use ghosting as a theoretical foundation for the study of uncommon perpetrators in *Fargo*.

This article specifically explores the relevance of ghosting when it comes to actors' performances. Connotations to actors' previous roles are always present in a given performance. Therefore, "[t]he recycled body of an actor […] will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles" (8). In Carlson's conception, this phenomenon happens whether or not the present role is similar to the actor's earlier roles and it may color or even dominate the reception process (Carlson 8-9). A well-known effect of the ghosting of actors is the notion of typecasting that indicates how certain actors are associated with and deliberately hired for specific types of roles, for example because of their earlier success in such roles or because of their physical characteristics that are particularly apt for certain roles (Carlson 8-9).

Once an actor has built a successful career and is widely recognized in public, their appearance in a new role may attract people to the production and underlines its perceived eminence (Carlson 92). Sometimes, the ghosting effect also becomes visible when two or more actors appear in productions together repeatedly (Carlson 93-95). On yet another level, the ghosting effect may be influenced by aspects from actors' lives outside the acting career, for example when an actor is involved in a scandal (85-89).

Importantly for the representation of perpetrators, ghosting is based on *identity* rather than *similarity*: an actor reappearing in different roles remains the same individual actor. This makes the reappearance of actors different from, for example, the reappearance of genre conventions that take similar, but not identical reiterations (Carlson 7). As numerous cases show, the level of performance is essential in the filmic or televisual representation of perpetrators. In some cases, there is an association of a certain role with the face or identity of an actor, as for example with Anthony Hopkins becoming an icon of Hannibal Lecter or Christoph Waltz becoming an epitome of something one might call perpetrator typecasting. An actor's convincing performance in the role of a perpetrator might even lead to the assumption that, in order to play an evil character, an actor must be evil as well. For instance, this effect led to young actor Brenock O'Connor being harassed by hate mail and death threats after playing evil character Olly, who murders Jon Snow in *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) (see for example "Game of Thrones Star"). Thus, the identity of a certain actor and the qualities of a certain role are often conflated in the public perception. These aspects create a sense of familiarity when an actor assumes the role of a perpetrator who is known for his or her ability to play this kind of role. Conversely, if an actor has played many roles of kind and innocent characters, the audience is likely to associate the actor with this category of roles and is less likely to expect them in the role of a perpetrator.

In the case of unlikely perpetrator figures in *Fargo*, the ghosting effected by the choice of actors is to be seen as a deliberate tool that contributes to the series' meaning-making. In his consideration on theatre, Marvin Carlson in particular allocates such deliberate utilizations to the postmodern theatre that is interested in rearranging fragments of existing material into new constellations and to emphasize their quoted nature (Carlson 14). As will become obvious over the course of this essay, *Fargo* utilizes the ghosting effect in a similarly self-reflexive way. In the following, I will offer a brief general account of the ghosting effect in *Fargo* before considering the cases of Martin Freeman as Lester Nygaard and Kirsten Dunst as Peggy Blomquist in more detail.

As such, ghosting is present in all performances, provided that the respective actor has a history of public performances. *Fargo* self-reflexively instrumentalizes the ghosting effect by overtly alluding to some actors' earlier roles, thus drawing on the audience's memory of these actors. The most forward instance of this technique is the inclusion of actors whose roles in *Fargo* evoke earlier roles thematically. For example, this is the case for the roles of Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele as a pair of clumsy FBI agents in Season One. Their detached dialogues—including the topics of fast food, a river crossing puzzle, and the question of whether life is just a dream—are in stark contrast with the violent acts they fail to prevent as FBI agents. This contrast is not only part of the comic mode deployed in *Fargo*, but it is also reminiscent of the two actors' joint performances in their comedy series *Key & Peele* (Comedy Central, 2012-2015). This also happens in the case of Ray Wise, whose spectral appearance in Season Three evokes his role as demon-possessed Leland Palmer in *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991, 2017). Considering that *Twin Peaks: The Return* was on the air simultaneously with Season Three of *Fargo* in 2017, the appearance of Ray Wise in a similar role might be seen as an explicit intertextual reference. In view of its narrative complexity, unconventional genre mixing and a focus on crimes in small-town America, *Twin Peaks* is also to be seen as a conceptual precursor to *Fargo*.

Apart from these references to actors' prior performances, *Fargo* employs forms of ghosting that operate within its own boundaries. For example, the voice of Martin Freeman, who has one of the main roles in Season One, reoccurs in the penultimate episode of Season Two in the form of an anonymous, heterodiegetic narrator. This acoustic appearance is entirely detached from Freeman's role in Season One. Freeman's voice is most likely not even recognized by all viewers, as he is speaking in a British accent as opposed to the Minnesota accent he uses in Season One. Another experiment with ghosting within the series concerns the brothers Emmit and Ray Stussy, who are both played by Ewan McGregor in Season Three. McGregor's twofold performance is marked by a stark visual difference between the two brothers, possibly making their portrayal by the same actor unrecognizable for some viewers. Only when Ray dresses up as his brother on a sex tape, does it become strikingly obvious that both characters are portrayed by the same actor. In this case, the series most overtly addresses the topics of role playing as well as makeup and costume design. These examples demonstrate

that *Fargo* extensively uses the level of performance for its meaning-making and confronts its audience with recognition and similarity, but also with alienation and confusion.

When it comes to the depiction of perpetrators, *Fargo* deliberately makes use of expectations created by the ghosting effect in order to turn the feeling of familiarity into a feeling of surprise, irritation, and alienation. The series features some rather unlikely perpetrators who are first introduced as somewhat quirky, but seemingly harmless people, and then evolve into villains, some of whose criminal potentials become even more skillful than those of professional criminals. The choice of actors for these roles complements the unexpected character developments and raises the issue of identity and role-playing on two parallel levels. Firstly, it challenges the audience's expectations about the respective actor's identity, as they have never seen him or her in evil roles before and might have difficulty accepting their unpleasant character development. Secondly, on the diegetic level, the series raises the question of whether evil is a constant part of a character's identity or whether it can evolve from a kind of role-playing in which the character deliberately decides to take a new identity as a criminal. This consideration takes into account two instances of evolving perpetrators, namely insurance salesman Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman) in Season One and beautician Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst) in Season Two. Both characters combine the act of self-renewal with the start of a criminal career and their respective development can be seen as a result of criminal reinterpretations of established gender roles. The haunting of Lester's and Peggy's character developments by Freeman's and Dunst's earlier roles will be the subject of the following sections.

Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman): "What if you're right and they're wrong?"

Season One of *Fargo* depicts a complex entanglement of different criminal forces that result in a number of brutal murders and are investigated by deputy Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman). One of the season's main story lines documents the evolution of insurance salesman Lester Nygaard from an ordinary man with integrity to a manipulative liar whose crimes eventually enable him to evade his former role as an unsuccessful, bullied person. Martin Freeman, who was nominated for an Emmy and Golden Globe Award for his performance as Lester Nygaard, had previously gained international renown in comedic productions such as *The Office* (2001-2003), *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005), and *The World's End* (2013). Arguably, his most iconic roles—that he played either simultaneously with or shortly before *Fargo* aired—include Dr. John Watson in the BBC *Sherlock* series (2010-2017), as well as Bilbo Baggins in

the *Hobbit* trilogy (2012-2014). Both Dr. Watson and Bilbo are righteous, likeable characters who make it their mission to fight evil forces and who have significantly contributed to Freeman's reputation as "this very nice guy" (Conan 00:16) who embodies integrity and harmlessness in many people's perception. In this sense, critics talk about "[t]he cuddly Bilbo and John Watson actor" (Pelley) who has become "a household name in Britain" (Smith).

In *Fargo*, Freeman as Lester Nygaard is first introduced as an unobtrusive middle-aged man who seems to have no way of standing up for himself, an image that is evidently consistent with Bilbo and Dr. Watson, who are harmless and sometimes helpless characters. Lester's life is in a pitiful state, as he is bullied and humiliated by other people, including his own wife and brother. The pity that is asked of the audience is likely to be reinforced by their memory of Freeman's earlier good-hearted characters. Interestingly, this thematic connotation is explicitly underlined by an overt visual quotation from *Sherlock*, as Lester is wearing a deerstalker hat that is a typical iconographic item of Sherlock Holmes. The series thus directly points to Freeman's earlier role as Sherlock Holmes' assistant, who has subscribed to the mission of catching perpetrators.

However, the role Lester assumes over time is diametrically opposed to that of Dr. Watson, as Lester becomes a criminal who repeatedly deceives the police. After accidentally breaking his nose on a window because he is threatened by his former schoolmate and bully Sam Hess (Kevin O'Grady), Lester tells a stranger in the hospital waiting room about the incident. This encounter is decisive for Lester's character development. The stranger, who turns out to be a hitman named Lorne Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton), tells Lester that he would have killed Sam Hess if he were in Lester's position (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1). Through a bizarre misunderstanding, Lorne Malvo takes their conversation as an instruction to kill Sam Hess and therewith initiates a vicious cycle for Lester. After the conversation with Malvo and the murder of Sam Hess, Lester is motivated to explore a new facet of his personality and—even though he initially found Malvo's suggestion absurd—takes Malvo's advice to kill someone by whom he is humiliated, namely his own wife, Pearl (Kelly Holden Bashar). Arguing with Pearl about their washing machine, Lester spontaneously hits her on the head with a hammer in order to silence her. In desperation, he then calls Lorne Malvo for help and subsequently causes the murder of a police officer when Malvo comes to his house. Left alone with two dead bodies in his home, Lester is desperately concerned with hiding evidence of his crime and a game of cat-and-mouse with the police begins, in which Lester more and more actively harms other people.

The ghosting of Martin Freeman in the role of evolving criminal Lester Nygaard raises important questions for the study of perpetrators. How do the audience's experiences with

Freeman's previous roles affect their viewing experience of *Fargo*, starring Freeman as a perpetrator? Do we perceive Lester as decidedly evil? If so, do we perceive him as evil in the same way that we perceive as evil, for example, supervillain Lorne Malvo, who is introduced as a ruthless murderer from the beginning and whose appearance is haunted by Billy Bob Thornton's history of perpetrator roles? Does our initial sympathy with Lester and his connotation with Freeman's good-hearted earlier characters impact our judgement of his criminal capabilities?

Some insights on these questions can be gained by observing Lester's character development and the corresponding visual cues from beginning to end. Even though Lester, within only one episode of the series, develops into a criminal who has murdered his own wife and caused two more deaths by accidentally instructing a hitman, the series still asks the audience to pity and sympathize with Lester in the beginning. Lorne Malvo's killings of Sam Hess and the police officer were the result of a misunderstanding and the murder of Lester's wife seems to have happened in the heat of the moment rather than with an insidious plan. In this sense, Lester does not appear as a genuinely evil character in comparison to a perpetrator like hitman Lorne Malvo, who deliberately plans his crimes and takes pleasure in harming other people. Also, the theme of desperation that was already present when Lester was bullied is continued after the death of Sam Hess and Pearl because he is not only trying to cope with the events, but also faces a police investigation. As a result, Lester's connotation with Freeman's innocent roles can be maintained for a while because Lester's criminal history begins under adverse, highly unlikely circumstances. He is represented as a perpetrator made by circumstance, not by conviction.

However, a notable quality of Lester's character development is that Lester increasingly perceives his new criminal history as a chance to end his role as a victim and instead assume a new role that makes him a perfidious bully. Previously, the kind of oppression Lester experienced was tied to notions of masculinity that he did not fulfill in other characters' conceptions. While Sam Hess humiliated Lester by telling him about his former sexual relations with Pearl and calling Lester a "pencil dick" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1), Pearl accuses him of being "not even half a man" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1) After the killing of Sam Hess, Lorne Malvo tells Lester that he is now "more of a man today than you were yesterday" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 1). Lester's newly assumed role as the murderer of both Sam Hess and his wife allows him to switch to the other side of the victim-perpetrator binary. Concurrently, he perceives his oppressor role as a way of proving his masculinity. In this vein, the series suggests that both perpetration and normative notions of masculinity are to be understood as

performative acts. Visually, the theme of personal transformation as a kind of role play is underlined by several inspirational writings in Lester's house. After Lester has killed his wife, he comes up with a plan to cover up his crime after looking at a poster in his cellar that says, "What if you're right and they're wrong?". The wording on the poster seems to give Lester confidence for his planned cover-up. The theme of motivational sayings is continued in several scenes from the following episodes. Such is the case of pictures on the wall saying "Everything happens for a reason" and "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams, live the life you've imagined" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 2). That is also the case with the kitchen fridge which is adorned with magnets containing the words "Dream," "Hope," and "The key to life is happiness" (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 3).

In Lester's evolution as an unlikely perpetrator, a turning point is reached when he begins to actively fool and oppress other people. While he had initially used lying as a reactive mechanism to evade adverse circumstances, he increasingly plans and enjoys his crimes. This turning point is initiated for Lester when he places evidence of his wife's murder in his brother's house. He does so not only to evade conviction, but also to take revenge on his brother, who started to suspect Lester and who had previously been presented as the more successful and attractive brother. After taking this action that later leads to an unjust conviction for his brother, Lester (for the first time) gives the impression that he feels good about doing something bad. From this point on, Lester is no longer depicted as a victim of bad circumstances, but as actively enjoying hurting other people and building a new life on the basis of this behavior. In order to leave his old role behind, he enters an unusual combination of personal growth, hypermasculinity, and the start of a criminal career. His transformation takes place on several levels: not only does he change his behavior, for example, by seeking revenge on Sam Hess by sleeping with and defrauding Hess' wife, but he also changes his outer appearance and removes old furniture from his house, including the pictures with motivational quotes (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 8). Ironically, as Lester has now fulfilled the meaning of these sayings, he no longer needs them as reminders in his house. Also—and more significantly—Lester is no longer seen wearing the deerstalker hat after the turning point. Here again, the series deliberately plays with the phenomenon of ghosting by removing the visual reference to Sherlock at a point when Lester has entirely lost his sense of morality and has thus also lost every similarity to Martin Freeman's earlier roles. At this point, it is questionable whether the memory of Freeman's "nice guy" roles influences the judgement of Lester's deeds any longer.

One year after the beginning of his transformation, Lester is at the height of success: he has married a new woman, is admired by people, and wins the national prize as insurance

salesman of the year. His newly acquired eminence is underlined by a new look and his position in the center of attention that gives him an almost kinglike appearance. However, the climax of his development is soon followed by new problems and the final catastrophe for Lester when he has another fatal encounter with Lorne Malvo in Las Vegas. Malvo, who has also assumed a new identity, pretends not to know Lester. Yet Lester denies being ignored and remarks that "the old Lester now, he would have just had a slide, but not this guy" (). After Malvo shoots his own friends and wife in the elevator because Lester has destroyed his new identity, Lester flees and is caught in a new cat-and-mouse game, this time with the supervillain himself. Even though Lester eventually manages to scare Malvo away, this further line of events deprives Lester of control. In a spectacular flight from the police in the Glacier National Park in Montana, Lester is killed after falling through a thin ice sheet. In this final scene of Lester's plot line, he is wearing the deerstalker hat again; in fact, the hat on top of Lester's dead body in the ice is the last thing we see of him (*Fargo*, Season 1, Episode 10). The hat in this scene might signify a last return to Lester's initial pitiable state and, thus, as one last reminder of the ghosting of Freeman's earlier role.

Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst): "I wanna be the best me I can be"

Season Two of *Fargo* continues the series' interest in antagonistic criminal forces and takes the audience back to the late 1970s. At the center of the plot is a violent war between two crime syndicates, the Gerhardt family,based in Fargo, and the Kansas City Mob. This criminal war is initiated by a fatal misunderstanding, as the Gerhardt family assumes that their youngest son, Rye (Kieran Culkin) has been murdered by members of the Kansas City Mob. However, Rye's death was caused by an accident that had nothing to do with the crime syndicates' machinations. Instead, it involves two previously blameless characters—beautician Peggy Blomquist (Kirsten Dunst) and her husband, butcher Ed Blomquist (Jesse Plemons) —who are pulled into the criminal milieu when they try to cover up for Rye's death. While Jesse Plemons, who portrays Ed Blomquist, is possibly known to viewers as a perpetrator figure from his role as Todd Alquist in *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), Kirsten Dunst's appearance in *Fargo* is haunted by a series of non-perpetrator roles in the actress' earlier career. As is the case with Martin Freeman as Lester Nygaard in Season One, the casting of Kirsten Dunst as the story's major evolving perpetrator is haunted by a sense of familiarity that is deconstructed over the course of the season. The ghosting effect, in this instance, is mainly achieved through the

thematic aspects of female gender roles and mental issues as points of connection to Dunst's previous history of performances.

Prior to her performance in *Fargo*, Kirsten Dunst established a film career heavily based on innocent, non-perpetrator characters. Her appearance in this type of roles ranges from her child performances in *Little Women* (1994) and *Jumanji* (1995) to performances in romantic comedies such as *Bring It On* (2000) and *Elizabethtown* (2005). As an adult actress, Dunst has often appeared in the role of an attractive young woman who is of romantic and sexual interest to men, which is evoked with Peggy Blomquist's profession as a beautician in *Fargo*. In many instances, however, these roles are also characterized by loneliness, failing relationships and an unequal treatment of the female character. This tendency can be seen, for example, in her role as discarded teenage lover Lux Lisbon in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), as betrayed lover Mary in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), as Marie Antoinette in the eponymous film (2006) who entered an arranged marriage at a very young age, and in her role as Mary Jane Watson in the *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002; 2004; 2007) that addresses the pitfalls of loving a superhero. The theme of unstable relationships culminates in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) in which Dunst plays the lead role of newlywed Justine whose relationship breaks apart on the day of her wedding and is soon followed by a planetary apocalypse. Next to its focus on broken relationships, *Melancholia* intensely explores the topic of mental illness,[2] a theme that is also vital in Peggy Blomquist's characterization. In the context of these types of roles in Dunst's earlier performances, the character of Peggy Blomquist, who starts out as a "seemingly sweet and innocent hairdresser and wife" (Eidelstein) is haunted by several themes from Dunst's previous career that evoke a sense of familiarity. However, as in the case of Lester Nygaard, the character of Peggy soon significantly deviates from these connotations and develops towards an unusual perpetrator figure.

It becomes obvious early on in the series that Peggy Blomquist faces relationship issues and is not fully satisfied with her life. Before the audience learns that Peggy was involved in a fatal accident, she is introduced having dinner with her husband, Ed, in their house. Peggy seems like a harmless character at this point, but it becomes apparent in the scene that the couple's relationship is characterized by diverging needs and a lack of communication. While Ed does not seem to understand Peggy's interest in a seminar called "Life Spring," that promises self-fulfillment, Peggy avoids the conversation about Ed's future plans, that involve having children, and she shows little interest in sexual encounters with her husband (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 1). In this introduction of the couple's story line, the character of Peggy evokes the aforementioned aspect of Dunst's earlier roles as women who fail to live in fulfilled

relationships and are victims of larger patriarchal power structures rather than perpetrators. Peggy's outer appearance, too, deviates from typical visual representations of perpetrators. In particular, her appearance contrasts with the visual representation of the male members of the Gerhardt family, who have been introduced as the major perpetrator figures in the series up to this point. These male perpetrators, including Dodd Gerhardt (Jeffrey Donovan), Bear Gerhardt (Angus Sampson), and Hanzee Dent (Zahn McClarnon) mostly appear in dark, brownish colors that complement their brutal, almost animalistic behavior. Peggy, on the other hand, is wearing colorful clothes, make-up and styled hair, a visual style that is upheld throughout her character development. In terms of ghosting, her costumes as a fashionable woman of the 1970s can also be seen as a continuation of a number of roles in which Kirsten Dunst was outfitted with extravagant and period costume designs, particularly her performances in historical dramas such as *The Cat's Meow* (2001), *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), and *Marie Antoinette* (2006). This evocation of innocent femininity through costume design and a focus on relationship issues combines with the ghosting of Kirsten Dunst's roles as innocent women and makes it very unlikely for the audience to anticipate Peggy as a major perpetrator in Season Two.

Nevertheless, within the couple's first introduction, Peggy's characterization begins to change. The audience learns that, prior to the dinner, she accidentally hit criminal Rye Gerhardt with her car. Rye had previously shot several people in a diner. Instead of calling an ambulance or providing first aid, Peggy has brought the injured man home to her garage and made hamburgers as if nothing happened. This failure to render assistance already makes the initial impression of Peggy as a righteous character fragile and hints at her unusual character traits.[3] When Ed hears noises from the garage, he discovers injured Rye and, in a subsequent fight, kills him in self-defense (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 1). At this point, the couple's criminal career begins: after Peggy convinces Ed that they have to cover up for the incident so that they will not have to go to prison, they get rid of all the evidence and soon find themselves at war with the Gerhardt family, who finds out about their killing Rye.

The main impulses for covering up and therewith beginning a criminal career come from Peggy who, through the unlikely circumstances, begins to assume a more active role in her relationship with Ed. Her own plans for self-actualization have so far been inhibited by her marriage; in a conflict about money that Ed wants to spend on buying the butcher shop rather than for Peggy's seminar, Peggy repeatedly gives in to her husband's needs and subordinates her own plans to her husband's family plans, while Ed actively belittles Peggy's needs. In this sense, the act of patriarchal oppression that appears in many of Kirsten Dunst's roles is still visible in Peggy and may be understood as asking the audience for pity even after they have

learned about Peggy's criminal behavior. It then increasingly becomes clear that Peggy's quest for self-actualization is directly tied to gendered expectations of women that she wants to leave behind. Her work colleague, Constance (Elizabeth Marvel), who has recommended the Life Spring seminar, tells her not to be "a prisoner of 'we'" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 2) and instead pursue her own goals. Later, Constance reinforces the need for female empowerment by telling Peggy that "no man should be able to tell you what to do, not with your body or your money" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 4) and that women should stop surrendering their needs to men's (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 4). Even though Peggy never participates in the seminar, her personal interpretation of the Life Spring maxims functions as a blueprint for her criminal actions that she perceives as an act of female liberation.

Peggy becomes more self-confident when the situation for her and Ed becomes increasingly dangerous as the Gerhardt family, led by their oldest son, Dodd (Jeffrey Donovan), attempt to take revenge. When warned about the risks of starting a war with the Gerhardts, Peggy insists on her future plans that include becoming "the best me I can be, because these are modern times, you know, and a woman […] just doesn't have to be a wife and a mother no more, […] there's nothing she can't be" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 6). In Peggy's case, "nothing a woman can't be" also includes being a perpetrator. After members of the Gerhardt family burn down the butcher shop, Ed's plans of buying the shop and starting a family in Luverne are annihilated and he commits to Peggy's plan of leaving town. From this point on, Peggy manages to reach her aims of liberation and self-actualization by seeing the war with the Gerhardts as a way of actually breaking free from her old life. At the same time, her mental issues are depicted more intensely as she is shown hallucinating multiple times. After killing some members of the Gerhardt clan and taking Dodd Gerhardt captive, she talks to an imaginary man about self-actualization (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8) and interprets the hallucinatory conversation as a prompt to do things instead of asking for permission. As a result, she perceives her subsequent flight with Ed as an exciting road trip that allows her to have fun and self-actualize. Similarly to Lester Nygaard, Peggy takes her criminal involvement as a chance to become a new person and evade her old role as a victim of gender norms.

The climax of Peggy's newly chosen role as an active perpetrator appears when the couple flees to a cabin where they hold Dodd Gerhardt captive. In a moment when Peggy is alone with Dodd, she suddenly makes him obedient by stabbing him with a kitchen knife several times (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8). This scene is significant not only because Peggy is now actively exerting violence on a person rather defending herself or trying to cover up for an accident, but also because her victim has previously been presented as the main oppressor of

women in the second season.[4] After insulting and threatening Peggy, Dodd is silenced by her violent act, which can be seen as another step in her criminal emancipation from oppressive patriarchal structures. Underpinning the series' ironic tone, Peggy's attack is still haunted by the female stereotypical elements she tries to leave behind. She uses a kitchen knife as a weapon and forces Dodd to exhibit good manners while she is cooking beans (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8), marking an instant return to the domestic sphere Peggy was previously assigned to as a nurturing, cooking wife. Also, as Allison Keene has remarked, her stabbing of Dodd "is juxtaposed brilliantly with Peggy's childlike innocence again later as she watches TV, and in her friendly but hesitant telephone conversation with Constance (Elizabeth Marvel)." In spite of this ambiguity, Peggy's torture of Dodd Gerhardt marks the climax in her self-actualization process as a newly minted perpetrator.

Subsequently, Peggy increasingly loses control of the situation, which marks the beginning of her downfall. While Peggy watches a film in the cabin, Dodd manages to free himself and confronts Peggy and Ed. As a surprising twist in the narrative, the fight between Dodd and Peggy intersects with another act of liberation, namely that of the Gerhardts' Native American accomplice Hanzee Dent (Zahn McClarnon), who kills Dodd after being called a "half-breed" and "mongrel" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 8). The unexpected rise of Hanzee's revenge plan and the couple's further involvement in the persecution of criminal clans leads to a mass killing and a final showdown between supervillain Hanzee and the Blomquists. During another hallucinatory episode, Peggy tries to save Ed by hiding in a cooling chamber; however, this action results in Ed's death and her own arrest. When captured by the police, Peggy insists that she "just wanted to be someone" and was a victim of societal expectations concerning women before she became a perpetrator (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 10). As in Lester's case, Peggy's development into an unusual perpetrator eventually leads to the total annihilation of her new personality and aspirations, while she once more invokes her initial state of being a victim.

Conclusion: Perpetration and/as Performance

The ghosting effect as described by Marvin Carlson is part of *Fargo*'s idiosyncratic play with cultural references and contributes to the series' representation of unlikely perpetrators. Including familiar elements from actors' previous roles and gradually combining them with strikingly unfamiliar elements, *Fargo* makes its audience aware of their expectations based on

cultural memory. In Season One, the audience is initially asked to pity Lester Nygaard and to perceive him as a genuinely harmless character, both due to the inequities Lester has to face and due to the righteousness and innocence that viewers are accustomed to in Martin Freeman's previous roles. Similarly, the character of Peggy Blomquist in Season Two is introduced as an innocent wife who suffers from the patriarchal power structures that are imposed on her, an impression that is complemented by an array of different non-perpetrator roles in Kirsten Dunst's previous career. In both instances, the familiarity and positive connotations with the actors are gradually becoming fragile because both Lester and Peggy evolve from innocent victims to ruthless and self-confident perpetrators. On the diegetic level, both characters initially take accidental crimes as a starting point for a criminal career that allows them to leave their old role as victims behind. While they manage to self-actualize through their criminal acts of liberation, their development eventually leads to a tragic fall – in Lester's case, to his own death, and in Peggy's case, to the death of her husband and her own arrest.

In conclusion, *Fargo* deliberately estranges its audience from familiar perpetrator stereotypes by ambiguously rearranging cultural conventions and drawing on its cast's history of performances. The harsh discrepancy between Freeman's and Dunst's earlier roles and their evolution towards major perpetrators in *Fargo* intensifies the audience's disorientation while they are experiencing highly unusual character developments. As part of the series' self-reflexivity, *Fargo* problematizes the issue of culturally acquired expectations and role playing on two levels: the depictions of Lester Nygaard and Peggy Blomquist suggest that the evolution of evil is an act of deliberate role-playing and therewith thematically parallels the unexpected defamiliarization the series employs on the performative level. With its ambiguous interplay of familiar and unfamiliar elements, *Fargo* destabilizes binaries such as good and evil, victim and perpetrator, and identity and role playing. Accordingly, performance is not only a necessary element in *Fargo*'s televisual narrative, but is utilized as a meaningful tool to create uncommon perpetrator figures.

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[1] The series was nominated for a number of prestigious awards, winning six Emmys (see "*Fargo*: Awards and Nominations") and three Golden Globe Awards (see "*Fargo*: Golden Globe Awards"), among others. As *Insider* claims, *Fargo* is among the 24 most popular series of all time according to data from *Metacritic* (see Renfro). Readers of *The Guardian* ranked season one of *Fargo* among the best TV series in 2014 (see "The Best TV").

[2] Dunst's performance in *Melancholia*, for which she was awarded a Best Actress award at the Cannes Film festival, received even more attention in the context of her private struggle with depression that she made public shortly before the film was released. The relevance of the actress's private life to the public perception of her work is another instance of ghosting, as outlined above.

[3] Ironically, in a later conversation from Peggy's beauty shop about the missing Rye Gerhardt, sheriff Hank Larsson (Ted Danson) remarks that "it's not like you're gonna just drive home with a Gerhardt in your windshield and start supper" (*Fargo*, Season 2, Episode 3), underlining Peggy's absurd behaviour.

[4] This representation includes Dodd's violent and oppressive upbringing of his daughter, Simone (Rachel Keller), and his lacking acceptance of his mother, Floyd (Jean Smart), as the new leader of the clan after the patriarch, Otto Gerhardt (Michael Hogan), has suffered a stroke. Season Two of *Fargo* is generally interested in female characters who attempt to resist male domination, including Simone and Floyd Gerhardt, as they challenge male coercion as exerted by Dodd.

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William Magrino[*]

From Disaffected Youth to Dangerous Adults: The Brooding Evil of the Familiar in Bret Easton Ellis's Fiction

"Turn up the TV, no one listening will suspect
Even your mother won't detect it
No your father won't know
They think that I've got no respect but
Everything means less than zero."

Elvis Costello, "Less Than Zero," 1977

"Here come the man
With the look in his eye
Fed on nothing
But full of pride
Look at them go
Look at them kick
Makes you wonder how the other half live."

INXS, "Devil Inside," 1988

Keywords: evil, morality, youth culture, postmodernism, subjectivity, performativity, commodification

Abstract: Contemporary American author Bret Easton Ellis has written seven novels, one collection of interrelated short stories, multiple screenplays, one long work of non-fiction, and a number of essays throughout the better part of the past four decades. In addition, in recent years, he has cultivated a significant online presence through social media, as well as a popular podcast. From the time of his debut novel, published while he was still an undergraduate student, until the present day, his works have been the subject of much scrutiny in terms of subject matter and style. Particularly in the case of the release of his best-known novel, *American Psycho* (1991), a good deal of the criticism of Ellis has shifted between the text and the public persona of the author himself. In typical postmodern style, this blurring of boundaries was not only welcomed, but frequently precipitated by Ellis, his publishers, and the public relations machinery at work on his

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behalf. The focus of the majority of this attention, self-perpetuated and otherwise, has been on the apparent element of *evil* at work in terms of the amorality of his characters and a corresponding lack of moral certitude. Firmly rooted in theoretical tradition established by Georges Bataille, as well as the work of numerous recent scholars, this project examines the squandering of youth and its damaging impact upon contemporary society as a consistent thread running through Bret Easton Ellis's oeuvre, particularly in his characters' pervasive drug use and conspicuous expression of sexuality. The trajectory of narrator-protagonist Clay, from isolated college student in *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) into savage narcissist in *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010) is a prime illustration of *evil, as inherent in the familiar,* throughout Ellis's postmodern landscape. As opposed to presenting an external perpetrator of evil as a threat to an existing moral order, Ellis's narrator reports on the evil at work in these young people's daily lives. The reader, therefore, as this project contends, is placed in the uncomfortable, but imperative and at times voyeuristic, position of determining the extent of culpability for an entire society—one that is all too familiar.

Youth and Consequences: The Fictionality of Bret Easton Ellis

For more than thirty years, Bret Easton Ellis's name has been synonymous with the concept of *evil*. Ever since the controversy surrounding the publication of his second novel, *American Psycho,* became fodder for media scrutiny even before its eventual publication in 1991, many have deemed him a scourge upon the literary world, as well as a symptom of a larger cultural affliction. While the reception of his work has evolved over time, there still does not seem to be any critic, popular or academic, who does not have an opinion on Ellis. There also seems to be no middle ground—opinions tend to vacillate between labeling him as misogynist or moralist. In 1994, Matthew Tyrnauer's *Vanity Fair* article "Who's Afraid of Bret Easton Ellis?" questioned the lasting impact of the *American Psycho* controversy. Tyrnauer recounts the time between Ellis's first novel, *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho,* when at the ripe age of twenty-seven, "The *enfant terrible* was suddenly merely *terrible*" (96). Apparently, more than three decades later, many people are still afraid of Bret Easton Ellis. I believe this is a warranted and healthy fear and I tend to think that Ellis, himself, has played a large part in cultivating it.

As opposed to simply presenting his readers with the object of his critique, our contemporary amorality, which he has ironically been accused of perpetuating, Ellis depicts it in the same discourse that also confronts us. His efficacy in this pursuit is largely due to the *familiarity* with which these signs encircle and define our society. As artifacts of the culture that has both produced it and is reflected by it, the borders of Ellis's texts have necessarily been blurred, adding

to the mythos of his works, as well as the author, himself, again impacted by our familiarity with the subject matter, its marketing, as well as the resulting public perception of author and text. This media focus surfaced initially as a publicity campaign thrust upon him. However, using the same signs of the culture designed to malign him, Ellis has learned to cunningly subvert the public-relations machinery to his advantage. As Sonia Baelo-Allué points out in *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*, "Ellis's novels have been promoted through posters, trailers, fake web pages and TV appearances . . ." (20). In early 2010, he lit up the blogosphere with a celebratory message from his Twitter account in was believed to be a reference to the death of J.D. Salinger. Ellis cheered that someone thought to be the reclusive writer is "finally dead" and suggested that he will "Party tonight!!!" almost immediately after news broke of the legendary author's demise (Ellis). As one would expect, many took this as an opportunity to once again brand him as an aberration—gloating over the death of a literary icon. A more astute reading would reveal that this message was not celebrating the end of Salinger as a man as much as a standard by which Ellis's work has always been judged—one that not only questions the morality of the society that is reflected in his work, but also the ways in which the notion of evil is represented. In Ellis's fictional representation of his contemporary society, the relationship between perpetrator and victim is necessarily upended, and frequently reversed in unexpected ways. While, at one time, Salinger and other post-World War II writers valorized protagonists that exposed society's foibles by means of a firm, independent moral compass, Ellis's critique is rooted in the absence of such an instrument in our current late capitalist era. Once one understands the logistics of the reversals that have taken place, both intentional and unintentional, in the marketing of Ellis's fiction, an elucidation of his textual positioning of perpetrator and victim, in terms of the acts of evil reflected in his texts, will follow.

An extreme depiction of late 1980s New York City, Ellis's third novel, *American Psycho*, attacks capitalism and male vanity as savagely as Patrick Bateman, its serial-killer protagonist and narrator, butchers his victims. Here, Ellis depicts Bateman as representative of the cannibalistic aura of 1980s capitalist America—the homicidal Gordon Gekko. As one may expect, due to the proximity of Ellis's target to its cultural context, many within the literary world at that time seemed to miss Ellis's point. Once advance galleys of the book were distributed among employees of Simon & Schuster, its original publisher, some of the more objectionable passages were leaked, out of context, to *Time* and *Spy* magazines. The result was a public outcry for the publisher to

forego the release of this book. As a result, *American Psycho* was dropped from its catalogue, Ellis was contractually permitted to keep his $300,000 advance, and Alfred A. Knopf immediately picked up the novel for release as a paperback under its Vintage imprint. In Ellis-like ironic fashion, the firestorm of controversy led to increased sales for the book and iconic status for its author. Certainly, the conditions leading to the publication of *American Psycho* and the text itself have become enmeshed. While it made him a literary phenom, his shifting of the boundaries between Ellis and his work during this time also led to a serious misreading of this text, as well as others throughout his career. However, to the assiduous Ellis scholar, it becomes apparent that these reversals taking place between author and text largely mirror the relationship between perpetrator and victim in his novels. The absence of moral certitude within the culture is, in actuality, the source of evil identified by Ellis, for which he was personally held accountable.

Rarely in the contemporary age has an author been personally vilified to this extent for a work of fiction. The National Organization of Women called *American Psycho* "a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women" (McDowell). Interestingly, spearheading a boycott of the novel was the then-president of the Los Angeles branch of the National Organization of Women (NOW), Tammy Bruce, who has experienced a resurgence of publicity in recent times as a conservative pundit. In fact, she has been one of the most vocal supporters of the US Presidential campaigns of Donald Trump, whose fictional representation is a repeated trope in *American Psycho* as one of Patrick Bateman's media idols.[1] However, as indicated, the believed perpetration of violence in his fiction by Bruce and others has simply shifted the target of the omnipresent evil from the prevailing culture to Ellis himself. In a 1995 web interview with *HotWired*, Ellis recounts receiving threats calling for him to be "raped with a nail-studded baseball bat" ("Bret Easton Ellis on *HotWired*"). This conflating of author and work within the prevailing culture is one of those now relatively commonplace moments in the contemporary media, which have only been exacerbated with the advent of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, in which the publicity defines the event. Since, on the surface, the text of *American Psycho* does depict the victimization of women, and incidentally an equal number of men, at the hands of an "alpha-male" protagonist, it is not surprising that the out-of-context excerpts would be misread in the manner of Ellis's most virulent critics. The irony is not lost on the fact that one of the prime targets of Ellis's satire is an acute obsession with *surface* in the American society he starkly depicts.

The most strident criticism of *American Psycho* occurred before anyone had the chance to read it. Recent academic critic Marco Abel points to the extent of "critical violence exerted" in response to a believed violent text (57). Before the book ever hit the shelves, upon the mere credibility the non-contextualized leaked passages, Roger Rosenblatt decried its publication in a *New York Times Book Review* article, "Snuff this Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?" Rosenblatt goes as far as equating the release of this novel with corporate greed, one of the major targets of the satire, on the part of Ellis's publisher (3, 16). This apparent call for censorship could not be simply dismissed as a partisan or publicity-seeking lark from an activist or name-seeking rogue journalist. While no stranger to controversy, at the time, Roger Rosenblatt represented the upper echelon of journalistic integrity as a prolific, award-winning, magazine writer, whose image has only been further lionized in recent years as a novelist and public intellectual. Solidified by the legitimacy of sources at the center of this controversy, considered to be bastions of free-speech, media figures such as Rosenblatt have forever fused the image of Ellis with his fictional characters. As a result, Ellis has often been relegated as a relic from the 80s "brat-pack" literati, along with his young, or youthful, contemporaries such as Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz, at the cusp of the American *fin de siècle* in which, in typical postmodern style, subsequent media coverage of the novel focused mainly on the scandal, as opposed to the text itself.

This critical shift of attention to a *meta* level in the popular press unintentionally served to sell more books while, unwittingly and unfortunately, removing the teeth from Ellis's satire. The intentional *evil* that takes place on the part of his protagonists, therefore, had become inseparable from the evil that Ellis is purported to have thrust upon our culture. While Ellis's intent was to shine a light on our unsettling familiarity with the cultural context that produces the perpetrators of the vile acts he depicts in his fiction, the outcome was to shift the blame to the author, as opposed to the institutions that create a world in which Patrick Bateman, and others of his ilk, could thrive. Unsurprisingly, the societal context to which Ellis takes his aim is the same context that attempts to suppress his critique. With its publication date of 1991 and the fictional events of the novel taking place roughly five years earlier, the Ellis debate and its residual impacts on literary production demonstrate the immense difficulty in satirizing a culture in its own place and time. Interestingly, the earliest critical work on Ellis has traditionally been conducted outside of the United States, possibly appealing to a prurient interest in American life, with Ellis as a sort of

documentarian of its amorality. It does, however, offer an antidote to the myopic readings of his texts at that time. Elizabeth Young, in *Shopping in Space*, the first serious collection of what was termed "Blank Generation" fiction, by she and her coeditor, Graham Caveney, in 1992, more accurately refers to Ellis as "Savagely puritanical" (40). Instead of regarding Ellis's texts as artifacts that offer insight into our cultural condition, many others chose to dismiss them as symptomatic of a collective obsession with extreme depictions of sex and violence.

Evil at the Intersection of the Fictional and the "Real"

The main deficit in the early, if not pre-natal, readings of Ellis's work is that they were, as a matter of course, incomplete. Critics decried the lack of a moral center in his fiction, while this *absence* was precisely Ellis's point. The subsequent discomfort, to put it mildly, with texts such as *American Psycho* is rooted in Ellis's intentional reversals of perpetrator and victim and the related associations with his reader. These reversals rely upon the reader's familiarity with the cultural signs that produce these characters. Specifically, this produces an *uncanny* level of familiarity, in the Freudian sense, with the perpetrator due to the reader's implication in the evils committed. While at first glance, one is led to believe that identification must take place on the part of the victim, it is the perpetrator to which the reader is grudgingly linked. In order to identify these concepts in Ellis's fiction, and the relationship between and among them, one must take a holistic view of Ellis's oeuvre, its related criticism, and how his public persona has contributed to them over the years.

The difficulties situating Ellis's work within the contemporary canon would be expected in light of the deleterious impact upon the focus his satire by the prevailing culture. Adding to the vastly distinct strains of literary critique, a number of genre critics read *American Psycho* as a work of gothic or horror literature. S.T. Joshi, in his examination of this work, points out that "a horror story is not necessarily a story in which horrible things happen" (188). While Joshi's assessment is correct, even in his disqualification of *American Psycho* as a proper genre work, this type of attention frequently served to ghettoize the text, outside of the literary canon, as a fringe novel. As the introduction to *Shopping in Space* admits, "In the mid-eighties, when the writers derisively known as the 'brat-pack' began to be published in Britain, critics were swift to describe them as lightweight and inconsequential without any consideration of the background to their fiction"

(Young and Caveney xi). More recently, while a great deal of scholarship on Ellis is still coming from abroad, now that there is a significant distance, at least in terms of temporality, from the era depicted, it is being presented in an accurate context as a critique of the United States in the late-capitalist era. In the decidedly polemic *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary*, published in 2011, Georgia Colby claims that, in *American Psycho*, "Ellis shows the effect of the reactionary politics of the Reagan administration on the consumer choices of the public, and points to the influence that the measures taken in the culture war period had on American society" (70). However, it is imperative that one take this line of thought further and discuss this novel, as well as Ellis's corpus as a whole, in terms of the discourse at work, and how his textual language serves to represent a specific time, place, and subject. The presence of evil is palpable from the outset in *American Psycho*. Opening with an admonishment appropriated from the third canto of Dante's *Inferno,* Ellis equates New York in the latter half of the 1980s with a forsaken underworld. As Bateman acknowledges, the initial sign is boldly, and publicly, represented: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab . . ." (3). From the novel's first scene, the reader is reminded of the textuality of Ellis's fictional landscape and the reader's presence within it.

While there is now a relative expanse of over thirty years between the time and place of Ellis's early work and today, his warnings about the direction of US culture have only become more prescient since then. The distance that Colby's analysis presupposes is additionally untenable because Ellis, his characters, and his themes are all part of the same, uncannily familiar, text. Ellis, viewed as inseparable from the characters he created, inevitably used this to his advantage as a self-promoting media figure. Correspondingly, it is clear that Ellis's intended reader is also a part of this overarching text. As James Annesley points out in another early analysis of the literary trend forged by Ellis and his contemporaries, "Blank fiction," in his qualification of Young and Caveney's term, "does not just depict its own period, it speaks in the commodified language *of* its own period" (7). In terms of his frame of mind while writing *American Psycho,* Ellis, in hindsight, admits in a recent interview with *The Paris Review*, "I was pursuing a life—you could call it the *Gentleman's Quarterly* way of living—that I knew was bullshit, and yet I couldn't seem to help it" (180).

In terms of perpetration, if Ellis is guilty of anything, it is attempting the inherently challenging task of satirizing a culture through its own cultural signs. As Patrick Bateman muses in *American Psycho*, "Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?" (377). Although, at first glance, there is a sense of irony in Bateman making this observation, it does reflect one of the key elements of Ellis's writing—the ontologies of evil at work in contemporary society and the actions that produce those ontologies. As he does in the opening of the novel, Ellis concludes his text with another semiotic warning. Bookending the novel's textual surface, the sign that states "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" at the close of *American Psycho* punctuates the theme of the illusive nature of justice in a society that perpetuates violence and degradation (399). One of the most controversial aspects of the book is the lack of a resolution in which Bateman could be brought to justice. In this vein, Kathryn Hume makes a salient point in *Aggressive Fictions*:

> Instead of giving us the comfort of aligning with law enforcement, Ellis not only puts us nominally outside the law because of our narrative point of view but gives us a different sort of tingle as well. We put ourselves outside the 'laws of decency' by continuing to read, by letting those agonizing images enter and dwell in our imaginations. That, of course, assumes that the law governs what goes on in our heads, and the degree of discomfort we feel reading tells us just how much we have internalized such laws. (125)

The initial, reductive analysis of Ellis at the hands of the mass media as a source of evil is precisely the narrow cultural view that his work serves to critique. The literary reception, or lack thereof, of *American Psycho* was due in large part to the difficulty positioning it within the existing American canon. This novel was written and marketed as a book of "serious" fiction, not a genre or fringe work. The inability, or unwillingness, for critics to fairly judge Ellis is precisely a symptom of their respective culture's societal ills. To view ourselves in the mirror Ellis holds for us is to admit our own *evils*.

Anyone familiar with Ellis's oeuvre would be aware that the groundwork for the *familiar perpetrator* in *American Psycho* was firmly set into place years earlier in his first novel, *Less Than Zero*. Ellis's rise to fame and notoriety in the mid-80s and early 90s coincided with a glut of media attention being garnered upon the notion of celebrity wherever it could be found—including literature. In what appeared to be a paradox to those who were already skeptical about his talents,

Ellis seemed to encourage the publicity created by the same culture industry that he purported to condemn in his books. For someone who appeared to be building a literary career on satirizing commodity culture, Ellis seemed to fit right in with the prevailing media-constructed narrative. For Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), he chose to set the action, or, once again, inaction, in a fictionalized version of Bennington called Camden College, of which Clay is an undergraduate and, by extension, now a minor character. While weathering the controversy over *American Psycho* (1991), Ellis released a collection of previously-developed, interrelated short stories entitled *The Informers* (1994), taking time to process the media onslaught he apparently instigated before devoting serious attention to his next novel. As established earlier, even in the pre-publication stage of *American Psycho*, there were allegations in the national press concerning the book's apparent misogyny and its supposed endorsement of sexual violence.

The notoriety following the release of *American Psycho* seemed daunting to Ellis as he continued to work on his most ambitious project to that point, *Glamorama* (1999), in which he overtly focuses upon the celebrity-saturated culture of the time. The cause célèbre of *American Psycho* and the amount of success, and infamy, he had achieved at such a young age, contributed to his fictionalized memoir, or work of autofiction, titled *Lunar Park*. Released in 2005, it received positive reviews for its self-deprecating look at media-hype and a very personal view of his shifting position, both wittingly and unwittingly, within the prevailing landscape. Presenting this narrative within the frame of a former "bad-boy" writer, coincidentally named "Bret Easton Ellis" and retreated to the suburbs to raise a family, Ellis clarifies his position as an author who, like his characters, is trapped by the signs of his culture. Derived from his successful podcast, *White*, Ellis's first non-fiction long work was released in 2019. Most recently, *The Shards*, fist released in serial form on the podcast and subsequently published early in 2023, offers a fictionalized account of his time at Los Angeles's prestigious Buckley School, marking Ellis's return to the novel.

Squandering of Youth and the Evil of the Everyday

In advance of inquiring how contemporary society could produce Patrick Bateman, one must go back and closely examine the constituency of Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero*. Youth, and the value of youth, has always been at the center of both Ellis's fiction as well as the conditions that determined it. Ellis wrote his debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, while an undergraduate

at Bennington College. He developed the project in a fiction workshop course taught by legendary non-fiction writer and novelist Joe McGinniss and populated by future literary *wunderkinder* such as Donna Tartt and Jonathan Lethem. With McGinniss's assistance, the novel was published in 1985, while Ellis was still enrolled at Bennington. Soon, the book garnered a great deal of attention, assisted by the big-budget, but loosely-based, Hollywood adaptation from 1987, catapulting Ellis to celebrity authorship at a very young age. In her generally positive *New York Times* review, Michiko Kakutani calls it "one of the most disturbing novels I've read in a long time" (32). Not long after, the young author, as a celebrity and burgeoning cult figure, was gaining as much attention as his book. This was a role, to Ellis's simultaneous detriment and benefit, which he relished.

Much to the chagrin of his early critics, but imperative to the fate of his characters, Ellis does not make use of a moral center in his work and there is no whitewashing of the social, cultural, and economic manifestations of this prevailing amorality. Ellis purposefully does not avoid the evil at work in his fiction. In fact, he forces one to confront it head-on, in terms of content as well as the residual effects upon the reader. Ellis writes about people with familiar qualities doing bad things and, as a result, his readers *feel bad*. In Marco Abel's estimation, in his consideration of the *affective response* to *American Psycho*, "[I]f nothing else, the value of the book is that it forces its audience to encounter the undeniably visceral response they have" (48). This does not mean, of course, that one should expect readers to attempt to replicate the evil deeds Ellis depicts, as several of his detractors warn. If a rationale is needed for his choice of subject matter, it is a fairer statement to say that these acts are being committed, literally and metaphorically, and it is Ellis's responsibility, and in turn, his protagonists, to report them. As Georges Bataille asserts in *Literature and Evil*, authorship requires "complicity in the knowledge of Evil" (ix). In his analysis, fiction is responsible for representing this "big-e" Evil through its inherent excesses. This is a direct response to Jean Paul Sartre's view of art's "moral" responsibility. Knowledge of evil, passed from author to reader is a means by which one can achieve *sovereignty*, which is for Bataille, in the aforementioned text, the realization of a heightened intellectual state (178). Though Ellis's work represents and reflects evil in both word and deed, as Bataille suggests, Ellis is not producing evil for its own sake. This evil is the mirror that Ellis holds to his own culture, as well as himself, in the guise of his protagonist. In "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille contends that "[h]umanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes

in principle *nonproductive expenditure*" (117). It is this nonproductive expenditure that Ellis is putting on display in these novels. The result of this waste, due to abject consumption, is the destruction of youth and the innocence associated with it. In a very literal way, these characters *have been sold a bill of goods* by the culture they inherited.

Long before his depiction of his Wall Street executive and serial killer, Patrick Bateman, and his heinous crimes, whether real or imagined, Ellis's work had always been steeped in evil,—actuated through both action and inaction. Confronting his reader with signs of the familiar, in which reading becomes a transgressive act in itself as suggested by Hume, Ellis implicates us in the narrative as well. As Ellis illustrates, our contemporary amorality is both pervasive and pervasively reproduced through mass media and its associated technologies. Clay, the narrator-protagonist of *Less Than Zero*, habitually watches music videos, one of which presents "buildings being blown up in slow motion and in black and white" (100). Patrick Bateman, in *American Psycho*, with the assistance of his VCR and the neighborhood video store, feeds his insatiable hunger for horror films and pornography. The deleterious and numbing impact of the proliferation of visual media forecasts our twenty-four-hour news cycle which provides endless repetition of tragic events, such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, until they are bereft of all meaning. In a decidedly *affectless* manner, Ellis's narrators speak in response to the discourse that envelops them, providing the reader with much knowledge about not only what they report but also *how* they report it. As opposed to presenting a wise-beyond-his-years main character exposing the phoniness in contemporary American culture through his inability to fit in, Ellis's protagonist offers an anti-Holden Caulfield in which a relatively vacuous character simply reports on society's ills, requiring the reader, as a constituent of the respective morality of the prevailing culture, to make their own judgements.

The loss of youth and its damaging impact upon contemporary society is a consistent thread running through Ellis's fiction, beginning with *Less Than Zero*. These texts, collectively, are emblematic of the natural progression of the evil inherent in the society in which Ellis situates his fictional avatars. The squandering of youth through the use of drugs and conspicuous sexuality is presented as a scourge upon our culture. There is no place for the innocence and purity of childhood and adolescence in postmodernity's flat, affectless world. Ellis's postmodern landscape acutely reveals the evil inherent in our society's view of youth. Following this theme throughout his novels, in the evolution from *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* to *American Psycho* and

Imperial Bedrooms, Ellis goes as far as showing us how disaffected youth inevitably become dangerous adults. Georges Bataille, in his assertion that literature is guilty of perpetuating evil, claims that "[l]iterature is a return to childhood" (x). Ellis's use of intertextuality emphasizes this notion within his postmodern milieu. Through the progression, or possibly regression, of Ellis's protagonist, Clay, for example, from an isolated college student in *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* into a savage narcissist in *Imperial Bedrooms*, one may trace a prime illustration of the impact of evil. Ellis's focus upon youth delivers a particularly salient warning about the direction of the contemporary American system of values. His portrayal of our children as drug-addled, oversexed automatons is reflective of the evil at work in our culture. The hedonistic impulses of his characters, and actions taken to fulfill these desires, both serve to facilitate and produce this evil.

In the absence of the moral certitude of the institutions of the family and larger community to rely upon, Clay and his contemporaries in *Less Than Zero* find themselves adrift in their most formidable years, attempting to moor themselves to the surrogate pleasures of sex and commodity. They appropriate their discourse from their culture, primarily through the mass media and consumer items. They eschew the values of the previous generation, which they find to be hypocritical, and accept *emptiness* as an alternative. As Clay vehemently states in *Less Than Zero*, "Nothing. Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing" (205). In actuality, *nothing-ness* makes Clay happy. He is intent on removing all emotion from his life by disrupting his relationships with his sometimes-girlfriend, Blair, and apparent friend-of-convenience, Julian. When pressed by Blair at the end of the novel, Clay says, "I don't want to care. If I care about things, it'll just be worse, it'll just be another thing to worry about. It's less painful if I don't care" (205). He is making a conscious choice not to care. He also, perhaps surprisingly, admits to the ability to feel pain. This may imply the existence of remnants of language at work in Clay, while quickly evaporating into the larger context of the Los Angeles cityscape. The presence of Blair and Julian in his life makes him feel insignificant precisely because they make him *feel*.

The Performativity of Evil in Ellis's First-Person Narration

In *Less Than Zero*, Clay attempts to construct his identity through a series of performative utterances to the reader that suggests a tension between *otherness from* and *incorporation with* the

prevailing discourse. This style of narration contributes to the novel's episodic structure and repetition of phrases and themes, which Annesley, citing David Pan, identifies as "the MTV style in Ellis's work" (90). In this way, Ellis employs a form of intermediality in which characters communicate through the use of song lyrics, sound bites, and catch phrases, lifted directly from the material they consume on a daily basis. According to James Annesley, "Blank fiction," as discussed earlier, "does not just depict its own period, it speaks in the commodified language *of* its own period" (7). Ellis's characters, and the extent of their personal agency as a function of their performative speech, are linguistically limited by the signs of their culture. This sampling of the prevailing discourse reifies these subjects, renders meaningful communication virtually impossible, and makes them practically indistinguishable from each other. Their language, therefore, intrinsically tied to the respective subject, is *performative* in its response to these subjects' social context. As Annesley goes on to state, "Using a language that seems to resonate with the accents of commercial culture, these texts develop formal dimensions that appear, in some cases commodified and in others, part of a wider engagement with consumer culture" (8). The signs, both literal and figurative, composing these characters' environment continuously dictate their desires. They become walking advertisements for the lifestyle that is concurrently being marketed to them. In this way, Ellis relegates authority over his characters, and by extension his reader, to wade through the discourse that serves to constitute them. Presenting an image-saturated landscape in both form and content, *Less Than Zero* serves to interpolate one into a commodified culture that is as completely familiar to his reader as it is to his characters.

Ellis's characters, through their appropriation of the commodified signs that confront them, are able to comment on their culture while remaining firmly entrenched in the prevailing discourse. Critics frequently lament the seemingly endless listing of products in *American Psycho*. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent however that Patrick Bateman, the novel's narrator and protagonist, communicates something quite meaningful to the reader through this vast array of names. The names that form Bateman's language are not those of his friends, family, or coworkers—he barely seems to know those names. The names that populate this novel, and Bateman's consciousness, are those attached to designer apparel and goods. Even the most assiduous reader of *GQ* and *Stereo Review* would struggle to identify and visualize each item in Bateman's inventory with the level of exacting detail provided. In what has become his signature style, Ellis's text reflects the excess of 1980s materialism critiqued through the prevalence of the

commodity object, and the resulting power of its image, in contemporary society. In turn, within the world depicted in these works, relationships between subjects have been supplanted by relationships between commodities. In an extreme depiction of what Marx observes in the connection between producer and product, Ellis presents a culture in which commodity, and the image associated with it, has completely erased the subject. Joshi correctly notes that the listing of items "horrify in exactly the same way as his murders: by excess" (188). In order to differentiate themselves from the world around them and from each other, mass-mediated brands and labels are the only privileged signs available to these characters.

The first-person narrative presented in *Less Than Zero* and Ellis's subsequent works compels a form of performance from each narrator-protagonist. These characters are always *speaking*, and therefore always *becoming*. Their tenuous existences and apparent awareness of this state of being is imperative in placing the reader in a perpetual position of unease. In turn, Ellis tests his reader's moral certitude, particularly in terms of excess, drug-use, and prurient sexuality. As the "Ellis" narrator recounts in *Lunar Park*, a member of his publisher's editorial board was to have said, "'[i]f there's an audience for a novel about coke-snorting, cock-sucking zombies, then by all means let's publish the damn thing' . . . " (6). At the time of publication, many critics contended that Ellis's portrayal of youth signified a negative cultural shift in American values and voiced nostalgia for an earlier time. A careful reading of Ellis illustrates that his characters are also wistful for the past in the face of contemporary violence and despair. However, as Ellis demonstrates in his characters' performative use of language, the nostalgia they experience is simply for an image created, reproduced, and marketed by the mass media, bereft of any related referent.

The fragmented subjectivities of Ellis's characters are reflected in the apparent instability of their sexual identification. Their androgynous sexualities represent their immersion into the signs that encircle them and ensure their relative interchangeability. As Judith Butler contends in *Gender Trouble*, "[G]ender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (33). Clay identifies other characters in *Less Than Zero* through various sexual cues. This mode of discourse is clearly performative on Clay's part. Specifically, he remembers acquaintances by whether he has had sex with them or not. As he tells the reader, "I realize for an instant that I might have slept with Didi Hellman. I also realize that I may have

slept with Warren also. I don't say anything. They probably already know" (28). What is startling about Clay's statement is not his admission to sexual activity with both genders, but his apparently frivolous attitude about these choices. Again, Ellis plays upon the assumed, relatively middle-class, sensibilities of his readers. Here, Clay's performance is a response to what Butler refers to as the *compulsory heterosexuality* of contemporary society. In line with the concept of Annesley's theorizing of "blank fiction," one is provided with a prime example of these characters being written in the discourse of their society. Clay's indication of his bisexuality to the reader, however, is no different than the manner in which he would broach the subject with a friend. They live in this insular, somewhat incestuous society of the affluent enclaves of Los Angeles, in which this behavior is not only common, but apparently expected. In the context of Ellis's readership, these casual asides create alarm, precisely because they are so *casual*. Their seeming promiscuity, as a challenge to the supposed value of monogamous relationships, is a stark response to the compulsory heterosexuality that Butler posits.

In the absence of a moral center in *Less Than Zero*, Ellis compels the reader to respond as an arbiter of good and evil. The characters' obliviousness actually heightens the seriousness of the matter. At a party, Clay is informed that he cannot use a bathroom, "Because Julian and Kim and Derf are fucking in there" (35). Clay, unable to register shock or disapproval, responds with "Derf's here?" (35). In this case, Clay is made aware of a casual sexual encounter that involves three of his friends. Again, Ellis challenges the moral position of the reader in two ways. First, the reader is made privy to an act which one would be expected to consider objectionable. Then, to magnify the moral challenge, the reader is confronted with Clay's lukewarm response. Clay's gender is constituted through a series of *performative utterances*. Again, Clay is positioned as a removed observer. His reaction, or lack thereof, signifies this moral stance. For Clay, performative gender formation occurs not in what he does, but what he witnesses. In the case of the alleged *ménage à trois*, Clay does not directly observe this act, nor does he partake in it. He engages, instead, in the discourse that illustrates the overarching morality, or lack thereof, of his culture. Clay's culpability reflects the reader's culpability. There is no such thing as a passive observer in Ellis's work. Their sexualities are constituted by the milieu in which they inhabit. Clay's *lack* of shock is intended to elicit shock in the reader. By mediating the line of moral certitude, Ellis wants to test Clay's limits of acceptance while testing the reader's moral sensibilities. On the one hand, we are challenged to reject Clay for his amorality. At the same time, however, we are tempted to

care about him because of his apparent innocence, with which we identify. The familiarity with which we recognize Clay, particularly through the signs that constitute him, forces us to confront our own moral code.

The Sin of Omission Preceding the Sin of Commission

Throughout his oeuvre, the prevailing cultural media representation of Ellis's depiction of decadence and vacuity has directly fed into his work. Each of his subsequent books can be seen as a response to the reception of both the previous text as well as the various accounts of his personal life. Ellis relies upon one's awareness and familiarity of the signs that produce the mythologies populating his texts, including those at work on a larger meta-level. In 2010's *Imperial Bedrooms* Ellis goes as far as directly responding to the film adaptation of his first novel, which Hollywood attempted to sanitize and recast as a cautionary tale against drug abuse. Early in *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay talks about the time many years before the novel takes place when he and Julian were watching the movie version of *Less Than Zero*, which he admits is loosely based on their experiences. Julian ruefully laments to Clay, "They killed me off" (9). In the film, Julian's death seems to represent a moral consequence for a life of drug addiction and hustling. In actuality, not only was the character of Julian "killed off" in this adaptation, but Ellis's moral challenge was eradicated from the narrative as well. Ellis capitalizes on this familiar cultural touchstone to hold the mirror before which his readers must make their own moral judgments.

In a very literal way, the statement about Julian has been *underwritten*, in Georgina Colby's use of the term, by the rewritten text of the cinematic adaptation, in which it is both accentuated and modified. Colby, in her discussion of underwriting in his work, claims, "Ellis, through the process of double-voicing, writes narratives below the surface narrative of both his work and of the contemporary culture of which his works are (intentionally) products" (5). Clay is clear, however, that Julian's eventual injuries and textual death were the result of drug addiction and prostitution throughout the earlier narrative. Physically, Julian has become both a commodity and a casualty of the prevailing culture. The subsequent, underwritten, entry in *Imperial Bedrooms*, however, sheds additional light on Julian's situation and, in turn, the major themes of the book. Although Julian is still alive while viewing the film with Clay and the others upon which the adaptation was supposed to have been based "on a warm October night three weeks prior to its

theatrical release, in a screening room on the 20th Century Fox lot," in the sense of being a breathing organism, he no longer exists to Clay in the way he once was (6). This discourse is taking place outside of the boundaries of Julian in Clay's consciousness and therefore outside of the events that perpetuates his textual existence. Julian's erasure has been ensured by the failings of his friends, family, and the institutions that have purported to protect him.

Ellis's cultural critique is based upon his reader's appreciation of his doubling of characterization and one's willingness to essentially "play along" with the joke. In this way, Ellis compels one to look at the lack of morality reflected in the actions of the characters and the society they inhabit, as well as textual effects of evil in a literary sense. This is represented by both Georges Bataille's transgressive approach to evil, as well as Ronald Paulson's more classical definition, which he presents from a decidedly moral distance. The loss of youth, and the perceived residual loss of *subjectivity*, results in a social and political chasm in which destruction and consumption are the only available means of exchange. When Clay realizes that he and Rip, a major source of the prevailing evil in both texts, are actually driving on a dead end in *Less Than Zero*, Rip requests that he continue driving. When Clay tells him, "But this road doesn't go anywhere," Rip tells him that all that matters is that, "Just that we're on it, dude" (195). This is a poignant representation of the mediated discourse of their society and these young subjects. Attempting escape is precisely the wrong action; their condition must be embraced.

The children of Ellis's fiction are largely progeny of the Original Sin of the previous generation. Their parents' worship of material goods and social status has produced a cold urban landscape and a generation of young people who are unable to connect with anything except for objects and labels. Indeed, these brand names represent the shared language among this collective society. One's familiarity with this nomenclature allows for communication among Ellis's subjects. Concordantly, this obsession with *surface*, and the identification of one another by means of the superficial perpetuates evil through their gradually fragmenting subjectivities. Citing the *OED*, Paulson claims that *evil* can be categorized as either *suffering*-evil or *doing*-evil. He defines suffering evil as "the condition of being unfortunate, miserable, wretched (as in evil health), a victim of calamity and misfortune" (2). He goes on to state, "An extension of suffering-evil (death, pain, natural disaster, murder), doing-evil has tended to designate the suffering of one sentient being imposed by another; it is the pain that matters and the fact that it is deliberately inflicted (as opposed to a natural disaster or accident)" (4). Ellis's characters frequently blur the lines between

suffering-evil and doing-evil, causing his reader to question the apparent reversals between victim and perpetrator. One may be led to believe that in *Less Than Zero*, Clay is responsible for the evil befallen his circle of friends through a sin of omission. His guilt is much deeper than that, however. He is not simply reporting the conditions of a nihilistic society. His desire "to see the worst" is both affecting and facilitating evil (172). Clay is not an aberration. He is not an anomaly. He is the natural product of his environment—inseparable from his surroundings. The same can be said of the textual world of the book itself, which revels in the excesses of its characters. The reader is therefore placed in the uncomfortable position of determining the extent of culpability for an entire society—a society that is totally familiar.

In line with the signs with which they are constituted, Bret Easton Ellis's characters are the ultimate consumers. They engorge themselves with media, drugs, and luxury items. They also seem to have an insatiable appetite for sexual consumption, beginning at a very young age. The sexualization of youth, a major theme in Ellis's writing, is frequently presented as a source of evil. Again, these are the signs that encircle, define, and serve, however tenuously, to connect them. Deviance on the part of the young people in *Less Than Zero* seems to be directly attributable to the lack of active parenting and the seemingly unlimited availability of financial resources and recreational drugs. The opening scene of the novel illustrates this overarching theme. Upon his arrival from LAX, Clay flatly informs the reader, "Nobody's home" (10). Clay has very little interaction with his family with the exception of shopping excursions and the occasional tedious meal. It should be noted that Clay's family name is never mentioned in the novel. This signifies his lack of identification as the only son and heir to his father. Clay's parents are rarely provided a direct quotation in *Less Than Zero*. The few occasions in which his mother is reported to speak to her children are delivered through Clay's consciousness. The grandparents are the only family members besides his two sisters who provide any significant dialogue, and that is only through flashbacks from Palm Springs. In one notable scene, upon approaching his mother's bedroom, Clay notices that his sisters are "leafing through old issues of *GQ*, watching some porno film on the Betamax with the sound turned off" (75). Again, media and technology, and their prurient uses, are described as accessories to sexuality. As Nicki Sahlin points out, "A large part of the psychic horror forming a strong undercurrent in the novel is the tendency of those who should be protectors and caretakers to act instead as predators and destroyers" (35). In the absence of traditional parenting, and the correspondingly implicit moral guidance, children are left to simply consume.

Pornography serves as wallpaper, while boredom is sated with fashion magazines. In this scene, one of his sisters offers, eliciting no reaction from Clay, that "she hates it when they show the guy coming" while they watch the pornographic film (75). In terms of those that reside in this privileged world, according to Elizabeth Young, "Ellis's own response to their behavior, and this remains constant throughout his work, is essentially one of puritan disgust" (25-26). Ellis plays upon the reader's expectations concerning a moral framework, but there may not be the necessary distance between his characters and their actions to present a "puritanical" response. It is left to the reader to distinguish between right and wrong based upon what one brings to the text. Clay finds it relevant to report upon his sisters' conduct, but provides no response to them or the reader. He also, at least within the context of the narrative, does not disclose his knowledge to any parent or authority figure. Ellis's indictment of contemporary morality and the associated infiltration of evil is established in the unmoored lives of these adolescents.

Ellis presents evil as a conflict between the sacred and profane in contemporary life, largely subverting our expectations about what literature can and should do. He juxtaposes our traditional values with the affectless consumption of the postmodern subject. Ellis relinquishes the authorial voice to his characters to amplify their atonal sensibility. Although these characters engage in evil deeds, they derive no pleasure from them. In fact, they merely find themselves falling deeper into their own personal hells. According to Andrew Delbanco in *The Death of Satan*, "The question of where responsibility lies for the perpetration of evil is, of course, an ancient one; but the brazenness of these disavowals is new, and it is one of the most striking features of contemporary culture—a mutant form of irony, but a form nevertheless" (215). Degradation of the sacred, therefore, results from the condition in which the individual is unable to release the object of desire and in which liberty, in terms of clarity of consciousness, is only achieved through death—a specter of the bodily death that is always lurking under the surface of Ellis's work to match the preceding spiritual death of his characters.

Loss of Innocence via Authorial Absence

Consistent with the discourse of the postmodern world his work inhabits, Ellis purposefully relinquishes authorial voice to his characters and, by extension, his reader. Employing a first-person narrative in *Less Than Zero*, Ellis continues to challenge his reader's expectations

concerning victim and perpetrator. In *The Accursed Share, Volume 1*, Georges Bataille asserts the following: "The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed" (59). Victimization is rooted in the excess that constitutes the characters of *Less Than Zero*, as well as all of Ellis's subsequent work. In this way, Ellis raises numerous questions about the level of agency on the part of the victim. To a large extent, Ellis is arguing that the victimization of the *Other* leads to the victimization of the subject and that, as a function of society, all parties are complicit in this relationship. Looking back upon Old Testament tradition, Ronald Paulson maintains that "crimes against the social order, the kingdom, and the family" in which "there was no victim, in the sense of some one person injured, there was a corruption of the whole body politic" (62). As mere signs within the consumer culture, the subjects that populate Ellis's recycled landscape are to be consumed as readily as a magazine or pop song.

Ellis's reliance upon contemporary cultural signs situates his fictional world in a specific time and place. The built-in obsolescence of these references reflects the fleeting relevance of the culturally familiar music and images that define these young characters. The recurrence of images that have a significant impact upon Ellis's own youth, such as Elvis Costello, emphasizes that the voices of these narrators speak for this specific generation. Representations of musician Elvis Costello operate on a variety of levels in this novel in terms the power of the *familiar image* upon how these characters view themselves and their outlook for the future. Again, Ellis is relying upon his reader's awareness and understanding of the relevance of these signs. The title of *Less Than Zero* is appropriated from Costello's song of the same name, "Thus both the book's title and its singer are second-hand," according to Elizabeth Young, "and revealing the way in which Ellis's teenagers feel themselves to be at the *end* of things" (22). When Clay arrives at his empty home, commencing his Christmas vacation from his Eastern school, Costello is the only familiar image there to greet him: "Elvis looks past me, with this wry ironic smile on his lips, staring out the window" (11). A clear distinction is drawn between the "Elvis" of Clay's generation and that of his parents. Since Clay's only exposure to religion is the chance viewing of a television preacher, in his mass-mediated world, Costello takes on a deified role for Clay. Awoken by unusual sounds coming from the windows of his house, Clay states the following: "It wakes me up and I sit up in bed and look over at the window and then glance over at the Elvis poster, and his eyes are looking out the window, beyond, into the night, and his face looks almost alarmed at what it might be

seeing, the word 'Trust' above the worried face" (63). Each time Clay fixates upon the poster, his mind turns to his childhood friend, Julian. For Clay, this image on his bedroom wall is a signpost serving to direct him. In the absence of parents, both physically and emotionally, Clay relies upon the sage advice of this icon. "There's an old, expensively framed poster of The Beach Boys hanging over Rip's bed," Clay observes, "and I stare at it trying to remember which one died, while Rip does three more lines" (50). Clay's attitude signifies an absence of meaning in the icons of his parents' generation. The illusion of youthful innocence, once imbued in the Los Angeles lifestyle by such media images as the Beach Boys, no longer has meaning for Clay's generation. These signs are only relevant in their death. As James Annesley elucidates, Clay exhibits an "implicit hostility towards contemporary culture and an anxiety about conditions in the late twentieth century" (86). On one occasion, when he becomes "tired of watching videos," Clay reports that he is watching two televangelists "talking about Led Zeppelin records, saying that, if they're played backwards, they 'possess alarming passages about the devil'" (87). Clay goes on to say that one of them "then begins to talk about how he's worried that it'll harm the young people. 'And the young are the future of this country,' he screams, and then breaks another record" (87). Here, Ellis lampoons the culture wars of the 1980s concerning music and other forms of popular entertainment. On the one hand, he is showing how these texts that were vilified by certain members of the "Religious Right" actually do contribute to evil, though in a way that would not have been identified by their detractors. On the other, he is presenting their discourse as just another cultural sign that is indistinguishable from the media it purports to disparage. The evil, therefore, is entrenched in the polyphony of voices that encircle Clay and his generation. Not only does Ellis require his readers to make moral judgements for these characters, but he also relies upon them to translate these signs in order to make those judgements, fully interpolating them into the narrative.

Clay's affectless narration reflects a boredom and malaise that comes from his recycled, mass-mediated existence. This nihilistic attitude is rooted in the *death drive* posited by Freud. The *ennui* exhibited by Clay and his friends is sated, however temporarily, by instruments of mass media. As a result of his consumption of the violent cultural signs presented on television and in the print media, Clay is obsessed with destruction and wants to remain in Los Angeles just as long as he can withstand the ensuing damage inflicted upon him. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud identifies death-instincts that serve to bring back an earlier state of being. As Freud contends,

"They operate against the purpose of the other instincts, which leads, by reason of their function, to death . . ." (40). He connects these death-instincts to the sexual-instincts in their relationship to the destruction of the object. In the case of Clay, death is a manifestation of a desire to return to an earlier state. However, this is a decidedly ambivalent desire since there is no available moral alternative. Although Clay does not provide a direct critique to the evil he witnesses, he does frequently look back to what he considers having been a more innocent time in his life. The novel is punctuated by Clay's memories of childhood excursions in Palm Springs. There is a palpable sense of innocence and love presented in these flashbacks, clearly absent from the present time. Clay states, albeit in his typically ambivalent manner, "*I wanted to remember the way things were*" (44). However, as the flashbacks are presented, it becomes clear that, even in this earlier time, there were premonitions of horror on the periphery of his existence. It appears as if there was a looming monster poised to strike at his family and, as a result, Clay's childhood innocence. Clay offers the following memory: "*There'd be these strange sounds and lights next door, and I'd go back upstairs to my room and lock the door and finally fall asleep*" (70). In one of his most descriptive recollections from Palm Springs, Clay shares an early memory of learning to drive at the age of fifteen. As he approaches a car accident, which he first believes is a bonfire, he sees a crying Mexican woman and "*two or three kids*" sitting by the flaming wreck (76). Although he wonders why no one has stopped on the highway to help, Clay speeds off after initially slowing down. He admits, "*I had an urge to stop, but I didn't*" (76). Later in the day and into the next, Clay becomes concerned that a child had fallen victim to the accident. As he speculates, "*Maybe some kid, thrown through the windshield and who'd fallen onto the engine, and I asked my sisters if they thought they saw a kid burning, melting, on the engine and they said no, did you?, neato, and I checked the papers the next day to make sure there hadn't been one*" (76). After that experience, Clay admits that he began collecting newspaper articles reporting horrific maimings and deaths, some accidental and some purposeful. As he recalls, "*I collected a lot of clippings during that time because, I guess, there were a lot to be collected*" (77). These photographic images of human death provided by the mass media represent the Freudian drive on Clay's part to return to an inorganic state.

The desire to return to a regressed manner of existence, manifest in the *death drive*, is reflected in the compulsive behaviors of Ellis's characters toward self-destruction and moral decay. The impulse to experience death through the observation and collection of violent, and

familiar, images, and the incessant repetition of these behaviors is apparent throughout Ellis's work. In this way, these subjects are directly confronted with the source of their fears. The mechanization of urban life assists in their reification. To a large extent, particularly in the case of Southern California, evil is represented by the influx of people into the cities and the resulting destruction that ensues. This concept of evil is also frequently aligned with the fear of impending tragedy in *Less Than Zero*, particularly as a component of the urban lifestyle. As Clay keeps reminding himself, from first line of the novel, "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (9). This sentence becomes a mantra for Clay. In response to his lack of a functional home life, Clay fears relationships with other people. He does not trust his friends or his family. Ruminating about a band named "Fear" that is scheduled to perform, Clay tells us that "Fear never shows up and the party ends early" (87). This specter of fear is repeated throughout the novel. In one of the essays in *Shopping in Space*, Graham Caveney juxtaposes the media's interpretation of the California lifestyle with its all-consuming influence upon the American sensibility arguing, "The co-existence of ominous portents and plush materialism suggests that the key to the myth of LA is to be found in its fears" (125). Clay's fears are rooted in his inability to forge authentic relationships. The preoccupation with death and decay among Clay and his acquaintances serves to interpersonally disconnect them from each other. Someone named Spit adamantly testifies: "I don't keep dead animals in my room anymore" (79). When Clay stops into a convenience store, he reports that "the checkout clerk is talking about murder statistics" (74). It seems like everyone is very literally simply passing the time until death arrives. As a result, the primary goal for the youth of Los Angeles is merely the desire to leave an attractive corpse. According to Young, "One of the central issues in Ellis's novel is how the self-indulgent paradise of California teen-hood is simultaneously the Gothic hell that Clay observes" (25). Again, the pastiche of familiar cultural images, collected and curated by these characters, serve as a self-imposed prison, in which the reader finds themself trapped, as well.

"Disappearing" into the Prevailing Narrative

Despite his own indiscretions, largely influenced by his environment, Clay aptly serves as a judge of his family and friends. Even though he is complicit in the behavior of his contemporaries, Clay manages to maintain a decided distance. Through the ironic sensibilities of

his reader, this combination of culpability and detachment as it relates to Ellis's engagement with evil becomes increasingly apparent throughout Clay's narration. Andrew Delbanco examines the relationship between the postmodern sense of irony and consciousness. This view of the self as a function of language, according to Delbanco, "is a way of thinking about the self that is incompatible with personal responsibility" (214). The knowledge that he will be returning to school at the end of his Christmas break provides Clay with a means of escape. This is presented in stark contrast to the fate of his friends. Clay frequently describes Julian as "looking almost dead" (91). His own image of himself, however, distorts as he becomes increasingly engaged with his surroundings. Clay admits, "Sun is flooding the room through the venetian blinds and when I look in the mirror it gives the impression that I have this wild, cracked grin" (40). According to Elizabeth Young, Clay's "very name denotes adolescent malleability" ("Vacant Possession" 23). Again, indicative of Freud's *death drive*, the narrator with which Ellis compels his reader to identify is represented as an inert, affectless mass. Clay's unformed, almost embryonic personality accentuates the distinction between his home and Camden College. His lack of affect in his reportage serves to accentuate the other characters' transgressions and, in turn, heighten the darkly satirical elements of the text. With almost documentary-style precision, Clay takes equal care in his descriptions of both the mundane and the exceptional. As Alan Bilton contends, "Clay's quiescence forms the moral focus of the novel; in the light of his passivity, the reader is forced to assume an active moral position—to draw the line somewhere" (203). In *Less Than Zero*, as well as the rest of Ellis's work, the actions are extreme, but his characters' reactions to them are decidedly not. As discussed earlier, Ellis defies his reader's expectations through the absence of a moral center to his novels. In presenting these narratives through the discourse of "blank fiction," that would be an impossibility. There is, however, a morality at work here. The *absence* of an intervening voice represents a firm moral perspective and Ellis challenges the reader to make moral judgments along the way. Only through his implication of the reader, Ellis is able to critique the prevailing culture. Time and again, one comes to realize that the most troubling part of Ellis's work is that the fictional world he portrays is so eerily reminiscent of our own.

Clay is frequently disturbed by the events he witnesses, but never enough to intervene. At one party he attends, there is a group of young people viewing what is purported to be a snuff film. Although he decides to "sit in the sun and light a cigarette and try to calm down," Clay says nothing while they discuss how much the video costs and debate its authenticity (153). In one of the most

horrific scenes in the book, Clay finds himself witnessing the gang rape of a twelve-year-old girl. When he questions the morality of this, Rip replies, "What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it" (189). When Clay informs him that he already has everything, Rip asserts that he doesn't. Upon Clay's confusion about what he could mean, Rip states: "I don't have anything to lose" (190). Like Ellis's reader, Clay receives knowledge through the confidence of an external source. Clay seems only able to interact with information as it is reported to him, outside of his immediate sphere of experience. The demise of Clay's friends is never presented first-hand. He only learns about the fate of his cohorts through rumor, gossip, and conjecture. In this world, people just disappear.

The recurring theme of disappearance represents Clay's view of the emptiness of his society. Clay first encounters the signs that become another mantra for him throughout the novel on a roadside billboard. As he dutifully reports, "All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light" (38-39). Clay, among Ellis's other characters, frequently exhibits an apparent confusion between mass media representations and authentic existence. He looks to commodified depictions of culture, such as a poster of Elvis Costello for the "Truth." The inability to gain any useful knowledge from other people further isolates them. As Clay testifies, "Whenever I'm on Wilshire or Sunset during lunch hour, I try to make eye contact with the driver of the car next to mine, stuck in traffic. When this doesn't happen, and it usually doesn't, I put my sunglasses back on and slowly move the car forward" (41). This sense of isolation, even among millions in Los Angeles, convinces Clay of the unreal nature of his environment and those that inhabit it with him. As previously discussed, people are as readily, literally, labeled as mass-market products. These labels represent the sense of isolation experienced by Clay and his resulting inability to connect with other people. Clay states, "Trent stops by and tells me about how 'a couple of hysterical J.A.P.'s' in Bel Air have seen what they called some kind of monster, talk of a werewolf. One of their friends has supposedly disappeared" (77). In a culture where people communicate through rumor and conjecture, it is appropriate that this is how the Clay is informed of the danger inherent in his existence. Again, nothing is authentic; all information is transmitted second-hand, but still quite familiar. In place of the lost referent, the familiarity of the image serves as a suitable identifier.

The fear of "disappearing" is the only feeling keeping Clay engaged in the events occurring around him. This absence of individuality informs the shared language among his friends. In Clay's circle, people are never addressed by more than a first name. Identity is usually relegated to a violent pseudonym such as Rip or Spit, or some derogatory categorization. Not only does Clay not intervene in the violence that these names represent, he also clearly possesses a voyeuristic sensibility about the evil befallen upon others. As a result of their perceived interchangeability and insignificance, these characters have already disappeared. This blurred line between truth and fiction frequently operates on textual level in *Less Than Zero*. In his description of a recent session with his therapist, Clay states, "I'll start to laugh for no reason and then feel sick. I lie to him sometimes" (25). The truth is irrelevant here, because people's motivations are not connected to the trustworthiness of the information they receive. When Clay's friend, Daniel, calls to ask for advice about whether or not to contact a former girlfriend he might have impregnated, Clay is "surprised at how much strength it takes to care enough to urge him to do so" (64). By the end of the brief conversation, of course, Daniel "says that he doesn't see the point" (64). When Clay learns that Julian is involved in hard drugs and prostitution, he decides to accompany him on one of his calls to "see if things like this can actually happen" because of his repeated desire to "see the worst" (172). Clay's interest in Julian's demise is admittedly prurient, as opposed to any actual concern with his well-being.

The gradual loss of self, memorialized as a constant reminder on a billboard, as a public signifier of commerce, follows Clay throughout Los Angeles. Immediately after seeing the "Disappear Here" sign for the first time, Clay states the following: "[I] keep looking into the rearview mirror, getting this strange feeling that someone's following me" (39). His anxiety is due to his repression of the belief that he is not simply going to be able to resume the life he left before leaving for college and that his friendships do not have the meaning that he believes they once did. As Freud states, "[T]he uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" ("The 'Uncanny'" 220). The only remaining connection between Clay and Julian, if there ever was one, is the repetition of a memory of what may have or have not once existed in an imagined past.

Confronting the Evil in the Familiar

The value of youth and innocence are gradually, but impactfully, diminished throughout Ellis's oeuvre. Moving from *Less Than Zero* into *American Psycho,* Ellis shows us how disaffected youth do become dangerous adults. Youth, and the desire for youth, is manifested in the signs that constitute the culture that defines Ellis's characters. The postmodern subject, ascribed by those signs, is presented as an object of pervasive evil. One of Ellis's major themes, and the source of much misguided criticism, is the inescapability of this dominant discourse. Although our culture defines subjectivity through language, rarely are we forced to confront its effects on us. When we do recognize these aberrant elements in our society, it is always from an outside, decidedly moral perspective. This is simply another way of separating ourselves from the destructive behavior. The mirror that Ellis provides through his fiction forces us to reconcile our actions as inscriptions of a larger cultural text, in which the functions of victim and perpetrator are upended in unexpected, and respectively impactful, ways.

Squarely situated in a time of social and moral crisis in our history, the trajectory of evil through a confrontation with the familiar at work in Ellis's texts suggests how we might move forward. While Ellis challenges the conventional notion of authorial voice as a force of agency, he does offer a salient warning concerning our greater cultural context. In the case of Clay as the adolescent, and Patrick Bateman, along with the elder Clay, among others, following him into adulthood, it is the lack of interest in the crimes they witness, and potentially participate, which appears to be more tragic than the crimes themselves. The abject apathy among his characters is the familiar source of evil at work throughout Ellis's literary project. As Terry Eagleton observes, "In a curious sense, evil is a protest against the debased quality of modern existence" (119). He continues with the following: "By setting its face against the spirit of utility, evil also has a seductive smack of radicalism about it, since utility lies at the root of our kind of civilisation" (120). The contemporary notion of evil has been colored by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in which the "axis of evil" is a political signifier used to describe enemies of the United States from abroad. Collectively, our focus has moved from transgressions within our culture to those who appear to challenge the Western, and by extension morally superior, way of life. At the turn of the millennium, we are seeing evil becoming increasingly politicized to an extent not witnessed since Reagan's vilification of the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire," in an era thoroughly interrogated in Ellis's early work.

Bret Easton Ellis is, in Georges Bataille's terms, pleading guilty and he is speaking for us all. However, for the most part, his plea has fallen upon deaf ears. The personal vilification of Ellis and subsequent misreading of his work have stunted the impact of a serious indictment. In Ellis's fiction, evil is represented by our corruption and loss of contemporary youth, as a direct result of our consumer culture. As with any effective satire, Ellis's critique is illustrated in an extreme, but solidly recognizable, way. As we navigate the boundaries between perpetrator and victim, Ellis's admonishment becomes acutely apparent. In a post-9/11 world when "evil" is seen to be something that exists merely outside of our society, as opposed to firmly within, these warnings are particularly salient.

[1] For a comprehensive study of the representation of Donald Trump in *American Psycho*, see the first four essays in *Trump Fiction: Essays on Donald Trump in Literature, Film, and Television* (Lexington Books, 2019) by contributors David Markus, Caitlin R. Duffy, Clinton J. Craig, and William Magrino.

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William Wright[*]

The Problem with Clowns: Political Perpetrators and Their Comedic Critics

Keywords: clowns, contempt, discourse, familiarity, parody, trauma

Abstract: Political clowns engage in statutory, cultural, and discursive crimes. While statutory crimes are available for litigation and resolution, cultural and discursive crimes are not. To comment and correct those actions, we turn to comedic clowns to police and parody political perpetrators. Those parodies and take-downs are clever, but they do not affect the behavior of the perpetrators, nor do they the result in the resolution of repetitive and stressful experience. Instead, those parodies produce familiarity, potential retraumatization, and coverage. The problem with clowns is that critical attention increases the reach of their influence and the assumption of their inevitability. This condition has hardened our political discourse and divisions and made it difficult to see civic enactments, such as elections, as productive or therapeutic in this age of cultural trauma. This article has four sections and a discussion. Part one discusses the clown as a perpetrator of discursive crimes. Part two explores how public commentaries on clownish political perpetrators both keep them in the public eye and excuse their actions as a joke. Part three focuses on how comedic response specifically repeats the discourse of perpetrators and runs the risk of retraumatizing their spectators. Part four examines how perpetrators employ self-clowning to invite derision and to delegitimize critique. The article will close with discussion of what currency we can find in the ideas of truth and reconciliation.

Our current crop of political clowns engages in three types of crimes: statutory, cultural, and discursive. Statutory crimes are crimes of motive. They are the easiest to identify and provide the clearest avenues for civic response. Legal systems are in place to establish the level of proof in cases of fraud, obstruction, defamation, extortion, and perjury. Cultural crimes are crimes of means. It is easy for political agents to appeal to extant hatreds and divisions, but it is difficult to litigate those appeals because they are protected speech. We do not have systems in place to tie complaints about China or legislation restricting drag shows, for instance, to violence against

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Asian or LGBTQIA+ citizens or to show that a reduction in such speech would lead to a reduction in violence. Specific institutions can police hateful or uncivil behavior, but to condemn divisive speech as crime is often to invite the perpetrators to present themselves as victims.[1] Discursive crimes are crimes of opportunity. The now general belief that language is slippery and our postmodern recognition of the space between the sign and its referent allows contemporary politicians in the U.S. and elsewhere to say whatever they want and to defend those statements however they might, if they even bother. This condition produces exhaustion in those who seek to police lies and provides coverage for those who use them to further their agendas and celebrity.

The problem with clowns is that critical attention increases the reach of their influence and the assumption of their inevitability. Our repetitive contempt for dangerous, political performers leads to a resigned familiarity with their persistence and outsized influence. Our reliance on late-night comedians to critique their actions reduces their crimes to antics and we citizens to spectators. This article has four sections and a discussion. Part one discusses the clown as a perpetrator of discursive crimes. Part two explores how public commentaries on clownish political perpetrators both keep them in the public eye and excuse their actions as a joke. Part three focuses on how comedic response specifically repeats the discourse of perpetrators and runs the risk of retraumatizing their spectators. Part four examines how perpetrators employ self-clowning to invite derision and to delegitimize critique. The article will close with discussion of what currency we can find in the ideas of truth and reconciliation.

Clowns and Words

I will say more about discursive crimes below, but first a word about clowns. I use the term "clown" because populist, nativist, and authoritarian politicians have stormed the stage, particularly though not exclusively in the United States, and their discourse is full of the ridiculous, the dangerous, the contemptible, and the performative. There is a clownish element to contemporary campaigns, to their coverage in the press, and to political performances of successful candidates after they win and unsuccessful candidates after they fail to admit defeat. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene was called a clown for carrying a balloon around the halls of Congress ahead of President Joe Biden's 2023 State of the Union Address. Former newscaster, election denier, and failed gubernatorial candidate, Kari Lake has been called a clown

by members of her own party. Congressman George Santos was on the 15 March 2023 cover of *The Advocate* in clown makeup. Joe Biden called Donald Trump a clown during their presidential debates and then apologized for doing so. A long list of victorious and defeated election deniers and Trump supporters are regularly dismissed as clowns, unable or uninterested in distinguishing between a joke, a lie, and the truth.[2] Trump's own clowning is presented as his Achilles' heel, his one great talent, and as a sturdy defense to charges ranging from racism to inciting insurrection.

I use the term "clown" also because we turn to professional clowns (comedians, talk show hosts, and celebrities) to expose and protect us from these jokesters, bombasts, and grifters. Our late-night talk shows are hosted almost exclusively by comedians, most of them men. In addition to the soft interviews of actors, writers, and other celebrities, they provide an interested, critical, and comic commentary on the civic and cultural crimes of political perpetrators. While the language has become more aggressive since the 2016 presidential election, the format and the faith in the power of parody and contempt are traditional and familiar. The host comments on the news of the day, exposes the clownishness of whichever political figure has transgressed, models amusement and outrage at the event, and then directs the audience to a derisive and comforting version of the truth. The idea is that laughter exposes hypocrisy and falsehood, and that once we see that the emperor has no clothes, we, and everyone else, will cease to participate in the hyperreal charade of their power.

These half-therapeutic and half-prosecutorial performances have been going on for some time. Some examples: in his monologue of 21 March 2023 on Trump's call for protests should he, Trump, be indicted, Jimmy Kimmel made fun of speaker of the house Kevin McCarthy's suggestion that Trump is not actually calling for protests but rather self-education ("Jimmy"). Kimmel quotes Trump directly to expose McCarthy's hypocrisy, including highlights of Trump's all-caps claims about the end of American and the need "to take the nation back." The audience laughs appreciatively, and both they and Kimmel go on to the next set of jokes. These include jokes about Trump's poor spelling and small hands. Jimmy Fallon jokes about getting Trump's fingerprints from the Cheetos dust on his diet coke cans ("Jimmy"). James Corden makes a pun about Trump being screwed twice in the investigation into paying hush money to a porn star (Chilton). Just one post from Trump on his own social media platform shows up on all the major news platforms and results in both comedy and threats of real violence.

This is the problem with clowns. They will not leave the stage, and we cannot laugh them off. They trade in the figures of hyperbole, feigned grievance, and misdirection. This allows them to say whatever they might, while denying responsibility for the consequences, intended or not. In her comments on Trump's call for protest, Rachel Maddow says that Trump is playing with fire.[3] What he is actually playing with is language. He is not alone. Trump is not a master of the posted word, but he is an active participant in the hyperrealities that such discourse produces, and he benefits from language's particular contemporary slipperiness. Jean Baudrillard is not the first to tell us that language is not transparent nor that it draws attention to itself. In the discussion of the four signs, he reminds us that language points at reality, distorts it, hides its absence, and disconnects from it entirely (Baudrillard 6). Trump and other clowns are perpetrators of discursive crimes in that they take advantage of the opportunity of indeterminacy to trade in lies, alt-facts, and immediacies as if they are on the same footing as truth, inquiry, and thoroughness.

James Kinneavy is not the first to divide discourse into specific categories, but he does give us a way to understand what kind of thing a text is and how difficult it is to ascribe responsibility (Kinneavy). He divides discourse into the expressive, the referential, the persuasive, and the literary. Expressive discourse is the realm of the speaker and of emotions. It is where we present surprise, joy, anger, excitement. It is difficult to argue with, for it is, finally, what the speaker says they feel. Referential discourse is the realm of reality. It is the discourse of pointing, definition, discovery, and verdict. This is Aristotle's forensic discourse, concerned with what has happened and what is. Persuasive discourse is the realm of the audience. It is discourse designed to move others to understanding, value, or action. Here is where the anxiety about rhetoric comes from, the concern that we will be moved to the ill rather than the good.

Literary discourse is the realm of figure. It is discourse that draws attention to representation, art, pleasure. When we say that Trump puts on a show at his rallies, we are suggesting that he is an entertainer, providing an aesthetic experience. If the attendees go burn down an FBI office afterwards, that's neither his fault, nor his intent. If he posts a screed about how democrats want to destroy America and that we have to take the country back, that's just self-expression. The same argument holds for the year-round yard signs and the flags on the back of pick-up trucks. They are defensibly offensive as self-expression or art.

To paraphrase Baudrillard, everywhere is the circus. Contemporary political speech and politics swing rather narrowly between the third and fourth sign. The third sign is the exaggerated

or faux version of a thing that serves to hide its absence in the real or conventional world. Disneyland hides the absence of happiness or community in small-town America. Prisons hide the absence of freedom in the wider culture. Trump's out-loud narcissism and incompetence hide the absence of civic virtue and qualifications in the current Republican Party and in U.S. democracy as a whole. A discursive function of Trump's later imitators is that their absurdities hide the lack of seriousness and coherence in his own positions and speech. By being the most hyperbolic of the commentators himself, Trump hides the absence of reasonableness in the calls for calm in the discourse of his supporters. Given that concealment is a consequence of fake representation rather than a goal or motive, it is difficult to identify the perpetrators or to ascribe motive. Means just looks like a function of grievance or a joke. To apply Kinneavy, when perpetrators are accused of false reference or incitement to ignorance, hatred, or violence, they can say that they were only engaging in the expressive discourse of grievance or the literary discourse of joke. Putting aside the appeals to free speech, those two moves would have likely made up the substance of Fox Corporation's defense in the Dominion Voting Systems defamation lawsuit. They were clowns, expressing their sadness or making us laugh.

Contempt Breeds Familiarity

Here is the difficulty of the job we have given to our comedic talk shows. We want them to entertain and also to expose the dangerous and ridiculous discourse of the ignorant, the hateful, and the contemptuous. The problem is that contempt breeds familiarity and not the other way around. Most of us first discovered Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene in February 2021 when the House voted to strip her of committee assignments for incendiary comments and encouragements to violence. Here is how National Public Radio reported the vote and Greene's defense of her previous comments:

> The Georgia freshman has come under fire in recent weeks for her history of trafficking in racism, anti-Semitism and baseless conspiracy theories, along with her support for online comments encouraging violence against Democratic officials prior to taking office.

> Greene spoke on the House floor ahead of the vote and said her past comments 'do not represent me.' (Sprunt)

In that speech, Greene rejects her past QAnon beliefs, admits to the reality of school shootings and the 9/11 attacks, and asks, "Will we allow the media, that is just as guilty as QAnon of presenting truth and lies, to divide us?" In responses to Greene's half-apology, Stephen Colbert suggested that "This is the new GOP! They want credit for recognizing reality."[4] Taking a joke about Greene to be a comment on the entire GOP expands the familiarity to the entire party.

Most Americans would be hard pressed to name their own congressperson, let alone one from the other side of the country, and yet here we are, our news feeds full of articles on the incendiary comments of otherwise ineffectual and inarticulate congresspeople. Since that speech, Greene has been mocked for claiming that wildfires are a product of "Jewish Space Lasers," complaining about Nancy Pelosi ordering "the gazpacho police" to spy on members of congress, and suggesting that the Founding Fathers would be in support of a national divorce between the red and blue states. What she has not done is leave the national stage or suffer professionally.

In fact, her discourse has become both more incendiary and more focused on the internal enemy. During a rally for Trump in October of 2022, Greene said that "I'm not going to mince words with you all. Democrats want Republicans dead. They've already started the killings." She added the following: "We will take back our country from the communists who have stolen it and want us to disappear. We will expose the unelected bureaucrats, the real enemies within, who have abused their power and have declared political warfare on the greatest president this country has ever had" (Zitser). She regularly calls democrats communists, out to destroy America. Just as regularly, she is called crazy, silly, and ridiculous on late-night talk shows (*Daily Show* "Marjorie"). This focus on enemies and victimhood is right out of the perpetrator playbook, but the mockery and contempt that has met these and other comments have not reduced Greene's profile. A change in leadership has seen her appointed to the Homeland Security Committee and the House Oversight Committee in January of 2023.

Critiques of Greene are funny and now almost exclusively parodic, the regular fare of the late-night talk shows. Comedians present clips of her from her appearances on news shows and then parody her voice. With parody, both the speaker and the audience are in on the joke. In his

parodic response to Greene's call for a national divorce between red and blue states, Seth Meyers of *Late Night with Seth Meyers* said:

> A National Divorce? 'A National Divorce was the VISION of the Founding Fathers. I know, because I time-traveled in a semi-conscious state and talked to them.'
>
> How about this? This will be the compromise: Instead of Red States getting a divorce from Blue States, America gets a divorce from Greene? She's definitely dressed for it. Remember when she showed up to the State of the Union screaming at Joe Biden in a white fur collar, like she was demanding sole custody of the Maltese? ("*Late Night*")

Colbert offers this fake quotation from Abraham Lincoln in his take on Greene's claim that a national divorce would not be a civil war: "A house divided against itself is actually a lot stronger than it is right now! Vaccines have microchips!" Self-conscious and hyperbolic lies are offered to hold perpetrators responsible for their discourse, but only in the sense that they are being foolish, clowns. The House vote to strip Greene of her committee assignments was a serious effort to hold Greene responsible for her words (Sprunt). It did not work either. What we get instead is familiarity. She continues to garner national contempt and attention—the latest being visits to incarcerated January 6th rioters (Macaro) and abusive questioning of witnesses before congressional committees (Pitofsky)—and there is talk of her being Trump's running mate in the 2024 presidential election (Smith).

Donald Trump's own persistent familiarity is a numbers game. It is estimated that he received some five billion dollars of free publicity during his first, successful campaign for the presidency. There has been no slacking of attention. Though much better known that Greene, his arrival at permanent political familiarity was much like hers. Like Greene, he was punished for his use of hateful discourse at the very beginning of his political career. The comments he made about Mexican immigrants at the announcement of his candidacy led directly to his being fired from his TV show, *The Apprentice*. These were not his first public forays into racist discourse, and they have not been his last. As with Greene, there was some expectation that he would either alter that discourse or be regulated to the unserious and clownish section of the campaign. The "covfefe" tweet was his gazpacho moment, and his flubs and errors are still held up to ridicule. He has called himself a "very stable genius," and in a rather prescient and ironic moment, he warned the president

of Iran in all caps that "We are no longer a country that will stand for your demented words of violence and death. Be cautious."[5] The comic contempt with which these and other posts and policies have been met has done little if anything to reduce Trump's familiarity or standing among hardline supporters.

Here is where familiarity moves into inevitability. What seems inevitable is the cycle of condemnation, mockery, and escalation. Trump's complaints have focused, much like Greene's, on the enemy within. His screeds against Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg Jr. and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis sound very like his January 6 speech on the national mall ahead of the riot, though, again, Trump has turned up the racism, calling Bragg an animal and Willis a racist (Goldiner). Both Bragg and Willis are Black. In a social media post on Bragg, Trump lumped all of his critics and investigators into one conspiratorial group, closing the post with, "They spied on my campaign, Rigged the Election, falsely Impeached, cheated and lied. They are HUMAN SCUM!" (Levin "Donald"). This "they" figured prominently in a campaign rally in Waco, TX, where Trump made an escalating series of threats. These included "Either the deep state destroys America or we destroy the deep state," "I am your retribution," and "2024 will be the final battle" (Linton and Watson). The lack of surprise from both critics and supporters of the former president speaks to this idea of inevitability, both regarding his continued central and familiar place in contemporary politics and the increasingly apocalyptic and aggrieved tone of his discourse.

The responses of earnest and comedic critics have also been familiar. Some one hundred and fifty former federal prosecutors have signed a letter condemning Trump's violent rhetoric toward Bragg. Comic Bill Maher said of Trump's threats of death of destruction that "[this is] [w]hat is known as an unveiled threat. Makes you miss those innocent days when he just undermined faith in our elections, you know?" (Christopher). Seth Meyers invented a fake quote from George Washington—"Not cool, dude"—to mock Trump's threats. Jimmy Kimmel said of the choice of locale for the rally, "Trump chose Waco because it's a powerful metaphor for his campaign. He's going down in flames, and he's taking his cult followers with him." He went on to list the lies Trump told at the rally (Bendix "Late"). The familiarity here is double-edged. In none of these comments and criticisms is there any indication that these comments from a former president are a surprise. Nor is there any hope that such comments will cease in the face of critic.

Finally, what is inevitable in this mix of earnest distress and comic mockery is fatigue, the chronic sort. It is difficult to conceive of a time when this sort of discourse will be rejected by political figures at rallies, on news shows, and on social media. The opportunities to garner attention and commentary, of whatever variety, are not going away. Impeachments, indictments, suspensions of social media accounts, serious and parodic public condemnations, all of these actions and responses serve to expand the boundaries of the circus.

Repetition as Trauma

I have been talking about familiarity as a result of the comedic parodies of political clowns. Now, I want to suggest that familiarity is itself part and productive of the traumatic experience. It does not stand outside of the event. This section is indebted to Lucy Bond and Stef Craps' study of trauma for the New Critical Idiom series (Bond and Craps). In terms of defining trauma and our reactions to, I want to borrow from Bond and Craps's discussions of Cathy Caruth and of Dominick LaCapra. In terms of the social trauma we experience when a public event abuses our faith in social bonds, I want to borrow from their discussion of Kai Eirkson and of Paul Saint-Amour. I borrow the ideas of cycle and repetition to discuss how the parody of abusive discourse can contribute to a repetitive cycle of discursive trauma.[6] To go further, I suggest that this discursive trauma is collectively produced, however unwittingly, by perpetrators, their apologists and enablers, and by commentators, parodists, and critics.

While each of us experiences the trauma of our current political discourse individually, collectively we are stuck in a situation where there is repetition but no resolution. This idea tracks with Bond and Craps discussion of Cathy Caruth's definitions of trauma and with LaCapra's notions of "acting-out" and "moving-on." Caruth defines trauma as an event not experienced fully "but only belatedly in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (qtd. in Bond and Craps 56). LaCapra divides our interactions with traumatic memory into "acting-out," where we relive the past in the present, and "working-though," where we re-establish a distinction between past, present, and future (Bond and Craps 143; 151). Applying these two ideas to our current political conditions, almost everyone is a trauma victim, Trump supporters possessed with wanting to "Take America Back" from the trauma of the 2020 election, and Trump critics, who re-enact-out Trump's characterization of himself as a victim of abuse. The four trials scheduled to take

place during Trump's run for re-election/restoration to the presidency would seem to be an effort at working-through the events of 2016-2023, but we should expect a hardening of positions relative to our traumatic political divisions.

Einstein's apocryphal definition of insanity is "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Repeated appeals to the rule of law and to the rules of civil decorum have had zero effect on our clownish perpetrators. In April 2023, House Committee on Homeland Security Chair Mark Green, of Tennessee, said that he would talk with Marjorie Taylor Greene, and with House Speaker, Kevin McCarthy, about her abusive behavior during questioning of witnesses. Greene was undeterred; McCarthy unmoved. For the victims of abuse, trauma can be defined as "doing different things over and over in response to abuse and getting the same result." Efforts to mock, call out, censure, impeach, search, indict, expose and ignore clownish perpetrators have had no effect on behavior or have been repurposed as campaign ads or to justify escalating threats. Trump's first campaign rally, for instance, featured video from the January 6th riot.

Both the clowning of perpetrators and our parodic responses track the characteristics of the typical abusive relationship. In the one, we have the belittling, threats, gaslighting, isolation, violence, and delusions of victimhood that make up, and are used to justify, the abuse. In the other, we have the magical thinking that a familiar response with the right tweak will somehow produce a novel change. The difference is that the trauma that comes from political and discursive abuse is public, pervasive, and perpetual. The abuse is public in that it takes place in plain sight. Trump, for instance, makes a threat of violence on social media or during a public rally. The mainstream media uses the public nature of the threat to establish it as legitimate news. Comedians and critics repeat, police, and critique the comment in front of a live studio audience. More articles summarize and celebrate the clever putdowns and public shaming. And the cycle repeats.

The process is pervasive in that it is everywhere and in that it produces trauma across the discursive apparatus. The initial incitement to violence is direct, producing shock and trauma. Reports repeat or remind us of the discursive event. Explanations or defenses of the perpetrator undermine the confidence of the victims or blame them for the event in the first place. Perpetrators claim that they are the real victims and make threats of retribution from that position. Late-night comedians dismiss the perpetrators as clowns and their threats as jokes, stunts, or bits. The more serious consumers of the initial threats and the critical response use those responses to make threats

of their own. Note the death threats directed at prosecutors and judges in Trump's current civil and criminal trials, as well as those directed at campaign officials after the 2020 election.

A word about political trauma. I define it as anxiety at the systematic mistreatment of groups across political activities and platforms and dread about the future persistence of the present political condition. In that sense, it is not an unwelcome revisiting of a past event so much as a repetitive despair in the present moment. I take that definition from Bond and Stef's discussions of Kai Erikson and of Paul Saint-Amour, and I illustrate it with a quotation from a POPSUGAR article. In 1976, Erikson defined collection trauma as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community" (qtd. in Bond and Craps 99). Again, a variety of subjects across the political spectrum would argue that our bonds of attachment and sense of community have been damaged, even as they might disagree about the nature of the events that have caused that trauma. In documenting the progression of our application of the idea of trauma to events and ways of reading, Bond and Craps cite Saint-Amour's call for "a re-orientation of trauma studies from the past to the future, from memory to anticipation" (Bond and Craps 127). Here it is the future, rather than the past, that affects and infects the present. Across political spectrums in a number of countries, there is dread at what future elections and divisions may bring. That dread is a collective experience, persistently available. In a web article on political trauma, Esme Mazzeo quotes psychiatrist Zamira Castro's definition of political trauma as "the outcome of traumatic events that have happened at the social level with political consequences and ramifications for certain groups of people based on their group membership" (Mazzeo).

Our political trauma is perpetual in that it never stops, and it never goes away. In the conventional domestic abuse scenario, there are sometimes moments of calm, periods where the victim can recover, strategize, or even hope for change. This is not true in cases of political trauma. As with the pandemic, we can adapt, but we cannot make anything go away. In all likelihood, we will redo the 2020 presidential election in 2024, with the same candidates and the same arguments. If the outcome is the same as in 2020, we can expect all manner of election denials and charges of illegitimacy. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we have been redoing or reliving the 2020 election since election night, or that Trump spent much of his presidency redoing 2016. Trump's campaign rallies and slogans all center on recovering what was unfairly lost and punishing those who stole it. Comedians respond to those rallies and postings with reminders that

he lost. Investigations, indictments, and trials center on his efforts to hide information and overturn results.

To illustrate the collective nature of our political trauma and the repetitiveness of the strategies and the results, let us turn briefly to an examination of the responses to Trump's indictment for campaign finance fraud in March of 2023. Supporters, imitators, and republican rivals to Trump turned to the tropes of anger. Critics and comedians turned to the tropes of hope. These two emotions are familiar locations in an abusive relationship. Trump's supporters expressed outrage, in the modern sense of the word as meaning outsized rage. Former Vice President Mike Pence said that an indictment for campaign finance issues was "an outrage." Florida Governor Ron DeSantis complained about a weaponized legal system turning "the rule of law on its head." Then-Fox News host Tucker Carlson expanded the reach of the indictment when he said, as quoted in *The New York Times*, that it was "probably not the best time to give up your AR-15s. The rule of law appears to be suspended tonight—not just for Trump, but for anyone who would consider voting for him." Other commentators said such things as, "This is a time of sorting" and "people better be careful" (Bender and Haberman). Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg's office was inundated with death threats and racist epithets, including "We are everywhere and we have guns" (Crane-Newman). This is the abusive bandwagon effect.

Anger's immediacy and fierceness can give it an outsized feeling of legitimacy relative to deliberation. It is expressive discourse, both evidence and excuse, and we can choose to perceive it as unmediated or unspun. For the abuser, and their apologists, the victim is the one who inspires the anger that causes the abuse. Warnings and threats are directed at identifying the victim as the transgressor and then justifying the recourse. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said of the indictment, "The American people will not tolerate this injustice, and the House of Representatives will hold Alvin Bragg and his unprecedented abuse of power to account" (@SpeakerMcCarthy). Trump's own feral remarks on women, journalists, despots, and laws are often celebrated as evidence of his authenticity (Katz and Kilbourne). It is common for abusive perpetrators to take their own anger as evidence of righteousness in order to justify the abuse in the first place, to wrest away the mantle of victim, and to frame and justify further threats. Even calling Trump's serial posts storms or rants or screeds suggests that they come from some real and unmediated space that makes them more justified.

The responses of late-night hosts to Trump's indictment were generally gleeful, focusing on resolution, change, and release. Trish Bendix documented their responses in an article for the *New York Times*. Jimmy Kimmel hugged the American flag in a parody of Trump from the 2016 campaign. Jimmy Fallon ran a deepfake video of Trump singing "I'm So Indicted" to the Pointer Sisters' song, "I'm So Excited." Stephen Colbert said, "Ladies and gentlemen, he was right. We are saying 'Merry Christmas' again! I didn't know I would feel this good!" He also ate a bowl of ice cream on the air. Seth Meyers claimed he had the cue card "Donald Trump has been indicted" ready for seven years and ran the audience through a lecture on the precedent for indicting and imprisoning former leaders in functioning democracies (Bendix, "Tickled"). The positive response to Trump's indictment is understandable. Here are crimes that are identifiable and available for litigation. The courtroom provides a space to resist manipulation and indifference to the truth. Where elections have become spectator sports rather than civic enactments, trials establish a baseline for truth and punishments for lying, or so we hope. There is hope that the prosecution of statutory crimes will provide a model for addressing the more divisive cultural and discursive crimes of political clowns.

Where anger is received as a condition, hope is put forth as an argument. It is prophetic in that it points at the looked-for outcome and suggests that one or more steps toward rescue or rehabilitation will lead to others. This is all well and good, but there are problems with hope, particularly in abusive relationships. As Ellen Sinclair and her co-authors point out, hope is often counterproductive. The central problem is that hopes are dashed, and the return to or recognition of the abusive status quo has consequences for both the relationship and the self-concept of the abused partner. The other central problem is that appeals to positivity without strategies for improvement or escape make the abusive situation worse. In the few rational days after January 6, 2021, there was some hope that we would soon be permanently done with Donald Trump. Cabinet members were resigning. Sycophants such as Lindsey Graham and Kevin McCarthy were jumping ship, and the House of Representatives impeachment of Trump invited the Senate to convict on the one charge of incitement to insurrection. The Senate forgave Trump his abuse of the electoral system, voting 57-43 to convict, ten votes short of conviction.

In saying "forgave," I am using the vocabulary of a literature review on the effects of positivity strategies on victims of domestic abuse. Ellen Sinclair, Rona Hart, and Tim Lomas suggest that positivity without strategies for change and Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) exacerbate

the levels of abuse and the psychological and physical suffering of the victim. I quote at length from the abstract to clearly set out their findings about hope and abuse: "Overall the literature suggests that misdirected or overgeneralized positivity exacerbates harm and abuse: an optimistic bias can put victims in danger; empathy, hope, acceptance and resilience are associated with refraining to leave abusive relationships; and forgiveness increases the likelihood of further transgression" (Sinclair et al. 26). They go on to say that appeals to collective resilience tend to "paper over" the problem of abuse and police the individual into maintaining allegiance to the specific community and the *status quo*. Republicans who voted to impeach or convict Trump were effectively purged from the Congress entirely or from positions of power in the party. Sinclair et al. also suggest that "[a]n event that shatters personal assumptions" (43) can lead to change and growth, however painful that event may be.

Comedians, even those responding to criminal clowns, are in the entertainment business. They may tell jokes to power, but their job is to please the studio audience and to maintain a sustainable share of viewers across platforms. They are not in the problem-solving business, John Oliver's and Seth Meyers' lectures aside. They are our surrogates though, and in that they, and we, are bystanders to clownish abuse. Graham Murdock argues that contemporary political campaigns in the United States and in Britain have tapped into a dissatisfaction with declining living standards and the ascendance of neo-liberalism to turn us into "spectators at pageants of power, rather than citizens collaborating in constructing a collective future" (43). In our consumption of comic responses to political clowning, and in our reposting to social media, we are also bystanders. We witness the abuse of opponents and marginalized groups and hope that jokes about the stupidity of that abuse and those abusers can help us to process its trauma. Jokes help us process the event, but they also retell it. The problem for bystanders is that in recounting the event we suffer similar levels of distress as the victims (Janson and Hazler 241).

Clowns and Immunity

There are strategies to address clownish inevitability and political trauma. Some comedians have stopped using Trump's name or reporting on the clowning of his minions and subalterns. Many of us have limited our exposure to social media. Most of us watch late-night shows in the daytime and on YouTube when we can control and appreciate the jokes. Post-traumatic growth

and communalism are local opportunities, finally. There are more important and mundane fights to be had over school boards and city councils. Despite efforts to delegitimize electoral events and court proceedings, there are systems in place to decide on our leaders and to litigate their crimes.

What is clever or chilling about the prevalence of parody as a response to political discourse is the way it is adapted by its subjects as a method of pre-emptive immunity. The problem with our political clowns is that their clowning provides deniability and distraction. If we call out a particularly hateful or false statement, they can claim they were only joking. When they package dangerous claims or incitements to violence with the other buffooneries, we focus on the silly clowning instead of the serious. Explainers and enablers of Trump have regularly had to claim that he was joking in claiming that Barack Obama founded ISIS, that Lysol cures COVID, that he really wants the police to be more brutal, and that his threats of death and destruction were something other than calls for peaceful protest (Phelps and Gittleson) (Singer). Representative Lauren Boebert of Colorado gets more press asking questions about public urination or encouraging "patriots" to be rude on airplanes than for citing a psalm in seeming to pray for Joe Biden's death (Pengelly). Marjorie Taylor Greene gets more attention for her outfit than for attacking witnesses and claiming that democrats are pedophiles (Concepcion).

I examine this protective and distracting clowning from four perspectives: the real, the distorted, the hidden, and the empty. These categories track Baudrillard's four signs. In each case, clowning, whether intended or not, serves to protect the perpetrator from accusation and to distract the respondents from the perpetrators' more serious crimes. Rudy Giuliani is the example of our real clown. There is no debate or disagreement about the public nature of his clowning or of his penchant for telling the truth about both his and Donald Trump's crimes. Giuliani has admitted that Trump paid off a porn star (Shear and Haberman), that Trump fired an FBI director for not lying for him (Faulders), that there was an effort to extort Ukraine into investigating Joe Biden (Levin "Rudy"), that there were no actual problems with voting machines (Chloe Kim), and that he and his campaign lied to suppress the Hispanic vote during his 1993 campaign for mayor of New York (Yang).

What protects Giuliani is the pathetic, public, and pervasive nature of his clowning. He may or may not get convicted over election tampering in Georgia, but if he avoids trials and prison, it may be due to a series of sad public moments. His hair dye ran down his face at a press conference on the 2020 election. He farted during a hearing of the State of Michigan Oversight

Committee on that same election. He gave a press conference at Four Seasons Total Landscaping in November 2020. When reporters there told him that the Associated Press and all the television networks had just called the presidential election for Joe Biden, Giuliani really said, "Networks don't get to decide elections, courts do" (O'Donnell). Sometimes when we call a public figure a clown, it is because their efforts to perform with dignity in public are comic failures. This is the case with Giuliani, and it makes it difficult to call him to account for his crimes.

Boebert and Greene are angry clowns of the second sign, where reality is distorted. They use anger to shift the context of a discussion and to reject criticism and characterization. We cannot pin down when they are clowning, joking, lying, or making a case for particular policies. We cannot criticize them into improving their behavior. They mix heckling President Biden with claims that democrats are communists and jihadists. Both characterize themselves as patriots rather than representatives. Both suggest that foes and critics are anti-American and anti-them. Both delegitimize their opponents and take up the mantle of victim when they are criticized. Their apologies are accusations, their defenders are counter-accusers, and their jokes are indistinguishable from their complaints and criticisms.

What protects them is their ability shift the context of the discussion and to take criticism as an opportunity to restate their arguments. Boebert responds to criticism with denial and counteraccusation. When Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota called out Boebert for a fabricated and anti-Muslim joke, Boebert took the opportunity to accuse Omar of being pro-terrorist (Kaczynski). When Boebert was called out for anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric in the wake of the shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, she called the idea that her rhetoric was partly responsible "disgusting" and went on to defend social media posts where she claimed that empowering transgender children was grooming (Caitlin Kim). Greene takes that approach to the next level. She ignores criticism of uncivil rhetoric and personal attacks altogether and makes the accusation again. In April 2023, she told the president of the American Federation of Teachers that she was not a real mother, a real doctor, or a real teacher. In the face of criticism—which *USA Today* described as "criticism from her Democratic colleagues"—Greene reposted the accusations and a video of her questioning on Twitter (Pitofsky).

Ron DeSantis is no clown at all, despite efforts by social media posters, political opponents, and late-night comics to portray him as one. His policies match his positions in terms of being anti-woke, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQIA+, misogynistic, and authoritarian. He supports Florida's

bans on books, curriculum, and abortion. He got married in Disneyworld and has unironically attacked the company for criticizing Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law. His cruel stunt of lying to immigrants in Texas so that he could fly them to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts was not something he denied or joked about. He just attacked critics and immigrants over the selectivity of their outrage. There are efforts to make DeSantis a clown. The Trump campaign makes fun of how he eats pudding. *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert played a parody of his campaign song. John Oliver calls him Fred Flintstone. The Daily Show aired a faked flight safety video in their response to the immigrant flight (Daily Show, "Leaked").

What protects DeSantis is that the apparatus for the making of fun is already in place. We can see him no differently than the pathetic and angry clowns discussed above. If our reception of him is to make fun of his authoritarian policies and complaints, he comes off as ridiculous instead of cruel or dangerous. He is Baudrillard's third sign come to life, a humorless clown who hides the absence of humor in the clowns that surround him. He is the willfully unfunny stand-up comic that makes the other comics funny. He does not have to be a clown himself. He just has to be clowned. The jokes about his boring book and presidential aspirations make it difficult to offer more damning and actionable critiques. And the absence of humor in his own discourse makes it more difficult to directly critique the cruelties in the Republican Party generally.

Trump's everyday clowning is almost exclusively grievance-based now and angry. His comic clowning is a side hustle consisting of trading cards and other merchandise or the occasional dancing and mugging at campaign rallies. Trump is the empty sign, full of jokes and threats and complaints signifying nothing. He is not duplicitous in the reflective sense of the word. He is indifferent. Despite their passion, so is his audience. It does not matter to him or to his supporters either what he says nor how he says it. Like AI chatbots, he traffics in iterations and familiarities. Documenting the number of his lies is of little use in combating his clownish rhetoric. The number is of no interest to his supporters and no surprise to his critics. His rhetoric exists at either end of Kinneavy's taxonomy, with expressions of grievance alternating with the figures of hyperbole. This pushes his believers away from reference and deliberation as well.

Trump's clowning is political posturing with consequences. The surprising thing about his January 6 speech is that it was not surprising. Trump told the crowd that "This the most corrupt election in the history, maybe of the world," and then went on to repeat a standard claim that the media is "the enemy of the people" (Naylor). There is plenty of evidence to suggest that he is a

racist, and, at the same time, Trump has repeatedly said that he is the least racist person in the room or world. In April 2023, he returned to his anti-immigrant and racist roots with the repeated and unsubstantiated claim that a psychologist at a mental institution in an unnamed South American country—a good man, according to Trump—has nothing to do now because all his patients have been sent to the U.S. (Dale). His claims at rallies that "this is the final battle" and "I am your retribution" are empty outside of how they allow both a comedic and serious embrace of grievance on the part of his audience. His discourse has consequences but not meaning, for if it was just a matter of exposing his falsehoods and cruelties to supporters who have been confused and manipulated, he would not be the frontrunner for the Republican nomination for president. That discourse is a simulation, measured not by its level of truth but by its effect on the ratings.

What protects him is the absolute emptiness of that discourse. If you do not lie, then there is no need to remember what you said yesterday. Engaging in a series of empty signs serves the same purpose. There are consequences to hateful, exclusionary, and indifferent rhetoric. We have criminalized poverty, immigration, even the idea of constructed, progressive, and discovered identities. Indifference both to meaning and to victims is a persistent and cruel policy, easy to enact and difficult to undo. There are efforts to identify Trump and those that come after as pathetic clowns (the *Des Moines Register* called him "a sorry little boy' (Leslie)), angry clowns (he threw his lunch on January 6th) or no clowns at all (judges have warned against jury tampering via social media posts). Popular culture has embraced the idea of parody and critique, but we might need something else.

Conclusion: Truth and Reconciliation

There is not much currency in truth and reconciliation at the moment. Panels, systems, and legislation in support of those concepts are attractive, but in the case of political clowning and trauma, it is difficult to decide how to deliberate about the truth or what conflicts and belief systems are in need of and available to reconciliation. Our political clowns engage in statutory, cultural, and discursive crimes. Litigating the first category is underway, and we can expect the economic penalties to maintain the *status quo*. Fox News, for instance, settled suits that allow it to continue to clown and report. The second category, cultural crimes, will remain more difficult to address. Our news feeds and YouTube habits will continue to suggest that some C-lister clown got burned

trying to troll this or that group, but as Calvin D. Armerding has pointed out, contempt leads to feelings of inferiority which leads to vertical striving for superiority, and the cycle continues (482-3).

Discursive crimes and how to address them are largely the responsibility of those of us who study language for a living. Perpetrator studies provides a location for doing that study. We can examine how political clowns both employ language and benefit from our assumptions about the nature of language. That has been the intent of this article. Our own precipitating shattered assumption might be the recognition that postmodern tropes are not exclusively available to one or another political or ideological position. That is a truth we can become reconciled to without having to throw up our hands and alphabets in defeat.

Parody is difficult to do. It demands a level of agreement on the focus and motive of the original text and an agreement on the level and length of the suspension of truth. Our current crop of political clowns may be engaged in an unintentional and undirected long-game parody of our complacent and compliant democratic systems. Cultural commentators of this particular moment in the political circus will debate how strong and central was the embrace of anger, contempt, indifference, and cruelty. They will also decide or discuss how central a role parody played and plays in processing the divisions and dangers that political clowns have incited and employed. MAGA voters might find themselves added to the pantheon of suffrage agitators, muckrakers, civil rights marchers, and social justice advocates. They might also find themselves lumped with the nativists, racists, no-nothings, and silent majorities of centuries past. We cannot leave these tasks exclusively to contemporary late-night clowns or to future civic agents. The one group gives us a location to process fear and anger. The other gives us a location for hope and progress. In between, we face the challenge of developing practical problem-solving strategies.

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[1] Calvin D. Armerding argues from an Adlerian perspective that contempt produces a sense of inferiority in the object of that contempt and the concomitant vertical striving for superiority.

[2] I have in mind Harry Frankfurt's definition of bullshit as speech indifferent to the truth. See also Caleb Ecarma's article in *Vanity Fair* on the clown caucus in the U.S. Congress.

[3] See the HuffPost report on Maddow's interview with MSNBC host Jonathon Capehart.

[4] See Spellberg on Colbert and Greene's apology.

[5] For a list of Trump's more outlandish tweets, see Dodds.

[6] See page 13 of Philip Scepanski's *Tragedy Plus Time* for a discussion of the use of clinical metaphors in terms of cultural trauma.

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"Instead of Pumping Iron, She was Pumping Bullets into her Husband": The Portrayal of a Female Perpetrator in Nanette Burstein's *Killer Sally*

Keywords: female perpetrator, battered women, Sally McNeil, Ray McNeil, Nanette Burstein, *Killer Sally*

Abstract: In the media, the law, and public opinion, women who resort to violence within abusive relationships are often depicted as either victims or monsters. Nanette Burstein's three-part docuseries, *Killer Sally* (2022), reexamines this binary which focuses on Sally McNeil, a former professional bodybuilder who murdered her husband, also a professional bodybuilder, in Southern California in 1995. Drawing on Belinda Morrissey's *When Women Kill* and *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, this article argues that Burstein questions the discursive, performative, and one-sided dimensions of media and legal portrayals of female perpetrators. By placing both the perpetrator and the victim within complex socio-psychological and posthuman frameworks, Burstein broadens the discourse on battered women who kill by granting the perpetrator agency and voice.

The three-part docuseries *Killer Sally* (2022) explores the life and trial of Sally McNeil. A former US Marine and passionate bodybuilder, McNeil was convicted of second-degree murder after ending the life of her husband, Ray McNeil, also a bodybuilder, on February 14, 1995. After serving a 25-year sentence, Sally was released from the Central California Women's Facility in the summer of 2020. Throughout the docuseries, Nanette Burstein delves into Sally's complex past, her tumultuous marriage with Ray, the events surrounding February 14, 1995, and the aftermath. Burstein uses a myriad of sources from courtroom footage, Sally's police interrogations, and private home videos to the media's coverage of the case, to provide depth to Sally's case. The docuseries further features diverse perspectives on Sally's and Ray's personalities by presenting interviews with the prosecutor, Dan Goldstein; the defense attorney, William Rafael; Sally's adult children, John and Shantina; friends of both Sally and Ray; expert psychologist Nancy Kaser-Boyd; and other neutral contributors such as journalist Diane

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Dimond, former IFB Chairman Wayne DeMilia, and Rachel Louise Snyder, author of *No Visible Bruises*, among many others. Based on Belinda Morrissey's *When Women Kill* and *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, this article examines how Burstein's docuseries questions popular cultural stereotypes associated with labels like "perpetrator" and "victim." It further exposes the partiality of legal and media portrayals of a perpetrator, and broadens the discourse about battered women.

Women who commit homicide, as Belinda Morrissey notes, are typically cast as either victims or malevolent figures (167). The victim discourse emphasizes women's oppression and disempowerment. As Robin May Schott states, "victims are typically portrayed as passive, pathetic and backward looking" (179). The monster theory, on the other hand, highlights an underlying fear that women have the power to create and destroy lives. "Women who kill," continues Morrissey, "confirm this archetypal feminine power, reinforcing the terrible antithesis to the myth of the good mother, reminding us that where creativity is located so too is destructiveness" (2). The former narrative supports ideas of "female oppression," while the latter perpetuates ideas of "feminine evil" (Morrissey 7). Such narratives become "conventional stock stories," that ensure the perpetrator is "easily identifiable" and enable "acceptable evaluations," writes Morrissey (9). In both scenarios, the agency of the perpetrators is overlooked: the victim is oppressed, and the wicked one, having lost her humanity, is deemed inhuman (Morrissey 25). In her study, Morrissey discusses how women who killed their batterers, such as Mrs. R., Erika Kontinnen and Pamela Sainsbury, in the court proceedings were often deemed irrational. This reflects, according to her, the legal system's inability to fully recognize the rationality behind their choices in self-defense (102). Morrissey underscores the lack of complexity or intermediate space between within mainstream legal discourse, where specific subjectivities are often emphasized, while others are limited (3).

In accordance with Morrissey's analyses, the legal authorities depicted Sally in a highly sensationalized way. Due to her muscular and robust appearance, she was deemed the perfect perpetrator. Leigh Goodmark lists how Sally defied female norms in several ways: she was a muscular female Marine, supported her husband's bodybuilding career financially, participated in wrestling matches with men who were attracted to her physical strength, had physical altercations with neighbors, police officers, women her husband dated, and confronted her husband about his infidelity. Moreover, she maintained a calm demeanor even on the night of the crime (2022). Because Sally embodied a mix of independence, fearlessness, toughness, and allure, she was perceived as less fragile and less vulnerable. The prosecutor, Dan Goldstein,

labeled her as “a bully” and “a thug,” who bridged the gender gap and become somebody who is “physical [and] confrontational” (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). Sally expresses her dismay and the hurt caused by such a reductive portrayal: “[The prosecutor] said that I wasn’t a real woman. Just because I’m a bodybuilder and just because I’m a Marine doesn’t mean I’m not a real woman. He made me out to be this monster” (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). Such misrepresentations exemplify the systemic biases within a patriarchal culture (particularly within the legal system), which, according to Lex Boyle, actively seeks to “protect normative sex, gender, and heterosexual identity paradigms that the specters of hypermuscular female bodies attack” (135). Sally’s physical strength and her defiance of traditional gender roles were misconstrued as her killing her husband intentionally and in cold blood.

The media’s portrayal of Sally also reveals their tendency to compartmentalize and categorize female perpetrators. Journalist Diane Diamond states that while domestic abuse was a central element of Sally’s defense, media coverage often focused on her physical appearance. Phrases such as “brawny bride,” “pumped-up princess,” and the striking statement, “‘Instead of pumping iron, she was pumping bullets into her husband,’” were used to describe her (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). Reflecting on this sensationalized coverage, Dimond admits, “That’s the way it was back then. That is what got the audience to come in and stay” (Burstein, “The People vs. Sally McNeil”). This inclination towards dramatic narratives over the actual legal details is also observed by criminologists Peter N. Grabosky and Paul Wilson,

> [T]he coverage of detailed and arcane legal proceedings is labor intensive, and media organizations devote few resources to reporting them. Too often, unfortunately, court reporters are not trained to do their task. They show disinterest in any legal problems that develop in the course of a trial and, as with crime news generally, look for the dramatic and entertaining rather than the politically and socially important features of a trial. (131)

The criminal court can become a spectacle due to a lack of nuanced and comprehensive reporting by journalists who, due to their own biases, interests, and incompetence, may influence the outcome of a case.

On the other hand, expert psychologist Nancy Kaser-Boyd and Sally’s defense attorney explained Sally through Battered Woman Syndrome (henceforth, BWS), which is a result of continuous domestic abuse. A battered woman is someone “who is repeatedly subjected to any

forceful physical or psychological behavior by a man in order to coerce her to do something he wants her to do without any concern for her rights" (Walker xv). Kaser-Boyd's assessment emphasizes the dire circumstances Sally faced, such as fractured bones, strangulation, and isolation, which, in her view, lead to Sally's perpetration of murder on that night (Burstein, "The People vs. Sally McNeil"). Sally's defense attorney, William Rafael, strategically utilizes this discourse of the battered woman to portray Sally not as an agentic criminal but as a victim responding to her environment (Burstein, "The People vs. Sally McNeil"). However, Mark A. Drumbl identifies the broader problematic aspects of such defense strategies in criminal trials. According to him, "the defense, exercising the responsibility they have to zealously represent the accused, also participates in a competing game of essentialization that inflates the innocence, cluelessness, and powerlessness of the perpetrator" (122). Similarly, while BWS offers a context for the defendant's actions, it reinforces restrictive stereotypes about women (Morrissey 22). BWS renders them as helpless, powerless, and subjugated entities.

During the trial, Sally's image was constructed differently by several parties involved in the proceedings. While the prosecutor painted her as a monstrous figure, the media sensationalized her persona. Conversely, both the psychologist and the defense presented her in a sympathetic light and accentuated her status as a victim. Burstein, thus, emphasizes the partial and manipulative discursivity and performativity of judicial processes. Subjectivity is shaped and enacted through language, concepts, theoretical frameworks, and societal systems and put into boxes (Morrissey 66). In contrast to the negative and simplistic narratives, Burstein offers a more comprehensive view of Sally, placing her at the forefront, digging into the socio-cultural, emotional, and material environment that shaped both her and Ray, ultimately endowing her with agency.

Burstein focuses extensively on Sally's and Ray's socio-cultural milieu and the dynamics between the two. As Paul Reynolds emphasizes, "an agent and their actions cannot be removed from their situatedness in social and cultural contexts" (204). In "Valentine's Day," Burstein delves into Ray's own troubled past. The audience is told that his mother gave him to his aunt when he was two weeks old. However, he was brought up in poverty and was sexually abused by the person who was living with them. The audience also learns about the intense pressure Ray was under to win competitions and how this changed his personality. "'He said that I was inferior, and that he was the more, uh, superior bodybuilder, and everything should go toward him,'" Sally states (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). She adds, "He didn't think he was good enough. This is a guy that's, at that point, he's like 240 and doesn't think he's big enough.

Men kind of reverse anorexia" (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). According to DJ Jeffers, a friend of Ray's, despite his kind and loving nature, he had a short fuse and was abusive towards those around him (Burstein, "Valentine's Day").

In the second episode, "The Death of Mr. California," the docuseries further sheds light on Sally's turbulent early life in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Born in 1960, her childhood was dominated by an alcoholic father and a violent stepfather. In order to win her parents' approval, Sally excelled at athletics, swimming, diving, and running. She pursued her passion for sports education at East Stroudsburg State College, but faced financial hurdles, dropping out just a semester shy of graduating when her parents refused to support her. Consequently, she enlisted in the Marine Corps, where she met her first husband, Tony, who was abusive. After leaving him, Sally met Ray McNeil in 1987, and married him within two months. His aggressive nature mirrored the toxic relationships of her past. However, as Burstein states in an interview Matthew Sherwood, just as Ray exhibited violent tendencies, Sally was not the quintessential victim either (2022). She also has a history of violence and trouble during her time in the Marines as well as during her marriage with Ray. One witness recounts an incident when Sally, from her balcony, hurled dumbbells onto Ray's car while he was inside it (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California").

It becomes clear that, by delving into their relationship, Burstein brings a complex perspective on the often simplistic dichotomy between victims and perpetrators. Mainstream perceptions commonly accept violence against women as prevalent, while violence committed by women is seen as rare (Frigon 4). Clare Bielby elaborates on this, noting that "the categories of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' tend to be gendered male and female respectively" (155) and she further asserts that "[g]ender is constitutive of how we think about the perpetrator, perpetration, and violence" (155). In the series, Sally embodies both roles as a perpetrator and a victim, while Ray, despite his history of abusing Sally and her children, is also portrayed as a victim. Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson observe that, "individuals do not always neatly fall within the boundaries of a given type. In our daily lives, our motivations are not singular … Individual motivations are multiple, layered, and fluid" (10). Traditionally, victims are viewed as "helpless, sorrowful, innocent, and virtuous," while perpetrators are seen as "all-powerful, malevolent, and merciless" (Skloot 313). In foregrounding the blurred lines between the roles of perpetrator and victim, Burstein invites viewers, the media, and legal personalities to take into account the complexities inherent in human relationships and their consequences.

In addition to examining the contextual factors that might lead someone to become a perpetrator, Burstein introduces the posthuman element to challenge viewers' perceptions of the essence of perpetration and the paths to becoming a perpetrator. According to Jonathan Luke Austin, the materiality of the world, namely, "[n]onhuman objects, environments, and phenomena can thus 'compel' violence based on the ways they are collectively assembled in certain environments" (175). He explains that objects are not just tools; they shape our actions, sometimes even towards violence, so understanding them is key to understanding violence itself:

> material objects are not simply the props through which human life plays out but actively shape, direct, and transform human behavior. Exploring the work of perpetrators through posthumanism can thus expand our understanding of the conditions of possibility for perpetration by adding an appreciation of how the "nonhuman" also works to make significant difference in why, how, and when human beings become perpetrators of violence. The perspective allows us to see how violence is often more than human in its coordinates. (169)

Austin asserts that the availability or mere presence of weapons can not only enable violent acts but also mold the character of the perpetrator (172). Sally's crime carried out using the firearm she had in her home, exemplifies how the mere possession of a weapon can transform an individual into a dangerous perpetrator. DJ Jeffers forewarned Ray, stating, "I said, Ray, I said, you guys have that shotgun at the house. Sally has did some crazy stuff. And I told Ray, No, she'll shoot you. I believe she'll—she'll kill you. He kind of laughed it off" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California").

The role of the steroids found in Ray's system further complicates the situation. These drugs, known for amplifying aggression, may have contributed to Sally's lethal actions. Sally herself describes Ray's heightened danger, stating, "He had five steroids in him. He was superhuman. He was super strong and he was superfast in a small apartment" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). The prosecutor also acknowledges the potential influence of steroids and the fact that it received minimal attention. Goldstein elaborates, "Ray had, by the way, five different kinds of steroids in his bloodstream at the time of his death. Sally had one. But Sally's defense was never, um, 'I did this because I was on steroids,' nor was her defense that 'Ray was on steroids, and that's why he was so aggressive towards me.' That—The—The basis of the case, the touchstone of the case, was that the relationship was violent" (Burstein, "The Death

of Mr. California"). This also emphasizes the one-sidedness of the trial and the need to broaden our perspective on the myriad factors that shape individuals into perpetrators of violence.

Significantly, in the docuseries, Sally takes center stage, sharing her personal story in a sit-down interview. Hilary Earl contends that, by "[reconstructing] the self-understanding of the perpetrators, not only by reading, observing, and analyzing their comportment at trial, but also by taking seriously and evaluating the reasons they have given for their own behavior," (117) we can attain a more comprehensive understanding of them. Sally says that, although she attempted to seek help from the authorities due to the abuse she endured, her pleas were often trivialized or ignored. For instance, when she reported issues with her first husband, the police simply advised her "to leave, and let him calm down" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). Similarly, with Ray, when she complained about him, he was momentarily taken into custody but was soon released (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). These examples demonstrate that the system can be masculinist, excluding women's experiences from its parameters. Morrissey critiques the ways "both law and media [represent] these women's abusive relationships with their male partners as unusual, and their murders as extraordinary, rather than as the worst results of an institution of marriage which historically and traditionally has enshrined unequal relations between men and women" (Morrissey 20). Burstein, thus, draws attention to the lapses in official intervention, which neglected to protect the battered woman.

Sally also took proactive measures, intending to end her relationship with Ray. However, the tragic incident occurred before she could finalize her decision. In a *The Daily Show* interview, Rachel Louise Snyder aptly describes the complexity of such situations, stating that leaving "is a process, not an event. It often takes years for battered women to leave" (2022). Marian Duggan further illuminates this by pointing out that "[t]he volatile nature of domestically abusive relationships also accounts for the back-and-forth nature that a couple may go through with respect to being together" (168). Shantina's account echoes this pattern, "My dad would come back, bring flowers and candies, and tell [my mother] he loved her, and he was gonna change, and . . . And it never got better. It got worse" (Burstein, "Valentine's Day"). These statements highlight the harrowing and complex path victims navigate in the quest for a life free from abuse.

Furthermore, Sally asserts that her actions were in self-defense when she took her husband's life because she became aware that he was going to kill her (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). It is pivotal to recognize her sense of agency and her acknowledgment of responsibility in her act of killing. She clarifies her stance, mentioning, "In my perspective,

when under attack . . . I have the right to defend myself" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). In another instance, she declares, "[y]ou threaten to hit me, I'm gonna hurt you before you hurt me" (Burstein, "The Death of Mr. California"). These statements suggest Sally's self-worth and her determination to retaliate, as Morrissey also argues when she writes that a woman who kills "asserts a self dedicated to placing herself first" (97). By presenting Sally as more than a victim, namely, as a battered woman with agency, Burstein expands the discourse on battered women, which depicts them only as victims. As Morrissey states, "[n]arratives which assert these murders as precipitated by self-defense, and not provocation or Battered Woman Syndrome, form the apex of these contemporary efforts to humanize and make women who kill agentic" (Morrissey 29). In doing so, Burstein, to some extent, changes the perception of such women, acknowledging their cognitive faculties and decision-making capabilities. The idea that a woman can be strong, autonomous, and a fighter while simultaneously being a victim should not be an oxymoron. Recognizing these complexities is vital, especially in legal settings, as judgments made there can have profound consequences for an individual's life and freedom.

To conclude, Burstein questions the simplistic victim/perpetrator dichotomy in her portrayal of Sally. *Killer Sally* shows that neither Sally, who suffered abuse, nor her slain husband can be labeled as pure victims or pure villains. By highlighting the familial, marital, posthumanist, personal influences as well as the neglectful authorities, Burstein sheds light on the constraints of the paradigms used to categorize perpetrators and underscores the importance of the complex factors that led Sally to murder her husband. Furthermore, the docuseries emphasizes the importance of personal agency. As Morrissey suggests, an alternative perspective on the battered woman can be proposed, one where the women can be both proactive and responsible, but also deserving of understanding and forgiveness (68). Building on this, is it not possible for a woman to be in a sound state of mind, commit the crime, and still be vulnerable and receive a reduced sentence? Thus, Burstein advocates for a nuanced understanding of individuals who commit such acts. Consequently, Burstein encourages a more open discourse on domestic issues rather than silencing or shaming them. "Domestic violence is a huge issue globally," she points out, "and the way that our society handles it, including the United States, really needs reckoning" (Burstein qtd. in Michallon 2022). It can only be hoped that women who kill can be understood within John Hoffman's "momentum concept," "one which 'unfolds' so that it is possible to continuously rework it in a way which realizes more and more of its egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential" (*Gender and Sovereignty* 23). According to Hoffman, it is "an idea that captures both the continuity a concept has with the

past as well as the need to reformulate it in the light of changing historical conditions" (*A Glossary of Political Theory* viii). Women who commit homicide should be viewed as a momentum concept, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding, acknowledging the ever-changing nature of societal values and perceptions.

Nota Bene:

It is crucial to note that the intent of this essay is not to suggest that Burstein's series condones or justifies Sally McNeil's actions. Rather, it posits that Burstein seeks to offer a more comprehensive and unbiased portrayal of Sally McNeil and her crime.

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