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Scandals of Misreading: Serial Killer Shockers and Imaginative Resistance

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Abstract

In the winter of 1991, the frenzied scandal around Bret Easton Ellis's serial killer smash *American Psycho* overshadowed another, no less serious literary controversy. Published less than two months after Ellis's blockbuster, Dennis Cooper's transgressive queer classic *Frisk* may have been largely ignored in mainstream cultural outlets, but in the queer community the scandal was deadly serious. Seemingly connecting queer sexuality with serial murder and pedophilia, the novel incited intensely angry demands for censorship. The controversy culminated in a very public death threat against Cooper from members of Queer Nation, a gay rights group known for its shock tactics. The critical response has mostly dismissed the scandals surrounding the novels as based on a particular kind of misreading or misinterpretation. Both works use similar narrative strategies to shock and scandalize their audience but aim to mitigate this response through the strategic use of unreliable narration. While scholars have often made the argument that the violence in the novels should be interpreted as mere fantasies of their unreliable narrators, this kind of nuanced interpretation was wholly absent in the scandalized response to the novels. The common critical defense, however, is itself based on a misunderstanding of the scandals. Fictionality and narrative reliability as such have little to do with the responses of imaginative resistance and moral disgust prompted by the representation of extreme violence. In this article, I analyze and compare the public and scholarly receptions of the novels, highlighting how scholarly discourse has often overlooked how the novels anticipated and aimed to incite the scandalized public response they ultimately provoked.

Keywords: literary scandals; censorship; transgressive fiction; imaginative resistance; extreme fiction; Bret Easton Ellis; *American Psycho*; Dennis Cooper; *Frisk*

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1. Introduction

Misreading and misinterpretation play a central role in two of the most scandalous serial killer novels of the early 1990s—both in the fictional storyworlds and in the reception of the novels. Nearing the end of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), Patrick Bateman—the titular psychopath in question—reaches the apex of his novel-long nervous breakdown. He is huddled up sobbing in his Wall Street office after a murderous rampage through the streets of New York, watching a SWAT team storm the wrong building across from the one he is hiding in. Clutching the phone, making one of his numerous confessions throughout the novel (which is, after all, a confession in itself), Bateman leaves an extended, detailed list of his crimes on his lawyer's answering machine. But the message is misread as a morbid joke. Later, Bateman accidentally bumps into the lawyer at a trendy downtown restaurant, only to hear that his message was hilarious. His confession was simply not

believable, because Bateman—the lawyer keeps insistently mistaking him for someone else despite Bateman's protestations—is too much of a "bloody ass-kisser" and "brown-nosing goody-goody" to be a psychopathic murderer (Ellis 1991, p. 387). No matter how much Bateman insists that he *is* the murderer, the lawyer is not convinced: not that Bateman is a killer, nor even that he is Bateman.

Similarly, the central image of Dennis Cooper's infamously bloody queer serial killer classic *Frisk* (1991) is a set of pornographic photographs that upend the life of thirteen-year-old Dennis, who'll grow up to become an aspiring author and serial killer. The photographs depict a young boy, alone in the pictures, set up in different poses—stone dead. The snuff photographs form the nucleus of Dennis's sexual fantasies from that point on. They go on "to completely direct or destroy my life in a way," Dennis tells us (Cooper 1991, p. 30). While at first Dennis believes the pictures to be real, he quickly finds out that they are in fact fake. A few years later, Dennis's boyfriend Julian picks up a boy for a three-way, and the boy turns out to be the model of the pictures Dennis has been obsessing about—still very much alive. He has misread the scene in the images as authentic, when the story they tell has been fictional all along. By this point, however, Dennis finds the damage has already been done. His sexuality is now completely controlled by an obsession with murdering his sexual partners.

These scenes of misreading prefigure the reception of the novels. Like in *Frisk*, contemporary readers took the fictional events as distressing enough to warrant real-life action. Both authors faced calls for censorship and received credible death threats. In the accusations against the novels and their authors, there seemed to be a misunderstanding of fictionality that manifested as a difficulty or as a reluctance to distinguish between fiction and reality. For instance, there was a campaign against Cooper that spread fliers insisting that the author "must die for the crime of killing gay boys in his books" (quoted in Stone 2018; see also Epstein 2001).

The academic reception of the novels, however, follows the model set by Bateman's lawyer in *American Psycho*. Since the narrators of the novels are deeply unreliable, scholars argue, there really is no violence at all in these intensely violent novels. The buckets of blood and gore in the grisly scenes of torture and murder are only figments of the narrators' imagination, so there's no need to worry about it.

Both responses are based on misreading. On the one hand, the contemporary critical response condemning the novels and demanding censorship is confused about the fictional status of the events in the novel. Contemporary readers and critics rhetorically blamed the actual authors for the fictional crimes of their protagonists. On the other hand, the scholarly discourse around *American Psycho* and *Frisk* misses the genuine ethical unease the novels deliberately invited. Both novels aim for shock value and intentionally transgressed the aesthetic and ethical boundaries of the literary field of the time. Moreover, the argument that the narrators' unreliability somehow neutralizes ethical concerns about the representation of extreme violence seems to ignore the fictionality of the novels as well. Whether or not the violent murders are real in the fictional world does not really make a difference. As Elisabeth Young, one of the first scholars to write about *American Psycho* notes, the reader must still go through extensive, realistic, and detailed scenes of horrific torture and murder (Young 1992, p. 116). Moreover, suspecting or denying the veracity of the novels' violent murder scenes does not change their ontological status. The murders are fictional, pure imagination from the beginning. The real question is not whether the murders happened—but why we insist that they didn't.

In this article, then, I'll begin by examining the reception of the novels both with the general audience and in academia. I'll then go on to analyze the unwillingness to deal with the affective force of the violence in the novels, which manifests both as the scandalized

response of the contemporary audience as well as the scholarly tendency to emphasize the unreliable narration in the novels. I'll argue that both responses are the results of imaginative resistance, a widely discussed phenomenon in analytic aesthetics that refers to audiences' comparative unease with works that transgress their ethical boundaries.

2. Don't Trust the Psycho: Scandalous Unreliability in American Psycho

Just like Patrick Bateman has become a perennial figure in American popular culture, the story of the publication of *American Psycho* has become a near obligatory part of any piece of writing on Ellis. In the winter of 1990–1991, *American Psycho* stayed in the culture pages for months. The novel's publication was one of the biggest literary scandals of all time, which naturally guaranteed huge sales, and Ellis—already famous—became a first-tier literary celebrity.

While the sales were phenomenal, the initial critical response was brutal. Critics saw the book as an obscene attack on the rights of women, glorifying sexual violence and eroticizing the degradation of women (Wolf 1991, p. 34). Critics accused the book of being pornographic, vapid, meaningless, revolting, and the "essence of trash" (see, e.g., Miner 1990; Sheppard 1990; Manguel 1991; Yardley 1991). Critics like the *New York Times*'s Roger Rosenblatt, in his plainly titled review "Snuff This Book!", hoped that the novel would be redacted and emphatically recommended that no one buy or read the offending work (Rosenblatt 1990, p. 16).

The vitriol against Ellis wasn't limited to just reviews. The book's sales were initially restricted in several countries including Germany, New Zealand, and Australia. In Queensland even today, the book must be sold shrink-wrapped and only to adults, and the police have raided bookshops carrying it illegally (Sutton 2015). Ellis also received numerous detailed death threats, and the National Organization for Women (NOW) organized a boycott not just for *American Psycho*, but for all Random House publications.

Strangely, as a part of the boycott, NOW funded a phone line where a female voice read aloud one of the more gruesome passages of rape and murder in the novel, so that people could hear for themselves just how depraved Ellis's book really was. (For a more detailed account of the initial reception of *American Psycho* (see, e.g., Murphet 2002; Brien 2006; Serpell 2014, pp. 195–96).

Reacting to the initial critical response to *American Psycho*, the academic reception of the novel has from the beginning felt the need to respond to the accusations of misogyny and abhorrent violence. After all, if *American Psycho* merits scholarly interest, it must have some redeeming qualities. The scholarly response to the novel uses roughly three escalating and interrelated strategies that work to rehabilitate the novel from a work of tasteless violence to one of canonical literature.

First and most importantly, scholars have pointed out that Bateman is an extremely unreliable narrator. If Bateman's murders are just hallucinations, we cannot accuse him of being a horrific serial killer. We could perhaps even feel sorry for him and his (rather severe) psychological troubles (see, e.g., Phillips 2009, p. 63; Murphet 2002, p. 45; Blazer 2002; Giles 2006, p. 171; Mandel 2006, pp. 9–10).

Second, as noted by Namwali Serpell (Serpell 2014, p. 197), many critics have not contented themselves just to point out that Bateman is delusional, but also argue that Bateman does not exist at all, that he is nothing more than pure surface behind which there is no essence or truth (see, e.g., Freccero 1997, p. 51; Young 1992, p. 18; Storey 2005, p. 58). There's plenty of textual evidence for this interpretation. As the novel progresses, Bateman becomes more and more depersonalized. At one point he confesses to be "simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being," (Ellis 1991, p. 282); at another that "there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity,

something illusory. . . I am simply not there. . . . My self is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being."(Ellis 1991, pp. 367–77).

By arguing that Bateman does not exist, the inherent violence of the work is relegated to the status of a purely textual phenomenon, far removed from its ethical repercussions in the real world. Naturally, this argument is absolutely correct in stating that Bateman does not exist—he is a fictional character, after all. However, the question whether he exists in the fictional world of the novel seems beside the point when confronted with Bateman confidently describing in gruesome, graphic detail how he cuts out an escort's tongue with a knife or buries a hatchet into a colleague's skull, to give just a few examples. He might not exist, but he *is* narrating—and readers are still faced with all the blood and gore.

Third, a lot of critics implicitly argue that *American Psycho* is not really about violence at all. This seems to be the most common take today. According to them, the novel is rather a black satire on the consumerist tendencies of late-1980s America, the evils of liberal capitalism, or the vapid emptiness of the young, beautiful, and wealthy, and so on (see, e.g., Abel 2007, p. 72; Storey 2005, p. 58; Messier 2004, p. 81; Gardiner 2021; Matthews 2023). And the novel is all these things. Listings of what everybody is wearing, treatises on cheesy popular music, and non-violent (and often hilarious) scenes set in trendy restaurants, parties, gyms, and offices take up most of the textual space of the 400-page novel. The narration of the violent scenes that come up every now and then can be dismissed as unreliable—Bateman is probably just fantasizing—and, after all, Bateman does not even exist as such. This kind of perspective allows some critics to go as far as to claim that there really "is no violence in *American Psycho*" (Brusseau 1999, p. 44).

All of these approaches to Ellis's novel hinge on narrative unreliability. The violent scenes are understood to be nothing more than Bateman's fantasies, dreamed up by a psychologically disturbed untrustworthy narrator. Yet, especially when obsessively describing the world around him in meticulous detail, he doesn't really seem all that unreliable. Most of the time, he is a remarkably precise and detailed narrator. In fact, one of the most crucial elements of the text is Bateman's obsessive observation of detail all around him. Importantly, this is true of the violent scenes as well. He narrates his violent acts with the same measured calm with which he lists fashion brands other people are wearing. Take, for instance, the first passage where Bateman describes an act of violence in detail. After leaving a party, he wanders the streets of New York and comes upon a heavily inebriated homeless man and his dog and proceeds to mutilate them. Before this, the novel consists mostly of dialogue and endless listings of brands and clothing, but now the pacing slows down and the surreal and comedic tone of the preceding pages turns into nightmarish slasher horror:

> I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina. . . . His eye, burst open, hangs out of its socket and runs down his face and he keeps blinking which causes what's left of it inside the wound to pour out like red, veiny egg yolk. I grab his head with one hand and push it back and then with my thumb and forefinger hold the other eye open and bring the knife up and push the tip of it into the socket, first breaking its protective film so the socket fills with blood, then slitting the eyeball open sideways, and he finally starts screaming once I slit his nose in two, lightly spraying me and the dog in blood . . . Still kneeling, I throw a quarter in his face, which is slick and shiny with blood, both sockets hollowed out and filled with gore, what's left of his eyes literally oozing over his screaming lips in thick, webby strands. Calmly I whisper, "There's a quarter." (Ellis 1991, pp. 131–32)

Bateman the narrator mirrors Bateman the psychopath's calm, measured manner. The text carefully describes Bateman's acts in unhurried detail, just as he carefully blinds the man, making sure to leave him alive, suffering in a pool of blood, covered in gore. Leaving the scene, Bateman "can't help but start laughing" and he lingers "at the scene, amused by the tableau" (Ellis 1991, p. 132). He is calm and measured, both as sadist and as narrator. There are no inconsistencies. The violence is over the top but not surreal. The tone may be pornographic, but the passage creates an illusion of reality through its graphic and highly descriptive tone.

Ultimately, there are no overt signs of unreliability in this passage. It's immediate and detailed, painting a vivid, realistic image of the bloody scene. And the same style repeats in most scenes of torture and murder in the book. The violent scenes are written out like snuff pornography, excessively detailed and striving for an effect of reality. The argument that the violent scenes happen only in Bateman's deranged imagination is based on the fact that he is clearly unreliable when he is describing how an ATM asks him to feed it a stray cat or when he's hallucinating flaming letters floating in the air at a U2 concert over Bono's head and spelling out that the singer is the devil (and thus, just like Bateman). But that hardly means that he is hallucinating when he mutilates the homeless man in the scene quoted above.

Based on textual evidence, the hypothesis that Bateman is only imagining and fantasizing the scenes of violence is ultimately a weak one. At most we can contend, since we know Bateman is unreliable *some* of the time, that Bateman might be unreliable *all* of the time. But if we go down this road, should we not assume that everything in the novel could be false—that Bateman might be lying when he describes renting and returning videotapes, working out at the gym, looking at a friend's business card, or attending a concert? This seems rather excessive, a strangely suspicious way of reading a novel (which, after all, is fictional in any case). I'd rather argue that when there are no overt signs of unreliability, we should give the narrator the benefit of the doubt and take what he says at face value.

Yet, a large part of the scholarly discourse on the novel takes for granted that the violent scenes are just as unreliable as the clearly hallucinated ones. Either the violent scenes are pure fantasy, or—since Bateman doesn't even really exist as a character—there just can't be any real violence in the novel. Going through all this trouble to neutralize and control the violent nature of *American Psycho* seem to me a bit overzealous. It suggests a way of thinking called 'kettle logic,' formulated in an anecdote in Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899): A man returns a borrowed kettle to his neighbor, but the kettle is broken. After the neighbor accuses the man of breaking the kettle, he answers with no less than three excuses: "In the first place, he said, he had returned the kettle undamaged; in the second, it already had holes in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, he had never borrowed the kettle from his neighbor at all." (Freud [1899] 1913, p. 101).

Just like the man in Freud's anecdote, at times the academic reception of *American Psycho* seems anxious to draw attention away from the violence in the novel through claims of unreliability, non-existence, and unimportance. This might be because we literary scholars are much more comfortable discussing narrative structures than the details of grisly acts of torture and murder. There are plenty of scenes in the novel disturbing and frankly disgusting enough that I would hesitate to quote them, say, at an academic conference or in a classroom environment even after giving out a trigger warning. Focusing on unreliability can be a way of sidestepping the inherent violence of the novel. In short, we tend to suspect the reliability of the violent scenes not because they are irrefutably unreliable, but because interpreting them as imaginary fantasies makes them easier to digest. In other words, we would rather be reading—or writing about—a satirical novel about a Wall Street yuppie who fantasizes about being a serial killer than a piece of slasher fiction about a Wall Street

yuppie who actually is one. By relegating the violence to a doubly imaginary status—not true even within the fictional world—the affective force of the violence is to some extent neutralized. And as a critical strategy, this move has been incredibly successful. While *American Psycho* was almost universally critically reviled when it was first published, it has in a quarter century become a staple of university reading lists taught to students all over the world as a canonical example of unreliable narration and a brilliant satirical black comedy about 1980s consumerism.

3. Kill Your Darlings: Shock Value and Fictional Homicide in Frisk

In *American Psycho*, Bateman's lawyer's incredulous response prefigures the scholarly reception of the novel, but Cooper's *Frisk* lays out not one, but two models for responding to the intense violence in the novel. Cooper does this by contrasting two different kinds of reading: absorbed and appalled.

Nearing the end of the novel, one of the central characters, Kevin, is sitting on a train absorbed in a book, his reading eyes resembling some gateways or "glistening caves to another dimension" (Cooper 1991, p. 108). Early in the story, twelve-year-old Kevin has been Dennis the narrator's more or less willing lover. Now, years later, he's racing to meet Dennis again, following his brother Julian, Dennis's former partner and best friend, who suspects Dennis has evolved into a sadistic serial killer of young men and boys.

The image of reading as absorption or immersion sits uneasily on Cooper's novel. The reader has just finished reading the most disturbing chapter in the novel, comprising a letter to Julian, where Dennis recounts several violent rapes and murders, including one of a ten-year-old boy, in grisly, sickening detail. The letter reads less like a confession and more like an invitation. It ends with Dennis asking Julian to join him and "participate in this discovery, like we did in our teens, but with this major transcendence or answer I've found in killing cute guys" (Cooper 1991, p. 107).

Significantly, there is little chance of being drawn into the letter's narrative. The detailed descriptions of rape and murder are intensely difficult to face, often forcing the reader to set down the repulsive book, scandalized, gasping for air. (I hesitate to quote the most disturbing segments but suffice it to say that the worst you are imagining right now probably pales in contrast to the text).

The intense repulsion that *Frisk* incites is not just the subjective reaction of this reader, but a readerly position structured within the work—that is, it is the central affective response of the authorial audience (i.e., the hypothetical audience for whom the text is composed, cf. Rabinowitz 1977). Readers are meant to be shocked, scandalized, and disgusted. (And judging from thousands of reviews on Goodreads, for instance, many readers still are). From a rhetorical perspective, we find several clues to the encoded emotional response of shocked disgust in the text. First of all, there's plenty of disgusted characters in the novel, whose emotional response the reader may empathize with. For example, Julian's as well as several other characters' first reaction to Dennis's writing is one of alarm and disgust. Moreover, Dennis himself is acutely aware that his writing is likely to be repellent. He keeps speculating whether Julian is still reading, hoping that if his audience manages to reach the end of the letter, they must be like him, potential accomplices to murder, which is what he's looking for. As if the only ones able to finish Dennis's letter—or Cooper's novel—are the disturbed, perverted, and murderous.

The contemporary reception of *Frisk* mirrored the appalled and alarmist attitude presented in the text. The novel incited an angry response in the queer community of the early nineties, culminating in a public death threat against Cooper from a local San Francisco chapter of Queer Nation, a gay rights group known for its shock tactics. (It should be noted here that the death threat campaign was a disproportionate exception. Most of

Queer Nation's campaigns have been valuable and beneficial for the gay rights movement). The activists circulated fliers demanding that "Dennis Cooper must die for the crime of killing gay boys in his books." Scribbled onto the flier that Cooper himself received was an ominous message: "we know where you live" (see Cooper in Epstein 2001; Stone 2018). The controversy eventually blew over, and the death threat was lifted, but unsurprisingly, the controversy led to greater fame and recognition for Cooper as a prominent writer of queer fiction.

The critical and scholarly reception to *Frisk*, however, has been positive from the beginning. Contemporary reviews recognized that the novel was not just a blood-spattered serial killer shocker but aimed for something far more ambitious and artistic. For instance, an extensive early review in the *Los Angeles Times* argued that Frisk "is about the process of taking forbidden materials and transforming them into art. . . . The reader is held in the twin grip of repulsion and fascination . . . because Cooper manages to subordinate the descent into terror to the quest of the holy." (Silverblatt 1991) Cooper quickly gained a position as a luminary of queer fiction, reviewed and interviewed in high-profile publications like the *New York Times* and the *Paris Review*, and his novels have generated a number of scholarly articles and books.

Just like with *American Psycho*, the disparity between the scandalized and repulsed public reaction and the admiring and fascinated scholarly response is due to different perspectives on narrative unreliability. Scholars have focused on the fact that the murders never actually happen in the book but are rather fantasies invented by an unreliable narrator. Focusing on narrative structure and technique can draw attention away from the violence in the novel. Contrastingly, the scandalized public response took no notice of the unreliability of the narration. The fact that the violent scenes in *Frisk* are fiction within a fiction didn't make the ethical issues of representing extreme violence any less problematic for the scandalized contemporary readers. In fact, they turned their vitriol not only against the novel for being too violent, but painted the author as immoral. Queer activists accused Cooper of murdering queer fictional characters in his novel; scholars have from the beginning recognized that in *Frisk* we're once again dealing with an unreliable narrator. Indeed, unlike with *American Psycho*, there's clear and undeniable textual evidence that the murders in *Frisk* never really happened. All the scenes of bloodshed and torture turn out to be nothing but Dennis's fantasies. In the final pages of the novel, we find out that he never actually proceeded to full-blown homicide. When Julian and Kevin meet up with Dennis, they force him to make a real confession: the letter describing Dennis's horrific murders is in fact just a piece of fiction. When Julian confronts Dennis on why he wrote the letter, Dennis replies:

> "I don't know," I muttered, shrugged. "Well, that's not totally true." My forehead crumpled up. "I sort of know . . . well, basically because I realized at some point that I couldn't and wouldn't kill anyone, no matter how persuasive the fantasy is. And theorizing about it, wondering why, never helped at all. Writing it down was and still is exciting in a pornographic way. But I couldn't see how it would ever fit into anything as legitimate as a novel or whatever." (Cooper 1991, p. 123)

However, like in *American Psycho*, the narrator's unreliability does little to mitigate the affective force of the violence that shocked and scandalized contemporary readers. The murders might be fictional even within the fictional storyworld, but they are presented in meticulous graphic detail that feels realistic. The intensely disturbing violence in Dennis's letter throws its shadow on the entire reading experience. Based on the intense affective response that the letter's explosive violence triggers, the entirety of the reading experience feels violent. Even after learning that the letter is just Dennis's pornographic fantasy, it still dominates the reader's experience of the novel. The letter is just a fiction within a fiction,

but it feels more real than the fictionally true parts of the novel. *Frisk* creates this illusion through two principal strategies.

First, the letter is much more intense than the preceding chapters of the novel. Through its nineteen pages (about 15% of the entire text of the novel) it describes five horrific murders, each worse than the one before, with the final rape and murder of a ten- or eleven-year-old child described for what seems like an eternity with endless, merciless details of spurting blood, crushing bone, and spilling entrails as Dennis methodically and unemotionally mutilates and rapes his victim. As far as extreme fiction goes, the final scene is about as bad as it gets: it's not something one can easily forget. The sheer force of the violence in the letter is calculated to trigger an intense emotional response of disgust and repulsion. This kind of intense emotional and bodily response to fiction can make it feel more immediate and present, leading to a stronger illusion of reality (see Vanhanen 2016, pp. 273–74).

Second, the narration in Dennis's letter is more "realistic" than the narration in the rest of the novel. The letter reads as letters do: it is completely focalized through Dennis, it tells only what he has seen and thought. For the rest of the novel, although Dennis is still the homodiegetic narrator, he seems to be all-seeing and all-knowing. Dennis reports with complete authority what other people are thinking, presents scenes in detail where he is not actually present, and so on. He seems to be an omniscient narrator—even though he is still a character in his own story. This kind of unnatural narration emphasizes the literariness and fictionality of the episodes. The letter, by contrast, seems to be a piece of more natural narration, as it follows the narrative (but not ethical!) conventions of letter writing. Set side by side with the self-reflexive narration of the other chapters, Dennis's letter acquires a comparative aura of realism.

Thus, Dennis's letter, a fiction within a fiction, is paradoxically the section that most closely follows the conventions of realistic narration in the novel. Dennis the narrator's letter, which he cannot "fit into anything as legitimate as a novel" (Cooper 1991, p. 123), nevertheless fits into *Frisk*, written by Dennis Cooper the novelist. *Frisk* presents itself, then, as a novelistic legitimization of fictional snuff pornography. The scandalized contemporary reception, however, did not agree. Activists felt that it was unethical and illegitimate to write and publish material like this, even though it was fictional. They blamed the author for inventing stories that were harmful for queer culture and saw him as a genuine threat. In this sense, they took the fantasies of Dennis the narrator as proof that Dennis Cooper the author was a dangerous influence. (Later on, Cooper was dubbed "the most dangerous writer in America," a characterization he proudly repeated in interviews and book blurbs (Goldstein 2000; see also Epstein 2001)).

What the scandalized reception recognized is that the doubled fictionality of these kinds of pornographic torture and murder scenes—that they are fictional even within the fiction—does not make them any less powerful or effective. When in the final chapter Dennis confesses to having made up the violent events in the letter, their affective force is hardly diminished. The reader has already imagined the scenes, and, after all, being revealed to be fiction within the already fictional storyworld has not changed the events' ontological status: in any case they were fiction to begin with. If we find the representation of this kind of eroticized violence to be ethically problematic, these problems are not sidestepped by them being nothing but fantasies even within the fictional world.

The affective power of the fake—fiction in this case—is appropriately one of the central themes of the novel (see, e.g., Gabriel 2021; Storey 2005; Silverblatt 1991). Recall the snuff pictures that ignite Dennis's obsession with sexual violence. The novel is bookended with two ekphrastic passages: *Frisk* begins with a detailed description of the original pictures, then ends with a description of a set of pictures that Dennis and Julian make with Kevin imitating the originals. While the sets of pictures are almost identical, the two passages

differ radically. In the opening passage, the pictures are described as authentic, but the closing passage concentrates on all the elements of the pictures that reveal them to be fake. The final paragraph of the novel describes the last photograph:

> Close-up. The "wound" is actually a glop of paint, ink, makeup, tape, cotton, tissue, and papier-mâché sculpted to suggest the inside of a human body. . . . It's a bit out of focus. Still, you can see the fingerprints of the person or persons who made it. (Cooper 1991, p. 128)

Just like the fake snuff pictures, the violence in *Frisk* is manufactured, obtaining only an illusion of reality. Nevertheless, the fake pictures carry within them the fingerprint, symbolically the identity, of their maker or makers. This final sentence of the novel prefigures the attitude of the scandalized reception of Cooper's work. The controversy was very much about Cooper himself, not just *Frisk*. The fact that he wrote something this disturbing was taken as evidence that *he* had to be disturbed on some level as well.

Frisk certainly encourages this sort of interpretation. Dennis the narrator shares the author's name and many rough biographical aspects of Cooper's life. Like Cooper, he's a rich kid from southern California who ends up living in Europe, writing transgressive fiction about queer sex and violence (see Silverberg 2011). At the end of the novel, Dennis is out of the closet: his sexual identity is complete and accepted not just by Dennis, but by Julian and Kevin as well. However, Dennis does not become a serial killer, but rather an artist, who stages an elaborate photo shoot for fake snuff pornography with his friends. By the end, Dennis the narrator has grown into Dennis the artist, who looks very much like Dennis Cooper the novelist. In the novel, his sexual identity is accepted as a form of queer expression by his friends; however, in the queer cultural circles of the early 90s, Cooper was vilified for daring to write something this disturbing and disgusting. And the novel rhetorically sets this up—the scandalized, shocked response of moral reprobation is built in, an expected audience response encoded within the text.

And this is the great paradox of the novel: it's obviously set up and advertised as a shocking read. Most readers stumbling upon the book would be aware of its transgressive reputation, whether in 1991 or today. But *Frisk* still manages to shock readers who are expecting to be shocked, ready and braced for the impact. We can see this clearly in reader reviews online that keep proliferating with each year. On Goodreads, for example, there are hundreds of written reviews of *Frisk*, many of which emphasize the intensity of the reading experience. One representative review from 2025 goes: "I knew this book was gonna be disturbing but never in my days have I expected it to be the level of disturbing and sickening it is. Never again will I put myself through something like this." (CC 2025) There are hundreds of reviews expressing similar sentiments, often mentioning how the book made them nauseous and disgusted. Readers are expecting the book to be repulsive—and then are surprised at just how horrifyingly revolting it turned out to be. Somehow, even decades later, Cooper's novel retains the power to scandalize.

4. "Proper Characteristics of Blame": Distaste and Imaginative Resistance

Thus, we come to the question that might have seemed too obvious at first: why are novels like *American Psycho* and *Frisk* so upsetting? After all, they are only words on a page; no animals or humans were harmed in the making of the novels. One productive way of answering these questions can be traced back to David Hume's essays "Of the Standard of Taste" and "Of Tragedy," both first published in *Four Dissertations* (1757). Understandably, the bulk of the attention on Hume's essays has focused on his formulations of the paradox of tragedy and of what constitutes good taste. However, in the essays Hume also puts forth a theory on what is considered *distasteful*—that is, what tends to shock and repulse audiences. (On Hume's "standard of distaste," see Vanhanen 2017, 2023).

For Hume, distaste is essentially an ethical concept: it does not just mean that a work is badly written, but that it is ethically suspect. In "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume argues that when our moral views are in conflict with the moral views of the author, we judge the work to be in bad taste, truly disfigured and deformed. A book is considered especially distasteful when "vicious manners are described without the proper characteristics of blame and disapprobation" (Hume 1757, p. 236)—surely an apt description of both *Frisk* and *American Psycho*.

This idea also resonates with Hume's argument in "Of Tragedy" (1757), where he specifically discusses the representation of violence. Hume argues that while the negative emotions that tragedies arouse in audiences are in many cases overpowered by the delight afforded by the elegance of the work and its beauty of expression, some works are simply too violent to afford aesthetic pleasure:

> An action, represented in tragedy, may be too bloody and atrocious. It may excite such movements as will not soften into pleasure; and the greatest energy of expression, bestowed on descriptions of that nature, serves only to augment our uneasiness. (Hume 1757, p. 198)

Hume goes on to describe an example of such a play: though he does not name it, based on his description it is ostensibly Nicolas Rowe's *The Ambitious Stepmother* (1700), where in the climactic scene, an old man, father to murdered children, cracks his head open by running headfirst into a wall, smearing it with "mingled brains and gore" (Hume 1757, p. 199). Thus, according to Hume, when the overall emotional response to a work is negative, all the emotional force, including the aesthetic admiration we have for the skill of the artist, adds to the overall negativity or painfulness of the experience. Following Hume, no matter how accomplished the work is in skill and eloquence, if it is too "bloody and atrocious," it should be wholly unpleasant for the audience, and the more skilled and eloquent it is, the more unpleasant and distasteful it will be.

Importantly, for Hume a distastefully bloody and atrocious work is not only of inferior aesthetic value, but we actually cannot appreciate the "energy of expression" or other aesthetic merits the work may otherwise have. These kinds of distasteful works repel and shock, and therefore our perception of them is always misleading. The disfigured and deformed tastelessness of the work prohibits us to connect with it properly, to perceive it from an aesthetic perspective (Hume 1757, pp. 236–37). Hume's response to works like *Frisk* and *American Psycho*, then, would undoubtedly be censorious—from a Humean perspective, the proper response to something as "bloody and atrocious" as the murder scenes in these novels would be a refusal to read (cf. Hume 1757, p. 198).

For Hume, reading fiction means "entering into the sentiments" of the author (Hume 1757, pp. 233, 236–37)—though, in modern narratological terms the author that Hume writes about would be called the implied author. When the values of the implied author go against the values of the reader or the audience, Hume argues that "I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and . . . I can never relish the composition" (Hume 1757, p. 236). In other words, Hume thinks we cannot fully enter into these kinds of works imaginatively, because we cannot imagine what we cannot conceive. We cannot imagine an act—say, dismembering someone—depicted as amusing or enticing in fiction when we believe that kind of act never is. What Hume is arguing here is that we tend to have a hard time reading a work of fiction where the implied author's ethical values differ from our own. In modern aesthetics this phenomenon is called "imaginative resistance."

The idea, originating from Hume, was brought into academic discussion in Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) and more pointedly in his article "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality" (1994). The term "imaginative resistance" was coined by Richard Moran in "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination" (Moran 1994) and cemented as a

common term in analytic aesthetics by Tamar Gendler's influential article "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance" (2000).

The idea hinges on Hume's theory of reading where we "enter into the sentiments" and feel a "peculiar sympathy" with the author of a fictional text (Hume 1757, pp. 233, 236–37). This means that when we read, we share the normative ethical perspectives offered by the text. In more narratological terms, reading a work of fiction entails occupying, or at least actively imagining occupying, the affective and normative position of the authorial audience, which shares the ethical views of the implied author.

Importantly, this does not mean that we change our ethical views when reading a work of fiction. Rather, from a Humean perspective, whether we are able to properly read a work is dependent on the compatibility of our sensibilities with that of the author. If the ethical views that the fictional work espouses clash with ours, we feel imaginative resistance and are blocked from the "peculiar sympathy with the writer, who resembles us" (Hume 1757, p. 233). In Hume's theory, the relationship between the reader and the author is one of agreeable friendship, the master metaphor of ethical criticism in Wayne C. Booth's influential *The Company We Keep* (1988). As Booth argues, the idea of reading as friendship has been hugely influential, especially from the nineteenth century onward and particularly in the English-speaking world (Booth 1988, pp. 171–72). Hume is a clear precursor to that trend.

The requirement of resemblance and sympathy between the reader and author relates primarily to the realm of ethics. The discussion around Hume's theory has centered on how readers react differently to normative and non-normative content when reading fiction (cf. Walton 1990, 2006; Walton and Tanner 1994; Gendler 2000, 2006; Dadlez 2002; Tuna 2024). Readers have no trouble imagining empirical facts as fictionally true that they perfectly well know to be untrue in the real world, but they resist imagining a world whose ethical views do not conform to the predominant ideologies of their own. Walton puts it succinctly: "when we interpret literary and other representational works of art, we are less willing to allow that the works' fictional worlds deviate from the real world in moral respects than in nonmoral ones" (Walton and Tanner 1994, p. 35). In other words, within the context of fiction, readers easily accept the existence of faeries, flying carpets, or faster-than-light space travel, but they resist imagining that murder, slavery, or racism could be ethically commendable.

Something comparable happens with novels aiming to shock and scandalize audiences through extremely graphic scenes of violence. Emphasizing the shock value and scandalizing power of extreme violence seems to bypass the ethical questions that the representation of violence raises in favor of pure shock entertainment. If we agree with Hume, as many modern scholars do, novels like *American Psycho* and *Frisk* upset us because they fail to properly show that the horrid scenes of bloody torture and murder are morally reprehensible. In Hume's terms, in gleefully reveling in the narrators' violent acts and fantasies, the novels describe "vicious manners" without the "proper characteristics of blame" (Hume 1757, p. 236).

The academic reception of the novels attempts to circumvent these ethical questions through an appeal to unreliability, holding on to the belief that all we need to do in order to salvage works like *Frisk* or *American Psycho* is to show that the narration is unreliable. If the scenes of eroticized violence in the novels are only fantasies, they are more revealing about the narrator than about the implied author. Thus we leave open the interpretative possibility that the implied author looks upon the narrator's violent fantasies with the "proper characteristics of blame and disapprobation" (Hume 1757, p. 236). While the novels' narrators do not do this, if the implied authors somehow do, the works might not be considered distasteful after all—we would, from the Humean view, be justified in making our students read *Frisk* and *American Psycho* as American classics.

In other words, if there is discordance between the narrator and the implied author—the classic Boothian definition of unreliability (Booth [1961] 1983, pp. 158–59)—the work can come under aesthetic and hermeneutic scrutiny. From a Humean perspective, if the narrators are unreliable, we can actually read and analyze the novels properly; if not, we are left to deal with the affective shock of their transgressions. Thus, if we emphasize unreliability, the novels could be considered acceptable for critical and scholarly attention.

In the cases of *American Psycho* and *Frisk*, however, the arguments for unreliability ultimately fall short of bypassing the novels' extreme violence. Unreliability doesn't negate the transgressive force of the brutally violent scenes. In *American Psycho*, Bateman commits his horrifying crimes without a hint of blame from the unobtrusive implied author. Even in the scene where Bateman flees from the police after having killed a street musician, and the narrative voice shifts from the first person to the third, the narration is still strictly focalized through the panicking Bateman, who only regrets having been seen, not the murderous rampage he's been caught in (see Ellis 1991, pp. 349–52). While the narrative is suddenly taken up by an unseen, heterodiegetic narrator, there is no overt disapproval or blame directed at Bateman, as the focalization keeps only a minimal distance to the distraught protagonist. Even if we interpret Bateman as an unreliable narrator, there's still no overt sign of "proper characteristics of blame" from the implied author.

With *Frisk*, the overall arc of the plot is centered on how Dennis comes to accept his violent fantasies as a fundamental part of his sexuality. While the scenes of torture and murder do turn out to be nothing more than fantasies (even within the fictional storyworld), the novel ends with Dennis's friends not just accepting him and his fantasies but happily participating in the creation of new fictional snuff pornography. Their acceptance seems to represent the attitude of the implied author as well. However, this happy ending, where Dennis gets to freely express his murderous fantasies seems to overlook the shocking and excruciating passages of wanton torture and murder that readers have just gone through. The scenes are liable to shock and scandalize most readers—and in fact, they are what creates the shock value the novel's scandalized reception as well as its lasting popularity hinge on. The violent scenes are first presented as fictionally true, only later to be revealed as fantasies. At this point, readers have already imagined the carnage in all its gore-soaked detail. Revealing only afterwards that it was all just a fantasy hardly cancels out the shock and revulsion that the eroticized rape and murder of a child is apt to incite in most readers.

5. Conclusions: Misreading the Scandalous

Approaching *American Psycho* and *Frisk* from a Humean point of view, the fact that Bateman and Dennis are textbook cases of unreliable narrators has really no bearing on the novels' lack of moral disapprobation of extreme violence. The scenes of torture are simply "too bloody and atrocious" to prompt aesthetic pleasure, no matter how skillfully the text describes these scenes of carnage or plays with unreliability (cf. Hume 1757, p. 198). It makes no difference that we may well question whether the torture and murders actually took place in the fictional world. The murders are still meticulously and graphically described in the text we are faced with—and, in any case, that text is fictional to begin with. Yet by using torture and violence for shock value, the works arguably delight in the representation of torturous homicide.

Looking at the scandalizing scenes from a Humean perspective, both novels seem to relish the spectacle of torture and murder, becoming some sort of pornography of violence—the two registers are continually blurred in the novels as pornographic sexual scenes escalate into nauseating violence. The works' willingness to revel in the gory violence implies that the authors at some level share blame for the atrocious acts of murder and mutilation. Writing on *American Psycho*, both Carla Freccero and Namwali Serpell

have pointed out that there is a tendency in the reception of the novel to confuse Ellis and Bateman, to blame Ellis for Bateman's fictitious crimes (Freccero 1997, p. 50; Serpell 2014, pp. 198–99). Clearly, something similar was going on when activists threatened to kill Dennis Cooper for "killing gay boys in his books" (Stone 2018). The authors are likened to co-culprits, blamed for writing the immoral filth that corrupts the young and impressionable. In this way, the scandalized and censorious public response ultimately demonized both the authors and the novels.

In contrast, the scholarly reception of *American Psycho* and *Frisk* has often sought to neutralize and contain the violence through incredulity and appeals to unreliability. By focusing on the nonviolent aspects of the novels, the scholarly perspective neutralizes the imaginative resistance that the representation of extreme violence can trigger. Both the public scandal and the scholarly focus on unreliability are based on misreading and a misunderstanding of fictionality and unreliability. On the one hand, the scandalized contemporary reaction was based on interpreting the novels' violence as evidence of the moral depravity of the authors, who were likened to real murderers for inventing fictional stories about murder. On the other hand, the scholarly response misunderstood the root of the respective scandal. The outraged public didn't care about unreliability: the interpretative argument that the murders were fictional even within the fictional world made no difference for scandalized contemporary readers. In any case, narrative unreliability has really no effect on the ontological status of the murders, which are fictional to begin with. Doubled fictionality—a fiction within a fiction—is just as fictional as first-order fictionality.

What the scholarly response has overlooked about the scandals around the novels is that they weren't about fictionality or reliability at all. Rather, the contemporary audience was concerned over the representation of eroticized violence and scandalized by the excessively violent scenes of gruesome torture and murder used for shock value and bloody-minded entertainment. In short, scandalized readers were experiencing imaginative resistance that manifested as moral disgust directed toward the authors, the novels, and their enthusiastic readers. And this, of course, is exactly what these deeply transgressive novels try to achieve. They are deeply provocative works that aim to shock and scandalize readers. The literary scandals they provoked ultimately led to greater sales and attention both in the media and in academia. The scholarly discourse on the novels, however, has most often focused on issues like narrative reliability, while downplaying the genuine ethical unease that these novels deliberately invited in their contemporary audiences. The scandalized contemporary response wasn't naïve in disregarding questions of reliability—it was simply focused on different aspects of the novels than scholars were. The scandals were ultimately about defining just where the limits of representation were and what authors were allowed to do with fiction in the early nineties. By crossing those lines, *American Psycho* and *Frisk* made these limits visible.

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