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Abstract Space in Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*

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Abstract

The consumer culture of late capitalism is more than ever associated with the concept of urban space. Prevalent in the late capitalist society is abstract space that homogenizes and flattens out the differences, conflicts and contradictions on the social scene. This process of homogenization acts as a mechanism of control to preserve the current status quo. In Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, abstract space, by homogenizing and fragmenting the body and lived experience, makes the characters comply with the consumer culture and suppresses the potentials for the difference and the emergence of alternative spaces. In this paper, the role abstract space plays in Ellis's novel is analyzed in the light of Henri Lefebvre's theory of space. The present study argues that abstract space numbs the potentials for difference and heterogeneity in Ellis's novel. Instead, it imposes homogeneity on social relations, pushing the characters to the brink of invisibility and nothingness.

Keywords

Henri Lefebvre; Spatiality; the Visual; the Phallic; the Mirror.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, new interest has been revived in space and its influence on human relations in terms of society, culture, politics and the production of knowledge. In contrast to the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries in which temporality and history left no room for the examination of spatial issues, space has found its way in the world of academia. Geocriticism or human geography is now part of the academic circles as distinguished scholars such as David Harvey, Edward Soja and Derek Gregory have done extensive research on the concept of social space. Much of such interest is indebted to Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) which is his

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response to urban problems and spatial issues. Lefebvre believes that space, abandoned in the history of Western philosophy, should not be considered as a container in which different social relations happen. Put otherwise, space itself comes to be a social product or construction which shapes and is shaped by social relations. In his book, Lefebvre tries to develop a theory whereby to understand the relationship between different forms of space. To him, to unite different modalities of space is a functional, fundamental way to disrupt the social status quo.

Through the years, the critical receptions of *Less Than Zero* are mixed. Some have hailed it as the MTV novel (Powers 4) and compared it to *The Catcher in the Rye* (Barnes 22), while others have criticized its juvenile excess and journalistic style (Teachout 53). One of the earliest critics is Nicki Sahlin (1991) who argues that the patterns of symbolism and imagery used in the novel help the readers to understand the overwhelming presence of the dread, which results in the characters' existential dilemma. Anxiety, meaninglessness and nothingness become the existential problems the characters have to deal with. In the meaningless world of the novel there is no room for moral conscience. Elizabeth Young (1992) focuses on the image of the young, jaded generation trapped in a Disneyfied consumer culture in which morality is lost. As people become more alienated and affectless, there are no space and time for ethical, emotional connections. The disconnection also finds its venue in the racial and ethnic tensions of Los Angeles. Julian Murphet (2001) devotes a chapter on the analysis of Ellis's Los Angeles novels and the representation of consumer space, focusing on social problems of the city and its homogenizing tendency in terms of race and ethnicity. The present essay intends to place this homogenizing impulse in the context of abstract space of late capitalism. Peter Freese (2001) associates this homogenization with the concept of entropy on its informational level and explains how the speechlessness of the young generation leads to the interchangeability of the characters and the absence of any real act of communication. This results in the primacy of sameness and similarity in all human relations. This sameness comes at the price of the dissolution of the subjectivity as the characters lose their distinct, individualized features and become the exact replica of one another.

The loss of subjectivity is what Georgina Colby (2011) focuses on in her study of the novel. She believes that melancholy as the product of systematic violence of neoliberalism results in the loss of subjectivity. Throughout the novel, the melancholic, alienated central character is scared of such dissolution and gradually withdraws from public spaces. The characters are more amused by the visual culture of the capitalist society and that is why Sonia Baelo-Allué (2011), taking Ellis's text as an MTV novel, embarks on the examination of the text against the backdrop of pop culture. To her, the immediate, fragmented nature of MTV reflects the temporal and spatial disjunction of the novels' chapters and, in a broader sense, the aimless, commodified life it represents.

This postmodern depthlessness is associated with emptiness of the wild, untamed setting in Ashley Donnelly's study (2018). The emptiness further spreads out in the characters' lifestyle as they seek stimulations and pleasures to presume their apathetic ways of life. The emptiness is extended to the banality of drug addiction, which, according to Heath Diehl (2021), is the characteristic of the novel as a transgressive text. She belives that Ellis creates a world in which the readers' social, cultural and ideological norms and expectations are suspended and the addict is not punished at the end.

Examining the novel from different viewpoints, and though partly analyzing urban, social space, these critiques have not foregrounded spatiality and spatial mechanism of the postmodern condition. These scholars examined the novel in the light of the postmodern, consumer culture and X Generation theories, and therefore, paid less attention to the spatial dimension of the novel. Space is a social product that affects the people's practices and perceptions. Seen in this light, the novel tells us more about the course of events and the characters' behavior. To understand the postmodern condition, it is needed to take urban space and its theory into serious account. Therefore, this paper applies Henri Lefebvre's theory of space to its reading and analysis of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (1985). The main focus will be on the impacts of abstract space in shaping the characters' behavior and thought. By focusing on the main features of abstract space, the paper tries to offer a bigger picture of the human condition in a postmodern society of late capitalism.

2. Lefebvre's Theory of Space

Lefebvre's theory of space is a theory of spatial representation since at the heart of any spatial experience inevitably lies the question of representation. To Lefebvre, social space is comprised of a "spatial triad," namely spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation. The daily social practices of individuals are perceived spaces that connect the images of the outer world with reality. As a series of regular patterns by which every individual lives, they connect two forms of reality, namely, the daily and the urban. Empirically understood, such practices need to be perceived in terms of bodily, sensory experiences in the context of the urban landscape. Moreover, as the spatial practices of every society "secretes that society's space" (Lefebvre 38), a relatively deterministic dimension is also implied and people are accustomed to do their daily routines in accordance with society's demands.

The representations of space, the second axis, are a realm of intentional, rational and abstract thinking. As maps, plans and any abstract designs, these conceived spaces are constructed by "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers" and burdened with knowledge, power relations and ideological underpinnings (Lefebvre 38). Through the process of adjustment and normalization, such representations hold our practices and behaviors in check and make us act within

representational structures, which attempt to standardize the bodily practices and perceptions of the individuals (Prieto 92). However, this process of standardization does not act flawlessly and there are some moments in which space represents social differences and spaces of representations are foregrounded.

The spaces of representation, the third axis, are lived, everyday spaces. Felt rather than thought and associated with images and symbols, these spaces are more associated with everyday life and the lived experience and find their voices in the ways the imaginative mind seeks to alter and adjust the social reality (Lefebvre 39). They are spaces of artists, writers and philosophers who create and appropriate social reality based on their vision of the world (ibid.). Associated with the bodily lived experience, the spaces of representations resist to be controlled and constrained by any homogenizing forces of consistency or cohesiveness.

In postmodern social scene, the abstract space has become the immediate embodiment of the conceived, in which, as Japhy Wilson states, "the devastating conquest of the lived by the conceived" happens (364). The term "abstract space" in Lefebvre's theory does not imply the absence of physical, concrete objects. It is, according to Wilson, "the space of capitalism" (ibid.) in which consumerism and commodity culture spread out in an unprecedented manner. As Andy Merrifield argues, the ultimate indicator of spaces is "*value*, whose universal measure (*money*) infuses abstract space" (112) (emphasis added). Abstract space of capitalism prioritizes the exchange value over the use value. It unites the fragmented, disjointed spaces by force to form a unity, but nothing is homogeneous about abstract space that intends to homogenize (Lefebvre 308). Abstract space is also imbued with some political and ideological undercurrents, which profoundly impact the way individuals interact with others as well as the system.

Lefebvre suggests that abstract space consists of three formants: the geometric, the phallic, and the visual. The geometric is a Euclidean space of reference, an absolute, calculative criterion based on which other spaces are measured. The phallic, the domain of force, male fecundity and masculine violence (Lefebvre 287), is related to the masculine dominance and the rising authority of the corporations and the state (Stewart 614). The visual produces a logic of visualization that prioritizes and dominates the eye over other senses. What is seen is reduced to an image and a mirror effect that overshadow the body and lived experience (Lefebvre 286). The visual "informs the entirety of social practice" and holds sway in the postmodern society on the basis of "the written word" or language and the spectacles, such as advertising, television, film, and alike (ibid.). These two factors make reading spaces possible, and by doing so, offer the illusion of transparency and conceal the deep social reality. In this regard, symbolic meanings are substituted by a system of signs, which, in turn, gives way to abstract maps and directions of the urban space (Stewart 614). By relegating objects to the distance, the gaze makes them passive and reduces them to an image, to "an icy coldness" (Lefebvre 286). Therefore, in abstract space the objects lose their true meanings and are replaced by signs.

Abstract space exerts influences on the urban, the body and the everyday. To Lefebvre, in cities, the everyday practices and lived experience come into constant conflict with the rationalization and abstraction imposed by the capitalistic forces (Stewart 614). As the urban way of life gets more engaged with abstraction, the body loses its significance as a whole is broken down into "specialized locations," falling to pieces and turning into "exchange value, into a sign of the commodity and indeed into commodity *per se*" (Lefebvre 310). This process of fragmentation is more evident in the advertising industry in which, for example, the female body is fractured into parts, “the legs stand for stockings, the breasts for bras, the face for make-up” (ibid.). The forms of lived experience emanated from the bodily practice and the everyday life become circumscribed within the dominant, restrictive circle of power relations so that at best they reappropriate and reinvent, or at worst inhabit and use the space (Stewart 615). However, these exertions of power do not always function as a whole and contains contradictions, which give rise to a type of space known as differential space. Differential space, rising from hiatus, gaps, and contradictions lurking in abstract space, resists the prevailing ideology and brings the individual's bodily, everyday experience to the fore. As "a counter-space" (Lefebvre 383), differential space depends on how much bodies are able to appropriate and create new forms of social space in which resistance to homogenizing relations can be felt.

3. Discussion

The point of departure for understanding the Los Angeles novels, David Fine believes, is that they are all about "the act of entry," men and women who have lived and worked a period of time in the area to which they have been total strangers (14). These people experience feelings of dislocation, disorientation and estrangement (ibid.). It is also true about Clay, the main character of *Less Than Zero*, who returns to his hometown for Christmas vacation, and on a series of occasions has the same feeling reinforced by the spatial relations.

At the beginning of the novel, Clay is rendered as a stranger, depicted differently from his friends in terms of his complexion and clothing style. In a series of sentences, he is rendered contrasted to Blair who comes to pick him up from the airport. Blair's clean tight jeans and blue T-shirt comes into sharp contrast with his muddy jeans, wrinkled damp shirt and gray argyle vest torn from the neck. Moreover, to the surprise of his family and friends, his face has gone pale. Back to Los Angeles, the West, from Camden College located in New Hampshire, the East coast, he "seems vaguely more *eastern* than before" (Ellis 9) (emphasis added). From the very beginning, the "East/West dichotomy" is constructed (Young 28) and these two geographical poles represent two different social perspectives and two diverse ways of living. While the East is associated

with restrain, culture and wisdom, the West is representative of unrestrained passion, nature, and sensuality. Clay's estrangement is more spatially emphasized when he arrives home and nobody is present to welcome him. Only a note on the kitchen table is left, saying his mother and two sisters are out, shopping. Home is empty, associated with absence, depersonalization and abandonment (Sahlin 27-28). Dislocated and disoriented, he is rendered as a stranger in the town.

Home is also associated with the absence of parental figures. In the novel, parents are careless, neglectful and unresponsive to their children's psychological and emotional needs, spending most of their time outside house, preoccupied with their own businesses, shopping from prestigious brand stores and vacationing in different places worldwide. They are usually divorced and it is through newspapers that their children know about their whereabouts on occasions such as holidays. When at home, they feel no responsibility for their children's upbringing and do not dedicate enough time to observe their conduct. Clay's mother is indifferent when her kids are talking about using drugs or watching graphic videos. The Christmas Eves reveal nothing but loose family ties and lack of intimacy. It is this parental absence that ushers the children into finding other alternatives in order to fill the gap. Julian, for instance, looks at Finn as a replacement because his parents do not look out for him and his circle of friends are so immensely preoccupied with sensual pleasure that no time is left to be really concerned about each other (Baelo-Allué 66). Home, traditionally considered as a site of shelter, security and support, is undermined by the absence of emotional ties and, therefore, is transformed into a void, an abstract space of absence in which the "loss of affect" and the "disenchantment of the traditional domestic space" are foregrounded (Lane 24). As "abstraction passes for an 'absence,'" the home becomes a space for the ideology of abstract space (Lefebvre 289, 309). This form of ideology is epitomized in different shapes and forms, such as the fashion industry, advertisement, and drug abuse, to name a few. It is not surprising that children's rooms are loaded with advertising posters, fashion magazines and drugs. These instances of postmodern consumer culture create an illusion of reality, a form of assumed transparency with the ways of the world.

Abstract space is profoundly associated with the image and the illusion of transparency, resultantly turning reality into an abstraction. The reduction of reality to the instances of the visual makes the postmodern city a visual construction. Whether in terms of tall skyscrapers and perpendicular buildings or different forms of the spectacles, such as billboards, advertising posters, TV shows, signs and alike, the postmodern logic of visualization affects the works and days of the city-dwellers. The characters in *Less Than Zero* are immersed in this visual world, losing the sense of reality. One of Clay' sisters, seeing "a truck with video games strapped in the back" passing by, cries out in a frenzy: 'Follow that video game!'" (Ellis 24) as if they, seduced by the simulation, were

supposed to be the virtual characters in a digital world and needed to follow an alternative urban map since they have lost a cognitive map to be oriented with. They become "characterless ciphers" and "passive consumer" (Young 33) of abstract space. The truck's advertisement ushers them to new, illusory directions. Here "a *precession* of simulacra" is at work, and accordingly, the representation *precedes* and *determines* the real and, as a result, the distinction between reality and its representations begins to fade and what is left is only *simulacrum* (Felluga) (emphasis in original). To Lefebvre, these representations are surfaces or the visual signals which, in the first place, determine a spatial abstraction and eventually become "the simulacrum of a full space" (Lefebvre 313). The dimensions of abstraction become so extended that the characters' understanding of the real world is under the heavy shadow of the visual.

After watching the snuff video, one of Clay's friends, in the midst of discussion about its authenticity, argues that it is impossible to fake such a video. In other words, the visual representation of violence, the "televisual violence" (Young 30), represents the reality itself since there is no chance to artificially create and reproduce such visual representation. The visual representation replaces the production itself, reducing reality to an illusion of transparency and a readable, written form (Stewart 614). The young characters live in a world of images in which reality is superficially decoded to produce its shallow, depthless version. Later on, in another scene in a discussion about a movie named *Beastman*, Clay asks Jared, the film student, "Didn't it bother you the way they just kept dropping characters out of the film for no reason at all?". "Kind of, but that happens in real life," Jared responds (Ellis 132). The movie, the realm of fantasy, invades the real world and the film student inadvertently prefers to read the real world in term of the fictive one as if there were no distinctive boundaries between the two. Such readability and transparency, however, is an illusion in a simulated, Disneyfied world in which reality only exists in terms of its reproduced and represented "second-hand" forms (Young 33).

The "second-hand form" is what Daniel takes refuge in as he, not interested in returning to the East, prefers staying in the West and writes his supposed, imaginary screenplay based on a violent fantasy about a girl he knew:

> She's pretty and sixteen and she lives around here and on some days she goes to the Westward Ho on Westwood Boulevard and she meets her dealer there. This seventeen-year-old guy from Uni. And this guy spends all day shooting her full of smack again and again […]. And then he feeds her some acid. (Ellis 159-60)

His scenario ends up with sexual violence, which later occurs in the real world as other characters sexually assault a handcuffed underage girl. The screenplay, a written document of fantasy, becomes an alternate reality. Daniel decides to stay in the West, to be localized in a familiar abstract space of imaginary representations. In contrast, in Camden College, New Hampshire, he is bereft of any other choice but to live in a real world and take courses for the next semester.

In all scenes described above, the subjects and the bodies are localized in a space in which the phantasmagoria of images becomes the only available reality. Image and fantasy are instruments for the homogenization of space, blurring the line between fact and fiction. The real space is shattered into images and signs or "connected-yet-disconnected data" and the subjects "after the manner of Lewis Carroll, the 'subject' passes through the looking-glass and becomes a lived abstraction" (Lefebvre 313-14). The characters, in this regard, become abstract images, or things in abstract space, and are incapable of the differentiating between their true selves and their image reflected in the imaginary social relations.

These imaginary social relations foreground the metaphor of mirror, which is a worthwhile device to understand the relationship between the body and its reflection, the real and the image. Ellis's text is replete with the mirror and other reflective objects and situations. Most of the time, the mirror is linked with the narcissistic drives of the main character. One day, having got up at eleven and listening to a song called "Artificial Insemination" playing on the radio, Clay narrates, "when I look in the mirror it gives the impression that I have this wild, cracked grin. I walk into the closet and look at my face and body in the mirror; flex my muscles a couple of times, wonder if I should get a haircut, decide I do need a tan" (Ellis 40). He detects a need in his mirror-image, but before that he feels taken aback at the perception of his distorted image in the first mirror. He needs to double-check his face and body in the closet mirror to alleviate the unexpected, unsettling anxiety. Georgina Colby explains that the difference in the images indicates a "gap between subjective and objective states" of the character (45). However, this difference can be explained spatially in terms of the difference between the "I" and the sign of "I." As Lefebvre states,

> The mirror discloses the relationship between me and myself, my body and the consciousness of my body – not because the reflection constitutes my unity *qua* subject, . . . but because it transforms what I am into the sign of what I am. This ice-smooth barrier, itself merely an inert sheen, reproduces and displays what I am – in a word, signifies what I am – within an imaginary sphere which is yet quite real. A process of abstraction then – but a *fascinating* abstraction. (185) (emphasis in original)

The mirror indicates the transformation of the body into an abstract sign. Clay, entangled in this hall of mirrors, becomes an abstract reflection or an alienated subject. No possible, alternative way is remained for him to escape this trap of alienation because he cannot differentiate between the I (the body) of himself and the sign of I (the mirror-image). Therefore, he remains in abstract space and becomes an abstract sign, unaware of the fact that his body is shattered and fragmented in this world of images. Later on, this body gets more shattered through the process of disappearance.

Invisibility or absence becomes a theme frequently referenced in the text. In Dupar's restaurant, waiting for his friends to show up, Clay notices a stranger. His "eyes suddenly focus in on the eyes of a small, dark, intense-looking guy wearing a Universal Studios T-shirt sitting two booths across from me" (Ellis 26). To his surprise, the man, though staring at him, does not notice his presence and this makes Clay think "either he doesn't see me or I'm not here does. I don't know why I think that" (ibid.). In either case, Clay's presence in this public space is called into question. This sense of absence is more accentuated in the same scene as the waitress, seemingly ignoring his order or not seeing him at all, starts to wipe another table and takes other customers' orders. To receive others' attention and therefore confirm his presence, he attempts to make eye-contacts with strangers on a number of occasions. However, such attempts lead to more confirmation of his absence and invisibility.

His gradual disappearance comes at the expense of losing his communication with others. A spatial relation is constructed based on different forms of relationships between people. As Lefebvre states,

> Space -- my space . . . is first of all my body, and then it is my body's counterpart or 'other', its mirror-image or shadow: it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the one hand, and all other bodies on the other. Thus we are concerned . . . with gaps and tensions, contacts and separations. (184)

In other words, it is the body and its relationship to other bodies that produce space. Such a relationship is compared to the mirror functioning:

> Every shape in space, every spatial plane, constitutes a mirror and produces a mirage effect; that within each body the rest of the world is reflected, and referred back to, in an ever-renewed to-and-fro of reciprocal reflection … a mere change of position, or a change in a place's surroundings, is enough to precipitate an object's passage into the light. (Lefebvre 183)

To the others' mirror, Clay's image is broken, refracted and vague, and at worst, there is no image at all. Talking to Julian and complimented by him saying he looks good, Clay remembers that he needs to get a tan, a sign of homogeneity. Out of such mirror functioning comes an artificial need that he needs to be like the others, to be part of the clique and the community he has left four months ago and to undergo a process of homogenization since "total otherness like total individuality is in danger of being unrecognizable" (Featherstone 85). The need to be homogenized comes to be part of the mechanism of abstract space, a space of the erasure of the relationship of the body and space. According to Merrifield, the body "gets refracted and mediated by mirrors of nonknowledge, by how we are *meant* to see ourselves in society" (113) (emphasis in original). This nonknowledge is more evident in the failure of the true, meaningful communication between the characters.

Sunglasses in Ellis's novel indicate another mirror-effect that builds a barrier in the process of communication. Spatially speaking, the person who wears sunglasses hinders the conflation of his/her mental space and the social space, or the worlds within and without. This reflective object, therefore, builds a blockade on true acts of communication and the by-product of this blockade comes to be the illusion of transparency, the idea that social space is what exists on the surface, readily understood and deciphered. It is under the cover of such illusion that abstract space spreads out its boundaries. In Clay's listless, boring meeting with his mother in a restaurant, the sunglasses his mother puts on serve these purposes:

> My mother and I are sitting in a restaurant on Melrose, and she's drinking white wine and still has her sunglasses on and she keeps touching her hair and I keep looking at my hands, pretty sure that they're shaking. She tries to smile when she asks me what I want for Christmas. I'm surprised at how much effort it takes to raise my head up and look at her. (Ellis 18)

Clay finds his mother in an exposed position as her nervous behavior signals her uncomfortable relationship with his son. She wears sunglasses as if she needed to hide her insubstantiality as a parent. The reflective function of sunglasses is perfectly at work in this mother-son encounter. Whatever she does finds a reflection or an imitation in Clay's behavior. Her touching hair reflects Clay's constant looking at his shaking hands and her pretended smile mirrors back Clay's languid look. Caught in another reflective relation, he feels lethargic, uninterested and nervous. Both characters cannot share their mental spaces and consequently, the prospect of building a social space based on mutuality and understanding proves to be unlikely. What is linguistically exchanged is about a Christmas gift, an object of consumption. Such blockage also occurs in Clay's

counseling sessions in which he wears sunglasses in a room with shades drawn. Ironically, the psychiatrist is more preoccupied with writing his own screenplay than the counseling sessions. These counseling meetings are merely repetitive without real, palpable outcomes for Clay. In another scene with a girl Clay picks up at After Hours club, the failure of sexual intimacy is also related to the mirror image. Giving Clay a tube of suntan lotion and a pair of sunglasses, the seductive girl does not allow him to touch her body and prevents him from taking his sunglasses off. No sexual intercourse occurs as she takes sexual pleasure from her mirror-image reflected on his sunglasses. More than suggesting "the distanciation associated with sunglasses" (Colby 42), the scene depicts a prison of images in which the characters are confined and gradually become invisible.

The invisibility is also evoked in a number of moments in which Clay is frightened and agitated. Early in the morning, driving out from Griffin's apartment, he notices a billboard on Sunshine Boulevard saying "Disappear Here" and even though he knows that "it's probably an ad for some resort," it makes him so scared that he "step[s] on the gas really hard and the car screeches" as he quickly passes the red light (Ellis 38). Immediately, he puts his sunglasses on to feel safe though it is still dark outside. Later the same day, when coming across that billboard again, he just tries not to think about it. However, this billboard is ever-present throughout the narrative, becoming a symbolic sign of fear of imminent disappearance. Invisibility and its concomitant fear do not lose grips on Clay's days and nights. In another instance, on a night when he is lying in bed, the intense wind that makes the windows rattle strikes fear into his heart. He stays up for hours lest the windows crack and shatter. In this condition, what is spontaneously comes to his mind is the picture of that billboard on Sunset.

The conflation of invisibility and fear is also depicted in association with other characters. Upon seeing Muriel, the girl with anorexia, who slaps her arm to find a vein for cocaine injection, Clay gets scared, witnessing her gradual disappearance. In addition, Julian's rebellion against Finn makes him apprehensive as his friend disappears into a void, diving "*straight into darkness*" (Ellis 48) (emphasis in original). As Muriel and Julian, according to Nicki Sahlin, "ceased to struggle and have submitted to a state of nonbeing," Clay more palpably feels the horror of getting disappeared, confronting "nothingness or the void" (32). Related to space, Lefebvre argues, are symbolic values implying "emotional investment[s], an affective charge[s]" such as fear, attraction, abhorrence and so forth, deposited at a particular place for a while and representing the core characteristic of that place (Lefebvre 141). Here, the spaces of Los Angeles incite affection of fear, anguish and threat, becoming the spaces of disappearance and absence in which characters are gradually transformed into invisible men and women.

This disappearance has also roots in the widening "void in culture" (Donnelly 58). In the commodified culture of abstract space, the characters suffer from their disengagement with the past. According to Fredric Jameson, "there no longer does seem to be an organic relationship between the American history we learn from school books and the lived experience of the current, multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life" (22). That is why Blair reads the Cliff Notes of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. The surface matters most. Moreover, the narratological strategy Ellis employs adds to this depthlessness. The course of the events is told by the first-person narrator in the present tense, reflecting "the MTV search for immediacy" (Baelo-Allué 56). The use of present tense, though unusual, is also employed for another purpose. It refers to the characters' lack of historical and psychological depth and their current disconnection with the past. In a sense, immersed in commodity culture and preoccupied with depthless, boring daily lives, the characters drift around the spaces of abstraction, which cut the ties of the past and cause the collapse of classic points of reference.

The lack of referentiality to the past intersects with the narratological technique Ellis employs in *Less Than Zero*. The prevalence of the present tense makes the narrative the very epitome of abstract space in which the characters, detached, distanced and alienated from themselves and one another, are limited in the context of the immediacy of the present and the world of current daily repetitions. In this way, the narrative itself become the realm of the concieved in which the reality takes precedence over the ideality (Lefebvre 60). By exerting violence over characters and pushing them to the brink of invisibility, abstract space of narrative perpetuates its dominance on the social scene. The characters are trapped in an abstract world of narration, which, by limiting their scope of actions in the present moment, numbs the potential for distinction and difference in any form.

Resistance to difference is also foregrounded by the primacy of gaze in the logic of visualization (Lefebvre 41). The gaze constructs and is constructed by rationalism which controls and objectifies the others and the differences. In *Less Than Zero*, the masculine gaze finds an echo particularly in connection with instances of spectacles, such as billboards, posters, and TV shows, which are an indispensable part of the postmodern, urban culture. Throughout the novel, the male gaze and the state of being disappeared often come together, reinforcing one another. Clay describes the Costello poster:

> It's the promotional poster for an old Elvis Costello record. Elvis looks past me, with this wry, ironic smile on his lips, staring out the window. The word "Trust" hovering over his head, and his sunglasses, one lens red, the other blue, pushed down past the ridge of his nose so that you can see his eyes, which are slightly off center. The eyes don't look at me, though. They only look at whoever's standing by the window, but I'm too tired to get up and stand by the window. (Ellis 11)

The pop singer's poster is more than a means of decoration as the music icon has such authority on Clay as if he demanded him to go the window to become the center of his gaze, the object of his desire. By moving to the window, Clay has been divested of any sort of agency, and, in a sense, becomes deprived of any right to resist. He is forced to be recognized and coordinated within the four walls of his own bedroom. To be homogenized by and oriented with the gaze as a mechanism of control, Clay needs to move to be the object of the poster's authority. The poster, therefore, challenges the position of Clay within his own room, his personal space. In another scene the poster becomes the center of Clay's attention as he listens to Alana talking about her abortion:

> I look over at the Elvis Costello poster, at his eyes, *watching her*, *watching us*, and I try to get away from it so I tell her to come over here, sit down, and she thinks I want to hug her or something and she comes over to me and puts her arms around my back and says something like 'I think we've all lost some kind of feeling'. (Ellis 157-58) (emphasis added)

The male gaze watches both of them when the sensitive word "abortion" is discussed. Abortion, a subject of heated debates of the 80s, makes him feel like they are under the authoritative eyes of power. Up to the end of the novel when Clay prepares to leave the West, this gaze is still present and felt. In addition, in Julian's hotel scene, Clay becomes the person who gazes, the voyeur, as he does not close his eyes to see the worst he could possibly see. He says, "you can disappear here without knowing it" (Ellis 176). It appears that Clay has no choice but to watch the sex scene in silence to the end. By doing this, he metaphorically disappears once more as his presence is not felt since the homogenizing power of abstract space shatters his individuality and pushes him to invisibility.

With the masculine gaze are associations of voyeurism and objectification. Notably, on three important occasions Clay himself becomes a watcher of painful death and violent sex scenes. Clay's movement from the subjective viewer to the objective recorder of the scenes furthers emphasizes the homogenizing impulse of abstraction. On one occasion the excruciating death of a coyote becomes the object of Clay's voyeuristic desire. The animal is hit by Blair's car and Clay carefully observes the dying animal:

> It's lying on its side, trying to wag its tail. Its eyes are wide and frightened looking and I watch it start to die beneath the sun, blood running out of its mouth. All of its legs are smashed and its body keeps convulsing and I begin to notice the pool of blood that's forming at the head. Blair calls out to me, and I ignore her and watch the coyote. I stand there for ten minutes. No cars pass. The coyote shudders and arches its body up three, four times and then its eyes go white. Flies start to converge, skimming over the blood and the drying film of the eyes. (Ellis 142-43)

Blair's hysterical, panic-stricken reaction comes in contrast to Clay's undisturbed, detached and detailed observation of the animal. He first becomes obsessed, but then subjectively gets fascinated with death. This voyeuristic impulse continues as Clay watches a violent, snuff video of the torture of unknown young boy and girl. Although without hesitation he goes inside to watch the video, he then leaves the room as soon as the degree of the cruelty gets unbelievably intensified. Outside the room, sitting on the deck, he hears "waves and the seagulls crying out" and "feel[s] the sun shining down" on him and "listen[s] to the sound of the trees shuffling in the warm wind," watching Blair walking alone on the shore (Ellis 154). The video's sound is still disturbing, but he finds peace and harmony in nature. For a moment, he feels a sense of detached liberty from the voyeuristic impulse and violence and is open to see to distance himself from the totalizing influence of the visual. However, this sense of freedom is momentary and fleeting, followed up with Julian's hotel scene in which he is incapable of resisting: "I tell myself I could leave. I could simply say to the man from Muncie and Julian that I want to leave. But, again, the words don't, can't, come out and I sit there and the need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly" (Ellis 175). The voyeur himself gradually disappears in the hotel room, a space of disappearance, and becomes the objective recorder of Julian's degradation and disappearance. The tendency toward spatial homogeneousness is accelerated by the overweening presence of the phallic

The phallic, one of the main features of abstract space, is frequently present in spaces of *Less Than Zero*. To reach Finn's apartment in Wilshire Boulevard, Julian and Clay have to pass through the darkness of a hall to get Finn's door. His mental and physical uneasiness exacerbates as he walks into Finn's office:

> Julian comes to a white door and opens it and the two of us walk into a totally spare, white room, complete with floor-to-ceiling windows and mirrors on the ceiling and this feeling of vertigo washes over me and I almost have to catch my balance. I notice that I can see my father's penthouse in Century City from this room and I get paranoid and start to wonder if my father can see me. (Ellis 168)

Clay's feeling of vertigo and paranoia is the dire consequence of being overwhelmed by the empty, mirror-decorated room with tall windows. Again Clay has been caught in a mirror-like situation, a hall of mirrors. Moreover, Finn's apartment becomes the semblance of what Lefebvre names "the visual space of transparency" in which "the phallic realm of (supposed) virility" is concealed (Lefebvre 147). From the moment that Clay realizes his father's penthouse (another abstract space) overlooks Finn's apartment, his paranoia intensifies. The phallic, the law of the father, dominates and keeps everything under surveillance. In abstract space, as Lefebvre suggests,

> The prestigious Phallus . . . forces its way into view by becoming erect. In the space to come, where the eye would usurp so many privileges, it would fall to the Phallus to receive or produce them. The eye in question would be that of God, that of the Father or that of the Leader. A space in which this eye laid hold of whatever served its purposes would also be a space of force, of violence, of power restrained by nothing but the limitations of its means. This was to be the space of the triune God, the space of kings, no longer the space of cryptic signs but rather the space of the written word and the rule of history. The space, too, of military violence - and hence a masculine space. (262)

The association of the law of the father with violence is more emphasized in Julian's hotel scene. Clay initially feels uncomfortable as the hotel reminds him of his great-grandfather who was found dead in a hotel room two days after his death. Such preliminary feeling of discomfort worsens as he anxiously becomes preoccupied with this idea that whether or not Mr. Erickson, the client, knows his father.

> I look down and realize that I don't have anything to say, but I try to think of something; the need to hear my own voice begins to get more intense and I keep wondering if my father knows this guy. I try to shake the thought from my head, the idea of this guy maybe coming up to my father at Ma Maison or Trumps, but it stays there, stuck. (Ellis 174)

The client's probable familiarity with his father implies that there is no escape from the eye of the dominant power. Clay does not close his eyes to see the worst he could possibly see, bearing the brunt of it. The close intersection of the Phallic and the visual shatters the lived experience, fragments the body and, by doing so, renders a meaningless way of life. The dizziness, paranoia and nausea are all indications of being stuck in a space in which Clay, encountering a void, feels disoriented, dislocated and alienated. From this space he has no chance to escape because he has lost "the cognitive mapping," a map to be oriented with (Murphet 93).

This sense of disorientation is given further emphasis in a series of flashbacks or memory chapters marked in italics. As the "psychogeographical flashbacks" (Lutton 4), these excerpts, reminiscent of a nostalgic time of innocence, refer to the past, mostly in Palm Springs, when the whole family came together on different occasions. The family was intact as Clay's grandparents were still alive, his parents not divorced, and his love for Blair prosperous. Although the remembrance of the past is not devoid of "ominous signs and intimations of bad things to come," these scenes depict a contrast between Clay's happy days and his present malaise characterized by "disorientation, anxiety and

despair" (Freese 249). The past gives Clay a stronger sense of orientation with home and its associated meanings. One day, during the end of his senior year, Clay decides to drive out to the old house located at the Palm Springs which used to be the place of family gatherings. The empty old house looks "*really scummy and unkempt and there were weeds and a television aerial that had fallen off the roof and empty trash cans were lying on what used to be the front lawn. The pool was drained*" (Ellis 44) (emphasis in original). Upon seeing the miserable condition of the house, his first reaction is crying. He remembers the weekend nights' gatherings and especially his playing card with his grandmother. Though seeing the forlorn, forgotten house is painful, he says " *I went out there because I wanted to remember the way things were*." (ibid.) (emphasis in original). Comparing "the way things are" with the present condition implies that how much things have undergone the inevitable changes. The old house is associated with images of love, joy, and intimacy. It becomes the very embodiment of representational spaces, "redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, . . . have their source in history - in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people" (Lefebvre 41). He, remembering those past days of the old house, is in search of a deeper connection with his identity as well as the surrounding community. Palm Springs brings him a rather strong sense of belonging. For him, the memory of his grandmother to whom he has the emotional ties, above all, becomes of particular attention. She is the only one who cares about family members, especially Clay and even strangers. On his grandfather's birthday, she bought him a bag of rock candy, frequently played cards with him, and he as a kid used to sit on her lap on their flights together. She is the only person who cared about the death of the stranger stuntman by asking about his name. This sense of love and compassion is what Clay has lost in the present condition, especially in his relationship with Blair.

In memory chapters, Clay's love for Blair is deemed to be prosperous and romantic, flourishing and promising. In a house on the beach, illuminated by the candles, where the weather was cool and the sea shimmering and green, listening to the old favorite records, they spent some time together, making love. Their love seems promising as they enjoy hanging out with each other. The recollections of this love stand in contrast to what he currently feels about her as he wonders why he meets Blair in the first place. After his return to Los Angeles, he confesses to her that he does not remember what their relationship was like. In the end, their love does not stand a chance to survive and his decision to resume his study at the college in the East defines the end of their relationship. Compared with the past, the present shows that Clay is a complete stranger, physically and emotionally detached from the cohort and disoriented within the limit of the community. In a broader sense, he needs to be homogenized in the West since the difference is not accepted.

Abstract space tends to terminate differences, conflicts and contradictions by flattening them out. There are moments in which Clay acts differently from his associated cohort and partially comes on the verge of realizing the inherent "unresolved conflicts and contradictions" in abstract space (Soja 5). These moments add flashes of disorder within the homogenized abstract space. As mentioned earlier, Clay is reluctant to watch the entire obscene snuff video to the end and prefers leaving the room in silence, without making an outright objection. Then, when he hears about a dead body found in the alley behind an empty store, despite the others' excitement, first he has the same spirit of nonchalance and, then, upon seeing the dead body, out of habit he observes the dead body in detail: "He's lying against the back wall, propped up. The face is bloated and pale and the eyes are shut, mouth open and the face belongs to some young, eighteen-, nineteen-year-old boy, dried blood, crusted, above the upper lip" (Ellis 186). Unlike others who are amusingly fascinated with the body, he cannot take his eyes off the dead body, drifting into ceaseless thought and wondering about "what would happen if the boy's eyes were open" (Ellis 187). These scenes pave the way for a rather more intense reaction in the scene of a twelve-year-old girl in Rip's apartment. Upon noticing the vicious intention of his friends, he immediately leaves the room, angry and upset. He complains to Rip that it is by no means right. Rip responds "What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it" (Ellis 189). In other words, the *need* to do something justifies the *right* to obtain it. Clay insists that he believes Rip has everything he needs but Rip says "I don't have anything to lose" (ibid., 190). This is a principle according to which Clay's friends live. For Clay, the word "right" has moral implications, while for Rip it "connotes only privilege or demand" and "while Clay is at least tentatively searching for values, most of his friends are openly nihilistic" (Sahlin 36). The novel depicts a world in which "the 'abnormal' becomes normal(ized),' the 'immoral' becomes if not 'moral' then banal" (Diehl 103). Rip lives a life of banality, alienation and insubstantiality, preoccupied with "orgy of indifference, disconnection, exhibition and circulation" (Baudrillard 96). Because of the alienation and immorality imposed by abstract space of late capitalism, the characters treat the others as mere objects or demands.

The scenes described above underscore the deep rifts within the youth culture that deepen and seep into different layers of society. Clay is on the verge of discovering such ruptures and contradictions of which Rip and others are not conscious. He comes close to understand a seed of new alternative space, the differential space. Out of contradictions in his friends' behavior, their unnecessary violence and the homogenizing power of capitalist culture, he encounters the totalizing tendency of abstraction. However, the development of differential space is impossible because abstract space of the novel still homogenizes the differences, no real interaction is possible between the

friends in terms of the personal and the collective uses of social space, and the capitalist culture still works. As a result, abstract space finds a way to reach a final equilibrium or the social entropy (Lefebvre 52). Disoriented with this culture of abstraction, Clay has no other option but returning to the East.

4. Conclusion

The hope of liberation from abstraction is less than zero in Ellis's novel. In the nightmare world of *Less Than Zero,* Ellis draws a picture of the West in which the characters are almost non-existence, lost their personality and freedom in the restrictive abstract space of consumer culture. Trapped in the labyrinth of abstraction, they reach such a numbness that parties, sex, and drugs can no longer satisfy them. They are incapable of detecting, recognizing and fulfilling their deep-seated desires since they themselves are the product of such abstraction. The West, providing no freedom or no freeways for people to merge, only offers abstraction and absence. The image and the spectacles have invaded human relationships, leading to the disappearance, dissolution, and destruction of social space. Abstract space has overrun the private and social spaces, leaving no room for alternative differential space. The novel's abstract space exerts its influence by means of the visual and the phallic features, leaving no room for the emergence of any new space. Emotionally disengaged and extremely detached from his family and friends, Clay, feeling like a stranger, is not in the world and teeters on the edge of disappearance. In the most of novel's scenes, his presence is not felt by others. Trapped in the hall of mirrors, he is transformed into a sign, a thing in space, and his body is fragmented in the form of abstract mirror-images. Invisibility and fear overshadow his works and days. Though realizing the contradictions embedded in abstract space in some moments, he cannot make changes to the way things are. He, therefore, has to make a decision between disappearance and homogenization in the West and departure for the East. He decides to go to the eastern college and resume his study as the homogenizing power of abstract space continue to dominate in his hometown

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