

# The Privilege of Contemporary Life: Periodization in the Bret Easton Ellis Decades

Theodore Martin

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Only the Utopian future is a place of truth in this sense, and the privilege of contemporary life and of the present lies not in its possession, but at best in the rigorous judgment it may be felt to pass on us.—Fredric Jameson, “Marxism and Historicism”

He’s helping define the decade, baby.—Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*

## Presents and Absence

Is it possible to orient the unfinished present in history? The widening net of globalization and the consequent fragmentation of everyday life have made it increasingly difficult, as Fredric Jameson observes, to grasp the historical significance of the present: “The sense people have of themselves and their own moment of history may ultimately have *nothing* whatsoever to do with its reality.”<sup>1</sup> But it seems equally likely that this inaccurate or even impossible self-presentation has been there all along, not only under the global diffusion of postmodernity but for as long as we have divided history into past, present, and future. The ability to organize historical events into a narrative of successive epochs or ages—a process of historical retrospection generally called periodization—seems logically unavailable to the present: in the immediacy or the embeddedness of the day-to-day, there is no place from which to make the external, totalizing judgment of history. “The present,” Jameson explains, “is not yet a historical period: it ought not to be able to name

<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 281.

itself and characterize its own originality.”<sup>2</sup> Harry Harootunian and Lauren Berlant have tried, however, to rescue the present from the colonizing force and homogenizing desire of modern history. The present, Harootunian writes, breaks “the spell cast by the phrases ‘our modernity,’ and ‘history itself’”; awakening a history otherwise “external and dead” requires “an ontology . . . sensitive to or accountable for the durational present.”<sup>3</sup> Berlant similarly recasts “the problem of writing the history of the present” as “a problem of affect”: by resisting periodization, the present becomes a space in which history can be immediately “sensed” or experienced.<sup>4</sup> For Harootunian and Berlant, the present opens a fissure in the official life of history, a suspended moment in which time is no longer narrated and manipulated from a distance but felt and “acted upon” from right up close (Harootunian, “Remembering,” 494).

A durational, unperiodized present, however, risks relegating history to the past. Between proximity and distance, embeddedness and retrospection, are we really left to choose either a present without history or a history without the present? The beginning of a more dialectical answer appears in an often-misunderstood maxim from Jameson’s *Singular Modernity*: “We cannot not periodize” (29). For Jameson, periodization is not the only, or only productive, way to view history, but it may be an unavoidable starting point. No matter how energetically theory has resisted fitting the “endless series of sheer facts and unrelated events” into a single narrative of historical development, the impulse to periodize inevitably reasserts itself: periodization returns to the present in the form of an “unauthorized self-affirmation” (29, 25). So it would be premature to separate the present radically from history and from the paradoxes of historical self-reflection. While it may be impossible to periodize the present with certainty, it is also impossible not to try.

In this essay I want “the problem of writing the history of the pres-

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 484, 492, 494.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event,” *American Literary History* 20 (2008): 845.

ent” to *remain* a problem—and to remain *that* problem and not become another one—in order to argue that rescuing what Berlant rightly calls the “disrespected” category of the present demands not cutting the present off from history but attending to the historical contradictions it mediates (848). Contrary to the claims of Berlant and Harootunian, the present is a fundamentally historical category, but it is a historical category unlike any other. The changing contours of what is forever called “contemporary life”—a category that both delimits history and drifts across it—make history a perpetual negotiation between embedded experience and external judgment. Demanding an act of historical self-reflection that is both “unauthorized” and unavoidable, the present pushes the limits of periodization not to repudiate it but to reveal how a truly dialectical sense of history emerges in the brief moments when periodization ceases to apply.

How does the present adopt a self-reflexive historical perspective in the first place? Berlant, Harootunian, and Jameson all have approached the question as a problem of literary form and as a matter, specifically, of the mechanics of genre. For Berlant, the affective present is best rendered through the “you-are-thereness” of the historical novel, which, she claims, has always been compelled to make history *feel* present to its readers (847). Yet it is hard to shake the feeling that looking back on the past and looking around at the present name decidedly different historical procedures. Berlant’s account of the historical novel is thus countered by Jameson, for whom the science fiction novel displaces the historical novel in “a relationship of kinship and inversion all at once,” shifting the classic historical gaze of “Sir Walter Scott’s apparatus” to the vicissitudes of the actual present (*Postmodernism*, 284, 285). Science fiction obtains a view of the present by imagining itself already looking back on it from the future (giving the genre the same utopian cast described by Jameson in the first epigraph to this essay). Discussing a 1959 novel by Philip K. Dick, Jameson argues that its future perspective (the novel is set in 1997) distinguishes the authentic process of history, “the realities of the 1950s,” from “the representation of that rather different thing, the ‘fifties,’” the allegorical summing up of the decade through its most visible stereotypes (281). Sci-fi’s speculative futures demystify those stereotypes. But having leaped forward into the future, the genre becomes less equipped to explain how the present

constructs its self-image to begin with: a self-reflexive impression of the “fifties,” no matter how ideologically mystified, nonetheless raises the central and as yet unanswered question of how contemporary experience gets molded into the shape of a historical period. Harootunian, in turn, seeks to come back to the matter of representing “the *actuality* of the everyday as it was being lived and experienced in the large industrialized cities.”<sup>5</sup> His wide-ranging account of a literature “privileging the details of everydayness” (*Disquiet*, 3) cannot help but call to mind the representational dilemmas of the realist novel, which Amy Kaplan describes as a genre under constant threat by “the sense of the world changing under the realists’ pens.”<sup>6</sup> As Harootunian acknowledges, the genre of everydayness is similarly unsettled, as the “unity of the present” is both “minimal” and “precarious” (*Disquiet*, 4). Lacking the contextualizing power of an outside perspective, the present has no clear beginning or end and thus threatens to expand, unbridled, into eternity.

At the heart of what Berlant and Harootunian call “the historical present” is a tension that none of these genres is quite able to resolve. The present names both an immersion in everyday life and an ad hoc historical totality and so requires a narrative form capable of representing the paradoxical intersection between retrospection and experience. I want, then, to propose a genre more uniquely suited to the paradox of the present: the “decade novel.” The decade is the preeminently “stereotypical” or degraded version of periodization; perhaps for this reason, it is also the perfect narrative mode for the present to try—and necessarily fail—to imagine itself as history. As a genre, the decade novel stages the futile confrontation between the narration of everyday life and the allegorical expression of a period.

The pages that follow examine how this genre is elaborated in the work of Bret Easton Ellis. *American Psycho* (1991) and *Glamorama* (1998) are best known for their graphic representations of sexual violence and gratuitous consumerism; as Laura Findlay points out, much criti-

<sup>5</sup> Harry Harootunian, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9.

cal work on *American Psycho* “brand[s] the novel as pornography.”<sup>7</sup> But the bright lights of Ellis’s spectacular content have tended to distract critics from the formal problems posed by the texts, which concern in equal measure the history of the present and the history of genre. *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* are both obsessive catalogs of their cultural presents, intensely devoted to recording the microhistory of everyday life in, respectively, the 1980s and the 1990s. Yet they have an unusually complex relation to the “details of everydayness” that they unrelentingly process. Surpassing the traditions of literary realism that they clearly invoke, *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*—and, I argue, the decade novel generally—undertake to raise realistic details to the level of history: in Ellis’s texts, the objects of everyday life are reinterpreted as historical metonyms or allegories that transform the present, however precariously, into a self-contained period. This compressed image of contemporary history inevitably takes the form of the decade. Mediating between immersion in the present and observation of the past, between the affects of history and the forms of narrative, Ellis’s decade novels trace the paradox of contemporaneity to a single source: the challenge of defining a present that is changing under our feet.

One may now detect a central ambiguity in the title of this essay. The periodizing label “the Bret Easton Ellis decades” first calls to mind the years of the 1980s and 1990s, during which the spectacular consumerism of postmodern culture that is the well-known subject (and often-cited symptom) of Ellis’s writings reached its pinnacle. But one ought justifiably to respond: can Ellis, whether as canonical literary chronicler of life under late capitalism or as “Brat Pack” celebrity author literally indulging capitalism’s excesses, single-handedly define a decade? Of course not. It is, in other words, impossible to avoid the arbitrariness that underpins every attempt to sum up the present as a decade. So Ellis’s decade novels not only act out the imaginative leap the present takes to turn itself into a historical period; they also expose the inevitable inadequacy of an image produced by squeezing a living present into the decade’s prefabricated mold. The first part of the pres-

<sup>7</sup> Laura Findlay, “Mary Harron’s *American Psycho*: Female Subversion or Perspective?” in *Sub-versions: Cultural Status, Genre, and Critique*, ed. Pauline MacPherson et al. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 80.

ent essay demonstrates how the historical logic of the decade ruptures Ellis's narratives by forcing them to adopt two incompatible perspectives at once. The second part suggests that the intertextual continuity between *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* exposes the critical limits of the decade as a self-reflexive mode of periodization. And the third part argues that the short circuits of the decade allow for new reflections on the question of contemporary history: underneath the self-referential blindness of a perpetually unfolding present (the eternity of "presentism" that has been linked to the ideologies of both modernism and postmodernism),<sup>8</sup> the effort to periodize the present discloses the structure of continuity that makes history both coherent and durable. In the tension between periodization and the present, history emerges as *longue durée*, and the afterimage of the dislocated decade becomes, finally, the continually retold story of capitalism itself.

### The Style of the Times

If Ellis's decade novels are known for anything, it is their virtually encyclopedic obsession with period detail: "Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti."<sup>9</sup> Jameson sees the obsession with fashion as a symptom of the failure to think historically: postmodernism can "[approach] the 'past' [only] through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the

<sup>8</sup> Harootunian claims that the "growing conviction in the autonomy of the present from past and future [is] variously called presentism and modernism" ("Remembering," 480). But this presentist disconnection from history has also been a central feature in accounts of postmodernism. Timothy Bewes, for instance, describes the postmodern condition as "a morbid, fearful refusal of antagonism or confrontation in a pitiful attempt to preserve the present" (*Cynicism and Postmodernity* [London: Verso, 1997], 7); Jameson similarly defines it as "the way our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster [1983; rpt. New York: New Press, 1998], 143–44). The invocation of presentism as a periodizable element of both modernism and postmodernism already hints at the continuity haunting the category of the present.

<sup>9</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 5.

attributes of fashion" (*Postmodernism*, 19). But the nostalgic negation of history does not fully account for *American Psycho*'s investment in the everyday. After all, the novel is aimed not at "approaching the 'past'" but at historicizing the present. As a description of the concreteness of the present, Ellis's gloss on the style of the times cuts two ways, undoing the "stylistic connotation" of a more familiarly nostalgic mode. The "attributes of fashion" in *American Psycho* do not replace a more authentic history; instead, they capture the fetishized fashion consciousness that characterizes the historical specificity of "the 1980s." For Ellis's novel, "What are people wearing?" is the question through which the period of the 1980s defines itself. The authentic history of the 1980s, in other words, *is* its superficiality.

*Glamorama* does nearly the same thing for the 1990s, only with fame-obsessed fashion models instead of social-climbing investment bankers and celebrity names instead of designer brands:

"Check the Cs for dinner." . . .

"Naomi Campbell, Helena Christensen, Cindy Crawford, Sheryl Crow, David Charvet, Courteney Cox, Harry Connick, Jr., Francesco Clemente, Nick Constantine, Zoe Cassavetes, Nicolas Cage, Thomas Calabro, Crisi Conway, Bob Collacello, Whitfield Crane, John Cusack, Dean Cain, Jim Courier, Roger Clemens, Russell Crowe, Tia Carrere and Helena Bonham Carter—but I'm not sure if she should be under B or C."<sup>10</sup>

Two historicizing operations are once again visible here. The avalanche of names underscores each one's built-in obsolescence: the farther a reader gets from the novel's contemporary sphere, the more unrecognizable these names become. Yet ultimately the spirit of the decade resides not in the content of the names but in their pathological repetition. The 1990s are expressed not simply as a mosaic of historically specific names but as the self-contained period in which the celebrity name itself became the unit of measurement for social space. *Glamorama* sums up the 1990s almost exactly as *American Psycho* sums up the 1980s, except this decade defines itself not by what it wears but by whom it knows.

Both novels make the stylistic vagaries of daily life stand for an

<sup>10</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 8–9.

entire decade. But while the decade novel initially promises to join the immediacy of the present with the distant judgment of periodization, the genre's narrative instability unwittingly demonstrates the logical gaps that the decade's hasty synthesis remains unable to bridge. Early in *American Psycho* there is an apparently routine description of a social call: "I shiver and hand her my black wool Giorgio Armani overcoat and she takes it from me, carefully airkissing my right cheek, then she performs the same exact movements on Price while taking his Armani overcoat. The new Talking Heads on CD plays softly in the living room" (10). Once again each detail functions as an ideological allegory for the decade. But as it plays softly in the background (in a historically new format, no less), the CD calls attention to an entirely different way of periodizing the present. Fashion provides both the immediate backdrop for Patrick Bateman's first-person narration and the symbolic counterpoint to its increasingly graphic episodes of violence; Patrick's interest in pop music, however, is deliberately set apart from his present-tense narrative and its moral provocations. The novel is broken into short sections whose banal titles denote the time, place, or activity that the sections describe: "Lunch with Bethany," "Office," "Thursday," "Video Store then D'Agostino's." Eventually we come to a section titled "Genesis," which is, as it duly warns, a laboriously detailed discography of Phil Collins's band, composed in the affirmative voice of the music journalist and intent on aligning the shape of the decade with the band's artistic trajectory—making good on the claim that Genesis is indeed "the best, most exciting band to come out of England in the 1980s" (136). The alternative sense of history first hinted at by the "new"-ness of the Talking Heads CD is finally made explicit in the "Genesis" section (which cannot, of course, help but already name something of a beginning): Patrick's musical encapsulation of the 1980s depends on a narrative of development and on a consciousness of historical change.

Describing the album *Invisible Touch*, which he calls "the group's undisputed masterpiece," Patrick relies on the dialectical perspective of periodization: "It's an epic meditation on intangibility, at the same time it deepens and enriches the meaning of the preceding three albums" (135). The two independent clauses are thrown off balance by a missing word, and the resulting cleavage, which denies both the

progressive temporality of the conjunction (“*but* at the same time”) and the simultaneity of comparison (“at the same time *as*”), reveals the two irreconcilable positions that *Invisible Touch* occupies as a historical and historicizable object. The album is first described on its own terms and according to its narrow thematic content (its “meditation on intangibility”), but *Invisible Touch* bears a different, cumulative meaning with respect to “the preceding three albums,” which it “deepens and enriches” only from the distance of its own later development. As Genesis’s previous albums are rearticulated as the prehistory of *Invisible Touch*, the presentist experience of history as immediate content becomes paired with a properly historical perspective able to organize objects retrospectively in changing relation to each other.

Indeed, the newly available position of historical judgment enables Patrick to view the 1980s as a distinct, fully formed period:

I’ve been a big Genesis fan ever since the release of their 1980 album, *Duke*. Before that I didn’t really understand any of their work. . . . all the albums before *Duke* seemed too artsy, too intellectual. It was *Duke* (Atlantic; 1980), where Phil Collins’ presence became more apparent, and the music got more modern, the drum machine more prevalent and the lyrics started getting less mystical and more specific (maybe because of Peter Gabriel’s departure), and complex, ambiguous studies of loss became, instead, smashing first-rate pop songs that I gratefully embraced. (133)

Patrick’s excursus neatly encodes the cultural transformations stereotypically associated with everyday life in the 1980s: emotional emptiness (banishing the “ambiguous” or “complex”), the omnipresence of technology (“the drum machine [became] more prevalent”), the replacement of artist with celebrity (“Phil Collins’ presence became more apparent”), the blurring of art and commodity (“first-rate pop songs”)—all changes that are necessary, Patrick claims, for him to embrace the band as continuous with, and finally symbolic of, his own historical present. Patrick’s modest explanation of how he comes to “understand” Genesis is thus a surprisingly apt account of epochal break, which separates his experience of “1980” from everything that came “before that” (what Patrick appropriately refers to, in the same paragraph, as “the 1970s”). From the aesthetic differences that index the internal progression from one Genesis album to another, Patrick

extrapolates the sense of epochal transformation necessary to make the band representative of a single, discrete decade. A mere allegory of historical break becomes the formal grounds for periodizing the present.

Yet Patrick's temporary periodizing perspective also makes the "Genesis" section radically discontinuous from the rest of the text. Two more "musical interludes" appear in the novel, under the titles "Whitney Houston" and "Huey Lewis and the News," and all three interludes fall outside the central narrative. Despite the novel's apparently unwavering chronological movement and its insistence on the concreteness of time and place (of what Patrick is doing, when, and where: "Video Store *then* D'Agostino's"), the interludes make no reference to the events of the narrative or their own situations of enunciation. They seem to take place outside narrative time.

Patrick's "I" persists through the interludes, but his narrative voice is decidedly altered, offering an emotionally inflected perspective—oscillating between thoughtful criticism and enthusiastic affirmation—that is at odds with the disinterested neutrality of the narrative's tireless, almost robotic mechanisms of cultural recording. When Patrick ebulliently describes Houston's debut album, *Whitney Houston*, as "one of the warmest, most complex and altogether satisfying rhythm and blues records of the decade" and declares that "Whitney herself has a voice that defies belief" (253), his register, both interpretive and libidinal, seems a far cry from the dry reportage of the narrative at large, which is dominated by Patrick's ubiquitously uninflected descriptions of his male companions' wardrobes ("Armstrong is wearing a four-button double-breasted chalk-striped spread-collar cotton shirt by Christian Dior and a large paisley-patterned silk tie by Givenchy Gentleman" [137]). But Patrick's increasing resemblance to a feeling, thinking human being must be seen as the effect of a deeper formal shift, which has endowed him with a capacity for authentically historiographical observation—the ability to see the 1980s as a completed decade, a frozen slice of historical life—only by excising him from his story. The historical life of the 1980s that Patrick is finally able to narrate is not, in the last instance, his own.

In his essay on "serial masculinity" in *American Psycho*, Berthold Schoene describes the "autistic self-encapsulation of its narrative and

the novel's adamant denial of progress" and wonders "whether there might be any conceivable way out."<sup>11</sup> The formal interruptions of the musical interludes (on which Schoene does not comment) provide an answer. As if in direct response to Schoene's question, the interludes show Patrick stepping outside his "self-encapsulation"—focusing instead on, say, the shared pleasures of Houston—while also embracing the progress narrative of Collins's career. What Schoene diagnoses as "the monotonous seriality of the novel, which resembles a Gothic tomb hermetically sealed off from all progress, development, or escape," is in fact ruptured by Patrick's pop music digressions, which transcend both the action of the narrative and the (psycho)pathology of Patrick himself (382). An inhuman serial killer and a postmodern male in crisis, Patrick becomes more emotionally human and less "rigidly" masculine once he inhabits the distance and detachment of the historian.<sup>12</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to say that he is redeemed by his critical distance, especially given that the historian's detached perspective uncomfortably mirrors Patrick's disconnected experience of his own body ("I

<sup>11</sup> Berthold Schoene, "Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*," *MFS* 54 (2008): 395, 394.

<sup>12</sup> Findlay claims that the novel expresses a "crisis of masculinity" (84), a point echoed by Schoene, who describes the "rigidly interpellative processes of male individuation . . . perpetuat[ed] through an endless series of coercive acts of psychic self-(de)formation" (379). Yet issues of masculinity are all but absent from the novel's musical interludes. We can best understand why by briefly considering what happens when the novel is adapted as a film. The film version of *American Psycho* (dir. Mary Harron; 2000) departs from the novel's formal constraints in only one important way: it brings Patrick's musical monologues inside the diegetic narrative, where he performs them in front of his victims as he prepares to kill them. Each of these speeches comes to resemble an ironic seduction and, in the climactic scene of the film, an actual seduction. As two women kiss on his couch, Patrick stands over them, talking sensually about Whitney Houston; the women laugh at him—"You actually listen to Whitney Houston? You *own* a Whitney Houston CD? More than one?"—and the hallucinatory chase scene that follows seems to derive both its urgency and its parodic sadism from the affront to Patrick's masculinity. Most significantly, however, this confrontation over Patrick's strange taste in music could not take place in the novel's version of the same scene: in the interludes, other people—indeed, the entire social matrix of gendered interpersonal relations—do not exist. The film thus points out the conspicuous *absence* of any negotiation between musical taste and male identity in the novel's interludes, putting a finer point on their separation from the main narrative. Detached from the concerns of the rest of the novel, the interludes express not the anxieties of masculinity but the fantasy of having already resolved or overcome them.

think I'm nodding" [375]) and ultimately of the entire outside world ("I simply am not there" [377]). On the contrary, Patrick's original emotional detachment—"all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it" (377)—clearly inaugurates his narrative separation from the grotesque immediacy of everyday life. While the gregarious, humanized language of the musical interludes at first seems to promise Patrick a redeemed connection to the world, it actually underscores the irredeemable absence of connection: the interludes indulge a fantasy incompatible with the rest of the narrative. It is the "humanizing" dream of historical distance, finally, not Patrick's original psychosis (despite the increasing air of unreality it gains throughout the novel), that seems conjured out of thin air.

The novel thus segregates its self-reflexive historical perspective from the narrative present. While depicting Patrick's murderous descent into madness as a symptom of the moral blankness of bourgeois consumer society, *American Psycho* repeatedly encounters, in the interruptive form of the interlude, the cognitive gap between a simple repudiation of Patrick (or diagnosis of his illness) and a grasp of the totality of his contemporary conditions. The two irreconcilable narrative levels simply reinforce Patrick's "one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed" (377). The demystifying power of history's critical distance remains, for the present, as unrealizable a fantasy as the moral redemption of Patrick himself.

*Glamorama* approaches the problem of historical perspective from the other side, yet its commitment to the uninterrupted immanence of the present is not enough to fend off the contradictory demands of decade thinking. While *Glamorama* retains *American Psycho*'s interest in pop music, it lacks the narrative exteriority that in the first novel makes possible a vision of progress. *Glamorama* possesses no transcendental apprehension of historical development to set against the overwhelming, immersive detail of day-to-day reality, and the autonomous pop objects through which Patrick has tracked historical change have now invaded the everyday life of Victor Ward's present.

In *Glamorama* the full-length album itself has been broken down into a mass of individually commodified singles more properly consigned to background music: "A couple walks out of the Crunch fitness center, carrying Prada gym bags, appearing vaguely energized,

Pulp's 'Disco 2000' blaring out of the gym behind them as they pass a line of BMWs" (269); "Everything But the Girl's 'Missing' plays over everything, occasionally interrupted by feel-good house music, along with doses of Beck's 'Where It's At' and so on and so on" (275); "As the Chemical Brothers' 'Setting Sun' blasts out on cue we're back in Notting Hill at some industrial billionaire's warehouse" (287). Pop music makes up the ideological fabric of Victor's daily life; taken together, the songs form nothing more than a sound track ("blast[ing] out on cue" from no discernible location).<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere Victor repeats snippets of decade-appropriate song lyrics when he is at a loss for anything else to say: "I'm a loser, baby, I sigh, slumping back into the booth. 'So why don't you kill me?'" (90). Such cultural references serve Ellis's allegorical reconstruction of the decade: "Loser," "Setting Sun," and other songs, the novel claims, somehow represent the unique attitude of "the 1990s." But *Glamorama* does not follow the meticulous historical record keeping of *American Psycho*, which provides the label and year of release of each album it mentions. Victor and his erstwhile bandmates challenge each other to recall songs' running times instead of their release dates (103–4), and *Glamorama*'s climactic scene returns to the same meaningless, dehistoricized musical statistics. As Victor races to uncover a terrorist plot to blow up an airplane, he realizes with dawning horror that the clue he has been following—a printout reading "WINGS / BAND ON THE RUN / 1985 / 511"—is not coded flight information at all: "It's a song called '1985.' . . . It's on the *Band on the Run* album. . . . It's not a flight number. . . . It's how long the song is. . . . That song is five minutes and eleven seconds long" (499). Even the briefest hint of history is immediately reduced to one more floating song title aimlessly dispersed throughout the narrative. Having effaced the context of its musical references, *Glamorama* makes history a matter not of years but of minutes—a radically condensed form of timekeeping able to measure nothing beyond itself.

"For historians," Harootunian suggests, "the date is the proper name of the event" (*Disquiet*, 15). So what happens when we plug in the dates ourselves? In fact, the added dates expose a strange discrep-

<sup>13</sup> The analogy is not inappropriate, given that Victor's psychological unraveling is measured by his growing certainty that his life is being scripted, directed, and filmed.

ancy between the historical life of the pop references and the narrative setting of *Glamorama*. Whereas “Missing” dates from 1994 and “Disco 2000” from 1995, neither “Where It’s At” nor “Setting Sun” was released until 1996. But *Glamorama* is supposed to take place between 1994 and 1995, which means that the historical setting of the narrative and the historicity of the objects used to establish it as a period fail to line up. In its effort to express the totality of the 1990s, the novel ends up referring to songs that, from the perspective of the narrative present, did not exist.

This misalignment (which might otherwise seem pedantic, if not simply accidental) reflects a deeper paradox concerning the historical status of the text itself: *Glamorama*, a novel striving to sum up the spirit of the 1990s, appeared in 1998, before the decade had ended. The totality of the decade is thus unconstrained by the particularity of the present, and the resulting disconnection shapes the vexed temporality of Victor’s own story. Consider: all we really know is that the plot takes place some time during a “1990s” whose calendar years the text does not bother to differentiate. Struggling to pinpoint the location of the narrative by using the signposts of pop culture (does it take place after Beck’s *Odelay* came out in 1996 or before Cindy Crawford left MTV’s *House of Style* in 1995?), we discover that the novel’s historical clues do not interact in a predictable or realistic way. *Glamorama* succeeds in representing itself as a unified decade by removing the dates from its world of floating and fragmentary pop singles—but in doing so, it sacrifices the coherent temporality of its present. This is perhaps why the novel refers to its moment of occurrence only once. Victor’s love interest, Jamie, provides the single clue to exactly when the story takes place: “It was maybe ten-thirty or eleven and . . . in December 1990 . . . four years ago? . . . five?” (351; ellipses in original). It is not quite right, then, to say that the novel is set between 1994 and 1995, because doing so ignores the crucial uncertainty of the passage: Jamie herself does not know what year it is.

In a novel whose surfeit of celebrity names and cultural references seems to promise a kinship with the traditions of realism (if not merely the excessive application of a “reality effect”), none of the characters knows the defining detail of modern social life: the date. Having rejected *American Psycho*’s tenuous fantasy of critical distance, *Glamo-*

*rama* collapses immediate experience and historical reflection into a single, suffocatingly synchronous narrative viewpoint: warned that “significance is rewarded in retrospect,” Victor replies, “I think this *is* the retrospect, baby” (527). Imprisoned by periodization, the novel loses track of its own present as a definite, locatable moment in history. Only the critical distance of an imagined exteriority could put the novel’s obsessive cultural documentation in proper perspective, revealing not the smooth, undifferentiable surface of the decade but the pulse of history as it moves immediately through the present. Without an outside perspective, everyday life in 1995 is all but swallowed up by the very attempt to imagine, from within it, the “period” of the 1990s as an already completed historical whole.

### **Eternal Occurrence**

Both *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* adapt their presents to the logic of the decade, yet neither narrative survives the confrontation between external analysis and immanent experience. In each case, the present is either ruptured or displaced, marked by an insupportable fantasy of critical distance or by an intractable entanglement in the colonizing totality of its periodizing imagination. Watching each novel wrestle with the self-reflexive logic of the decade, one may feel the historicity of the present slipping away. But the contradictions of historical self-reflection are embedded as much in the concept of the decade as in the blinkered immediacy of the everyday. It therefore becomes necessary to read *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* not simply in isolation but as formally and inextricably linked, bound together by uncanny echoes and structural repetitions that bring to the fore the false closure of the decade. As an attempt to articulate contemporary life as a self-contained period, the decade runs aground on the continuity of the present.

The link between *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* takes the form of an elaborate joke, which proceeds in two parts. The first is set up in the final scene of *American Psycho*, with Patrick sitting in Harry’s bar, unable to gain the attention or concern of his companions, discussing what he thinks must be the universality of experience at this particular moment in history—“This is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in

a club in New York, maybe *anywhere*, at the end of the century and how people, you know, *me*, behave”—and finally settling his gaze on a building placard bearing, in blood-red letters, the ominous warning “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (399). As the novel’s last words, the sign offers allegorical assurance that the historical boundaries dictating “how [Patrick’s] life presents itself . . . at the end of the century” will not easily be overcome. The second part of the joke comes at the beginning of *Glamorama* as Victor struggles to explain his dissatisfaction with the design scheme of his new nightclub: “It’s just that this is all so . . . so . . . ’89?” (12). Just as Patrick reads the grand distinction of the epoch into the difference between Genesis’s output in the 1980s and everything the band did in the 1970s,<sup>14</sup> Victor assumes that his own place in the midst of the 1990s must imply a decisive break from *American Psycho*’s 1980s. The frightening impossibility of change or “EXIT” that ends *American Psycho* thus appears to be ironically overturned in *Glamorama*, whose characters take it on faith that the dates separating one decade from another produce the historical transformation they are supposed to name. As an MTV interviewer says to Victor: “Aren’t the 1980s over? Don’t you think opening a club like this is a throwback to an era most people want to forget?” (160). If the interviewer is right, then Patrick must simply have a taste for the dramatic, since escape from his historical circumstances turns out to have been as easy as flipping the calendar. For Victor, there are the 1990s, and then there is everything else—all of which is *so* 1989.

How does Patrick’s anxiety that the 1980s will never end so easily transform into Victor’s sanguine belief that the 1990s name something definitively new? The tension between the hopeless eternity of the present (to which not only the very last but also the very first words of *American Psycho* alert us: “ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE” [3]) and the epochal routine of the decade is ultimately resolved by the formal continuity between the novels themselves. While Patrick assumes that a radical cultural shift engenders the leap from the 1970s to the 1980s, he cannot explain the causes that underlie it; he has no

<sup>14</sup> Patrick sees the same epochal tension in the work of Huey Lewis and the News, who “burst onto the national music scene at the beginning of the decade” but “really didn’t come into their own” until jettisoning the “late seventies” fads of New Wave and punk (352–53).

idea how the change from one period to another actually takes place. An air of indecipherable mystery surrounds historical transition, making Patrick's present feel as if it will never end: without an account of causality or a concrete concept of change, there is, indeed, no way to imagine an exit. Victor's rejection of what in turn seems to him *so* 1980s is not a reversal at all but a perfect repetition. Like Patrick, he assumes that his present emerged fully formed from a historical break that he nevertheless cannot explain; so even as he embraces the myth of his present's origin, Victor guarantees that there will be no way to imagine its end. Finally, then, the ostensibly epochal differences that separate *Glamorama* from *American Psycho* collapse into each other: a shared belief in the sui generis singularity of the decade makes the novels formally identical. The brand names and celebrity faces may change, but the persistence of brands and celebrities underscores the continuity between the texts' ways of writing history. Even the parallel trajectories of Patrick and Victor (one violent, fashion-obsessed protagonist ends his novel talking to a park bench, the other to an imaginary film crew) suggest that the basic terms of the novels remain constant, creating the strange but unavoidable impression that there is little difference between being a serial killer with political pretensions and being a terrorist without any.

Taken to such an extreme, the formal continuity between the books disturbs the premises of their social satire. *American Psycho*'s success as a satire would seem to depend on its historical specificity, on "how life presents itself" at the unique moment of the 1980s. The metaphorical link between investment banker and serial killer indexes the ethical consequences of emergent cultural decay: at the empty center of 1980s bourgeois professional culture, "surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in" (375). But the symptoms by which *American Psycho* defines the specificity of its decade—"Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. . . . Desire [is] meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead" (375)—could just as easily describe the 1990s of *Glamorama*. Victor has the same "mathematical" or pornographic relation to sex, the same illegible individuality (both he and Patrick are constantly mistaken for other people), the same inability to bring or be brought to justice, and the same obsession with status and "surface." The serial killer seems at first to provide a perfect allegory

for the unique ethical wasteland of 1980s Wall Street, except that in Ellis's version of the 1990s the "analogy" between empty cultural values and sociopathic violence takes exactly the same form. Just as work in "mergers and acquisitions" becomes, in Patrick's hands, "murders and executions" (206), so fashion models become interchangeable with terrorists: "As a model all you do all day is stand around and do what other people tell you to do . . . and it was an analogy that made sense . . . and it wasn't hard to recruit people [. . .] everyone wanted to be around us [. . .] everyone wanted to be movie stars [. . .] and in the end, basically, everyone was a sociopath" (352; bracketed ellipses in original).

In the end, then, the joke of the novels is played on the very form of the decade, on the perverse arbitrariness of the line that separates "the 1980s" from "the 1990s." Read side by side, Ellis's two satires of social decay—and the symptoms they diagnose—become interchangeable, and the presumed historical difference between their two decades fades away. In its place, the 1980s and the 1990s merge into the period of postmodernity at large, which more precisely names the overarching context for (and the proper periodization of) Ellis's writing. While the decade squeezes history into a smaller and smaller frame, its act of compression is undone by the continuity that turns Ellis's allegorical decades into versions of the same unfolding, postmodern present.

### Art/History

Yet the continuity forged between *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* also threatens to impose a present that goes on forever. Harootunian cautions, "Too often, thinkers [have] submitted to the temptation to see everyday life as a perennial present, instants successively piled on top of one another, . . . assuming the de-historicized coloration of the commodity" (*Disquiet*, 72). Jameson likewise observes that the present "inevitably comes to be thickened and solidified, complemented, by a rather more metaphysical backing or content, which is none other than the idea of eternity itself."<sup>15</sup> How, then, can we affirm the present without "affirm[ing] its eternity" (Harootunian, *Disquiet*, 93)? Having exposed the inadequacy of the decade, the present suggests a new

<sup>15</sup> Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003): 712.

concept of historical continuity, able to serve something other than perpetual expansion. Out of the confrontation between periodization and the present, history reappears not as eternal return but as *longue durée*.

The specter of eternity haunts *Glamorama* before it even begins. The novel's first epigraph, attributed to Krishna, reads: "There was no time when you nor I nor these kings did not exist." The anxiety that underwrites Victor's narrative from the beginning is the same as the anxiety that Patrick's narrative can register only at the end: what happens if nothing ever changes? Here is the urgent problem of the present to which the decade was a necessary, if necessarily failed, response: how to ensure that the apparently infinite experience of the present actually comes to an end. Lacking the promise of the distanced historical perspective that appears, however inexplicably, in *American Psycho*, *Glamorama* discovers itself fully imprisoned in the immediacy of the present. It is thus all the more pressing to find a way out.

If Schoene's question about a "way out" of *American Psycho* is really a question about historical change, and if reading Ellis's two novels together emphasizes the illusory form of change as it appears on the border between decades, then we must look elsewhere for a way to narrate the changing history of the present. In the last scene of *Glamorama* Victor sits at a hotel bar waiting to be assassinated, contemplating, in the time that remains to him, an elaborate painting:

I'm drinking a glass of water in the empty hotel bar at the Principe di Savoia and staring at the mural behind the bar and in the mural there is a giant mountain, a vast field spread out below it where villagers are celebrating in a field of long grass that blankets the mountain dotted with tall white flowers, and in the sky above the mountain it's morning and the sun is spreading itself across the mural's frame, burning over the small cliffs and the low-hanging clouds that encircle the mountain's peak, and a bridge strung across a path through the mountain will take you to any point beyond that you need to arrive at, because behind that mountain is a highway, and along that highway are billboards with answers on them—who, what, where, when, why—and I'm falling forward but also moving up toward the mountain, my shadow looming against its jagged peaks, and I'm surging forward, ascending, sailing through dark clouds, rising up, a fiery wind propelling me, and soon it's night and stars hang in the sky above the mountain, revolving as they burn.

The stars are real.  
The future is that mountain. (546)

While describing the mural's strange panorama, in what appears to be a hallucinatory flight of fancy, Victor suddenly imagines himself within it. At this fantastic (and probably unreliable) moment, there is no longer any distinction between the painting and Victor, and the novel is able to pose the central problem of the present: what happens when you analyze a landscape of which you yourself are a part? But *Glamorama's* response is disappointingly allegorical; the landscape keeps changing—first “it’s morning” and then “it’s night,” and Victor is crossing a path and then a bridge and then a highway—without ever actually arriving somewhere. Confronted with an image of his own present, Victor sees a landscape in infinite regress: the perpetually but superficially shifting present blinds him to the possibility of a truly transformative end. Amid these crudely allegorical renderings of historical “movement” (paths, bridges, highways), does anything *actually* change?

In fact, something does. First the crude “bridge strung across a path” is replaced by a “highway,” and then the “low-hanging clouds” part to reveal the consumer seductions of “billboards”—the mural doesn’t change, it *modernizes*. The allegorical change from day to night is merely shorthand for a grander (though, it turns out, equally naturalized) narrative of history, which we now recognize as the well-worn tale of capitalism’s plodding conquest of the natural world. The painting depicts the historical procession of modernity, in which, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno predicted, the “economic powers” of capital “are taking society’s domination over nature to unimagined heights”:<sup>16</sup> heights represented not only by the mural’s mountain peak but by the forms of late capitalism—the temporality of fashion, the fetishism of celebrity, the commodification of art, the disintegration of political belief—that Ellis’s decade novels have all along sought to document.

Faced with the threat of a present that goes on forever and a consumer ideology that claims to be inescapable, the decade novel pro-

<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xvii.

vides a surprisingly Lukácsian response: to “bring the past to life as the prehistory of the present,” it is necessary to scale the ad hoc walls of the decade.<sup>17</sup> The causal link between contemporary life and its conditions of possibility in the past first appears as the ironic but indissoluble continuity between presents. While the 1980s and the 1990s were initially folded into the “period” of postmodernity, they can now be situated in a still larger historical dynamic, which, like the present, has not existed for all eternity but only acts as if it did: this is, of course, the history called capitalism. The sense—equally modern and postmodern—of the present’s endlessness thus turns out to be the ventriloquized claim of capital itself. The “EXIT” that Patrick seeks out in vain is not, after all, an escape from a 1980s of his own construction; it is an escape from capital’s ceaseless *durée*, of which the hollow culture of the 1980s is merely a recent and extreme iteration. The dialectics of the present, both trying and failing to periodize itself through the lens of the decade, make it possible to read the present and the past as self-consciously distinct but ideologically continuous moments in the modern and modernizing—ongoing and self-reproducing—history of capitalism.

In response to the claim that “we cannot not periodize,” Ellis’s decade novels—positioned at the intersection between the present and history, between everyday life and external judgment, between the vexed immediacy of realism and the ex post facto perspective of historical narrative—show how the present always threatens to resolve Jameson’s double negative into a single one. My contention has been that the decade’s negation has a crucially positive dimension. The present conjures an angel of history propelled not by the approaching “storm” of progress but by a sea of seemingly constant change, doomed not simply to record “one single catastrophe” but to struggle in vain to revise every catastrophic word as it is recorded.<sup>18</sup> The ironic temporality of capitalism is buoyed by accelerated change: capital continually transforms itself in order to stay the same, to remain actively under the sign of ever-expanding accumulation. Yet the same paradoxical experience of change structures the contemporaneity of contemporary life,

<sup>17</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962), 53.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257–58.

the constantly shifting boundaries of the present. The double life of the present, which both adopts and repels periodization and which is suspended precariously, as Krishna warns, between the flow of history and the abyss of eternity, thus orients us within the *longue durée* of capital itself. While Harootunian dismisses “presumptions of continuity” as the ideology of historians (*Disquiet*, 15), I claim that they express the essential retort that the present gives to the privilege of retrospection. In Ellis’s decade novels the present resists both the pull of eternity and the lure of self-containment by recognizing itself as a contingent moment in the continuous march of capitalism. Neither naturalizing nor eternalizing, the revelation of continuity levels a ceaselessly relevant critique. Despite their claims to the contrary, those billboards, which line not only the highways of *Glamorama*’s mural but the two novels’ shared vision of late capitalist life, have not always been there, and this means that their “answers” will not, finally, have the last word.

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**Theodore Martin** is a PhD candidate in English at the University of California, Berkeley. His dissertation, “Contemporary Drift: The History of the Present and the Afterlife of Genre,” investigates the relation between the accretive histories of genre and the unstable status of the contemporary as a category of literary history.