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Autofiction as a Political Act:
The Use of the Self in Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq, and Walter Siti

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Lay Summary

The literary genre of autofiction is a fascinating and complex field of study. Its origins, its uses, and even its own existence are still fiercely debated by both academic and literary critics. In a nutshell, however, we might say that we are facing an autofiction when the author of a narrative, with their name and surname, is also the protagonist or a side character of that same narrative. In autofiction, what is real (autobiography) and what is invented (fiction) always has blurred contours; and, as demonstrated by the works of writers and critics such Philippe Gasparini, Chloé Delaume, Marie Darrieussecq, Isabelle Grell, and Arnaud Genon, it is exactly for this reason that this new literary genre reveals itself as a particularly apt instrument to describe and to question certain aspects typical of our contemporary era. These aspects can regard, for instance, our relationship with mass media and with social networks.

In this thesis, however, I have focused on what we might define as the *political* potential of the use of autofiction; political in the sense that certain authors have consciously used autofiction with the intention to make a precise political critique; a kind of critique that could be made only through the use of this literary genre. To demonstrate this point, I have decided to analyse the autofictional works of three writers coming from different countries, the United States, France, and Italy, and from different cultural backgrounds: Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq, and Walter Siti. As can be seen, I have decided to use a comparatist approach; the reason is that the target against which these three writers have concentrated their critical efforts is something that goes beyond nations and their relative borders: Neoliberalism and its

cultural and economic logic, a logic that tends to commodify and to put on profit every aspect of our lives.

My point is that these three authors have used autofiction as an instrument to critique certain aspects and mechanisms typical of neoliberalism and typical of the kind of subject that neoliberalism produces and shapes in order to perpetuate its hegemony. Self-branding, tendency to adapt personal behaviours to the models imposed by the market, and obsession with performance are all, according to Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot, typical features of the so-called neoliberal subject (2); and, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, I think that autofiction has something to say in this sense. And this is exactly the reason why Ellis, Houellebecq, and Siti have decided to use this new literary genre of autofiction. Through the analysis of Ellis, Houellebecq, and Siti's literary works, focusing in particular on their autofictional novels *Lunar Park*, *La Carte et le Territoire*, and *Troppi Paradisi*, it will become clear that, thanks to the instruments that the use of this literary genre offers, they managed to shed new light on certain issues related to our contemporary times that have always been at the core of their entire literary work. As we will see, the way how they represent and question issues like self-branding, obsession with consumerism, pervasiveness of mass media, is political; and as this thesis demonstrates, it is a political critique that could be performed only through autofiction, which use therefore becomes a political act.

Abstract

Since its first appearance on the back cover of Serge Doubrovsky's 1977 novel *Fils*, the term *autofiction* immediately attracted the interest of many French critics and writers. Critics such as Philippe Lejeune, Philippe Gasparini, Gérard Genette, Vincent Colonna, Marie Darrieussecq, and Régine Robin started a vibrant debate about this new literary genre, whose subject was neither entirely autobiographical nor exactly fictional, a debate that even today is far from being concluded. In its early stages, the debate on autofiction was primarily focused on issues such as its position in Lejeune's autobiographical pact, on its generic status as a literary genre, and on its differences with other literary genres such as the autobiographical novel and the memoir. However, thanks to critics and writers such as Arnaud Genon and Chloé Delaume, the debate on autofiction was opened up to other stimulating perspectives, like its relationship with postmodernism and its ability to represent the *fractured* and shift identity typical of the postmodern era. Moreover, Genon and Delaume, among other critics, also started to focus on the political aspect of autofiction – political in the sense that, because of its characteristics, autofiction could be an appropriate instrument for representing, questioning, and therefore critiquing certain features of our contemporary times.

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on this side of autofiction, which is related to its political potential. Though this aspect has been partially ignored by most critics, in my view it represents an extremely fecund and stimulating field of research. In particular, this thesis will focus on the ways in which the literary genre of autofiction can represent an appropriate instrument for unveiling and questioning certain mechanisms, like self-branding, selfish competition, and obsession with consumerism, of that cultural and economic system which is now hegemonic: neoliberalism. In this sense, the autofictional works of three contemporary

authors from three different countries and backgrounds will be taken into consideration: Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq, and Walter Siti. As this thesis will demonstrate, these three authors used the literary genre of autofiction as an instrument for representing and critiquing the mechanisms through which neoliberalism imposes and perpetuates its hegemony. Ellis's, Houellebecq's, and Siti's autofiction is, as we shall see, an integral part of the critique of neoliberalism they have pursued throughout their entire literary careers. It is a political critique that, in the cases examined, could only have been carried out through the literary genre of autofiction, whose use is therefore a political act in itself.

Ultimately, I will also introduce the distinction between *passive* autofiction and *active* autofiction. This distinction, as the thesis will demonstrate, is a valid instrument for describing certain attitudes – mostly related to the neoliberal imperative to self-brand – that have now become hegemonic and oppressive. After all, what is self-branding if not a form of autofiction?

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Simone Calabrò

To Alessandra, who patiently put the pieces together while I was falling apart.

Un giorno riuscirò a parlarti, E saranno parole d'amore.

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Introduction

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che altro è, l'acclamata autofiction,
se non l'incasinamento dei patti? – non può essere accusato –
in letteratura – di violare i patti. Nella vita, è un altro discorso.
Giulio Mozzi

(*But an artist that builds their work right on the*
systematic violation of pacts –
what else it is, the glorified autofiction,
if not a messing up of pacts? – cannot be blamed –
in literature – to breach the pacts. In life, that is another story)

Per la minoranza / per l'opposizione
Simona Menicocci

(*For the minority / for the opposition*)

When the project that resulted in this thesis first began to be conceived – almost six years ago: a totally different world –, the literary genre of autofiction was (especially in Italy and the United States) a field still partially unexplored, on which it was possible to work on

many levels, and that somehow still gave a sort of pioneer feeling. More recently, however, the debate around the term *autofiction* has become widespread, and it does not sound so *exotic* anymore. It is undeniable that in recent times issues other than autofiction seem more urgent and worthy of study and reflection. Examples that immediately come to mind include, for instance, the new feminist fights, from *#MeToo* to xenofeminism, the discussions around the Anthropocene and global warming, or even emerging literary genres such as the so-called *New Weird*, which explores themes like hybridism and post-humanity. It can be said, therefore, that these issues are so important and urgent that, in comparison, writing a thesis on the political aspects of autofiction might seem like academic affectation, or like the violins of the Titanic's orchestra that kept playing even while the ship was sinking. However, in response, one can suggest, as I intend to do in this thesis, that at the base of most of the more exciting issues mentioned above there is *something* that we struggle to completely understand, something that, quoting Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie*, is pertinent to the realm of the Eerie (8), which we know exists but are not able to clearly identify: the Western economic system, that is to say, late capitalism, or – more precisely – neoliberalism. It is my conjecture that, in this sense, the study of autofiction might have something to say about it. I believe that certain aspects related to autofiction might be helpful in order to understand the reasons leading to the phase of our history that theorists of Anthropocene studies like Matteo Meschiari have defined as the era of *Collapse* (12). For instance, in a 2020 article, Franco Palazzi reminds us that Michel Foucault, in his 1979 work *Naissance de la biopolitique* – the transcript of the lectures he delivered at the Collège de France in the years 1978-1979 –, dated the passage from classical free trade to neoliberalism back to the shift from a model based on trade to one based on enterprise (3). This change of paradigm affected not only companies, which now had to act as enterprises, but even individuals, who were led to behave like an enterprise, becoming *entrepreneurs of themselves* (3). This anthropological mutation, whose date of *birth* Foucault places during a conference devoted to Walter Lippman that occurred in Paris in 1938 (32), has been crucial in the shaping of contemporary subjectivities. As Teresa Pullano observes, Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot,

in the 2009 essay titled *La nouvelle raison du monde: Essai sur la société néolibérale*, pointed out that the neoliberal subject is continuously pushed to *mutate* in order to adapt to competition (1); therefore, Pullano quotes, individuals become *experts* on themselves, employers of themselves, *inventors* of themselves: in other words, entrepreneurs of themselves (1). Similarly, addressing the same issue, the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han – in his 2017 essay *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* – defines this anthropological mutation as a shift from *subject* to *project* (9).

What has the literary genre of autofiction to do with all of this? As noted by Silvio Lorusso in his 2018 *Enterprecariat*, and by Anna Simone and Federico Chicchi in their 2017 *La società della prestazione*, one of the main characteristics of being an entrepreneur of the self is, as with any other enterprise, *self-branding* (37). And what is self-branding if not a form of autofiction? My argument is that the birth and spread of the literary genre of autofiction can be seen as a consequence and a *reaction* to certain aspects of the effects of neoliberalist logic on contemporary subjectivity. After all, as Walter Siti writes in his 2013 pamphlet *Il realismo è l'impossibile*, it is not by chance that, referring to the Italian context, the use of autofiction has flourished in this day and age, in the wake of an entire society's *need* to lie (21). The fact that this literary genre has recently prospered in many different countries with many different cultural backgrounds invites us to resort to a comparative perspective, and this is why I analyse here the autofictional work of three different authors – Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq, and Walter Siti – from three different countries – the United States, France, and Italy, respectively. However, the object of this thesis is not to explore neoliberalism in its various forms, strategies, and effects. More modestly, my aim is to remark on how these three authors used the literary genre of autofiction as an instrument in order to unveil and thus question certain mechanisms through which neoliberalism spreads and reasserts its dominion, performing in this sense a *political* act. In fact, other than the use of autofiction, these three authors have in common their critique of neoliberal mechanisms as a main characteristic of their literary work. Issues like an obsession with consumerism, the commodification of relationships and emotions

– all of which, according to these three authors, replicate the same logic of economic neoliberalism –, self-branding, mass media influence, and the extension of neoliberal logic to all aspects of our lives are certainly pivotal in their novels. However, Ellis, Houellebecq, and, to a certain extent, Siti also share the fact that they are all very well known because of the controversies generated by both their work and their public personae. It might be objected that Ellis and Houellebecq in particular have consciously contributed to fuelling these controversies, which certainly helped to sell more copies of their books. Indeed, what is so subversive and political about authors who allegedly exploit certain themes and even their public as vehicles for selling more copies and enlarging their bank accounts? Isn't this a typical case of self-branding? And for what reason am I assuming that their use of autofiction can be defined as *political*, instead of considering it further evidence of their narcissism?

At this point, I have to ask for some patience from the reader for what might be seen as a digression, but one that can be helpful in clarifying my argument. All these possible objections remind me of a 2011 episode of the acclaimed Channel 4 television series *Black Mirror*, entitled "Fifteen million merits". This episode is set in a dystopian – and not very far off – future where people are forced to ride power-generating stationary bicycles in order to earn "merits". With these merits they are able to buy essentials and – most importantly – to stop the endless, obsessive, pervasive advertisements that appear on the iPad screens covering the rooms in which they live. The only way to escape this alienating life is through participation in a reality show named *Hot Shot*, which promises a life of fame and luxury to its winners. The main protagonist of the episode is called Bing – magnificently portrayed by Daniel Kaluuya – who, like many others, spends his days riding the power-generating bicycles and passively consuming the low-level entertainment imposed by the media. He falls in love with a girl named Abi Khan – portrayed by Jessica Brown Findlay – and, after hearing her singing, convinces her to participate in the talent show, a ticket for which costs fifteen million credits. Bing offers to pay for Abi's ticket, having inherited this sum from his deceased brother. Abi offers a powerful performance, but the judges declare that there are already enough singers and offer her a place

on a pornography channel. Abi, succumbing to audience pressure and eager to change her life, accepts, despite Bing's desperate protests. Then one day, Bing is languishing in his room inundated by continuous advertisements, given that he is now out of credits, when an ad showing Abi promoting the pornographic channel she works for suddenly appears. It is too much for Bing, who takes an extreme decision: he wants to participate in *Hot Shot* and then commit suicide in front of millions of spectators as a protest against this horrific reality. After months of furious work and deprivation, Bing manages to earn the fifteen million credits he needs to participate in the show and, when on the stage, he threatens to cut his neck with a piece of glass that he has previously hidden in his pants. The judges encourage him to speak, and he desperately inveighs against the superficial, unequal, pointless, and ferocious society they have to live in. Then, impressed by Bing's rant, the judges offer him a show where he can keep performing his invectives against society worldwide. The episode ends with Bing recording his widely followed show holding in his hand the piece of glass he wanted to use to kill himself. This episode of *Black Mirror* – written by Charlie Brooker and Konnie Huq – is a very clear and elegant representation of one of the main characteristics of neoliberalism: the ability to absorb and commodify every potentially subversive voice. Instead of kicking off an awareness among the people and therefore leading to riot, the rage and desperation of an entire society represented by Bing is rather immediately reconverted by neoliberal logic into spectacle, which means it is put to profit: commodified, then controlled, and therefore dismantled. What happened to Bing's protest can be applied to every attempt made to question neoliberal logic, including those made by literature. And, I would argue, this is the case for authors such Michel Houellebecq and Bret Easton Ellis. In fact, my argument is that Houellebecq and Ellis became, to an extent, *victims* of the same mechanisms they analysed and criticised in their literary work. Their public identity became a *brand*, which means it was manipulated in order to become more saleable and appealing to the public, and the characteristics of their literary work that caused so many controversies were exaggerated by mass media for marketing reasons, which have absorbed and overshadowed all the other aspects that could potentially have been subversive.

In sum, the political analysis and critique they have pursued in their literary work – and even their personal identity – became a *commodity*, reconverted by neoliberal logic into something that could be manipulated and sold like any other commodity. It was, in other words, brought under control, in the same way as Bing's protest was. As I shall demonstrate, Houellebecq and Ellis became conscious of this mechanism, and in the novels that I analyse, they create a fictional and parodic version of their public image through the literary genre of autofiction, with the aim of revealing, and therefore questioning, the mechanisms through which neoliberalism absorbs and commodifies all potentially subversive voices. Additionally, they use autofiction as an instrument to reveal how neoliberalism has today found a way to make a profit even from our personal identities, thus extending its constitutive ability to commodify every aspect of our life.

As I shall demonstrate, Ellis's and Houellebecq's choice to use the literary genre of autofiction – therefore producing in their novels characters that share their names and certain aspects and episodes of their personal life – is not related to an excess of narcissism or to an attempt to further exploit the inevitable controversies generated by their public image. On the contrary, through autofiction they strive to criticise and overturn the commodification of their personal identities – retaking control over their public image – and to reveal and therefore question the mechanisms through which neoliberalism managed to absorb the subversive and political potential of certain aspects of their literary work. In this way, through their writing Houellebecq and Ellis perform a *political* act. It is political in the sense that it is a conscious critique of a specific *power* and its acts and methods of *governance*, a power represented in this case by neoliberal logic and its cultural, anthropological, and economic hegemony. Now that this hegemony, as stated by Dardot and Laval, has been established as global, it consists in imposing the logic of capital inside the economy, society, and the State itself, until it shapes the subjectivities and controls the norm of existence (13). It is therefore a political act that – and this is the most important point of the thesis – can only be performed, in the way intended by

the authors analysed here, through the literary genre of autofiction, whose use becomes, as we shall see, a political act in itself.

This use of autofiction, which I claim to be political, unites not only Michel Houellebecq and Bret Easton Ellis, but also the third author analysed in this thesis: the Italian writer, academic, and critic Walter Siti. Siti can be certainly defined as the one among these three authors who has made the most conscious use of autofiction, a literary genre that, as he is an academic, he has also meticulously studied. Siti has had a rather different career as a writer compared to Ellis and Houellebecq: he debuted as a novelist at a later stage in his life, and, even though he is very well known and respected, both as a novelist and as an academic, in Italy and partially in France, receiving many important accolades for his novels, like the *Premio Strega*, he is not as widely known or discussed as Ellis and Houellebecq. He has never generated huge debates over the controversial content of his novels, as Ellis and Houellebecq have, as outlined by critics such as Sonia Baelo-Allué and Denis Demonpion, and any debates have certainly not been of the same proportions or with the same media exposure. However, it is possible to argue that, in their literary work, Siti, Houellebecq, and Ellis all address the same issues and have the same aim: to question neoliberalist logic and its effects. Siti has devoted a large part of his literary efforts to exploring and questioning the ways in which neoliberal logic has contributed to shaping our subjectivities, focusing in particular on the relationship between personal identities, desire, and consumerism, and on the role played in this kind of subjectivation by mass media, especially in the Italian context. In fact, as we shall see, Siti suggests that the advent of certain television shows in Italy, like reality shows in particular, have contributed to shaping a kind of subjectivity that is increasingly unable to distinguish between reality and fiction. As a consequence, personal identity tends to continuously shift between these two poles, an attitude that obviously also concerns personal behaviours. This point is very important because, as we shall see in the following chapters of this thesis, it is strictly related to the neoliberal strategies that are at the core of these three authors' reflections. Noticeably, in this sense, the literary genre of autofiction – which constitutively merges reality and fiction – is a

particularly apt instrument for the representation of the kind of subjectivity that is unable to distinguish reality from fiction, as described above.

In his literary work, moreover, Siti devotes particular attention to the question of *desire*. Siti's aim is to unveil how the imposition and manipulation of personal desires becomes one of the main instruments through which neoliberalism reasserts its cultural hegemony. In this sense, one of the reasons put forward by Siti for his choice to use autofiction is remarkably interesting. As we shall see, one of Siti's aims when he started his career as a novelist was to reflect on his personal relationship with desire. He firstly considered the basis of his desire, an obsession with male bodybuilders who generally prostitute themselves, as being the deviation of a monster, but then he wondered if his personal obsessions could instead be revealing of certain mechanisms that might to a certain extent represent a general tendency: a tendency that is related to the ways in which neoliberalism produces, organises, and thus controls desire. Therefore, Siti decides to use his *I* as a vehicle through which this general tendency is unveiled and questioned. As claimed by the Italian critic and academic Daniele Giglioli, Siti's autobiography is an 'autobiografia che si trasforma automaticamente in sociologia' ('an autobiography that automatically turns into sociology'; 82). Siti's obsession with male bodybuilders, moreover, becomes particularly interesting in his literary work in terms of his reflection upon neoliberal hegemony. In fact, as we shall see, Siti claims that the body of the bodybuilders is one that is *designed* to be *sold*, to be put on sale. It is a kind of body, therefore, that is artificially constructed in order to become as attractive as possible to the market. In this sense, as I shall demonstrate, the bodybuilders described by Siti become the perfect representation of how the neoliberalist logic of self-branding became the hegemonic model.

This artificial construction of the self not only concerns bodies, but also people's behaviours. We live in a society dominated by neoliberalist imperatives like competition and selfish individualism, where we are encouraged to think of ourselves as enterprises, as *projects*. Therefore, we live in a society that pushes us to modify our bodies and our behaviours in order to correspond to the expectation of the market. The result is that this neoliberal imperative to

modify and promote ourselves has become dominant in our life, and these attempts through which we try to adapt, to design ourselves with the aim of maximising our market appeal, are all forms of autofiction. However, it is a kind of autofiction that – as I shall demonstrate – can be considered an *unconscious/passive* autofiction, while the kind of autofiction produced by Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq, and Walter Siti should be considered – I posit – a *conscious/active* autofiction. This distinction is very important, because if the first one functions to perpetuate neoliberal dominion, the second is potentially subversive. To demonstrate the political aspect of this subversive kind of autofiction, an aspect that has been and still is partially unexplored, will be the final aim of this thesis.

As we shall see, autofiction is a particularly complex and insidious research field. Since its first appearance, on the back cover of Serge Doubrovsky's 1977 book *Fils*, the term *autofiction* has been the object of a wide and fierce debate among writers, critics, and academics. It must be said that this curious portmanteau of two terms, autobiography and fiction, which are often considered to be oxymorons, this unidentified literary object, raises several questions: where exactly is the line between the life of the authors and their invention? Should readers believe what they read? What about the distinction between the authors and their autofictional characters? As we shall see, despite countless attempts made by critics, writers, and academics, it seems very difficult to find a shared and unequivocal definition of this roguish literary genre. As evidenced by the work of critics such as Philippe Gasparini, Arnaud Genon, Chloé Delaume, Vincent Colonna, Régine Robin, Isabelle Grell, Claire Boyle, and Philippe Vilain, among others – to mention only the French context –, an exact definition of the literary genre of autofiction has yet to be reached. As I explain in the first chapter, I tend to agree with the definition given by the French critic Philippe Gasparini in his 2004 essay titled *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction*, where Gasparini defines autofiction as a 'récit reposant sur l'homonymie de l'auteur, du narrateur, et du héros mais présentant un développement projectif dans des situations imaginaires' ('story based on the homonymy of the author, the narrator and the hero that tells a projective development into imaginary situations';

26). Even nowadays, the peculiar characteristics of this literary genre, have not ceased to trigger fiery controversy. While I write, in France, a letter written by Hélène Devynck – wife of the acclaimed French writer Emmanuel Carrère – and published by the French edition of the magazine *Vanity Fair* has aroused much controversy. In this letter, Devynck claims that certain episodes reported in Carrère's last book, *Yoga*, a narrative that, as is typical with Carrère, amalgamates autobiographical elements and fiction, do not correspond to the truth. Additionally, according to Devynck, in reporting these episodes Carrère has allegedly violated certain non-disclosure agreements previously signed by both Devynck and Carrère, where Carrère pledged not to name either his former wife or their daughters. As noted, this letter triggered an intense debate in France, and one that has rapidly spread to other countries such as Italy, where it has recently been the object of an interesting webinar animated by the Italian writers and critics Gianluca Didino, Claudia Durastanti, Vincenzo Latronico, and Giorgia Tolfo. Moreover, the Italian philosopher Ilaria Gaspari, in a 2020 article, wonders what this debate around Carrère's *Yoga* implies in terms of limits to what can or cannot be said in a literary text, especially considering that Carrère was effectively bound – and therefore *limited* – by a legal agreement. In sum, however, Carrère has been accused of having violated both the *pact* with the reader – what was presented as *truth* was not actually truth – and the pact he legally signed with his wife. The controversy and consequent debate concerning Carrère's *Yoga* is interesting because it clearly confirms that certain issues related to autofiction, like, for instance, its position in Lejeune's *pacte autobiographique*, its status as a literary genre, what makes autofiction different compared to other hybrid writings such as the autobiographical novel, the distinction between the *real* persons and their fictionalised version, and so on, still have not been resolved. This is because the categories we previously used in order to discuss autofiction – what in it is real, what is fiction, what is autobiographical, and what is invented – are now insufficient. Autofiction, I shall argue, is a literary genre that is a child and a consequence of its time. It is a literary genre that constitutively merges the realms of reality and fiction. We live in a society where, after the advent of new technologies, and because of the

pervasiveness of mass media – we might fix as a turning point the media coverage of 9/11 – categories like reality and fiction are, to a certain extent, outdated. We might say that there is no longer a distinction between them, now they are *hybridised*. And, as noted by the Italian writer and critic Gianluca Didino in his 2020 essay *Essere senza casa*, the category we should address in order to understand our contemporary time and to shed light on our possible futures is exactly *hybridity* (237). I contend that the literary genre of autofiction, which is constitutively hybrid, is a very useful instrument in this sense. I suggest that if we move the focus, autofiction has a lot more to say. This is why I have decided to partially overcome these aforementioned questions in the thesis and to focus on an aspect of autofiction which is still mostly unexplored: autofiction's subversive and political potential as a conscious critique of a specific form of *power* and its acts and methods of *governance*; in this case, neoliberal logic and its cultural, anthropological, and economic hegemony. The literary genre of autofiction – as with all literary genres and forms – is also a result and a consequence of our time, and we live in a period in which neoliberal logic is dominant. An obsession with consumerism, the imperative to self-brand, plus competition, selfish individualism, and the commodification of every aspect of our life, including personal identities, are the instruments with which it subjugates us and establishes and holds its hegemony. It is fundamentally important to reveal and to question its mechanisms, and this is exactly the kind of contribution that – to a certain extent – autofiction, as well as its analysis, can offer: it offers instruments with which to reveal and question certain mechanisms peculiar to the neoliberal logic that can be – as I shall demonstrate – unveiled and questioned only through its use. At the end of this thesis, it will be clear that Michel Houellebecq, Bret Easton Ellis, and Walter Siti have used autofiction with a political intent that could only have been pursued through the literary genre of autofiction, which in this sense becomes, as noted by the French critic and writer Marie Darrieussecq, a 'subversive [thus political] act' (8). In order to demonstrate this, I divide the thesis into four parts.

In the first chapter, I follow the journey of the literary genre of autofiction, from its first appearance on the back cover of Serge Doubrovsky's 1977 novel *Fils* to the latest debates on it

in France, the United States, and Italy. During this account, I discuss work by authors such Philippe Lejeune, Vincent Colonna, Gérard Genette, Marie Darrieussecq, Chloé Delaume, and Arnaud Genon, as well as works by Marjorie Worthington, Lorenzo Marchese, Valentina Sturli, and Walter Siti. The final aim of this chapter, other than to give a relatively exhaustive overview of how the debate on autofiction has developed over the years, will be to demonstrate why the literary genre can be defined as a valid instrument with which to analyse and question certain problems typical of our era.

The second chapter is devoted to the (in)famous and controversial French author Michel Houellebecq, and in particular to his 2010 work of autofiction, *La carte et le territoire*. In this chapter, I firstly show how the critical reception of Houellebecq's earliest novels – *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, and *Les particules élémentaires* – and aspects of Houellebecq's own behaviour contributed to the creation of the *public character* Michel Houellebecq. As we shall see, Houellebecq uses autofiction as an instrument in order to *get rid* of this public character and to regain control of it. Then, relying on the work of critics such as Ruth Cruickshank and Douglas Morrey, I analyse the political aspect of Houellebecq's work, and how his aforementioned novels *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les particules élémentaires* address the issue of the neoliberalist tendency to commodify every aspect of life. Finally, I analyse Houellebecq's autofiction *La carte et le territoire*. I focus on two aspects: the ways in which Houellebecq addresses the *liaisons dangereuse* between art and the market – therefore how art adapts to neoliberal logic – and then Houellebecq's own autofiction, which means how he represents himself or, better, his public character, and why his use of autofiction can be considered political.

Chapter three focuses on work by the notorious American writer Bret Easton Ellis, and in particular on his 2005 autofiction *Lunar Park.* In the first section of the chapter, I outline the ways in which Ellis addresses the relationship between individuals, mass media, consumerism, and commodification, focusing in particular on certain aspects of his novels *Less than Zero* (1985), *American Psycho* (1991), and *Glamorama* (1999). Here, I base my analysis on works

by critics such Naomi Mandel, Sonia Baelo-Allué, and James Annesley. In the second section of the chapter, the object of analysis is the media construction of the *public character* of Bret Easton Ellis, and how the antagonism towards this character influenced Ellis's reflection on and subsequent decision to use the literary genre of autofiction. In this sense, Annesley's critical work is very useful, to which we owe the brilliant invention of the term *Brand* Easton Ellis. Finally, I analyse how Bret Easton Ellis constructed a caricature – as we shall see, it might be defined as a *parody* – of his public image in his 2005 autofiction *Lunar Park*. In this section, I argue that in *Lunar Park*, Ellis's use of autofiction is coherent with a critique of neoliberal logic and its tendency to commodify every aspect of our lives. Through the use of autofiction, I argue, Ellis manages to retake control of his commodified public image, and to move from a *passive* reified object – the *Brand* Easton Ellis – to an active subject, questioning and subverting in this way mechanisms typical of neoliberalist logic. I also address the question of – quoting Esther Peeren – Ellis's *self-spectralization* (3) in *Lunar Park*, arguing that the ghosts who persecute the character Bret Easton Ellis, among whom is the notorious Patrick Bateman, are not only related to Ellis's *past*, but also to a wider reflection by Ellis upon what the British philosopher Mark Fisher defined as a *nostalgia* for *possible futures* that never happened.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis is centred on the work of the Italian writer, academic, and critic Walter Siti, and in particular on his 2006 autofiction *Troppi paradisi*. The first section is devoted to the exploration and analysis of how Siti addresses the relationship between neoliberalism and desire in his work, and of how this relationship has been dominant in the processes of subjectivation of contemporary individuals' personal identity. Siti's reflections on the influence of mass media, and in particular reality shows, as a major actor in the Italian context in these processes of subjectivation and construction of personal identity is a substantial object of analysis. Then, drawing on works by authors such as Daniela Brogi, Francesca Giglio, Daniele Giglioli, and Lorenzo Marchese, among others, I address the reasons why Siti decided to use – through autofiction – his self, his *I*, as an exemplar of certain tendencies and mechanisms that are now dominant, mechanisms that, once again, are related to

neoliberal logic's hegemony. Siti's aim, as we shall see, is particularly ambitious, and I demonstrate how it could have been reached only through the literary genre of autofiction. Furthermore, as a consequence of these analyses, I introduce the distinction between *unconscious*/*passive* autofiction and *conscious*/*active* autofiction.

At that point, my hope is to have convincingly shed light on the political and subversive potential of the literary genre of autofiction, which academic scholarship has yet to fully explore, and also to have offered as complete an overview as possible of the debate about autofiction, as it currently stands. To explore these aspects of as contemporary a genre as autofiction is, if not urgent, then to an extent *necessary*. As I shall demonstrate, the particular use of autofiction I have analysed contributes to the unveiling of certain mechanisms that helped in the establishment and perpetuation of a cultural and economic system that is arguably leading us to destruction or, even worse, as the Italian philosopher and activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi would say (13), to a tremendous and abysmal unhappiness. I think that helping to unveil these mechanisms is something that has to do with the pursuit of a *truth*, which is or should be the ultimate aim of a literary critic – a truth that is, as truth sometimes can be, subversive, and thus political. It is time for a radical change, and to achieve it we need to identify the mechanisms and weaknesses of what we want to change. After all, as Houellebecq wrote, 'toute société a ses points de moindre résistance, ses plaies' ('every society has its weakest points, its wounds'), and therefore what we must do is put 'le doigt sur la plaie, et appuyez bien fort' ('put the finger on the wound and press hard'; 24).

Chapter 1: Autofiction's Journey in France, Italy, and the United States

When dealing with autofiction, it is important to bear in mind that it is a very recent literary genre. When the term first appeared on the back cover of Serge Doubrovsky's 1977 book *Fils*, it immediately attracted a clamorous level of attention and curiosity, the kind of curiosity that usually takes hold of people when a mysterious object appears out of nowhere and, even more mysteriously, is suddenly and inexplicably perceived as something that was long awaited and has eventually arrived – exactly in the right place, at the right time, even if we still do not realise it. The curiosity stemmed from the fact that, because of its characteristics, autofiction seemed to be an apt tool for addressing certain new issues, including those related to the mutations of the contemporary subject, especially concerning its relationship to the postmodern era in general and new technologies in particular. In this sense, the approximate time when the term *autofiction* appeared was a time of seismic changes. The end of what Jean-François Lyotard (8) first and Fredric Jameson later (19) called the grand narrations left people disoriented and anxious, setting the stage for the so-called postmodern era; the advent of new technologies and mass media would make it more and more difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction, while neoliberalism was slated to become the dominant economic system, and its cultural logic, based on an obsession with consumerism, selfish competition, and an enterprise-oriented attitude, would soon become hegemonic. In this sense, Lyotard claims in his seminal *The Postmodern Condition* that the end of the 'great narrations' (8), which could be, for example, Communism and Fascism, left the subject disoriented and with feelings of high anxiety. The term *disoriented* is extremely important as it forms the foundation of Jameson's theoretical approach to the postmodern condition in the post-industrial era. In his fundamental essay *Postmodernism. Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Jameson explores the roots of postmodernism from a historical perspective, with the intention of identifying the origins of

this term, as well as the historical and economic conditions that generated and nurtured it. He opens his essay by explaining how, in the second half of the twentieth century, something had changed in people's perceptions of the future, claiming:

> The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the crisis of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called Postmodernism. (Jameson 8)

Following these considerations, Jameson enumerates the main characteristics of postmodernism: parody, that is "the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language" (Jameson 17); and imitation, which Jameson considers one of the most peculiar narrative strategies of literary postmodernism and postmodern society, which he likens, for instance, to "Plato's conception of Simulacrum, the identical copy for which no original has ever existed" (18). To better illustrate his point, Jameson gives the city of Las Vegas as an example of what is, effectively, a sort of *summa of postmodernism.* In Las Vegas, it is not unusual to find a copy of the French Eiffel Tower next to a copy of the Italian Coliseum (imitation), and copies of the most famous European paintings hung up in the hallway of a casino (simulacrum). The choice of a city and its architecture, however, is not incidental; on the contrary, Jameson considers architecture to be the quintessential postmodern art. With these premises, Jameson introduces the notion of postmodern space, which is, he argues, a place in which the human body is unable to locate itself (44). Furthermore, humankind has lost touch with the mutation of the concept of place; it has sunk into it, feeling disoriented, terrified, and incapable of understanding the reasons for and the consequences of such disorientation. These feelings are provoked by the lack of landmarks within the postmodern space, which can either be a solid place or a palace like Frank

Gerhy's House (Jameson 109), or even an abstract setting, such as the cyberspace created by William Gibson in *Neuromancer* (Jameson 35). In order to fully grasp Jameson's assumptions, it is important to bear in mind that the lack of landmarks can be interpreted in either an abstract or a physical sense. This is claimed by Jameson himself to be one of the main characteristics of postmodern space, referring again to the example of architecture (in this case, a hotel) to illustrate this idea. Jameson writes that the main characteristic of the Westin Bonaventura Hotel in Los Angeles is the absence of exits and entries, or perhaps even the perfect exchangeability of the two. According to Jameson, this ambiguity evokes a sense of disorientation (as mentioned earlier) in the visitors of the hotel. This same ambiguity and relative confusion can be seen in any commercial shopping centre in the world.

Jameson further claims in his essay that *postmodernism* is merely a symptom that has been commonly associated with a larger phenomenon; drawing on an essay by the economist Ernest Mandel, he calls this phenomenon the logical culture of late capitalism (31). Moreover, in his 2014 essay, *Ipermodernità,* the Italian critic and academic Raffaele Donnarumma agrees and expands on Jameson's idea. Donnarumma claims that our contemporary era cannot be defined as *postmodern*, believing that the prefix *post* implies the end of a phenomenon, in this case modernity. The Italian critic argues, on the contrary, that modernity has never been healthier. In this sense, the Italian critic offers a *revision* of Jameson's work on postmodernism, claiming that

> parlare di ipermodernità vuol dire svelare che il proclama postmoderno dell'uscita dalla logica moderna del nuovo è stato solo un desiderio o una velleità: a smentirlo c'è un'inflazione di rincorse alla novità e al suo valore differenziale in molti ambiti, dalla scienza al marketing, dalla moda alle arti, soprattutto figurative. In questo senso, la modernità non è mai finita, e quello cui assistiamo ora, nell'economia o nelle tecniche, è una sua continuazione esasperata, quando non caricaturale. (Donnarumma 103-104)

> (talking about hypermodernity means revealing that the postmodern proclamation of the exit from the modern logic was only a desire or an aspiration, disproved by an inflation of the hunt for novelty and its differential value in many areas, from science to marketing, from fashion to arts, especially figurative arts. In this respect, modernity never ended and what we witness now, in economy or technology, is its exasperated continuation, if not caricatural).

Donnarumma thus argues that modernity is today experiencing a sort of hypertrophy, caused by the exasperation of postmodernism's main characteristics. As already mentioned by Lyotard, these characteristics include the obsession with new technologies, disorientation caused by the lack of landmarks, and parody. Moreover, Donnarumma claims that hypermodernity adds to postmodernism an obsession with progress and hypertrophy that bring about a sense of anxiety. In this way, according to Donnarumma, hypermodernity can be regarded as both an answer to and a consequence of postmodernism:

> We could then argue that hypermodernity is the answer and partly the dysphoric consequence to postmodernism, since while enhancing its colours, it ends up by veering them to black. The prefix 'hyper' hence prevents any possible nuance of celebration and reveals its anxiogenic and intimidating load; 'hyper' is the constraint of being of contemporaneity, its obsession of performance. (Donnarumma 107)

Conversely, Donnarumma thinks that the *birth* of hypermodernity does not necessarily imply the *death* or the overcoming of postmodernism; they should rather be considered two phenomena that coexist in the same historical period. Most importantly, they neither announce nor decree the end of modernism:

> l'ipermodernità non designa la totalità di una nuova era. Come Rinascimento, Manierismo e Barocco stanno dentro una stessa epoca, così postmoderno e ipermoderno (e prima, la fase che vedeva la concomitanza di modernismo e avanguardie) sono atti diversi dello stesso dramma, in cui la modernità, sotto la spinta sempre più affannata della modernizzazione e trasformandosi in globalizzazione, cambia, evolve, ma non smette di essere sé stessa. (Donnarumma 105)
>
> (Hypermodernity does not designate the whole of a new era. As the Renaissance, Mannerism and Baroque are at the same time, so postmodern and hypermodern [and before that, the phase that saw the correspondence between modernism and avant-garde] are different acts of the same drama, where modernity, under the increasingly eager drive of modernization, turns itself into globalization, and therefore changes, evolves, but never stops to being itself).

Postmodernism and hypermodernity, therefore, are both an extension of modernity itself, which has not ceased to exist, but is simply growing and doped: it is hypertrophic. Yet, by far the most interesting point made by Donnarumma is in relation to the new obsession with the individual carrying out increasingly frequent performances, caused by the anxiety that hypermodernity produces. This obsession with performance can be related to a very recent attitude that one might define as *self-branding*. Obviously, promotion and advertising have always existed; however, new technologies such as social networks have given way to a new phenomenon whereby people feel the urge to use these new technologies in order to promote not their artisanal work (for example, an artist's painting, a painting for an artist), but simply their own selves. In this regard, it is interesting to look at an article written by American novelist Bret Easton Ellis that recently appeared in the New York Times Magazine, titled "Living in the Cult of Likability". In this article, he claims that, due to the visibility provided by social

networks, we all consider ourselves to be specialists in any given field. We are thus adamant that our opinion is *necessary*. Ellis goes on to argue that we agree to submit to the rules set by social networks (above all, Facebook, as cited by Ellis) in order to give resonance to our voices. The point is, according to Ellis, that people tend to 'present an idealized portrait of their lives — a nicer, friendlier, duller self' (3) in order to be more *likeable*, to better *sell* themselves to others.

In the aforementioned article, Bret Easton Ellis seems to touch on a point that is of great concern nowadays and is the direct successor to the preoccupations surrounding the role of the individual and identity in the era of the new technologies typical of postmodern theory. In this sense, it is no surprise that the appearance of a new literary genre, whose constitutive characteristic is, as stated by Gasparini, the merging of autobiographical, thus supposedly real, elements and fiction (91), immediately raised such interest. It is not difficult to realise that exactly because of this characteristic, autofiction seemed a useful instrument for representing a new kind of subjectivity: a subjectivity that struggled to distinguish between reality and fiction and that, having introjected the logic of neoliberalism, started to perceive itself in terms of market appeal; a subjectivity that, eventually, because of its inability to construct a real and singular identity, has been forced to continuously create new ones. However, as we shall see, the debate raised by autofiction was initially focused on more technical issues, such its position within the famous scheme elaborated by Philippe Lejeune in his 1975 *Le pacte autobiographique*, on its difference with other literary genres such as the autobiographical novel and the memoir, and even on its *newness*. Later on, the debate was enriched by other approaches. Critics, writers, and scholars such as Chloé Delaume, Arnaud Genon, Marie Darrieussecq, and Régine Robin, among others, preferred instead to move from the issues concerning the generic status of autofiction to rather direct their magnifying glass to the potentials of this new literary genre, wondering what autofiction and its use had to say about our contemporary era. These critics, as I show in the second section of this chapter, outlined, for instance, how autofiction seemed to be an appropriate way to represent and capture the

essence of the so-called *postmodern subject*. The creator of the term, Serge Doubrovsky, once defined autofiction as a postmodern evolution of the subject (87), stressing in this sense its relationship with postmodern literature. Additionally, French critics and writers like Chloé Delaume and Marie Darrieussecq have opened up other perspectives, defining, in the case of Darrieussecq, autofiction and its use as something subversive (8) and, in the case of Delaume, its use even as a political tool (233), because in some cases it could be an interesting way of representing and questioning certain aspects of our contemporary times and unveiling the mechanisms that rule them. It is from this perspective that I want to develop my own analysis in this thesis, exploring in particular what autofiction has to say concerning the hegemonic economic and cultural system of neoliberalism. However, before explaining how Ellis, Houellebecq, and Siti used autofiction in order to unveil and question certain mechanisms typical of neoliberal hegemony, it is important to try to shed some light on what exactly autofiction is. In the following section, I shall therefore outline a sort of *biography* of autofiction, from its birth to the most recent debate on it, focusing on how this debate has been perceived and developed especially in countries such as France, the United States, and Italy.

AUTOFICTION, 'A GENRE INDÉCIDABLE': THE FRENCH CONTEXT

First of all, what do we talk about when we talk about autofiction? Autofiction may be defined, for instance, as a hybrid literary genre that typically manifests both autobiographical and fictional elements. The French critic Bruno Blanckeman, for example, in his 2002 book titled *Les fictions singulières: étude sur le roman français contemporain*, instead describes autofiction as a 'récit indécidable' (137), pushing on its constitutive ambiguity. In a 1982 essay co-written by Bruno Vercier and Jacques Lecarme titled *La littérature en France depuis 1968*, the French critic Jacques Lecarme takes up Doubrovsky's definition (21) and describes autofiction as a new genre whose prime characteristic is that the protagonist of the novel 'porte

le même nom que le narrateur et l'auteur' ('bears the same name as the narrator and the author'; 150-151). Philippe Gasparini, on the other hand, in a 2004 essay titled *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction*, expands on Doubrovsky's definition, arguing that autofiction might be defined as a 'récit reposant sur l'homonymie de l'auteur, du narrateur, et du héros mais présentant un développement projectif dans des situations imaginaires' ('story based on the homonymy of the author, the narrator and the hero that tells a projective development into imaginary situations'; 26). At first glance, based on Gasparini's claim, the characteristics of autofiction seem quite well delineated. It is important to bear in mind, however, that it is not as clear cut as that, and that the discussion surrounding autofiction can be considered to have emerged from the birth of the term itself. In fact, even the effective paternity of this neologism has been the subject of much debate. The first author to claim the creation of the term *autofiction* is the French writer and critic Doubrovsky, who introduced it on the back cover of his 1977 novel *Fils*:

> Autobiographie? Non. C'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde au soir de leur vie et dans un beau style. Fiction d'événements et de faits strictement réels; si l'on veut *autofiction*, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. (Doubrovsky 1)

> (Autobiography? No. It's a privilege reserved to the most influential people of this world approaching the end of their lives in a nice style. It must be fiction of facts, strictly real facts if we want autofiction that has the merit of having entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, out of wisdom and syntax of a novel, traditional or new).

In contrast, in his 1997 novel titled *Chaos*, the writer Marc Weitzmann (who is, incidentally, the nephew of Serge Doubrovsky himself) claims that the first writer to have used the term *autofiction* was Jerzy Kosinski, specifically in his 1965 book *L'oiseau bariolé*. However, this statement has been strongly denied by the French critic Vincent Colonna in a review of Phillippe Gasparini's *Est-il je?* (4). The question is obviously very intricate and difficult to answer without some degree of doubt. However, recognising the paternity of the term is only one of many concerns surrounding the debate. Another crucial concern is the effective independence of autofiction; or, rather, whether it is merely a title for an old genre such as, for example, the autobiographical novel, or if it can be considered *something else*. The first theorist to reveal an interest in this topic was Philippe Lejeune, who had notably gained recognition as a major expert in autobiographical writings after publishing his 1975 book, *Le pacte autobiographique.* In this essay, Lejeune sets a sort of regulation for autobiographical writings, introducing the concept of a *pact* that guarantees everything that has been written by the author is to be taken as *truth* (22). This guarantee is given, as argued by Lejeune, if it satisfies one simple rule: 'In autobiography, the *author*, the *narrator* and the *protagonist* must be *identical*' (5). Lejeune became interested in Doubrovsky's neologism – as confirmed by the 1993 work *Autofiction & Cie*, which includes contributions by Lejeune, Lecarme, and Doubrovsky – and many scholars have persuasively explored the long theoretical exchange between the two French critics, such as Lejeune himself in *Moi Aussi*, and Claire Boyle in *Consuming Autobiographies*. However, Lejeune concludes that 'dans ces dix dernières années du "mentir vrai" à "l'autofiction", le roman autobiographique est arrivé au point de rendre plus indécise que jamais la frontière entre les deux domaines' ('in the last ten years passing from "true lies" to "autofiction", the autobiographical novel made more undecided than ever the boundaries between the two domains'; 24). There are, however, other scholars who have approached the question of autofiction from a different point of view. For instance, the well-known French critic Gérard Genette seemed to defend the thesis that autofiction is an independent literary genre, when in his 1982 seminal work, *Palimpsestes,* he announced that

he had finally found a term to describe Marcel Proust's autobiographical approach in *À la recherche du temps perdu*:

> Comment appeler ce genre, cette forme de fiction, puisque fiction, au sens fort du terme, il y a bien ici? Le meilleur terme serait sans doute celui dont Serge Doubrovsky désigne son propre récit : *autofiction*. (Genette 358)
>
> (What to call this genre, this form of fiction, given that it is fiction, in the strongest sense of the term, that can be found here? The best term would be undoubtedly the one that Serge Doubrovsky used to denominate his own narrative, *autofiction*).

Nevertheless, in an essay published in 1983, just one year after *Palimpsestes*, titled *Nouveau discours du récit*, Genette returns to discuss his reflections on *À la recherche*, surprising his readers with a lack of use of the term *autofiction* throughout the entire work. With this choice, it appears there can be one explanation for why Genette defined Proust's novel as an *autofiction*: simply, I would argue, because he found in *autofiction* a more appealing term than the exhausted *autobiographical novel*. This statement is confirmed by Philippe Gasparini in his fundamental work, *Autofiction: une aventure du langage*, where he argues that 'Genette récupère le néologisme pour éviter d'employer les expressions *roman personnel* ou *roman autobiographique* qui évoquent fâcheusement la critique préformaliste' ('Genette recovers the neologism to avoid using the expression "personal novel" or "autobiographical novel" that incongruously evokes preformalist criticism'; 111). Therefore, Genette seemed to consider autofiction to be no more than a mere *synonym*, if fashionable, of the *roman personnel*. However, in his 1999 *Figures IV* he backed down and admitted that he had changed his mind about autofiction. In fact, he wrote that 'toute autobiographie comporte, presque inévitablement, une partie d'autofiction' ('every autobiography comprises, almost inevitably, a

part of autofiction'; *Figures* 33). Yet, on the other hand, in 1989 Genette himself happened to supervise a Ph.D. dissertation, by Vincent Colonna, titled *Autofiction: essai sur la fictionalisation de soi en littérature*. In this dissertation, Colonna argues that it is not possible to identify autofiction with the genre of *roman personnel*, as already claimed by Genette in *Palimpsestes*. The reason, according to Colonna, is that in the *roman personnel* 'l'écrivain laisse entendre que son texte est une confession' ('the writer allows it to be understood that his/her text is a confession'; *Palimpsestes* 34). Therefore, Colonna argues that autofiction can instead be defined as 'l'antithèse précise du roman personnel' ('as the antithesis of the personal novel'; 35), also considering the fact that Doubrovsky himself has often claimed the importance of the fictional parts of *Fils* with respect to the autobiographical notes (78). What is then particularly interesting about this point is that in the end Colonna seems to conclude that autofiction is not a new literary genre *tout court*, but rather a new term that describes an ancient *praxis*. However, he concedes that the invention of the term contributed to naming a literary practice – 'la *fictionnalisation de* soi' – that previously lacked a definition, writing that autofiction defines 'une pratique ancienne mais jusque-là dépourvue d'appellation, la fictionnalisation de soi en littérature' ('an old practice, but until then lacking designation, the fictionalising of the self in literature'; 22-23). In this sense, Colonna associates the term *autofiction* with an impressive number of literary texts from every age, including works by Dante Alighieri, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Romain Gary, among others, all brought under the same definition.

The debate on autofiction's status has also continued in recent years. In a 2010 essay titled *Le démon de la definition*, for instance, the French critic and writer Philippe Vilain polemicises against Gasparini, disputing the latter's definition of autofiction, in regard to the heteronomy between the hero, the author, and the narrator (473). In fact, Vilain tries to include among autofictional texts even books that do not present the aforementioned heteronomy, introducing the concept of *autofiction anonimale* (473). To better explain his point, Vilain claims that there are many literary works that can be defined as autofiction, even if the name of

the author does not appear, using as an example his own literary works. For instance, Vilain recalls that Doubrovsky claimed Vilain's work could not be defined as autofictional because 'Philippe Vilain aime dire *je* mais ne parle pas de Philippe Vilain' ('Vilain loves to say *I*, but never talks about Philippe Vilain'; Doubrovsky, quoted by Vilain 474); Vilain, obviously did not agree with the inventor of the term *autofiction*, claiming that even if Philippe Vilain does not appear as a character, his books offer very strong autobiographical portions that he has freely reinvented and fictionalised:

> En résumé, j'écris à la première personne et raconte une histoire depuis un fait réel, vérifiable mais transposé, à laquelle je donne un prolongement romanesque possible, un élargissement poétique sans toujours me nommer. (Vilain 476)
>
> (In a nutshell, I write in the first person and tell a story after a real story, verifiable but transposed, to which I give a possible fictional extension, a poetical widening without always naming myself).

Therefore, Vilain ultimately offers another definition of *autofiction*, a definition that is however at the same time an enlargement and rebuttal of Gasparini's:

> L'autofiction anominale ou nominalement indéterminée telle que je la pratique, en prenant des libertés avec l'autofiction doubrovskienne, pose ainsi un problème qui m'impose de préciser mon pacte définitoire : 'Fiction homonymique ou *anominale* qu'un individu fait de sa vie ou d'une partie de celle-ci'. (Vilain 477)
>
> (The anominal autofiction of nominally undetermined as I practice it, taking some liberties from the autofiction as designed by Doubrovsky, poses a problem that

> forces me to specify my defining pact: 'A homonymous or anominal fiction that an individual creates from his life or a part of it').

The objection raised by Vilain is certainly interesting, even if not, I would argue, entirely convincing. In fact, the presence of the name of the author as a character in a partially (or even totally) fictional work is basically what distinguishes an autofiction from an autobiographical novel. However, Vilain touches on an interesting point after all, which is that the definition given by Gasparini is effectively too restrictive. In fact, there are a number of autofictional texts in which the author's name is not given to the principal character, the *hero,* but rather to a side character. In this sense, the 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire* by the French writer Michel Houellebecq is exemplary. In fact, as we shall see, in *La carte et le territoire* the character Michel Houellebecq is not the *hero* of the novel, but only a side character, appearing for a few chapters and then ending up being brutally murdered. In light of this, Gasparini's definition of autofiction should, in my view, be adopted, adding that the homonymy between the author, the narrator, and the hero that *trigger*s the autofictional disposition should not be limited only to the *hero,* but rather enlarged to any character in general. At this point, however, I am very aware that it might seem that much of the French debate over autofiction focused only on issues relating to its status or position within Lejeune's autobiographical pact. On the contrary, this is only one side of the coin. In fact, other scholars and writers have decided to explore other aspects of autofiction, trying to relate, as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, the birth of this new literary genre to the necessity of finding new instruments to face new, more contemporary issues.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON AUTOFICTION IN FRANCE

A few scholars and critics have tried to explore the relationship between autofiction and postmodernism. Doubrovsky himself, for instance, in an interview with Vilain (in Vilain's 2005 work *Défence de narcisse*) described the creation of his neologism as a 'postmodern evolution of autobiography' (212). This assumption is somewhat intriguing, even if it is useful to bear in mind that Doubrovsky often changed his mind about the origins of autofiction. However, in his 1980 essay collection, *Parcours critique*, Doubrovsky explains how written work on the subject and the stylistic innovations made by postmodern writers like John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon had made a lasting impression on him (67). This interest in American postmodern writers is telling, especially in regard to their work on the questioning of the subject. In fact, as testified by the work of, among others, the American scholar Fredric Jameson, the concern for the role of the self in the postmodern era – especially its relationship with new media – was debated in particular. In this sense, autofiction may have been intended by Doubrovsky as an appropriate new instrument with which to handle this question. In fact, in the aforementioned 1982 essay, Lecarme claims that Doubrovsky's neologism can be regarded as a testimony to the 'postmodern dissolution of the self' (261). Moreover, in her 1997 book *Le golem de l'écriture: de l'autofiction au cybersoi*, the French writer Régine Robin seemed to agree with Doubrovsky, describing autofiction as a 'tentation de l'identité postmoderne' ('postmodern identity temptation'; 81). The reference in Robin's essay title to the Golem, the famous monster typical of Jewish folklore, is not coincidental, given that autofiction has often been related to Jewish contemporary literature. This connection was confirmed by Doubrovsky in a 2007 essay titled "Les points sur les 'i'" (54). Marc Weitzmann, on the other hand, has pointed out how the ambiguity between biography and imaginative facts typical of autofiction can be a helpful tool in order to help survivors represent, through writing, the horror of Holocaust. For this reason, Weitzmann even included Primo Levi among writers of autofiction (61).

It seems very rudimentary to limit the phenomenon of autofiction to Jewish post-war writing, due to the fact that not all autofictional writing contains Holocaust themes. However,

it is undeniable that Weitzmann touched on a very interesting point, which is the relation between the birth of autofictional written works and the postmodern condition of the self. In fact, Raymond Federman, in his 2006 essay titled *Surfiction*, wrote that 'l'autofiction est la forme post-moderne, c'est-à-dire post-holocauste, de l'autobiographie' ('autofiction is the postmodern form, that is post-holocaust form of autobiography'; 73). Furthermore, in a 1998 article titled "L'hypothèse du soi", Weitzmann wrote that it might be argued that the genre of autofiction was born as a way to face 'la menace de dévastation radicale du sujet' ('the danger of the radical devastation of the subject'; 91). However, even if Weitzmann seems to accept autofiction as a new literary genre, his vision appears to me to be too narrow, given that he only refers to the so-called Holocaust writings. Therefore, I would suggest pursuing the line of reasoning that relates autofiction to contemporary issues, especially concerning the question of the subject, but trying at the same time to identify other, more open perspectives in this sense.

In particular, it seems that the recent debate upon autofiction converged, at least in France, on the relationship between the use of autofiction and certain aspects typical of the contemporary *subject*. In fact, in a 2007 article titled "Notes sur l'autofiction et la question du sujet", Arnaud Genon argues that 'L'autofiction […] est en fait le moyen qu'a trouvé le sujet […] pour refuser l'idée d'une vérité univoque et revendiquer sa fracture' ('Autofiction is in fact the way found by the subject to refuse the idea of a unique truth and to reclaim its own fracture'; 1). In addition, in his 2001 essay *Le roman, le je* Philippe Forest likens autofictional writings to the 'consumerist dissolution of the self' (91), typical of consumerist society. Therefore, at this point it might be possible to suppose a correlation between the birth of autofiction and the kind of crisis experienced by the subject in the postmodern era, as described by Jameson and Lyotard, and to suppose, moreover, that the explosion of autofictional writings in recent years is one of the consequences of that dissolution of identity discussed by authors such as Zygmunt Bauman in his 2000 essay *Liquid Modernity*. As is very well known, Bauman's most famous innovation was the introduction of the concept of a *liquid society*, which he developed in his 2000 essay *Liquid Modernity*. Bauman argues that liquid society is a society that has lost its

landmarks (the class division, for instance) because of the advent of mass media and post-industrial capitalism (37). Moreover, part of this essay is devoted to a consideration of the importance of identity within liquid society, which Bauman considers nowadays to be as liquid as the society itself (93). Bauman defines a liquid identity as an identity that is in constant search of change and renewal in order to become, like any other product, as appealing as possible (41). As such, he reaffirms what is argued by Bret Easton Ellis in the aforementioned article. Moreover, the liquid identity is constantly in search of a *place*, or, better, a community. The reason for this change is, in Bauman's view, related to the individualism born after the third industrial revolution (63). In the past, roles, and therefore identities, were defined by work and social order, both strongly established and almost impenetrable. However, this new freedom also brought about a sense of displacement; liquid identity therefore started to adapt itself to the circumstances, accompanied by a continuous and compulsive change in desires. Furthermore, Bauman claims that capitalism has intercepted this tendency and started to produce more and more commodities in order to satisfy consumers' needs (97). At the same time, *models* (celebrities, movie stars, etcetera) are created in order to be imitated, as are the products necessary to imitate these models. This point is particularly interesting, because, in light of what is outlined above, it seems that the capitalist system basically benefits from the *anxiety* of the liquid identity, but also creates the *anxyolitic*: new identities/models to imitate through consuming.

This relationship between autofiction and the question of the postmodern subject is certainly very promising, and merits at least a brief discussion in this chapter. At this point, it is possible to isolate three fundamental points, which are useful for clarifying the extent to which autofiction is a consequence of, or even a reaction to, reflections on the postmodern subject. First of all, we know that, as claimed by Jameson in his 1989 work *Postmodernism. Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, one of the most important characteristics of the postmodern subject is the continuous perception of a sort of sense of disorientation (44). This characteristic of the postmodern subject, I would argue, might be easily related to autofiction.

In fact, considering that the main feature of this literary genre is its constitutive hybridism between autobiography and fiction, it might therefore cause the reader to feel a sense of disorientation, a feeling caused by his or her struggle to decide whether to believe the narrator or not. In this sense, the feeling of disorientation evidently evokes the one illustrated by Jameson.

Another aspect of autofiction that might be outlined is that, because of its characteristics, it can be considered a very apt instrument with which to represent narration related to *traumas*. This is a point that has been touched on above with regard to the quotation by Federman, in which he claims that autofiction is a postmodern in general, and post-Holocaust in particular, evolution of autobiography (73). When relating autofiction to Holocaust writings, Federman is referring to the representation of a kind of subject devastated by the terrible experience of Holocaust, a kind of subject who therefore, in order to report his or her memories (or testimonies), had to use the instruments of both memory and fiction. The reason given for this approach, for this *shift*, is the attempt to make the narration of that horror less painful through the filter of fiction. This link between trauma writings and autofiction has also been explored by scholars such as Nina Schmidt, in her 2018 work *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twenty-First Century German Literature*, and Arnaud Genon, who extended the discussion to writing related to AIDS. For instance, in his 2010 essay titled "Hervé Guibert: fracture autobiographique et écriture du SIDA", Genon analysed the autofictional journey of the French writer Hervé Guibert. In this essay, Genon first of all argues that not all of Guibert's work, even if it often shows strong autobiographical elements, can be defined as *autofictional*, but that his work as a whole definitely converges in this sense:

> Si tous les textes de Guibert ne peuvent donc être considérés comme appartenant à l'autofiction ainsi définie, il semble pourtant que son œuvre entière tende vers ce genre qui constitue l'aboutissement de son travail, à travers la trilogie du sida, *A*

> *L'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990), *Le Protocole compassionnel* (1991) et *L'homme au chapeau rouge* (1992). (Genon 189)
>
> (If not all texts by Guibert can be considered as belonging to autofiction thus defined, yet it seems that his whole work tends to that genre that constitutes the outcome of his effort, through the AIDS trilogy, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* [1990], *Compassion Protocol* [1991] and *The Man with the Red Hat* [1992]).

Genon argues that in the end Guibert did produce an autofiction, and explains why, in his opinion, Guibert decided to do so:

> l'autofiction est le dispositif littéraire, la posture énonciative qu'a trouvée Guibert pour dire le sida et la crise identitaire, puis la fracture autobiographique dont il est la cause, pour dire la disparition du sujet et sa mort proche. (Genon 189)
>
> (Autofiction is the literary device, the declaratory stance found by Guibert in order to tell of AIDS and the identity crisis, then the autobiographical fracture which he is responsible for, to tell of the disappearing of the subject and its near death).

This statement is extremely interesting. In fact, here Genon seems to posit that Guibert decided to use autofiction because his aim was to represent the fracture he perceived between *himself* and his body and self being devastated by AIDS – a body and a self that he could not recognise anymore, and that he ends up considering as being something *other*, almost as if he had two detached and irreconcilable selves living together. Genon ultimately argues that Guibert's aim, in his view, could have been achieved only through autofiction:

> L'autofiction, plus qu'un choix, devient une nécessité : elle traduit l'expérience radicale du moi qui se sent désormais étranger à lui-même, elle donne à l'auteur le pouvoir d'écrire la fracture ontologique qui l'habite en se distanciant de celui qu'il est devenu et dans lequel il ne se reconnait pas. L'autofiction est le genre qui permet d'exprimer à la fois la singularité du 'je' et la multiplicité des Autres qui le menacent. (Genon 200)
>
> (Autofiction becomes a necessity, more than a choice: it translates the radical experience of the self now feeling stranger to itself, it gives to the author the power of writing down the ontological fracture inhabiting him, taking his distance from what he has become and does not recognise. Autofiction is the genre that allows the expression of the uniqueness of the 'I' and, at the same time, the multiplicity of the Others threatening it).

At this point, I would argue that it seems clear that Guibert utilised autofiction as a means of representing the *split* between his self and his body, which, as already argued, he ended up perceiving as something *other*, and which, because of AIDS, he could not recognise anymore. In this sense, therefore, the use of autofiction becomes, as suggested by Genon too, a way to regain control, or even an attempt at a sort of *reunification* or *reconciliation* of an identity that is fragmented or, in Guibert's case, perceived as an *antagonist*. This example of using autofiction to retake control of a self over which we feel we have lost agency is very important for this thesis, because it opens up the prospect of using autofiction as an instrument able to somehow *subvert* a condition that is usually perceived as incontrovertible. In Guibert's case, as we have seen, it is the incontrovertibility of a status of total *passivity* and powerlessness when facing a devastating disease such as AIDS, while, on the contrary, the literary genre of autofiction gives him the instruments to subvert this status of passivity and to *actively* retake control and agency. Here autofiction seems to start to reveal its potential as a literary genre and

open up new perspectives, including the one that interests us in this thesis, its political potential.[1] This perspective, as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, recently became one of the most discussed in the French debate.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO AUTOFICTION IN THE FRENCH CONTEXT

As already mentioned, in my view, the most apparent limit to the debate raised around autofiction in recent years has been its tendency to reduce discussion to questions solely related to its generic status, leaving aside other potentially interesting aspects, such as questions like: what is then its rightful position in Lejeune's autobiographical space? Is it a new literary genre or just a temporary mannerism? These are certainly important topics, but there is also a risk of losing sight of autofiction's potential as a literary genre. Fortunately, not all early analysis of autofiction took that direction. A first approach in this sense was made by the French critic and writer Marie Darrieussecq, who, in a 1996 essay titled "Autofiction: un genre pas sérieux", defined autofiction as 'un acte subversif' (8), marking a new approach to this literary genre that was stimulating and promising. Fortunately, it seems that a change of perspective in this very direction recently took place in the French literary debate. The discussion of Doubrovsky's neologism, therefore, seemed at a certain point to have overcome the aforementioned formalistic questions and to be considering autofiction from a wholly different stance, or at least, it appeared not to be entirely focused on its generic status. For instance, even Gasparini, who has been one of the most tenacious investigators of autofiction's theoretical position, shows enough confidence in a 2016 essay to define autofiction as a 'phénomène littéraire radicalement nouveau' ('an extremely new literary phenomenon'; 192). Moreover, and most

[1] In this sense, it might be worth remembering how critics such as Jean-Pierre Boulé and James N. Agar have defined Guibert's choice to write about AIDS as a political act (72).

importantly for the aims of this thesis, in 2016 an essay collection appeared, coordinated by Isabelle Grell and Arnaud Genon, titled *Lisières de l'autofiction: enjeux géographique, artistiques et politiques*. Reading the texts contained therein, one has the impression that the debate on autofiction has radically evolved. In fact, autofiction is now regarded by some critics and scholars as an already established literary genre. Therefore, the focus in this sense seems to have been shifted to its uses in literature and also to its relationship to certain aspects of our contemporary era. In the work coordinated by Grell and Genon, for example, there is an analysis of how the use of autofiction changes depending on different cultures and nationalities. This is because, as argued by Grell in the introduction, 'Le *je* ne s'exprime pas à l'identique partout, mais selon les pays, les continents, les langues, les cultures, les religions, l'histoire, les gouvernements, les influences politiques' ('The *I* does not express itself in the same way, but changes according to its country, continent, the language, culture, religion, history, government, and political influences'; 5). Even more interestingly, particular attention is devoted to what can be defined as the *political* aspects of autofiction, meaning how certain aspects of this new literary genre can be used as an instrument of protest or political engagement. In this sense, the article written by the French writer and critic Chloé Delaume, titled "Politique et autofiction", is highly relevant. In this article, Delaume begins with Baudrillard's claim that 'nous ne voulons plus d'un destin. Nous voulons une histoire' (Baudrillard, quoted by Delaume) ('We do not want a destiny. We want a story'; 223), and then argues that we are all subjected to so-called collective fictions (223) such as those of a family, dominant culture, religion, and so on, and that these collective fictions are functional in perpetuating neoliberalism logic's hegemony:

> L'homme exige une histoire, le réel, ça tombe bien, n'est constitué que de fictions. Des fictions collectives, qui saturent le réel autant qu'elles le composent. Familiales, culturelles, religieuses, institutionnelles, sociales, économiques, politiques, médiatiques. Ère du *storytelling*, le réel se construit en fabriquant lui-même ses

> fables qui formatent les corps et les esprits. Pratique inhérente au néocapitalisme, les recettes marketing appliquées à la vie publique. (Delaume 223-224)
>
> (Humankind demands an history, and reality, luckily, is only made of fictions. These are collective fictions, that saturate reality as much they constitute it. Families, cultures, religions, institutions, societies, economics, politics, and media. In this era of storytelling, reality constitutes its own tales which shape bodies and souls. It's a practice inherent to new capitalism, a series of marketing recipes applied to public life).

Here Delaume uses the term neocapitalism, to which I prefer *neoliberalism*, although both terms describe the same entity. Delaume claims that we are all victims of collective fictions and consequentially to codes of behaviours that are imposed by neoliberalism in order to perpetuate itself, along with those goods that need to be consumed in order to respect these collective fictions and related codes of behaviour. In this sense, Delaume argues, we are therefore condemned to a life devoted only to consuming and reproducing our species: 'vivre n'est que consommer, et perpétuer l'espèce' ('living is just consuming and perpetuating the species'; 218). Delaume seems to argue that we do not have a proper, independent *personal* identity, but rather that we only have a series of codified formats (*fictions collectives*) that we try to apply to ourselves. In this sense, Delaume's analysis introduces the kind of argument I pursue in the following chapters of this thesis, especially concerning the difference between *passive* and *active* autofiction. Speaking about *active* autofiction, Delaume continues her reasoning by explaining that through autofiction, it is possible to a certain extent to *subvert* these collective fictions and therefore 'enrayer la machine' ('jam the system'; 225). She argues that the use of autofiction, and therefore the *production* of both an autobiographical and fictive *self*, might be intended as a *creative* and *active* production of an autonomous and conscious

identity, a kind of identity, therefore, which is free from these already codified collective fictions.

> Aujourd'hui, 2012, c'est le 23 juillet, corps féminin, race blanche, par sa bouche il affirme l'autofiction un geste qui enraye la machine, un changement de focale, le *je* désynchronise. L'autofiction charrie un flux de narrations propres, quel que soit leur mobile, des *je* s'élèvent en marge des fictions collectives. (Delaume 224)

> (Today, year 2012, on the 23 July, female body, white race, it affirms autofiction through its mouth as a gesture that breaks the system, a change in the focus, the *I* desynchronises. Autofiction moves a flow of its own narrations, whatever the motive is, the 'I's rise outside of the collective fictions).

In this way, according to Delaume, the kind of *I* produced by autofiction can be considered a new form of subjectivity, becoming open in this way to new, exciting perspectives related to questions such as hybridity between humans and machines and to theories on the posthuman in general. Furthermore, the use of autofiction becomes a political choice, that is, when the choice of a personally constructed and consciously critical new identity counterpoises the already codified identities imposed by neoliberalism, defined by Delaume as collective, therefore opposing an *aware*/*active* form of autofiction to an *unaware*/*passive* one. What Delaume argues in her article is extremely interesting, and it can easily be related to contemporary issues, such as our relationship with social networks. In fact, the 'fictions collectives' (223) posited by the French writer disturbingly evoke the mechanisms that rule social media platforms like Facebook. Through this social network, in fact, we have an opportunity to *produce* a *new* identity, activating in this sense that conscious production of a more aware and independent subjectivity suggested by Delaume. The problem is that we tend to construct our new self on Facebook adhering to models and codes of behaviours that are imposed by Facebook itself. Therefore, this *new* and *independent* subjectivity, in this case, does

not seem as independent or free from the collective fictions explained by Delaume. The same mechanism, as argued by Julia Caroline Böckling in her 2020 essay "Life Writing as Photo-Posting: Listing, Branding, and the Stylization of life on Instagram", can be applied to other social media such as Instagram. In this sense, the mechanism represented by how Facebook and Instagram work can be defined as the umpteenth way found by neoliberalism to absorb a potentially subversive instrument, autofiction in this case, and turn it into a way to *make money*; commodifying and therefore controlling it. Certainly, both Facebook and Instagram profit from our personal identities and dismantle the potentially subversive instrument of autofiction.

In this way, it recalls two neoliberalist strategies I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis: a tendency to commodify every aspect of life, including personal identity, and an ability to absorb every potentially subversive voice or instrument. Moreover, it is worth remarking that Delaume's essay is interesting for two main reasons: it defines autofiction as a newly established literary genre, and, more importantly, it opens up the possibility of considering autofiction's political potential. This path was followed by another article from the 2016 collection coordinated by Isabelle Grell and Arnaud Genon, written by Genon and titled "L'autofiction comme en(JE)u politique dans l'œuvre d'Abdellah Taïa". In this article, Genon focuses on the autofictional work of the Moroccan writer and activist Abdellah Taïa, arguing that his use of autofiction might be considered a way to question and, as Genon argues, to destabilise certain collective fictions that characterise Moroccan culture. Therefore, Genon first of all confirms what Isabelle Grell argued concerning the differences in perception of the self among different cultures, claiming that: 'Le *je* n'est pas universel, il a ses particularités culturelles' ('The *I* is not universal, it has its own cultural features'; 236). Furthermore, quoting an article by El Hassan Yacoubi, Genon explains, in the wake of what Delaume claimed concerning so-called collective fictions, how complex in this sense the relation with the personal self in the Maghreb is, especially in Morocco:

> La personnalité arabo-musulmane, et la personnalité marocaine en particulier, se définit par rapport à la société, au groupe et à la famille. Le statut de la personne est indissociable de la notion d'identité collective. L'individu doit respecter un pacte social dans le cadre duquel la marge de liberté individuelle est conditionnée à celle de la communauté. L'individu ou le sujet dépend donc du groupe auquel il est lié par tous ses actes. (Genon 242-243)
>
> (The Arab Muslim personality, and the Moroccan personality in particular, define itself with respect to society, community and family. The status of person is inseparable from the notion of collective identity. The individual must respect a social pact where the margin of individual freedom is conditioned by the freedom of the community. The individual or the subject therefore depends on the group to which it is bonded by all its actions).

Genon then articulates how the use of autofiction, in his view, can be an apt instrument for questioning and to a certain extent *subverting* these imposed and as it seems *trans-national* and *trans-cultural* collective fictions through the construction of, as we have seen with Delaume, a new subjectivation, a new kind of *Je*. Therefore, he claims that:

> le désir de proposer de nouvelles fictions, des fictions intimes, du moi, du *je* assumé et dévoilé, qui auraient pour but de déstabiliser celles construites de toutes pièces par la famille, la religion, les traditions, les ordres moraux conservateurs afin de questionner précisément l'univers social et les individus qui le composent. (Genon 237)
>
> (the desire to propose new, intimate and self-related fictions, concerning an aware and disclosed *I*, aiming to destabilise the fictions entirely built by family, religion,

> traditions, conservative moral orders in order to question precisely the social universe and the individuals who compose it).

Then, Genon refers to the autofictional journey of the Moroccan writer Abdellah Taïa, arguing that

> Abdellah Taïa est un de ceux qui par l'emploi du *je* questionne la société marocaine, la bouscule, la déstabilise dans ses préjugés les plus profonds. Ses œuvres ne sont pas des miroirs sociaux réconfortant ou consolateurs, mais bien des miroirs qui déconfortent, questionnent et ébranlent un ordre social sclérosé. (Genon 237)
>
> (Abdellah Taïa is one of those who questions Moroccan society, shakes up and destabilises it in its deepest prejudices. His works are not social comfort or consoling, but rather mirrors that destabilise, question and perturb a sclerotic social order).

Eventually, Genon concludes that Taïa's decision to use the literary genre of autofiction might be considered a consequence of his will to produce, in the sense highlighted by Delaume, a new, more *personal* form of subjectivation to discuss the imposed forms of subjectivity – Delaume's collective fictions – of a country, Morocco, and a culture that, according to Genon, denied Taïa's right to freely live his own subjectivity, mostly because of his homosexuality. In this case, Genon argues, autofiction offers a space where the authors can construct their identity *on their own terms*:

> C'est donc dans l'espace autofictionnel que le narrateur construit son identité, c'est par cette mise en fiction qu'émerge ce qui ne pouvait pas advenir dans l'espace

> social […] C'est loin du groupe, seul, que le sujet retrouve son souffle, qu'il n'est plus obligé de se conformer aux fictions collectives et peut raconter la sienne propre, se l'approprier. (Genon 249)
>
> (It is therefore within the autofictional space that the writer builds its identity, through this use of fiction all that could not happen in the social space finally emerges […] It is away from the group, alone, that the subject finds its breath again, it is not obliged to conform to the collective fictions and can tell its own and call it its own).

As can be seen, therefore, Genon takes a similar standpoint to Delaume. In particular, they are both concerned with the use of autofiction as a way to question and subvert so-called collective fictions. In this sense, it is possible to argue that certain uses of the literary genre of autofiction represent a way to *actively* face, question, and even *subvert* these collective fictions to which all are expected to obediently conform.

To conclude, both Delaume and Genon finally shed light on that scarcely explored region of autofiction studies relevant to this thesis: the political potential of autofiction. Genon concludes his extremely interesting article insisting on the point that the use of autofiction, depending on how it is used, and because of those very characteristics it necessarily faces, can often be considered a *political* act:

> Il s'agit bien de cela, pour l'auteur, non pas de raconter sa trajectoire de manière narcissique et complaisante, mais, au contraire, de faire de soi un personnage, de faire du *je* une fiction capable d'échapper aux fictions qu'on lui impose, de lutter contre les faux clichés identitaires que l'on voudrait lui accoler, pour mieux le stigmatiser et l'exclure de la communauté. […] S'il y a donc une « politique de

> l'autofiction', comme le remarquait Chloé Delaume, c'est que souvent l'autofiction est par essence politique. (Genon 253)
>
> (What really matters, for the author, is not recounting his/her trajectory in a narcissistic and self-indulgent way, but on the contrary it is rather making of itself a character, to make the *I* a fiction able to escape the fictions that threaten it, to fight against the fake preconceptions which it risks being labelled with, to better stigmatise it and exclude it from the community. […] If there is a 'politics of autofiction', as Chloé Delaume pointed out, it is that often autofiction is intrinsically political).

This point in particular is decisive for my thesis. Genon reaffirms how the use of a literary genre that constitutively merges autobiography and fiction and that offers the possibility of continuously producing different, though ultimately the same, selves, as autofiction does, opens up a vast variety of options for it as an instrument with which to question certain aspects of our contemporary times. This is the case in an era dominated by neoliberalist logic, which imposes its hegemony through the production of subjectivities that are designed to adhere to its commandments, and absorbs every potentially subversive voice. In an era that forces us to continuously *design* our identities in order to have greater appeal for the market, in an era of so-called self-branding that continuously forces us to distort our selves, the aware and *active* use of a literary genre like autofiction, which uses neoliberalist logic's strategies as a weapon against it, has to be considered a *political act*. This, in my view, is the most interesting way to explore the potential of a literary genre that, as we shall see, has slowly started to spread to other countries such as the United States, taking root there due to circumstances that are similar to those in the French-speaking world.

AUTOFICTION IN THE UNITED STATES: DOES AN AMERICAN AUTOFICTION EXIST?

If, as we have seen, the term *autofiction* is very well established in France and has been the subject of a rich and well-articulated debate since its first appearance, the same cannot be said of its presence in the United States. In his introduction to the 2018 collection of essays he edited, *Autofiction in English*, Hywel Dix argues that in the English-speaking academic world, autofiction was at first considered 'a genre of low capital' (9); adding that one of the reasons for this perception was the fact that 'many of the French writers of autofiction are women, and this might be one of the reasons why their writing has been historically marginalised and has only recently received critical attention' (Dix 10). In this sense, it comes as no surprise that, according to Dix, the most interesting examples of recent English autofiction have been written by previously marginalised authors such as women and post-colonial writers (11). However, the term is now taking hold and also starting to attract the attention of American academics and scholars, as in the case, for instance, of Marjorie Worthington, who in 2018 published a book that provides the most compelling and complete overview – as far as I know – of contemporary American autofiction: *The Story of 'Me': Contemporary American Autofiction*. In this book, in addition to offering a useful list of American autofiction writers, from Gertrude Stein to Michael Chabon, passing through Joan Didion, Bret Easton Ellis, Percival Everett, and Ben Lerner – a list to which Karen Ferreira-Meyers, in a 2020 essay, will add authors such as Ernest Hemingway and James Baldwin (Ferreira-Meyers 35) –, Worthington questions the historical and cultural conditions that in her view have led to the recent flourishing of autofictional works in the United States. The book traces the roots and various developments of American autofiction, as well as describing and analysing the political, civic and cultural changes that contributed to its spread. In the first chapter, Worthington 'addresses the fact that by far most American autofiction is written by white men' (19), also arguing that 'the authorial intrusions

of autofiction could be read as both emerging from and as a reaction against modernist ideas of impersonality and universality' (19). In this chapter, Worthington focuses at first on the shift between modernist and postmodernist literature, characterised, according to the author, by an increasing self-consciousness of the writer – primarily white and male – and therefore by an increasing *intrusion* of the author into the narrative. Worthington posits that one of the reasons for this new self-consciousness can be attributed to a crisis of masculinity which 'has given rise to an increased self-consciousness in fiction by men, leading ultimately to the trend I have been calling autofiction' (25). Worthington, therefore, explains:

> When a cultural trope (such as 'the author') is deemed to be in danger of becoming obsolete (or 'dying'), the resulting anxiety actually masks a deeper anxiety about the potential loss of social privilege. The emergent anxiety that self-conscious fiction evinces of a loss of authorial authority actually provides cover for the deeper-seated anxiety of loss of male privilege. (Worthington 27)

According to the author, the reasons for this feeling of *danger* can be found in the recent – at that time – rise of feminist literary theory and women's liberation movements, which acted as 'an instrumental catalyst in bringing about a shift in literature from the modern to the postmodern, particularly the shift from a disavowal of self-conscious authorial intrusion to a seemingly wholehearted embrace of that trope' (Worthington 44). She concludes that in certain kinds of, let us say, protoautofictions, 'the author makes an appearance as a character specifically to stake a claim for the kind of masculine authorial authority that had heretofore never been seriously challenged' (45). Then, Worthington makes an interesting point concerning the relationship between autofiction – especially its role in the self-construction of the author's literary image –, authorship, and the reaffirmation of masculine normative power, claiming that 'autofiction also often acts in the service of recuperating masculine privilege by exploiting the spectacle of the author-character […] Autofiction thus demonstrates that, even if

the author-character is disempowered, the actual author is posited as the godlike creator of its own image' (52). In order to support these claims, Worthington take as examples – among others – two works by two white, male American authors: the 1972 novel *Chimera* by John Barth and the 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut, both books where the intrusion of the author is particularly evident. *Chimera* is a reinterpretation of the classic Scheherazade story from *One Thousand and One Nights*. It is narrated from the point of view of her sister Dunyazade, who meets a nameless time-traveller author from Maryland (a caricatural version of Barth himself), who, after consulting his copy of *One Thousand and One Nights*, suggests to her the stories that will be narrated by Scheherazade in order to please King Shahryar. According to Worthington, 'the writer in *Chimera* exhibits no compunction in absorbing the sister's stories and making them his own' (60), thus reaffirming, reimposing in this way his masculine authorial privilege through an act that is none other than 'the appropriation of the story of women' (60). On the other hand, according to Worthington, Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* represents another example of the use of autofiction as a reaction to the loss of white, male authors' authority. In this novel, we find the character Kurt Vonnegut entering the novel in order to meet his most famous creations – Kilgore Trout and Eliot Rosewater, among others – with the aim of making them aware of his existence, reclaiming the paternity of those characters that only exist thanks to his imagination. Vonnegut's attempt, according to Worthington, demonstrates

> one of the central paradoxes of autofiction: it depicts a white male author in crisis whose waning creative power is not even sufficient to control his own narrative, while drawing attention, through the autofictional author-character, to the still powerful and highly creative *actual* author who created the weaker character who shares his name. *Breakfast of Champions* restores and reasserts authorial authority by poignantly depicting the loss of that authority. (Worthington 57)

Worthington's argument concerning this aspect of autofiction is certainly interesting and convincing. However, it can be defined as *central* only if we acknowledge Worthington's approach to autofiction as the sole way possible; meanwhile, if we consider all the potential uses of autofiction – like, for instance, the *political* use, as addressed in my thesis – it becomes just one among many aspects of autofiction, albeit an important one.

The second line of reasoning explored by Worthington also leads to the idea of considering the rise of autofictional works in the United States a reaction to the great influence that French poststructuralist theory had on both the academic and cultural American milieu. In particular, Worthington focuses on Roland Barthes' famous concept of the death of the author, where the French thinker posits that – as Worthington puts it – 'once a literary text is published, the author is no longer relevant to its interpretation' (63). In sum, according to poststructuralist theory, the figure of the author must not be considered in terms of literary analysis; therefore, according to Worthington, the increasing prevalence of authorial intrusions in many American novels in the twentieth century can be viewed as a reaction to the loss of centrality of the author during the exercise of literary criticism. Moreover, Worthington claims that at a certain point there was 'a decided shift away from considering the author as a source of meaning. This shift has been exacerbated in recent years by the advent of new media and the resulting proliferation of crowdsourced websites, blogs, twitter journalism, and self-publishing. Advances in new media have democratized the notion of authorship to such an extent that now seemingly anyone and everyone can be an author' (Worthington 65). One effect of this critical tendency is therefore, Worthington adds, 'the autofictional impulse, which proliferates at this contemporary moment in direct response to the perceived diminishment of authorial importance fomented by the rise of poststructuralist theory' (65). This shift, according to Worthington, was originally generated by Michel Foucault's theorisation of the *author-function*. As Worthington puts it, according to Foucault 'the author is not a person who writes, but rather the symbolic entity that serves to organize texts into their respective discourse categories […] So, unlike Barthes, Foucault argues that the author does have a function in literary analysis but that author-function

is not inextricably connected with the human person who wrote the text. Rather the author-function is a cultural image that acts as an organizing principle for the texts written by a particular writer that are referred to that writer's name' (70-71). Worthington then argues that American scholars and writers have somehow introjected these ideas, and that some felt, to a certain extent, that their role as authors was not only called into question, but also even considered unnecessary. In this sense, the increasing use of autofiction by American writers can be considered a sort of counterattack, a way to regain centrality in the debate, even if through a more equivocal position, given the ambiguous generic status typical of autofiction. A further point raised by Worthington is important to my thesis, one that has also been well explored by Bran Nicol (271) – namely, the question of the celebrity author, the kind who has, for many reasons, not least of which can be the controversial content of their work, a very recognisable public persona. This public persona, which they certainly helped to construct, is one they have to negotiate with, and, in certain cases, decide to call into question. In this sense, the use of autofiction can be a powerful instrument, because it allows certain authors to *stage* their public persona in order to *challenge* it. I develop this point in the following sections of this thesis, where autofictional works by Bret Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq are analysed. Worthington argues first of all that celebrity is 'a sociological construction' (77), and claims that 'celebrity autofiction, then, represents one way an author can participate in the construction of his image, while it also evinces a postmodern awareness that the image is just that: a construction' (78). This awareness, I argue, can also lead to a challenge – through the literary genre of autofiction – to the kind of public image that becomes so strong that it risks overshadowing the quality of that author's work. As we shall see, this is one of my main points concerning the use of autofiction by Ellis and Houellebecq.

Furthermore, Worthington touches on another point that is extremely important to my thesis, the *political* potential of autofiction, but from a different angle. When talking about Percival Everett's 2009 novel *I'm Not Sidney Poitier*, she underlines at first that '[n]ot only are autofictions by women and people of colour shockingly rare (given how commonplace they are

among white male writers), but when they do appear, such works often employ third-person narratives to represent their author-characters, rather than the first-person narratives that are more typical with white male writers' (89); then, she remarks that – unlike many other autofictions written by white, male authors – 'the third-person author-characters in these works, particularly *I am Not Sidney Poitier* and *A Tale for the Time Being*, are neither impotent nor malignant, but rather seek to help their protagonists' (90). Finally, she argues that 'it could be surmised that one reason why these authors do not feel obsolete or disempowered is because, being from underrepresented groups, they never were empowered in first place' (91). Worthington here is certainly right, but I think that it is possible to go a little further. My contention is that these authors – being historically exploited, marginalised, and disempowered by the white, patriarchal society – found a way, through the use of autofiction, to demand and regain attention and power. It is in this sense that the use of autofiction further unveils its subversive, political potential. Through this kind of use, autofiction ceases to be an instrument of *reaction* – the white, privileged male who, after having acknowledged the loss of his privilege, tries to retake control through his intrusion in the text – and thus takes the shape of a subversive act.

In the third part of her book, Worthington moves the lens to the rise of New Journalism during the sixties and the cultural context that led to its birth and diffusion, and, of course, to its relationship with autofiction. In this respect, Worthington concludes that 'often (but not always) the complete submersion of the writer into his/her subject matter resulted in the inclusion of the writer's own persona within the resulting narrative […] For this reason, such works of metajournalism can be seen as a precursor to the current popularity of the memoir genre (which I discuss in chapter 5) and a precursor of autofiction as well' (93). In order to explore the various ramifications of New Journalism, Worthington at first focuses on the works of Thomas Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Norman Mailer, discussing their authorial approach and also – an aspect that is very important to my thesis – their public persona. Concerning Wolfe, Worthington focuses on his authorial approach, claiming that to him,

'evoking emotion in the reader is literature's most important calling' (104), while, writing about Thompson, she underlines Thompson's closeness to autofiction. In this respect, Worthington – quoting an episode in Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* – argues that 'when the narrator tells someone holding a picture of Thompson, "that's not me, I said. That's a guy named Thompson. He works for *Rolling Stone*… a really vicious, crazy kind of person". […] This kind of ironic claiming yet denying of authorial identity is also indicative of autofiction (107)'. At this point, Worthington touches on a question that, as already mentioned, is of great interest for my thesis, which is the question of the celebrity author, or, better, the question of how certain authors, who have gained huge popularity, relate to their public image: how they participate in its construction and which strategies they adopt in order to manage it or even – in certain cases, which are the most interesting to me – to *challenge* it. In this sense, Worthington claims that:

> As the New Journalists became more established, some critics began to speculate that the increasingly widespread inclusion of the characterized version of the writers themselves served less of a narrative or journalistic purpose and more to aggrandize the figure of the writer […] Hollowell continues: 'By turning attention upon themselves and how he "got the story", the new journalist has himself become a product in this image-making world' (49) […] In the case of Hunter S. Thompson, John Hellmann argues that 'he has purposely emphasized and exaggerated certain of his traits in order to create a fictive version of himself which is essentially a self-caricature, not an in-depth representation of a complex human being. Nevertheless, a further confusion arises from Thompson's having carried this creation of a persona into his lectures, interviews and general public exposure' (1981, 72). In this current age, writers and even journalists are expected to turn themselves into 'brands' and market themselves by tirelessly flogging their work on digital media. (Worthington 117)

Worthington seems particularly interested here in those kinds of narratives that include the presence of a caricatural version of the *public image* of the author, a kind of version that – in the case of Hunter S. Thompson – can be defined as a self-caricature. This point is particularly important to me – as well as the question of the *branding* of the author – and I develop it further in the chapters devoted to Bret Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq. At this point, it is essential to underline that this intrusion of the author as a sort of *self-caricature* can have different intentions and produce different effects. It can be, for instance, a way through which certain popular authors try to *exploit* their own popularity. This is the case – according to Worthington – for Norman Mailer's self-characterisation in his 1968 novel *The Armies of the Night* where, Worthington argues, 'in this kind of authorial intrusive journalistic narrative, celebrity becomes an end in itself; for Mailer, when the reporter enters the story, the reporter becomes the story. But, as Lasch points out, "Mailer" with quotation marks is an interesting character only insofar as Mailer without quotation marks is a celebrity in the world outside the text' (119). A totally different approach is the one used by another celebrity author like Bret Easton Ellis who, I argue, uses self-caricature as a way of discussing vital questions like the relationship between the market and personal identity, the many ways in which mass media manipulate his public image, and so on. This is a kind of approach that – as we shall see – I consider prominently political, and one that could only be achieved through the literary genre of autofiction. Ellis's 2005 autofictional novel *Lunar Park*, one of the three main texts analysed in my thesis, is particularly important to Worthington, who will read it closely in the final chapter of her book.

Finally, in the last section of her book, Worthington's aim is to address:

> the simultaneously adversarial and symbiotic intersections between autofiction and the contemporary memoir. I argue that the increasing proliferation of autofiction and the recent explosive popularity of the contemporary memoir both demonstrate the wider cultural acceptance of poststructuralist theories of how language works to

> construct perceptions of reality. At the same time, however, these genres also expose the limitations of the cultural absorption of those theories. That is to say, contemporary readers are capable of comprehending the ironic representation of the author-character in autofiction, but there still exists a strong yearning among contemporary readers for a factual account, or a 'true story'. (Worthington 21)

At first, in fact, Worthington argues that the recent, huge success of contemporary memoir has been caused by the 'reader's desire for a "true story"' (148). As Worthington puts it, 'while contemporary critics and theorists seem to have accepted the idea that a narrative cannot convey truth, but only a partial and not impartial version of it, a more general readership may have not accepted that idea and may, in fact, be actively resisting it by embracing memoir as a genre' (154). Worthington then moves her focus to autofiction, given that it offers the kinds of narratives that programmatically make it more and more difficult to separate truth from fiction. I am interested in two aspects of Worthington's reflection in particular, concerning two different uses of the literary genre of autofiction. Firstly, Worthington argues that autofiction, like memoir, has recently witnessed a huge rise in popularity for essentially the same reasons:

> It is my contention that the same cultural forces that contribute to the increasing popularity of the memoir genre also contribute to the rapid increase in contemporary autofictions. The contemporary American preoccupation with a 'true story' – or the impossibility thereof – has led both to the rise in prominence of the literary memoir and to the widespread proliferation of autofiction. (Worthington 168)

On the other hand, however, Worthington suggests that the birth of certain examples of American autofiction have to be traced back to an attempt to economically exploit this already mentioned appetite for true stories. In this regard, Worthington writes:

> In an era in which the heretofore dominant literary genre of fiction is potentially being overthrown in importance and marketability by the memoir, some autofiction could be viewed as 'fictional memoirs' – as literary efforts to capitalize on the popularity of the memoir. (Worthington 168)

However, this is not the case with all American autofictions. In fact, immediately after this, Worthington clarifies that there are authors who instead use the literary genre of autofiction as a way to experiment (171). This is the case for the great American novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace, who stretched the boundaries between reality and fiction, providing for instance his personal home address and Social Security number in his posthumous novel *The Pale King*. Secondly, autofiction is therefore an instrument that can be used in a different way. It can be used to adapt to the expectation of the market and also as a way to explore and discuss questions like authorship, identity, and even the thin line that separates reality from fiction. In certain cases, it can also be used by authors as a way of reflecting on their position as authors – when, for instance, they are particularly popular or controversial – and on their role and limits in the construction and relative perception of their public persona, as is the case with the most famous non-winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature of recent times: Philip Roth.

In his 1993 novel *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, we find the character Philip Roth investigating a man – named Moishe Pipik – who appropriated Roth's identity and used his celebrity to propagate the so-called *Diasporism* in Israel, which is an ideology that advocates the return of Israeli Jews to their European nations of exile. According to Worthington, the novel 'explores the extent to which Pipik is able to exploit "Philip's" authorial persona for an agenda that has nothing to do with his writing: it addresses the question of what kind of real-world authority an author can legitimately (or illegitimately) claim' (170). Moreover – and this point is extremely important to my thesis – Roth's novel also 'suggests that an important recurrent theme in autofiction, at least in the case of *Operation Shylock*, is an author's desire to participate in and control the construction of his authorial image' (171). Then, Worthington

focuses on an author whose public persona and authorial image is certainly a matter of discussion, especially for himself: Bret Easton Ellis. In a subsequent chapter of this thesis, I will extensively discuss Ellis's autofictional work and the reasons that led him to the use of this literary genre, along with another controversial author, Michel Houellebecq. According to Worthington, however, one of the reasons why Ellis decided to use autofiction in his 2004 work *Lunar Park* can be traced back to the controversy that has surrounded almost all Ellis's narrative works from the beginning. For instance, as Worthington puts it, after the publishing of his notorious 1991 novel *American Psycho*, Ellis 'was reviled as a dangerous psychopathic for having written it' (173). In this sense, Worthington writes that 'it is perhaps in response to having been repeatedly equated with one of his protagonists that Ellis decided to actually feature a characterized version of himself in *Lunar Park*' (173). The second reason why, according to Worthington, Ellis decided to use autofiction is that it can be considered a sort of attempt to retake control of his public persona, which, as I will argue in the chapter of my thesis devoted to Ellis, has been manipulated and commodified by mass media in order to make it more saleable to the public. In sum, I agree with Worthington's argument that one of the reasons Ellis created this characterisation of his public persona (one that seems to contain a lot of caricature) is that 'as an autofictional character, however, "Bret" seizes the control of the interpretation [*of the critics and of the public*, italics mine] and asserts a kind of authority that Ellis the author rarely or never does' (173). Todd Womble, in his 2018 essay 'Roth is Roth as Roth: Autofiction and the Implied Author', contained in the aforementioned essay collection *Autofiction in English*, agrees to this interpretation too, claiming that in *Lunar Park* Ellis used 'himself as narrator in order to satirically present the version of Bret Easton Ellis created by various critics' (Womble 228). Moreover, Worthington makes a very interesting reflection concerning why at a certain point of *Lunar Park* Ellis refers to his autofictional character as *the ghost*:

> ['Bret'] refers to himself as 'the ghost' because he wanders around his house barely present, almost transparent (at one point he even wraps himself in a bed-sheet) as the life of his family goes on around him without his participation. In this sense, 'Bret' the character embodies the figurative role we assign to authors: that of a ghostly presence, not quite part of the work not quite separate from it either. Thus, while authors are unable to exert direct influence over their published work, their indirect influence continues to be felt and felt most acutely in autofiction. (Worthington 176)

This point is interesting, even if, in my chapter on Ellis, I shall give a further interpretation, using the theories elaborated by Mark Fisher, of what this *ghost* might represent. Worthington moreover argues that this *ghost* signifies a sort of metaphor for the *Author* in general who, because we have seen their loss of authority, tries, through autofiction, to reaffirm their *presence*:

> 'Bret' the character embodies the figurative role we assign to authors: that of a ghostly presence, not quite part of the work but not quite separate from it either. Thus, while authors are unable to exert direct influence over their published work, their indirect influence continues to be felt most acutely in autofiction. The author-characters of autofiction direct our attention to the ghostly presence that is the extratextual author. (Worthington 176)

On the other hand, it is very interesting to notice that Womble, in the aforementioned essay, argues instead that this ghost – which Worthington identifies as a metaphor for the Author in general – has to be interpreted as a reference to a sort of 'implied author' (233), which means a further manifestation of the author (in this case Ellis) that haunts *Lunar Park* among all the other ghosts as a way to further deceive (and therefore challenge) the reader (233).

Eventually, Worthington concludes by writing that '*Lunar Park* thematized the idea that writing exacts its price from an author by alienating him from his own life' (177). In this sense, it can be argued that Ellis – among other writers – used the literary genre of autofiction as an instrument for *redeeming* that life, retaking control of it to a certain extent, at least in literature. However, Worthington offers a different conclusion, claiming that autofiction gave Ellis, and the other writers she had previously discussed, the opportunity to not only reshape his reality, but also to construct a *shield* from it:

> The idea that a writer uses his fiction-making ability to reconstruct reality to his own liking and shield himself from actual life is reflected in the structure of autofictions I have being discussing. In other words, if constantly chronicling one's life builds a screen of words between the writer and that life, these autofictions similarly build a screen of fiction between the author and the character, suggesting that they are the same person while also implying that they cannot be. And the irony here is that it is through this very screen of fiction (as opposed to nonfiction) that the real emotional impact can be felt of the devastation of the writer-character's life. (Worthington 177)

In this case I tend to disagree with Worthington. As will be demonstrated in the chapter devoted to Ellis, I argue that Ellis decided to use autofiction not, as claimed by Worthington, to shield from a reality he could not accept anymore, but rather as a way to face it. In writing *Lunar Park*, Ellis did not want to hide from his past – the controversies, his public image, and so on –, he wanted to open a dialogue with it. When creating those ghosts, his intention was to interrogate them, and therefore to finally face them, with the intention of understanding not only why a certain past happened, but also why certain other possible futures did not happen. In *Lunar Park* there is another ghost that Worthington seems not to have identified, the fictional part of the autofictional Bret Easton Ellis: the father, the husband, the fallible human being who nevertheless tries to protect his family. That is not a ghost of the past, but the ghost of a possible

future that never happened, that Ellis tries to elaborate through his talent. Ellis' autofiction does not attempt to build a wall against reality, against the past, but is rather an attempt to open a door.

As we have seen, Worthington's remarkable work has traced the roots and evolution of autofiction in America and explored the ground in which those magmatic cultural, social, and economic changes fermented and led to the proliferation of this literary genre: a reaction to the power loss of white male authors caused by the rise of political movements that vindicated the rights of female and marginalised people in general; a reaction to the influence of French poststructuralist theories; a way in which to reflect on important questions like identity and authorship; and, most importantly, a way– as we have seen with Ellis – to redeem ourselves. However, in her work, Worthington seems not to mention the economic and cultural phenomenon that, in my view, is most responsible for the lack of agency of many marginalised authors: neoliberalism, an economic and cultural phenomenon, now hegemonic, on which autofiction has something to say – as this thesis aims to demonstrate. Nevertheless, Worthington's *The Story of 'Me'* manages to demonstrate once again that autofiction, far from being just a variation of the autobiographical novel or memoir, is a literary genre in its own right, one that, as Worthington shows, has the power to shed light on new and fecund areas of contemporary literature.

ITALIAN AUTOFICTION: A GENEALOGY

As in the United States, in Italy the term *autofiction* entered the literary and academic debate decades after its first conception. In this section of my chapter, I will try to map a sort of genealogy of Italian autofiction, and to isolate the peculiarities that characterise the ways in

which this new literary genre was perceived and *performed* in the Italian literary context. One of the first times the term *autofiction* appeared in an academic essay was in a 1998 article written by Stefania Lucamante, titled "Le scelte dell'autofiction: il romanzo della memoria contro il potere della storia". However, at that time the term was far from being well established in Italy. In fact, it was only in 2012 that Italian critic Carlo Mazza Galanti wrote one of the first articles to shed some light on the initial evolutions of autofiction in Italy. In this article, published in the Italian on-line magazine *Minima&Moralia* and titled "Autofinzioni", Mazza Galanti first of all tried to summarise the history of the term *autofiction* and then to identify the ways in which this literary genre penetrated Italy and, most importantly, which Italian writers could effectively be defined as *autofictional*. Mazza Galanti refers for instance to writers such as Giuseppe Genna, Antonio Scurati, Emanuele Trevi, and Walter Siti. Moreover, one year before Mazza Galanti's intervention, in 2009, the Italian writer – though he defined himself as a *former writer* – and critic Giulio Mozzi posted in his web *bulletin* called *Vibrisse* an interesting article including the term *autofiction*. In this article, referring to autofiction, Mozzi claims that it is undeniable that there is a new tendency in Italian literature that tries to find new strategies in order to narrate our contemporary reality in the era of the 'end of experience' (1). This means, Mozzi explains, that we all live in a world where it is impossible to live *real* experiences, given that everything is mediated by mass media (1). However, he doubts that the literary genre of autofiction – which he refers to as useless – is sufficient for labelling and representing this tendency (2). This interesting point also sounds somewhat ambiguous if we consider that Mozzi has often been defined – by Lorenzo Marchese, for instance – as one of the first Italian autofictional writers (*L'Io Possibile* 4). In that period, it seems, the Italian debate over autofiction was already quite well established, and, unlike what we have seen in the French context, it was from the very beginning more focused on the ways in which autofiction is used, and what it has to say concerning our contemporary times, instead of its status as a literary genre. Also in 2009, the Italian critic and novelist Cristiano de Majo wrote an article in which he concentrates on the relationship between autofiction and mass media, discussing Bret Easton

Ellis and Walter Siti and using the term *autofiction* to describe their literary work. In this article, De Majo, inspired by Guy Debord, claims that certain techniques of the representation of reality in mass media that have become dominant nowadays – at least in Italy – have consistently changed the viewers' ways of seeing (2). De Majo refers in particular to certain Italian reality television shows, explaining that the insistent use of *reality*, or, better, the use of its simulacrums, in a frame of fiction has become dominant in these kind of spectacles – which De Majo considers the pure articulation of an ideology – with the result that, as Debord teaches us, the *truth* becomes an unprovable hypothesis (2). Therefore, Italian television has been filled with fictive narrations that exhibit personal and sometimes painful emotions as a guarantee of truth, moving the axis, according to De Majo, from the spectacle traditionally intended as a *representation* of reality to a representation that performs reality. The consequence of a representation that performs reality – De Majo argues – is that *pure fiction* is disempowered, given that readers are now accustomed to a sort of exaggerated truth:

> Quando si costruiscono storie su un'irrealtà che usa il vero, la finzione pura finisce per essere depotenziata, perché i lettori sono desensibilizzati, assuefatti a una dose di realtà molto più alta […] Abbiamo fame di cose vere. L'autofiction è la risposta più nuova che gli scrittori stanno offrendo alla vampirizzazione del reale […] Si sono anche loro – gli scrittori – trasformati in vampiri – vampiri delle loro stesse vite – per esigenze di credibilità. (De Majo 3)
>
> (When plots are built on an unreality that employs reality, the unadulterated fiction can be disempowered, as the readers are desensitized, accustomed to a much higher dose of reality. [...]We crave real things. The autofiction is the newest answer that writers are offering to the vampirisation of their own lives. Writers themselves have transformed into vampires – vampires of their own lives – for credibility reasons)

As already mentioned, De Majo refers to Bret Easton Ellis and Walter Siti as writers who have been able to use autofiction *properly*, meaning, as an instrument with which to explore and question those issues outlined above. However, De Majo warns, it is not the case for all autofictional writings, especially in Italy:

> Siti, e ancora di più Ellis – che ha sempre coltivato nel mimetismo un'ambizione politica – riescono con il loro camaleontismo a rappresentare l'ideologia che regge il governo dello spettacolo, a spiegarne il fascino e, al tempo stesso, a percepirne il male quintessenziato che da esso promana. Ma questo non è un affare per tutti […] Ellis e Siti coltivano nella finzione una possibilità di redenzione, non sono vittime della verosimiglianza ma la utilizzano. Se quest'aspetto manca, l'autore che ha scelto l'autofiction come modalità espressiva finisce per fare il ruolo della cavia. Da torturatore del potere diventa torturato. (De Majo 4)

> (Siti and even further Ellis – who has always cultivated a political ambition through mimesis – succeed in representing with their chameleonic writing the ideology ruling the entertainment, in explaining its charm and at the same time, and in perceiving the quintessential evil arising from it. However, not everyone has this talent [...] Ellis and Siti nurture in hope a chance of redemption, they are not victims of plausibility, but they use it. If this aspect is missing, the author choosing autofiction as means of expression ends up becoming the guinea pig. From persecutors of the power they become the persecuted, a victim of a literary snuff that they helped put together. They end up looking like a frog made of glass, a tiny animal with see-through skin that can do no harm and can only be observed right down into the most remote point of its guts).

The point here is that, according to De Majo, the literary genre of autofiction is not an easy instrument for a writer to handle, and that it can therefore be a double-edged sword. The risk is, and I tend to agree, of lapsing into narcissism or, as Siti described certain uses of autofiction, into a sort of 'esibizionismo ricattatorio' ('blackmail exhibitionism'; *Il Realismo* 21). When I say that every autofiction can be political or subversive, it does not mean that all are. Autofiction is a literary instrument, and just like any other literary instrument, its outcomes depend on the quality of the text and the talent of the writer. Moreover, in De Majo's analysis, we can already see the germs of the main points that will characterise the Italian debate on autofiction, such as the use of autofiction as an instrument to explore and question the effects that a certain kind of Italian television, like reality shows, and mass media in general had on the Italian people. In this sense, it is useful to come back to the 2010 article by Mazza Galanti, *Autofinzioni*, where he argued against the French critic and academic Vincent Colonna, one of the most important and respected theorists of autofiction. Mazza Galanti questioned Colonna's argument, according to which autofictional narrations had existed since the very beginning of literature, even taking Dante as example. In opposition to this argument, Mazza Galanti offered the idea – with which I tend to agree – that the use of autofiction has on the contrary a lot to do with very contemporary questions like the manipulative power of mass media, as already observed by De Majo. In this sense, Mazza Galanti writes:

> Per quanto suggestiva, il difetto della tesi di Colonna è quello di non rendere assolutamente conto dell'*indecidibilità* che colpisce ciò che siamo ormai abituati a considerare l'universo autofinzionale: spazio perfettamente ibrido dove la realtà continua ad avanzare pretese nei confronti di una finzione nascosta, allusa, suggerita ma incapace di prendere il sopravvento e di costituire una chiara cornice generica. Se nessuno potrebbe oggi mettere seriamente in discussione il carattere finzionale della *Divina commedia*, il termine "autofinzione" definisce al contrario proprio il

> disorientamento che impedisce di interpretare certi elementi del racconto come reali o come inventati. Un gioco piuttosto sadico che lo scrittore impone al lettore, e che ricorda da vicino il potere manipolatorio e persuasivo esercitato dai mezzi di comunicazione di massa. (Mazza Galanti 1)

> (Although suggestive, the flaw of Colonna's thesis is to not give any account of the undecidability that affects what we are now used to regarding as the autofictional universe: a perfectly hybrid space where reality keeps making demands to a hidden, implied, hinted at fiction, but that is unable to take over and create a defined genre framing. If nowadays no one could seriously question the fictional nature of the *Divine Comedy*, the term 'autofiction' defines on the contrary the disorientation that prevents the interpretation of certain elements of the plot as real or invented. It is a quite sadistic game that the writer imposes on the reader and that on a closer look reminds us of the manipulative and persuasive power of the mass media.)

At this point, Mazza Galanti extends his reflection to an issue that we have already encountered, which is the relationship between autofiction and the rise of new technologies. The point is that some of the mechanisms characteristic of new technologies, such as social networks, can be compared to autofiction because they both offer the opportunity to generate potentially unlimited identities. In this sense, Mazza Galanti refers to the already mentioned French writer Régine Robin, and claims that 'l'*autofiction* è diventata il terreno sperimentale entro cui il soggetto, piuttosto che lasciare emergere l'inconscio attraverso l'iniziativa di una parola "sintomatica", può divertirsi a manipolare la propria identità, ad "auto-generarsi" sbizzarrendosi in una sorta di euforica onnipotenza creativa' ('autofiction has become the experimenting ground where, rather than letting the expression of the unconscious emerge

through a symptomatic word, the subject can enjoy the manipulation of its own identity, its "auto-genesis", cutting loose in a sort of euphoric creative almightiness'; 3).

However, Mazza Galanti does not seem to share this position, which he considered excessively optimistic; but is nevertheless convinced of the political and subversive potential of the literary genre of autofiction as an instrument for questioning our contemporary era, on condition that, obviously, this instrument is used with the right degree of *consciousness*:

> Di fronte ai rischi della smaterializzazione, di fronte alla manipolazione e sofisticazione tecnica della vita (biologica, sentimentale, relazionale), se il genere dell'*autofiction* ha un senso diverso da quello di un'adesione passiva allo stato delle cose, questo sarà da cercarsi nella capacità dello scrittore di problematizzare […] l'indecidibilità di cui si diceva sopra. Soltanto un approccio *critico* alla questione del disorientamento […] indotto dalla confusione dei livelli di realtà tipica della nostra epoca ipertecnologica potrà, a mio avviso, dare consistenza e valore a quella che altrimenti non saprebbe essere altro che una moda fra le tante. (Mazza Galanti 4)

> (Facing the risks of dematerialisation and the technical manipulation and adulteration of life (biological, sentimental, relational), if the genre of autofiction holds a different meaning than a passive adhesion to the state of things, this is to be looked for in the ability of the writer to problematise the above mentioned undecidability. Only a critical approach to the disorientation induced by the blurring of the reality levels, which is typical of our hyper technological times, will be able to, in my opinion, give meaning to what would be otherwise only a trend among others.)

Then, Mazza Galanti specifies good examples of Italian autofiction. At first, he describes contemporary Italian narratives characterised by an *I* of uncertain status, taking as examples writers like Lorenzo Pavolini, and Emanuele Trevi, one of the greatest living Italian writers. However, he argues that their works cannot be defined as proper autofiction given that, according to him, proper autofiction should to a certain extent represent and draw our attention to that 'perdita di solidità del mondo e dell'individuo' ('loss of solidity of the world and the individual') which is typical of our contemporary era, arguing that 'Le loro prime persone non sono soggetti consumati dall'interno, le identità vuote (e quindi potenzialmente infinite) che parlano nell'autofinzione' ('Their "I's" are not subjects consumed from within, the empty identities [therefore potentially infinite] that speak in autofiction'; 3). In this sense, Mazza Galanti seems to agree with the concept of liquid identity elaborated by Bauman and already discussed in the first part of this chapter. Furthermore, Mazza Galanti discusses two contemporary Italian authors who in their literary works came to a result that he considers very close to his idea of autofiction: Giuseppe Genna and Antonio Scurati. However, analysing Genna's *Italia de profundis*, Mazza Galanti reproaches Genna for an excess of narcissism, claiming that:

> L'Io di Genna ('Io, quello che si batte contro l'io') sprofonda in una spirale dove la ridondanza dal sapore esistenzialista della massima appena citata pare in stretto rapporto con l'inconsistenza del soggetto che la pronuncia. Non sapere se quel Genna è Genna e subire la marea montante della sua prima persona sono effetti della medesima causa. Che certamente lo scrittore, in qualche modo, cerca di controllare, di valorizzare artisticamente, di tematizzare, ma mai, si direbbe, riuscendoci fino in fondo: vittima infelice (o forse, in fondo, felice) della cattiva infinità narcisistica che si sforza di denunciare. (Mazza Galanti 4)

(The I of Genna ('I, that is fighting with the I') sinks into a spiral where the redundancy, loaded with an existential flair of the aforementioned aphorism, seems to be tightly connected with the inconsistency of the uttering subject. Not knowing if that Genna actually is Genna and being overwhelmed by his first person are two effects of the same cause. Surely the writer tries somehow to control it, to artistically enhance, to thematise, but never quite successfully: a miserable victim (or perhaps, deep down, satisfied) of the evil narcissistic infinity that he strives to expose).

On the other hand, concerning Antonio Scurati's *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo*, Mazza Galanti appreciates Scurati's attempt to use autofiction as an instrument of analysis in a discourse concerning sociological and anthropological questions, but he thinks that Scurati – as well as Genna – ultimately succumbed to an overly narcissistic approach:

Accanto alla prosopopea della messa in scena, allo sfruttamento di effetti che rimandano a quella stessa massmediatica "confusione dei confini" che la letteratura vorrebbe superare, la presenza della prima persona finta/vera del narratore A. Scurati fatica a trovare un titolo di legittimità. Perché lo scrittore ha utilizzato la propria identità anagrafica? Dove produce senso la confusione delle piste, l'egotismo pseudoautobiografico? Non c'è anche qua (ma molto meno travagliato e sofferto di quello di Genna) un ripiegamento passivamente narcisistico? E non finisce in cronaca, in pettegolo chiacchiericcio, anche la storia dell'identità personale, oltre a quella dell'identità collettiva?

Scurati ha giustamente posto il problema dell'autofinzione in termini sociologico-antropologici, collocando la propria finta autobiografia nel quadro di un più ampio discorso sui modi della comunicazione e della rappresentazione mediatica. Non pare tuttavia che abbia trovato gli strumenti (letterari) per risolverlo. (Mazza Galanti 5)

(Next to the haughtiness of the setting, to the employment of effects referring to the same mass media 'boundary blurring' that literature aims to overcome, the presence of the narrator 'real/fictional first person A. Scurati' struggles to find its legitimacy. Why did the writer use his own personal identity? What meaning does the blurring of the tracks, the pseudo-autobiographical egotism come up with? [...] Scurati rightfully raised the issue of autofiction in socio-anthropological terms, placing his fake autobiography in the framework of a wider discourse on the tools of communication and the media representation. However, it looks like he did not find the [literary] tools to solve it)

Finally, Mazza Galanti explores an example of a contemporary Italian writer who, according to him, demonstrates a fully conscious and convincing use of autofiction: Walter Siti. In fact, Mazza Galanti states that Siti is the only Italian autofiction writer, at least at the time his article was written, who has managed to picture an accurate and complex portrayal of contemporary individuals without getting overwhelmed by the same kind of narcissism he wanted to represent, producing in this way a kind of realism apt for representing the era of unreality:

Siti, attraverso l'ambigua parola del suo io real-fittizio, esegue un ritratto assolutamente convincente dell'uomo contemporaneo […] Le contraddizioni sono assunte da questo scrittore con piena, drammatica consapevolezza. Siti è l'unico autore italiano (e forse non soltanto italiano) di autofinzioni capace di incarnare compiutamente il modello descritto da Vittorio Giacopini nell'ultimo numero dello Straniero: 'Se la 'molla' dell'arte è il narcisismo – ha scritto Giacopini – l'artista deve farsi critico di se stesso e ogni opera consapevole deve contenere dentro di sé i criteri dialettici della sua contestazione ragionevole' [..] è indubbio che Siti riesce

> laddove quasi tutti falliscono: respirare, senza lasciarsene soffocare, l'aria che ci circonda – fare dell'irrealtà […] l'oggetto e lo strumento di un realismo che sia veramente al passo con i nostri tempi. (Mazza Galanti 6)

> (Through the ambiguous words of his 'real-fictional' self, Siti depicts an extremely convincing portrait of the contemporary man [...] Contradictions are embodied by this writer with a full and dramatic awareness. Siti is the only Italian autofiction author (and possibly not only Italian) able to fully epitomise the model described by Vittorio Giacopini in the last issue of the magazine "Lo Straniero": 'If the motivation of art is narcissism – as written by Giacopini – the artist needs to become a critic of oneself and every conscious work of art must contain within themselves the dialectic criteria of its reasonable criticism'. [...] It is certain that Siti succeeds where almost everyone else has failed: he breathes in – without suffocating in it – the air all around us – he makes of unreality the object and the tool of a realism that is truly keeping up with our times).

It should therefore be clear that in 2010, the debate around Italian autofiction was already well established in the Italian cultural milieu, even if this debate was not well acknowledged in academia (sadly a persistent issue even now). Fortunately, in 2011 the Italian critic Marco Mongelli wrote an undergraduate dissertation that can be considered the first academic attempt to systematise the rising debate on Italian autofiction and to identify common features among such a variegated kind of narration. Mongelli opens his dissertation – revised by the Italian poet, critic, and academic Guido Mazzoni – with a very convincing and complete (at least for that time) excursus on the progression of autofictional writing, from its germination to the contemporary French debate, passing from Lejeune and Doubrovsky to Marie

Darrieussecq and Régine Robin (Mongelli 41). After outlining autofiction's origins, Mongelli begins his exploration of the first attempts at Italian autofiction, dividing them between autofictional narratives that do not feature an *exact* coincidence between the authors and the names of their narrators, and fictional narratives presenting an evident homonymy between the author and the narrator/hero. At first, Mongelli describes the kind of autofictional narrations that have an inexact onomastic coincidence with their authors, but that still present many resemblances to their biography and/or physical aspect. In this sense, Mongelli takes as examples works by Italian authors such as Fabrizia Rondolino's *Althénopis*, Tiziano Scarpa's *Kamikaze d'Occidente*, and also two books by one of the greatest living Italian writers: Aldo Busi's *Seminario sulla gioventù* and *Casanova di sé stessi* (33). Secondly, Mongelli discusses Italian autofictional narratives that demonstrate homonymy between the narrator and the author, using as examples works such as Michele Mari's *Rondini sul filo*, Mauro Covacich's *Prima di sparire*, Emanuele Trevi's *Il libro della gioia perpetua*, and Antonio Scurati's *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo*. However, according to Mongelli, all these authors' works, even if remarkable, cannot be defined entirely as autofictions. Or, better, their authors cannot be defined as autofictional authors. The reason is that, Mongelli argues, we have a *proper* autofiction when the author consciously utilises the possibilities offered by this new literary genre as a way to question the contradictions of our contemporary times (37). This point is particularly important because it introduces one of the aspects that, as we shall see, Mongelli defined as peculiar to Italian autofiction, which is the *political* approach to it taken by some Italian autofictional writers. In this sense, Mongelli states that the first Italian author for whose work the term autofiction can be properly used is the Italian writer and academic Walter Siti (39). In fact, concerning Siti's 1994 first novel *Scuola di nudo*, Mongelli argues that:

> Siti dimostra una piena consapevolezza autofinzionale nello sfruttare la strategia identitaria per cogliere le storture del contemporaneo. In questo primo, dilagante,

> romanzo, a un'assenza di trama lineare corrisponde un proliferare di fatti pubblici e privati […] Il compiacimento della trasgressione, l'ossessione estetica per i corpi nudi delle palestre, l'ansia di un pensiero più alto sono tutti aspetti che ritroveremo, canalizzati in una narrazione più compatta in *Troppi paradisi*. Tuttavia i nuclei forti della poetica di Siti, il magma indistinguibile di vero e falso, l'isteria personale e collettiva, il tormento amoroso ed esistenziale, sono già qui, narrati con una lingua insieme leggera e potente. (Mongelli 39)

> (Siti shows a full awareness of the autofictional tool in exploiting the identification strategy, in order to seize the flaws of contemporaneity. In this first, pervasive novel, a lack of a linear plot matches an abundance of public and private facts. [...] The complacency of transgression, the aesthetic obsession for the naked gym bodies, the longing for a deeper thinking, are all aspects that we will find in *Troppi paradisi*, channelled in a more concentrated narrative. However, the strong cores of Siti's poetics, the indiscernible blur of truth and falsity, the personal and collective hysteria, the love and existential anguish, are already present and told with both a light and powerful language)

Having identified the first Italian writer whose work can properly be defined as autofictional, Mongelli, starting from the aforementioned article by Mazza Galanti, speculates about what kind of features can be defined as specific to autofiction in general and Italian autofiction in particular. In this sense, he seems to identify a tendency in Italian autofictional writers that can be defined as a peculiar political attitude; a kind of attitude that he considers already constitutive in the choice of using autofiction. It is political in the sense that these kinds of narratives tend to programmatically problematise, and in some cases engage with, very contemporary concerns – concerns that notably influence all of us as a collective society – with

the aim of raising awareness in readers. This aspect, which is extremely important for my thesis, seems to be central in the debate over Italian autofiction, while it seems only tangential in the French and American context where, as we have seen in the previous sections of this chapter, most critics (at least in the early stages of the debate) preferred to focus on autofiction's generic status, its relationship with other literary genres such as the memoir, and its connections with postmodernism or poststructuralist theories. In this sense, Mongelli writes that:

> Il genere dell'*autofiction* non può essere adesione passiva allo stato delle cose, ma deve problematizzare, letterariamente, lo smarrimento teorico, esistenziale e pratico del soggetto di fronte all'irrealtà […] La peculiarità di questa categoria testuale, soprattutto in Italia, è l'instaurarsi di un rapporto ambiguo, repulsivo e allo stesso momento attraente, tra un io sempre più finto, e una finzione sempre più vera. Guardando ai risvolti socio-antropologici dell'*autofiction* italiana Mazza Galanti rileva la compenetrazione di tre elementi tipici e molto nuovi, per tutto l'Occidente e per l'Italia in particolare: l'egolatria (ovvero un narcisismo sociale), lo sviluppo straordinario delle tecnologie della comunicazione (e la smaterializzazione dei rapporti sociali che ne deriva), la confusione sistematica (a livello massmediatico) di realtà e finzione. 'In questo senso l'autofinzione è molto più di un genere letterario: è un codice di comportamento, un modello etico, una strategia di sopravvivenza sociale'. (Mongelli 41)

> (The genre of autofiction cannot passively adhere to the state of things, but it has to problematise, in literary terms, the theoretical, existential and practical bewilderment of the subject faced with unreality. [...]The peculiarity of this textual category, especially in Italy, is the establishment of an ambiguous relationship, repulsive and attractive at the same time. By focusing on the socio-anthropological

> implications of the Italian autofiction, Mazza Galanti identifies the intertwining of three typical and very new elements for the whole Western world and Italy in particular: the egolatry (namely a form of social narcissism), the extraordinary development of technologies (and the ensuing dematerialisation of social relations), the systematic blurring of reality and fiction on a mass media level. In this sense, the autofiction represents much more than a literary genre: it is a behavioural code, an ethical model, a social strategy for survival).

I tend to agree with Mongelli's suggestion that one of the main characteristics of Italian autofiction relates to a conscious problematisation of certain aspects of Italian contemporaneity. For instance, the progressive confusion between reality and unreality is explored, and the spectacularisation of personal emotions by mass media and the tendency towards mass narcissism can be considered the battleground where Italian autofictions proliferate and act. This point is important for my argument because here Mongelli seems to characterise the use of autofiction, at least in Italy, as a kind of *active* posture that is constitutively opposed to a *passive* adhesion to the present state of things. In sum, Mongelli defines autofiction as a constitutively subversive act, a sort of Italian edition of the French notion of autofiction as a political act *par essence* shared by Delaume and Genon.[2] Moreover, having defined, in his view, the peculiar characteristics of Italian autofiction, Mongelli specifies the Italian authors who, according to him, have produced literary works containing more conscious, sophisticated, and combative uses of autofiction. These authors are notably Giuseppe Genna, Giorgio Vasta, and Walter Siti. Mongelli takes as examples three novels in particular: Genna's *Italia de profundis*,

2. Though the aim is to explore the political potential of autofiction, I only partially agree with this statement, given that I have already distinguished a kind of autofiction that is not *active* but is nevertheless still autofiction. This is, as we have already seen, the *passive* autofiction, which is the kind of autofiction in which we all are submerged and forced to perform, and that is constitutive of the type of subjectivity that is produced and promoted by neoliberal logic.

Vasta's *Spaesamento*, and Siti's *Troppi paradisi*. I do not have space to detail Mongelli's compelling analyses of these novels in full, but it suffices to observe that, according to him, all three authors engage with similar concerns through their autofiction, including mass media influence, the commodification and spectacularisation of *true stories* by television, mass narcissism, and an obsession with consumerism. These concerns, it can be argued, find in autofiction a very apt instrument to be faced, given that autofiction, as previously demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, constitutively acts in the grey zone between reality and fiction.

Another work of interest to this thesis is Daniele Giglioli's *Senza trauma* (2011), in which Giglioli considers autofiction, along with detective fiction, to be the most interesting and innovative genre in contemporary Italian literature (38). The fact that Giglioli, a very well-respected academic and critic, viewed autofiction as an established new literary genre in 2011 demonstrates that the debate over Italian autofiction was starting to take root more and more. This debate was so vital and widespread that in 2013 Walter Siti himself, who, aside from being a great writer, is an important critic and academic, personally entered the debate, writing a brief but dense pamphlet titled *Il realismo è l'impossibile*. In this work, Siti, during a discussion of the difficulties of finding the right kind of realism in order to represent our contemporary (un)reality, also writes about the question of autofiction. He recognises the author's programmatic intention to challenge the reader – a claim he will reiterate in future – as one of autofiction's main characteristics (13). Moreover, Siti offers a remarkable sociological perspective on autofiction, considering its use an apt way of representing the impossibility of distinguishing reality from fiction, which is typical of our contemporary era:

> L'Autofiction, si è detto, non è che un caso particolare di narratore inattendibile; un po' come i fabulatori di cui si parlava prima; solo che la voce dei narratori autofittivi non è in maschera, anzi si presenta incrinata dall'angoscia, o dalla fregola, o

dall'esaltazione – è una voce che esige partecipazione e consenso. Esibizionismo ricattatorio, si è detto ancora, che funziona come 'intimazione della realtà'; ma l'autore di autofiction mentre dice al lettore "credimi", gli comunica con altrettanta sfacciataggine "sto mentendo". Non per nulla la moda è fiorita proprio adesso, sull'onda del bisogno di mentire di un'intera società. Il mainstream della tendenza è sociologico: si duplica (con ambizioni di contrasto e autocoscienza dialettica) l'attuale impossibilità mediatica di distinguere il vero dal falso, il costruito spettacolarmente dal semplicemente accaduto. (Siti 21)

(Autofiction, as stated above, is nothing but a particular case of unreliable narrator, just like the aforementioned fabulators; however, the voice of the autofictional narrators is not masked, in fact it presents itself as broken by distress, restlessness or excitement – it is a voice that demands participation and consensus. It has also been described as a form of extortive exhibitionism, working as an 'imposition of reality': as the autofiction author, while asking the reader to be 'believed', at the same time is revealed with as much nerve to be 'lying'. It is no coincidence that this trend has begun just at this time, in the wake of a need to lie of the whole society. The mainstream nature of this drive is sociological: the current inability of the media to tell the true from the false, the spectacularly constructed from what simply happened, duplicates itself with ambitions for conflict and dialectical self-consciousness).

Given that *Il realismo è l'impossibile* concerns the question of finding a new realism which is capable of narrating our contemporary reality, a reality that continuously and confusingly oscillates between reality and fiction, Siti argues that autofiction is a particularly useful instrument for this purpose:

> L'io dell'autofiction oscilla tra empiria e letteratura: mentre si sforza di dare carne e sangue alle parole, si trova tra le mani un'identità cartacea e depotenziata. Sa che la sua mimesi è spesso mimesi di immagini virtuali, che il suo è un realismo nell'epoca della de-realizzazione. (Siti 21)

> (The autofictional self swings between empiricism and literature: as it struggles to give substance to words, it is left with nothing but a paper-thin and weakened identity. The self is aware that its mimesis is often an emulation of virtual images, that its realism belongs to the time of de-realisation).

However, Siti also concludes by warning us that if they insist too much on the use of autofiction, the authors risk becoming a sort of *caricature* of themselves (32), thus reducing the autofictive approach to a sort of mannerism and dismantling all its revelatory and subversive potential. I tend to agree with the analysis of autofiction that Siti provides in *Il realismo è l'impossibile*, because he offers a compelling and original sociological perspective on autofiction. In fact, Siti relates the use of autofiction to a 'bisogno di mentire' ('need to lie'; 21), which he considers a general tendency in Italian society nowadays. This point is crucial for the thesis because I shall relate this need to lie to the neoliberal imperative to design our personal selves in order to result in greater appeal to the market; an attitude that is a form of self-branding and, therefore, a form of autofiction.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO ITALIAN AUTOFICTION

At this point it should be clear that, during those years, the debate around Italian autofiction was particularly rich, as it would also be in the years that followed. In fact, in 2014 the well-respected Italian critic and academic Lorenzo Marchese published a remarkable book titled *L'io possible. L'autofiction come paradosso del romanzo contemporaneo*. This essay has

the double aim of both introducing the term *autofiction* to the Italian public and offering a comparative and international perspective. Marchese begins with a very full description of the evolution of and the debate on autofiction and then devotes some interesting analysis to international autofiction authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Philip Roth, and Walter Siti. Marchese starts with a complete account of the journey of the term *autofiction*, offering in this sense –and importantly for this thesis – a clear and stimulating analysis of the major technical questions related to it. At first Marchese touches on issues already encountered, such as autofiction's position in Lejeune's autobiographical pact and its relationship to other genres such as the memoir, the autobiographical novel, and the confession. Then, Marchese provides an overview of Italian autofiction from the earliest to the latest examples, towards a very comprehensive range of literary works. In this list there are authors that we have already met, like Giulio Mozzi, Mauro Covacich, Walter Siti, Fabrizia Rondolino, Michele Mari, Giuseppe Genna, and Aldo Busi, as well as other authors yet to appear in this thesis, such as Antonio Pascale, Helena Janeczek, Simona Vinci, Aldo Nove, Roberto Saviano, Antonio Moresco, and Emmanuela Carbé (*L'Io possible*, Marchese 185). These are all authors who – some more than others – have dealt with the insertion of fictional elements in an autobiographical context in their works, and as such they have to a certain extent dealt with autofiction. Particularly interesting is Marchese's interest in the relationship between autofiction and social networks. After these considerations, however, Marchese concentrates his analysis on the *technical* aspects of Italian autofiction, focusing on its status as a literary genre, its position between truth and narrative invention, and the role of paratext in both confusing the reader and challenging them to verify the accountability of the information provided by the author, a kind of approach that, as we have seen, was typical of the early debates on autofiction, especially in France. Marchese's approach is considerably different from mine: though we both discuss autofictional works by Michel Houellebecq and Walter Siti, Marchese focuses on the more theoretical aspects of autofiction as a literary genre – aligning himself with the early stages of the debate

in France –, while I prefer to focus on the political potential of Houellebecq's and Siti's autofictional approach.

However, if we consider that in 2014, the same year Marchese's essay appeared, the Italian academic Raffaele Donnarumma also published a book on Italian autofiction, *Ipermodernità*, we can safely state that at that point autofiction, its use by Italian authors, and the debate around it was very well established, both in academia and the literary *milieu*. The term, in fact, is now commonly used to describe a clear typology of literary works. However, the debate on autofiction continued to prosper, and in 2017 the Italian literary magazine "Il Verri" dedicated an entire issue to autofiction, with a dossier titled *L'io in finzione*. The special issue hosts some thought-provoking articles, written by well-respected critics and academics such as Carlo Tirinanzi de' Medici, Filippo Pennacchio, Giacomo Tinelli, and Lorenzo Marchese. Marchese's article in particular offers an opportunity to once again take stock of autofiction's journey in Italy. In his essay, "Genealogia dell'autofinzione italiana", Marchese thus seizes the chance to update his outlook on Italian autofiction and to reconsider certain issues that he evidently perceived as still not having been entirely explored. For instance, Marchese clarifies that one of the specifics of Italian autofiction is an explicit intention to trick the reader (2), taking as his main example the first Siti novel *Scuola di nudo* (Marchese 3). Moreover, he adds that in this novel Siti creates a deliberate rupture in the kind of literary approach that was hegemonic at that time in contemporary literature:

> Quella di Siti è un'operazione che costituisce intenzionalmente una rottura con la narrativa italiana coeva più significativa (degli anni '80: *Scuola di nudo* ha avuto una gestazione decennale, è stato iniziato nel 1982 e parla principalmente di quel decennio). Opere come *Treno di panna* (1981) di Andrea De Carlo o *Diario di un millennio che fugge* (1986) di Marco Lodoli, per indicarne due emblematiche, non

mirano certo a colpire il lettore dandogli l'impressione che la letteratura e la realtà entrino in cortocircuito. (Marchese 3)

(Siti's operation intentionally constitutes a break with the most significant Italian fiction of the eighties: *Scuola di nudo* took him almost a decade to write, it was started in 1982 and mostly talks about that decade). Books such as *Treno di panna* (1981) by Andrea De Carlo or *Diario di un millennio che fugge* (1986) by Marco Lodoli, to name two emblematic ones, surely do not aim to strike the reader by creating the impression of a short circuit between literature and reality).

Secondly, Marchese seems to agree with Donnarumma's analysis in *Ipermodernità*, when he claims that one of the reasons autofiction developed in Italy was through an intention to redeem Italian literature produced in the 1980s and 1990s, which was perceived, quite arguably, I would say, as too *distant* and unable to face certain contemporary issues; a kind of literature that, quoting the Italian critic and writer Tommaso Labranca, had partially lost contact with *reality*, in the sense that it chose to ignore political and anthropological changes:

L'autofiction, in una posizione non ancora così impegnata e moralistica come la scrittura cosiddetta di *non-fiction*, emerge in Italia con l'obiettivo di ricalibrare l'immagine di una letteratura percepita a metà degli anni '90 come qualcosa di distante e inerte. Non è molto lontano dall'ottica degli autofinzionalisti, nello stesso 1994, un intellettuale acuto come Labranca quando nota: «La letteratura, intendo la letteratura narrativa contemporanea italiana, è qualcosa di totalmente estranea alla realtà. La letteratura è uno specchio che non riflette più nessuna immagine o forse riflette solo l'immagine del suo autore. In ogni caso è un oggetto inutile e va buttato via» (30). Il primo passo per tornare a restituire un riflesso del mondo, nell'autofiction, è usare se stessi come superficie specchiante. (Marchese 4)

(The autofiction, with a less engaged and moralistic stance than the so-called *non-fiction*, emerges in Italy with the aim of resetting a literature perceived in the mid 1990s as something distant and lifeless. A sharp intellectual as Labranca is not far from the point of view of autofictionalists when he argues that 'Literature, by which I mean the Italian contemporary narrative literature, is something completely unrelated to reality. Literature is a mirror that no longer reflects any images or maybe it just reflects the image of its author. However, it is a useless object and needs to be thrown away' (30) The first step to return to a reflection of the world in autofiction is using yourself as a reflecting surface).

However, Marchese points out that the autofictional approach is not limited to the *novel*, but is also open to other kind of texts, like those that contain images, portions of personal journals, or texts from newspapers and so on. Marchese takes as examples works by authors such as Rino Genovese and Giulio Mozzi:

D'altro canto, sarebbe complesso ascrivere le prime autofinzioni italiane in blocco alla galassia del romanzo. Se Siti rivendica la funzione conoscitiva di questa forma simbolica, per marcare una distanza con la narrativa di alcuni autori degli anni '80, altri scrittori di autofiction utilizzano una narrazione fatta di lacerti diaristici, annotazioni artatamente informi, brevi segmenti narrativi montati alla rinfusa in modo da lasciare cuciture imperfette e spazi vuoti che spetta al lettore riempire. (Marchese 4)

> (On the other hand, it would be complex to fully include the first Italian autofictions into the novel galaxy. If Siti claims the cognitive function of this symbolic form in order to mark a distance with the narrative of some authors of the 80s, other autofiction writers use a narrative made of diary fragments, artificially shapeless annotations, short narrative segments haphazardly arranged so to leave imperfect seams and empty spaces that are to be filled by the reader).

Even if, at the end of his essay, Marchese produces a complete overview of the most recent examples of Italian autofiction, including the latest works by Tiziano Scarpa, Giuseppe Genna, Massimiliano Parente, Michele Mari, and Walter Siti, in his conclusions he seems to declare the journey of Italian autofiction over, considering it a literary genre whose use is no longer a viable option (6). Marchese wrote this essay in 2017, and he could not know that at the very moment I am writing, Italian autofiction is still alive. It is not dead, it simply evolved, as did the themes it threatens. We have seen that most critics agree there are certain issues typical of Italian autofiction, such as an intention to challenge the reader and the determination to face issues that are characteristic of our contemporary era, including the influence of reality shows, the increasing difficulty in distinguishing reality from fiction, the ways – as we shall see in the chapter on Siti – that spectators try to adapt to the unreality imposed by television, or the obsession with hedonism and consumerism. However, times change, and therefore autofiction also changes, challenging and facing new issues. A remarkable case in point is discussed in Chiara Mengozzi's 2010 essay "Strategie e forme di rappresentazione di sé nella letteratura italiana della migrazione", where she argues that autofiction is one of the main instruments used by Italian migrant writers to narrate their story (1). This is a very urgent issue, and autofiction has a lot to say on the subject, given that it is capable of representing fractured identities, such as those of migrants and second-generation migrants. As an example, in 2019 the Italian writer Claudia Durastanti published a book titled *La straniera*, where she narrates her condition as a

precarious Italian intellectual who migrated to the UK, continuously shifting between two (and even more than two) different countries, two different languages, and therefore two equally different identities. *La straniera* is a remarkable literary work and, despite Marchese's declaration of death, it is an autofiction.

In sum, we can say that Italian autofiction is not dead, it is just evolving, hand in hand with the evolution of culture and society. To conclude, this chapter has attempted to provide an overview of the ways in which autofiction has evolved in different cultures that share different backgrounds. However, it cannot be by chance that the three contexts I have explored – French, American and Italian –have experienced such a significant production of autofictions. As we shall see, the reason for this production represents a sort of *fil rouge* connecting not only these three countries, but Western society in general. The cause of this rich production of autofiction, I shall contend, has to do with that economic, cultural, and ideological system that day by day is nourishing unacceptable inequalities and consuming the planet, condemning later generations to experience the devastating effects of global warming, among many others. This system is neoliberalism. In the following chapters, we see how three different authors from three different countries, Michel Houellebecq, Bret Easton Ellis, and Walter Siti, have used the literary genre of autofiction as an instrument for unveiling and questioning the mechanisms (or at least some of them) that establish, impose, and protect the logic through which neoliberalism keeps perpetuating its power. We shall see for what reasons and through which strategies this use of autofiction manages to perform an act that can be defined as liberating, and, therefore, political.

Chapter 2: The Autofiction of Michel Houellebecq

Toute société a ses points de moindre résistance, ses plaies.
Mettez le doigt sur la plaie, et appuyez bien fort.
Michel Houellebecq

(*Every society has its weakest points, its wounds.*
Put the finger on the wound and press hard)

INTRODUCTION

Since publishing his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, in 1994, the French writer Michel Houellebecq has polarised the reactions of both critics and readers. The story of this young, lonely, alienated programmer who is never named has, according to the French critic Denis Demompion, been praised for its sharp, humorous style and for the accuracy of its sociological analysis. Furthermore, it has been much discussed for its raw description of sexuality and its laconic and programmatic lack of consideration for any kind of hope (Demompion 31). However, it was only four years later, after publishing his second novel, *Les particules élémentaires*, that Houellebecq gained the status of the *enfant terrible* of French literature. In order to give an idea of the degree of attention the novel attracted, in his unauthorised biography of Houellebecq, Demompion described its impact on the French

literary milieu in these terms: 'son irruption dans le paysage littéraire à l'automne 1998 a provoqué un tel séisme que l'onde de choc a dépassé les frontières' ('its irruption into the literary panorama in the autumn of the year 1998 provoked such a huge quake that it overcame the frontiers'; 12). The novel touches on many delicate and potentially controversial themes, such as eugenics, the legacy of 1968 in France, the New Age, and so on. According to Ruth Cruickshank, the controversy around *Les particules élémentaires* 'dominated the 1998 *rentrée littéraire*' (116), with the mainstream press covering the debate around the novel for many months and *Le Monde* even coining the phrase *affaire Houellebecq* (Cruickshank 118). The work was accused of being racist, misogynist, and blasphemous, and many magazines that had previously published Houellebecq's essays and articles publicly took a position against him. As noted by Carole Sweeney, the magazine *Perpendiculaire* expelled Houellebecq from its board and its contributors published a series of articles – entitled *Trials* – to distance themselves from the content of the novel, which was judged to be racist and reactionary (37).

The controversies and polemics generated by *Les particules élémentaires* have had very few equals in modern French literary history; the level of rage and resentment levelled at Houellebecq might find a recent comparison, according to Douglas Morrey (5), perhaps only in the wave of disgust aimed at Louis-Ferdinand Céline because of his anti-Semitic pamphlets. Additionally, the many provocative – and often contradictory – interviews given by Houellebecq himself, who seemed to have no intention of calming the polemics, contributed to imprinting in the collective imagination the image of the writer as a professional *provocateur*. As outlined by Demompion, for the 2001 launch of *Platforme* (Houellebecq's third novel), the publisher of *Les particules élémentaires*, Flammarion, organised an unprecedented publicity campaign (71). Unfortunately, this novel, which narrates the story of typically alienated Houellebecqian characters moving in a setting of sexual tourism, did not achieve the same degree of success as its predecessor – although it did cement Houellebecq's status as a provocative author. Therefore, it would be legitimate to posit that the economic success of *Les particules élémentaires* was partially owing to three elements: the delicate themes touched

upon, the often controversial interviews and behaviours exhibited by the author, and the platform offered by the mass media to his critics and related debates. It is also reasonable to presume that all the participants in this scheme benefited from the *movement*; thus, its perpetuation was favourable to everyone. It would seem that at a certain point Michel Houellebecq ceased being merely a controversial writer and became a brand. The difficulty is, according to Cruickshank, that this brand risks overshadowing the qualitative value of his work, compelling the critic to pay more attention to the author's public behaviour and to the scandals generated by the themes he addresses, instead of focusing on his works (128). At this stage, it would be appropriate to propose two hypotheses: first of all, Houellebecq has seldom attempted to confute his controversial public image – on the contrary, he has confirmed and, in some cases, even exaggerated it, implying that perhaps he was conscious of the controversies it provoked, becoming to some extent complicit in its construction. For instance, in a 2002 article Suzie Mackenzie underlines that many journalists who have interviewed Houellebecq asked themselves if 'he was nothing but a drunk instead of the writer of two bestselling novels' (3). Second, he accepted this complicity, transitioning then from a passive victim of the mass media to an active agent – because he reaped economic advantage from it – with the main intention of perpetrating his brand. This kind of cynical approach has been insinuated, for instance, by critics such as Jean-François Patricola (37) and Louise Moor (8). The intention of this chapter is not to refute this argument, but rather to demonstrate that Houellebecq is acutely conscious of his public image. It will be argued that this is a fundamental part of a strategy of self-representation whose final aim is a political critique of contemporary society. Most importantly, the argument will not fall into the interpretative trap denounced by Cruickshank that, as already outlined, focuses too much on Houellebecq's public figure while underestimating his work. Instead, it will be claimed that such a strategy is strictly related to Houellebecq's narrative and that its aim can only be achieved through literary instruments: in this case, the literary genre of autofiction. In Houellebecq's 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire*, Michel Houellebecq is himself a character and, most interestingly, in the second part of the novel his fictional self is

brutally murdered and shredded into pieces. It will be argued that this macabre homicide is yet again not a provocation, but the completion of a coherent social critique which begins with *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and culminates fully with the killing of the fictive Michel Houellebecq in *La carte et le territoire*. As this chapter will demonstrate, this critique concerns the extension of neoliberalist attitudes towards the spheres of love and sexuality, as Houellebecq posits in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, towards the overall sphere of artistic creation and, by extension, to the artists that produce the art and, therefore, to personal identities in general. As such, it is suggested that along with this critique, Houellebecq adopted the literary instrument of autofiction to create a caricature of his public image in order to regain control of it, before finally destroying it altogether. Finally, it will be argued that this type of political critique could be made possible only through autofiction, unveiling the political and subversive potential of this literary genre.

In order to achieve these aims, the first section of this chapter will outline the critical reception of Houellebecq's work, focusing upon different interpretations by various scholars and on how the author's public persona and controversies have limited and influenced the perception of his work. The next section will provide a summary of the interpretative processes followed throughout the chapter, partly based on Ruth Cruickshank's 2009 essay titled *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetic of Crisis*. The originality of this approach will be explored and extended in the third section of this chapter, which will propose a continuity between Houellebecq's major novels – from *Extension du domaine de la lutte* to *La carte et le territoire* – based on his reflections on the neoliberal tendency towards commodifying everything and the consequences this attitude has on people. This approach will subsequently be applied to Houellebecq's 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire*, explaining how these attitudes have extended from sex and love – as Houellebecq explained in his first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* – to art and identity, claiming that in this novel Houellebecq conducts a pointed and political critique of our contemporary era. Finally, the chapter claims that this particular critique is possible only via the literary genre of autofiction, analysing Houellebecq's

application of this literary instrument and why it is strictly related to his political critique, and arguing that in this way the use of autofiction becomes a political act.

L'AFFAIRE HOUELLEBECQ

Houellebecq is without doubt one of the most famous and discussed living French authors. The number of articles, papers, chapters, dissertations, and books that scholars, critics, and journalists from across the world have devoted to his literary works or his public persona is surprisingly high. It is also undeniable that too many of these have principally – if not wholly – focused on his public persona and on the scandals and controversies it has generated. This was the case, for instance, with Eric Naulleau, who in his 2005 essay *Au secours, Houellebecq revient* intended to satirise the agitation that consumes the French literary landscape every time a new novel by Houellebecq is announced. Jean-François Patricola's book *Michel Houellebecq: ou la provocation permanente* has been credited with a subtler analysis of the role of mass media – and the consequential economic interests – in the construction of the media version of Michel Houellebecq and, most intriguingly, the complicity of the author himself in producing this discourse (Patricola 63). Houellebecq's complicity in the construction of his image as a provocative author has also been well explored by Russell Williams, especially in his 2019 essay "Uncomfortable Proximity. Literary Technique, Authorial Provocations and Dog Whistles in Michel Houellebecq's Fiction".

Louise Moor, in her fascinating article "Posture polémique ou polémisation de la posture? Le cas de Michel Houellebecq", gives a timely and appreciably well-documented résumé of the polemics that have surrounded Houellebecq throughout his literary career and how they have influenced the public and critical perception of his work (Moor 3). In particular, she points out how these polemics become a structure of sorts that 'supporte et oriente, d'une part, l'intégration et la pérennisation de l'auteur au sein du champ littéraire et, d'autre part, la réception de l'œuvre et la posture de son écrivain' ('supports and guides, on one hand, the

integration and the consolidation of the author within the literary landscape and, on the other hand, the reception of the work and the position of its writer'; 15). Moor's reflection can be linked to Raphael Baroni's article "Comment débusquer la voix d'un auteur dans sa fiction? Une étude de quelques provocations de Michel Houellebecq", where he gathers and closely analyses some of the most virulent and controversial passages of Houellebecq's novel and speculates as to whether a potentially scandalised reader is allowed to assign moral responsibility to the author for the ideas promulgated by his characters (Baroni 6).

Some critics have tried to provide a more comprehensive analysis of Houellebecq's work, focusing more sharply on his literary works. Bruno Viard, for instance, has devoted several books to Houellebecq, including *Houellebecq au laser: La faute à mai 68* (2008), *Les tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq* (2013), and *Littérature et déchirure de Montaigne à Houellebecq: Étude anthropologique* (2013), and who additionally organised an important conference on the author, held in Aix-en-Provence and Marseille in May 2012. There have been a few notable attempts to categorise Houellebecq: Bruno Blanckeman, in a 2005 article titled "Le souci de societé (sur quelques écritures néoréalistes)", located Houellebecq in the context of *objectivité naturaliste* ('naturalist objectivity'; 8), while, in a 2015 book titled *Le discours néo-réactionnaire*, Pascal Durand and Sarah Sindaco made efforts to include Houellebecq in a neo-right movement defined as *néo-réactionnaires*, forgetting that the writer started his literary career writing for left-oriented magazines such as *Les Inrockuptibles*. Moreover, an analysis proposed by Sabine van Wesemael in a 2015 article titled "Michel Houellebecq: un auteur post-postmoderne", defining Houellebecq as a post-postmodern author, is more interesting, even if her view might be accused (not without reason) of being a theoretical stretch. This chapter is reticent to attempt to categorise Houellebecq's literary position, given that his entire novelistic strategy seems to constantly indicate a certain resistance to any kind of literary label, and also considering that the variety of codified literary genres present in *La carte et le territoire* is representative of this. Therefore, in order to conclude the matter, it is necessary to recall that when Houellebecq himself was asked about his literary and intellectual positioning in a 2010

interview for *The Paris Review*, he answered that he considered himself a 'realist that exaggerates a little' and 'an old Calvinist pain in the ass' (128-136).

To enlarge the view of this brief outline of Houellebecq's critical reception, it is well known that interest in him is not limited to France and it is thus useful to note the work of Douglas Morrey, who in his 2013 book *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath* offers a compelling introduction to Houellebecq's themes and an acute analysis of his public persona and his complicity in its media construction (3). Most importantly, even though his essay principally focuses on Houellebecq's vision of a posthuman era (Morrey 8), Morrey identifies two interpretative lines of thought that offer extremely useful support to this dissertation: firstly, he suggests a kind of continuity in Houellebecq's novels based on a critique of how humanity is 'irrevocably overtaken by the prosthesis of the global economy, a superstructure that grows out of human relations and yet comes to determine those relations in unpredictable and unintended ways' (152); secondly, Morrey reflects on the inextricable bonds between art and the market in *La carte et le territoire* – which, considering the main focus of his essay, he attributes to humanity's relation to work in a late capitalist society (97), and on Houellebecq's autoportrait (positing that it is not autofiction) in *La carte et le territoire*. Here, Morrey claims that Houellebecq's representation of himself is connected to the French writer's discourse about the substitution, for touristic reasons, of the *real* France with its simulacrum (Morrey 100). Finally, he also suggests that he 'elsewhere shows clearly how the art world ascribes monetary value to individuals just as much as the worlds of work and sex that came in for criticism in earlier novels' (Morrey 113), concluding that this self-portrait is part of a strategy for 'avoiding this reification of the artist' (Morrey 113).

Morrey's approach is both fascinating and stimulating; however, he seems to woefully underestimate the importance of the use of autofiction in Houellebecq's strategy, claiming in fact that *La carte et le territoire* is not an autofiction at all but 'quite simply, Michel

Houellebecq appears as a character in his own novel' (104). In this sense, Morrey refers to the French critic Philippe Gasparini who, in his 2008 essay *Autofiction. Une aventure du langage*, defines autofiction as a 'récit reposant sur l'homonymie de l'auteur, du narrateur, et du héros mais présentant un développement projectif dans des situations imaginaires' ('story based on the homonymy of the author, the narrator and the hero that tells a projective development into imaginary situations'; 26) excluding, therefore, *La carte et le territoire* from this categorisation, given that the character of Michel Houellebecq therein is not the protagonist (the hero) but merely a secondary character. Whether or not one is obsessed with categorisations, here Morrey seems to forget that *La carte et le territoire* does in fact adhere to the literary genre of autofiction and to one category in particular – that individuated and delineated by Vincent Colonna in his seminal 2004 essay *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires* and which he defined as *autofiction spéculaire*. According to Colonna, this particular autofictive stance materialises when 'un écrivain s'immisce dans sa fiction' (55) ('a writer intrudes in their own fiction'), therefore becoming a character among others (120), and this is exactly the case with the Michel Houellebecq character in *La carte et le territoire*. Furthermore, Morrey's analysis could be enlarged upon and implemented precisely by starting with the basis of Houellebecq's choice for using the literary genre of autofiction. Morrey is certainly accurate in suggesting that one of Houellebecq's aims in *La carte et le territoire* is to put forward a discussion of the risk of reification for the figure of the artist in late capitalist society (113), but of particular interest herein is the possibility of demonstrating that this risk of reification is – as will be discussed later – part of a larger neoliberal strategy to commodify (and thus absorb and control) every aspect of human life, including artists but also, by extension, personal identities in general. This neoliberal strategy is at the core of the analysis of contemporary society's mechanisms pursued by Houellebecq throughout his literary works and is certainly related – as Morrey acutely grasps – to sex, love, and art, but can also be extended to personal identities. Additionally, as this chapter will demonstrate, in order to develop these critiques, Houellebecq uses himself – his character (*La carte et le territoire* being a case in point), which could be made possible only

through the literary genre of autofiction, and not only fits *La carte et le territoire* as a category but also represents its most efficient instrument – or weapon – of critique.

As briefly outlined above, the body of literature on Houellebecq created and developed by critics, journalists, and scholars is vast and variegated. Despite the remarkable quality of the works quoted above, another type of critique stands out: that which explores the political aspect of Houellebecq's novels, and which is less frequently analysed by critics in general – even though, as confirmed by Wesemael, his ability to represent certain contemporary human struggles is commonly accepted (8). However, the number of articles or books that define Houellebecq as a political author is very modest, at least compared to all the literature surrounding his public image and the polemics provoked by it. According to Olivier Bardolle (71), there is a particular reason for the lack of attention – or selective amnesia, it might be said – to this aspect of Houellebecq's work, which is also, incidentally, the reason he is so discussed and controversial: he touches on concerns that are like exposed nerves in our society and, given that our society is unable to resolve the issues he raises and clearly illustrates, in his classically detached and clinical style, its reaction is to reject and even delegitimise him – for instance, through the accusation that he is merely a professional *provocateur*, a weasel who has intentionally built his success upon human misery, nothing more than a jackal. On the contrary, this chapter will demonstrate that his work shows a strong and conscious political critique of the extension of the neoliberal attitude to all aspects of life. This intent is evident in Houellebecq's work, and, as well as being conscious and thoughtful, it is both pointed and well-structured. Therefore, this chapter will explore how Houellebecq develops his critique of contemporary society, assessing his methods and instruments. It is not by chance that in a collection of poems titled *Rester vivant*, articulated as a sort of pedagogy of the poet, Houellebecq writes that 'toute société a ses points de moindre résistance, ses plaies. Mettez le doigt sur la plaie, et appuyez bien fort' ('every society has its weakest points, its wounds. Put the finger on the wound and press hard'; 24).

A Political approach to Michel Houellebecq's novels: a methodology

Some critics have put remarkable effort into analysing Houellebecq's political side, as outlined above. For instance, Carole Sweeney, in her 2013 book *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, analyses how Houellebecq articulates his critique of neoliberalism and its effects on the lives and personal relations of his characters. The same theme is explored extensively by Cruickshank who, in her seminal 2009 book *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetic of Crisis*, collocates Houellebecq's works and themes with a larger literary tendency that emerged in France during the first years of the new millennium. In this intriguing essay, Cruickshank cites a common tendency to explore a supposed end-of-millennium crisis in French literature, taking as examples the works of four writers: Jean Echenoz, Michel Houellebecq, Christine Angot and Marie Redonnet. In summary, Cruickshank analyses how these writers faced the main *fin de millénaire* concerns such as, according to her analysis, the failure of neoliberalism; the frustration of demands made in the French protests 1968; the disappearance of the *engaged* writer, as traditionally conceived in the country; the fear of – as well as the obsession with – new technologies; and the commodification, and thus the neutralisation, of every idea, value, or experience. According to Cruickshank, even though Houellebecq's reflection on commodification, political correctness, the mass media, and advertising is certainly stimulating, Houellebecq himself does not escape the risk of being absorbed by the dominant discourses he strives to challenge. If, on the one hand, his work 'develops a totalizing theory that simultaneously operates as a mise en scène and diagnosis of what it portrays' (Cruickshank 123), on the other hand, because of his being a cultural product and (to paraphrase Bourdieu) an *intellectuel médiatique*, his work essentially 'takes the risk of perpetuating the norms and conventions that it portrays in its attempt to challenge them'

(Cruickshank 160). In Cruickshank's view, he fails, in spite of the fact that his efforts might serve as testimony to literature's failure – and the failure of art in general, as well as a privileged arena suitable for hosting discussions on contemporary concerns. Although some of her reservations could be disputed, Cruickshank's approach is extremely fertile, and her reflections might be a good starting point for illustrating the argument explored in this chapter, which intends to defend the political efficiency – or at least to demonstrate the strategically political intent – of Houellebecq's works. Cruickshank's objections are valid and substantiated, but her book was published in 2009, one year before the publication of *La carte et le territoire*, where Houellebecq reflects on this exact topic of being himself a cultural product and, thus, of both him and the political potential of his analysis being liable to manipulation, normalisation, and neutralisation. He manages to evade this contradiction, as will be demonstrated, by the use of autofiction.

Therefore, the line of exploration that will be followed in this chapter is the one Houellebecq started to trace in his first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and that, as will become apparent, finds perfect fulfilment in his 2010 autofiction *La carte et le territoire*, which is the first of Houellebecq's autofictional works. Some of the themes isolated by Cruickshank will thus be referred to: the effects of late capitalism in contemporary society and the strategies utilised by various authors in order to face these concerns – it may be noted that Cruickshank limited her analysis to France and French writers, while this chapter takes the view that the tendencies she acutely identified might be extended to all of Western society. The first point will therefore focus on the concerns of the late capitalist tendency to commodify everything, which might be regarded as a crucial theme in all Houellebecq's literary work. It will be argued that there is a sort of *fil rouge* between *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *La carte et le territoire*, which resides in the question of neoliberal commodification. In conclusion, if, in the first Houellebecq novel, the focus is on the extension of late capitalist commodification attitudes to sex, love, and personal relationships, in *La carte et le territoire* this analysis encompasses art and culture in general. The second argument concerns Houellebecq's choice

to use the literary instrument of autofiction, which might again be strictly related to the question of late capitalist commodification and which will thus be explored. In fact, the decision to use autofiction can lead to two kinds of reflection: first, given that in *La carte et le territoire* the aim is to reveal the mechanisms that led to the commodification of art and culture, it is possible to argue that this attitude relates to the producers of art (in this case Houellebecq himself); in this sense, the artist becomes a product and is thus saleable, manipulable, and replaceable like any other product. Second, might this attitude of reproducing the self, prevalent across Western society and well represented by autofiction, be considered a product of neoliberalist strategy? If so, what exactly is this strategy?

SEX, LOVE, DEATH, AND IDENTITY: THE EXTENSION OF THE NEOLIBERALISM DOMAIN

When Houellebecq's first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* was published in 1994, it immediately gained, according to Cruickshank, the status of a '*cult* novel' (116) and, despite the absolute absence of any kind of marketing strategy or media polemic, it sold an impressive 16,000 copies. During a 2009 interview given to *The Paris Review*, Houellebecq explained the success of the novel and the reasons he felt compelled to write it in these terms:

> I hadn't seen any novel make the statement that entering the workforce was like entering the grave. That from then on, nothing happens and you have to pretend to be interested in your work. And, furthermore, that some people have a sex life and others don't just because some are more attractive than others. I wanted to acknowledge that if people don't have a sex life, it's not for some moral reason, it's because they're ugly. Once you've said it, it sounds obvious, but I wanted to say it. (Houellebecq 7)

The plot of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is relatively simple: it tells the story of a thirty-something-year-old male – never named in the novel – who works as a computer programmer. This character is represented as alienated and mostly depressed, whose only apparent joy in life is the act of choosing the best ready meal offered by the French supermarket chain *Monoprix*. During the second part of the novel, he is invited to visit a series of small French towns in order to teach various groups of state employees how to use a new application. He is accompanied on this journey by a colleague named Tisserand, an interesting young man with a satisfying work life and a good salary, but who is hopelessly shy and unattractive. The frustration regarding his sexual inabilities and the delusion following an unsatisfactory sexual encounter with a prostitute lead Tisserand to try to commit homicide and, in the end – apparently – suicide. Finally, the unnamed protagonist experiences an acute depressive episode that pushes him to commit himself to a mental ward and, after release from the hospital, to plan a trip to the French region of Ardèche, an experience that will be delusional and unsatisfactory and, in accordance with the character's nihilist attitude, just like all the others.

Extension du domaine de la lutte, with its calibrated alternation of sociological reflection, economic theory, and acerbic humour that will become Houellebecq's signature style in his following novels, touches on a wide range of themes. In particular, Tisserand's countless attempts to pursue sexual intercourse during the novel will dramatically fail because of his lack of ease and his unattractiveness, which in turn provide occasion for the author to propose various sociological reflections on how the extension of neoliberalist competitive attitudes – traditionally associated with the fields of work and remuneration – also taint the spheres of love and sexuality. Neoliberalism (at least in the Western countries where it was born) has developed, and still prospers, tending to commodify and transform everything into either goods or exchangeable values, additionally producing competition – or struggle – to obtain those values. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Houellebecq theorises that in our contemporary society, this attitude has also permeated love and sexuality. In other words, according to Morrey, who clearly and acutely demonstrates this point, Houellebecq posits that

in contemporary society 'sexuality is a system of social differentiation and hierarchisation, structurally parallel to that of money, just as ruthless and just as capable of producing phenomena of absolute pauperisation' (51). In a similar vein, Cruickshank points out that a characteristic of neoliberalism is also the ability to strategically create and push desires. These desires are therefore a cause of competition – *domaine de la lutte* – and thus frustration and depression. Cruickshank points out how Houellebecq 'states that the producing of consuming desire is doubled by a parallel economy producing sexual desire, thus extending the realm of competition – and therefore of crisis production – into every aspect of life' (123).

To sum up, according to Houellebecq, in contemporary society late capitalism produces and pushes sexual desires, applying a neoliberal law where, as happens with money in general, some people are more advantaged than others. This imbalance, obviously, creates frustration:

> En système économique parfaitement libéral, certains accumulent des fortunes considérables; d'autres croupissent dans le chômage et la misère. En système sexuel parfaitement libéral, certains ont une vie érotique variée et excitante; d'autres sont réduits à la masturbation et la solitude. Le libéralisme économique, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. (Houellebecq 100)

> (In a completely liberal economy, some people accumulate large fortunes, whilst others grovel in unemployment and poverty. In a completely liberal sexual economy, some people have varied and exciting sex lives whilst others are reduced to masturbation and loneliness. Liberal market economics means the extension of the struggle, to all life stages and to all social classes).

Houellebecq's reflection also concludes that in this double system – economic and sexual – there is another consequent struggle: it is also possible that people who are winners in economic competition can simultaneously be losers in sexual competition and vice versa. For

instance, the former is illustrated in the case of Tisserand, who is economically satisfied but unable to attain an acceptable sexual life. Moreover, as argued by Morrey, this competition (as with all competition) is a source of hierarchisation leading to narcissistic gratification or frustration. In this sense, an illuminating example is the moment in the novel where another character wishes to purchase a new bed but struggles with the choice of whether it should be single or double. The reason for this struggle is very simple: if he buys a single bed, he will be seen by the salesperson as a pathetic single man with no sexual life, while if he buys a double, it will be a source of inevitable frustration because he knows it would be more or less useless. Therefore, here we have commodification: given that sexuality has become a competition, to win gives access to status – the higher the number of trophies, the higher the position in the hierarchy, exactly as with any other kind of product. Consequently, sexuality becomes a good like any other. According to François-Xavier Ajavon, it is possible to speak of 'consumérisme amoureux' ('romantic consumerism'; 171), whereby the sexual trophy is aimed at and consumed only for hierarchical and then narcissistic purposes. However, this competition, this struggle is not only a natural effect of neoliberalist attitudes, but also the product of a precise control strategy perpetuated by neoliberalism itself, a strategy that consists of creating, pushing, and frustrating desires, producing as a consequence the kind of competition that *consumes* (this being the appropriate word) our existence and which leads Tisserand to suicide and the protagonist in *Extension* to voluntarily commit himself to a psychiatric hospital. The result or reward of this strategy is an individual's total control over and organisation of their desires, which in an economic and social system based on the imperative of the fulfilment of desire means control and organisation of an individual's own life. In this way, the neoliberalist system perpetuates itself. In *Les particules élémentaires* Houellebecq describes this process perfectly:

> La société érotique-publicitaire où nous vivons s'attache à organiser le désir, à développer le désir dans des proportions inouïes, tout en maintenant la satisfaction dans le domaine de la sphère privée. Pour que la société fonctionne, pour que la

> compétition continue, il faut que le désir croisse, s'étende et dévore la vie des hommes. (Houellebecq 200)
>
> (The sex-and-advertising society we live in, where desire is marshalled and blown up out of all proportion, while satisfaction is maintained in the private sphere. For society to function, for competition to continue, people have to want more and more, until desire fills their lives and finally devours them).

This extension of the *spaces* of commodification will be central to Houellebecq's actions in his subsequent literary and non-literary works. In his most famous and discussed novel *Les particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq pushes his reflections on the commodification of sexuality further, positing that, in the end, the only alternative to neoliberalist competition – and related frustration – would be a new kind of lab-grown human whose desire (the source of all struggle since the dawn of time and neoliberalism's most efficient instrument of control) has been artificially eradicated. This dream of a new, artificially perfected humanity would also be the basis of *La possibilité d'une île*, while in *Lanzarote* and *Platforme* Houellebecq focuses on sexual tourism and how countries like Thailand have shaped their offerings around this kind of tourism, which he defines as neither more nor less than a new form of colonialism. The analysis and representation of these two spaces of commodification – sex (and, by extension, love) and tourism – are revisited in Houellebecq's 2010 autofiction *La carte et le territoire*, where this representation of the late capitalist process of extension to every aspect of human life is extended to other spaces of commodification: art, national culture, death, and identity. If the importance of the market in the literary field is well known and discussed, identity in particular seems to be the new land of conquest, chosen by late capitalism to implement its system of power. An example in this sense, as will become apparent, is represented by Houellebecq himself, whose public persona has been manipulated and established by the mass media in order

to make it more saleable – which has evidently worked rather well, considering the impact of the *affaire Houellebecq*. The way in which Houellebecq's public image has been mediated, promoted, manipulated, and placed on the literary market seems an efficient example of how easily a personal identity – even one belonging to a public character – can be reified as any other industrial product, to the point that it would be legitimate to use the definition of *commodification of the self*, with all the issues in terms of deprivation of self-responsibility that this definition raises and embodies. It would also appear that this is a symptom of a larger contemporary issue, and one that Houellebecq grasped through his literary works. At this stage, how does Houellebecq articulate these concerns in a political way? Cruickshank describes a double bind whereby Houellebecq immobilised himself through his failure to escape the risk of commodification that he sought to describe and, by consequence, to challenge (158). In *La carte et le territoire* it seems that Houellebecq sought to conquer this contradiction, in addition to concluding his reflection on the late capitalist strategy of commodification. Could this, ultimately, have been Houellebecq's strategy for avoiding the double bind or cul-de-sac defined by Cruickshank? And to what extent is it related to the choice to use autofiction?

LA CARTE EST PLUS INTÉRESSANTE QUE LE TERRITOIRE: THE *LIAISONS DANGEREUSES* BETWEEN CULTURE AND THE MARKET

When *La carte et le territoire* was published in 2010, it brought its author, along with the usual trail of polemics, the gratification of obtaining the most famous and talked-about French literary prize: the Prix Goncourt, awarded by the Académie Goncourt. Houellebecq's achievement in securing this prize is particularly significant because it can be considered validation of the most discussed French author by the most important French literary institution. As very well pointed out by Agathe Novak-Lechevalier in her extremely interesting introduction to the 2016 edition of *La carte et le territoire*, this choice has been widely debated

(Novak-Lechevalier 4). Louise Moor, for instance, recalls how Houellebecq was accused of having written a novel 'taillé sur mesure pour un prix Goncourt' ('Tailored for a Goncourt prize'; 13); however, Houellebecq himself, as Moor again points out, responded to critics by explaining that 'le but du Goncourt n'est pas de mettre en valeur des thèmes, mais bien une écriture et un talent littéraire' ('the aim of the Goncourt is not to showcase certain themes, but a style and a literary talent'; 13). Despite much controversy surrounding the awarding of the Goncourt, it is undeniable that, even for the most biased critic, *La carte et le territoire* is a dense and complex novel, which covers a rich variety of themes such as the relationship between art and the market – and the relative risk of reification, love, euthanasia, depression, urbanism, hyperreality, late capitalism, and all the colourful ingredients that have made Houellebecq so widely discussed and read. Here he not only demonstrates an impressive maturity of style, but also, by switching from an existentialist novelistic style to the *noir* genre, he holds all the fragments together with a typically Houellebecqian drop of coldness and detached sense of humour. Even this genre can be considered strategic, given that, as we are reminded by Cruickshank, Houellebecq usually tends towards a sort of 'appropriation of a variety of generic conventions and the juxtaposition of contradictory discourses' (152).

La carte et le territoire narrates the deeds of Jed Martin, a young artist obsessed with his work and unable to establish deep human contact, either with his own father or his girlfriend, Olga. Following Jed's artistic journey, which passes from photography to video art over an arc of fifty years, Houellebecq seizes the chance to reflect on his habitual themes, extending his previous reflections on the effects of late capitalist strategy to the domain of art, posing the following question: what happens when *le domaine de la lutte* extends to the realm of art? Is it possible to conceive a *pure* art, free from the bonds of the market?

The question of the *liaisons dangereuse* between art and the market is immediately introduced in the very first pages of *La carte et le territoire*, where the reader meets Jed in the act of painting a canvas representing Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, two of the most famous and highly paid artists in the world; the name of the work – which will be revealed only after almost

thirty pages – could not be more explicit: *Damien Hirst et Jeff Koons se partagent le marché de l'art* (*Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons share the art market*; 29). In the opening lines, which fundamentally portray a disorienting ekphrasis, Houellebecq powerfully represents the idea of the contemporary artist moving ambiguously between the urgency of artistic fulfilment and other less poetic urgencies, such as those of the market:

> Alors que Koons semblait porter en lui quelque chose de double, comme une contradiction insurmontable entre la rouerie ordinaire du technico-commercial et l'exaltation de l'ascète […] Il avait des photographies de Koons seul, en compagnie de Roman Abramovich, Madonna, Barack Obama, Bono, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates… Aucune ne parvenait à exprimer quoi que ce soit de la personnalité de Koons, à dépasser cette apparence de vendeur de décapotables. (Houellebecq 10)
>
> (Koons, on the other hand, seemed to have a duality, an insurmountable contradiction between the basic cunning of the technical sales rep and the exaltation of the ascetic […] He had photographs of Koons on his own, in the company of Roman Abramovich, Madonna, Barack Obama, Bono, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates… Not one of them managed to express anything of the personality of Koons, to go beyond the appearance of a Chevrolet convertible salesman).

Houellebecq's choice to represent Jeff Koons is interesting in many ways. The American perfectly represents the kind of artist who is totally and consciously involved in the art market, a condition that makes it extremely difficult to define the effective aesthetic value of his art and to ascertain which aspects of his works come from genuine aesthetic research and which have been deliberately produced to meet the market's expectations. As an aside, and an aspect that will be demonstrated later in this chapter, this case could easily be juxtaposed with Houellebecq's. Jed considers this relation, as seen in the extract above, a contradiction, or at

least something to be regarded with suspicion, but at the same time it intrigues him for being both unfathomable and apparently inextricable: the art world is bonded with the market and it seems that one cannot exist without the other, being mutually influential. Yet there is tension with an ideal of pure art – which is free and responds only to the artist's expression and exigencies, and is unrelated to commercial rules – that pervades all of Jed's artistic research and to which he devotes his entire life: 'Jed consacra sa vie (du moins sa vie professionnelle, qui devrait assez vite se confondre avec *l'ensemble de sa vie*) à *l'art*' ('Jed devoted his life [or at least his professional life, which quite quickly became the whole of his life] to art'; 39). There are many examples in *La carte et le territoire* that represent Jed's vocation, which is present from a young age and is immediately perceived by the few people around him. One of these people is Geneviève, a young, aspiring artist who, in order to fund her tuition at the school of art she attends along with Jed, prostitutes herself – or, as the narrator specifies, she '*faisait commerce de ses charmes*, comme on disait jadis' ('Geneviève cashed in on her charms, as it was once described'; 56). Geneviève is described as 'douce et paisible' ('sweet and calm') as well as '*chaude*' ('hot'; 56), and she is very aware of her lover's talent, which is supported by commitment, rigour, and endless ambition and which she opposes with her *naïveté*, almost reclaiming it:

> 'Toi, tu as la vocation d'artiste, tu en veux vraiment… […] Tu es tout petit, tout mignon, tout gracile, mais tu as la volonté de faire quelque chose, tu as une ambition énorme, je l'ai vu tout de suite dans ton regard. Moi […] je fais ça juste pour m'amuser'. (Houellebecq 58)
>
> ('You have the vocation of an artist, you truly want it …' […] 'You're small, cute, and slender, but you have the will to do something, you have enormous ambition. I saw it straightaway in your eyes. Me, I do that […] just for fun.')

When, during an interview, Jed is asked what art means to him, he answers:

> être artiste, à ses yeux, c'était avant tout être quelqu'un de *soumis*. Soumis à des messages mystérieux, imprévisibles […] messages qui n'en commandaient pas moins de manière impérieuse, catégorique, sans laisser la moindre possibilité de s'y soustraire – sauf à perdre toute notion d'intégrité et tout respect de soi même. (Houellebecq 106)

> (to be an artist, in his view, was above all to be someone submissive. Someone who submitted himself to mysterious, unpredictable messages […] messages which nonetheless commanded you in an imperious and categorical manner, without leaving the slightest possibility of escape—except by losing any notion of integrity and self-respect).

Jed's attitude towards art contributes to the perception of him as the type of artist who is entirely insensitive to commercial matters, appearing rather like the classic romantic ideal of the pure artist, indifferent to the seductions of the market. Nevertheless, the market does exist, and Jed has to come to terms with it; yet, he always seems very aware of how the rules of the market have the potential to compromise the authenticity of his art, and throughout the novel it is apparent how he develops strategies to avoid this risk. When he obtains his first paid commission, producing photographs for culinary books, he seems very decided about limiting himself to pure photography, avoiding any kind of digital photo retouching, which, in his view, is related to the risk of adhering to commercial logic:

> il estimait en outre souhaitable de maintenir une certaine pratique de photographe, limité à la photographie pure. Il se contentait de livrer des plan-films, parfaitement définis et exposés, que l'agence scannait et modifiait à sa guise; il préférait ne pas se lancer dans la retouche d'images, vraisemblablement soumise à différents

> impératifs commerciaux ou publicitaires, et se contenter de livrer des clichés techniquement parfaits, mais neutres. (Houellebecq 45)
>
> (he felt it desirable to maintain a certain style of pure photography. He contented himself with delivering large-format negatives, precisely defined and exposed, that the agencies scanned and modified as they saw fit; he preferred not to get involved with the retouching of images, presumably subject to different commercial or advertising imperatives, and simply delivered pictures that were technically perfect but entirely neutral).

He also seems to immediately perceive when his artistic journey ceases being purely aesthetic and conceptual research and risks being absorbed by the market, becoming a commercial object. When he starts to sell the photographs produced for his first artistic project – a collection of working tools, gathered with the intent of 'donner une description objective du monde' ('giving an objective description of the world'; 51), he instantly decides to consider that artistic experience concluded, because he 'comprit qu'il en avait fini avec la photographie d'objets – au moins sur le plan artistique. Comme si le fait qu'il en soit venu à photographier ces objets dans un but purement professionnel, commercial, invalidait toute possibilité de les utiliser dans un projet créateur' ('understood that he had finished with the photography of objects—at least on the artistic level. He had come to photograph these objects in a purely professional and commercial aim invalidated any possibility of using them in a creative project'; 52).

Furthermore, Jed demonstrates a total disinterest in money. For instance, he pays no attention to the impressive prices achieved by his works, often displaying a sort of incredulity, if not complete apathy. Even when Franz, his art dealer, announces that one of his paintings has sold for the outstanding amount of fourteen million euros, Jed shows no emotion, limiting

himself to the observation that he has become 'un homme riche' ('a rich man'; 237). He does not even show any interest in success. When Marylin – the publicist hired to promote Jed's first important exhibition – euphorically announces to him that his work has received enthusiastic reviews, he remains impassive, asking only 'et maintenant, qu'est-ce qui va se passer?' ('and now, what is going to happen?'; 84).

At this stage, it would be easy to define Jed as an *idiot savant*, or at least someone who is absorbed – or obsessed – by his art to the point of being totally detached from the real world. In this way it seems that he effectively manages to maintain authenticity in his art, exploiting the market without being exploited by it, and he apparently succeeds in this task without realising it. Despite his seeming apathy, Jed is very conscious that his artistic journey articulates a precise critique, which he fiercely asserts when he says: 'ce que je fais, en tout cas, se situe entièrement dans le social' ('what I do, in any case, is situated entirely in the social'; 150). But what exactly does this critique consist of? It could be argued that it refers to the impossibility of pure art in the context of late capitalist attitudes. My point is that the problem nowadays is that art is so bonded to the market, it risks becoming too heavily influenced by it, and the role of the artist in this context becomes very delicate, as they are forced to struggle between personal artistic research and the expectations raised by the market. There are certain instances whereby the promotional machine created and imposed by the market around an artist and his or her work becomes so intense that it threatens to overshadow both, pushing – and sometimes inventing – certain characteristics of the artist in order to present a more saleable version of that individual. It could be claimed that the market designs a sort of creative representation of the artist, revised and modified to be more appealing. Sometimes, the artist ends up adhering to the format created by the market to promote and categorise him- or herself. This can happen because of the compliance of the artist or as a natural consequence of the economic system that rules the art market. In this sense, Jed's choice to represent Jeff Koons in a painting becomes clearer, and for two reasons in particular. First of all, it is because Koons is the quintessential exemplification of the artist inextricably bonded to the market. To better explain this point,

think of how Jed's father, an architect and frustrated workaholic who renounced in his youth the ideals of innovative, affordable, and ecologically sustainable buildings in favour of more remunerative resorts and malls, refers to Jeff Koons:

> L'idée fondamentale des préraphaélites, c'est que l'art avait commencé à dégénérer juste après le Moyen âge, que dès le début de la Renaissance il s'était coupé de toute spiritualité, de toute authenticité, pour devenir une activité purement industrielle et commerciale, et que les soi-disant *grands maitres* de la Renaissance – que ce soit Botticelli, Rembrandt, ou Léonard de Vinci – se comportaient en réalité purement et simplement comme les chefs d'entreprise commerciale; exactement comme Jeff Koons ou Damien Hirst aujourd'hui, les soi-disant *grands maitres* de la Renaissance dirigent d'une main de fer des ateliers de cinquante, voire cent assistants, qui produisaient à la chaine des tableaux, des sculptures, des fresques. (Houellebecq 227)

> (The fundamental idea of the Pre-Raphaelites was that art had begun to degenerate just after the Middle Ages, that from the start of the Renaissance it had cut itself off from any spirituality, any authenticity, to become a purely industrial and commercial activity, and that the so-called great masters of the Renaissance—be they Botticelli, Rembrandt, or Leonardo da Vinci—behaved in fact exclusively as the heads of commercial enterprises).

In Jed's father's view, therefore, art has ceased to be simply a genuine expression of human aspiration to beauty and has instead become a commercial activity among many others – losing in this way the pureness that is so important to Jed and becoming commodified. In addition, Koons represents the kind of artist whose brand – a mixture of public perception and mediatic strategy – has become more important than his specific artistic achievements, with his critical perception inextricable from his public figure and the mediatic strategy that created it.

To clarify, it is possible to argue that nowadays the success of an artist is ratified in large part by his or her media exposure. In essence, we might say that often it is not the work of art that is sold but the public image or brand of the artist. Consequently, the artist becomes both producer and product, and so exists this double movement of commodification of both the work of art – whose characteristics are established and manipulated by the market – and the artist's identity, which becomes a brand, a product, to be established and manipulated and thus easy to control. In this way, by consequence, even any potentially subversive voice can be reified, controlled, and therefore *absorbed*.

Reflections of this nature are obviously not limited to the world of art but can be expanded to all fields of culture in general – where there is a market, there is a risk of commodification, even in the publishing world. This field in particular is represented in the novel by the character of Frédéric Beigbeder, a famous French writer, controversial public figure, and personal friend of Houellebecq himself. Beigbeder is, like Koons, the type of artist whose media persona often overshadows his quietly remarkable literary talent. He is also paradigmatic and very aware of his bonds with the market, indulgently – even cynically – flirting with it. Houellebecq portrays Beigbeder by way of a caricature, exaggerating those characteristics for which his public figure is so famous, and, it could be said, saleable, being a drug addict yet somehow charming and obsessed by women:

> Très amaigri, l'auteur d'*Au secours pardon* arborait à l'époque une barbe clairsemée, dans l'évidente intention de ressembler à un héros du roman russe. […] l'éclat de son regard devait sans doute davantage à la cocaïne qu'à la ferveur religieuse mais y avait-il une différence? Se demanda Jed. "C'est vous qui l'avez eue?" questionna de nouveau Beigbeder avec une intensité croissante. Ne sachant que dire, Jed garda le silence. "Vous savez que vous êtes avec une des cinq plus belles femmes de Paris?" Son ton était redevenu sérieux, professionnel, il connaissait visiblement les quatre autres. A cela non plus, Jed ne trouva rien à répondre. Que répondre, en général, aux interrogations humaines? (Houellebecq 75)

> (Having lost a lot of weight, the author of *SOS Forgiveness* had at that time a thin beard, with the obvious aim of looking like the hero of a Russian novel […] looking him straight in the eyes with worrying intensity—and then he really did look like the hero of a Russian novel, though the gleam in his eyes no doubt owed more to cocaine than to religious fervour. But was there really any difference? Jed wondered. 'It's you who's having her?' Beigbeder asked again with increasing intensity. Not knowing what to say, Jed remained silent. 'You know that you're with one of the five most beautiful women in Paris?' His tone had returned to being serious, professional; he visibly knew the other four. Jed had no reply to that, either. What can you reply, in general, to human questions?)

Beigbeder's caricature raises the suspicion that Houellebecq is trying, in his novel, to use the same process by which the market makes the artist more saleable: exaggerating – and sometimes even inventing – characteristics that are usually considered more appealing, like, for instance, the trite cliché of the *maudit* artist. Reading how Beigbeder and other artists are depicted, the suspicion emerges that each artist portrayed by Houellebecq in *La carte et le territoire* is perfectly conscious of how his or her public image is shaped and sold, but instead of trying to retake control – by subverting it or explicitly revealing its artificiality – it seems that he or she tries to behave according to their public image even in his or her real life, therefore losing any ability to distinguish the private persona from the public. Ultimately, the artists become the caricatures of their mediatic, manipulated identities: caricatures of their own caricatures. Consider, for instance, the character of Beigbeder: he appears very aware of his public image and also of being regarded as a frivolous and commercial writer with no real talent, but instead of trying to contradict these accusations, he tends to, cynically, reinforce and exaggerate them. When Jed claims that, in a certain sense, he can be considered an artist, the character Beigbeder laughs loudly and exclaims:

“Mais oui, bien sûr, il faut être *artiste*! La littérature, comme plan, c’est complètement râpé! Pour coucher avec les plus belles femmes, aujourd’hui, il faut être *artiste*! Moi, aussi, je veux devenir *ar-tis-te*!”

Et de manière surprenante, écartant largement les bras, il entonna, très fort et presque juste, ce couplet de *Blues du businessman*:

J’aurais voulu être un artiiiiste
Pour avoir le monde à refaire
Pour pouvoir être un anarchiiiiste
Et vivre comme un millionnaire!

Son verre de vodka tremblait entre ses mains. La moitié de la salle était tournée vers eux, maintenant. Il baissa les bras, ajouta d’une voix égarée : “Paroles de Luc Plamondon, musique de Michel Berger” et éclata en sanglots (Houellebecq 76-77).

(‘But yes, of course, you have to be an artist! Literature, as a plan, is completely old hat! To sleep with the most beautiful women today, you have to be an artist! I too want to become an ar-tist!’

And in a surprising manner, stretching his arms out wide, he intoned, very loudly and almost without a false note, ‘The Businessman’s Blues’:
I would have liked to be an artiiiist
To reinvent the world
To be an anarchiiiist
And live like a millionaire!

His glass of vodka was trembling in his hands. Half the room was now looking at them. He dropped his arms, and added, in a bewildered voice, ‘Words by Luc Plamondon, music by Michel Berger,’ and burst out sobbing).

It is also tempting to define this process operated by the market – and so well described by Houellebecq – as a tendency to substitute, at least figuratively, its subjects with their manipulated public representation. This notion of substitution is consistent with the duration of Jed's artistic journey: first, he photographs the old manual tools, now replaced by mechanical tools, then he paints a series of *métiers simples*, where he represents old crafts that are fast becoming obsolete (being replaced by mechanical instruments), with the intent of 'fixer leur image sur la toile pendant qu'il en était encore temps' ('fixing their images on canvas while there was still time'; 120). The concept is especially clear in the series of photographs of the famous Michelin maps that will make up the protagonist's first important exhibition and to which he will assign the explicit title of 'La Carte est plus intéressante que le Territoire' (82) ('the map is more interesting than the territory'). In this sense, what is Jed implying by claiming that the map is more interesting than the territory? The answer is related to how France has been represented in tourist guides – like the Michelin Guide – and how it is perceived by foreigners. In the novel, Houellebecq posits that France has organised its touristic appeal around a certain idea of France – Roland Barthes would describe it as *francité* – which is in vogue among foreigners; therefore, in order to attract tourists, France is slowly modelling its physiognomy and touristic offerings on tourists' perception of the country, an idea that is actually fairly stereotypical. It is a *hyperreal* France – as defined by Baudrillard (1) – condensing all the stereotypes of French culture as perceived by tourists, slowly substituting it for the *real* France, making it more respectful of tourists' expectations. This is explicated thoroughly in the novel through the character of Olga, Jed's former girlfriend, who is responsible for the Michelin corporation in the Russian market. Olga perfectly represents those tourists imbued with a certain idea of France, and Houellebecq portrays her thus:

> Olga faisait partie de ces Russes attachants qui ont appris au cours de leurs années de formation à admirer une certain image de la France – galanterie, gastronomie,

littérature et ainsi de suite – et se désolent ensuite régulièrement de ce que le pays réel corresponde si mal à leurs attentes. (Houellebecq 71)

(Olga was one of those endearing Russians who have learned in the course of their formative years to admire a certain image of France—gallantry, gastronomy, literature, and so on—and who are then regularly upset that the real country corresponds so badly to their expectations).

Tourists are attracted to France because of an idealistic notion of the country, which does not really exist, and so they are often disappointed. As such, France now models itself so as to avoid this disappointment. This point is very well explained by Bülent Diken who, in a 2016 article, writes that 'Houellebecq's is a late modern world in which capital tends to replace, like a map, the actual experience of life in the territory' and 'a world in which everything is modelled on the logic of business' (2). Here, the strategic scheme of late capitalist commodification is again apparent: the desire for an idyllic France is created and promoted by the mass media and assimilated by tourists, who continue to be frustrated and disoriented by the disappointment produced when experiencing the reality, where the object of desire, France in this case, tends to model itself in such a way as to satisfy the subject of desire, making itself more appealing. Similarly, this is what happens to France, according to the novel. Take, for example, this description of the French village of Souppes: 'le village demeurait figé dans sa perfection rurale à destination touristique, il demeurait ainsi dans les siècles des siècles, avec l'adjonction discrète de quelques éléments de confort de vie tels que les bornes Internet et les parkings' ('the village remained stuck in its rural perfection for tourist consumption. It would remain this way for centuries to come, with the discreet addition of a few elements of creature comforts like Internet connections and car parks'; 360). Souppes has been shaped and adapted to adhere to tourist clichés and is frozen in its idyllic rural appearance, enhanced by few

artificial additions in order to make the tourists feel more comfortable. As such, there is a recognisable trend towards promoting and manipulating France's representation, flattening its cultural particularities into more saleable clichés while, conversely, France shapes itself in order to conform to tourists' expectations, which are neither more nor less than those same clichés promoted and manipulated by the mass media. The map – that is, the manner in which the object is represented by the mass media – has become more interesting than the territory – that is, the object itself.

Nevertheless, neoliberalism has no intention of stopping and, according to Houellebecq, has extended from the works of art themselves to their producers, the artists, and, given that behind the artist there is almost always an individual, an identity, commodifying personal identities thus seems to be the next step targeted by neoliberalism. The way in which Beigbeder is portrayed is paradigmatic and, as will be seen later, similar to the way Houellebecq decides to portray another famous and controversial *maudit* French writer: Michel Houellebecq.

'UNE VIEILLE TORTUE MALADE': THE AUTOFICTIVE LIFE AND DEATH OF MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

The fictive Michel Houellebecq in *La carte et le territoire*, instead of being a partially fictionalised version of himself, appears to be more of a caricature, or, better still, a caricature of his public image and how this persona has been described – constructed, even – and disseminated by the mass media. It seems that, instead of focusing on the autobiographical side of autofiction, sprinkling it with a dose of fiction, as many autofiction authors usually do, Houellebecq chose to exaggerate the fictive component of autofiction. In summary, as explained by Sabine van Wesemael, 'Houellebecq, le personnage est une caricature de l'auteur, un produit d'exagération humoristique' ('the character Houellebecq is a caricature of the author, a product of humoresque exaggeration'; 223). In light of this, an examination of the second part

of the novel removes any doubt about the astonishingly detached fictiveness of Houellebecq's avatar, wherein the character of Michel Houellebecq is brutally murdered in his house by a hitman hired by an insane plastic surgeon to steal a portrait of Houellebecq, painted by Jed Martin and owned by Houellebecq himself, on display in his home. Furthermore, there are many other unequivocal examples throughout the novel that collectively define the construction of the Michel Houellebecq character, as stated by Russell Williams, as a caricature (7), or, as Anne Chamayou put it, as a 'parodie critique' ('critical parody'; 3). For instance, during a meeting with Jed Martin, Michel Houellebecq is described in the following manner:

> Il tambourina pendant au moins deux minutes à sa porte, sous une pluie battante, avant que Houellebecq ne vienne lui ouvrir. L'auteur des *Particules Élémentaires* était vêtu d'un pyjama rayé gris qui le faisait vaguement ressembler à un bagnard de feuilleton télévisé; ses cheveux étaient ébouriffés et sales son visage rouge, presque couperosé, et il puait un peu. L'incapacité à faire sa toilette est un des signes les plus sûrs de l'établissement d'un état dépressif, se souvint Jed. (Houellebecq 164)
>
> (He hammered on the door for at least two minutes, under a heavy downpour, before Houellebecq came to open it. The author of *Atomised* was wearing gray-striped pajamas that made him vaguely resemble a prisoner in a television series; his hair was ruffled and dirty, his face red, almost with broken veins, and he stank a little. The inability to wash, Jed remembered, is one of the surest signs of depression).

Immediately the classic public perception of Houellebecq comes to mind: he is dirty, probably drunk, and slightly depressed, a description that effectively retraces the very recent public appearances of the writer; but why does this chapter suggest that it is clearly a caricature of Houellebecq's public persona? Historically, a caricature connotes certain characteristics. For instance, it is notably achieved through exaggeration; therefore, Houellebecq exaggerates the

main characteristics of his own public persona, which include a scruffy appearance, alcoholic habits, misanthropy, and misogyny. The way in which Houellebecq's supposed alcoholism is depicted is related to this strategy: consider how the fictive Michel Houellebecq explicitly displays a tendency for *ivresse*:

> "Je vais ouvrir une autre bouteille," intervint l'écrivain. Il se leva, traversa la cuisine en zigzaguant entre les bouts de verre […] "Aimer, rire et chanter" entonna-t-il de nouveau avant d'avaler d'un trait un verre de vin chilien. "Foucra bouldou! Bistroye! Bistroye!" Ajouta-t-il avec conviction. Depuis quelque temps déjà, l'illustre écrivain avait contracté cette manie d'employer des mots bizarres, parfois désuets ou franchement impropres, quand ce n'étaient pas de néologismes enfantins à la manière du capitaine Haddock. Ses rares amis restants, comme ses éditeurs, lui passaient cette faiblesse, comme on passe à peu près tout à un vieux décadent fatigué. (Houellebecq 172-173)

> ('I'm going to open another bottle,' said the writer. He stood up and crossed the kitchen, zigzagging past the shards of glass […] he announced before gulping down a glass of Chilean wine. 'Foucra bouldou! Bistroye! Bistroye!' he added with conviction. For some time now, the famous writer had contracted this mania for using bizarre, outmoded, or frankly inappropriate words, as if they weren't infantile neologisms worthy of Captain Haddock. His few remaining friends, like his publishers, allowed him this weakness, as you do almost anything from a tired old decadent).

Moreover, here is an example of the kinds of statements that contribute to his notorious reputation as a misanthrope: '"C'est vrai, je n'éprouve qu'un faible sentiment de solidarité à l'égard de l'espèce humaine…" dit Houellebecq comme s'il avait deviné ses pensées. "Je dirais

que mon sentiment d'appartenance diminue un peu tous les jours"' ('"It's true, I feel only a faint sense of solidarity with the human species…" Houellebecq said as if he'd read Jed's thoughts. "I would say that my feeling of belonging diminishes a little more each day"'; 175). Additionally, Houellebecq is very well known and discussed for the presumed misogynistic content of his novels and for his passion for Thai prostitutes. In the beginning of her interview of Houellebecq on behalf of the magazine *The Paris Review*, Susannah Hunnewell confirms how this perception of Houellebecq's public persona is deep-rooted:

> Given Houellebecq's reputation for getting drunk and making passes at his female interviewers, I was slightly apprehensive as I rang the doorbell of his modest short-term rental in Paris. But during the two days we spent together, he was scrupulously polite and rather shy. (Hunnewell 1)

This perception becomes, therefore, an aspect of his fictive character in *La carte et le territoire*, along with his tendency towards depression:

> Mais au printemps c'est insupportable, les couchers du soleil sont interminables et magnifiques, c'est comme une espèce de putain d'opéra, il y a sans arrêt de nouvelles couleurs, de nouvelles lueurs, j'ai essayé une fois de rester ici tout le printemps et l'été et j'ai cru mourir, chaque soir j'étais au bord du suicide, avec cette nuit qui ne tombait jamais. Depuis, début avril, je vais en Thaïlande […] c'est la morte-saison touristique, les bordels tournent au ralenti mais ils sont quand même ouverts et ça me va, ça me convient, les prestations restent excellentes ou très bonnes. (Houellebecq 145).
>
> (But in spring it's unbearable. The sunsets are endless and magnificent, it's like some kind of fucking opera, there are constantly new colors, new flashes of light. I

> once tried to stay here the whole spring and summer and thought I would die. Every evening, I was on the brink of suicide, with this night that never fell. Since then, at the beginning of April, I go to Thailand […] it's the dead season for tourists. The brothels are empty, but they're still open and that suits me fine; the service remains excellent or very good).

At this juncture, the following questions must be posed: why did Houellebecq decide to create a literary caricature of his public persona in a novel focusing on, among other things, the late capitalist attitude towards commodifying everything? Why, as claimed by Anna Chamayou, did Houellebecq decide to 'construire sa propre fiction' ('construct his own fiction'; 3)? That choice came about for two reasons: firstly, as a result of Houellebecq's restiveness regarding the construction of his public image as produced by the mass media, partially with his complicity (as noted by Louise Moor, Olivier Bardolle, and Jean-François Patricola); and secondly, due to a reflection on the late capitalist commodification of values and subsequent 'disaster' (146), which Houellebecq, as observed by Morrey (153), has consistently pursued throughout his work. Morrey, with reference to Patricola, Bardolle, and Waldberg, states that Houellebecq is extremely conscious of his public image (5) and, most significantly, of his being a brand; the advertising *battage* and polemics surrounding the publication of his novels constitute proof of this condition, and he shows it with adamantine clarity in *La carte et le territoire*. In a dialogue between the fictive Michel Houellebecq and Jed Martin, after which the writer – who defines himself, with remarkable irony, as a 'vieille tortue malade' (an 'old, sick turtle'; 148) – the character expresses, once again, his misogynistic and racist tendencies, to which Jed responds with 'J'ai l'impression que vous jouez un peu votre propre rôle' ('Now I have the slight impression you're playing your own role') and the fictive Houellebecq explicitly replies that 'oui, c'est vrai' ('yes, that's true'; 146).

Therefore, given this self-consciousness about his own caricatural image, for Houellebecq to devise and construct his own character as a caricature, in the same manner in which he had accused the mass media of having done so previously, could be seen as a means of criticising how his public image has been constructed and manipulated and of reclaiming a certain level of control over it. It is important to keep in mind, however, that he has been an active part of this marketing strategy – creating the scandal, exploiting it, and legitimating it through interviews, which has certainly paid off in terms of book sales and notoriety. The problem is that at a certain point the character – one might say the hyperreal – Michel Houellebecq supplanted the author Michel Houellebecq: a media construction, programmatically designed to be more appealing and saleable, has replaced the subject itself (at least in the public's perception), just as the hyperreal France (constructed and manipulated by the public's perception) has supplanted the real country. Houellebecq's manipulated media perception also makes any calm judgements of Houellebecq's literary value difficult, as pointed out by Cruickshank in *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction*, where she claims that 'Houellebecq's often contradictory and troubling contributions to the *affaire* not only indicate the author's uncanny ability to manipulate the media, but also add to the difficulties of textual analysis' (118). Houellebecq's complicity in the construction of his public figure can be considered, at least to some extent, an autofiction of another kind, intended not as a textual autofiction (as *La carte et le territoire* certainly is) but as a *performative* act, whereby Houellebecq physically plays – and thus reproduces – his public character. In this sense, it could be claimed that Houellebecq experienced two different and distinguished autofictive eras: the first related to his complicity in the construction and dissemination of his own public persona, which might be defined as his physical or performative autofiction, and then there is his literary autofiction, as he conceived and implemented it in his 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire*. Houellebecq's literary autofiction has to be intended as both a consequence of and reaction to his real-life performance as a caricature of himself, made necessary by the author's partial loss of control over the latter. The risk was that he might cease to be an author and become, as previously

outlined, a brand – that is, a product – or, worse, an author who consciously adheres to that brand. The descriptions of the fictive Beigbeder and the references to Jeff Koons must be understood in this context. This reflection leads to a discussion of the second reason Houellebecq decided to use the literary genre of autofiction and relates to the question of the neoliberalist tendency to commodify everything.

This chapter has so far explored how Houellebecq, throughout his oeuvre, has pursued a critique of the extension of neoliberalist attitudes to sex and love – in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les particules élémentaires* – as well as to art, national culture, and even urbanism – in *La carte et le territoire*. The point is that the extension of this attitude (based on the commodification, creation, and frustration of desire and competition) to art can also be easily extended to the producers of art: the artists. Given, then, that artists are individuals, their identities – and, by definition, everyone's identities – can be commodified and thus reproduced, manipulated, and even replaced after their obsolescence, just as with any other kind of product. This is one of Houellebecq's main preoccupations and is well explicated in a dialogue between the fictive Michel Houellebecq and Jed Martin:

> C'est brutal, vous savez, c'est terriblement brutal. Alors que les espèces animales les plus insignifiantes mettent des milliers, parfois des millions d'années à disparaitre, les produits manufacturés sont rayés de la surface du globe en quelques jours, il ne leur est jamais accordé de seconde chance, ils ne peuvent que subir, impuissants, le diktat irresponsable et fasciste des responsables des lignes de produit qui savent naturellement mieux que tout autre ce que veut le consommateur, qui prétendent capter une *attente de nouveauté* chez le consommateur, qui ne font en réalité que transformer sa vie en une quête épuisante et désespérée, une errance sans fin entre des linéaires éternellement modifiés […] *Nous aussi, nous sommes des produits, des produits culturels* [italics are mine]. Nous aussi nous serons frappés d'obsolescence. Le fonctionnement du dispositif est identique – à ceci près qu'il n'y

> a pas, en général, d'amélioration technique ou fonctionnelle évidente; seule demeure l'exigence de nouveauté à l'état pur. (Houellebecq 171-172)
>
> (It's brutal, you know, it's terribly brutal. While the most insignificant animal species take thousands, sometimes millions of years to disappear, manufactured products are wiped off the surface of the globe in a few days; they're never given a second chance, they can only suffer, powerless, the irresponsible and fascistic diktat of product-line managers who of course know better than anyone else what the customer wants, who claim to capture an expectation of novelty in the consumer, and who in reality just turn his life into one exhausting and desperate quest, an endless wandering between eternally modified product lines […] We too are products," he went on, "cultural products. We too will become obsolete. The functioning of the system is identical—with the difference that, in general, there is no obvious technical or functional improvement; all that remains is the demand for novelty in its pure state).

Here Houellebecq is implying that neoliberalist attitudes have now also seeped into the realm of art and, thus, the producers of art and their identities. They are both – art and artists – mere products that can be manipulated, reproduced, sold, and even replaced after their obsolescence. Therefore, in order to illustrate this point, Houellebecq decided, through the literary genre of autofiction, to use his own case as an example. In fact, he depicted himself as his own caricature, which is essentially how his public character has been constructed and manipulated by himself and the mass media – and made more appealing via some artificial additions, such as the exaggerations about his being a *maudit* writer, which were deliberately encouraged and spread. In this way, he demonstrated that even an identity can be reproduced and sold. As such, Houellebecq's public persona is the product. This can be seen in the vicissitudes experienced in relation to the portrait of Michel Houellebecq produced by Jed

Martin in *La carte et le territoire*. This portrait is painted by Jed in return for the introduction Houellebecq writes to the catalogue for one of Jed's most important exhibitions. Houellebecq immediately agrees to write the introduction, even though, during a previous dialogue with the fictive Beigbeder, Jed seems worried about a possible refusal; Beigbeder reassures him, claiming that 'si vous lui proposez pas mal d'argent, je pense que vous avez vos chances' ('if you offer him a good amount of money, I think you'll have a chance'; 131). Even if this dialogue insists metaphorically on the inextricable bond between art (in this context, Houellebecq as an artist) and the market, in the portrait Houellebecq is represented as the typical romantic writer possessed by the demon of creation and interested only in the exigency of artistic expression:

> Saisi à l'instant où il vient de repérer une correction à effectuer sur une des feuilles posées sur le bureau devant lui, l'auteur parait en état de transe, possédé par une furie que certains n'ont pas hésité à qualifier de démoniaque. (Houellebecq 185)
>
> (Captured at the moment of noticing a mistake on one of the pages on the desk in front of him, the author appears to be in a trance, possessed by a fury that some have not hesitated to describe as demonic).

Then, in the third part of the novel, the portrait is stolen – again, because of its impressive economic value – and the fictive Houellebecq is found cruelly murdered:

> La tête de la victime était intacte, tranchée net, posée sur un des fauteuils devant la cheminée, une petite flaque de sang s'était formée sur le velours vert sombre […] Ni la tête de l'homme ni celle du chien n'étaient pourtant immobilisées dans une expression d'horreur, mais plutôt d'incrédulité et de colère. […] Les lambeaux de chair eux-mêmes, d'un rouge qui virait sur places au noirâtre, ne semblaient pas

> disposés au hasard mais suivant des motifs difficiles à décrypter, il avait l'impression d'être en présence d'un puzzle. (Houellebecq 288)
>
> (The head of the victim was intact, cut off cleanly and placed on one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace. A small pool of blood had formed on the dark green velvet […] neither the head of the man nor that of the dog was frozen in an expression of horror, but rather one of incredulity and anger […] The strips of flesh in themselves, of a red color which sometimes became blackish, did not seem arranged at random, but followed motifs that were difficult to decrypt; he felt it was like being in the presence of a puzzle).

In keeping with the rest of the novel – and with Houellebecq's work in general – it is tempting to think that this brief extract perfectly condenses the question of commodification of both art and artist and, by extension, identity. In the painting, as already outlined above, Houellebecq is represented as an artist moved only by the demon of creation; therefore, while producing a piece of pure art, he is unfettered by the market. This pureness is opposed to the way Houellebecq represents himself in the novel: a caricature that exaggerates his artificially constructed public image, intended as a depiction of the side of himself that is totally bonded to the market. Then, when the painting reaches an inestimable value – that is, when it has been absorbed by the market – it directly leads to the murder of the fictional Michel Houellebecq, who is killed during its theft; therefore, his identity, as represented by the painting, is commodified and sold, and it is this commodification that results in the death of the subject represented. Nevertheless, a further interpretation might be made by claiming that this episode offers a metaphor for Houellebecq's whole story: when his work and his public identity, as embodied in the portrait, have been manipulated by the market and thus commodified, it entails the loss of pureness – and thus the death – of both. Houellebecq overturns this movement, however, because in the end it is his caricature – and thus his commodified version – that is

killed due to a portrait that represents his authentic calling. Therefore, through an ambitious three-card trick, Houellebecq retakes control of his public persona, destroying its caricature while simultaneously claiming the pureness of his art.

In *La carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq essentially attempted to unveil the mechanism of neoliberalism which has become a system of power: everything, from an object of art to a village and even an identity can be manipulated, reproduced, and replaced by something that is artificially constructed, usually for marketing reasons. It was demonstrated here with the village of Souppes, modified in order to render it more appealing to tourists – an attitude that, according to Houellebecq, is prevalent across France and has also been seen in regard to his public persona. Moreover Houellebecq, through the caricature of his public image and the murder of his character, seems to propose an exaggeration of the fictional side of autofiction, as if he wishes to point out in no uncertain terms that the Carte – the fictive representation – has triumphed over the territory – the reality, which in this case is the autobiographical element of autofiction.

As such, it is clear that in order to demonstrate this point, Houellebecq was compelled to use autofiction because it is the only literary genre that constitutively offers the possibility of recreating a fictive self. In a 2017 article, Scarpellini noted that in his recent public appearances, Houellebecq had become increasingly scruffy and desolate, presenting almost a physical personification of decadence, as if he wanted to carry over to his own body 'i segni della miseria umana raccontata nei suoi libri' ('the signs of the human misery that he narrates in his books'; 2). Consequently, it is possible to say that through autofiction, Houellebecq is attempting to produce, via his characters, what he has been producing with his own body in his recent public appearances: to represent the terrible effects that neoliberalist attitudes have on people's lives.

To conclude, given that at the beginning of this chapter Michel Houellebecq was portrayed as a political writer and his use of autofiction as a political act, where is this political act? I do believe that to unveil a mechanism of power constitutes a political act; therefore, unveiling neoliberalism mechanisms (which continuously evolve to perpetuate control), as Houellebecq has done throughout the course of his work, can be considered a political act. Moreover, the particular critique elaborated in *La carte et le territoire* was only possible through autofiction, which gave Houellebecq an instrument for representing and using himself as a case in point, thus becoming in itself a political act as well. It is interesting to note that in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch claimed that the only places to find some semblance of solace amid the struggles of a late capitalist society were in art and love, which are exactly, according to Houellebecq, the spaces that neoliberalism is extending its tentacles towards, by using constructed, commodified versions of these spaces as instruments in order to perpetuate its supremacy. Michel Houellebecq plunged his scalpel into this mechanism, dwelling on wounds that most do not want to examine because they are too painful. Maybe this is the reason he is so discussed and despised, yet at the same time so necessary? In the end, as Houellebecq wrote in his 1997 collection of poems titled *Rester vivant*, 'la vérité est scandaleuse. Mais, sans elle, il n'y a rien qui vaille' ('truth is outrageous. But without it, there is nothing worthwhile'; 35).

Chapter 3: The Autofiction of Bret Easton Ellis

I would read about 'Bret Easton Ellis', and I'd go, Well, that isn't me.
But I realised 'Bret Easton Ellis' was going to take over,
and that I was more or less dead. But I get it; he's the better story.
Bret Easton Ellis

I came to understand I wasn't any good at recognizing what
would or wouldn't tick people off, because art had never offended me.
Bret Easton Ellis

INTRODUCTION

Bret Easton Ellis is a writer with a lot in common with Michel Houellebecq. Indeed, both have had to face and problematise a very strong public image, one that has threatened to overshadow their literary work; both have generated much controversy with their novels and public appearances; both have pursued in the course of their literary career a critique of neoliberalism's logic; and, most importantly, both decided at a certain point in their lives to produce, through autofiction, a parodic and caricatural version of their public image. Even the reasons behind their decision to use autofiction are very similar. I shall argue that, for both writers, its use was intended as a way of retaking control of that public image, and also of unveiling the mechanisms that led to both the commodification of their personal identity and the absorption of the political and subversive potential of their literary work. Accordingly, this chapter will address the media perception of Bret Easton Ellis and the consequent media construction of his public image – the characteristics of which, I argue, have been manipulated and exaggerated to result in a more saleable and appealing commodity for the market. These characteristics have finally, as in the case of Houellebecq, overshadowed and even defined his

literary work and its perception by both readers and critics, giving birth to what James Annesley has acutely defined as the *Brand* Easton Ellis (8). Drawing on works by Naomi Mandel, Sonia Baelo-Allué, and James Annesley, I will address the aspects of Ellis's work that can be defined as eminently *political*. I argue, that, as with Houellebecq's works, there is a political *fil rouge* in Ellis's works that can be identified in the form of a strong critique of neoliberal logic in general and consumerism and commodification in particular. Moreover, I will argue that Ellis's choice to use the literary genre of autofiction in his 2005 book *Lunar Park* is an integral part of this process: Ellis became conscious at a certain point in his life that he had lost control of his public image, which was a commodified media construction that overshadowed the undeniable value of his literary work, and that made its political and subversive potential harmless. Furthermore, in this chapter other issues will be raised that are also important to my thesis, concerning, in particular, the instruments through which neoliberalism, as well as any other system of power, produces a subjectivity, and how this kind of subjectivation is used to perpetuate its hegemony. Ultimately, the analysis of Ellis's use of autofiction in *Lunar Park* pursued in this chapter will allow me to further reflect upon other aspects ascribable to this literary genre. In particular, I will try to apply Mark Fisher's theories on ghosts and hauntology to *Lunar Park*. After all, what is autofiction if not a phantasmatic version of its author; what is autofiction if not a *ghost*?

A Political approach to Bret Easton Ellis

As already outlined, one of the aims of this chapter is to demonstrate why Bret Easton Ellis can be considered a political author and, more importantly, how *Lunar Park* can be considered the natural prosecution of Ellis's political critique, through the literary genre of autofiction. It will first be useful to place Ellis in his cultural context, and in consequence to understand to what extent and in what terms certain aspects of his work can be considered *political*.

A remarkable move in this direction has been pointed out by the American scholar James Annesley and the Spanish academic Sonia Baelo-Allué. Annesley, in two essays titled *Blank Fictions* (1995) and *Fictions of Globalization* (2006), has argued that at the core of Ellis's authorial intentions as a writer there is a strong critique of certain aspects of the economic and cultural context that characterise the United States at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Annesley identifies as targets of Ellis's critique certain issues typical of the neoliberal era, such as an obsession with consumerism and the commodification of relationships and of all aspects of our lives (14). This reading seems to be shared by Sonia Baelo-Allué, who, in her remarkable 2011 essay

Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing between High and Low Culture, articulates a strong and highly convincing analysis of the literary strategies through which Ellis has pursued his critique of neoliberal values throughout his literary career.

According to both Annesley and Baelo-Allué, Ellis's critique of the mechanisms ruling certain aspects of his contemporary society started in his very first novel *Less than Zero* (1985). Notably, this novel resulted from a creative writing class that Ellis attended during the years he spent at Bennington College, a small and upper-class humanist college in Vermont, and which, under the name of Camden College, is the main setting of Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). In *Less than Zero*, it is easy for a careful reader to find the seeds of certain themes that will characterise Ellis's later work, such as alienation, obsession with consumerism, the pervasiveness of mass media and pop culture, and a lack of trust in any traditional values. The novel narrates the story of Clay, a young and alienated student who passively witnesses the self-destruction of his friends and most of the people that surround him. Ellis mostly represents these characters as passive, disenchanted, selfish, and obsessed with drugs and consumerism. Clay is represented as being unable to hook his personal identity to any authoritative figure – for instance, his parents are entirely absent – and he is unable to commit himself to any kind of relationship. Therefore, Ellis seems to argue that the only way he can construct his personality and relative system of values is through consumer objects and, consequently, through the models of behaviour that these goods embody. In this sense, Baelo-Allué states that in *Less than Zero* 'commodities provide them with the possibility of constructing their personality through their consumer choice' (64). This might also be one of the reasons the novel is filled with brand names, which continuously recur like the obsessive incantations of a ritual and whose use will be a linguistic strategy characteristic of all Ellis's further literary work. Clay often seems to act as a *ghost*, a phantasmatic presence moving in a context where everything can be exploited and consumed, and where, not by chance, a billboard inscribed with the words 'disappear here' (12) often appears. However, there are moments in the novel at which Clay seems to have a reaction. One occasion is when he watches, along with his friends, a videotape recorded by his friend Rip showing the rape of a 12-year-old girl. However, even in front of these horrific images, Clay seems unable to offer anything other than a weak protest, stuttering only that what is shown in the videotape 'is just… wrong' (56). In the pages of the novel, it becomes very clear that in *Less than Zero* Ellis depicts an amoral society where everything is, as neoliberalism commands, permitted, where desires have no limits, and where personal relationships are based on consumption rather than empathy or love. Ellis seems to argue, moreover, that in this kind of context, a context dominated by neoliberal values that produces a kind of subjectivity that has introjected those values, the only possible and accepted morality is the one established by those same values, which is the logic of the

market. In this vein, in the introduction to a 2011 essay collection devoted to Ellis coordinated by Naomi Mandel, Mandel claims that 'when power creates its own morality, there can be no moral agent to applaud goodness or condemn evil' (6). Therefore, in *Less than Zero* we can find *in nuce* certain elements that, as we shall see, will be a constant in Ellis's subsequent work: a critique of consumerism, alienation, and an extension of the neoliberalist tendency to commodify every aspect of life, right down to personal relationships. At this point, however, having traced the first signs of the kind of political critique that Ellis continued to pursue in his subsequent novels, it is important to highlight that *Less than Zero* represents the birth of not only Bret Easton Ellis the *writer*, but also the birth of the entity that will, at least in the perception of most readers and critics, rapidly *take his place*: Bret Easton Ellis the public phenomenon.

Less than Zero, according to Mandel, represents the initial phase of Ellis as a commercial phenomenon (2). Upon its publication in 1985, the book immediately attracted substantial attention from critics and mass media in general, which rapidly established Ellis as the young and sexy *voice* of a new generation. In sum, as claimed by Mandel, *Less than Zero*

> established Ellis as a representative writer of his generation, alternately described as the Blank Generation or Generation X, and (with authors Tama Janowitz and Jay McInerney) a member of the literary 'brat pack' – a group of young, photogenic authors characterized by seemingly infinite media presence, popularity, and marketability (Mandel 4).

It must be said, however, that Ellis, to a certain extent, took advantage of the attention that his first novel generated. And, if mass media pushed the construction around Ellis of an aura of *auteur maudit*, he certainly did very little to counter this kind of narrative. For instance, as noted by Baelo-Allué, 'Ellis himself has admitted that when he was 21, he would give interviews drunk at lunch, and thought it was cool to smoke unfiltered cigarettes and not to take his sunglasses off' (15). In this vein, Elizabeth Young ended up comparing the rise of Ellis's media career to that of a rock star (19). It might reasonably be posited that one of the possible effects of this media exposure was that it became very difficult for critics to separate the Ellis pop phenomenon from the literary quality of his first novel, *Less than Zero*. Baelo-Allué states that 'some literary critics could not forgive the fact that Ellis had become a media star too quickly, and the more of a media star he became, the less they were willing to take his work seriously' (Baelo-Allué 15). Along the same lines, the American scholar Marjorie Worthington claims that as Ellis's 'celebrity star rose, his increasingly extravagant behaviour often became the story, eclipsing the novels themselves, making it almost impossible for readers and critics to differentiate between the work and its author' (4). The risk of this public over-

exposure is that one side, the author, often overshadows the other, his or her work. In this case, *Bret Easton Ellis*, or the media construct of his persona, ended up overshadowing or even gobbling up the genuine literary quality and, most importantly for this thesis, the political and subversive potential of Ellis's novels, starting with *Less than Zero*. As we have seen, *Less than Zero* can be understood as a critique of alienation and the obsession with consumerism, as well as of the extension of the neoliberal strategy of objectifying everything in the sphere of private relationships. This kind of critique can to a certain extent be juxtaposed with the one pursued by Houellebecq in his early novels, as we have seen. However, all these aspects of the novel, according to Mandel, were partially overshadowed by the rising public image of the young author, as well as by the controversies that surrounded the novel (4), especially concerning some sexual scenes and the drugs habits of the characters. In this sense, as part of the same neoliberalist strategy we observed with Houellebecq, the political potential of the novel has been dismissed, ignored, and therefore *absorbed*. This attention to Ellis's public persona, at the partial expense of interest in the quality of his literary work, and the consequently greater critical focus on the *character* Bret Easton Ellis rather than on the critique of neoliberalism he pursued, will persecute Ellis throughout his entire career.

However, the media over-exposure that Ellis faced after the publication of *Less than Zero* was nothing compared to the attention and controversies generated by his third novel, published in 1991: *American Psycho*. This work is notably one of the apical expressions of Ellis's critique of aspects of neoliberalism, such as commodification and obsession with consumerism. Nevertheless, despite the undeniable quality of the writing, and despite evidence of its political implications, the novel is universally famous for the controversies it generated. Of course, this chapter does not aim to provide a detailed overview of the reactions caused by the novel, which is the story of a young, handsome Wall Street broker obsessed with consumerism, who becomes a pitiless serial killer at night. It should be enough to recall that Mandel defined *American Psycho* as 'easily one of the most controversial novels of the twentieth century' (8). However, to reduce *American Psycho* merely to its media exposure or the number of controversies it generated would be ungenerous and pointless. On the contrary, it would be far more interesting, at least for the aims of this thesis, to try to highlight its political aspect, and in which way it is the natural continuation of the critique of neoliberal values that Ellis began in *Less than Zero*. In fact, as stated by Baelo-Allué, '*American Psycho* is a much more complex novel; it is a metaphor for a shallow, narcissistic society obsessed with consumerism. The yuppie represents the superficial American society of the 1980s, while the serial killer becomes its metaphorical embodiment' (95).

American Psycho can be described as a merciless critique of the values typical of neoliberal logic, such as selfish competition and obsession with consumerism. The themes treated by Ellis, and

the way in which these are questioned, make them an integral part of his critical journey in this sense. In fact, the main character, the notorious Patrick Bateman, a young, handsome, rich yuppie obsessed with status and consumerism, who spends his nights brutally murdering prostitutes, the homeless, and colleagues, is emblematic. Bateman can be considered a *blank* figure, like *Less than Zero*'s main character, Clay. Bateman is a man so devoid of references and model behaviours, except those imposed by the market, that he is able to construct his identity only through objects of consumption. He is therefore obsessed with commodities and the lifestyle those commodities represent; in the novel, it seems that this carefully constructed superficial appearance is the only essence of Patrick Bateman as a human being. *American Psycho*, despite all the controversies caused by the sex scenes and the frankly disturbing but never specious descriptions of violence, is not just a gratuitously provocative novel. On the contrary, as I have already argued, it is a novel against the neoliberal obsession with consumerism, and, in this sense, it is perfectly in line with the kind of critique of consumerism and neoliberal strategies to commodify every aspect of life pursued by Ellis in his literary career. Bateman as a character is key in this sense because he is a man obsessed with objects and the status those objects represent, and also because he is a serial killer, a murderer. Therefore, he is someone who can be defined as a *consumer* of bodies, which he treats as mere *objects*. For these reasons, Bateman, both as a man obsessed with consumerism *and* as a serial killer, is a perfect representation of what the Italian critic and academic Gianluigi Simonetti has defined as the 'perfect consumer' (*La letteratura circostante* 300). More specifically, he is the perfect consumer *because* of his being a serial killer. In fact, Bateman's compulsive act of serially killing people and then abusing their bodies can be understood as a reflection of the act of compulsively desiring and consuming commodities. In this sense, Simonetti explains that in *American Psycho*

> il consumo delle merci è omologo a quello dei corpi: la metafora centrale del libro, quella dell'assassino seriale, ha il compito di suggellarlo […] La violenza omicida rappresentata nel libro allude, fin troppo palesemente, alla violenza del consumo compulsive. (Simonetti 302)

> (the consumption of goods is the counterpart of the consumption of bodies: the core metaphor of the book – the serial killer – seals this equivalence. […] The murderous violence shown in the book hints, far too openly, at the violence of compulsive consumption).

Baelo-Allué, in the aforementioned book *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing between High and Low Culture*, confirms this relationship between the act of killing and the consumption of commodities:

> In *American Psycho*, Bateman sees life through brand names since in his social life everything is reduced to commodity consumption, a practice closely linked to his status as serial killer, itself another kind of consumption. (Baelo-Allué 102)

Bateman can be seen as a metaphor for the obsessive consumer: a man who builds his own identity using commodities as bricks; someone who speaks in the language of advertising, often putting commercial lines into his discourse, and who conceives of everything as buyable and consumable. Here the metaphor of the serial killer is particularly fitting: when you think that everything is a commodity, that everything exists only to be consumed, then even people become goods to be consumed immediately and *replaced* by other goods. As has been well synthesised by James Annesley, 'Bateman seems unaware of the difference between commodities and human life' (*Fictions of Globalization* 13). Bateman is unable to distinguish a human body from an object, a commodity, and in this sense, Ellis's critique of neoliberal attitudes towards commodification and subsuming all that exists, even *people*, within the profit motive becomes crystal clear here. However, Bateman is not only the *absolute* consumer. In fact, another aspect that instantly strikes the reader of *American Psycho* is that all the characters in the novel seem identical, to the point that all of them might be considered easily *interchangeable*. *American Psycho* characters all look very similar, both aesthetically and in terms of occupation and behaviour. Bateman often confuses faces and names (Ellis 118), and he is often confused for other people (Ellis 267). In this sense, people are represented in the same way as mass reproducible objects, and this parallelism between human beings and mass reproducible objects reveals a continuity in Ellis's critique. This continuity can be understood only if we put it in relation with another explicit and decisive aspect that defines *American Psycho*: the obsessive repetition of brand names. Ellis devotes hundreds of pages to the description of a particular brand, and this is a tendency that was also present in his previous novels, but reaches its apogee in *American Psycho*. Moreover, as noticed by Baelo-Allué, his colleagues consider Bateman a sort of *arbiter elegantarium*, a man who 'masters the rules of etiquette and correct behaviour and he even lectures his friends, who keep asking him questions about the norms of protocols' (93). As Annesley explained in *Blank Fictions*, Ellis's *American Psycho* is filled with brand names because they are part of our cultural landscape (48). As observed by Baelo-Allué, Arvidsson is certainly right when he defines *American Psycho* as the 'first literary text where brand names played a prominent part' (102).

This obsessive repetition of brand names in *American Psycho* seems legitimate, considering we are talking about a novel that has among its many aims being a critique of the obsession with consumerism typical of the neoliberal era. On the other hand, it is possible to state that this obsessive repetition of brand names has another function, that is, to mimic the repetitive mechanism of mass reproduction: millions of products that are all the same, and that gain value as a status symbol only through advertisement and mass media. Moreover, it might be argued that this repetition of brand names also deprives them of meaning, reducing them to what they are: objects to be consumed and then replaced by other meaningless objects. This procedure is similar, for instance, to the one adopted by Andy Warhol in his famous 1964 work *Electric Chair*, in which Warhol proposed a series of images of the electric chair. Through the use of repetition, the images lose their horrific role as an instrument of death, and in the end, what remains for the spectator is the image of the object itself: a simple chair, symbolising that, with repetition, even the most frightening image can be drained of its meaning. The relationship between this procedure and Ellis's work is also confirmed by Annesley who, in his essay *Fictions of Globalization*, writes:

> Like Andy Warhol's absorption in the emblems and logos of popular culture, an aesthetic that draws its power from the patterns of similarity and the serial nature of the images, Ellis seems to be making a statement about language and contemporary culture. Collapsing the boundaries that divide his fiction from other terrains, Ellis offers not simply an overblown satire, but a text that engages with the fabric of contemporary consumerism (Annesley 32).

The point, therefore, is that through representing the basically identical characters that populate *American Psycho*, Ellis seems to suggest that the same logic of mass reproducibility can be extended not only to objects, but also to *people*. Through this procedure Ellis represents people in the same way he represents brands and, by extension, objects. Deprived, through repetition, of their symbolic value, these objects, these goods, reveal themselves to be empty and useless, whose only value is supplied by advertisements and the lifestyle that consumers associate with them. At the same time, the characters in the novel, given that they have constructed their identity through consumerism and then through consumer objects, reveal the same, cold emptiness. Following this parallelism between brands, consumer goods, and characters (therefore people, even if they are imaginary), we might say that if products are continuously reproducible, so are *people*, and, by consequence, *identities*. Moreover, if these consumer goods are manipulable and saleable like any other good, even people and personal identities can be manipulated and sold. In this way, Ellis problematises the

question of personal identity in the context of a critique of consumerism and, on a larger scale, an attack on the neoliberal tendency to commodify every aspect of our lives. These parts of Ellis's critique also open up other questions. Is it possible, for instance, to treat or, better, to *manage* a personal identity in the same way a consumer good is treated? Is it possible to produce, promote, manipulate, and, to a certain extent *improve* a personal identity in order to make it more appealing and therefore more saleable? And what about the person to whom this personal identity is attached? This is one of the main questions of this chapter, and it will also be relevant to the chapter on the Italian writer Walter Siti. As we shall see, it is strictly related to Bret Easton Ellis himself. More importantly, it will be clear that Ellis has reflected deeply on this question, writing a novel in which, through autofiction, he is the main character, and where the name 'Bret Easton Ellis' will be used in the same way brand names were used in his previous novels, because now, given Ellis's established status as a celebrity writer, even 'Bret Easton Ellis' as a public persona is part of the mediatised, consumerist, neoliberal society that he has criticised and questioned throughout his literary career. However, before getting to this point, it is important to focus briefly on how Ellis faced the question of the relationship between personal identity and mass media, a reflection that gave birth to what he himself often claimed to consider his most valuable work: *Glamorama*.

Published in 1999, *Glamorama* might be considered Ellis's most ambitious work. The protagonist of the novel, Victor Ward – who also appears briefly in Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* – is an extremely interesting character, despite his maddening superficiality and obtuseness. He is interesting because he is used by Ellis as the epitome of one of the aspects of Western society that he wants to critique in this novel: mass media society. Further, he is an apt representation of the kind of subjectivation produced by neoliberalism in order to perpetuate its hegemony. Victor lives in a society where people are famous only for *being* famous and are obsessed with the idea of appearing in a magazine or on television: in sum, it is a society where you *exist* only if you appear on television or in the newspapers. In this novel, Ellis's critique is a pronouncement against the influence of mass media society and the effects this influence produces on personal identities. In *Glamorama* Ellis also explores how people react to this kind of influence, and to what extent this influence contributes to the shaping of that kind of subjectivity that neoliberalism needs to reproduce itself.

Victor, a young, handsome model who, without any specific ability, desperately tries to become famous, can be defined as the absolute mass media (-influenced) personality, just as Patrick Bateman is the absolute consumer. However, his obsession is somewhat different. Bateman is the perfect consumer, but he is not interested in notoriety, while Ward not only wants to be a consumer,

but he also wants to be one of those people whom he believes influence what is considered worth consuming: he wants to be a celebrity, without acknowledging, except when it is too late, that celebrities are subject to the same rules as normal people – the rules of the market. One characteristic that immediately grabs the attention of the reader is that Victor is devoid of any kind of *original* identity. Or, better, it might be said that his identity contains nothing *personal*; it is more a collection of advertising slogans and jingles, and attitudes and behaviours taken from television shows and movies. Victor moves into a kind of reality where he is not able to distinguish what is *real* from what is *fictive.* As claimed by Arthur Redding in the aforementioned collection of essays devoted to Ellis and edited by Naomi Mandel, Victor always acts and behaves as if he is appearing in a film or an advertisement (Redding 98). What is interesting to note, for the aims of this thesis, is the way in which Victor *models* and *designs* both his identity and body in proportion to his attempts to become famous. This is a process that involves both his body, which, in order to adhere to the models imposed by mass media, he stresses with gruelling gym sessions, and his behaviours, which he tends to modulate in order to reproduce those of celebrities. This kind of identity production, I argue, is a perfect example of *self-branding*, which is one of the main features of what we have defined as neoliberal subjectivity. Victor perceives his body and his identity as things that need to be appealing to the market, that can be manipulated and then sold, in a very similar way to the male bodybuilders depicted by Walter Siti who prostitute themselves, as we shall see in the next chapter. Victor *designs* his actions and behaviours as part of a project whose aim is to place him successfully on the market. In this sense, Victor perfectly represents the kind of subject that has totally introjected neoliberal logic. As already mentioned, the tendency to self-brand and to reproduce the behaviours of celebrities is both a form of autofiction; and, more specifically, an example of that kind of *unaware*/*passive* autofiction I have previously theorised. Victor is actually a *champion* in this sense, given that he dedicates his entire life to the *reproduction* of behavioural models imposed by the market. In sum, according to Baelo-Allué, in *Glamorama*

> the characters are not just obsessed with buying and consuming all available goods and do not just define themselves by the possessions they have. Instead, they have become brand names, who are bought and sold each day on the cultural market. They are artificially constructed according to the tastes of the people, of mass society. (Baelo-Allué 133)

In *Glamorama*, unlike in *American Psycho*, personal identities are not only constructed by possession and consumption of commodities, but also treated like commodities. They *become* commodities. In fact, Victor's and other characters' personal identities are perceived as things that

are *on sale*, and, by extension, saleable and manipulable, just like any other commodity. This passage, from the commodification of bodies seen in *American Psycho* to the commodification and exploitation of personal identities for profit, corroborates that critique of the extension of spaces of commodification which forms the core of Ellis's political approach. Moreover, this reduction of personal identities into commodities is made evident in *Glamorama* through the technique of repetition, for example. Just as in *American Psycho*, in this novel there are entire pages full of celebrity and brand names, which are inexorably and obsessively repeated in the same way. Therefore, in *Glamorama* personal identities are described as being subjected to the same economic logic that rules the products associated with the various brands in *American Psycho*. By consequence, like any other commodity, they can be manipulated, promoted, sold, and even *substituted* with an upgraded version, and this is exactly what happens to Victor at the end of *Glamorama*. After being kidnapped and locked up in a hotel room, he discovers that he has literally been replaced by an *improved* version of himself, a version that was basically the *opposite* of the real Victor. If Victor was considered stupid and superficial, his *double* is smart and highly educated; if Victor was considered lazy and undisciplined, his double is rigorous and ambitious, and so on. Most importantly, this new version of Victor conforms more to neoliberal logic: it is more efficient, disciplined, and very easily controlled. In fact, at the end of the novel we discover that Victor has been substituted by this improved version of himself on the orders of his own father, a senator who wants to run as president of the United States and needs a more *presentable* Victor, who is more useful to Power, while the *real* one is destined to be *absorbed*, to simply disappear. The process of production, *obsolescence*, and substitution mimics the same kind of process experienced by commodities in general. This point is confirmed by Baelo-Allué when she writes that 'celebrities in *Glamorama* are not only transitory, but they are also interchangeable and disposable, probably because they have been mass-produced using the same marketing techniques' (150). In this sense, the process clearly reminds us of what Houellebecq says about *produits culturels*: cultural products can be reproduced and substituted when obsolete, as with any other product.

As we shall see in the following section of this chapter, the process of commodification, absorption, and substitution is, to an extent, the same movement experienced by Ellis during his literary career. Or, better, it is the same movement experienced by Ellis's public persona, which, in a similar way to Houellebecq's, has been a media construct, manipulated and *upgraded* in order to conform to the expectation of the market. Like Houellebecq, Ellis therefore understood this mechanism at a certain point, and, as noted above, when we manage to understand and unveil an oppressive mechanism, we find at the same time the necessary strength and the *method* with which to question and battle it. The method found by Ellis to question and subvert this

commodification/absorption/substitution mechanism, one of most powerful neoliberal weapons, is the literary genre of autofiction.

TWO BRETS?

In 2019, almost ten years after his last novel – *Imperial Bedrooms*, a sequel to *Less than Zero* – Ellis published a new book that was surprisingly not a novel but a collection of what we might define as autobiographical essays, titled *White*. According to Ellis, the title was supposed to be – rather provocatively – *White Privileged Male* (8), which can be considered an ironic reference to the privileged gaze that has been the object of many critiques of certain aspects of Ellis's work such as, for instance, explicit sex scenes, accurately described episodes of violence, especially against women, and so on. In this work, among the wide range of arguments addressed by Ellis in his usual sulphuric, elegant, provocative, and never clichéd style, one chapter is particularly relevant for the aims of this thesis. The chapter is titled "Secondself", and it is focused on Ellis's relationship with celebrity; in particular, it is focused on Ellis's relationship with his most famous, or rather most *notorious*, and frightening creature: *American Psycho*'s main character, Patrick Bateman. Ellis's memoir of writing his most famous literary work is significant because, if the reception of *American Psycho*, the polemics it produced, and its literary quality have been widely reported and discussed (as already mentioned, the overview curated by Baelo-Allué is pivotal in this sense), what seems to be lacking among the thousands of pages written about *America Psycho*'s *affaire* is Ellis's own perspective. In this sense, *White* offers a formidable glimpse into how the American author experienced the writing of *American Psycho*, the motivations that pushed him to write the novel, and, most importantly, how this experience affected and influenced his subsequent work and public posture.

As mentioned above, after the publication of *Less than Zero*, Ellis started to turn into a celebrity writer (as we have seen in the accounts of Baelo-Allué and Annesley). He released many interviews, participated in television programmes, and even appeared in gossip magazines. This situation, which obviously escalated after the publication of *American Psycho*, was already evident and perceived in a problematic way by the author even before writing his most notorious novel. Looking back on that period –1987 – in *White*, Ellis, writing in a style similar to that of *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*, and sometimes referring to himself in the third person, confesses that

> I floated through 1987 in the midst of a dreamlike narrative that was decidedly mine yet also felt completely disconnected, as if belonged to someone else […]. It was supposed to

> be an ’80s win-win, a kind of fantasy, though my anxiety and doubt about nearly everything kept blooming out of control. I skimmed articles about Bret Easton Ellis. I saw pictures newspapers and magazines. I read that he’d been seen at certain art opening and nightclubs […] and at certain trendy restaurants (with literary Brat Pack cohort Jay McInerney) and sometimes I might have been there (paparazzi pics proved I was) and other times I couldn’t be sure: my author’s photo might have been printed next to a story about a gallery opening or a Midtown movie premiere, but that didn’t mean I was there […]. In a sense there were now two Brets – the private and the public – and 1987 was the year I realized they coexisted, which was how unusual my life as a twenty-three-year-old celebrity seemed to me. (Ellis 67)

To explore the relationship between these two Brets at this point would be fruitful, but before doing so, it is necessary to define the specific nature of these two entities. It might be said that if the first Bret is the private one, with all the ambiguities that such a definition inevitably implies (Bret Easton Ellis the man, the artist, the engaged writer), the second Bret can be defined as Ellis’s public figure; a figure that has been partially constructed by both the market and mass media, the entire *circus* that Annesley brilliantly defined as the *Brand* Easton Ellis (8). This construction implies the kinds of manipulation that are typical in the world of promotion and advertisement, which operate in order to make the product – the celebrity writer Bret Easton Ellis – more appealing for the reader/consumer. Now, what is interesting here is to try to understand the amount of *agency* that the first Bret has in comparison with the second, and to what extent the second has obscured, overshadowed, *absorbed* the first. In addition, one can propose a hypothesis here, indeed one of the main hypotheses of this thesis: what if this *reification*, or adaptation of Ellis’s work and public persona to marketing imperatives, might have more reasons than merely economic ones? What if one of these reasons is to *domesticate*, to absorb, to dismantle a voice that could have been potentially subversive? This strategy is obviously not the fruit of a conspiracy, or the design of an unspecified, obscure group of people, but is typical of neoliberalism itself, given that one of its most well-known characteristics is the mechanism of subsumption, which, as the Italian philosopher and academic Elisa Cuter reminds us, instead of refusing any potentially antagonist perspective, prefers to adapt it, to turn it to its favour (12). In this sense, it might be useful to recall what Baelo-Allué argued when she mentioned, in connection with the substitution of the *real* Victor Ward in favour of his enhanced double in *Glamorama*, Baudrillard’s concept of ‘extermination of the real by its double’ (90). In fact, it might be posited that the main problem in Ellis’s reception is that the entity we have defined as the *second* Bret, namely his public image, has, to a certain extent, *killed* the first one, the writer. Obviously, it might be objected that the two Brets cannot be considered two different entities, totally

separate and unconnected. This can be discussed further, but the point here is firstly to offer the hypothesis that at a certain point Ellis managed to understand this mechanism – his becoming essentially a *commodity*, similar to those enumerated in the pages of *American Psycho* – and then to explore what kind of narrative strategies Ellis used in order to unveil this mechanism and problematise this occurrence. In fact, it is beyond doubt that at a certain point Ellis started to perceive himself, or, better, to perceive his mediatised, public persona, as a sort of commodity, developing a sort of bored (if not indulged) *detachment* for what we have defined as the second Bret. This point is confirmed by Annesley (*Fictions of Globalization* 32) and by Ellis himself, who in a 2010 interview with Decca Aitkenhead stated that 'I would read about "Bret Easton Ellis", and I'd go, Well, that isn't me. But I realised "Bret Easton Ellis" was going to take over, and that I was more or less dead. But I get it; he's the better story' (4). These lines are particularly interesting because they reveal Ellis's attitude for part of his literary career, which was to submit to and reinforce his media double, as confirmed by Baelo-Allué when she writes, as quoted above, that 'Ellis himself has admitted that when he was 21, he would give interviews drunk at lunch, and thought it was cool to smoke unfiltered cigarettes and not to take his sunglasses off' (15).

However, what is worth analysing is what happened when Ellis became aware of the fact that this second Bret was overshadowing his literary work, and the consequences of this substitution, which was the reduction of his identity to a commodity that, like any other commodity, was manipulable and saleable. Most worthy of analysis is the other result of this reification, which is the neutralisation of the political potential of his literary work. This procedure of reification and neutralisation typical of neoliberalism has been well described by Fredric Dumas in a 2008 essay, where, using the representation of the musical *Les Misérables* in *American Psycho* as an example, he synthesises how neoliberal strategy works:

> At the diegetic time of *American Psycho* the musical 'Les Misérables' was a huge success in Broadway. Bateman and all his Yuppie acquaintances were ecstatic; the posters and the merchandising were omnipresent and the music score was monopolizing the radio stations. Without any qualms, the bombastic show reified poverty into a highly lucrative, kitsch commodity, exploiting Hugo's revolutionary spirit to consolidate the values of dominant capitalistic conformism. (Dumas 3)

At this point, the question is as follows: what kind of literary strategies did Ellis decide to adopt in order to question and *subvert* this mechanism? In this sense, Ellis's journey – from the *enfant terrible* of American literature to a sort of popstar, and the consequent awareness and problematisation of that – can be related to the one experienced, as we have seen, by the French writer

Michel Houellebecq. In fact, as pointed out in the previous chapter, Houellebecq in his 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire* offers a pointed reflection on the relationship between art and the market. In this novel, he posits that the media representation of the artist is now more important than the work of art itself because the work of art often gets immediately absorbed by the market, thus losing all its subversive or political potential. In *La carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq decides to use *himself* as a case in point, suggesting that his public persona became more important and in certain cases even overshadowed his literary work and consequently its judgement by the public and critics. Because Houellebecq – like Ellis – came to understand the mechanism that reduced his work to a manipulable and saleable commodity, thus dismantling all its critical potential, he decided to reveal and to question this mechanism by placing himself as a secondary character in his 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire* and, at the end of the novel, killing his literary – and media – double (the murder of the character Michel Houellebecq, incidentally, impressively resembles those performed by Patrick Bateman).

As already discussed, this kind of critique was possible only through the literary genre of autofiction, and an autofiction is exactly what Ellis wrote in 2005 with *Lunar Park*, which is the final subject of analysis in this chapter. However, this is not the only similarity between the two authors. For instance, as noted in the previous chapter, Houellebecq offers a sort of *caricature* of his public persona, exaggerating the aspects that represent the general public perception of Michel Houellebecq – depressed, alcoholic, misogynist, misanthropic – and that have been pushed and manipulated by the market to maximise media exposure and thus sales. The caricature, the self-parody, is exactly the same kind of procedure adopted by Ellis in order to describe the character Bret Easton Ellis in *Lunar Park*. Moreover, as we have seen, if in *La carte et le territoire* the character Michel Houellebecq leaves the scene after being brutally murdered, the character Bret Easton Ellis – as noted by Lorenzo Marchese (243) – also abruptly disappears from the pages of *Lunar Park*, albeit in a less spectacular way.

However, there is a more profound liaison between the two authors, who share not only the status of celebrity writers, but also the malaise of being aware that their literary work has been overshadowed by a public image that has been produced, manipulated, reduced into a commodity, and sold on the market; they are conscious, too, that the subversive and political potential of their books has been, through this process of reification, absorbed by the market and thus dismantled. They share the malaise of being aware their identity has been turned into a *commodity*. In this sense, Ellis's case is particularly interesting. The British theorist Mark Fisher, who is neither quoted nor studied enough, refers to the pop icon Britney Spears in his 2014 collection of essays, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, writing that in Spears's song "Piece of Me" 'you can either hear this as the moment when a commodity achieves self-consciousness, or when a

human realises he or she has become a commodity' (Fisher 247), and Ellis's entire literary path seems to be a long journey that leads to his personal "Piece of Me", which is *Lunar Park*; it is a journey based on a critique of consumerism, reification, loss, commodification, which leads to the awareness of having become nothing more than a commodity. What is at stake in this chapter is firstly to show that Ellis's autofiction in *Lunar Park* is perfectly in keeping with that critique of neoliberalism and consumerism that has characterised his career; and secondly to show that this kind of critique was possible only through the literary genre of autofiction. The question is, to what extent is Ellis's critique of neoliberalism related to the choice of introducing his own *self* as the main character of one of his novels? In a 2007 article – later included in a collection published in 2019 – the French radical collective named Le Comité invisible writes:

> The nature of capitalism is not much about selling a product but making accountable what has no monetary value yet; what the night before was priceless, suddenly has a price tag on it; creating new markets, and all of this builds up its oceanic reservoir. Capitalism is ultimately the universal extension of measure (Le Comité invisible 2).

Therefore, the neoliberal strategy is based on expanding the spaces of commodification. We might say that one of the new spaces chosen by neoliberalism into which to extend its domain is personal identity. This has been turned into a commodity like any other, and is thus interchangeable, saleable, manipulable, and so on. Let us think again about social networks: is it not the same logic of putting ourselves *on display*? Is it not evident that the way the social network is structured tends to impose neoliberal logic, the commandment to make yourself more appealing and thus more saleable? Is it not evident that the whole social network mechanism is based on competition, self-marketing, and what is now called *self-branding*? What are social networks if not a place where we put our personal identity, our *selves*, on display? The question of self-branding or, better, marketing of the self, is obviously not a brand new thing, but has existed since the advent of mass media and has already been confronted by Ellis – as we have seen – in *Glamorama*. What has changed, in my view, is the fact that self-branding is now not only a celebrity prerogative: through social networks, everyone can produce their own *brand new self*. One may object that this can be defined as a form of freedom, as everyone deserves the opportunity to *reinvent* themselves, but, as claimed by Ellis in the aforementioned 2015 article "Living the Cult of Likability", it is only a superficial freedom (4), because it is subordinate to the rules imposed by the social network itself, which are the rules typical of neoliberalism. And, as we have already seen, this tendency towards self-branding, towards perceiving ourselves as something to be put on sale and *reinventing* ourselves in order to result in a

more appealing product for the market, is typical of the kind of subjectivity produced and promoted by neoliberalism, because it aids the perpetuation of its hegemony. At this point, it might be objected: what does all of this have to do with autofiction? Well, my point is that the use of autofiction is a way of problematising and thus stimulating debate on the issues outlined above. What, after all, are social networks if not a form of autofiction? What is self-branding if not a form of autofiction?

This is exactly what Ellis decided to write: an autofiction. This choice is perfectly congruent with the critique of consumerism and neoliberalism's strategies that have characterised his literary career. After having described the reification of feelings, relationships, bodies, and people in *Less than Zero*, *American Psycho*, and *Glamorama*, Ellis realised that *his very self* – his personal identity – had become a commodity, that he had become part of the same mechanism he wanted to critique. Therefore, in order to problematise the question of reification of personal identities, he decided to treat his personal identity, or, better, his public persona, as being on a par with the commodities he described in his previous novels. To develop this critique, the only literary instrument he could use was autofiction, because only through autofiction can the writer produce a fictional version of their personal identity. This kind of critique, which is political and possible only through autofiction, is, in this way, a political act. Obviously, Ellis could not be aware of the immense spread of social networks, but to a certain extent he understood – with that inscrutable prophetic ability that is the essence of great literature – that personal identity was going to become the next victim of neoliberal logic. Moreover, as we have seen, part of the neoliberalist hegemonic strategy is, according to Dardot and Laval, to create a sort of neoliberal subject (31), which means a subject that, involuntarily or consciously, *adapts* itself to the neoliberal logic. In this sense, we have already seen that Ellis, like Houellebecq, shared in the responsibility of creating the *character* Bret Easton Ellis, which overshadowed the writer, contaminating the critical and public perception of his literary work. Now, absorbing and modelling everything on its logic are techniques adopted by neoliberalism to impose its dominion and defuse any potentially subversive voice. This strategy usually works; until someone becomes conscious of the mechanism and decides to reveal and subvert it, which is exactly what Ellis did in *Lunar Park*.

To be clear, *Lunar Park* is not only a novel concerning the relationship between Bret Easton Ellis and his public character: it is also an attempt to elaborate and therefore to recover the *ghosts* that have haunted him through his entire life. Mark Fisher, in his 2009 and 2016 books *Capitalist Realism* and *Ghosts of My Life*, details two exciting theories: first of all, he posits that mental diseases like depression, loneliness, and drug addiction are all structurally caused by neoliberalism and the consequent introjections of its logic (*Capitalist Realism*, 141). Self-branding and obsession with competition are both constitutive parts of the neoliberal subject. The refusal or impossibility to adapt

to these imperatives, according to Fisher, generates mental diseases like depression and alcoholism, and the obsession with performance leads to drug addiction. The struggle to adapt to these neoliberal imperatives, and the consequent risk of developing depression and mental illness, might be, I argue, one of the reasons behind the disappearance of the rich teenagers in *Lunar Park*. As described at the end of *Lunar Park*, this disappearance – which will also involve Robby, Ellis's fictive son – will turn out to be an escape – an escape, I argue, from precisely those neoliberal imperatives, such as obsession with performance, materialism, and consumerism. One example might be the way in which Ellis describes an advertisement that the fictional Ellis listens to while entering Robby's bedroom, with the intention to try to talk to him:

> A scruffy, gorgeous youth, hands on his skinny-boy hips, stared defiantly into the camera and made the following statements in a blank voice, subtitled beneath him in a blood red scroll: 'Why haven't you become a millionaire yet?' followed by 'There is not more to life than money' followed by 'You do need to own an island' followed by 'You should never sleep because there are no second chances' followed by 'It is important to be slick and evocative' followed by 'Come with us and make a bundle' followed by 'If you aren't rich you deserve to be humiliated' (Ellis 227).

Moreover, Fisher – inspired by Derrida – theorised that we live in a society obsessed and persecuted by *ghosts*; in particular, according to Fisher (76), our society is persecuted by the ghost of what *could have been* and did not happen: the failure of Communism, the frustration of the promise of eras of hope like 1968 and the 1970s, the normalisation and reification of rave culture. Obviously, neoliberalism found a way to absorb and put to profit even those ghosts. This explains the contemporary obsession with vintage – which is, according to the Italian designer Riccardo Falcinelli, 'the commercialization of nostalgia' (103). Meanwhile, the only ghost that neoliberalism wants to defeat is the ghost of its possible alternatives. However, we do not have to fight those ghosts, but we should rather *interrogate* them: why have those hopes failed? What happened? At this point one might object: what do all these stories about ghosts have to do with this chapter on Bret Easton Ellis and on autofiction in general? The answer is that *Lunar Park* – for reasons and implications that will be explained soon – is partially a *ghost story*; and ghosts in general play a crucial part in it. Concerning autofiction, just think for a moment: what is autofiction if not the creation by an author of their own personal *ghost*?

First, it is useful to clear the field of doubts concerning the *autofictiveness* of *Lunar Park*. Even if Ellis himself in *White* – using his beloved cinematographic vocabulary and imaginary – defined *Lunar Park* as a 'mockumentary' (18), there is no doubt that it is an autofiction. In France, where the term was invented and is widely used, critics and commentators easily identified the novel according to this definition; in fact, François Busnel, in a 2005 interview, wrote that 'si l'on tient vraiment aux étiquettes, on dira que ce roman appartient au genre dit «autofiction»' ('if you really care for labels, you can say that this novel belongs to the genre called "autofiction"'; 2). As confirmed by Henrik Skov Nielsen, *Lunar Park* is an autofiction: '*Lunar Park*, of course, is an autofiction both in the narrow sense established by Doubrovsky and in Genette's broader sense of the term' (130). It can be added that *Lunar Park* respects not only the characteristics established by Doubrovsky and Genette in order to consider a text an autofiction, but also – and in a more cogent way – those described by Vincent Colonna in his definition of *autofiction fantastique*. In fact, in his 2004 book *Autofiction et autre mythomanies littéraire* the French theorist defines four autofictional *postures*: 'autofiction fantastique', 'autofiction biographique', 'autofiction spéculaire', and 'autofiction intrusive' (75). The first posture seems to fit *Lunar Park* – at least partially, but this is the problem with categorisations: they are rarely totally exhaustive. The 'autofiction fantastique' (75) is summarised by Colonna in this way: 'l'écrivain est au centre du texte comme dans une autobiographie (c'est l'héros), mais il transfigure son existence et son identité, dans une histoire irréelle, indifférente à la vraisemblance' ('the writer stands at the centre of their text as in an autobiography [becoming the hero], but they transform their existence and their identity into an unreal story, indifferent to likelihood'; 75). As we shall see, the fantastic plays a crucial role in the novel, especially in the second part, which Ellis himself once defined in an interview as having been influenced by Stephen King (3). In Italy – where the term *autofiction* has slowly been taking root recently, thanks to the work of authors such as Walter Siti – *Lunar Park* has been categorised by the label of autofiction by critics like Lorenzo Marchese, who included the novel in his admirable 2013 book *L'io possibile. L'autofiction come Paradosso del romanzo contemporaneo* (243). The reason *Lunar Park* was not immediately perceived as an autofiction in the United States is because this term has not, until recently, penetrated American academia or the cultural milieu, where historically terms like *life writing* have always been preferred; however, the status of autofiction as a literary genre is slowly making its way into the New World, as demonstrated by recent publications such as Marjorie Worthington's *The Story of 'Me': Contemporary American Autofiction* (2018) and the collection of

essays edited by Hywel Dix, titled *Autofiction in English* (2018). In both *The Story of 'Me'* (16) and *Autofiction in English* (219), the authors refer to *Lunar Park* as an autofiction. Now that the doubts concerning the autofictive nature of *Lunar Park* have been entirely dispelled, it is time – eventually – to face *Lunar Park* itself and all the *ghosts* that it guards.

Lunar Park appeared in 2005, seven years after the publication of *Glamorama*. The first thing to capture the attention of the reader is the fact that the main character of the novel has the name 'Bret Easton Ellis'. As we have already seen when discussing works by Mandel and Baelo-Allué, Ellis's work has always been associated with his private life, and the (supposed) autobiographical aspect of his novels has always been a matter for discussion. Therefore, the presence of the name 'Bret Easton Ellis' at the beginning of *Lunar Park* might immediately lead us to think that we are dealing with an autobiography. However, turning the pages of the novel, the reader finds certain things that clash with the information we have about Ellis's private life. For instance, the reader learns that Ellis has a son, named Robert – like Ellis's father –, and that he is married to a famous actress named Jayne Dennis. Now, anyone familiar with Ellis knows that he has no children and has never been married. The inaccuracies follow one after the other in *Lunar Park*: for example, the narrator Ellis claims that he graduated from Camden College (18), while attentive readers know that Ellis graduated from Bennington College and that Camden College is a fictional institution recurring in Ellis's literary universe. It seems that Ellis is producing a sort of fictive parody of himself, or, in other words, a parody of his public character. *Lunar Park* opens with a sort of autobiographical confession, but an autobiography that starts from the publication of his first novel (5), with no mention of his life before becoming a writer, raising the suspicion (again) that this is not the narrative of his life – the typical characteristic of an autobiography – but rather the narration of his *public persona*. This suspicion is reinforced in the subsequent pages, which depict the promotional tour for *Glamorama*. Here, between an overdose and a Michelin-starred restaurant, the feeling is that we are dealing not with the *author* Bret Easton Ellis, but rather with a typical *character* from, well, a Bret Easton Ellis novel:

> And soon I was doing bumps every ten minutes during interviews in a hotel bar in Cincinnati while guzzling double cosmopolitans at two in the afternoon. I was smuggling propane torches and large quantities of crack onto Delta flights. I overdosed in a bathtub in Seattle (I had technically died for three minutes in the Sorrento). (Ellis 29)

The persistent feeling of ambiguity is stoked by a continuous interplay between the planes of reality and fiction. At one point the narrator claims that 'Ellis is a big fraud' (31), while after a few

pages he writes that 'all of it really happened, every word is true' (45). There are countless examples of this sort of acrobatics between truth and lies in the novel, and the space to enumerate all of them is unfortunately lacking. Instead, we might find it interesting to analyse the reasons Ellis decided to produce a version of himself as a character in a way that raises the suspicion that it is more a *parody* of himself or, in other words the introduction of a Bret Easton Ellis that seems to be an exact reproduction of how Ellis is perceived by the mass media and by some of his readers. Why do I think Ellis is representing a parody of himself? Well, after the pages dedicated to the description of the various excesses that characterised the early life of the fictive Bret Easton Ellis, we find Ellis in the new home he shares with his movie star wife Jayne Dennis, their son Robby, and Jayne's daughter Sarah, while he is organising a Halloween party. Interestingly, Ellis claims that for the fancy-dress party, he wants to dress up like, well, Bret Easton Ellis:

> You do an awfully good impression of yourself. Jayne said this after she looked me over with a confused expression and asked pointedly what I was going as to the Halloween party we were throwing that night, and I told her I'd decided to go simply as 'me'. I was wearing faded jeans, sandals, an oversized white T-shirt with a giant marijuana flower emblazoned on it and a miniature straw sombrero. We were in a bedroom the size of a large apartment when we shared this exchange, and I tried to clarify things by raising my arms up and turning slowly around to give her a chance to check out the full-on Bret. 'I've decided against wearing masks', I said proudly. 'I want to be real, honey. This is what's known as the Official Face'. (Ellis 36)

Overlooking the fact that Jayne herself blames Ellis for producing a parody, a caricature of himself – or, better, of his public image –, the examples are, again, countless: during the party Ellis gets drunk and tries to seduce one of his students (in the novel Ellis works as a creative writing teacher in a small college for rich people); he snorts cocaine in his garage with the famous American writer Jay McInerney (who, of course, gets drunk and is then found swimming naked in the pool by Ellis's wife); he claims – possibly being honest for once – that 'it is not easy at all to be the greatest under 40 American writer' (55); he is frivolous, selfish (he repeatedly ignores Jayne's daughter, Sarah, when she asks him for help), childish, caustic, superficially provocative, and unbearably arrogant. Moreover, even his literary work is described in the form of self-parody. The book that the fictive Ellis is currently writing is titled *Teenage Pussy* and he claims that it had been sketched 'over the summer and a lot had been accomplished despite the hours playing Tetris on my Gateway' (100). Ellis has had to change the title because the previous one, *Outrageous Mike*, was deemed by the

publisher to be 'noncontroversial' (101) and, of course, a Bret Easton Ellis novel *has* to be controversial given that, as argued by Annesley, 'As *Lunar Park* makes clear, Ellis is very aware that his brand values include notoriety, superficiality, decadence, sleaziness, and a kind of anti-authoritarian cool. This is what the reader gets from a Bret Easton Ellis product' (154). The plot of *Teenage Pussy* is, again, the caricature of what you would expect from an Ellis novel:

> The book was the story of Michael Graves and this young, hip Manhattan bachelor's erotic life – a 'guy who loved to give love and loves to get loved back' is what I promised to my publishers – and I had envisioned a narrative that was elegantly hard-core and interspersed with jaunty bouts of my laconic humour. (Ellis 102)

The way in which Ellis describes his writing procedure is particularly interesting. It reflects how he is generally perceived by critics and by the public as the childish and superficial writer, but it is substantially false. It is Ellis himself – in an aforementioned interview with "L'Express" – who denies this perception, claiming that while writing his novels 'je travaille énormément: je prends des notes, par milliers de pages, puis je m'enferme pour écrire, chronologiquement, ce qui deviendra le livre. Ensuite, je coupe. Beaucoup' ('I do an enormous amount of work: I take notes, thousands of pages, then I lock myself up to write, chronologically, what will become the book. Then, I cut. A lot'; 4).

Therefore, from the very first pages of *Lunar Park* we have all the features of Bret Easton Ellis's public persona, all the aspects that characterise the way in which he is generally perceived by the public and critics: a superficial and overrated writer who uses cheap, provocative themes in order to sell more copies. As can easily be seen, all these aspects are exaggerated and caricaturised with the clear intent of self-parody. Having demonstrated this, we can now try to understand why, in the first part of *Lunar Park*, Ellis decided to depict a version of himself that seems to adhere to all the accusations made against his work during his literary career. A key to our reading is provided by Colonna, who, in his definition of 'autofiction fantastique', writes that one of the effects of this kind of autofiction is a sort of 'réification artistique, par lequel l'écrivain n'est plus seulement une personne mais aussi un objet esthétique' ('artistic commodification, through which the writer is no longer just a person, but also an aesthetic object'; 77). The relationship between autofiction and objectification/reification is crucial here because, I argue, it explains why Ellis decided to use autofiction. In fact, only through autofiction was it possible for Ellis to produce an *objectified* version of himself – objectified in the true sense of the word, which refers to something reified, reduced to an object, a good, a commodity. The reduction of his persona to an object through autofiction clearly

befits Ellis's literary career: as we have seen, Ellis realised that *he* had become a commodity, an object to be consumed like any other. This is how he represents himself: as a (fictive) spectral apparition – as the *ghost* – of the idea of Bret Easton Ellis that has been manipulated and promoted by the mass media and that, as we have already seen, overshadowed his literary work and poisoned judgements made by critics and the public alike. As Ellis writes in *Lunar Park*,

> My life – my *name* – had been rendered a repetitive, unfunny punch line and I was sick of eating it. Celebrity was a life in code – it was a place where you constantly had to decipher what people wanted from you, and where the terrain was slippery and a world where ultimately you always made the wrong choice. (Ellis 37)

In this sense, Annesley is certainly right when, in a 2011 article, he explores the role and the consequences that celebrity had for Ellis, using the definition of *Brand* Easton Ellis. Annesley writes that in *Lunar Park* Ellis wanted to 'reflect about his status as a writer and as a brand' (145), arguing as well that 'at the core of the novel is an intense self-consciousness about the nature of Ellis's own status as a writer' (Annesley 146). The question of self-objectification rapidly comes across in the essay, and it is almost a gift to Annesley, who wrote extensively about Ellis's critique of consumerism:

> In *Lunar Park* it seems that Ellis is complicating his already intricate understanding of the forces at work by linking his brand identity as an author to his established account of consumer culture. The difference is that in *Less Than Zero* he could discuss consumption, products, and franchises without having to think about his own direct complicity. *Lunar Park* shows Ellis recognizing that his own name has now become a brand and circulates alongside the other commodities in the text. In this sense, the increasingly self-reflexive quality of the fiction Ellis has published since *American Psycho* can be explained by understanding that Ellis is a writer who cannot now write about branding and consumption without writing about himself as well […] Ellis is using his imagined version of himself to articulate a sense of the writer as a commodity. In *Lunar Park* he writes about himself so that his brand may be understood in discursive relation to contemporary culture's constellation of commercial signs. (Annesley 149-150)

Therefore, having understood that his name – his personal identity – had become a brand, a commodity, an object that could be manipulated and sold like everything else, Ellis decided to use this brand, this objectified version of himself, as an instrument for criticising and unveiling the

mechanism that led to this objectification, just as he had done in his previous novels when he described the reification of feelings and people. In this way, Ellis also manages to unveil and thus interrogate the neoliberalist strategy to commodify – and then absorb, *normalise* – everything, even personal identities. In fact, by materialising on paper, in one of his novels, as what can be considered the mediatised version of Bret Easton Ellis, he illuminates two points that appear to be crucial to him. First of all, the fact that this mediatised public persona – which, as already underlined, has been created partially with Ellis's complicity – has totally overshadowed the perception of his work, whose subversive potential is dismantled by its reduction – through the brandification of its author and themes – to an object, a commodity. In this sense his strategy has been very similar to the one adopted by Houellebecq in his autofiction, as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. It can be argued that when Ellis realised he had lost control of his public image, he decided to represent this mass media version of himself to *regain* control of it and, at the end of *Lunar Park*, to eventually *destroy* it. In fact, if in the second part of *La carte et le territoire* the character Michel Houellebecq gets murdered and shredded into pieces, at the end of *Lunar Park* the character Bret Easton Ellis will *dissolve* himself among 'the pages of *Lunar Park*' (415). Moreover, Ellis wants to point out how the neoliberal strategy enlarges the spaces of commodification, extending its tentacles towards personal identities. In fact, if the name 'Bret Easton Ellis' has become a commodity, something that can be manipulated and sold, then this can happen to every personal identity: and this is exactly what has happened, as Ellis describes in *Living in the Cult of Likability*, with social networks (4). It might be objected, however, that Ellis has been partially complicit in his own commodification. While this is true, one of the reasons behind the writing of *Lunar Park* was Ellis's attempt to contend with this commodification of the so-called Brand Easton Ellis and his complicity in it, and also, an attempt to redeem himself. Therefore, it is in these two points that the political aspect of Ellis's autofiction can be individuated, a political aspect that, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, could only have been made possible through the literary genre of autofiction. In fact, if on the one hand he acutely problematises the mechanism through which his work has been objectified and thus *normalised* by the market, on the other hand Ellis warns us about the methods used by neoliberalism to commodify – and thus extract value from – our personal identities.

BRET EASTON ELLIS'S GHOST OF LOST FUTURES

Even if Todd Womble was certainly right when he claimed, in his 2018 essay "Roth is Roth as Roth: Autofiction and the Implied Author", that most of the critics addressed their attention to the

first forty pages of *Lunar Park* (228), in this section of this chapter I shall focus on the second part of *Lunar Park*. In this section, the autofiction turns into a ghost story, where the character Bret Easton Ellis has to face the ghosts that, according to the novel, have tormented him during his life. These include his father, celebrity, that notorious, ludicrous, elegant, and grinning gentleman called Patrick Bateman, and the scariest ghost of all: 'that terrible disaster called Bret Easton Ellis' (341). In this part of the novel – which, as already mentioned, Ellis defined as 'the Stephen King part of *Lunar Park*' (3) – Ellis will also try to save his family from their haunted house, which slowly reveals that under the varnish it has always been the house where Ellis grew up:

> When we walked around to the side of the house facing the Allens', we saw that the wall was still in the process of changing. The salmon pink had darkened and the stucco was pronouncing itself more forcefully in wheeling patterns that were suddenly appearing everywhere. The writer whispered to me: the house is turning into the one you grew up in. (Ellis 516)

Ellis will also try to prevent the disappearance of his son Robby, who, after planning the escape of his friends from their rich and obsessed parents, wants to escape in turn:

> there was something off about the obsession with their children that bordered on the fanatical. It wasn't that they weren't concerned about their kids, but they wanted something back, they wanted a return on their investment—this need was almost religious. (Ellis 332)

The reasons these rich teenagers want to escape, however, might be traced back, I argue, to the pressure both from parents – whose attitude Ellis describes, as shown in the quotation above, as 'fanatical' (332) – and from neoliberal society and its imperatives. This is a society where everything is, as Ellis writes in *Lunar Park*, a 'performance' (283), and where there were 'kids experiencing dizzy spells due to the pressure of elementary school and who were in alternative therapies, and there were ten-year-old boys with eating disorders caused by unrealistic body images' (Ellis 333). In the social milieu frequented by the fictional Ellis, rehearsal parties are organised in order 'to gauge which kids "worked" and which did not' (269). Moreover, at a party that the fictional Ellis attends with his wife Jayne and her daughter Sarah, he realises that all the kids present at the party 'were on meds' (Ellis 270): meds that, as Ellis writes, 'caused them to move lethargically and speak in affectless monotones' (270). This kind of society, where neoliberal logic is hegemonic, and from which Ellis's fictional son Robby tries to escape, along with his friends, is exactly the kind of society that Ellis has critiqued during his entire literary career. This critique is central to *Lunar Park*, too.

Moreover, it is extremely interesting to notice the evolution of the character Bret Easton Ellis throughout the novel: from a childish, vacuous, superficial celebrity writer, he turns into an adult who wants to help his family and to redeem himself. In the final part of *Lunar Park*, we find the fictional Bret Easton Ellis trying to regain the trust of his family, claiming:

> I wanted another chance. But I could express this wish only to myself. What I needed to do was put it into action and prove that I hadn't dropped out, that I hadn't killed the buzz, that I could rejuvenate. I needed to prove that somehow I could shift out of the slow lane. I was still young. I was still smart. I was still convinced of things. I hadn't lost it entirely. I could move through the hassle. I could erase Jayne's resentment […] I could make Robby love me. (Ellis 430)

The fictional Ellis realises that he was making mistakes with Robby that his own father made with him, ones that caused their inability to communicate ('I was now my father. Robby was now me' [396]), but he desperately tries to be redeemed. When the spirits that haunt Ellis's house start to become more and more threatening, he tries to comfort his son, telling him:

> 'Nothing's going to happen to you, Robby.'
> 'How do you know?' he asked, his voice moving up an octave.
> 'I just do...'
> 'But how do you really know?'
> 'Because I'm not gonna let anything happen to you.'
> 'But aren't you scared too?' His voice cracked.
> I stared at him. 'I am. Everybody is scared. But if we stick together—if we all try to be there for each other—we won't be scared anymore.'
> He didn't say anything.
> 'I don't want you to go anywhere, Robby' (Ellis 540)

Scared by the hauntings in the house and determined to protect his son Robby and his stepdaughter Sarah, Ellis decides to approach a man, Robert Miller, who defines himself as a 'paranormal investigator' (84). After checking the house with the help of his associates, Miller suddenly and surprisingly concludes that the source of the haunting is not the house; when Ellis asks who or what could be the source, Miller answers that 'Mr Ellis […]. You are' (635). This awareness will lead Ellis to actively face his ghosts and to try to prevent Robby's escape, an attempt that sadly will not succeed, given that Robby will disappear, leaving his parents in a state of desperate anguish.

The anguish is so painful that the fictional Ellis fails to find the words to describe it: 'When we were told that Robby Dennis was now officially missing I could not describe the sounds Jayne began making, and neither could the writer' (707).

Considering Ellis's attempts to change, to be a better husband and a better father, in sum, to redeem himself, I argue that, in this way, he tried to evolve from the narrative of his public persona, over which he had lost control, thus placing himself in a *passive* position, to the narrative of a *new*, perhaps idealised or more honest Bret Easton Ellis, of whose construction he is now in charge, regaining agency over his public persona and taking on an *active* position. He moves from an o*bject* – manipulated, reified, passive – to a *subject*, subverting the neoliberal mechanism of commodification and, in this sense, operating an aware/*active* use of autofiction. This is indeed a political operation, possible only with autofiction. To better understand this point, it is useful to explore the role of the *ghost*, the *spectre* in *Lunar Park*; and, in particular, the work on hauntology pursued by the British radical thinker Mark Fisher, and the kind of relation that it can, as I shall argue, entertain with the literary genre of autofiction.

The concept of *hauntology*, elaborated by Fisher in his 2014 essay collection *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, is based on the concept of *hauntologie* developed by Jacques Derrida in his 1994 book *Spectres of Marx*. Fisher writes that the idea of *hauntologie*

> was the successor to previous concepts of Derrida's such as the trace and différance; like those earlier terms, it referred to the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence. Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does. (Fisher 40)

Then Fisher clarifies that, according to Martin Haagglund, the *spectre* as intended by Derrida 'marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet' (41), arguing that we have to 'think of hauntology as the agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing' (41). At this point, Fisher argues that 'we can provisionally distinguish two directions in hauntology. The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which remains effective as a virtuality (the traumatic "compulsion to repeat", a fatal pattern). The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour)' (42). Starting

from this point, Fisher elaborates his own definition of *hauntology*. According to Fisher, therefore, we are as a society obsessed not only by a past that we have not been able to process and face – think, for instance, of crimes perpetrated by the UK, France, and Italy in their colonialist past – but also obsessed by all the *possible futures* that never happened. In this sense, Fisher refers to his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, writing that 'the era of what I have called "capitalist realism" – the widespread belief that there is no alternative to capitalism – has been haunted not by the apparition of the spectre of communism, but by its disappearance' (Fisher 43). All the utopias that characterised the 1960s and 1970s are now gone, along with all the hopes they used to incarnate. What we have now is a nostalgia for a future that never happened (45) but that still – through its spectres – torments us by its absence/presence. Fisher's reflection on hauntology is extremely rich, fecund, and exciting, and there is no way to summarise it in all its complexity in a few lines without the risk of being disrespectful. Therefore, I focus on the question of what may be called the spectre of the lost future and what it has to do with Ellis's autofiction, and autofiction in general. Derrida's notion of hauntology has already been applied to *Lunar Park* by Esther Peeren in her 2012 essay "Ghostly Generation Games: Multidirectional Hauntings and Self-Spectralization in Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*". In this essay, Peeren acutely argues that in *Lunar Park* Ellis is persecuted by the spectres of his literary creations, over which he no longer has any control. One of them is, obviously, Patrick Bateman:

> Patrick Bateman—the protagonist of *American Psycho*—is performatively produced or conjured by Bret's writing as something that is no longer under his control. The resistance, horror, fear, and repulsion that characterize Bret's reaction to his own passivity in the face of the ghostwriting 'spirit' point to his desire to exorcise, his 'not wanting to know' and, concomitantly, the (necessary) failure of absolute hospitality. Bateman haunts Lunar Park as a textual revenant from this ghostwriting passage until Bret 'kills' him by writing a story in which he dies (Peeren 5).

Therefore, it seems that Patrick Bateman's spectre could be defeated only by the creation of another spectre of Bateman himself, one over whom the author – through the *active* act of (re)writing – has new agency. It is interesting to note that in *Lunar Park* Patrick Bateman is characterised from the beginning as an entity over whom Ellis, even as his creator, never had proper control. When describing the process of writing *American Psycho*, Ellis explains:

> What I didn't—and couldn't—tell anyone was that writing the book had been an extremely disturbing experience. That even though I had planned to base Patrick Bateman on my father, someone—something—else took over and caused this new character to be my only

> reference point during the three years it took to complete the novel. What I didn't tell anyone was that the book was written mostly at night when the spirit of this madman would visit, sometimes waking me from a deep, Xanax-induced sleep. (Ellis 41)

In *Lunar Park* Bateman persecutes Ellis continuously and in various forms, until Ellis decides to face him, realising that 'If I had created Patrick Bateman I would now write a story in which he was uncreated and his world was erased' (676). Therefore, I argue that, through the active act of writing (in this case, *rewriting*), Ellis manages to retake control, or even take control for the first time, over something he created but which suddenly became something else, and ultimately took him over and persecuted him. This *something*, which Patrick Bateman in *Lunar Park* turned into and Ellis needs to destroy, is, I argue, a reference to the controversies that had surrounded *American Psycho* since its publication: controversies that, as we have seen, overshadowed the quality of the novel and its political potential. This is the Patrick Bateman who persecutes Ellis and whom Ellis wants to destroy: something he created and lost control of, which then came back in another form. This form represents the image of Patrick Bateman as it has been reshaped by the public and some of the critics, and the form that overshadowed the *real* Patrick Bateman as he was conceived by Ellis: a critique of consumerism and neoliberal values. In fact, in *Lunar Park*, it turns out that the Patrick Bateman persecuting Ellis and his family was not the *real* Patrick Bateman, but a mentally disturbed man obsessed with the character. Rewriting Bateman's story means, I argue, regaining agency over something he created but ended up being *written* by others, becoming a ghost haunting Ellis during his literary career.

In her article, Peeren also points out that at a certain stage in *Lunar Park* even the character Bret Easton Ellis adopts the guise of a *ghost*:

> In the third chapter of the novel Bret explicitly identifies as a ghost, when he wakes up disoriented and walks through the house wrapped in a sheet. His feelings of self-alienation are emphasized by erratic shifts between first- and third-person description. (Peeren 6)

Ellis's *self-spectralisation* of himself is extremely interesting because it raises the suspicion that perhaps Ellis had another kind of spectre to exorcise, aside from those of his father and his literary characters, as identified by Peeren. If Peeren insists on the fact that Ellis is persecuted by his literary creation, over which he has lost his control as an author, my argument is that there is a more important ghost that haunts Ellis: the spectre of his public image, over which, as we have already seen, he has lost control because of its mediatisation, because of its objectification of his persona. Therefore, in

order to *kill*, to exorcise this spectre, he has to use the same procedure, as noted by Peeren, used to kill Patrick Bateman, which is to produce another version of himself over which he has control again. In this way the autofictional Ellis evolves from being a *passive* object – with a reified public image (a commodity) – to an *active* subject (an author and father), who is in charge again of his own identity, even if it is only spectral. It is for this reason that in the novel he slowly *takes shape*, changing from a *ghost* to an active subject who tries to redeem himself as a father, an author, and a human being in general. This procedure – which is political, because it tends to reverse the neoliberal commodification strategy – was possible, again, only through the literary genre of autofiction, given that autofiction constitutively operates between biography and fiction, between reality and *spectre*. Again: what is autofiction if not the creation of a spectral self?

In this regard, even the literary choice of giving a fictive son to the character Bret Easton Ellis is somehow revelatory, and it is at this point that Fisher's definition of hauntology takes centre stage. In fact, I argue, Ellis's literary spectre aims not only to exorcise the persecutory ghosts of his past – his father, Patrick Bateman, and so on – but also to exorcise Ellis's *lost future*, which is what could have been and never happened, or what happened only partially and which creates a form of *nostalgia*. Among these lost futures, there is obviously his being a *father*, a better father than his own was to him. Moreover, the creation, through autofiction, of a new self that he is in control of again in *Lunar Park*, even if it is imaginary, offered him a double opportunity: first, to destroy that mediatised public persona that overshadowed his work and, at the same time, especially in the first part of *Lunar Park*, to unveil that mechanism through which his identity was commodified, therefore adding a new chapter to his critique of the neoliberal commodifying strategy. Through the use of autofiction, Ellis manages to *rewrite* his past and bring back to life one of the many futures that never happened or that happened only in part: the future where that personal image he helped create has not partially overshadowed the political potential of his literary work, a political potential that in *Lunar Park* through autofiction he managed to, as already said, bring back to life. This is a kind of future that now, thanks to autofiction, can still exist and that maybe, again, thanks to autofiction, already does.

CONCLUSIONS

In *Lunar Park*, as we have seen, Ellis continues his critique of the neoliberal strategy of commodifying every aspect of people's lives, which he has pursued throughout his career. This is a strategy that, as we have seen, started with the commodification of emotions and relationships in *Less*

than Zero, continued with the obsession with consumerism in *American Psycho*, and concluded with the commodification of personal identities in *Glamorama* and *Lunar Park*. Ellis, through the literary genre of autofiction, manages to take back control over his commodified public persona and to reclaim the political potential of his literary work and, to a certain extent, to redeem himself. In this sense, Ellis's approach is similar to that of Houellebecq's; however, there is a substantial difference between them. If Houellebecq decided to *kill* his public image in order to give the last word to his literature, Ellis manages – or at least tries – to retake control of his identity, his *name*, offering in this sense a sort of hope: let us face our ghosts, let us listen to them, let us become aware that there is not only one possible past, present, or future. Because, as Fisher taught us, nostalgia for a possible future – which never happened and that is thus lost – can be depressing and devastating, but it can also be fecund, even revolutionary, because it pushes us to ask ourselves – as Ellis did in *Lunar Park* – at what point and why this possible future did not happen. It is precisely in this space that, as the Italian radical thinker and philosopher Franco "Bifo" Berardi wrote, we must look in order to find – and then cultivate – 'the germs of possibility' (12).

Chapter 4: The Autofiction of Walter Siti

Io voglio inocularmi il presente,
capire in me la malattia del mondo
Walter Siti
(*I want to inoculate myself with the present,*
understand within me the disease of the world)

Anche la mia letteratura, oltre alla
mia persona, è tutta un bluff
Walter Siti
(*Also my literature, besides*
my person, it's all a bluff)

INTRODUCTION

Walter Siti is, to a certain extent, a separate case compared to the other two writers analysed in this thesis, Bret Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq. Siti made his debut as a narrative writer in the second part of his life – he published his first novel, *Scuola di nudo*, in 1994, at the age of 47 – while the other two started to publish narratives at a young age. Ellis and Houellebecq immediately reached a wide public, while Siti had to await the 2006 publication of his third novel, *Troppi paradisi*, before becoming known by a non-specialist audience. However, one substantial difference, and the most relevant for the purpose of this thesis, is that Walter Siti has never reached the kind of success of Ellis and Houellebecq, and, by consequence, he has never achieved their level of notoriety. Therefore, one of the methods I applied in the previous chapters – the analysis of autofiction as an author's attempt to retake control of their public image, which had overshadowed the author's literary

work, and the consequent unveiling of the market's strategies – risks being unproductive in this case. However, there is a common thread between Siti, Ellis, and Houellebecq, which is the use of the literary genre of autofiction in a way that is consciously *political*, in the sense that it represents a substantiated critique of contemporary society, a critique that, again, was only made possible through autofiction. As demonstrated by the Italian academic and critic Valentina Sturli in her 2020 essay *Estremi occidenti. Frontiere del contemporaneo in Walter Siti e Michel Houellebecq*, Siti has a lot in common with Michel Houellebecq in terms of themes and poetic vision, and this was made explicit by Siti himself in his 2006 novel *Troppi paradisi*, where we find a Houellebecq quotation at the beginning of the novel (2). Siti shares with Houellebecq an interest in the relationship between neoliberalism, consumerism, and sexuality, and the consequent reification of human feelings and personal relationships, which, according to the two authors, replicates the logic of economic neoliberalism, now hegemonic. In particular, as specified by Siti, in a 2019 conversation with Matilde Quarti, it is the reflections on consumerism and sexual desire that will lead Siti to write in 1994 – after 12 years of gestation – his first novel, *Scuola di nudo*. These reflections started casually during a *flânerie* in Paris:

> È stato a Parigi, che è una città dove vado spesso perché mi sento a casa, mentre girellavo tra Rue Saint-Denis, il Beaubourg e Les Halles, un imbuto pieno di negozi. Era una specie di paradiso della merce, il Beaubourg rappresentava la merce intellettuale e Saint-Denis quella sessuale. Allora mi sono detto: "Sono nel triangolo della merce, e forse i miei desideri sessuali hanno le stesse caratteristiche di questo consumismo". (Siti 2)
>
> (It happened in Paris, a city that I visit often because I feel at home, while I was strolling between Rue Saint-Denis, the Beaubourg and Les Halles, a choke point full of shops. It felt like some kind of commodities paradise, the Beaubourg represented the intellectual goods and Saint-Denis the sexual goods. Then I said to myself 'I'm the triangle of commodities, and maybe my sexual desires have the same characteristics of this consumerism').

Siti felt that his own sexual desires – muscular male bodies, mainly prostitutes, thus *commodified* – had something in common with neoliberal consumerism in general; therefore, as he claims in an interview with the Italian critic Carlo Mazza Galanti, he started to think that his own *monstrosity* (128) – he had always perceived himself, because of his sexual obsessions, as a monster, thus something *abnormal* – was on the contrary *typical*, representative of the majority:

> Allora ho detto: vuoi vedere che invece di essere un mostro sono tipico? Perché il mio desiderare corpi mercificati è nel centro esatto di questo triangolo: voglio fare una cosa artistica, utilizzando un corpo e trattandolo come una merce. Una volta capito questo ho pensato che valeva la pena raccontarlo, perché poteva essere una cosa più universale e non solamente il lamento di un mostriciattolo. (Siti 128-129)
>
> (Then I said: could it be that instead of being a monster, I am typical? As my desire for commodified bodies is located exactly in the centre of this triangle: I want to do something artistic, using a body and treating it like a commodity. Once I realised this, I thought that it was worth telling, because it could be something more universal and not only the lament of a critter).

It is at that point that Siti began to reflect on whether to narrate his own story, maybe through an autobiography. This choice might appear practical, given that his aim was to narrate *himself*, his personal experience, and to claim that his own relationship with consumerism and sexual desire was representative of a general tendency. However, Siti understood that a *traditional* autobiography – the retrospective record in prose that a real person gives of his or her own being, according to Lejeune (14) – was not somehow *solid* enough, that it would lack something and that it thus needed something *else* to support it:

> Mi chiedevo: cos'è che conosco veramente bene? Quello che mi succede. Quindi partiamo da lì. Quasi subito però ho capito che il me stesso empirico sarebbe stato troppo debole, così mi sono inventato un me stesso aumentato, come si dice della realtà aumentata. L'idea mi venne leggendo i saggi sul romanzo di Kundera, dove a un certo punto parla di *moi expérimental* dicendo che intende *sperimentale* nel senso zoliano del termine, quindi prendere l'io e metterlo in situazioni diverse, come fanno gli scienziati con le sostanze chimiche per vedere come reagiscono. Ho capito che quella era la mia strada, dovevo prendere l'io e buttarlo in situazioni che avrei voluto vivere ma non ho vissuto e vedere come andava a finire. (Siti 117)
>
> (I was asking myself: what is it that I really know well? What happens to me. So let's start from there. Almost immediately though, I realised that my empiric self would have been too weak, so I made up an enhanced version of myself, as they say about augmented reality. This idea came to me reading the essays by Kundera on the novel, where at a certain point he talks about an 'experimental self', stating that he means 'experimental' as intended by Zola, i.e. taking the self and putting it in different situations, as scientists do with chemical

> substances to see how they react. I realised that was my path, I had to take the self and throw it in situations that I would have wanted to experience, but I didn't, and see the outcome).

Therefore, Siti decided to use his own *self* as the main character of his first novel *Scuola di nudo*; a character that shared name and occupation – university professor and literary critic – but that contained also a number of incongruities, and that lived experiences that, as Siti often stated, the *real* Walter Siti never experienced, maintaining thus a continuous tension between fiction and autobiographical elements. This tension, and the systematic and programmatic ambiguity between reality and fiction, is the focus of the second line of reasoning that will be explored in this chapter. Siti, in my view, seems to suggest that this *ambiguity* between reality and fiction is typical of our contemporary era, and that nowadays, because of the influence of mass media and the evolution of new technologies, this ambiguity is also constitutive of our personal identities. This ambiguity is then subjected to a sort of overturning: the fictional part becomes predominant, giving birth to *partially fictional* identities, systematically confused between reality and fiction. This phenomenon in particular (among many others that unfortunately cannot be discussed in this chapter for reasons of space) is at the core of Siti's most famous and praised autofiction, *Troppi paradisi*, which is the work analysed in this chapter because it is most relevant for the main hypothesis of this thesis: the existence of a political use of the literary genre of autofiction. In this sense, it seems to me that Siti's political discourse coagulates in one specific line of reasoning, which is the way in which Siti grasps and articulates his relationship with *desire*, not only in sexual terms but in a wider sense, as representative of a general tendency (related to the neoliberal strategy of commodifying everything). This commodification – and this is the second argument – also permeates the personal identity, which becomes a commodity like all the other commodities, and leads to the shaping of what Christian Laval, Pierre Dardot, and Byung-Chul Han have defined as the neoliberal subject; a kind of subject that has *introjected* and therefore reproduces neoliberalist logic. Therefore, in this chapter I shall try to answer to the following questions: why does Siti think that his personal obsessions are somehow related to a general tendency? Why did Siti decide to use the literary genre of autofiction and why can this choice be considered political? I shall try then to demonstrate the core point of my thesis: that autofiction is the most appropriate way to approach these issues.

In the first section of this chapter, I shall analyse the ways in which Siti addresses, in his work in general and in *Troppi paradisi* in particular, the relationship between neoliberalism and personal desire. Siti's reflections on the influence of mass media, and in particular reality shows, as a major actor in the Italian context in these processes of subjectivation and construction of personal identity

will be a substantial object of analysis. Then, I will address Siti's choice to use autofiction and why he decided to use his personal experience, his *I*, as exemplary of certain contemporary tendencies, which are now dominant and are related to certain mechanisms typical of neoliberal logic. Ultimately, I shall introduce the distinction between *unconscious*/*passive* autofiction and *conscious*/*active* autofiction. In this chapter I hope to demonstrate that the aim of Siti's critique could only have been reached through the literary genre of autofiction. After all, it is not by chance that Siti once wrote that 'io voglio inocularmi il presente, capire in me la malattia del mondo' ('I want to inoculate myself with the present, understand within me the disease of the world'; 221).

SITI, IDENTITY, NEOLIBERALISM, DESIRE

Reflections on desire, obsession with consumerism, and identity in the neoliberalist era are certainly central in Siti's work. He articulated these reflections in the literary trilogy he wrote between 1982 and 2006, composed of the autofictional novels *Scuola di nudo*, *Un dolore normale*, and *Troppi paradisi*, where the main protagonist is the character Walter Siti. This character – as autofiction's tradition dictates – corresponds only partially with the author, who, at the beginning of *Scuola di nudo*, defines the match between his name and that of his main character as a 'sconcertante omonimia' (Siti 2) ('disconcerting homonymy'). The character Walter Siti – as well as his creator – is obsessed by a particular type of desire: muscular male bodies, mainly bodybuilders, and in fact, in his 2006 novel *Troppi paradisi* a bodybuilder called Marcello is at the centre of the narration. Marcello – who previously appeared in Siti's 2004 short story collection *La magnifica merce* – is a former professional bodybuilder raised and bred in Rome's suburbs, who prostitutes himself in order to feed his addiction to cocaine. *Troppi paradisi* has been praised as one of the most important Italian novels of the recent years. It immediately received much attention from Italian critics, and its status as autofiction made it slightly difficult to compare it to other recent Italian literary productions; this is why two of the most interesting contemporary writers, Nicola Lagioia and Giuseppe Genna, felt the need to refer to more international comparisons, like American postmodernism, or even two old friends of this thesis: Bret Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq. In a 2006 article dedicated to *Troppi paradisi*, Nicola Lagioia wrote:

> Un ulteriore motivo per cui l'Einaudi dovrebbe fare di tutto per esportare all'estero questo romanzo. Ci aiuterebbe a superare il provincialissimo complesso di inferiorità che da qualche anno ci prende quando leggiamo Houellebecq o Easton Ellis. Ecco, un autore in grado di reggere il confronto adesso ce l'abbiamo, con buona pace degli onesti lavori dei Tabucchi e delle Mazzucco. (Lagioia 4)
>
> (There is a further reason why the publishing house Einaudi should do its utmost to export this novel abroad. It would help our narrow-minded inferiority complex that we suffer from reading Houellebecq or Easton Ellis. There, now we have an author that can hold a candle, no offence to the honest work of writers like Tabucchi and Mazzucco).

This enthusiasm was shared by Giuseppe Genna, who wrote:

> *Troppi paradisi* è in assoluto il primo esempio di postmodernismo in Italia da molti anni a questa parte: non sfiorando mai, se non in un punto preciso, che merita trattazione a sé – il tragico, trova una forma per il tragico nella contemporaneità. Questo è ciò che la critica italiana non ha mai compreso, citando un postmoderno che non è mai stato l'equivalente del postmodernism angloamericano. Siti riesce nell'impresa, aggiungendo ciò che agli angloamericani non riesce: stende un romanzo che può dirsi pensiero in movimento e che commuove. (Genna 2)
>
> (*Troppi paradisi* has been the best example of postmodernism in Italy for many years now: despite never dealing with tragedy – except for a specific point, deserving a reading on its own – it finds a place for tragedy in contemporaneity. This is what Italian critics have never understood, mentioning a postmodern that was never an equivalent of Anglo-American postmodernism. Siti succeeds in the endeavour, adding what Anglo-Americans cannot add; he writes out a novel that can call itself moving and in-motion thinking).

Troppi paradisi's plot is quite simple: the character Walter Siti falls desperately in love with Marcello, and this relationship unleashes – through the alternation between literature and sociological analysis, which is one of Siti's characteristic features – a series of reflections on the relationship between desire, obsession, and consumerism. The question of desire, as already mentioned, is central in all Siti's works – in a 2017 video-interview given to the Italian website *Fanpage,* Siti claimed that sometimes he felt as if he had written only *one* book which had desire as its nuclear centre – and it is inextricably bound to consumerism and commodification, given his obsession with male prostitutes.

The figure of the bodybuilder is very important because – according to Siti – the bodybuilders' bodies subsume the idea of bodies that are *artificially produced* in order to *adapt* to the bodies represented by television, the idea of bodies that are *built* in order to be sold, bodies that are – as claimed by Siti in a 2019 book-length interview edited by Mazza Galanti – 'preparati per essere merce' ('built to be goods'; 123). Therefore, according to Siti, there is a relationship between consumerism, commodification, and desire; indeed, as he posited in the aforementioned video-interview, 'il consumismo – nella forma in cui negli anni è andato evolvendosi – non sarebbe potuto esistere senza il desidero' ('consumerism, in the way it has evolved over the years, could not have existed without desire'; min. 4:00). As stated by Siti, consumerism substituted the human tendency to desire an *absolute* – religion, art, love, happiness, etcetera – with the desire for the *surrogate* of this absolute, its *image*, which means its commodified version. As has been well explained by the Italian critic, academic, and writer Alberto Casadei (59), Siti claims that at a certain point the whole Western economic and social system – neoliberalism – evolved in order to substitute for desire of the Absolute (God, for instance, a kind of desire that was constitutively unattainable) a kind of desire based on consumerism, which was attainable because *concrete* and palpable: the desire for consumer goods. At the same time – and this is the greatest deception of consumerism – consumerism offered the illusion that *every kind of desire* was (through goods) effectively attainable. Furthermore, Siti posits that neoliberalism managed to substitute concrete *reality* with an *image*, which, explains Casadei, corresponds to the materiality of what can be desired without corresponding to anything *concrete*:

> La posizione del Siti-sosia […] viene chiarita ripetutamente: l'intero sistema sociale dell'Occidente si è evoluto per sostituire Dio con un desiderio realizzabile, e ha fatto sì che la materialità del reale-reale venisse progressivamente sostituita dalla sua immagine, ovvero da una iper – o post – realtà che corrisponde a quanto è umanamente desiderabile, senza corrispondere a niente di concreto. (Casadei 59)

> (The position of the Siti doppelganger […] is repeatedly clarified: the entire social system of the Western world has evolved to replace God with an achievable desire and has ensured that the materiality of the true reality was progressively replaced with its image, namely a hyper- or post-reality that corresponds to what is humanly desirable, without leading to anything concrete).

Therefore, if everything can be reduced to an impalpable image – even the illusion of an absolute reduced to, let us say, an absolute *prêt à porter* –, everything can thus be reproduced, substituted, commodified, and sold. In this sense, everything can therefore be *controlled*. As can be

seen, here comes the neoliberalist strategy again to commodify and then control every aspect of life, the same strategy that was the core of my approach to the novels by Houellebecq and Easton Ellis analysed in the previous chapters of this thesis.

As he argued in the interview with Mazza Galanti, Siti considered his own relationship with obsession, consumerism, and desire to be *typical*, representative of a general tendency. Because – as he writes in *Troppi paradisi* – 'io non so degli altri, so solo di me stesso' ('I don't know anything about others, I only know myself'; 62), he problematises this relationship in *Troppi paradisi*'s third chapter, evocatively titled "Io Sono l'Occidente" ("I Am the Western Society"). In this chapter, Siti claims that in his view, the main aim of Western society is to create the conditions for an existence without any kind of absolute, like God, for instance. This obviously leads to the loss of any hope for a life after death, and therefore the loss of hope for any kind of Heaven. Siti posits as well that 'nessuno crede più *davvero* nell'esistenza di un altro mondo, col Paradiso e la resurrezione delle anime. Se ci credessero, vivrebbero in tutt'altra maniera' ('Nobody *actually* believes in the existence of another world, with Paradise and resurrection of souls. If they believed in it, they would live in a totally different way'; 133). Siti explains that if we lose any hope in an afterlife, this *vertical* hope can be substituted by a more *horizontal* one: a paradise on earth, which is, according to Siti, consumerism's society final aim:

> per resistere senza speranza nell'aldilà, e nel Paradiso, bisogna poter sperare nel paradiso in terra. […] Dare l'illusione del paradiso in terra è l'obiettivo finale del consumismo; o, se si vuole, il consumismo è una protesta contro l'inesistenza di Dio. (Siti 133)
>
> (In order to resist with no hope for an afterlife and for paradise, you need to be able to hope for paradise on earth […] To give the illusion of paradise on earth is the final aim of consumerism; or, if you would, consumerism is a form of protest against the inexistence of God).

According to Siti, after having substituted – through goods, through consumerism – the absolute with the illusion of a paradise on earth, with the illusion that the absolute could be *concrete* and thus attainable, neoliberalism's second step was to substitute *concrete reality* with its derivative *image*, something that is – as already discussed – not *real* but that *refers* to something real: its abstract emanation. The inspiration for this development came, Siti explains, from art and literature:

> Fin da quando Dio c'era ancora, e la realtà era puzzolente, bruta, refrattaria, l'arte garantiva una via di mezzo, un mondo alternativo informato a una *ratio* superiore. A ogni scatto in

> avanti dell'economia, man mano che i cittadini d'Occidente facevano una vita più meccanizzata e standard, l'arte li risarciva di quel che andavano perdendo, i fiori i sentimenti puri l'eccesso di infanzia. In quell'universo parallelo che assomigliava tanto alla realtà (questo spiega l'altra anomalia occidentale di un'arte *realistica*), ma che si poteva comprare, niente era più sottratto all'onnipotenza dell'uomo. Potevi tenerti in casa l'immagine di due geishe che traversano un ponte sullo sfondo del Fujiyama, il dibattito tra due intellettuali rinchiusi in un sanatorio, il sorriso di un parente defunto. L'*Immagine*, ecco la parola magica. Se si accettava che la realtà fosse sostituita dall'immagine della realtà, il paradiso in terra tornava ad essere possibile. (Siti 134)
>
> (Ever since God was still around, and reality was stinky, brute and refractory, art would guarantee a middle way, an alternative informed world with a higher ratio. With every financial step forward, as Western citizens were living an increasingly mechanized and standardized life, art would restore what they were missing, the flowers, the pure feelings, the overload of infancy. Within that parallel universe that looked so much like reality (and this explains the other Western anomaly of a *realistic* art), but that you could buy, nothing was taken away from the almightiness of man. You could keep in your home the picture of two geishas crossing a bridge with the Fujiyama mountain in the background, the discussion between two intellectuals confined in a sanatorium, the smile of a deceased relative. The image, here is your magic word. If you accepted that reality would be substituted by the image of reality, paradise on earth could be possible again).

In sum, according to Siti, this is the kind of relationship with desire that became dominant: the desire for *images* that can be – given that images are manipulable – modelled and therefore imposed by neoliberalism itself. The reason Siti claims his relationship with desire is typical is because he is able to conceive only of a kind of desire that is related to images, and thus a desire related to consumerism and therefore to reification. In sum, we can say it is a commodified and reified version of desire. Therefore, if, according to Siti, contemporary desire is inexorably related to the reification of the objects of desire – and to reification in general – it is no surprise that Siti has an obsession for male bodybuilders, considering that their bodies are 'preparati per essere merce' ('built to be goods'; 123). These male bodybuilders, who prostitute themselves, according to Siti (124), *design* themselves in order to adhere to the models imposed by mass media and, in this way, they hope to become more appealing to the market. They are the quintessential example of the neoliberal subject; a kind of subject that, as we have seen, perceives itself as an *enterprise* and that therefore *designs* itself according to market logic. This reflection raises two problems: who decides what kind of models we *have* to adhere to and, secondly, what are the ways in which we try to adhere to those

imposed models in order to become more appealing? The first point has already been analysed in the previous chapters of this thesis: it is the market itself that imposes and produces the models to adhere to and that absorb everything *subversive*, as we have seen with Houellebecq and Ellis; it is neoliberalism itself that positions and organises *desire*, imposing which models are *worthy* of being desired (and the *objects* we need in order to adhere to these models) through the mass media. The second point, however, deserves more space because it is very fruitful for the further development of this thesis, and in particular because it allows me to further explore the potentially productive concepts of *unconscious* (*passive*) autofiction and *conscious* (*active*) autofiction. These two concepts, as we shall see, can be interpreted as a mass trend. In order to explain this point, we might start from something that is common ground for both Siti and Houellebecq: mass tourism. In fact, as we have seen in *La carte et Le territoire*, Houellebecq reflects on how certain places in France – though the tendency can include any place – *modified* themselves in order to meet the expectations of the tourists. In *Troppi Paradisi* Siti makes a very similar reflection when he writes:

> Il turismo è l'altro grande marchingegno inventato dall'Occidente per de-realizzare il mondo. Andava ancora bene quando il turista partiva per luoghi avventurosi, dove non l'aspettavano; era una conoscenza superficiale, ma pur sempre di qualcosa che si poteva definire realtà. Pian piano il turista ha cominciato a frequentare luoghi preparati per lui: ogni punto bello del mondo è diventato un set. (Siti 157)

> (Tourism is the other great contrivance invented by the West to derealise the world. Everything was still fine when tourists would go to adventurous places, where they were not expected: it was a superficial acquaintance, but still something that could be defined as reality. Slowly tourists have begun travelling to places set up for them: every beautiful place in the world has turned into a set).

Therefore, according to both Houellebecq and Siti, we see the places (the *territories*) that tend to change themselves in order to *adhere* to the way they are *represented* by mass media, and therefore to meet the expectations of the market. Moreover, we have seen that, according to Siti, Western society has substituted the *real* with its *image*; here, we can witness the opposite phenomenon: it is the *real* that tries to adhere to its *image*; but an image that is *second-hand*. The real tries to fit an image that has been already manipulated and imposed by the market, and that has very little to do with the *real* it is supposed to evoke. This reflection can be extended to the people who try to adhere to models that have been manipulated and imposed by the market, as we have seen in the previous

chapters, where the way in which Houellebecq and Ellis problematise their public personas has been addressed. Siti seems to agree with this point when in *Troppi paradisi* he writes that

> i ragazzi di periferia sperano per il loro futuro di diventare come i ragazzi dei cartelloni, che i sarti hanno truccato da ragazzi di periferia. Viviamo dentro uno show il cui regista è la scommessa occidentale di fare a meno di un Creatore (con la conseguenza che dobbiamo essere i creatori di noi stessi). (Siti 34)
>
> (the slum boys hope for their future to become just like the boys on the billboards, that tailors have prepared to look like slum boys. We live in a show where the puppeteer is the Western challenge to do without a Maker [and as a result we have to be the makers of ourselves]).

It is in this sense that, I argue, it is possible to refer to a sort of *mass passive/unconscious autofiction*; passive in the sense that the people who try to adapt, to adhere to these imposed models, which are a form of autofiction, do it without knowing either that it is an autofiction or the mechanism that lies behind this other-directed *adaptation*. It is therefore a passive, unconscious autofiction. This kind of autofiction, I argue, is opposite to the one elaborated by Siti – as well as by Houellebecq and Ellis. In fact, their kind of autofiction is, on the contrary, conscious and planned in order to achieve an *aim*, to pursue a *truth* concerning the mechanisms that rule our contemporary era; it is therefore an *active* and *political* use of autofiction, as we shall see better in the next section of this chapter. To conclude this section, in my view it seems therefore that the tendency that is becoming dominant is to *adapt* to a model imposed by the market in order to become more appealing – as Siti puts it, to be makers of ourselves (134). This is a self which, in order to find a place on the market – any kind of market –, needs to adhere to models that are imposed by the market itself. This means adhering to images that, as I have discussed, are produced and manipulated, thus reified and controlled. This tendency, as we have seen with both Houellebecq and Ellis, can be extended to everything, even people. It is at this point that the use of the literary genre of autofiction becomes decisive, because what is this move to *create ourselves*, to design our bodies or our lives in general, to try to adhere to models imposed by the market in order to become more appealing to it, if not a mass form of autofiction? Which other literary genre or instrument can be more appropriate for representing and problematising this general tendency, if not a literary genre that constitutively and programmatically blurs autobiographical and fictive elements? And besides, it was Siti himself who – in a 2015 pamphlet titled *Il realismo è l'impossibile* – wrote that the practice of autofiction is 'fiorita proprio

adesso, sull'onda del bisogno di mentire di un'intera società' ('Has begun just at this time, in the wake of a need to lie of the whole society'; 21).

WALTER SITI, COME TUTTI

Troppi paradisi is certainly an autofiction. It adheres perfectly to the definition of *autofiction* theorised by Gasparini, which means the presence of the name of the author, and several biographical elements, in a (more or less) fictive text. The Italian critic Lorenzo Marchese, in his fundamental 2014 essay *L'io possibile, l'Autofiction come Paradosso del romanzo contemporaneo*, compares Siti's autofictive approach to the one elaborated by the inventor of the term: Serge Doubrovsky (243). In his 2014 book, *Exit Strategy*, Siti himself often referred to his literary trilogy – *Scuola di nudo, Un dolore normale, Troppi paradisi* – as 'la mia trilogia autofittiva' ('my autofictive trilogy') (191). *Troppi paradisi*, therefore, is an autofiction, and the *admonition* at the beginning of the novel is rather explicit in this sense:

> Anche in questo romanzo, il personaggio Walter Siti è da considerarsi un personaggio fittizio: la sua è un'autobiografia di fatti non accaduti, un facsimile di vita. Gli avvenimenti *veri* sono immersi in un flusso che li falsifica; la realtà è un progetto, e il realismo è una tecnica di potere. […] Come nell'universo mediatico, anche qui più un fatto *sembra* vero, più si può stare sicuri che non è accaduto in quel modo […] Tutto l'impianto realistico, insomma, è un gigantesco soufflé pronto ad afflosciarsi in una poltiglia di finzione; punta estrema, forse, del quesito paradossale che regge la mia trilogia romanzesca: se l'autobiografia sia ancora possibile, al tempo della fine dell'esperienza e dell'individualità come spot. (Siti 2)

> (Also in this novel, the character of Walter Siti is to be considered a fictional character: his autobiography is made of facts that have not happened, a specimen life. The real circumstances are immersed in a counterfeiting flux of events; reality is a project, and realism is a technique of power […] As it happens in the media universe, in this novel the more an event seems real, the more sure you can be that it did not happen that way […] In other words, the whole realistic structure is a giant soufflé, ready to sag in a puddle of fiction; it is perhaps the tip of the paradoxical question that sustains my fictional trilogy: whether autobiography is still possible, at the time of the end of experience and individuality as advertisement).

The very first page of the novel, moreover, further confirms beyond all reasonable doubt Siti's autofictional approach:

> Mi chiamo Walter Siti, come tutti. Campione di mediocrità. Le mie reazioni sono standard, la mia diversità è di massa. Più intelligente della media, ma di un'intelligenza che serve per evadere. Anche questa civetteria di mediocrità è mediocre, come i ragazzi di borgata che indossano a migliaia le T-shirts con scritto "original"; notano la contraddizione e gli sembra spiritosa. L'eccezionalità occupa i primi cinque centimetri, tutto il resto è comune. Se non fossi medio, troverei l'angolatura per criticare questo mondo, e inventerei qualcosa che lo cambia. (Siti 3)
>
> (My name is Walter Siti, like everyone else. Champion of mediocrity. My reactions are average, my diversity is a massified. Smarter than average, but only to escape. Even this coquettish mediocrity is ordinary, as thousands of suburbs boys wear T-shirts that say 'original', they notice the contradiction and find it funny. My uniqueness covers the first 2 inches, all the rest is average. If I were not average, I would find the angle to criticize this world, and invent something to change it).

Walter Siti, therefore like everyone else. Aside from the hidden quotation taken from Erik Satie's autobiography ('Je m'appelle Erik Satie, comme tout le monde' [7]), which reinforces the unreliability of the narrator, we can isolate one interesting point here. In fact, the author makes clear that he wants to present himself – or better, his avatar – as *typical*; as already mentioned, Siti wants to describe his avatar as representative of a general tendency. We have already seen why: Siti claimed that his own relationship with consumerism and desire is typical of Western society. However, there is another reason why the character Walter Siti is 'come tutti' ('like everyone else'; 3), a reason that lies, I argue, in the way in which the author describes the mechanisms of television and how he suggests it influences our personal life, pushing us to adhere to externally imposed models – participating in the commodification of our personal identity – and undermining our ability to distinguish reality from fiction. Siti wants to describe this mechanism from the inside – as a 'microbo tra microbi' ('microbe among microbes'; 41) – because he is conscious of it and therefore able to analyse and then unveil it. As an operation that is possible only through the literary genre of autofiction, it therefore gives its author the opportunity to shift from a mass form of *passive/unconscious* autofiction to an *active/conscious* form of autofiction. In order to achieve these aims, Siti makes clear from the very beginning of the text that the character Walter Siti is fictional,

adding at the same time that in the novel he deliberately decided to hide the *real* facts in a flux of fiction. Then, the author explains how, in his stylistic strategy in *Troppi paradisi*, 'più un fatto *sembra* vero, più si può stare sicuri che non è accaduto in quel modo' ('the more an event seems real, the surer you can be that it did not happen that way'; Siti 2), relating this strategy to the way in which mass media, and television in particular, *re-elaborate* reality. Here Siti – considering his experience as script collaborator on various Italian reality shows – articulates an interesting point related to what he defines as *realtà depotenziata* ('disempowered reality'; 96). Siti explains that the narrative strategy used in so-called *reality TV* is to apply narrative techniques (a good drop of storytelling) to *real stories*. In this way, the stories become more appealing to the viewers, who are usually not able to spot the difference between fiction and reality:

> La televisione è piuttosto uno specchio deformante, che sta facendo subire alla realtà un'interessantissima torsione. È l'opposto del cinema. Se quando ti siedi al cinema vedi sullo schermo due persone che litigano, la prima cosa che pensi è che stiano recitando; se li vedi in televisione, pensi che sia una lite vera. Anche se, per ragioni di budget, si riempiono i palinsesti di fiction, resta che il proprio della televisione è far vedere la realtà. Dunque la realtà che passa in tivù è quella sola che spinge fin dove i protagonisti possono osare, e che non 'turba' gli spettatori. Quello che di solito, sbagliando, chiamiamo "irrealtà televisiva" è invece *realtà depotenziata*. La realtà mostrata in tivù deve essere accettabile (e produrre denaro): dunque è bene tenerla sotto controllo, aggiustarla *prima* che la telecamera la riprenda. […] Il cinema è realizzazione onirica, la tivù è onirizzazione (cioè addormentamento) del reale. La gente che ci va, anche se vera, è comunque "gente da televisione", già predisposta dentro e fuori a essere televisionabile. (Siti 96)

> (Television is rather a distorting mirror that is submitting reality to an extremely interesting twist. It is the opposite of cinema. If when you go to the cinema, you see two people arguing on the screen, the first thing you think is that they are acting; if you see them on TV, you believe that it is a real fight. Even if the programme schedule is filled with TV drama, what remains is that the feature of television is showing reality, therefore the reality shown through television is the one that pushes the limits as much as the characters can dare to handle, and that does not 'unsettle' the viewers. What we usually erroneously call 'unreality television', is instead *disempowered reality*. The reality shown on TV must be acceptable (and raise money), then it is better to keep it under control, fixing it before the camera starts filming. […] Cinema is an oneiric realization (or sedation) of reality. People that appear in television, even if real, are 'people for television' anyway, already set up on the inside and out to be processed according to the TV schemes).

In this passage Siti suggests, in my view, that television not only *represents* reality, but that it actively *produces* a new kind of approach to how reality is perceived. According to Siti, the kind of reality represented by television can be defined as a sort of *disempowered* reality; a representation of a reality that is controlled and rewritten before being broadcast. This process is accurately described by Siti in *Troppi paradisi* in the moment where the character Walter Siti collaborates on the script of an Italian talk show, therefore actively contributing to shaping this disempowered reality. In this passage, we see a couple invited onto the programme to talk about their dysfunctional relationship. Even if on-screen they seem to be talking *honestly* about their experience, their story and their dialogues have been written and re-elaborated by someone else, who carefully prepares the protagonists in order to avoid any improvisation or any unexpected reaction (Siti 132). The effect is that all the elements that can result in something *disturbing*, weird, or simply unexpected get polished, softened, or even deleted. All those characteristics that make reality *real* – the weird, the shocking, the unexpected: in other words, *real life* – get *domesticated*. The reason for this – in Siti's words – disempowered reality is to offer the public a version of reality with nothing that can potentially hurt people's feelings or convictions. Nothing disturbing or even subversive can even be conceived, and when the unexpected suddenly appears, it immediately gets domesticated. This is the case in an episode of the television show on which the character Walter Siti works, where a young girl is planning to come on the show in order to confess her love for another girl. The girl hopes that in exposing herself by making such a personal and delicate confession in front of a camera, the girl with whom she is in love will understand how much she loves her. Then, the producers of the show ask the character Walter Siti to *delete* the homosexuality of the young girl, and to write a story where she has just broken up with her boyfriend (Siti 141). It is at this point that Siti's concept of *depowered reality* becomes clearer: the *reality* of the young girl's identity – of which sexuality is an embedded part – is considered too disturbing for the Italian public, so it needs to be deleted and *substituted* – through the *writing* of the character Walter Siti – for a fictional version of her that does not include her sexuality. Moreover, in my view Siti seems to suggest that this tendency for television to *depower reality* has had massive consequences for the way in which the Italian public perceives the blurring of real stories and fiction. In this sense, I argue, people have lost the ability to distinguish the difference between the real stories and the fictive elements injected into those stories in order to become – in Siti's words – 'televisionabili' ('ready to be processed according to the TV schemes'; 96), which means people who are already predisposed to introject and spontaneously adapt to television schemes. This point is interesting because, I argue, these 'televisionabili' (96) people seem to tend to reproduce the behaviours of the people they watch on the reality shows, without bearing in

mind that they have been rewritten and re-elaborated. Therefore, it might be possible to define this phenomenon as a sort of collective *unconscious* autofiction. In order to represent this collective tendency, Siti uses as an example someone who is both *victim* and *perpetrator*: a famous Italian television personality named by Siti as the *TV Personality*. This TV personality is described as a woman who struggles between her *real self* and the character – the fictive self – that she created for the television:

> Il PT è talmente abituato a percepire il mondo attraverso dei filtri (l'agente, il factotum, la segretaria, la babysitter, i fan), che non gli passa nemmeno per l'anticamera del cervello che potrebbe per esempio afferrare la cornetta e scusarsi *personalmente*; il PT è solo per metà uomo, o donna: per l'altra metà è un effetto ottico, un'Immagine che lui stesso non padroneggia – quindi non capisce mai bene se a essere invitato è lui o l'Immagine, e chi dei due debba eventualmente reagire; per non cadere preda della schizofrenia, il PT decide che *talvolta* agisce come uomo (o donna), *talvolta* viene agito come Immagine; ma non gli si può chiedere anche di sincronizzare la coerenza delle azioni; se si fa scopare dall'agente, o scopa la segretaria, è per un bisogno umanissimo di autenticità, per cercare di unire le due parti scisse di sé. (Siti 84)

> (The TP [TV personality] is so used to perceiving the world through filters (agent, handyman, secretary, babysitter, fans) that the fact that she could for example pick up the phone and apologize *personally* does not cross its mind; the TP is just half man or woman; he or she is an optical effect for the other half, an image that it cannot really master itself – so he or she does not really know if the real person or the Image gets an invitation, and who between the two should potentially react. In order not to fall prey to schizophrenia, the TP has decided *sometimes* to act as a man [or woman] and *sometimes* he or she is *acted* out as an Image, but you can't really ask him or her to synchronize its actions coherently; if it gets fucked by the agent, or fucks the secretary, it does it for an extremely human need of authenticity, to try to unify its two split parts).

This scission between the *real* self and the *fictive* self diffused and imposed by television – which, according to Siti, does not even spare the people who *impose* the fictive models we tend to adhere to – can be considered an anthropological tendency, something that affects everyone, and that deserves to be analysed and problematised. Therefore – and here we come to one of the main arguments of this chapter – in order to represent this kind of individual shifting between *reality* and *dwered reality*, I argue, Siti decided to use the literary genre of autofiction, whose narrative subject is constitutively located between reality (autobiography) and fiction (the domesticated reality

imposed by television). Daniela Brogi seems to confirm this statement when, in a 2006 article, the Italian critic – albeit without referring to the genre of autofiction, using instead the definition of *narcissistic writer* – claims:

> Il narciso romanziere pretende di essere riconosciuto e creduto non in quanto visceralmente sincero, ma in quanto esibitamente – e esibizionisticamente – capace di ricettare e falsificare la realtà, producendo il medesimo effetto di reality provocato dalla cultura televisiva. (Brogi 3)
>
> (The narcissistic novelist claims to be acknowledged and believed not as viscerally sincere, but as able to fence and forge reality in a displayed and ostentatious way, producing the same reality effect of television culture).

Furthermore, the Italian critic Daniele Giglioli seems to confirm that Siti's choice of using autofiction is an appropriate way to develop and problematise this anthropological tendency when, in his 2011 essay *Senza trauma*, he writes that in *Troppi paradisi* 'l'autobiografia si trasforma automaticamente in sociologia' ('autobiography automatically turns into sociology') (82). Moreover, Giglioli touches on another interesting issue in a 2006 article, writing:

> La televisione non è irrealtà ma realtà impoverita, contingentata, ritoccata e riadattata secondo i tempi e le esigenze della produzione e degli sponsor; resa fruibile, consumabile, imitabile, e proprio perciò capace di generare per contagio una realtà extratelevisiva già pronta per essere ripresa e riformattata dalle telecamere. Non prevede e non permette alcun altrove, come invece l'arte, realtà intensificata, conflittuale, antagonistica, in perenne tensione tra l'immagine e la cosa, che nella società dello spettacolo collidono fino a diventare una sola sostanza: 'se non si può rappresentare tutta la vita, allora la vita non è altro che ciò che si rappresenta. (Siti 224)
>
> (Television is not unreality, but impoverished reality, tied to events, retouched and readjusted according to the needs of the producers and sponsors; made available, consumable, imitable and, precisely for all of this, able to generate through infection an extratelevised reality, already set to be filmed and reformatted by TV cameras. It doesn't foresee or allow any elsewhere, as art does, which provides an enhanced, conflictual, antagonistic reality in endless tension between the image and the object, which in show business end up colliding into one substance: if you can't represent the entire life, then life is nothing more than what you represent).

Here Giglioli points out that the consequence of this impoverished reality is to influence individuals to try to adapt their *real* lives to the depowered reality imposed by television. This attempt to adhere to the models of behaviour imposed by television is, according to both Giglioli and Siti, useful for television itself, given that if people tend to reproduce a domesticated reality, then television does not need to *adapt* the personal history of people, given that people are already *reproducing* and performing a kind of personal history that is – as claimed by Giglioli – 'set to be filmed and reformatted by television' (224). This kind of self-adaptation can be considered – as already mentioned – a form of mass unconscious/passive autofiction; a kind of autofiction that leads people to adhere to imposed models without any clue as to how the mechanism works. The Italian critic Giuseppe Carrara – in a 2018 essay titled 'Il gioco e l'erotismo: David Foster Wallace, Michel Houellebecq e Walter Siti' – claims that Siti shares with Houellebecq the concept that the neoliberal consumerist model incorporated both the sphere of sexuality and our perception of the body (Carrara 1), quoting Siti, who, in *Troppi paradisi*, writes that 'l'importante non è più quello che un corpo fa, ma come si scambia alla borsa del desiderio' ('what matters is no longer what a body does, but the way it performs in the desire stock market'; 150).

Therefore, we can say that – as I have pointed out in the previous chapters of this thesis, especially in the one devoted to Houellebecq – the neoliberalist strategy of commodifying everything has infected sex, love, and personal relationships. The same happens with our personal identity, because both our body, as we have seen with the bodybuilders, and our *behaviour* gain worth as much as they adhere to a model that has been imposed and promoted by neoliberalism itself through the mass media. Our personal identity, therefore, becomes something that can be manipulated in order to be more saleable, that can be bought and sold, and thus controlled, because it is the neoliberalism itself that decides the models, and obviously no potentially subversive or *disturbing* behaviour can be accepted. This is a kind of autofiction, because the irony is that we do our best to adapt to these models *spontaneously*, and this is a general tendency. In fact, in a 2011 interview, Siti claimed that:

> Ho l'impressione che sia in atto proprio un cambiamento di parametri, c'è l'idea che si può prendere un pezzo qui e un pezzo là e formarsi un'individualità *prêt à porter*, mentre il sentimento come lo immaginavamo noi presupponeva un'identità ben salda: un *individuo* prova sentimenti. Non siamo più così sicuri che l'individuo abbia delle radici e che non sia invece una 'cosa' creata prendendo un pezzo di verità da una parte, un pezzo di immagine dall'altra. (Siti 4)

> (I get the impression that a shift of standards is underway, there is the idea that you can take a piece here and another there to shape a *prêt à porter* individuality, while feelings as we used to imagine them implied a solid identity: an *individual* experiences feelings. We are not so sure that the individual has roots anymore and that it is not a 'thing' created by taking a bit of truth somewhere, a piece of image somewhere else).

This attitude, this unconscious/passive autofiction, is very similar to the one described – as we have seen – by Ellis in his 1999 novel *Glamorama*. In this novel, the main character Victor Ward is a young and handsome model who desperately wants to be famous, and whose identity contains nothing *personal*: it is instead a collection of advertisement slogan and jingles, and attitudes and behaviours taken from television shows and movies that he tries to replicate. In the chapter devoted to Ellis, I defined this attitude as self-branding, and it is like the one described by Siti through the character of the TP (TV personality), who continuously struggles to separate her personal identity from the one exhibited on the television show she hosts. In *Glamorama* Ellis describes this phenomenon as it appears in the celebrity world, but it can be extended as a mass phenomenon: a colossal unconscious/passive autofiction, the kind of autofiction to which Ellis, Houellebecq, and in this case Siti oppose an *active/conscious* autofiction. This means a conscious use of the literary genre of autofiction to problematise a mass phenomenon, and a kind of identity that – quoting the definition given by Gianluigi Simonetti for the identity of the character Walter Siti – is characterised by an 'incerto statuto di realtà' ('uncertain status of reality'; 3). As already noted, only through the conscious use of autofiction is it possible to analyse a general tendency to perform an unconscious autofiction, which is typical nowadays. Therefore, at this point it becomes clearer why Siti considers the character Walter Siti *typical*, why Giglioli defines Siti's autofiction – as already outlined – as an 'autobiografia che si trasforma automaticamente in sociologia' ('an autobiography that immediately turns into sociology'; 82), and also why Siti wanted to describe these mechanisms as a 'microbo tra microbi' ('microbe among microbes'; Siti 41).

Siti himself, moreover, has reflected extensively on his use of autofiction, and in the aforementioned book-length interview with Mazza Galanti, he begins to wonder if through the use of autofiction he was becoming a sort of accomplice (or even a *victim*) of the same mechanism he aimed to describe, problematise, and thus challenge:

> ho iniziato a tematizzare anche dentro di me quello che stavo facendo, mi sono posto la questione: sono l'amico del giaguaro? Non sto facendo esattamente quello che rimprovero ai media di fare? Da un certo punto di vista era come se pantografassi me stesso come la

> televisione pantografava i personaggi del *Grande Fratello*. L'unico appiglio che ho trovato per garantirmi che non stavo facendo una cattiva azione era pensare che mentre i media agiscono in un modo totalmente incosciente o peggio ancora peloso, cioè approfittando di questa esaltazione dell'io esercita per fare soldi, io lo stavo facendo in modo autocritico. Come se in qualche misura svelassi il gioco facendo vedere quali sono i meccanismi attraverso cui funziona. (Siti 127)
>
> (I have started to thematize also internally what I was doing, I wondered about this: am I taking sides with the enemy? Am I not doing exactly what I am reproaching the media for? From a certain point of view, it felt like I was pantographing myself as television was pantographing the characters of *Big Brother*. The only pretext I found to make sure I was not doing a bad thing was thinking that, whereas the media act in a completely reckless or, even worse, ruthless way, that is taking advantage of this excitement of the self to make money, I was doing it an autocritical way. As if I was unravelling the game, showing the mechanics through which it works).

In this self-exegetical passage, which is something that, as claimed by Marchese, Siti seems to like a lot (127), he offers a very prompt example of what I intend as the difference between active and passive autofiction. The difference is given by, as Siti seems to confirm, a conscious intention to use autofiction as an *active* instrument to unveil those mechanisms through which neoliberal logic imposes this mass *passive* autofiction I have identified. This is a kind of mechanism that, as I have already argued, can be represented and questioned only through the literary genre of autofiction. Siti has understood this mechanism and produced a kind of autofictive self that, because of its characteristics, could be defined, as we shall see, as an allegory of the entire Western society. As posited, in fact, by Francesca Giglio in her 2008 monograph on Walter Siti titled *Un'autobiografia di fatti non accaduti. La narrativa di Walter Siti*, 'la giustificazione del narcisismo del nostro autore è, a ben guardare, rappresentata dall'allegoria. Walter-sosia, infatti, è per sua stessa ammissione Occidente allegorizzato' ('The explanation of the narcissism of our author is, ultimately, represented by allegory. As a matter of fact, Walter's double is by his own admission the allegorized West'; Giglio 106). Therefore, the character Siti, as already argued, is a metaphor for Western society because he posits himself as an allegory of the mechanisms that rule our society. However, I think that there can also be *something else*. My argument is that the character Walter Siti is a metaphor for Western society because of his status as *avatar*, meaning that he is an *image*, a domesticated transposition of the *real* Walter Siti; he is a representation of the kind of identity, struggling between

reality and fiction, that is typical of our contemporary era. Therefore, the only way to represent this kind of identity is through autofiction, because

> L'io dell'autofiction oscilla tra empiria e letteratura: mentre si sforza di dare carne e sangue alle parole, si trova tra le mani un'identità cartacea e depotenziata. Sa che la sua mimesi è spesso mimesi di immagini virtuali, che il suo è un realismo nell'epoca della de-realizzazione. (Siti 42)
>
> (The 'I' in autofiction swings between empiricism and literature, while it struggles to embody words, it finds itself dealing with a papery and weakened identity. It knows that its mimesis is often a mimesis of virtual images and that it is a realism at the time of derealisation).

Therefore, I would argue that, in this sense, the literary genre of autofiction becomes an appropriate instrument for representing this kind of subjectivity; a subjectivity that continuously struggles between reality and fiction, and that tends to adapt itself to fictive models, which are designed and imposed by neoliberalism. This is, in my view, a general tendency, and it can be efficaciously represented only by autofiction, because autofiction is the only literary genre in which the narrative subject is constitutively located exactly between reality and fiction. And, if to describe and thus reveal a sociological tendency (which is basically imposed) is a political act (and it is), then, as posited by the French writers Arnaud Genon and Chloé Delaume, the use of autofiction becomes a political act in itself (239).

To conclude, at the end of *Troppi paradisi* we witness a sort of *death* of the fictive Walter Siti and the *rebirth* of the *real* Walter; a rebirth represented by the fulfilment of Walter's desire to penetrate Marcello, made possible by the application of a prosthetic penis, as throughout the entire novel Walter has found himself unable to penetrate Marcello because of his impotence. In this way, the character Walter Siti discovers that Marcello – the object of his desire – is a person, not just an image, or merely a kind of desire imposed by neoliberalism. The character Siti manages, through love, through the discovery and the acceptance that the *other* exists, to find a little bit of *authenticity*, and therefore the author, the *real* Walter Siti, suddenly *appears*, getting finally rid of his fictional self:

> Marcello mi sta espellendo dall'autobiografia: dopo essere penetrati nell'Assoluto, che resta da dire? Vederlo concentrato e remissivo, mentre si soffia il naso che gli sto ancora dentro e sento il contrarsi dei suoi muscoli anali, be', se lui è un dio come ho sempre creduto finora, non mi resta che cadere in ginocchio, muto per sempre. Se non lo è, allora gli altri esistono davvero, e non è più con l'autobiografia che si possono incontrare. Quanto era povera e ristretta, e distorta, l'esperienza su cui tanto ho elucubrato. […] Ricordo la frase siderale di Beckett, in cui dice che il suo più grande terrore è sempre stato quello di "morire prima di esser nato". Ora sono nato: da circa sette mesi sono nato. Se in più di mille pagine ho prodotto un sosia, era perché io non c'ero, non ci volevo essere: adesso ci sono. Nel bene o nel male, nell'ipocrisia o nella sincerità; nell'assistere o nell'agire, nella banalità o nell'intelligenza. Ora che Dio mi ama, non ho più bisogno di esibirmi. Sto meglio man mano che il mondo peggiora, pazienza. Le mie idiosincrasie si scontreranno con quelle degli altri in campo aperto; se avrò qualcosa da raccontare, non sarà su di me. (Siti 425)
>
> (Marcello is ejecting me from the autobiography: after having penetrated into the Absolute, what is left to say? Watching him focused and submissive while he blows his nose and I'm still inside of him, feeling his anal muscles contracting, well, if he's a god as I have always thought so far, there's nothing left for me but to drop to my knees, forever speechless. If he's not, then others really exist, and it's not through autobiography that they can be met. How poor and narrow was the experience I elucubrated so much on […] I remember the sidereal sentence by Beckett, where he says that his biggest fear was to be 'dead before being born'. Now I am born, I am born from seven months. If in more than a thousand pages I created a double, it was because I wasn't there, I didn't want to be there; now here I am. For better or worse, into hypocrisy or honesty, as a witness or an agent, into banality or intelligence. Now that God loves me I don't need to perform anymore. I am gradually feeling better while the world gets worse, never mind. My idiosyncrasies will collide with those of others in the open field. If I will have something to tell, it won't be about me).

Moreover, the act of penetration of Marcello, passing therefore from a *passive* role to an *active* one, suggestively represents the passage made by the author Siti from the passive/unconscious autofiction – which is typical of our contemporary era – to a form of active/conscious autofiction. This way of using autofiction is definitely political. In his last book, published in 2016 and titled *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher posits that the most eerie concept at the moment is the neoliberal economic system, because it is characterised by its *invisibility* (who manages the financial system? Who decides the model we are pushed to adhere to?); it is something we know exists, but we are unable to decipher it (12). Therefore, every attempt to unveil the mechanisms that constitute this

ineffable identity is a political act, because truth *is* political. This is exactly what Walter Siti tries to do in *Troppi paradisi*: to understand and thus unveil a mechanism that influences everyone. Siti wrote that he thinks that 'siamo su questa terra per capire le cose, e a me sembra di capire le cose solo quando le scrivo' ('we are on this earth to understand things, and it seems to be that I understand things only when I write them'; Siti 110). The act of writing is therefore an act of knowledge, and, like any act of knowledge, it is liberating. It is political.

Conclusions

To write a Ph.D. thesis is somewhat like embarking on a journey. And, as with every journey, it carries a certain number of risks with it. After all, it is an act of writing, and as Victor Hugo said, to write is always a dangerous activity. It is like going to work in a very deep and obscure mine, he said: accidents very often happen, down there (2). For the moment I can say that, like every journey, it was in any case valuable. As Louis-Ferdinand Céline wrote in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, 'Voyager, c'est bien utile, ça fait travailler l'imagination. Tout le reste n'est que déception et fatigue' ('To travel is very useful, it makes the imagination work, the rest is just delusion and pain'; 1).

However, like every journey, it has a starting point and, if all goes well, it has an end; and, like every journey, it has the power to influence or even to change the person who had the courage – or who stumbled upon it because of some misfortune – to undertake it. Now it is time to try to arrive at some conclusions, to emphasise the merits of this thesis, to admit its inevitable limits, and to identify the ways in which we might use some of the material we have considered as a map for further stimulating journeys.

In these pages, I have tried to shed light on what I consider a partially unexplored field – I should say a *region*, to stick to the journey metaphor – within the studies on autofiction: the political and subversive potential that characterises certain uses of this new literary genre. Autofiction is political, once again, in the sense that it can be used as a conscious critique of a specific *power* and its acts and methods of *governance*, comprising in this case neoliberal logic and its cultural, anthropological, and economic hegemony. As is well known, autofiction is a very recent literary genre and consequently it is, I believe, the child and effect of our times. Therefore, I felt compelled to wonder what this new literary genre had to say in terms of questioning and *politically* challenging the same contemporary issues that had contributed to its creation and spread. We live in a society where the diktats of neoliberal logic, such as competition, self-branding, obsession with consumerism, anesthetisation and absorption of every potentially subversive voice or behaviour, and commodification of every aspect of our lives, have become dominant and apparently untouchable. Throughout this thesis, I have aimed to demonstrate how certain characteristics specific to autofiction, such as the constitutive indistinguishability between autobiographical and fictional elements, and the ability to always reproduce different selves, despite their being homonymous, are evidently suited to questioning and challenging certain aspects of neoliberal hegemony through the unveiling of its mechanisms.

In the first chapter of this thesis, we saw how autofiction was considered an appropriate instrument with which to face certain contemporary questions, such as the progressive fragmentation of identities, and to address the sense of disorientation produced by the indistinguishability between reality and fiction typical of our contemporary times, caused by new technologies and mass media. We can say, therefore, that autofiction is related to the birth of new, contemporary types of identity-related concerns, and that its appearance can be seen as an attempt to represent and to address these concerns. I then argued that certain uses of autofiction could be defined as *political*, and I focused on how these uses of autofiction addressed, in a political way, one question in particular: the relationship between neoliberal logic and personal identities. In this vein, I presented and discussed the work of three contemporary authors – Michel Houellebecq, Bret Easton Ellis, and Walter Siti – who, I argued, used autofiction with specifically political aims, which, considering the themes treated, I claimed could have been achieved only through the literary genre of autofiction. These three authors, despite coming from different countries and having very different backgrounds, shared one common thread: they all pursued, in their literary works, a critique of neoliberal logic and its effects. Therefore, in this thesis I tried to explore why they decided to use autofiction, and to understand what their use of autofiction had to do with neoliberal logic. In this sense, my thesis followed two main directions: the typical neoliberal strategy of commodifying and therefore *controlling* every aspect of our life – even personal identity – and the forms of subjectivation that neoliberal logic produces in order to establish and perpetuate its hegemony.

In the chapter on Houellebecq, we saw how, in *La carte et le territoire*, the French author produced a caricatured version of his public image: a version of Michel Houellebecq that evidently reflected the public image constructed by the mass media and partially by the author himself over the years, and that deliberately respected the expectations of the readers and critics who identified the author Michel Houellebecq with that constructed image. I also addressed how Houellebecq certainly participated and was an *accomplice* in the construction of this public image. I then focused on how Houellebecq's public image, which at some point became a sort of *brand*, overshadowed the effective quality of Houellebecq's work. Most importantly, I focused on how Houellebecq reacted to what can be considered a commodification of his personal identity. My argument was that Houellebecq's choice to use autofiction in *La carte et le territoire* was strictly related to a critique of aspects of neoliberal logic, pursued throughout his literary career. I focused on two particular aspects of this critique: neoliberalism's aim to make every aspect of our lives profitable, and its aim to promote an obsession with consumerism and selfish competition as hegemonic behaviour models. In fact, as already noted, neoliberalism (at least in the Western countries where it was born) has developed, and still prospers, thanks to a tendency to commodify and transform everything either into goods or into

exchange values, additionally producing competition – or struggle – to obtain these. In his first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Houellebecq theorises that in contemporary society this attitude was also invested in those aspects of our lives that are *not* supposed to become mere goods, like friendship, or love. Everything can be bought, sold, commodified, reproduced, and therefore controlled. This is part of a strategy that consists in creating, promoting, and frustrating desires, producing as a consequence a sense of competition that *consumes* (this being the appropriate word) our existence. The result or reward of this strategy is an individual's total control over and organisation of his or her desires, which in an economic and social system based on the imperative of the fulfilment of desire means the organisation, and thus the control, of an individual's own life.

Then, in *La carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq takes as an example both the world of the art market and tourism, and extends his reflection upon commodification to art, culture in general, and even personal identity. Moreover, he opens up interesting questions upon the strategies through which neoliberal logic absorbs every voice that might appear dissonant, if not even subversive. In this sense, I argued that in *La carte et le territoire* Houellebecq seems to suggest there are cases where art is so bonded to the market that it risks becoming too heavily influenced by it, and that therefore the role of the artist in this context becomes very delicate, with the artist being forced to struggle between personal artistic research and the expectations raised by the market. There are also cases, and this might certainly be so for Houellebecq, where the economic machine constructed around artists becomes more important than the quality of the work of art itself, overshadowing it, especially concerning those aspects that might become *dangerous* for the hegemonic system. Moreover, certain artists start to *adapt* their work according to the expectations of the market, and behave according to their public image. This is the case, for instance, for the character of the writer Frédéric Beigbeder in *La carte et le territoire*, where Beigbeder is depicted as an author who seems to behave exactly according to his public image. The point is that this public image is mostly a media construct designed – and therefore manipulated – by the media in order to become more saleable and more appealing to the market itself. This is a media construction to which Beigbeder seems to have adapted himself, and that overshadowed his undeniable talent. The core business in this sense is not the *writer* anymore but the *brand* Frédéric Beigbeder; not his *work* but his *identity* and the ways in which the mass media have constructed that identity, which therefore becomes something that can be manipulated and sold like any other commodity. The same discourse can be applied to Houellebecq's public image. Therefore, it is in this way that neoliberal logic, after having been extended to the realm of love and art, also occupies the space of personal identity. It is in this mechanism of mediatisation, manipulation, commodification, and absorption that the subtle neoliberal strategy becomes clear, especially concerning those works of art and those behaviours whose aim is to explore and question

its hegemony and critical nodes. Every attempt in this direction, Houellebecq seems to suggest, gets immediately absorbed, manipulated, made acceptable for the market and therefore made profitable. And, eventually, it is disarmed and subdued; a kind of fate that is worse than censorship itself.

However, despite the typical Houellebecqian cynicism and the accusations of his being a nihilist writer, there is also scope for an option other than becoming absorbed or even adapting to market rules. There is the option, in fact, of becoming conscious of the mechanism and trying to both reveal and *subvert* it. This is certainly the case for Houellebecq. As we observed, in *La carte et le territoire* the French writer produces a fictive Michel Houellebecq who is an evident parody – or, as Anne Chamayou put it, a 'parodie critique' ('critical parody'; 3) – of his well-known public image: he represents himself as a dirty, depressed, misogynist, racist, often drunk old man who resembles a 'vieille tortue malade' (an 'old sick turtle'; Houellebecq 148). This is a parody whose aim is, I argued, to represent the mechanism through which the mass media have constructed and manipulated his public image; a public image that *replaced* the *real* Michel Houellebecq and became so big as to overshadow the quality of his work and even – most importantly – its political aspects. Consequently, its subversive potential in this way was absorbed and *domesticated*. The Carte therefore became more important than the Territoire. The reasons Houellebecq decided – through autofiction – to produce this parody of his public image here becomes clear: he wanted to represent, to unveil, and therefore to question the mechanisms through which neoliberalism had become a hegemonic system of power, whereby everything, from an art object to a village and even an identity, could be manipulated, reproduced, and replaced by something artificially constructed for marketing reasons. Every potentially subversive voice had to be absorbed and dismantled. It is not a coincidence, moreover, that the parody of his public image that Houellebecq produced would later, in the middle of the novel, be brutally murdered, a prospect that, incidentally, seems to interest Houellebecq very much, given that in the 2014 movie *Near Death Experience* the character he plays wants to commit suicide. However, the death of the fictional Michel Houellebecq in *La carte et le territoire* could be interpreted, I argued, in two ways: as an attempt to *destroy* his public image and as a way of retaking control and agency over it. In this way he managed to both unveil and subvert the mechanism that he described. This is a political act, and it seemed to me that the use of autofiction was a rather apt instrument in this sense, given that it was the only literary genre that constitutively offered the possibility of (re)creating a kind of autobiographical *self* which, while preserving the name, surname, and other biographical markers of the author, still remained partially *fictive*, therefore subject to every kind of manipulation.

What has been said about Houellebecq also applies – at least partly – to Bret Easton Ellis. In fact, in the chapter devoted to the American writer, we saw that they shared certain preoccupations.

They both had to face and problematise a media construction and manipulation of their public image that threatened to overshadow their literary work; they both raised much controversy with their novels and public appearances; they both pursued a critique of the logic of neoliberalism; and, most importantly, they both decided at a certain point in life to produce, through autofiction, a *parodic* and caricatured version of their public image. In the first section of my chapter on Ellis, I addressed the media perception of him and the consequent media construction of his public image, whose characteristics, I argued, had been manipulated and exaggerated in order to become more saleable and appealing to the market, and which, finally, as happened to Houellebecq, overshadowed and even defined his literary work and its interpretation by both readers and critics, giving birth to what James Annesley acutely defined as the *Brand* Easton Ellis. Then, using works by Naomi Mandel, Sonia Baelo-Allué, and James Annesley, I addressed aspects of Ellis's work that could be defined as eminently *political*. I argued that there was a *fil rouge* in Ellis's works in political terms that could be identified as a strong critique of neoliberal logic in general, and of consumerism and commodification in particular. In the progression of his works, it was almost possible to notice a structure creating a sort of cadenced *commodification* rhythm, opening with the commodification of sex and feelings in 1985, with *Less than Zero*, continuing with the commodification of bodies and desire in 1991's *American Psycho*, and ending with the commodification of personal identities – in the form of self-branding – in 1999's *Glamorama*. In this sense, I argued that Ellis's choice to use the literary genre of autofiction in 2005's *Lunar Park* was an integral part of this process: Ellis became conscious that he had lost control of his public image, which was a commodified media construction that overshadowed the undeniable value of his literary work, and that made its political and subversive potential harmless. 'My life – my *name* – had been rendered a repetitive, unfunny punch line and I was sick of eating it' (37) claims the fictive Bret Easton Ellis in *Lunar Park*. Because of this awareness, he created a critical parody of his commodified public image to retake control of it and to denounce the mechanisms through which neoliberalism voraciously extended its commodification and absorbed every potentially subversive voice, as Ellis's certainly is. This is a political use of autofiction, and it is to a certain extent the same approach adopted by Houellebecq.

However, the chapter devoted to Ellis also raised other important issues, concerning, in particular, the instruments through which neoliberalism, as well as any other system of power, produced a *subjectivity*; and how this kind of subjectivation functioned to perpetuate its hegemony. It was thus interesting to observe how Ellis represented the main character – Victor Ward, a celebrity wannabe – in *Glamorama*. As we saw, Ward's mentality and behaviour were a convincing representation of how neoliberal imperatives to self-brand worked. Ward is a young man obsessed with appearance. He wants to be a celebrity, without acknowledging – or only when it is too late –

that celebrities are subject to the same rules as *normal* people: the rules of the market. Ward, therefore, *designs* every aspect of his life – from his body to his desires and his behaviours – to meet the expectations of the market in which he wants to succeed, the celebrity market, so as to result in a self that is as appealing and saleable as possible. He perceives himself and acts as an *enterprise*, which is the first commandment that neoliberalism imposes on the neoliberal subject, while he deals with his individuality as if it is something that goes to the market and can be manipulated and sold, like any other commodity. Ward essentially constructs his personal identity in order to *adapt* to the models and behaviours imposed by mass media, acting as an example of what I have defined as passive/unconscious autofiction, in comparison to the active/conscious autofiction used by Houellebecq, Ellis, and Siti.

In terms of autofiction, Ellis's *Lunar Park* allowed me to further reflect upon other aspects ascribable to this literary genre. In particular, I applied Mark Fisher's theories on hauntology to *Lunar Park*. I argued that the character Bret Easton Ellis was not only persecuted by his literary creations like Patrick Bateman, as acutely noticed by Esther Peeren; but that he was also persecuted not by the spectres of what he *was* and he *did*, but of what he *could have* been: a father, for instance, or the political and subversive writer he could have been, had he not been overshadowed by his public image. What, in sum, is an autofiction if not a phantasmatic version of its author; what does autofiction depict if not a *ghost*? I argued that this consideration was fecund in terms of studies on autofiction's status.

In the chapter devoted to the Italian writer Walter Siti, we saw how Siti's critique of neoliberal logic focused on the kind of subjectivation that neoliberalism produced, which functioned to perpetuate its hegemony. I noted that Siti, starting from his personal experiences and through deep *cabotage* in the dark pit of his desires, reflected on how and through which mechanisms this subjectivation was produced and managed, and how autofiction could represent it. As already stated, neoliberalism is a system of power; like all systems of power, it produces its own ideology and, by extension, it produces the subjectivities that will adhere to that ideology. As indicated by Slavoj Žižek in Sophie Fiennes's documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, ideology is fundamentally the space of organisation of desires, and it is precisely from desire that Siti started his reflection. Siti claimed that his relationship with desire – his obsession for male bodybuilders – was representative of a general tendency related to the inextricable bond between neoliberalism, consumerism, and commodification. This is a preoccupation he shares with Houellebecq and Ellis. Siti's obsession with bodybuilders, however, was useful as a way of understanding how the neoliberal strategy of subjectivation worked. We said that the first commandment for the neoliberal subject was to consider their *self* as an enterprise, and Siti's male bodybuilders, who prostituted themselves, were, in fact,

depicted as people who had specifically *designed* their bodies and behaviours to become more appealing to the market. They therefore *constructed* their economic value through the adhesion to *models* created and imposed by the market itself through mass media, in a very similar way to Ellis's Victor Ward. Siti suggests that this tendency to *adapt* to imposed behaviour models has become dominant, and mass media certainly plays a major role in the establishment of this hegemony.

In *Troppi paradisi* I demonstrated that Siti masterfully described how mass media in general and television in particular influenced spectators, contributing in my view towards shaping a kind of subjectivity no longer able to distinguish reality from fiction. Most importantly, they contribute to creating a kind of subject that tends to behave according to the models of behaviour imposed by television. Siti takes as an example Italian reality television shows, where supposedly *real* people – who are actually actors – stage supposedly *real* stories. These stories are framed as if they are totally *true*, but are nothing other than *scripts*, which, even if they are created with a minimum of inspiration from truth, are largely remodelled in order to be more appealing to the public. As we observed, every potentially subversive or uncomfortable aspect that these stories might have contained was immediately deleted. Siti defined reality television as *depowered* reality (96): a reality that is deprived of anything disturbing or unexpected; therefore, a reality deprived of the *real*. In my view, one of the effects of this domesticated reality was that spectators tended to *reproduce* the behaviours of the people they watched on reality shows, without bearing in mind that those behaviours were part of a script. This tendency has become dominant, and the subject that it produces functions to perpetuate neoliberalism because it is neoliberalism itself that produces and imposes both the behaviour models and the *necessary goods* in order to adhere to these models. Moreover, this subjectivity functions to perpetuate neoliberalism because, as we saw with the bodybuilders, it is designed to consider everything from love, to feelings, to art, to personal identity as *exchangeable values*, as *commodities* that, as with any other commodity, can be sold, manipulated, substituted, and controlled. This subjectivity, finally, is effective because there is so much introjected neoliberal logic that currently, as Fisher wrote in his 2009 essay *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?*, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, of which neoliberalism is an emanation. This hegemonic adaptation to imposed models, moreover, is strictly related to autofiction. In fact, as Siti claimed in his 2013 pamphlet *Il realismo è l'impossibile*, it is not by chance that the literary genre of autofiction is flourishing right now, on the wave of an entire society's 'bisogno di mentire' ('need for lying'; 32). In this sense, I argued that the reproduction of these behaviour models could be defined as a form of *mass* autofiction, an autofiction I called *passive*/*unconscious*, compared to the self-conscious, reflective use of autofiction by Houellebecq, Ellis, and Siti that I defined as *active*/*conscious* autofiction. This use of autofiction is *political*. It is political because, in this case,

autofiction is used as a way to represent and question some of the mechanisms that make neoliberal hegemony possible. Additionally, it is political because it problematises and challenges a phenomenon that is relevant to all of us. This is why Siti decided to use autofiction: he wanted to use his individuality as a symptom of a general tendency related to the kind of subjectivity produced and imposed by neoliberalism; a subjectivity that, according to Siti, is constitutively unable to distinguish reality from fiction, that is shaped to perceive itself as a *commodity*, and that is forced into self-branding, and therefore to continuous self-misrepresentation. This is a goal for which Siti found the literary genre of autofiction to be the perfect tool, as it was for Houellebecq and Ellis, even if in a different way.

In view of this, autofiction therefore ceases to be merely an ironic, postmodern game of mirrors and intentionally faces the present by revealing it, questioning it, and, through its unique characteristics, challenging it, becoming in this way a political act.

At this point, it seems clear to me that autofiction, because of its constitutive characteristics, is an exceptionally good instrument for representing and questioning certain aspects of our times. I have focused on some mechanisms that are characteristic of neoliberalism, identifying in the authors analysed a common thread of reflection concerning its hegemonic strategies. I have shown how Michel Houellebecq, Bret Easton Ellis, and Walter Siti used autofiction to treat complex and urgent issues, such as the neoliberalist tendency to commodify every aspect of our life, as well as the strategies through which neoliberalism domesticates and absorbs every potentially subversive voice, and the kind of subjectivities it produces and promotes in order to establish and maintain its hegemony. I hope, moreover, to have done justice to authors who – especially in the cases of Ellis and Houellebecq – have often been accused of being superficial or, worse, vainly provocative writers, and also to autofiction in general, whose political aspects are still a very fecund field of research. I hope that with these pages I have contributed to paving the way for further discussions of a literary genre that is, in my opinion, more alive than ever, with a lot more to say about our times. I am cautiously confident that this thesis has raised some interesting points. However, I am very aware that it is not exempt from weaknesses. For instance, I recognise that I have not provided a *personal* or original definition of autofiction. I might reply that this has been a *conscious* choice, because I found that the debate on autofiction was getting too fossilised over questions of status or its position in the autobiographical pact, and so on. Therefore, my aim was to sidestep these debates and then try to shed light on other aspects of autofiction that I believed to be more important and valuable for my analysis. Secondly, it might be argued that if one of the aims of this thesis was to demonstrate how certain authors used autofiction in order to depict a general tendency, the selection of authors I made was extremely limited. After all, the three writers analysed in this thesis are all, to allude to Ellis's

most recent book title, three white, privileged males. This is certainly a good point, and it is potentially very promising in terms of further research and analysis. It is undeniable that the point of view of these authors is inevitably partial and influenced by their social position and privileged background. However, I would say that I have chosen these writers because their use of autofiction, along with the critical approach they have pursued during their careers, seemed to me the most appropriate for demonstrating the main aim of my thesis, which was to explore the political potential of autofiction. Furthermore, it was appropriate in a crystal-clear way that I have not encountered in other contemporary authors, independent of background. Besides, who is better placed to unveil a certain mechanism than someone who is, at least in terms of privilege, an integral part of that very mechanism?

Finally, as stated above, I believe that autofiction has a lot more to say, and that many aspects of this literary genre can lead to stimulating research and analysis. For instance, in 2013 the Italian writer Vanni Santoni wrote an article where he reflected upon the relationship between autofiction and new technologies like, for example, social networks. This is certainly an interesting starting point for further research, and in this sense, it might be useful to refer to Camille Laurens's 2016 novel *Celle que vous croyez*. The relationship between autofiction and technology can open up other discussions related to questions concerning posthumanism and augmented reality. For instance, Siti defined, in a 2019 book-length interview with Carlo Mazza Galanti, his use of autofiction as an example in this sense (117). Mark Fisher's definition of hauntology, moreover, is very promising in terms of new studies on autofiction, as well as in relation to the growing interest in questions of hybridity and weirdness from a new generation of critics and scholars. As can be seen, these are all very rich and stimulating perspectives for a literary genre that continuously reveals its vitality. At this point, I have to say that I feel slightly baffled, because I have defined these conclusions as the end of a journey, while it rather seems that the journey, on the contrary, has just begun.

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