Sonia Baelo-Allué

Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction

Writing Between High and Low Culture

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For Luis Miguel

Contents

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1

Introduction

'The book (American Psycho) is totally hateful – in effect, a how-to manual on the torture and dismemberment of women.'

(John Leo 1990: 23)

'It is a book with ambition, a book of serious intent. ... Think of Pasolini, of Genet.'

(Sonny Mehta in Reuter 1990: 10)

'Mr. Ellis is a confused, sick young man with a deep hatred of women who will do anything for a fast buck.'

(Tammy Bruce in Cohen 1991b: C18)

'This man Bret Easton Ellis is a very, very good writer. He gets us to a "T". And we can't stand it. It's our problem, not his.'

(Fay Weldon 1991: C1)

These four introductory quotations raise some intriguing questions: How can a novel be a how-to manual on torture but also a book of serious ambition? How can the same writer be a confused, sick young misogynist and a very good writer capable of portraying our society in every detail? Can any of these opposites be reconciled? The fact that an author such as Bret Easton Ellis has received glowing praise together with harsh condemnation can be explained by the insistence of many reviewers and critics on measuring him against artificially dichotomized standards: his fiction is either pornographic gore or serious postmodern literature. This attitude contrasts with the general blurring of high and low culture that we have been experiencing in the arts at least since the early 1960s. Both literary author and celebrity, Ellis represents a type of contemporary writer who falls between the high and the low, who uses popular culture references, styles and subject matter in a literary fiction that aspires to be more than mere entertainment. His case points up the many contradictions in contemporary culture and underlines the need for a balanced analysis of his fiction which takes into account the author's multiple ascription in cultural terms and the fact that he draws on sources from both 'high' and 'low' culture. This book attempts to delve into these contradictions by examining the work of Bret Easton Ellis, a key author in contemporary American literature. Whether his fiction poses a

sustained social criticism or is the result of modern society's maladies or both at the same time deserves to be considered in detail through both a textual and a contextual analysis of his fiction. Only after carrying out this analysis can we start to make sense of the opening quotations and the ambiguities that Ellis and other contemporary writers create in their embrace of popular culture.

This book has three aims. First, I propose to situate Ellis's fiction within the current panorama of US fiction and culture by studying the reception of his most important works both in mass market newspapers and magazines and in specialized academic journals and studies. Both the high and the low sides of the market have focused on Ellis and their sometimes contrasting approaches can throw light not only on his oeuvre but on the culture which has received it. Second, I intend to analyse Ellis's own use of popular and mass culture in his fiction, which ranges from the use of brand names, celebrity names, films, TV programmes and music, to the use of genres such as the coming-of-age novel, the serial killer formula and the conspiracy thriller as structures to be deconstructed and changed. Third, I propose to close-read Ellis's novels with the help of narratological tools while also analysing their place in the literary field. Special attention will be paid to the author's use of minimalist, metafictional and blank fiction techniques.

To date, Ellis has written seven books of fiction: *Less Than Zero* (1985), *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), *American Psycho* (1991), *The Informers* (1994), *Glamorama* (1998), *Lunar Park* (2005) and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010). All his novels explore the apathy, boredom and alienation of affluent white Americans, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. His first novel, *Less Than Zero*, published when he was 21, was written while he was still a student at Bennington College in Vermont and dealt with the life of a college freshman who returns home to Los Angeles for Christmas break. The success of the novel turned him into 'the voice of a generation' and within weeks of publication the book was being discussed by critics, newspaper columnists and film executives as if it were a state-of-the-union address. The year it came out it sold about 50,000 copies, becoming a bestseller.

Two years after the publication of *Less Than Zero* Ellis wrote *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), which deals with the romantic vacillations of three college students in New Hampshire. Ellis went deeper and deeper through surfaces, showing the shallow life of students at Camden College, a fictional New England liberal arts college. The book provided a devastating account of loneliness and isolation in college as the different characters recount their own stories through an alternate first-person narration. The literary style was more carefully constructed and complex than *Less Than Zero*'s but the reception of this book was not as impressive since critics considered it less arresting and original, a reworking of the themes of his first one. *American Psycho* (1991) brought Ellis back into the spotlight of American letters. It caused a great deal of controversy since it was a politically incorrect novel at a time when political correctness seemed to engulf everything. The book is a serial killer's monologue through whose voice

we learn not only about his horrific crimes but also his daily routine and life as a yuppie executive in Manhattan. Ellis's next publication was a collection of short stories called *The Informers* (1994), a book of interrelated vignettes of Los Angeles life in the 1980s which deals with people who suffer from the death of hope and feeling in their lives. Ellis's usual subjects of consumer excess, blankness and violence link the different stories which incorporate vampires, college students, murderers and the wealthy.

Glamorama (1998) deals with celebrity culture and the worship of popular icons in America. Ellis's previous books are set in Manhattan and Los Angeles, but *Glamorama* is also set in London, Paris, Milan and the middle of the Atlantic. The range of protagonists extends to supermodels, teenagers, nightclub owners, terrorists, spies and drug addicts. However, the most important novelty of this book is the use of a plot. The novel is a Pynchon-like conspiracy thriller that deconstructs itself because of the excessive entanglement of the plot, the overload of information and the metafictional tone deployed. From the minimalist plot and shallow characters in *Less Than Zero*, Ellis has moved to longer and more elaborate stories in a self-conscious mode of writing. *Lunar Park* (2005) is good proof of this evolution since it is the story of a writer called Bret Easton Ellis who wrote *American Psycho* and is now married and lives in the suburbs. In the novel there is an obvious play between reality and fiction, a juxtaposition of real events with fictional inventions in a gothic tale of copycat *American Psycho* killings, toys that are apparently alive and a lurking stalker. Ellis's most recent novel is a *Less Than Zero* sequel titled *Imperial Bedrooms* – the name of a 1982 album by Elvis Costello. With this novel Ellis seems to come full circle after 25 years, revisiting the characters of *Less Than Zero* and the minimalist style of his first novel, and at the same time reinforcing the literary universe that he has created.

In this book I will mainly focus on the three novels that constitute the backbone of Ellis's production – *Less Than Zero*, *American Psycho*, and *Glamorama* – but obviously there will be references to his other novels, especially his most recent ones, *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, since they rework many of the author's most characteristic topics and tropes. *Less Than Zero* was the first novel he wrote and it brought him instant fame at 21. *American Psycho* is his best-known novel, a bestseller that both awoke public debate on the role of literature and its limits and earned him death threats and a boycott. *Glamorama* was his long-awaited return and most ambitious and sophisticated work, where Ellis exposes the celebrity culture he seems to both love and hate. *The Rules of Attraction* deals with the same topics as *Less Than Zero* and will be briefly considered in its own right. *The Informers* is a transitional collection of short stories that Ellis wrote at the same time as he was writing *American Psycho*, although it would be published later under pressure from his publishers, who needed something in the market after the huge success of *American Psycho*. It did not arouse much public interest and turned into an anticlimactic disappointment when compared to the previous novel. The analysis of *Lunar Park* and the brief introduction to

Imperial Bedrooms will bring up to date the record of Ellis's role in American literature.

All Ellis's novels are interrelated, since they share similar concerns and characters. Clay, the narrator of *Less Than Zero*, turns up in *The Rules of Attraction,* where one of the main characters (Sean Bateman) has a brother called Patrick, whose life is detailed in *American Psycho* and who briefly reappears in both *Glamorama* and *Lunar Park*. The whole cast of *Less Than Zero* come back in *Imperial Bedrooms*. In a similar way, Victor Ward, Jamie Fields, Lauren Hynde and Bertrand Ripleis were college students in *The Rules of Attraction* and are main characters in *Glamorama*. In *Lunar Park* Donald Kimball (the detective in *American Psycho*) is the detective who interrogates the character of Bret Easton Ellis (the greatest creation of all) in connection with a series of killings carried out in an *American Psycho*-like style. Ellis has even borrowed characters from fellow novelists, for example, Alison Poole – the main character in Jay McInerney's *Story of My Life* (1988) – who makes a brief appearance in *American Psycho* as a surviving victim of Bateman, and who reappears in *Glamorama*. This repeated use of characters in different novels helps Ellis in the creation of a universe inhabited by the rich and spoiled where characters seem to grow older but remain just as immature and shallow as before.

Ellis's books do not just share characters, they also have a very characteristic set of topics: shallowness, vanity, narcissism, an obsession with surfaces, juxtaposition of trivial and important things, an affectless narratorial tone, unreliable narrators, flat characters, an apparent lack of critical distance, an awareness of the narrative's own literary construction, a parodic tone and references to popular culture and fiction. Ellis's tendency to combine both metafictional forms with a wide use of generic fiction and popular culture is especially interesting. This mixture of styles lies behind many of the questions raised about his status as a prestigious writer and about literature's changing position in the contemporary cultural field. An analysis of his career cannot ignore these issues, and may help clarify Ellis's representative role in contemporary American literature.

This book is divided into five parts. The first one focuses on Ellis's various connections with both high and low culture. I first deal with Ellis's ambiguous position as a celebrity author and with the way each novel has contributed to his growing fame. He has blurred boundaries both in the subjects he has chosen to deal with in his fiction and in the way he has carved out his career, not unlike the way a star in the entertainment media might. His case has to be considered in the context of the changing world of book publishing which fears being taken over by the entertainment corporations, but which is also aware of the need for high sales and more innovative marketing campaigns. I will also place Ellis within the different literary currents in the contemporary American literary scene, focusing especially on blank fiction, which I believe provides the best context within which to understand the author's work.

The second part deals with *Less Than Zero*. I first analyse the reception of the novel which was divided between those who thought Ellis was heir to Fitzgerald,

Hemingway and Salinger and those who considered Ellis a product of promotional hype. Thus, *Less Than Zero* brought him, on the one hand, commercial success and the attention of mass market magazines, and, on the other, the respect of many critics for capturing the speech of teenagers and the banality of their world. In the next chapter I go beyond Ellis's incorporation of popular culture in the novel (music, TV programmes, films, fashion and other consumer choices) and focus on how he makes literary forms of them, transforming their style into narrative prose. In the final chapter of this part I consider the novel's controversial subject matter and Ellis's way of tackling it. In generic terms the novel plays with the conventions of the coming-of-age novel and displays a lack of a traditional condemning narrative voice, while leaving room for social criticism in very ambiguous ways.

In the third part I analyse *American Psycho,* Ellis's most controversial novel. First, I focus on its reception and on how cultural critics and magazine writers across the political spectrum took issue with the book's publication. In this debate the question of whether the work was serious art or mere pulp fiction was latent in the arguments in its defence and its attack. Second, I analyse Ellis's use of popular and mass culture in the novel and the ways in which the seriality of the killer's murders is linked to the seriality provided by different forms of mass culture: talk shows, daily news, advertisements, pop music, magazines, pornography and consumerism in general. Finally, I deal with the way *American Psycho* deconstructs the serial-killer generic conventions and how 1980s New York yuppie society is depicted in the novel, becoming an unwitting accomplice to the serial killer crimes.

In the fourth part, *Glamorama*'s reception is first considered, paying special attention to the contradictions and ambiguities that emerge from this study since *Glamorama* was hardly treated as a novel but as a reflection of the author's shallow lifestyle. The next chapter considers Ellis's use of celebrity culture within the framework of a novel of manners. TV programmes, magazine articles and photos are of great importance in a world where celebrities construct their personality through pseudo-events and media images, which can only lead to a world of the hyperreal and fake identities. In the final chapter of this part I analyse the novel by taking into account the other genre that frames it: the conspiracy thriller, a genre that usually seeks to restore social order by connecting events and disclosing hidden plots. *Glamorama* reworks these conventions since society as depicted in the novel is not naturally good but a celebrity-obsessed New York and the hero is a paranoid and passive person, incapable of disentangling the conspiracy.

The final part of this book, in which his last two novels are analysed, brings us up to date with Ellis's career. Starting with the study of *Lunar Park*'s initial reception, I consider its marketing campaign, its different influences – ranging from Shakespeare to Stephen King – the connections with his previous novels and the extent of his departure from his characteristic blank style. The analysis of the novel serves as review of the author's main motifs and stylistic choices since

it offers an interesting metafictional game in which Ellis becomes the protagonist of the story, constructed out of the personalities of his most distinctive fictional characters. However, the Ellis character evolves out of these depictions and is able to openly express his feelings and learn from his mistakes. The final chapter of this book briefly considers *Imperial Bedrooms* and the way Ellis seems to have closed his 25-year literary career by returning to the characters and style of *Less Than Zero*, both closing and reinforcing the circle around the alternative literary universe he created during these years.

Both the chapters in this book dealing with the reception of the author's works and those dealing with the use of popular culture show that the blurring of the high and low, though usual and characteristic of our present culture, is still ambiguously done and not completely accepted in certain milieux. Ellis's hybrid case exemplifies the many contradictions that the high/low culture debate still displays. His use of popular and mass culture genres and references, together with minimalist, blank fiction and metafictional techniques, has led to discomfort on both sides of the cultural spectrum. The representation of torture, rape, murder, sex and drugs in the name of serious literature and for a bestseller readership has caused much of the controversy that his works have encountered. Hence, this book is an attempt to grasp the context which has surrounded Ellis's literary production, bearing in mind the changes that have taken place in the literary market, but it is also an attempt to analyse his most important novels as the literary works they are. As a result, the ambiguities and uncertainties of the postmodernist transgression of boundaries resurface and prove that this indeed remains a contentious issue.

Part 1

Between the High and the Low

2

The Low: Ellis in the Celebrity World

Ellis represents a new generation of writers who are not afraid to create a celebrity status in order to make a name in literature, and who in their novels display the dangers and benefits of openly combining high and low culture. Celebrity authors represent a midpoint between high culture (literature for the elite) and popular culture (celebrity culture). It is obvious that the role of authors cannot be the same in times of very sharply divided high and low cultural categories as in times of blurred boundaries and a consumer-oriented economy. In this social atmosphere celebrity authors have flourished, a phenomenon that some literary critics interpret as a threat to the 'sacred' field of literature. The role of celebrity writers brings forth questions such as the relationship between small printing houses and big corporations, or between literature and the marketplace. Bret Easton Ellis exemplifies the benefits and side effects, the dangers and values, of the celebrity author in contemporary culture.

2.1 The Emergence of the Celebrity Author

Surprising as it may seem, ever since the early nineteenth century – when the professionalisation of authorship and the rise of literature as a commodity began – American authors established a close relationship with both the system of market exchange and the advertising industry. Some of the forms of popular literature that appeared between the 1840s and the 1890s – such as the story paper, the dime novel and the cheap library – represented the emerging literary industry of the nineteenth century, a 'fiction factory' where dime novels were seen as commodities (Denning 1987: 17–26). Advertising played an important role in the development of this kind of literature and in the creation of authors as personalities: it fostered a trend for books to be published in serial form accompanied by advertisements; it subsidized magazines dealing with literary personalities and sponsored other related cultural activities. The improvement in communication – through technological innovations such as the telegraph, the rotary press and photography – also contributed to a new cult of literary personality (Moran 2000: 16). While increasing literacy, the diminishing

price of books and the ideological emphasis of a democratic culture made it possible for writers to reach a wider swathe of readers (Cawelti 1977: 165). In the mid-nineteenth century the word 'celebrity' was first used to refer to a famous person, and authors were among the main celebrities because the printed media – books, magazines and newspapers – were dominant. In the twentieth century, the advent of film, radio, TV and popular music was to produce other types of celebrities, those depicted in *Glamorama*.

Literary authors promoted themselves through the lecture circuit and the popular press. The lecture circuit reached its peak in the 1870s and 1880s, providing authors with a source of income. In fact, it developed a system of national celebrities thanks to the press, which reported on the lecturers and sometimes reprinted their speeches, thus creating a number of recognizable names. Charles Dickens's and Mark Twain's tours received widespread media coverage, comparable to that of The Beatles in the early 1960s (Cawelti 1977: 166). In the 1880s the cheap, mass-market, illustrated weekly was created. Later, magazines such as *Time* (1923–) and *Life Magazine* (1936–) somewhat transformed the way authors had hitherto been treated. By visiting writers in their places of work and residence, they began to deal not so much with the authors' tours and speeches as with the links between the authors' life and art. They created a new kind of celebrity, closer to that of stage and screen stars. This kind of celebrity, at least in its early and more innocent stage, was regarded as a form of 'egalitarian distinction' (Gamson 1994: 31), or as the 'democratic myth' of celebrity (Marshall 1997: 9). Anyone could be discovered and become a star as long as that person had the gift, the talent or the personality. Authors had the power to embody this democratic myth of celebrity, and, accordingly, magazines were not only interested in what made authors special (their art) but in what made them common (their life and history).

However, not just any author qualified to represent the democratic myth of celebrity. Journalists would profile and interview commercially successful authors, highlighting their sales figures, their position on the *New York Times* bestseller list, the size of print runs and the profitability of subsidiary rights, for instance. At the same time, these authors were expected to have serious 'literary' aims, which were attested to through their winning major literary awards, participation in commercial book clubs and favourable reviews in the *New York Times Book Review* and *Saturday Review*. Commercial success seasoned with literary quality was the successful recipe, Hemingway being a good example of this tension (Moran 2000: 27). For example, John Raeburn sees Ernest Hemingway as 'both a respected novelist and a *bona fide* celebrity, a double distinction enjoyed by no other writer of his generation' (1974: 91). He obtained his initial fame from the recognition of his literary achievements, but he confirmed and increased his renown by making public his private life. Cawelti also considers Hemingway, together with Norman Mailer, perfect examples of writers who used their celebrity persona as an integral part of their art. In fact, Hemingway's public persona was in certain ways a real-life version of some of the characters in his novels (1977: 171). This is also true of Ellis. After the publication of *Less*

Than Zero, he was seen as one of the jaded Californian kids who populate his novel; after *American Psycho*, he seemed to endorse serial killing, at least according to some feminists, as well as a type of serial consumer obsessed with partying and eating out. After *Glamorama*, he was a fatuous celebrity interested in superficiality and trivia. In *Lunar Park* it is Ellis himself who turns the narrator of the novel into a version of himself, mocking the usual confusion between narrator and author present in many reviews of his novels. It is to be expected that something similar will happen with *Imperial Bedrooms* since the characters in the novel are the same age as Ellis and live in Los Angeles, where Ellis moved back some years ago. As can be seen, like Hemingway and Mailer, Ellis has used his celebrity persona as an integral part of his art. Unlike in Hemingway's case, however, the reflection of Ellis's persona in his art seems to have worked to his detriment, rather than enhancing his figure in literary circles.

A possible explanation for this negative perception may arise from the fact that the idyllic conception of celebrity as a democratic myth has changed as promotional and publicity methods have become more and more obvious and intricate. In the case of film stars, the idea that fame is an artificial creation of studios in search of box office sales has grown. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, cultural conservatives and Marxist critics such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) denounced the domination of the masses who had become passive consumers and blindly identified with stars. In the same vein, in his 1967 classic, *The Society of Spectacle*, Guy Debord describes how, in his opinion, the spectacle and its stars fosters a lack of critical awareness. However, although people are prone to identify with stars, stardom is in fact reached by only a few, enough to keep alive the artificial myth of potential universal success. Besides, from 1901 to 1941 there was a progressive change of interest, from 'heroes of production', such as business leaders or politicians, to 'heroes of consumption', mainly movie stars and sport celebrities (Lowenthal 1961: 109–140). In this line, Daniel J. Boorstin formulated the distinction between heroes (known for their achievements) and celebrities (known for their image or trademark) (1961: 61). Celebrities are people known for their 'well-knownness', a definition that still holds true since one of the most prevalent ideas about celebrities nowadays is that they are shallow, artificially constructed, nonproductive, consumable and interchangeable.

Horkheimer, Adorno, Lowenthal, Boorstin and Debord were concerned with celebrities who had nothing to offer but their image. For them, the differences between celebrities and serious authors were clear. Celebrities were idols of consumption: they 'sold' the values of lifestyle. Literary authors, on the other hand, should be idols of production according to these critics: they produced their literary art, their writings. While celebrities were brand names and mass-produced, interchangeable commodities, authors were talented people who had an unmistakable style of their own. Whereas celebrities were known for their 'well-knownness', authors were known for their writing. Many celebrities became famous thanks to the visual media, since image was all they had to sell (their exchange value); authors became popular because of their work (their

use value). These critics were perpetuating a romantic image of the author as an individual creative genius of original works. For Joshua Gamson, the binary oppositions they were trying to maintain were: surface versus substance; image versus reality; irrelevance versus truth; imitation and copying versus originality and imagination; passivity versus involvement; lifestyle and consumption versus work and production (1994: 6–7).

However, if we analyse the contemporary cultural arena, it is apparent that many of these binary oppositions no longer hold true. The fear is now, especially over the last few decades, that mass consumption has completely taken over high culture and authors are now closer to being seen as film stars than as prestigious literary creators. Literature is now part of a consumer-oriented culture and even an active participant in a struggle for its own survival. For Jeremy Rifkin this responds to a more general trend whereby the cultural sphere is being pulled into the commercial sphere. From a production-oriented capitalism that emphasizes saving, capital formation, organization of the modes of production and disciplining workforces, we have moved into a consumer-oriented capitalism. This form of capitalism also includes culture, which has openly become a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace. This is a culture industrially produced for mass consumption, since the arts have been removed from the museum and put into the marketplace (2000: 143). As Rifkin observes, nowadays the old giants of the Industrial Age (Exxon, General Motors, USX and Sears) are being surpassed by the new giants of cultural capitalism (Microsoft, Viacom, Time Warner, Disney, Sony, Seagram, News Corporation, General Electric, Bertelsmann AG and PolyGram). The publishing industry has also experienced these changes, and, from the 1960s onward, has been increasingly drawn into the sphere of monopoly capital. It has thus been transformed from family-run houses to major publishers owned by multimedia parent companies.

The case of Simon & Schuster, the publishing house that, at the eleventh hour, refused to publish *American Psycho*, is illustrative. It was already part of Paramount Communications when, in 1995, Paramount and Viacom merged, bringing together Paramount's collection of 50,000 films, Simon & Schuster's 300,000 book titles, Blockbuster Entertainment's 500 music stores, Nickelodeon and MTV, as well as several theme parks and television and radio stations. In 1999 Viacom merged again with CBS, which made Viacom the industry leader in the media and entertainment fields. In 2005 the two companies split and the former Viacom was renamed CBS Corporation, which included CBS, The CW, CBS Radio, CBS Outdoor, Showtime, Simon & Schuster and most television assets formerly owned by the larger company. As a result, Simon & Schuster is now a division of the media conglomerate CBS Corporation, one of the four largest English-language publishers, but also a small piece in a huge multimedia company. This change from family-run houses to media conglomerates has brought about two side effects: planned marketing and pressure for commercial success.

Curiously enough, until recently book promotion was seen as inefficient. As Joe Moran remarks, there existed the widespread belief that books were all

distinct, unmarketable products, issued by publishers working for the love of literature rather than for mere financial gain (2000: 36). The importance of marketing has nevertheless grown in the last two decades, to the extent that cultural critics such as Andrew Wernick believe all available goods nowadays participate in the promotional condition of our culture. This logic of promotion is an all-pervasive and irresistible force affecting cultural goods; it now exists as a generalized social category and goes beyond mere advertising, marketing or public relations (2000: 302). In this cultural atmosphere, parent companies play an important role, since books are sold through mass media products owned by the same company, such as magazines, newspapers, the internet and radio and television stations.

Of all possible forms of publicity, publishers have promoted those that concentrate on the author, because they are cheap and effective. These inexpensive forms of promotion include magazine and newspaper features, television and radio appearances and author tours. The *New York Times* has even denounced the practice of some literary agents to provide, together with book proposals, videotapes of their clients, image being as important as writing when selling books (McDowell 1988). As Moran explains, 80 per cent of all published books are commercial failures; however, one bestseller in a season makes up for all losses. This is the book and the author that receive the greatest promotional effort, namely 'the six-figure print run, the lavish book jacket, the pressure on the news media, the ten-city tour, the television interviews, the advertisements, the four-color posters and bookstore displays' (2000: 38). The concentration on the author implies that only the most marketable and photogenic have a chance of being promoted. Ellis is one of these authors even though *Less Than Zero* was an unexpected success which did not have a huge promotional campaign. *The Rules of Attraction* did, but did not benefit from the free publicity generated by Ellis's pervasive image as a shallow brat pack member. *American Psycho* generated enormous amounts of free publicity but it did not have a promotional campaign as such because of the death threats the author received. However, it made Ellis a well-known name outside literary circles. *The Informers* was widely reviewed but, as it was just a collection of stories which Ellis had written when he was still a student, it was not the object of a huge promotional campaign. *Glamorama*, *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms* did receive the full promotional treatment, which even involved the introduction of new innovative marketing techniques, such as the creation of fake web pages, and thus confirmed Ellis as a celebrity author.

2.2 Ellis' Career as a Celebrity Author

Ellis's relationship with the celebrity world began in 1985, when he published his best-selling novel, *Less Than Zero,* at the age of 21. It sold about 50,000 copies in its first year of publication, and its success turned Ellis into 'the voice of a generation' and won him instant fame. Within weeks of publication the book

was being discussed by critics, newspaper columnists, and film executives. Ellis was interviewed by *People* magazine on 29 July 1985, together with Whitney Houston, as representatives of the next generation of American artists and entertainers; notice how both worlds were already inextricably linked. Even now he is profiled in newspapers as if his story were that of the classic celebrity discovered by someone who spotted his talent; as if he were a postmodern Lana Turner.

When interviewed by *People* in 1985 his profile was not only about *Less Than Zero* and its film adaptation, but also about his life as a student in California and the separation of his parents. Here we see the democratic myth of celebrity at work: Ellis was portrayed as both someone special (a writer) and someone with plenty of things in common with his potential readers. He did not belong to the celebrity world yet, so he did not hesitate to say that he didn't want the adaptation of his book to become a mainstream film; he would favour an independent movie. As Greg Bottoms suggests, he was talking to *People* magazine, which usually deals with image, celebrity and shallowness, 'like someone who wouldn't use *People* to line a bird cage' (1999). Since the publication of his first novel he has learned better.

Less Than Zero brought him, on the one hand, commercial success and the attention of magazines like *People*, and, on the other hand, it earned him the respect of many critics for capturing the speech of teenagers and the banality of their world. Being compared to Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Salinger, for a while Ellis was successful and prestigious, a combination that not all critics were ready to forgive. This honeymoon did not last long and critics gave full vent to their resentment with the publication of Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). The book was a complete failure and Ellis was pilloried in the press as much for his lifestyle as for his literary style. On top of this, and in the same year, the film adaptation of *Less Than Zero* was equally disastrous.

Besides, Ellis had started to act as a pretentious, fatuous celebrity. But what does that mean? In Julie Burchill's words:

> Stars behave as the newspapers and some racial memory tells them stars behave: wearing dark glasses into nightclubs, refusing to be photographed after six solid months of working nine to five – nine at night to five in the morning, that is – on their exposure, bursting into tears for no apparent reason, sleeping with famous pushovers and showing amazement and disgust when their sheath size is revealed to a sniggering public, eating and drinking themselves silly, getting divorced, punching photographers, getting remarried to someone half their age and twice their height, trying suicide on for size, retiring to a health farm, being Born Again and making comebacks. (1992: 133)

Ellis himself has admitted that when he was 21 he would give interviews drunk at lunch, and thought it was cool to smoke unfiltered cigarettes and not to take