



PROJECT MUSE®

An Ambivalent Attraction?: Post-Punk Kinship and the
Politics of Bonding in Historias del Kronen and Less Than
Zero

Matthew J. Marr

Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies, Volume 10, 2006, pp. 9-22 (Article)



Published by University of Arizona

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcs.2007.0030>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214572>

An Ambivalent Attraction?: Post-Punk Kinship and the Politics of Bonding in *Historias del Kronen* and *Less Than Zero*

Matthew J. Marr is an Assistant Professor in Hispanic Studies at The University of Illinois, Chicago. His most recent publications consider such topics as space and identity in Esther Tusquets's El mismo mar de todos los veranos and postmodern humor in the poetry of Roger Wolfe. He is the author of a forthcoming book entitled Postmodern Meta-poetry and the Replenishment of the Spanish Lyrical Genre: 1980-2000.

José Ángel Mañas's *Historias del Kronen* (1994) is a novel that ostentatiously flaunts its literary kinship with other texts—with rock lyrics (The The, Nirvana), films (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*), and even a novel: namely, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). So pronounced, in fact, is Mañas's "name-dropping" that it has led one critic, Germán Gullón, to signal what he dubs "pararreferencialidad" as one of the book's most salient features (xxiii). In short, *Historias del Kronen* assails its reader with a barrage of pop culture allusions in a kind of narrative offensive: one designed, it seems, to prove the author's incomparability (at least in the recent Spanish context) as a connoisseur of primarily nihilistic, violent, "edgy"—and almost always Anglo-American—music, film, and literature from the end of the twentieth century. This said, and especially in light of Mañas's explicit attraction to the work of Bret Easton Ellis, it is curious that the former makes no direct allusion to that latter's breakthrough first novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985):¹ a best-seller and arguably a foundational text of the subgenre within which Mañas's work clearly resides. Yet, the stylistic and thematic similarities between *Less Than Zero* and *Historias del Kronen* are striking—to such a degree, in fact, that it is enticing to suggest that the latter is intertextually attracted to the former in an almost "closeted" manner.

Rock and pop music references are a key element in the relationship between the novels. Throughout the pages of *Historias del Kronen*, Mañas's forays into an aggressively eclectic matrix of musical allusions, though often crossing through such incongruous stylistic territories as those of

Nirvana, Elton John, Whitney Houston, and Sonic Youth (106-07, 155-56, 218, 186), in a number of instances do effectively bring his novel into contact with a definably cohesive legion of bands. Specifically, I refer to his allusions to those groups which, in the London music scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s (in the wake of the Sex Pistols's literal self-destruction), come to be known under the banner of "post-punk"—the purveyors of a sound that fuses punk with a sophisticated pop sensibility which prides itself on songwriting craftsmanship. A foremost example of this type of allusion occurs at what is roughly the structural midpoint of Mañas's novel, an episode in which Carlos and his entourage approach a club where disc-jockeys play, to quote the protagonist's own remarks, "música entre el *After-punk* tipo De Quiur [y] Depesh Mod" (117, my emphasis)—that is, The Cure and Depeche Mode (throughout the novel, Mañas renders the phonetic value of dozens of English band names and song titles into Castilian orthography). In fact, as the members of the Kronen clan deliberate entering the bar, a typically coked-up Carlos dances on the sidewalk to songs from The Cure's latest album. Given the novel's various allusions to festivities related to the Olympic Games in Barcelona, the war in Yugoslavia, Miguel Indurain's success in the Tour de France, and San Fermines, the novel is clearly set in July of 1992. With this in mind, "el último disco de De Quiur" (117) can be none other than *Wish*: a release that not only marks the pinnacle of this particular band's commercial and critical success after sixteen years in the business, but which can also be viewed emblematically as one of the last veritable hurrahs for one of the most influential groups of the post-punk British music scene.² For, as it happens, the flat vocals, instrumental minimalism, and nihilistic

ethos of the Seattle-based grunge movement are internationally and irreversibly on the rise by 1992: a musical and commercial trend, spear-headed in large measure by Kurt Cobain's Nirvana, which clearly does not pass unnoticed by Mañas's narrative lens. Indeed, Chapter VII of the novel depicts in detail one particular stop—Madrid—on the latter band's European tour that year (104-08).³

Yet, also in 1992, another favorite of the early 1980s London post-punk underground, Matt Johnson's band The The, emerges from three years of relative inactivity to release *Dusk*—a record which marks the greatest commercial success of the group's career, ultimately reaching number two on the British charts. The recording has its media profile greatly bolstered by the participation of cult-hero Johnny Marr (formerly of the Mancunian sensations, The Smiths) on guitars and harmonica, Dave Palmer (formerly of the mid-1980s, New Wave phenomenon ABC) on drums, and eventually by regular MTV play of a video for the single "Love is Stronger than Death"—a visual project co-directed by Tim Pope, a U.K. pioneer of the music-video genre who had risen to fame throughout the 1980s as the director of several madcap videos by none other than The Cure.⁴ This glimpse at international prominence afforded to The The in 1992 (and, indeed, well into their 1993 world tour)—in addition to the re-release of the 1983 album *Soul Mining* in compact-disc format in early 1991—naturally brings the group to the attention of more than a few amateur rock critics and connoisseurs in America and European nations other than the U.K., such as Spain (where Matt Johnson—as well as a host of other post-punk British music idols like the surviving members of Joy Division, known since the early eighties as New Order—reside part-time).⁵

Evidently, one such connoisseur is twenty-one year-old José Ángel Mañas in Madrid. In fact, in what constitutes his most sustained allusion to rock lyrics (post-punk or otherwise), Mañas curiously positions the same two verses of “Giant” (a woeful song from *Soul Mining*) as bookends to *Historias del Kronen* (9, 239). The song’s existentially doleful lyrics, included as epigraph and postscript to the novel, function to articulate an element absent within Mañas’s book: namely, evidence of a superego that never materializes in the protagonist and first-person narrator, Carlos. Johnson’s tortured musings serve as a frame to a disquieting tale whose main character is polluted by rabid self-interest, moral indifference, and a sense of identity precariously constructed on the shaky ground of nihilism. The regretful voice of “Giant” acts, *a posteriori* as it were, as a kind surrogate conscience for the remorseless and puerile Carlos. Perhaps implying this character’s possible repentance at some moment subsequent to the plot’s conclusion, or more likely included as marker of Mañas’s own personal scruples, the lyrics’ intrinsic function is to temper the conventional reader’s response to the work as a whole. Moral indifference, the lyrics imply, has painful consequences in the long run:

I’m thinking of things I’d hoped to forget. / I’m choking to death in a sun that never sets. / I clugged [*sic*] up my mind with perpetual grief / and turned all my friends into enemies / and now the past has returned to haunt me. (The The, “Giant” qtd. in Mañas 9, 239)

These rock-lyric bookends conjoin Mañas’s novel in one of numerous ways to Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* (1985). The

Bennington College student’s debut novel is, like *Historias del Kronen*, littered with references to the post-punk bands of the early 1980s—an assortment of groups made internationally recognizable through the advent of the MTV video (which, in its infancy—from 1981 to 1983—features underground bands from the U.K. and Australia almost exclusively). The MTV medium, for its part, has a constant iconic presence in Ellis’s novel. Indeed, in light of the book’s depiction of rampant drug and alcohol abuse, MTV is actually one of the few *non-toxic* elixirs imbibed ad nauseum by the southern California youth culture portrayed therein. One of *Less Than Zero*’s opening sequences introduces the MTV *leitmotif*. Here, the narrator-protagonist Clay leaves behind a bucolic New Hampshire liberal arts college for winter recess, returning home to the vastly dissimilar, complex social reality that typifies life in the wealthy L.A. suburbs.⁶ The world that greets Clay in L.A. is one capable of inducing a kind of cultural vertigo. He quickly finds himself immersed in a milieu characterized by nightmarish traffic, conspicuous consumption, eating disorders, dysfunctional families, sexual experimentation, and substance abuse on all sides. In a twisted take on the parable of the prodigal son, the fever-stricken protagonist arrives home to a wholly indifferent welcome. No one but the family’s new maid is at the house; an aloof note has been left for him by his mother asking if he still wants some old comic books left in his closet; and, there awaits for him a greeting card—from his on-again, off-again girlfriend, Blair—whose cover nihilistically reads “Fuck Christmas” (Ellis 11). Emotionally beleaguered by the culture shock brought on by the circumstances of his homecoming (and the ghosts

they have drawn out in his head), Clay falls into bed exhausted. Thereafter, he turns to the deadening medicine of cable television in hopes of calming his nerves: “I turn on MTV and tell myself I could get over it and go to sleep if I had some Valium and then I [...] feel a little sick as the videos begin to flash by” (12).

As is the case with *Historias del Kronen*, the reader of *Less Than Zero* experiences a dizzying sensation which is ultimately analogous to that of Clay as he watches MTV. Allusions to post-punk bands of the day abound throughout the novel: Devo (49), INXS (74), Psychedelic Furs (74), Oingo Boingo (80), Bananarama (118), Soft Cell (178), The Clash (181), and the Human League are just a few (it is from this last band’s studio that The The borrows the equipment, including drum machines, used in making the record *Soul Mining* [Medsker]). Post-punk references “flash by” in Ellis’s novel with restless frequency, and their recurrence imposes upon the text a frenzied rhythm—one very much in keeping with the fast and free lifestyles of the novel’s characters, the sons and daughters of a West Coast elite whose lives (like those of the Kronen group) are measured out in lines of cocaine, cocktails, and trysts. Although the name-dropping that peppers the pages of *Less Than Zero* in itself would seem to justify a comparison of the two novels at hand, it is in fact a more sustained and prominently positioned allusion to one specific icon of the British post-punk musical scene which evokes a more striking structural parallel with *Historias del Kronen*. Much as Mañas employs lyrics by The The as both epigraph and postscript to his novel, Ellis begins and ends *Less Than Zero* with scenes that structurally privilege an icon of the British post-punk scene. Namely, when Clay first returns to his boyhood bedroom

at the outset of the novel, and then again as he leaves it, perhaps for good, when the holidays are over (the end of the novel), he pauses to contemplate a promotional poster hanging on the wall above his bed. The poster in question is for Elvis Costello’s 1981 album, *Trust* (it should be noted that the eighth track on Costello’s landmark 1977 album, *My Aim is True*, is none other than a song entitled “Less Than Zero”). Ellis’s narrative lens focuses not on the lyrics of any particular tune off Costello’s *Trust*, but rather, on the poster itself as a visual emblem: one that seems to be in conversation with the current of cynical disillusionment running through the narrative as a whole.⁷ In the following passage from the third page of the novel, Clay describes this poster with a deliberateness that serves to elevate the image to the level of the symbolic:

[T]he poster [is] encased in glass [...and] hangs on the wall above my bed [...]. It’s the promotional poster for an old Elvis Costello record. Elvis looks past me, with this wry, ironic smile on his lips, staring out the window. The word “Trust” hovering over his head, and his sunglasses, one lens red, the other blue, pushed down past the ridge of his nose so that you can see his eyes, which are slightly off center. The eyes don’t look at me, though. They only look at whoever’s standing by the window, but I’m too tired to get up and stand by the window. (11)

Elvis Costello’s knowing expression—as it is rendered in Ellis’s language—functions as an emblem of ironic distance, one that almost seems mindful of the presence of duplicity and moral ambiguity beyond the window: that is, within the culture of wealth, superficial beauty, and artificial thrills that

dominates life amidst the white upper-class of 1980s Los Angeles. Literally speaking, Costello's image on the poster looks out *over* (and not *through*) what resemble 3-D lenses or rose-colored glasses (an image which George Corsillo prominently features on the jacket design to the novel's first hardback edition).⁸ By peering over these symbolic glasses, Costello as icon is able to see with greater precision "who[m]ever's standing by the window"—or, in broader terms, to see the disquieting L.A. subculture in which Clay finds himself entrenched. The image of Costello (which also makes use of the same type of Ray Ban wayfarers worn by the hung-over characters in both of the novels here considered) almost seems to suggest that a kind of special critical perspective is afforded to the politically and socially conscious singer-songwriter. His would seem to be a vision uncommon to the California youths immersed within the decadent and morally *distorted* sphere of influence depicted within the book. Theirs is a culture, indeed, where "trust" is an uncommon pleasure.⁹

In a structural move that parallels, or even prefigures, Mañas's use of post-punk lyrics as a frame device in *Historias del Kronen*, Ellis positions Costello as a prominent visual icon again at the very conclusion of *Less Than Zero*. On the novel's penultimate page, Clay takes leave of his childhood bedroom before returning to college in New Hampshire:

When I left there was nothing much in my room except a couple of books, the television, stereo, the Elvis Costello poster, eyes still staring out the window. (207)¹⁰

Nothing has changed; Clay remains, like his counterpart Carlos in *Historias del Kronen*, suspended in a reality devoid of meaning,

morality, and consequences. When all is said and done, neither novel seems to involve the completion of a modern heroic quest. Neither protagonist has evolved meaningfully after some moment of epiphany, nor has either garnered great wisdom or insight from his misdeeds and morally vacant choices. Nonetheless, like Mañas's use of Matt Johnson's lyrics, the allusions to the poster of Elvis Costello do function to infuse the text with a perspective of *conscience*, a moral high ground absent in the person of each work's nihilistic, first-person narrator. In both cases, then, it might be said that this perspective has been imposed, after the fact as it were, by a pair of implicit authors concerned with problematizing the moral dynamics of a generation.

Such casual similarities, however, do not in themselves close the case on the primary thesis of this essay: principally, that Mañas's novel manifests a kind of "closeted" intertextual attraction toward Ellis's *Less Than Zero*. Mañas's *overt* engagement of the work of Bret Easton Ellis is, of course, by no means a secret. That the characters Carlos and Roberto are captivated by one of the American author's most memorable and infamous characters, Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho: A Novel*, is a detail "outed" early within the pages of *Historias del Kronen*. In Chapter IV, these central characters even debate one another on the principles of hate that govern Bateman's sadistic philosophy. Their language reveals an unusual degree of reverence toward an incomparably depraved antihero, the main character in a novel they view as something of a manual of conduct:

En el Parque de las Avenidas, buscamos un sitio para sentarnos, pero hay mierdas de perro por todas partes.

—Malditos perros, habría que exterminarlos—dice Roberto—.

Seguro que Beitman los ametrallaría a todos.

Una vieja pasa con un caniche negro feísimo y nos mira. Yo le saco la lengua y el caniche se pone a ladrar.

—No te pases—dice Celia.

—Malditos viejos. Habría que implantar la eutanasia obligatoria a los cincuenta y cinco.

—Beitman no se carga a ningún viejo *en la novela*—dice Roberto.

—Porque le dan demasiado asco, hasta para matarlos.¹¹ (53-55, my emphasis)

This explicit allusion to *American Psycho* (in conjunction with several others that follow its lead on subsequent pages) unmistakably situates *Historias del Kronen* in an intertextual kinship system with Ellis's literary production. This kinship system, in fact, could be seen as encompassing an even broader subgenre. Maria T. Pao argues in a 2002 article, for example, that Mañas's novel follows in the predominantly American—though increasingly international—tradition of what James Annesley dubs "blank fiction" in his 1998 book of the same name. Pao sums up the latter's critical paradigm in the following passage, which here merits citation in full:

Drawing from narratives by authors such as Dennis Cooper, Douglas Coupland, Bret Easton Ellis and Evelyn Lau, Annesley describes their protagonists' preoccupation with violence, sex, drug use, popular culture, mediums, and styles. These novels, set in the urban environments of New York City or Los Angeles, depict characters whose rejection both of the traditional constraints of job and family and of political or social

ideals dovetails with a sense of living at a remove from reality, produced in part by the ubiquitous presence of television, film, and video. The characters that emerge from these conditions exude an air of indifference, ennui, indolence, and indulgence. They project a splintered, nihilistic view of the world as they increasingly withdraw from society and reality. Unlike earlier American works that presented sensory excess and hedonism as an expression of freedom from and an antidote to bourgeois life, these novels contain no such alternative philosophy per se. Rather, they offer images of extreme sex and violence—reflections of the body's commodification as consumer and consumed—in flat, neutral tones, providing a blank record of events. (245)

Pao's own analysis of Mañas's novel, pegged as it is to a contextualization of the text's more unequivocal overtures to *American Psycho*, bypasses what I see to be a most profound and critically alluring intertextual connection: *Historias del Kronen*'s unacknowledged gravitation to the narrative stylings of Ellis's *Less Than Zero*. In addition to their use of post-punk "bookends," there are several lucid similarities that exist between the two novels. Both works feature directionless plotlines narrated in the present tense by economically-privileged, first-person, male narrators who are somewhere in their late teens to early twenties. These narrators are mobilized in their constant comings and goings from their parents' houses by an unquenchable thirst for the next high—for thrills that, more often than not, are sought in the form of illicit drugs, alcohol, cinematic spectacles of violence, and loveless sex acts. Indeed, the practical

arrangements involved in carrying out such “quests” comprise the better part of both novels’ narrative happenings. In both novels, curiously enough, such plot events are many times depicted against unexpectedly ordinary, and sometimes comically ironic, backdrops unbecoming of the sorts of glamorous and mysterious settings rendered conventional by Hollywood. The following passage from *Less Than Zero* is representative of this tendency:

We’re waiting for Julian, who’s supposed to be bringing Trent a gram. Julian is fifteen minutes late and Trent is nervous and impatient and when I tell him that he should deal with Rip, like I do, instead of Julian, he just shrugs. We finally leave and he says that he might be able to find Julian in the arcade in Westwood. But we don’t find Julian at the arcade in Westwood, so Trent suggests that we go to Fatburger and eat something. He says that he’s hungry, that he hasn’t eaten anything in a long time, mentions something about fasting. We order and take the food to one of the booths. But I’m not too hungry and Trent notices that there’s no chili on my Fatburger.

‘What is this? You can’t eat a Fatburger without chili.’

I roll my eyes up at him and light a cigarette.

‘Jesus, you’re weird. Been up in fucking New Hampshire too long,’ he mutters. ‘No fucking chili.’ (19-20)

Comparable situations appear throughout the pages of *Historias del Kronen*. For example, Carlos fields innumerable phone calls regarding the tedious particulars necessary in maintaining a chronic drug habit. The novel is replete with slang-infused tran-

scriptions of telephone dialogues concerned with the ways-and-means of procuring “coca,” “costo,” and other substances from a vast network of acquaintances and small-time dealers (Ellis’s narrative strategies in *Less Than Zero* frequently employ the direct transcription of phone calls involving drug-related matters [e.g., 87-88, 99-100, 134-35, 161-62]). All of this, rather incongruously, is set against the “unhip” backdrop of Carlos’s humdrum domestic sphere, a space populated by (what he perceives as) nagging family members and the constant drone of *telediaristas*. At the beginning of Chapter VIII, after deflecting comments and questions from his mother in regard to both his pale complexion¹² and late-night exploits with Roberto, an ill-tempered Carlos chooses to avoid mealtime conversations altogether. He turns instead to the antisocial elixir of television, and eventually leaves the table abruptly to take of a nap. His fatigue, however, is apparently not sufficient enough to warrant dodging a “business-related” call from Roberto. In a moment approaching the ridiculous, this supposedly serious call is announced by Carlos’s screaming little brother (whom he calls “el enano”):

Mientras me voy a mi habitación, suena el teléfono.

—CARLOS. PARA TI—grita el enano.

—¿Quién es?

—Roberto.

—¿Sí?... Qué pasa, Carlos. ¿Qué haces?... Pues ahora iba a dormir una siesta... ¿No has dormido todavía?... No. Todavía no... Estás loco, tío. Yo acabo de levantarme ahora, y como una rosa... ¿Sí?... Bueno. He llamado a Miguel y me ha dicho que no ha podido pillar y que hasta el miércoles no ve al Niñas en el trabajo... ¿Y? Es que nos queremos ir de acampada

el lunes y no queda costo... ¿Y qué quieres que haga yo?... ¿No se te ocurre nadie que pueda pasarnos?... ¿Manolo?... No. Él sólo pasa coca. Pues lo único que se me ocurre es llamar al ex novio de mi hermana, al que vimos ayer en Agapo. ¿Le puedes llamar ahora?... Más tarde. Ahora tengo que dormir la siesta... Pero no le llames muy tarde, que saldrá. Le dices que queremos veinticinco, ¿vale?... (122-23)

Another stylistic bond between *Less Than Zero* and *Historias del Kronen* resides in both novels' fascination with spectacles of gratuitous violence. In the former, Clay repeatedly alludes to a morbid fascination with car accidents (67, 76, 151), fatal house fires (77), and ritualistic murders (77, 153-54, 190-91).¹³ As a child, he even amasses an archive of newspaper clippings about such incidents since, according to his own coolly detached logic, "during that time, I guess, there were a lot to be collected" (77). As an adult character and narrator, however, his gravitation to spectacles of violence seems much less a function of their quantitative presence in current events than the result of a kind of obsessive attraction. For instance, while at a movie "about a group of young pretty sorority girls who get their throats slit and are thrown into a pool," he confesses to have not watched much of the film at all, but rather, "just the gory parts" (97). Later in the novel, he attends a party where a snuff video is shown. As a character, Clay reacts to its visuals with a characteristically apathetic sensibility. He neither engages in a speculative discussion of the film's authenticity (as do other viewers in attendance), nor does he stay in the room for the movie's gruesome concluding scene (though he notes that the victim's screams are audible outdoors). His narrative description of the film, nonethe-

less, constitutes one of the most detailed and sustained passages of the book: one whose highly engrossed language attests to the psychological hold of violence on the narrator. The following is an excerpt from this page-long description:

[H]er arms [are] tied together above her head and her legs spread apart, each foot tied to a bedpost. She's lying on what looks like newspaper. The film's in black and white and scratchy and it's kind of hard to tell [...] but it looks like newspaper. The camera cuts quickly to a young, thin, nude, scared-looking boy [...] being pushed into the room by this fat black guy, who's also naked and who's got this huge hardon. [...] The black man ties the boy up on the floor, and I wonder why there's a chainsaw in the corner of the room, in the background, and then has sex with him and then he has sex with the girl and then walks off the screen. When he comes back he's carrying [...] a toolbox and [...] he takes out an ice pick and what looks like a wire hanger and a package of nails and then a thin, large knife and he comes toward the girl [...]. (153)

This prolonged, present-tense, play-by-play narration of a bloody movie sequence is not only akin in its style and content to Carlos's grisly summary of his own "película favorita," the widely distributed *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (Mañas 30), but, moreover, it serves to link the novels in yet another way: via their shared allusions to snuff movies. Carlos piques Roberto's interest with a description of these gruesomely perverse films in Chapter VI.

—A ti, Roberto —digo—, lo que te encantarían son las Esnafmuvis.
—¿Qué es eso?

—Unas pelis que están ahora de moda en las que filman a un tío o a una tía, normalmente una puta o un chavalito, se los follan y luego les matan. Pero de verdad, y delante de la cámara.

—Pues sí, me molaría. Pero, ¿hay de eso en España?

—Venga, dejad de decir burradas, que lo de Beitman está muy bien, pero es una novela y punto.

—Anda, Pedro, no seas moralista. Dime, Carlos, ¿hay películas de ésas en España?

—Pues claro.

—¿Y cuánto cuestan?

—Eso ya no lo sé.

—Venga, Roberto, ¿no ves que te está vacilando? Te está mintiendo.¹⁴ (93)

As is typical of many scenes in the novel, this passage highlights Carlos's pronounced desire to show himself to be ahead of the curve in regard to countercultural trends, particularly when and where these involve an element of radical shock value. Of course, on the world stage, snuff movies are nothing new in 1992. The advent of the video cassette and the VCR enable their underground distribution beginning in the 1970s (their 1985 appearance in *Less Than Zero* tells us as much). Within the Spanish context, however, perhaps it is fair to say that Carlos—and Mañas for that matter—are relatively “hip” to trends that might be described as provocative; it would be two full years later that Alejandro Amenábar, for instance, incorporates snuff films into the plot of his Goya-winning film, *Tesis*.

Yet, from a comparative angle, and in considering the novel as a whole, can it be said that Mañas's novel is itself ahead of the curve? Perhaps not entirely. As this study has sought to illustrate to this point, *Historias*

del Kronen reveals a demonstrable degree of literary kinship with Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* which is based, in large part, on a shared network of cultural allusions and structural parallels. Nevertheless, to make such a pronouncement and to go no further would belie the complexity of this intertextual relationship. The content of Mañas's novel presents a case study in the dynamics of clan-like behavior, of the ritual-like behavior of male-bonding among a particular circle of sullen, directionless *madrileños* of the so-called Generation X—characters who (like the texts *Less Than Zero* and *Historias del Kronen*) exist in a kind of kinship system. In a 2003 article which examines Mañas's novel as “an acute vision of a crisis in Being [...] a literary performance of addiction,” Nina Molinaro sets forth an anthropologically-based vision of the Kronen group as a kind of masculine tribe whose bonds are forged upon a common ground of idleness and exclusionary disdain toward others:

[M]embers of the loosely knit social group use one another to exclude other kinds of relationships and to control their interactions with the world. In broad strokes, they relegate women [...] to the role of social accessory and/or sexual service station. They view non-Spaniards [...] and [...] minorities in particular as irrelevant to human existence. [...] They hold parents and grandparents responsible for the scarce economic and emotional resources available to them [...] And, finally, although their activities are almost exclusively homosocial and occasionally homoerotic, Carlos and his friends are unreservedly hostile toward any indication of male homosexuality. (298)

This latter point, which Molinaro leaves undeveloped so as to pursue her study of addiction, is especially worthy of note. Without a doubt, homoeroticism plays a key role in a number of the rituals and practices that comprise the process of male-bonding among the members of the *Kronen* clan: most notably between the book's central characters, Carlos and Roberto. For instance, in Chapter VII of the novel, Roberto and Carlos pick up a transvestite prostitute along the Castellana in the early morning hours of one of their countless nights of drug-induced revelry. Pulling out five thousand pesetas from his wallet, Roberto insists on purchasing oral sex for both Carlos and himself, a service they receive in succession within the diminutive confines of the Roberto's Volkswagen Golf—first Roberto, and second (in an uncharacteristic gesture of submissiveness) the alpha-male Carlos (118-19). Earlier that night, however, Carlos had played the role of homoerotic aggressor, mischievously caressing Roberto's neck and kissing him on the mouth in public at the Nirvana concert, as if in an effort to taunt him (“Le paso la mano por el cuello a Roberto” [106]; “Le agarro a Roberto del cuello, cosa que sé que odia, y le doy un beso en la boca” [107]).

Roberto's irritation in such a moment is, of course, born of frustration. As the reader learns in the last narrative segment of the book, Roberto has deeply rooted homosexual feelings for Carlos. Thus, although he longs to reciprocate the latter's disingenuous gestures with a bona fide physical expression of passion, he cannot do so, for—despite the *Kronen* group's indulgence in homoerotic playfulness—overt *homophobia* is a core tenet of the clan. Carlos, the group's chieftain, views sex as but another recreational drug, as an act devoid of emotional repercussions—an attitude he even expresses

in public. Namely, at the novel's tragic final party, and amidst a series of homophobic jokes uttered at the expense of Fierro, he declares, “[a] mí no me molestaría que me hiciera una mamada un tío y no soy maricón” (216). Minutes later, he coerces Roberto to engage in mutual masturbation as they voyeuristically watch Pedro having sex with his girlfriend. Carlos's language of coercion is both marked by a series of forceful commands—“Desabróchame tú,” “Espera, no tan bruscamente,” “Tienes que cogerme así,” “Más rápido, más rápido” (220)—and directed toward a conscious manipulation of Roberto's vulnerability as a closeted homosexual—“A ti, lo que pasa es que te gustan los tíos [...]. No te pongas rojo y venga, déjame tocarte” (220).¹⁵ Carlos explicitly associates their actions with a twisted brand of fraternal camaraderie, intermittently repeating the rhetorical question, “Somos colegas, ¿no?” (220). Yet, when Roberto begins to kiss Carlos, thus expressing passion on his own terms—with agency and as a homosexual—the latter chastises the former, unleashing a slur that rebukes what is effectively a violation of a key tribal *taboo*: “Eso es de juldrones” (221). The result is Roberto's exclusion from Carlos's inner circle. He is branded as a “pringao” by Carlos, who later tosses the former's explanatory letter “en la primera papelera que encuentr[a]” (229). Humiliated and ostracized by the object of his infatuation, Roberto—as a transgressor of the *Kronen* group's kinship code—is shamed and shunned, left to work out his heartbreak with a psychiatrist in the final chapter of the book, a text without so much as its own name or number.¹⁶

Therefore, by way of concluding, it is tempting to propose that Mañas's novel itself—as a constituent text in a discernible kinship system with the work of Bret

Easton Ellis—reflects a dynamic which is ultimately analogous to that of the Kronen clan depicted within its pages. The homoerotic/homophobic tension within this clan is, in a certain sense, parallel to *Historias del Kronen*'s own dialectical relationship with Ellis's novels. As past criticism and this essay both show, Mañas's novel overtly "flirts" with the novel *American Psycho*. At the same time, *Historias del Kronen* (and, in at least one interview, Mañas himself) conspicuously retreats from acknowledging what I have presented as a rich and intriguing intertextual engagement of *Less Than Zero*. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Mañas's intertextual magnetism toward *Less Than Zero* remains "closeted," effectively buried within the deep structure of his novel—a desire governed by ambivalent, almost Freudian, push-pull forces of attraction and avoidance. In fact, the figurative relationship between the novels in question—their form of "bonding," if you will—replicates a dialectic observable in certain predominately male, institutionally oriented communities (the clergy, the military, professional sports). In 1994, José Ángel Mañas is a young writer whose career clearly stands to profit from critical and commercial bonds with the rapidly consolidating, international "institution" that is Generation X masculine narrative. Much like the post-punk music weaved into the fabric of this very subgenre (music whose own homoerotic aesthetic during the early 1980s—both in the Madrid Movida and the London underground—is another matter all together), Mañas's fiction does, indeed, "riff" on themes and structures brought to the fore by his immediate forebears: albeit never to the point of derivate homage. Ultimately, with its masterful linguistic representation of youth slang in "Spain's year" of 1992, its commentary on the sociopolitical

repercussions of integration with the European Union, and its fixation on the tastes, values, and anxieties of the first generation of Spaniards raised almost entirely in the post-Franco cultural climate, *Historias del Kronen* is a novel unto its own. As such, it holds, and will likely retain, a distinctive place within the incipient canon of contemporary Spanish fiction.

Notes

¹ The film adaptation of *Less Than Zero*, directed by Marek Kaniévski, was in wide distribution by 20th Century Fox in 1987 (the Spanish-language version is entitled "Golpe al sueño americano"). The soundtrack to the film, which features The Bangles chart-topping cover of Simon & Garfunkel's "Hazy Shade of Winter," was also unavoidable on radio airwaves in 1988 (as was a music video featuring clips from the film). As for Ellis's novel itself, Mañas flatly denies having read it prior to writing *Historias del Kronen*: "Yo cuando escribí *Kronen*, sólo había leído *American Psycho*, no *Menos que Cero* (la gente no se lo cree, pero es cierto)." ("Ha estado [...]")

² In tracing the musically-based intertextual connections between Mañas and Ellis, it is of relevance to note that The Cure contribute the track "Watching Me Fall (Underdog Remix)" to the soundtrack of the 2000 film adaptation of Ellis's *American Psycho*; two years later, their song "Six Different Ways" (from the 1985 album *The Head on the Door*) is included on the soundtrack to the film version of Ellis's *Rules of Attraction* (2002). Yet, it is the first track on The Cure's 1992 album *Wish*, "Open"—a discordant, guitar-driven maelstrom set to alternate tunings—whose lyrics most distinctly connect to the nocturnal, drug-induced exploits typical of both the Kronen group and Ellis's characters in *Less Than Zero*. The opening lines of the song (the first number played at The Cure's November 6, 1992 performance at the Pabellón de los Deportes in Madrid [*The Cure Concerts*]) initiate a descent into a world of decadence and emptiness:

i really don't know what i'm doing here / i really think i should've gone to bed tonight but... / just one drink and there're some people to meet you / i think that you'll like them / i have to say we do / and i promise in less than an hour we will honestly go/nw why don't i just get you another while you just say hello...

The songwriting of Robert Smith, The Cure's lyricist, frontman, and lead guitarist, frequently makes use of literary intertexts; in fact, the band's debut U.K. single, "Killing an Arab" (1979) is a provocative take on Camus's *L'Étranger*. With respect to Bret Easton Ellis, however, Smith has wryly quipped that "I don't know what to say about [him]. I certainly took enough drugs not to have to read his books..." ("Robert Smith and His Books").

³ Mañas's account of Nirvana's July 3, 1992 concert is factually distorted from historical reality. The author rearranges that night's set list so as to name-drop as many hit titles as possible within the span of a few pages. In his fictionalized version of events, the band kicks off its show with its chart-topping single "Smells Like Teen Spirit"—or, as he renders the title, "Esmelslaiktinspirit" (106). The fact is, however, that this was more of a closing number—that is, the penultimate song performed that night. Additionally, the novel's placement of "In Bloom"—"Inblum" (106)—and "Come As You Are"—"Camasyuar" (106)—as the second and third songs of the night, respectively, clearly reworks the actual set list from that evening. The former was actually the fifth song played, and the latter (likely part of an encore) was performed just prior to "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (*Nirvana Live*).

⁴ In light of several oblique allusions within Mañas's novel to the escalating problem of HIV-AIDS among sexually promiscuous, heroin-abusing youths in early 1990s Madrid (e.g., "Te habrás hecho el test del sida, ¿no?" [91]), it is of interest to note that an adaptation of this music video is later contributed by The The to an AIDS awareness/benefit project:

[...] director Charles Vanderpool and his wife, producer Marilyn Vanderpool, requested for The The's song to be the soundtrack for an AIDS awareness video—their contribution to an April '93 benefit in Baltimore, MD. Through film footage and still photographs, the Vanderpools' video showed real people of all ages and races with AIDS and HIV, all of whom gave their permission to be filmed. When Johnson was shown the original clip, it was decided to integrate Tim Pope's acoustic performance footage of the song with the Vanderpools' work for an additional video for 'Love Is Stronger Than Death.' (*A The The Biography*)

⁵ In a 1993 interview, Johnson alludes to his status as a part-time resident in Spain: "I don't spend that much time here [in England]. I'm much more at home in Spain or America these days" (Mathur and Sheehan).

⁶ Ellis, who is born and raised in Los Angeles, publishes *Less Than Zero* while an undergraduate at Bennington College in southwestern Vermont (book jacket, *Less Than Zero*).

⁷ Ellis's second epigraph ("There's a feeling I get when I look to the West...") is taken from the third verse of Led Zeppelin's 1971 classic, "Stairway to Heaven." This song's second verse alludes to encoded messages in "signs" (posters?) on walls: "There's a sign on the wall but she wants to be sure/'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings."

⁸ Ellis's bleak, Generation X vision of life in decadent southern California bears an unmistakable resemblance to the Lost Generation's literature of youthful disillusionment in the urban milieu. For example, the language and symbolic content of Costello's image on the poster bring to mind the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, which stare out over the New York wasteland at the outset of Chapter II of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "[A]bove the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over

it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes [...] blue and gigantic [...] their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many painless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground” (23).

⁹ “Trust” is also the title of the eighth track on The Cure’s aforementioned *Wish*.

¹⁰ As if a proxy for the poster in Clay’s bedroom, midway through the novel there hangs on a wall in the office of his psychiatrist a framed cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine which reads “Elvis Costello Repents” (122). Clay (“coming off from coke, sneezing blood”) sees it and experiences a kind of confused moment of catharsis, an empty epiphany in which he is reduced to tears for no clear reason:

I tell him I don’t know what’s wrong; that maybe it has something to do with my parents but not really or maybe my friends or that I drive sometimes and get lost; maybe it’s the drugs. (122)

¹¹ Carlos’s suggestion of mandatory euthanasia for those beyond middleagedness calls to mind the cult classic film *Logan’s Run* (1976)—a futuristic dystopia in which society calls for the obligatory euthanasia of all citizens at the age of thirty.

¹² “—Carlos está muy pálido hoy—dice mi hermano.—Sí. No tiene buena cara—dice la vieja” (Mañas 122). Curiously, in *Less Than Zero*, Clay’s pale complexion is commented upon repeatedly in the initial pages of the novel. When he arrives in California, Blair tells him, “you look pale” (10). Soon thereafter, at a party, a friend Daniel tells Clay the very same thing, and actually suggests that he go to “a tanning salon on Santa Monica” that dyes skin (14). An acquaintance Alana, moments later, states that “You look kind of pale, Clay. You should go to the beach or something” (17). Clay attributes

his pallor to having spent four months in New Hampshire (14).

¹³ The cover of Gullón’s 1998 critical edition of *Historias del Kronen* features a fragment from Andy Warhol’s “Five Deaths Eleven Times in Orange.” The piece, produced in 1963, depicts multiple views of a car accident (curiously, the image was inverted by the cover designers at Destino). While, indeed, Mañas’s novel does include a memorable scene in which Roberto and Carlos drive against traffic in the wrong lane on the M-30 in Madrid, it is actually Ellis’s novel that reveals a recurrent thematic fascination with car crashes and death on urban expressways.

¹⁴ Days later, Roberto continues to dwell upon this subject. He asks Carlos, “lo de la película ésa del otro día, ¿era verdad? ¿Podría conseguirme una?” The protagonist admits that he does not know where to find one (142).

¹⁵ Carlos’s knowledge of Roberto’s closeted homosexuality is hinted at on the second page of the novel, where he reprimands Pedro for expressing concerns about his best friend’s sexuality: “¿Y a ti qué te importa si sale o no sale con tías? Déjale en paz. Es un problema suyo, no tuyo. El día que Roberto quiera tener una cerda, la tendrá” (12).

¹⁶ “Para mí, el que me quisiera tocar era maravilloso, no podía resistirme. Pensé que al fin se había dado cuenta. Me engañaba. Él nunca me quiso, al menos no como yo le quería. Me di cuenta en cuanto quise besarle y él me dijo que era de julandrones. Sentí tanta vergüenza...” (232).

Works Cited

- Annesley, James. *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998.
- A The The Biography* (Reprinted from defunct version of official Sony Legacy site, <<http://legacyrecordings.com/thethe/>>. Ed. Uziel. 10 Apr. 2005. <<http://www.ingsoc.com/thethe/information/biography.html>>.
- Costello, Elvis & The Attractions. *Trust*. Columbia, 1981.
- . Promotional Poster for *Trust*. Columbia, 1981.

- Ellis, Bret Easton. *American Psycho: A Novel*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- . *Less Than Zero*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.
- Gullón, Germán. Introducción. *Historias del Kronen*. By José Ángel Mañas. Barcelona: Ediciones Destino (CCC), 1998. v-xxxix.
- "Ha estado con nosotros ... José Ángel Mañas." *Encuentros digitales. Elmundo.es* 9 March 2005 <<http://www.el-mundo.es/encuentros/invitados/2005/03/1472/>>.
- Led Zeppelin. "Stairway to Heaven." *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971.
- Less Than Zero*. Dir. Marek Kaniévska. 1987. DVD. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002.
- Logan's Run*. Dir. Michael Anderson. MGM, 1976.
- Mañas, José Ángel. *Historias del Kronen*. 4th ed. Barcelona: Ediciones Destino (CCC), 1998.
- Mathur, Paul, and Tom Sheehan. "Slow Emotion Replay." (Reprint from *Melody Maker*, 28 Aug. 1999). *This is the Day*. Lazarus Ltd. 12 Apr. 2005. <<http://www.thethe.com>>.
- Medsker, David. Rev. of "Soul Mining," by The The. *Pop Matters* 30 Aug. 2002. 15 Apr. 2005. <<http://www.popmatters.co/music/reviews/t/thethe-soulmining.shtml>>.
- Molinaro, Nina. "The 'Real' Story of Drugs, *Dasein* and José Ángel Mañas's *Historias del Kronen*." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 27.2 (2003). 291-306.
- Nirvana Live Guide*. Eds. Kris Sproul & Mike Ziegler. 12 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.nirvanaguide.com/>>.
- Pao, Maria T. "Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll: *Historias del Kronen* as Blank Fiction." *Alec* 27.2 (2002): 245-60.
- "Robert Smith and His Books." (Reprinted from *Rock et Folk* [France], Aug. 2003). *A Chain of Flowers*. Trans. David Fargier. 20 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/ChainofFlowers/rock-folk0703.html>>.
- The Bangles. "Hazy Shade of Winter." *Less Than Zero*. Original Motion Picture Soundtrack. Columbia Records, 1987.
- . "Hazy Shade of Winter." *Less Than Zero*. Original Motion Picture Soundtrack. Columbia Records, 1987. Music Video. Dir. Jim Shea. 28 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZvn4FAR07g>>.
- The Cure Concerts Guide*. 15 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.cure-concerts.de/1992.htm>>.
- . "Killing an Arab." Single. Fiction Records, 1979.
- The Cure. "Open." *Wish*. Elektra, 1992.
- . "Six Different Ways." *The Rules of Attraction*. Motion Picture Soundtrack. Compendia, 2002.
- . *The Head on the Door*. Electra, 1985.
- . "Watching Me Fall (Underdog Remix)." *American Psycho: Music from the Controversial Motion Picture*. Soundtrack. Koch Records, 2000.
- The The. *Dusk*. Sony, 1993.
- . "Giant." *Soul Mining*. Epic, 1983.
- . "Love is Stronger than Death." *Dusk*. Epic Records, 1993. Music Video. Dir. Charles Vanderpool & Tim Pope. 28 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2fxlgMeIMY>>.
- The Rules of Attraction*. Dir. Roger Avary. 2002. DVD. Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2003.
- Warhol, Andy. *Five Deaths Eleven Times in Orange*. Lithograph. 1964.