

*Baelo-Allué, Sonia. Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction : Writing Between High and Low Culture*

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9993>

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou, "Baelo-Allué, Sonia. *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction : Writing Between High and Low Culture*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2013-1, document 8, Online since 17 April 2013, connection on 09 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9993>

---

This text was automatically generated on 9 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

---

# Baelo-Allué, Sonia. *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction : Writing Between High and Low Culture*

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou

---

## REFERENCES

London and New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. Pp.228 (Works Cited and Index included). ISBN 978-1-4411-0791-6.

- 1 Sonia Baelo-Allué's monograph with the title *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* was published in 2011, a year during which two other volumes about Ellis's works emerged: Naomi Mandel's edited collection of essays with the title *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park* and Georgia Colby's monograph entitled *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary*. The publication of these three volumes in the same year with two of them emerging from the same publisher constitutes a major event if one considers the controversy Ellis's books have generated between editors, publishers, reviewers and literary analysts since the appearance of Ellis's first novel in 1985. As regards Baelo-Allué's work, this constitutes a well-informed and well-documented study that offers not only good food for thought but also multiple insights into Ellis's works for scholars, university students, educators and the general reader with an interest in contemporary American fiction.
- 2 Situating the discussion of Ellis's fiction writing within the interstices of high and low culture, Baelo-Allué's commentary sheds light on the multiple sources Ellis draws his material from as well as on those dichotomies, divisions and labels that often fuel literary appraisals or condemnations. Through a contextualized reading of his novels, Baelo-Allué reveals the literary "battles" that for a number of years placed Ellis's works in the margins of literary taste but at the top of bestselling success. By focusing on *Less*

than *Zero*, *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* that, as she writes in her introduction, “constitute the back-bone of Ellis’s production” (3), Baelo-Allué highlights the transgressive, ambiguous and hybrid character of his narratives by juxtaposing close textual analysis with secondary criticism and newspaper reviewing with popular culture referencing. Her five-part study concludes with the evaluation of Ellis’s *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms* in an attempt to signal a turning point both in Ellis’s writing career and critics’ stance towards his works.

- 3 In particular, in the first part of her book Baelo-Allué attempts to trace the construction of Ellis’s image as a celebrity author as well as the critical reception of his works under the “brat pack,” “postmodern” and “blank fiction” label. Starting with a brief introductory overview of the celebrity author image in American letters, Baelo-Allué moves on to Ellis’s case and his emergence in the American contemporary literary scene. This is examined in conjunction with the major changes that took place in the publishing landscape of the 1980s in the U.S. market by the transition from small-scale publishing houses to media conglomerates as well as from copyright to trademark authorship. This resulted in the adoption of book-marketing strategies that primarily paid attention to commercial success rather than literary value. Caught up in such a transition, Ellis’s literary merit was often overlooked since it was his image and lifestyle that prevailed through the media and not his writing profile. Since early 1990s, literary critics such as Elizabeth Young, Graham Caveney, and James Annesley among others have tried to comment on the literary devices Ellis’s works resort to in an effort to highlight their literary qualities. Although the critical studies that emerged at the time contributed massively to the acknowledgement of Ellis’s writing style, they again concentrated on certain of its literary traits. This led to the classification of his works either as “brat pack,” “postmodern” or “blank,” which prevented the promotion of their thematic and stylistic diversity.
- 4 In the second part of her study, Baelo-Allué turns to the examination of Ellis’s first novel title, *Less Than Zero*, published in 1985. Commencing with the reception of the novel, she then turns to its mass media and mass culture connections so as to proceed with its writing style and aesthetics. Situated between new journalism techniques, MTV culture and eminent literary influences (Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote), *Less than Zero* exposes the American youth culture of the 1980s, its habits, lifestyle and controversies in the midst of a highly-commodified, mass media-driven and consumerist society. Even though many reviewers attempted to promote it as a mere autobiographical piece of writing, this book does so much more than being a reality checker of its own writer’s life experiences. What critics found hard to decode and come to terms with is its blatant and detached style in its portrayal of a whole generation presented to be obsessed with drugs, sex and death. Borrowing from the mass and popular culture that surrounds it, Ellis in *Less Than Zero* resorts to the use of short sentences, song lyrics, strong images, present tenses, juxtapositions between present incidents and past memories, repetitions and fragments so as to communicate the crisis of values that characterized American society at the time. Some critics tried to view *Less Than Zero* as a continuation of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. However, as Baelo-Allué attests, this is not a coming-of-age novel since “no rebellion is sought from [the characters] because they have nothing to rebel against” (76). Some others insisted on its classification as a model of blank fiction by commenting on the passivity, disengagement, and distancing of its characters. However, what matters in this case is not the mere portrayal or description of the

novel's blank style. After all, in accordance with Baelo-Allué's discussion, *Less Than Zero* is the by-product of cultural emptiness or blankness itself.

- 5 The third part of Baelo-Allué's analysis concentrates on Ellis's controversial novel *American Psycho* published in 1991. What initially pushed this novel to the top of the bestsellers list, as Baelo-Allué explains, was the controversy that surrounded its publication and the uproar this generated. With the book contract moving from Simon & Schuster to Vintage Contemporary Series, this marks an interesting transition from prestigious hardback to culturally significant paperback publications. This combined with reactions coming from booksellers and feminist activists in addition to negative newspaper reviews placed the novel at the center of public attention. This was reinforced by the comments of eminent writers, such as Fay Weldon and Normal Mailer, who although spoke in favor of or against Ellis's novel, they acknowledged the need for the publication of books with great confrontational power. Moving from its reception to its writing aesthetics, Baelo-Allué effectively comments on the formula Ellis resorts to here so as to enact his cultural criticism. Borrowing from the serial-killer genre, Ellis constructs a narrative that departs from the genre conventions so as to confront readers not just with a series of graphically described crimes but with the apathy and anomie of culture itself. As Baelo-Allué explains, Patrick Bateman, the main character and narrator in *American Psycho*, becomes the embodiment of deranged success. Being a well-off and respectable businessman, he is nothing more than a commodity himself. His serial-killings become the extension of the "serial consumerism of [his] surrounding culture" (Baelo-Allué 95). By resorting to major studies as well as literary examples in the serial-killer genre, Baelo-Allué examines Ellis's novel alongside the mass culture of consumption that generates it. Serial-killings and well-known brand names feature in Ellis's novel side by side. The extremity of its violent scenes and its excessive but deadpan referencing to consumerist products serve both as a criticism of late 1980s culture and a pronouncement of the extremity of culture itself. Baelo-Allué talks about Ellis's "aesthetics of serial killing" in an attempt to highlight what the novel actually exposes: cultural anonymity, economic inequality, indifference, and commodification of violence through mass media seriality. By denouncing political correctness, Ellis constructs a novel that transgresses moral, cultural and literary norms so as to attack cultural complacency and passivity from within.
- 6 In the fourth part of her book, Baelo-Allué turns to Ellis's *Glamorama*, published in 1998. In this novel, Ellis moves from mere consumption of objects to character branding as well as from an atonal or blank narrative to a deconstructive conspiracy thriller formula. As with his other books, *Glamorama* remains equally ambiguous with regard to its literary intentions and connections with external reality. "Whether [it] was a criticism of the shallow celebrity world or part of that same world was one of the most debated aspects in the reviews" (129), Baelo-Allué notes. What is interesting about this novel though is the way it mixes celebrity fact with celebrity fiction so as to point towards the manufacturing power and artificiality of the media spectacle. Ellis's main character here, Victor Ward, moves beyond Patrick Bateman's repetitive compulsiveness, as noted in *American Psycho*. With *Glamorama*'s storyline taking place both in New York and Europe, it appears that everything in it is nothing more than a fake re-enactment of lived experience. Baelo-Allué through close textual analysis shows how certain generic conventions, as regards the novel of manners and conspiracy thriller, that Ellis draws on in *Glamorama* turn into metafictional devices so as to

highlight the artificiality of the whole narrative by erasing its anchoring to reality. *Glamorama* does not just attack celebrity culture from within, as it would happen in Ellis's previous novels, but it stands for celebrity superficiality and pretentiousness itself.

- 7 In the fifth and final part of her study, Baelo-Allué focuses on *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms* published in 2005 and 2010 respectively. Both novels seem to be borrowing from other genres: *Lunar Park* from "horror films, TV reality shows, horror comics and Stephen King novels" (Baelo-Allué 188), while *Imperial Bedrooms* from hard-boiled and noir fiction. What distinguishes these two novels from all the previous titles is their intertextual and popular culture references that somehow bring Ellis's oeuvre full circle. Baelo-Allué refers to the characters from all other Ellis's novels plus Ellis himself that readers encounter in the pages of *Lunar Park* in addition to the celebrity, MTV, and song information one finds dispersed in the narrative of *Imperial Bedrooms*. Baelo-Allué characteristically refers to the various literary phases Ellis's writing has gone through in the twenty-five years of its development ranging from minimalistic and blank to metafictional and minimalistic style again but with a twist each time. Through her careful and well-referenced commentary, Baelo-Allué presents the techniques Ellis resorts to in his last two works, highlighting in this way both his self-parodic and transgressive, in terms of generic influences, writing style that positions him among the controversial voices of the contemporary American literary scene.
- 8 Throughout her volume, Baelo-Allué has managed to approach Ellis's works from various perspectives. Starting in each part with the reception of every novel under consideration, she has attempted to shed light on the thematic and generic multiplicity as well as complexity that have characterized Ellis's writing style since the beginning due to the misinterpretations and accusations it has generated. By placing the study of Ellis's main novel titles within the broader context of high and low culture and drawing on diverse sources of criticism – interviews, newspaper reviews, academic studies – Baelo-Allué successfully highlights the gaps that exist when it comes to the evaluation of cultural production. Ellis's case has often been considered too extreme to handle due to the violence and abuse – sexual, criminal, consumerist, emotional, and moral – that has featured in the pages of his novels. What is important to pinpoint, however, is what these novels often reveal about the unacknowledged social and cultural forces that shape up attitudes, ideologies, perceptions and instincts in the contemporary western world. Baelo-Allué rightly comments that, "high and low culture is a binary opposition that for decades has brought order to cultural productions" (198). With writers such as Ellis, one comes to appreciate that what matters is not the classification or categorization of literary or artistic expression but the confrontation with what we often consider unrepresentable. This becomes particularly important in a culture that is dominated by media exposure and media manipulation. Baelo-Allué with great clarity lets readers draw their own conclusions with regard to Ellis's works, making them aware at the same time of the contradictions that this process entails and creates.

---

AUTHOR

**TATIANI G. RAPATZIKOU**

School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki