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Bret/*BRAT*

2024 was the year of the brat. That was what the Collins Dictionary asserted when they crowned it their 'word of the year', fending off competition from 'brainrot', 'delulu', 'anti-tourism', and 'era'.[1] Propelled by the success of the album *BRAT*, released in June by popstar Charli XCX, what secured its place at the top, Collins wrote, was 'More than a hugely successful album, "brat" is a cultural phenomenon that has resonated with people globally, and "brat summer" established itself as an aesthetic and a way of life'.[2] The key to that resonance, especially among young people, was the reclamation of the word from its conventional associations. No longer was 'brat' simply a noun that signified 'a child, esp. one who is ill-mannered or unruly'; it was now also an adjective, one that Collins newly defined as a quality 'characterized by a confident, independent, and hedonistic attitude'.[3]

It was the summer the world turned slime green, when clothing brands, FinTech start-ups, vegan sausages, and Presidential candidates all embraced elements of the 'brat' aesthetic in hopes of wooing the demographic to whom it most appealed. Its influence has proved remarkably pervasive. A focus on punk attitude, sexual liberation, and club culture has invaded practically all of the visual, literary, and performing arts in some form over the last year. In fashion, leather jackets, denim mini-skirts, neon nail polish, black wrap-around sunglasses, platform boots, and messy hair have all returned to high streets and runways. At the Academy Awards, *Anora*, which followed the chaotic, short-lived relationship between a New York City sex worker and the spoiled son of a Russian oligarch, beat out architectural epic *The Brutalist* and Catholic drama *Conclave* for Best Picture. Meanwhile, in the world of dating, the number of users on one app who added 'Brat' to their profiles, a kink that involves 'misbehaving or disobeying', increased by 540%.[4]

The surprising thing about 'brat summer', though, was just how unlikely its rapid ascent really was. As Charli XCX's sixth studio album, *BRAT* belonged to a genre of music that is thought to have peaked more than a decade ago. In 2021, the singer herself posted a eulogy of sorts to her Twitter account, 'rip hyperpop? Discuss'.[5] The supposed decline of

the genre ran parallel to the decline of the places where it had formerly been enjoyed. The closure of night clubs at an unprecedented rate – owed, in part, to young people turning away from alcohol and drugs – had led to Gen Z being branded 'Generation Sensible'.[6] Accordingly, the dominant trend in internet culture prior to 'brat' had been 'clean girl aesthetic', which encouraged young women to channel an understated elegance in beauty, fashion, and demeanour. The last things they were likely to embrace were the three objects through which Charli described the 'brat aesthetic': 'a pack of cigs, a Bic lighter, and a strappy white top with no bra'.[7]

So why, then, did 'brat summer' prove quite so appealing? Unlikely though it might have seemed in 2024, it was not the first time that young people had coalesced around 'brat' as a marker for adolescent transgression. Forty years earlier, the zodiac found itself similarly aligned, when the word appeared everywhere in teen magazines, film reviews, book columns, and late-night chat shows, after the 'Brat Pack' was coined to refer pejoratively to a group of young, attractive Hollywood actors starring in a group of films including *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire*.[8] It quickly gained mainstream currency, and was adopted to describe a trio of authors whose debut novels attracted significant interest for their presentation of the depraved, drug-fuelled lives of Generation X.[9] But these '80s brats, with their golden tans and preppy varsity jackets, seem a world away from Charli's brat, whose 'vibe' she described in the lead single, '360', as 'city sewer slut'.[10] So, too, was their attitude towards the label of 'brat' wildly different. While Charli unapologetically embraced its connotations of rudeness, entitlement, and self-indulgence, the original members of the Hollywood and Literary 'Brat Packs' did everything they could to escape the label.

That is, all except one. Like Charli, Bret Easton Ellis understood that leaning into 'brattiness' was what made his books resonate with young people who felt condescended to and ignored by their elders. Rather than fight against attempts to deride him, he saw the potential in performing their primary insult *ad absurdum*. Initially, that came in the form of sex and drugs: 'Sometimes I left a party I was throwing and I would be having another party somewhere else … The first party was the pre-party. That was probably at the height of my drug days'.[11] Eventually, though, 'brat' became a key part of Ellis's brand in creative terms, too. After the significant attention heaped on his bestselling debut, *Less Than Zero* (1985), published when he was just twenty-one years old, Ellis continued his interest in young, rich characters living extravagant lifestyles in *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), *American Psycho* (1991), *Glamorama* (1998), *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010) and, most

recently, in *The Shards* (2023). While his 'Brat Pack' colleagues varied their output in pursuit of greater critical acclaim, Ellis doubled down, with every review from establishment critics that branded him vacuous, insipid and superficial, only compounding his appeal. Four decades later, Ellis remains perhaps the only original 'Brat Pack' writer whose work still achieves wide readership. One journalist has even referred to him as 'the novelist who turned being a bad boy into a literary form'.[12]

But what exactly does Ellis's 'bad boy literary form' look and sound like, and what precursory relationship might it have to the spirit and aesthetics of 'brat summer', encapsulated in the music, fashion, and behaviour of Charli XCX? In its comparative study of Bret and *BRAT*, this article settles into three parts. The first part argues for the existence of 'brat' as a distinct artistic style, one that plays off the dynamic between sensory deprivation and overload at two key moments in history. The second part examines the gendering of the term 'brat', pitting Ellis and Charli against each other to show how their respective rebellious behaviour responds to historic expectations for 'bad boys' and 'feisty girls'. The third part concentrates on the significance of 'brat summer' as a cultural moment today. Why might one want to be 'brat'? What does it say about the stage of society that we have reached? And where does it leave us, now that Charli has sought to rebrand 'brat summer' as 'brat forever <3'?

'Hedonistic with the gravel drawl and dead eyes'

When we use the word 'brat' in ordinary conversation, it is almost always preceded by a specific adjective: *spoilt*. Spoilt brats are individuals who are inherently dissatisfied with their lot – however lavish it may be – and have an insatiable appetite for more. That appetite manifests itself through feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and extreme behaviour designed to attract attention, to decry the injustice of not getting whatever it is they want. It is an affliction we associate with childhood, that period when we are yet to be accustomed to notions of reasonable limitation – to being told 'no' – but also with adults who, for various reasons, have not outgrown such behaviour. When it appears in adults, it comes with psychoanalytic baggage, with the unrealisation of sexual pleasure, originating in over-indulgent parents. But when adults exhibit spoiled behaviour, we are reminded, too, of the capitalist context without which such inherent dissatisfaction would not be possible. The rise of the spoiled brat, in short, is wrapped up with how we have been raised to respond to excess.

The labels that are often employed to describe the genres of the work of Charli XCX and Bret Easton Ellis make it seem as if they would have little in common when it comes to representing excess. The former's music has been referred to as the most commercially successful instantiation of 'hyperpop', a subgenre established in the UK in the early 2010s by Charli's collaborators, A. G. Cook and SOPHIE.[13] Centred around unrelentingly high tempo, computerised vocal distortion effects, and self-consciously 'catchy' melodies, hyperpop exalts in excess. For Julie Ackermann, that is the genre's distinctive feature: 'Extreme pop, conveying extreme emotions, produced by extreme people'.[14] Ellis, meanwhile, has been studied within the context of 'Blank Fiction', writing which relies on affectless tone, flat characters, and moral vacuums. However, in his book outlining that context, James Annesley details the ways in which those techniques of lack rely fundamentally on an awareness of excess: 'There's an emphasis on the extreme, the marginal and the violent. There's a sense of indifference and indolence. The limits of the human body seem indistinct, blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease and brutality.'[15] Both Ellis's writing and Charli XCX's music, we might infer, present the same clash of maximalist background – the overstimulation of the senses – with the deadpan, emotionless voice of the speaker cutting through.

For Bret Easton Ellis, nowhere represented excess in the '80s better than Los Angeles. There, the rich, disaffected youths of *Less Than Zero*, have more than they could ever need. In the first of many parties in the novel, Clay meets some old high school friends who have returned home from college for Christmas: '"I go to the University of Spoiled Children," Blair says, still grinning, running her fingers through her long blond hair. "Where?" asks Daniel. "U.S.C.," she says'.[16] With parents who provide them with money to replace emotional intimacy, their standards for fulfilment have become unreachable: 'The trust is keeping things steady for now. I might go back when I run out. Only problem is, I don't think it's ever gonna run out'.[17] In search of extreme experience to break through the numbness of privilege, Clay experiments with drugs and sex, watches as his friends taunt a dead body, and witnesses a gang rape. In one scene, it all gets too much, when Clay has a come-down on a night out:

> It's two in the morning and hot and we're at the Edge in the back room and Trent is trying on my sunglasses and I tell him that I want to leave. Trent tells me that we'll leave soon, a couple of minutes maybe. The music from the dance floor seems too loud and I tense up every time the music stops and another song comes on. I

> lean back against the brick wall and notice that there are two boys embracing in a darkened corner. Trent senses I'm tense and says, "What do you want me to do? You wanna lude, is that it?" He pulls out a Pez dispenser and pulls Daffy Duck's head back. I don't say anything, just keep staring at the Pez dispenser and then he puts it away and cranes his neck. "Is that Muriel?"[18]

Exacerbated by the constant switching between songs on the dance floor, the solution to Clay's overloaded consciousness, for Trent, is to pop a sedative pill. Connected to the bombardment of branded marketing that appears throughout *Less Than Zero*, the pill dispenser has a perverted innocence, topped with the plastic head of a cartoon character. Always on the hunt for fresh stimulation, Trent rejects Clay's request to leave the club by pretending to mistake a 'black teenage boy' for their friend, Muriel, thereby allowing them to look at something else, think about something else, as another song starts playing on the dancefloor.

As many readers will notice, songs aren't only heard in nightclubs in *Less Than Zero*. Frequently, they are accompanied by images, when characters decide to turn on the Music Television channel, launched in August 1981. MTV is summoned at moments where deeper feelings need blocking out with the kind of disruption that Clay feels at the Edge, to scatter his brain with a spoil of sensory information. When Clay has orgasmed after masturbating next to a girl he met at a club, the clarifying drop in hormones is deferred by clicking the remote control: 'Bowie's on the stereo and she gets up, flushed, and turns the stereo off and turns on MTV. I lie there, naked, sunglasses still on, and she hands me a box of Kleenex'.[19] When he encounters photographs of himself with his girlfriend, Blair, whom he is contemplating breaking up with, Clay stifles the guilt by choosing to 'Light a cigarette and turn on MTV and turn off the sound'.[20] On multiple occasions, it is combined with drug consumption, in a never-ending cycle of stimulation and sedation: 'I turn on MTV and tell myself I could get over it and go to sleep if I had some Valium and then I think about Muriel and feel a little sick as the videos begin to flash by'.[21]

Much has been made in the criticism of the episodic 'flashes' in Ellis's novel and the short attention spans of the MTV generation.[22] So too, though, has Charli XCX's music been considered as reflective of the fondness for short snippets on the video platforms used by the youth of today.[23] The overloading of the consciousness with sounds and images is the major preoccupation of *BRAT*, as the album stifles the slower, more lyrical tracks with fast-paced rhythms, mirroring the contrast between extreme behaviour and the introspection of Ellis's novel. Towards

the end of the album, Charli sandwiches a meditative song between two of the fastest, loudest tracks on the entire album. 'Mean girls' opens and closes with the sound of a crowd, with so many voices layered on top of each other that they come to resemble rushing water. The track describes a stereotypical 'mean girl', 'Yeah she's in her mid-20s, real intelligent, / Hedonistic with the gravel drawl and dead eyes, / You say she's anorexic and you heard she likes when people say it, / Think you already know her but you don't'.[24] The 'mean girl' reminds us of the 'brats' in *Less Than Zero*, who possess 'thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices'.[25] As the song fades out to the deafening sound of the crowd, the next track, 'I think about it all the time', foregrounds Charli's vocals, resembling a spoken word recording more than a pop song. It offers a moment of clarity after 'Mean girls', as the singer reflects on meeting her friends' baby, and wondering whether she might pause her music career to have a family of her own: 'Should I stop my birth control? / 'Cause my career feels so small in the existential scheme of it all'.[26] However, just as we expect *BRAT* to conclude with this solemn dilemma about growing up, the album bursts abruptly into its final and most energetic track.

When describing '365' in an interview, Charli XCX claimed that she wanted this climactic song to capture the 'journey of a crazy night out': 'I'm imagining I'm in this superclub and every door I go through it's a different room in the club and the room sounds slightly different'.[27] The shifts of pace that occur in '365' disorient the listener, as we imagine ourselves stumbling out of the bathroom, along the corridor and onto the dancefloor. Common to all of these rooms, however, is the melody which underpins the whole of the track. When we refer back to the song that opens the album, '360', we realise that this melody is an accelerated sample from the earlier track, meaning that if the album is put on repeat – and '365' is able to loop back into '360' – it gives the impression of the album speeding up until it reaches a dizzying terminal velocity. As it is for Clay at the Edge, that sensory confusion is combined with drug use; the call-and-response phrase, 'bumpin' that,' appears throughout '365', referring both to the 'bumping' of an audio device to increase the volume and to the snorting of powdered drugs.[28] Charli XCX ties this combination to the 'brat' persona when the word appears for the first time in the album: 'Who the fuck are you? I'm a brat when I'm bumping that'. The 'brat' becomes synonymous with sensory excess, someone who is instructed to 'never go home, don't sleep, don't eat / Just do it on repeat, keep (bumpin' that)', so that by the end of the song, we are left with a soundscape overloaded with heavy bass, layered melodies, and snatches of lyrics from various points in the song.

The curious thing about the sensory overload experienced by Ellis and Charli's brats, though, is that both took place during periods of economic deceleration. The cost-of-living crisis, brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and sanctions against Russia, meant that the 'brat summer' of 2024 was, for most of the world's population, no time for self-indulgence. Similarly, the summer of 1985 saw the US in the midst of its recovery from the recession of the first two years of that decade, as it grappled with high interest rates, unemployment and inflation. One way of comprehending the emergence of an overloaded artistic style through *BRAT* and *Less Than Zero* during these periods could be to bring it under the umbrella of 'Recession Pop', art which is thought to exalt in maximalism, high energy, and optimism as a way of escaping the difficulties that lie outside the walls of the nightclub. In his study of dance pop music produced in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, Carter Hanson argued that songs by Lady Gaga, Ke$ha and the Black Eyed Peas projected 'an idealized, albeit ephemeral and sensualist, recession-free utopian space'.[29] While some of the songs on *BRAT* might be illuminated by Hanson's theory of ecstatic movement – 'Club classics' and 'Everything is romantic' in particular – the escapist category of 'Recession Pop' stifles one of the most important qualities of both Ellis's and Charli's art. Specifically, it does not account for the narrative voice which undercuts the high energy of the background noise, a voice which is defined by lethargy, despondency, and numbness.

Although this may strike us as a contradiction, this dynamic actually makes sense, for the insatiable appetite of the brat never allows itself the kind of satisfaction that may produce strong feelings. During times of financial instability, that hunger for more seems all-consuming. When changes of vocal key do occur in *BRAT* – and they are rare – they are often facilitated by the conscious use of Autotune, making any departure from affectlessness appear noticeably artificial. In 'Sympathy is a knife', jealousy is revealed as the major drawback of having everything you could ever want: "Cause I couldn't even be her if I tried / I'm opposite I'm on the other side / I feel all these feelings I can't control'.[30] As we hear Charli XCX's expressionless tone dragged onto pitch by the distortion of Autotune technology, it exposes the insecurity that whatever she has will never be enough.

In Ellis's novels, desensitisation to extreme behaviour is not only what provides the action, as the characters drive around in search of fresh experience, but also the overwhelming sense of futility, as we are aware that nothing they do will ever generate the desired response; indeed, any response at all. The creation that best embodies this cycle is the serial-killing yuppie, Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of *American*

Psycho. Obsessed with branded clothing, fine dining, and luxury cars, Bateman's cry in the video store, '*There are too many fucking movies to choose from*', has been read as symptomatic of the 'synaptic overload integral to our society […] There is no space, no time for humanitarian behaviour or emotional connections.'[31] He demonstrates that fact as soon as he leaves the store, when he is forced, like Clay in *Less Than Zero*, to quell multiple stimuli with sedatives: 'my eyes almost like they were guided by radar, focus in on a red Lamborghini Countach parked at the curb, gleaming beneath the streetlamps, and I have to stop moving, the Valium shockingly, unexpectedly kicking in, everything else becomes obliterated[.]'[32] Given the vacancy that underpins his tone throughout, it is not difficult to imagine how this character will maintain his cool later in the novel, when he will report having committed a series of crimes that include stabbing a child at the zoo and eating the intestines of one of his victims. His affectless logic reigns supreme: 'Though I am satisfied at first by my actions, I'm suddenly jolted with a mournful despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless, it is to take a child's life'.[33]

Incapable of experiencing any strong emotions, the only pleasure Bateman derives from life is a kind of perverted comedy, taunting homeless people and playing with dead bodies. When it comes to finding things funny, though, Bateman's extreme desensitisation precludes laughter, even if he recognises that that is the intention: 'I hear Hamlin saying, "Bateman, is it okay to wear argyle socks with a business suit?" He's attempting a joke but it fails to amuse me. Sighing inwardly, my eyes closed, I answer, impatient, "Not really, Hamlin. They're too sporty. They interfere with a business image."'[34] Throughout Ellis's writing, jokes are constantly being misunderstood. In *Less Than Zero*, hardly any of them land at all: 'I look over at my mother, who stares into her glass and one of my sisters tells her a joke and she doesn't get it and orders a drink'; 'they tell me a couple of jokes that I don't get and tell my father what they want for Christmas'; '"Jared heard this stupid joke from his boyfriend who works at Morton's. 'What are the two biggest lies?' 'I'll pay you back and I won't come in your mouth.' I don't even get it."'[35] Jokes fail in Ellis's writing not just because the characters lack the intellectual range to understand them, but because they are simply expecting *more*. Deadpan humour hinges on undercutting our expectation that there will be more to a comment than there actually is; the person telling the joke will often match the anticlimax with a vacant tone and facial expression. That makes this brand of humour the perfect iteration of a 'spoiled brat' sensibility, the kind of jokes for individuals who

have grown so desensitised to extreme behaviour that only the idea of 'more' now satisfies.

This deadpan 'brat' sense of humour is a trait that Ellis shares with Charli XCX. When she announced the UK arena tour for *BRAT*, the poster consisted of the artist's name, the dates, and venues in white letters superimposed onto a transparent plastic 'baggie'. Commonly associated with the consumption and distribution of recreational drugs, the artist was contacted by the UK Advertising Standards Authority, 'cause they said it was like promoting bad things'.[36] Rather than withdraw the advert, however, Charli decided to alter it, explaining in a video on her TikTok account that 'it's obviously a sandwich bag, so I just made it really obvious and put a sandwich in the bag […] just for anyone who thought it wasn't a sandwich bag, like what else would you put in this, obviously?' The poster, then approved by the ASA, featured a ham sandwich behind the white text, and she encouraged her fans to 'bring your sandwiches to the *BRAT* arena tour in the UK'. What the editing of the poster made clear – even clearer than the original poster – was that 'brat' thrives when it is given an opportunity to tease authority. While the western world was in the midst of economic contraction, those who bought tickets to the concert would lust after a hedonistic fantasy. Charli XCX looked the ASA dead in the eyes, and placed all the responsibility for 'bad behaviour' back onto their imagination.

'I might say something stupid'

Talk of a 'brat' sense of humour, one which relies on subverting expectations, on baiting an audience only to deny them the satisfaction of the climactic punchline, raises an activity central to Ellis' and Charli's rebellious personae. Both are highly fond of trolling, of being deliberately offensive, sarcastic, or controversial in order to elicit a reaction. In David Rudrum's recent book on the subject, he locates an allegiance between the way in which a troll undercuts the smooth operations of a communicative ball game, and the 'kind of childish brats who, as soon as they start losing, pick up their ball and take it home'.[37] But while Ellis and Charli both seek to disrupt the usual contract of sincere communication between artist and audience, they differ in terms of how that disruption has been described. For Ellis, his fondness for 'triggering' readers has been considered part of his 'bad boy' bravado, as the '*enfant terrible*' or the 'studied provocateur'.[38] For Charli, however, her tongue-in-cheek remarks are often considered 'bitchy', 'nasty', 'disgusting', 'not only classless but ignorant too'.[39] Comparing them, then, we not only observe two skilful trolls at work in an area growing in interest for scholars of

postmodernism, but are also able to trace new lineages for each of their rebellious 'brat' performances, lineages which are directed fundamentally by issues relating to gender.

Among Ellis's many attempts to toy with his readers' understanding of a situation as either real or invented, the most famous concerns the crimes of Patrick Bateman. Studies of *American Psycho* will reliably call to our attention the possibility that Bateman's violent mutilation of bodies may never have taken place at all. In the novel, Bateman narrates how he killed Paul Owen, 'The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up'.[40] Later, though, we are told that his story must be impossible, after another character confesses: 'I had … dinner … with Paul Owen … twice … in London … *just ten days ago*'.[41] By refusing to resolve our suspicions, Ellis facilitates the possibility of reading *American Psycho* as a kind of extended prank. If we do so, however, our impression of Bateman alters; he is no longer the ruthless serial killer, but someone who *pretends* to be one. That is what Mark Storey infers, when he writes that 'If Ellis constructs Bateman out of deliberately clichéd and extreme language, a particular language that belongs to the masculinity Bateman represents, then the novel exists to expose and satirize the beliefs that masculine language has about human nature: The murderous insanity of Bateman is merely the ultimate realization of normative masculinity's internal logic'.[42]

The curious thing about *American Psycho* as a satire of hypermasculinity, though, is that in recent years it has become the central text in support of a new kind of male idol. The 'Sigma Male' was first coined in 2010 by alt-right commentator Vox Day, who argued that 'Sigmas' were 'lone wolves' who transcended the ranks of 'Alpha' and 'Beta': 'the true Sigma's withdrawal from the pack is not a reaction to the way he is treated, it is pure instinct'.[43] In the last ten years, Patrick Bateman has become the 'arch-sigma' in certain corners of the Internet, the personification of many qualities prized by such men, including detachment, confidence, and self-discipline.[44] The director of the film version of *American Psycho*, Mary Harron, has declared herself 'mystified' by this fact: 'I don't think that […] I ever expected it to be embraced by Wall Street bros, at all. That was not our intention. So, did we *fail*? I'm not sure why [it happened], because Christian [Bale]'s very clearly making fun of them'.[45] Harron's mystification over Bateman's appeal relies on the supposed failure of Sigmas to understand *American Psycho* properly as a satire. But what if the Sigmas are reading something into Bateman that we have not yet discovered? What if his pranking of the audience regarding the truth of his crimes reveals not pathetic boasting,

but a successful attempt to garner the attention he so badly craves? There are many times that Bateman trolls other characters in order to generate a reaction. In a conversation with Evelyn, he confesses: 'I'd want to bring a Harrison AK-47 assault rifle to the ceremony […] with a thirty-round magazine so after thoroughly blowing your fat mother's head off with it I could use it on that fag brother of yours'.[46] Such comments act as a kind of metafictional wink to the reader. Is Evelyn going to take this comment seriously or not? Is she even listening? Are *you* going to take all of my crimes seriously or not? That wink implies a stratification of the audience into those who understand the performance for what it is – an attempt to manufacture outrage – and those who don't.

That fostering of an exclusive community of men 'in the know', defined against a rival community who take the bait, could be one reason why the novel has taken on a new significance for Sigma Males. Online communities on Reddit, 4chan, and TikTok offer an opportunity for the Sigmas to flex their version of masculinity, which involves the anonymous targeting of other users in order to provoke a response. Ellis himself has remarked that had *American Psycho* been written in 2016, Bateman would be 'flashing his bling on Instagram and trolling people on Twitter'.[47] In her sociological study of video games, Megan Condis has identified trolling as an inherently masculine-coded activity: 'even in cases where their barbs are gender neutral, the trolls' aims is to trick victims into temporarily losing their ability to adequately enact a textual performance of masculinity. Gender is the conceptual field upon which the game of trolls is played'.[48] The way in which *American Psycho* was able to stoke such heightened responses from audiences regarding its depiction of violence against women – even leading to the cancellation of its publication by Simon & Shuster – indicated how successful Bateman's trolling had been.

So, Patrick Bateman might display the characteristics of an Internet troll, but where does that leave his 'brat' creator? In fact, Ellis has used the word 'troll' frequently to describe himself. In the early 2010s, much of his creative energy was being funnelled through his Twitter account. Early tweets seemed intent on testing the limits of the medium, trying their best to stoke a reaction: 'You can't get to where Michael Phelps has gotten without severe Daddy issues. This is true of most young men who achieve early success'; 'I think it's just that women's natural inclination leans towards secrecy, mysteriousness, an otherness lodged in their DNA. It's not a slam'; 'I like the idea of "Glee" but why is it that every time I watch an episode I feel like I've stepped into a puddle of HIV'.[49] On many occasions, Ellis referred to the reactions of friends, 'Concerned Empire woman offended by Bigelow tweet writes "I love

you, babe. But stop tweeting wasted." When the hell else should I tweet?!?'[50] Outraged comments failed to move Ellis, who continued to provoke his followers with sarcastic posts. On one occasion, what was seemingly intended as a text to his drug dealer was mistakenly tweeted from his account, 'Come over at do bring coke now'.[51] Nevertheless, Ellis feigned frustration with the response, arguing that some people misunderstood what he was trying to do: 'Anyone Unfollowing me should have known better and never Followed me in the first place. Wise up: pussies and snowflakes. Get the F over it'.[52]

In his memoir, *White*, short for 'White Privileged Male', Ellis owned up to what he refers to as 'trolling', conceiving of it as a symbolic – if impulsive – activity: 'my desire was to have a good time, to be a provocative, somewhat outrageous and opinionated critic, to be a bad boy, a douche, to lead my own dance in this writers' funhouse – all in 140 characters or less'.[53] Ellis acknowledged that these 'bad boy' qualities made his account attractive to a certain subset of internet users, a subset almost certainly populated in part by 'Sigmas':

> A few people suggested it was the 'rancour' with which I expressed myself that prompted strangers to follow my verified account, and that I had "targets" they enjoyed seeing skewered, but this implied that my Twitter feed (and the very nature of the medium) was somehow planned. For me, it was, instead, something entirely spontaneous and random.[54]

What drew Ellis to Twitter trolling was something curious that happened to the truth value of the statements he was communicating, something that had clearly been a major preoccupation in *American Psycho*: 'That Twitter campaign had been partly sincere and partly performance art, and like everything, I thought, in the immediate Twitter moment, meant to be surprising, playful *and* provocative, real *and* fake, easy to read *and* hard to decipher, and most importantly, *not to be taken too seriously*'.[55] But that trickster instinct which appeared often late at night on Twitter also finds its manifestation in the autofictional turn in Ellis's novels, adding another dimension to so-called 'bad boy' literary form.

There is something inherently prankish about Ellis's exploitation of autobiographical information in his fiction. In the long retrospective that opens *Lunar Park*, for instance, Bret recalls the moment in an interview in which he had responded to the rumours of his being a homosexual, '"Yeah, you bet I am – sure!" adding what I thought to be a jaunty and overtly sarcastic remark about coming out of the closet:

"Thank God!" I shouted. "Someone has *finally* outed me!"'[56] Ellis goes on to defend his outburst with reference to the behaviour that was expected from this notorious 'brat': 'I was just being "rambunctious." I was just being a "prankster." I was just being "Bret"'.[57] The person most affected by this 'trolling', though, is the novel's main female character, Bret's fictional wife, Jeyne, who makes 'confused, tearful phone calls' to her husband.

In Ellis's most recent work, *The Shards*, the persona of the 'troll' is closely associated with ideas of masculinity. The novel revolves around the activities of a serial killer, the 'Trawler', who stalks the Hollywood hills for his victims, typically popular teenagers whom he brutally murders and dismembers. Incidentally, that nickname has an important etymological relation to 'Troller', with both words referring to different methods for baiting and catching fish.[58] In time, the Trawler becomes a troll, taunting the police and local population: 'they had received two phone calls from the suspect or suspects ("the groaning drawl" of the suspect's "fake" voice, the voice that promised it had committed the crimes, and would commit more, was confirmed in the articles that followed)'.[59] Although the Trawler thereby exerts the kind of Sigma masculinity that appealed to followers of Ellis's Twitter account, the novel fixates on manifestations of conventional 'Alpha' masculine energy. The main object of narrator Bret's interest, football jock Thom Wright, is not only 'casually beautiful, all-American, dark-blond hair, green eyes, perpetually tan', but also sexualised, 'There was also the paleness around his newly muscled thighs and ass – the place where his bathing suit had blocked the sun from his weekends in the Hamptons'.[60] Drawing on the work of T. L. Taylor, Megan Condis informs us that trolling as an activity is rooted in 'geek masculinity', whereby 'male subjects who found themselves locked out of the privileges associated with successful performances of traditional masculinity in the physical world (because of their failure to achieve certain masculine makers such as bodily strength and athleticism) to (re)claim a new kind of manhood'.[61] The kind of energy that motivates Ellis's pranking tendency in his novels, we might claim, is this 'geek masculinity', a masculinity which attempts to assert its rebellious credentials by provoking a heightened – supposedly feminine – reaction from its targets.

Like Ellis, Charli XCX relishes the act of trolling, telling an interviewer that 'I think the people who know me and my work know that 50 percent of the time I'm entirely serious, and the other 50 percent of the time I'm a troll'.[62] However, while Ellis's trolling sets out to provoke an outraged reaction from others, Charli's prankster persona relies on responding to others' attempts to troll *her*. When asked about her

method for dealing with online insults on the internet, she replied that 'My best friends, God bless them, always like to screen grab the most abusive ones and send them to me. I have a collage of them in my phone'.[63] Charli does not just deny the response that trolls try to generate; she neutralises them by going along with it.

This practice of trolling the troller finds its way into many of the songs in *BRAT*. The opening to 'Von dutch', for instance, reads like a response to somebody criticising her appearance: 'It's okay to just admit that you're jealous of me / Yeah, I heard you talk about me, that's the word on the street / You're obsessing, just confess it, put your hands up / It's obvious I'm your number one'.[64] The accusation of obsession turns the insult around, questioning the intentions of the troll and exposing them to a perceived weakness of their own. What is interesting about the lyrics, though, is that the original trolling comment is not mentioned, only inferred. Charli uses that technique again, this time outside of a musical context, when it was announced that she was to be awarded 'Songwriter of the Year' at the BRIT Awards. As if anticipating the comments that might be made in response to the announcement, Charli simply replied to the tweet herself and quoted her own lyrics: 'yeah i wanna dance to me me me me me. when i go to the club club club club club club – charli xcx, songwriter of the year xx'.[65] No insult can stick to Charli if she not only gets there first, with a kind of pre-emptive self-awareness, but also if she taunts the troll by owning whatever it is they have accused her of. If 'Gender is the conceptual field on which the game of trolls is played', and Ellis's provocations can be considered as learning into a kind of 'geek masculinity', then Charli's pre-emptive self-trolling does something entirely new with the expected overreactive role of the feminine. It acts as an antidote to Ellis's method of trolling, removing the bait from the rod before he has even thrown it into the sea.

So, what kinds of reassessments does Charli's version of trolling encourage us to make to existing ideas of femininity and rebelliousness? In her recent essay, 'Young Women and Popular Music', Angela McRobbie has investigated the development of the 'feisty' female pop star, a figure who has 'become part of the working culture of the popular music sector, a way of matching the transgressive and charismatic image of the male rock star'.[66] Predicated on a resemblance to a type of masculine figure, McRobbie indicates that there are 'two obvious caveats' to the idea that 'feisty' female pop stars were 'free to act like young men, with impunity': the first being that 'the feisty (phallic) girl would not confront sexism or harassment in the music industry', and the second that 'these young women were to remain within the realm of heterosexual desirability upon which male approval rested'.[67] On both counts,

Charli offers a rejoinder to the caveat, and does so by harnessing the qualities which also make her an accomplished troll.

With regard to confronting sexism or harassment in the industry, McRobbie's implication is that the 'feisty' pop star would not think critically about her own feistiness; she would simply go along with the label's plans for marketing her career. However, Charli has long questioned the relationship between an artist and the wider industry, even falling out with her own label after they sought – oblivious to the irony – to make her more 'authentic'.[68] Nearly a decade before *BRAT*, Charli discussed feminism for a documentary that she created with the BBC, 'Charli XCX: The F-Word and Me'. Accompanied by a camera crew while on tour in 2015, she interviewed fellow artists on the challenges faced by female pop stars. On multiple occasions, she references the kinds of 'neat little boxes' that female artists are expected to fit into, and even the kinds of tactics that labels use to market them: 'I actually brought my old school uniform, I think I'm going to wear my shortest skirt; it's a mini-skirt because sex sells! I'm kidding'.[69] As with her pre-emptive trolling, Charli infers an insult regarding the motivation for her choice of outfit. Rather than change her outfit, though, she points out the industry expectations and exalts in wearing it, an idea which would inspire many of the lyrics of *BRAT* nearly ten years later. In 'Girl, so confusing', Charli references the tendency for female musicians to be compared to each other, with feuds often invented to drive engagement: 'It's you and me on the coin / The industry loves to spend'.[70]

That a female pop star has to play a preconceived role, rather than forge her own path, is something Charli not only acknowledges, but actively interrogates through her method of trolling. Throughout her career, Charli has always been thought to inhabit the boundary between cult following and popular acclaim. Being pulled in two directions, she used her previous album, *Crash* (2022), to think critically about what playing the role of the full-time mainstream pop star would look like. As the final album to be released under a previous contract with Atlantic, Charli told an interviewer that *Crash* was conceived as a kind of 'personal experiment of how far I can push myself into this 2022 pop star character who's signed to Atlantic Records'.[71] The album, she claimed, can be enjoyed as a straightforward pop album, or as a commentary on one: 'I was […] playing into the idea of what a stereotypical pop star is often deemed to be, and looking at the boxes women are often put in – the virgin, the whore or the vixen – and kind of exploring what those themes are within pop music, and the way that the industry can sometimes perceive women and characterize them'.[72] Although the album received backlash from some fans who resented her move into mainstream

pop, it allowed Charli to inhabit both the figures of the pop star *and* the troll, depending on how you viewed it.[73]

McRobbie's second caveat to 'feistiness' is the idea that the female pop star must remain 'within the realm of heterosexual desirability'. Again, Charli refutes this requirement by turning it inside out. The *BRAT* visual universe is perhaps best described paradoxically, as enticingly ugly. The artwork, which featured the word 'brat' in pixellated black typeface on a background of saturated lime green gave the impression of minimal effort exerted on a minimal budget.[74] When it first appeared, long discussions were penned about the shade of green – later becoming known as 'brat green' – tracing its historical connotations: '[The hues] could be considered off-putting and ugly. At the same time, they could also be construed as bold and rebellious, as a color imbued with vitality and playful energy'.[75] Charli XCX, meanwhile, was more direct in describing the emotive response she wanted to generate: 'the fact that it is actually quite gross and unpleasant makes it very interesting […] to use a colour that I felt was already quite oversaturated was kind of funny to me, because that's annoying in itself'.[76] The artwork was about standing out, provoking disgust, but also about meditating on why we can be made to feel that way: 'Why are some things considered good and acceptable, and some things deemed bad? I'm interested in the narrative behind that and I want to provoke people. I'm not doing things to be nice'.[77]

Her approach to questions of 'heterosexual desirability' follows the same logic. The skin-tight black clothing that she wears on stage, usually with a flash of a 'brat green' accessory and chunky, platform boots, introduces elements of conventionally 'sexy' attire but undercuts them with something we might consider off-putting, combative, or ugly. When she smokes, drinks, and licks her own spit off the stage, that 'enticingly ugly' element is behavioural. At one performance of *BRAT* in Austin, Texas, that element was the possibility of a stray tampon string: 'Sometimes […] you get your period right before the show and you're wearing tight leather hot pants and you're like damn what the fuck is my tampon string gonna stick out or is it gonna be OK? To be decided'. It is that combination of baiting heterosexual desire, only to have it be rejected by something *too* feminine that constitutes a kind of trolling.

On some occasions, Charli seeks to warp our understanding of 'heterosexual desirability' in even more profound terms, as she experiments with what exactly constitutes 'femininity'. One element of Charli's artistry that has always proved controversial to wider audiences is her use of Autotune. Traditionally associated with singers who lack natural

talent, Charli uses the technology in *BRAT* as an instrument, highlighting the chasm between perfectionism and reality. In the song, 'I might say something stupid', her confession regarding feelings of insecurity, 'Talk to myself in the mirror / Wear these clothes as disguise / Just to re-enter the party', is delivered through a computerised tone that jars against the seeming sincerity of the words, giving life to the idea of 'disguise'.[78] Certainly, Autotune can possess utopian possibilities, and Julie Ackermann has examined its potential to allow trans and queer artists to connect their external appearance to their inner selves.[79] But Charli does not use it to seek perfection; rather to criticise it.

Despite that critical dimension, audiences have struggled to see past their association of Autotune with the marketing of typically female singers. She responded to viewers of her performance at Glastonbury Festival in June 2025:

> really enjoying these boomer vibe comments on Glastonbury performance. it's super fascinating to me […] like the idea that singing with deliberate autotune makes you a fraud or that not having a traditional band suddenly means you must not be a 'real artist' is like, the most boring take ever. yawn sorry just fell asleep xx […] but to be honest … i enjoy the discourse. imo the best art is divisive and confrontational and often evolved into truly interesting culture rather than being like kind of ok, easily understood and sort of forgettable.[80]

Replying to the online 'boomer' trolls, Charli suspends her usual tactic by engaging substantively with their accusations. She dwells on two characterisations in particular, that she is a 'fraud', and not a 'real artist'. However, little do these 'boomers' know that the songs she was singing through her Autotuned microphone were designed to interrogate those issues, too. In 'Rewind', Charli outlines her anxieties: 'I'd go back in time to when I wasn't insecure, / To when I didn't over-analyze my face shape', and confesses how 'I used to never think about Billboard / But now I've started thinking again / Wondering 'bout whether I think I deserve commercial success'.[81] Her candour lends a metafictional dimension to the song, as she evaluates whether being more 'authentic' might lead to greater acclaim. In doing so, Charli examines a quality which has come to be required from modern artists: 'Over the past four or five years there's been this desperate craving of realness from pop stars – of needing pop stars to be human […] if I'm not seen as authentic or real, I'm not going to be able to be connected with, or [listeners are] not going to believe me'.[82]

BRAT has a particularly complicated relationship with 'authenticity'. While some listeners (including the 'boomer' trolls) accused her own being a 'fraud', others argued that authenticity was one of its key attributes: '*Brat* – both as an album and a visual universe – invites people to embrace their rawest and most authentic selves'.[83] Clearly, then, there is something contradictory going on so far as access to the singer's 'authentic self' is concerned. That is, though, precisely the point. Charli's authenticity is constructed by means of negation, by trolling as the various categories of woman that the music label might hope to promote. The most appealingly authentic thing about 'brat', then, is the transgressive impulse itself, a fact that we now turn to examine.

brat forever <3

In June 2025, on the first anniversary of the release of *BRAT*, Charli XCX announced a new version of the album cover art, so that instead of reading 'brat', it now read 'forever <3'. The alteration implied that 'brat summer' had entered its final iteration, one that was simultaneously announced on stage at the end of each show on the 2025 *BRAT* tour, including the Glastonbury performance criticised by 'boomer' trolls. After the final song, '(I Don't Care) I Love It', had ended, Charli stood alone on the stage, as the screen behind her lit up with the words: 'it wasn't just a summer thing[;] it's a forever thing xx'.

But *can* 'brat' truly be forever? 'Brat' is a word we usually assume has an expiration date, a childish trait out of which a (slightly more) mature adult will hope to grow. Built into our traditional understanding of 'brat' is a sense of transience, of being absorbed into a structure where its rebellious energies can be contained at school, the workplace, or in monogamous heterosexual relationships. When adults have a 'brat summer', then, it provides a time-limited opportunity to purge any latent transgressive impulses, before retreating to the hibernation of some kind of 'demure winter'.

This process of the containment of transgressive energy is nothing new. As Dick Hebdige explored many years ago: 'The cycle leading from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation encloses each successive subculture'.[84] 'Brat', seemingly, is no different. In fact, the very associations of the word make it seem to constitute that cycle *par excellence*: the petulant child who grows up into a law-abiding citizen. When *BRAT* was first released, that cycle happened practically immediately. The manner in which businesses, brands, and establishment politicians all embraced the angsty energy of 'brat' made the time between transgression and containment practically non-existent. It almost seemed as

if 'brat' had been engineered simply as a hollow marketing trend, a 'masterclass in brand building', as one communications agency put it, ripe for mainstream brand deals to cash in on its subcultural capital.[85] Soon after its release, Charli was already collaborating with Converse, Aperol, and Valentino. She was pushing the viral 'Apple dance' on TikTok and Instagram, encouraging her listeners to join celebrities by recording themselves performing a routine to the album's catchiest song. The album also received nine Grammy nominations, that is despite one of the songs on the album's deluxe edition, 'Spring breakers', claiming to have blown up the Staples Center, where the ceremony is held, 'poured a load of gasoline on the carpet / Lit a cigarette, took a drag, then, I just flicked it'.[86] 'Brat' may well have been the fastest instance of this process of subcultural containment to have taken place in recent memory.

However, it was precisely the speed of that ostensible 'selling-out' which really was new. In fact, it was *so* immediate and *so* easily done, that it separates 'brat' from the kinds of containments of transgression that Hebdige describes. It causes us to wonder, if it was so easily co-opted, just how authentic were brat's rebellious credentials in the first place? The reality, though, is that there was never any gap between the original moment of supposed transgression and the participation of the commercial world, because *BRAT* itself is steeped in the language of consumerism. One of the most successful songs on the album, 'Von dutch', is named after the car design-cum-fashion brand; another, 'Guess', discusses locking naked photos on a 'Google drive', while the music video for '360' opens with a not-so-subtle demonstration of one of the Google Pixel's newest features. Julie Ackermann calls Charli the 'exemplary case' of the musician who has embraced the 'mercantile culture of entertainment', frequently quoting brand names in her songs.[87] Her song for the *Barbie* movie soundtrack, 'Speed Drive', referred to figures as various as Devon Lee Carlson, Van Gogh, and Voltaire, while '360' name-drops a number of Charli's influencer friends: 'I'm everywhere, I'm so Julia', 'I went my own way and I made it / I'm your favourite reference, baby / Call me Gabriette you're so inspired'. But there is surely something contradictory about going 'my own way', before asking her interlocutor to call her by another's name, the model 'Gabbriette'. This tension, between individualism and commercial similarity, is something that stalks interpretations of the 'brat' aesthetic. Is it truly subcultural, individual, and transgressive, or simply packaging itself as ripe for mainstream assimilation?

One of Charli's brand partnerships presents this issue clearly. Given the astronomical success of the album, audiences were surprised that the singer did not release a wide range of merchandise to capitalise on

its success. But to do so, some marketing experts claimed, would work against its priorities: 'Brat is anti-merch; it embodies fan-made, DIY club outfits in their purest form. It wouldn't make much sense for a retailer to market products as "brat," because the core Charli XCX customer wouldn't buy them'.[88] But if 'brat' is all about DIY 'sustainable' outfits, what are we to do with Charli's decision, soon after the release of the album, to enter into a collaboration with H&M? Some audiences were disappointed by the partnership, claiming that 'it's not very "brat" of Charli XCX to endorse the fast-fashion giant'.[89] When we think about exactly what motivates 'brat', however, we realise that it very much is. In an interview with NPR Music, Charli asserted:

> Oh, I love selling out. Yeah, I don't care, because the thing is I actually find it fun and interesting. Pop is supposed to be a fantasy, right? I feel that sometimes people are so caught up in this idea of being real and authentic, particularly now. I feel like now it's almost a necessity for the validity of an artist for them to be considered real or genuine or down to earth. […] Everybody seems to be on this quest for authenticity to prove that they are real, they are down to Earth, but I personally don't care about that in my favorite pop artists. I don't want to know what Britney was having for breakfast, I want to see Britney in full Britney mode, being a pop star. I don't care if that comes with this Paris Hilton-esque air of fantasy, which I think sometimes can be deemed as selling out. Selling out creates pop culture. To get Warhol-y about it, that's what that is — it's mass market selling out. I think it's pop-tastic and fun and disposable. We're in this disposable culture now more than ever so I'm kind of here for it.[90]

The implication is that the market 'cult of authenticity' has rendered the quality empty, and that artists would be better off – in a post-Baudrillardian sense – consciously surrendering themselves to the 'fantasy' of pop. But there is also a gendered element to negative perceptions of Charli 'selling out'. In her documentary, 'The F-Word and Me', she spoke with fellow artist Marina Diamandis, who claimed that accusations of 'selling out' from 'grim trolls online' usually tend to be directed against female artists, while male artists are simply told 'you're shit now'.[91] Charli agrees that the financial and celebrity motivations of 'selling out' are often directed towards women artists, and, given what has been observed regarding her fondness for trolling the trollers, in true 'brat' fashion, she takes ownership of the process, and reaps the financial rewards of brand deals, no matter how they are perceived.

Having examined what is new about the way that 'brat' handles itself as a subculture under threat of 'containment' by the commercial world, what about how the commercial world has responded? In recent years, the way in which brands have sought to tap into the transgressive energies of subculture has come to seem predictable to the consumer. We are so used to the idea of transgression as a distinctly *marketable* marker of authenticity, that brands have to be more creative about how they harness it. With that in mind, when it came to participating in 'brat summer', the commercial world took a new direction, electing to be self-referential, even ironic, about their attempts to channel their inner 'brat'.

Key to this kind of self-referential engagement was the ability to easily adopt the 'brat' aesthetic through the online platform, <bratgenerator.com>. As companies inputted their brand name into the generator, they made their own versions of the album cover, with one of the most memorable examples being the manufacturer of plant-based 'brat-wurst' sausages, who bought advertising space on a billboard in Toronto.[92] The PR team argued that the campaign harnessed 'meme-versiting' as a way to 'authentically connect with the gen z target'.[93] The billboard acknowledged its own piggy-backing onto the rebellious associations of 'brat summer', thereby performing a kind of 'brat' self-trolling in the process. But this approach is a delicate balancing act, and while the 'bratwurst' campaign received largely positive engagement from audiences, others have teetered off the tightrope of self-referentiality and into the depths of corporate cringe below. When Deutsche Bank posted a job interview 'we're looking for a brat in finance', they elaborated in the job description: 'What's a DB brat? Banker, Reliable, Ambitious, Talented'.[94] That instance represented a more straightforward version of a corporate 'gimmick', what Sianne Ngai considers 'transparency about how it is producing what we take to be its intended effect', without the key element of self-referentiality that characterises the 'bratwurst' campaign.[95] Nevertheless, when it came to using the 'brat generator', there was one instance that inspired the most discussion, and has proved the most consequential for the possibility of 'brat forever <3'.

In the autumn of 2024, 'brat' went political when a tweet of Charli's went viral: 'kamala IS brat'.[96] The statement was quickly adopted by the nascent Harris campaign, which used the online generator to deck the social media accounts of 'kamala hq' in 'brat green'. In that moment, commentators declared the subversive energies of 'brat' to have been comprehensively drained: 'Whatever counter-cultural cachet the idea of "brat summer" may once have had has been obliterated overnight:

it's now the 2024 equivalent of "*Pokémon Go* to the polls", as edgy and transgressive as Hillary Clinton's cameo appearance on *Broad City*'.[97] The campaign hoped that an unironic assertion of Harris's 'brat' credentials – 'As the first woman, Black person, and person of South Asian descent to be vice president, Harris' career has been characterized by being decidedly different' – would convince the public, but she was ultimately less successful than her opponent in converting perceived transgressive energy into votes.[98] Considered too much a part of the incumbent administration, the more convincingly insurgent 'brat' turned out to be her opponent, the candidate who did not embrace the commercialised version of the phenomenon.

Despite not receiving Charli's endorsement, it is difficult to deny that Donald Trump possesses many of the qualities that define the 'brat' sensibility. There is not only his self-stylisation as a rebellious disruptor of the 'swamp' elite, but there is also the joy that he finds in twisting the truth-value of his words, as well as his preference for rooms so bedecked in gold that they simulate the kind of sensory overload that exists in 'brat' music and literature. He embodies the way in which the right has adopted counter-cultural affects, not only in his shameless channelling of 'badness' in a political sense (being openly misogynistic, racist, and homophobic) but also his trolling of overreactive liberal commentators. With that in mind, Trump's allegiances are more to the kind of 'brat' that exists in the work of Bret Easton Ellis, than that of Charli XCX. Indeed, it comes as little surprise, given this resemblance, that the yet-to-be President features in *American Psycho* as the idol of Patrick Bateman. 'Why wasn't Donald Trump invited to your party?' Bateman asks Evelyn, who replies '"Oh god. Is that why you were acting like such a buffoon? This obsession has *got* to end!'[99] Similarly revered by Sigma Males, Trump's ability to stimulate frenetic responses from audiences links him to Bateman, and it is that quality that interests Ellis about the President today: 'There seems to have been this hysterical overreaction that can be solved with voting him out of office. And I don't know whether this pain and turmoil people have inflicted on themselves have gotten them anything. I just see a lot of people who have turned themselves inside out'.[100] When Ellis recommends 'voting him out of office', he knows that transgressive 'brats' are only powerful when operating from an outside position. Once a brat becomes the mainstream, its opposite gains the advantage, to which the see-sawing between Trump and Biden's election victories is surely testament. The President, then, personifies one of the main difficulties in making 'brat summer' last 'forever <3'.

But there is also a sense that, because it operates by means of negation – because it represents 'transgressive' energy itself – that 'brat' could constantly switch to remain on the outside looking in, with Trump continuing to rail against the institutions of which he is now in charge. That is why there is still something 'brat' about Charli 'selling out'; she can do exactly what she wants, especially if that is not want her audience wants her to do. In a general sense, there is also something 'brat' about refusing to let the subculture die, about insisting on its relevance even as the cycle of popular culture grinds onto its next summer trend. 'I've known for a minute that at some point, someone will say this is over', Charli told an interviewer.[101] But once it is declared 'over', that is exactly when 'brat' regains its insurgent power: 'I actually think the press and outlets don't get to decide when it's over. The kids get to decide when it's over. This is a "sit back and watch it burn" situation for me'.

Notes

1 See Collins Word of the Year 2024 <collinsdictionary.com/woty>.
2 Collins Word of the Year 2024 <collinsdictionary.com/woty>.
3 "brat", noun 1.; "brat", adjective 2. *Collins Online Dictionary* <collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/brat#:~:text=Definition%20of%20'brat'&text=1., informal>.
4 Natasha McKeever and Luke Brunning, "Feeld Raw Reveals a Year of Exploration, Fluidity and Connection" (December 2024) <feeld.co/news/feeld-raw-reveals-a-year-of-exploration-fluidity-and-connection>.
5 Charli XCX, Tweet @charli_xcx (8 August 2021) <x.com/charli_xcx/status/1424415556724088837?lang=en-GB>.
6 See "'Generation Sensible' in five charts", BBC News (19 July 2018) <bbc.co.uk/news/44880278>.
7 Charli XCX, "Sidetracked with Charli XCX", "Podcast: Sidetracked with Annie and Nick" BBC Sounds (6 June 2024).
8 See David Blum, "Hollywood's Brat Pack", *New York* (June 10, 1985) <nymag.com/movies/features/49902/>.
9 The first use of the phrase has been attributed to Hilary DeVries, "Jay McInerney enters the literary fast lane", *Christian Science Monitor* (29 October 1985) <csmonitor.com/1985/1029/dbjay.html>.
10 Alexander Guy Cook, Blake Slatkin, Charlotte Aitchison, Finn Keane, Henry Walter, Omer Fedi, "360" in Charli XCX, *BRAT* (Atlantic Recording Corporation, 2024).
11 Helena de Bertodano, "Bret Easton Ellis: 'Did I do too much cocaine? Definitely", *The Times* (14 January 2023).
12 Ed Pilkington, "Bret Easton Ellis attacks 'gatekeepers of politically correct gayness'", *Guardian* (13 May 2013) <theguardian.com/books/2013/may/13/bret-easton-ellis-gay-criticism>.
13 She has been considered the "celebrity figurehead" by Spencer Kornhaber in "Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive: Hyperpop could become the

countercultural sound of the 2020s", *Atlantic* (March 2021) <theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/03/hyperpop/617795/>. The question of hyperpop as constituting its own genre is a vexed one. See, for instance, Eliot Bates, Sophie Delphis, Romulo Moraes, Julia Santoli, "Assembling Hyperpop: Genre Formation on Wikipedia", *Cultural Sociology* (2024).

14 Julie Ackermann, *Hyperpop: La pop au temps du capitalisme numérique* (Lyon: Façonnage éditions, 2024), 17. ["Une pop extreme, véhiculant des émotions extremes, produite par des gens extremes"].

15 James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 1.

16 Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 2011), 5-6.

17 *Less Than Zero*, 25.

18 *Less Than Zero*, 13.

19 *Less Than Zero*, 111.

20 *Less Than Zero*, 62-63.

21 *Less Than Zero*, 4.

22 See especially Annesley, *Blank Fictions*; Jason Diamond, "Sex, Drugs, and Bestsellers: The Legend of the Literary Brat Pack", *Harper's Bazaar* (2 November 2016) <harpersbazaar.com/culture/art-books-music/a18422/literary-brat-pack-donna-tartt-jay-mcinerney/>; Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

23 Lydia Hawken, "Music fans fume over 'embarassingly short pop songs' catering to TikTok generation – so, why are today's hits so much shorter?", *Daily Mail* Online (31 July 2024), <dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-13693391/music-fans-short-pop-songs-tiktok-generation.html>.

24 Alexander Guy Cook, Charlotte Aitchison, Ross Birchard, "Mean girls", *BRAT*.

25 *Less Than Zero*, 140.

26 Alexander Guy Cook, Bonnie Raitt, Charlotte Aitchison, Finn Keane, Jonathan Christopher Shave, Justin Deyarmond Edison Vernon, "I think about it all the time", *BRAT*.

27 Charli XCX, in "TN:138 Charli XCX, George Daniel & A.G. Cook", Tape Notes Podcast, Patreon (20 June 2024).

28 Alexander Guy Cook, Blake Slatkin, Charlotte Aitchison, Cirkut, Finn Keane, Omer Fedi, "365", *BRAT*.

29 Carter F. Hanson, "Pop Goes Utopia: An Examination of Utopianism in Recent Electronic Dance Pop", *Utopian Studies* 25.2 (2014), 384-413, 390.

30 Charlotte Aitchison, Finn Keane, Jonathan Christopher Shave, "Sympathy is a knife", *BRAT*.

31 Elizabeth Young, "Vacant Possession: Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, in Young and Caveney, *Shopping in Space*, 21-42, 29; Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 2000), 112.

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