

An American Tragedy

Or

Serial Killers R' Us

In his New York Times book review of December 16th, 1990, "Snuff This Book," Roger Rosenblatt ridicules the fact that Bret Easton Ellis's novel American Psycho could be "shockingly critical of the amorality of modern urban life" ¹ (Rosenblatt). Bret Easton Ellis's novel of 1991 American Psycho, however, is indeed a critique of the selfish amorality of modern urban life and the decadence of the 1980's by portraying its serial-killing protagonist, Patrick Bateman, as the fictional representative of his time and society. The novel demonstrates what Reaganomics and multinational capitalism have done to the America of the poor, the workers, women, and minorities in the name of free enterprise, which has sublimated love and sex into things and money. The novel implies that Bateman's society is as disordered as he is by presenting his schizophrenia as culturally transmitted and his violence as a response to the empty promise of consumer fulfillment in America. American Psycho is a tragedy for three reasons: first, because Patrick Bateman proves that excessive consuming is a vicious cycle that fills artificial needs with artificial products; secondly, because Bateman's failed attempts at finding meaning through killing allegorize that there is no regeneration through violence; thirdly, because Bateman has lost all connection to the real world and people: he leads a double life that epitomizes how, in late capitalism, need has been turned against real life and love.

American Psycho begins with a quote from Dante's Inferno: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here,"² implying that the New York of the 1980's was a kind of circular hell. The novel plunges its protagonist into Dantesque surroundings of torture and suffering, but it tells its tale from the point of view of one of the damned souls, namely the Wall-Street banker Patrick Bateman. The latter exists in a steroid-riddled form of what Fredric Jameson depicts as the third and late stage of capitalism: "What 'late' generally conveys is... the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive"³ (Jameson xxi). The novel portrays the all-pervasiveness of late capitalism as a hell of surface perfection without substance, peopled by beautiful people without souls who all look the same, but only share the same consumer products. It is important to point out that the novel does not place Patrick Bateman on the fringes of society as most serial-killer fiction does⁴, but in a leading member-position, thereby destroying any chances of blaming his deeds on the individual's disorder or outsider-status alone.

American Psycho turns the tables by pinning the blame on the media and materialism-obsessed society of late capitalism itself by portraying Patrick Bateman as the spirit of his time. He is the poster-child of all that is desirable: he is white, male, American, handsome and very rich, and he allegorically commits all the crimes that Reaganomics committed. His co-worker Tim Price, whom Bateman describes as "the only interesting person I know (22)," and who therefore likely is a manifestation of

Patrick's own split personality, voices the credo of all yuppies in the beginning of the novel: "I'm resourceful. I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society *cannot* afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*" (3). The implication throughout American Psycho is, however, that Price, Bateman and company are more so what the first syllable of the word "asset" depicts than what its more general meaning of "quality" refers to. The latter word-play at the beginning of the novel sets the stage for the unreliable fantasist-narrator Patrick Bateman and immediately warns that neither do words have clear meanings anymore, nor are there any longer clear theories that provide universal explanations in the world of American Psycho. Instead, the novel's self-narrated tale, which brims with exhausting catalogues of consumer product descriptions, pornography and violence, directly refers to an entire social layer's schizophrenia, alienation and commodity fetishism that solely employs Patrick Bateman as its personification. Since Bateman represents all that is desirous (money, power, beauty), his actions are disturbing, as they offer no excuse for the rest of the nation. The novel's implication is that Patrick Bateman *is* the rest of the nation.

American Psycho exposes one of the hallmarks of the Reagan-era, American Exceptionalism – the notion that America is unique not only internationally, but also on a domestic level because each generation will forever move upwards concerning earnings and consumption- as a myth. The belief in the latter, the novel reveals, is a cause of class warfare through its exclusion and labeling as threat of everyone who is not part of the patriarchal system founded on white economic supremacy at the expense of others. As an example, Bateman – as the spirit of his social layer – oppresses minorities; he doesn't recognize his own doorman, only the fact that he is "Hispanic," which leads Bateman to

immediately conclude based on race, class, and stereotype-prejudice that the doorman is on the phone with “his dealer or some crack addict” (70). Bateman condescends to the lady at the Chinese dry-cleaners because she doesn’t speak any English. He calls her talking “jabbering,” “yippling,” “blabbering,” and he makes fun of her accent: “Are you trying to say bleach-ee or stupid bitch-ee” (82-3). Her speech doesn’t have any notation, but Bateman’s speech is diligently drawn-out and his gestures are given stage directions to emphasize the injustice of how nondescript “the other” is viewed by Bateman’s social layer. Bateman lives in a solipsistic circle peopled with characters of similar background. Hence he has no way of relating to anybody outside of his lot.

American Psycho goes a step further when it ridicules Bateman as typically Western-cultured American who cannot tell a Chinese person from a Japanese. To allegorize the fear of the Japanese Reaganomics had, Patrick kills an Asian delivery boy, thinking he has killed a Japanese, who turns out to be Chinese: Patrick calls this “an irritating setback –accidentally killing the wrong type of Asian” (181). The biting humor the novel employs at its cruelest moments allows it the necessary liberty to cross the line into the taboo, which lessens the blow somewhat, but still manages to make the necessary points of social critique, in this case the arrogance and ignorance of Patrick’s social layer. American Psycho is even more powerful in its social critique when it is considered from the theory Roland Barthes developed in Mythologies. Barthes claimed that narratives are influenced by their author’s social and historical context, which finds its way into their writing and results in unintended meanings. Ellis wrote American Psycho in the late 1980’s in New York City at the height of the Reagan-era. The aspect of the novel being made up of a constant flow of monotone ad-speak and sound bytes takes on a new level

of corporate determinism in respect to how identities and narratives are impacted and constructed through media imposition, a symptom Fredric Jameson describes as a lack of real history and truth outside of culture.

In Barthes's sense, American Psycho not only represents a story from its time and culture, it *is* its time and culture: texts are "a tissue of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture"⁵ (Barthes). The novel exposes and satirizes the all-pervasive victory of capitalist thinking over all other forms of thought, which Jameson calls "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson). As Barthes points out in Mythologies when he asks: "By providing children with "artificial" materials and toys are we, in turn, providing them with an "artificial" view of the world" (Barthes). Patrick's identity is solely formed by consuming what corporations dictate, which cuts him off from the real world outside of late capitalist corporate logic. The novel aligns with Jean-Francois Lyotard in its condemnation of grand narratives such as market fundamentalism that offer universal explanations, because they feed off the authority their absolute truths give them. Lyotard argued that grand narratives are tyrannical and destructive toward the creativity of the individual in The Postmodern Condition because they prescribe what a person ought to want or need, not what they really do want or need. He viewed grand-narratives such as unregulated capitalism (market fundamentalism), which American Psycho comes very close to during the Reagan-era, as all-embracing explanations that only appear to serve the whole population, but actually only fit the schemes of corporations in that they circulate artificial needs and fill them with equally artificial products.

The hallmark of Reaganomics was that businesses would prosper with minimal government interference, taxes or regulation. If corporations did well, working people

would reap financial benefits, a process that became known as "the trickle-down theory."

Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor, describes Reaganomics as a failure:

“Trickle down economics didn't work very well. Very little trickled down to the poor. The gap between the rich and the poor began to widen during the Reagan administration and has continued to widen since then. We also saw that deregulation did not always work. We had a savings and loan crisis partly because of the deregulated financial markets”⁷ (Lehrer).

American Psycho portrays the “trickle-down-theory” as the Inferno's wolf dressed in politically correct sheep's-clothing, who presents wealth and luxury as available to all, whereas it is only available to Patrick's social layer and the middle-class.

The novel delves deeply into the artificiality of Bateman's world. It establishes the dominance of late-capitalist consumer products as the cause of Patrick's non-self and fragmented mind. Patrick displays the kind of fragmented personality that Frederic Jameson depicts in “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.”⁸ Jameson associates schizophrenia with late capitalism and describes schizophrenic experiences as "isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence," similar to the many images that shoot across television screens and the sound of white noise from the radio and other media (Jameson). The kind of monotonous bombardment of a series of never-ending sound bytes is what disorients Patrick, and what contributes to the lack of self that is characteristic of schizophrenia within multinational capitalism. Borrowing from Lacan, Jameson defines schizophrenia as "the failure of the infant to accede fully into the realm of speech and language" (Jameson). The

schizophrenic character fails to acquire speech, and consequently cannot individuate, because the infant must enter into a social/linguistic field to develop an ego. Jameson explains that: “The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ over time” (Jameson). According to Jameson, the schizophrenic has not formed a unique identity, is unable to differentiate between the self and the world, and cannot experience continuity or history.

Jameson claims that late capitalism-culture has transmitted the symptoms of schizophrenia through the media, which confounds a person’s ability to think critically and inhibits the formation of an independent identity. Bateman’s jump cuts in his thought process reveal the link between schizophrenia and late capitalist consumerism: “J&B I am thinking...Charivari. Shirt from Charivari. Fusilli I am thinking. Jami Gertz I am thinking...Porsche 911. A sharpei I am thinking...A valium...Cellular phone I am thinking” (80-81). Since Bateman doesn’t know anything else beyond the materialistic world of late capitalism, he doesn’t question consumer culture’s co-existence with him, if not its dominance over him. American Psycho emphasizes the schizophrenic double life Patrick Bateman leads to expose the two-faced hypocrisy of Reaganomics, and to show that Patrick’s disorder does not have its origin in the psychic history of the individual, but is culturally transmitted by society within multinational capitalism. Patrick’s schizophrenia is portrayed as a culturally syntonetic disorder, which mirrors the schizoid experience of late capitalism with its media culture. The chapters of the book reflect the schizophrenic experience as well: they are short, disordered, and lack continuity; with their overabundance of brand names and disrupting rhythm, the chapters add to expose

Bateman's lack of coherence: the chapter 'Paul Owen,' in which Bateman kills his co-worker Paul Owen out of envy and greed, is followed by the chapter 'Paul Smith,' a designer. To place a chapter about a human being and his death alongside one about a designer store reveals Patrick's extreme fragmentation and loss of touch: they are the same to him.

Bateman stands in for his social layer even in respect to hypocrisy: he is polished and politically correct on the outside, but a primitive killer on the inside; he publicly speaks of helping the poor, but privately kills them. He tells his friends: "I just want everyone to know that I am pro-family and anti-drug," but he does coke every other night (157); in front of his co-workers he espouses: "Well, we have to end apartheid," while silently ridiculing his secretary Jean's blind love for him: "I could even explain my pro-apartheid stance and have her find reasons why she too should share them and invest large sums of money in racist corporations" (263). Bateman is not being sarcastic: he is incapable of connecting the contradiction-dots due to his schizophrenic disorder.

Bateman realizes throughout the course of the novel that within his spectacle-society, it doesn't matter if he is the person next door or the psychopath next door as long as he represents himself as what people want to see: "inside doesn't matter" (397). As long as he looks like a respectable Wall Street banker on the outside, no one will believe that he is a schizophrenic serial killer on the inside.

It is latter surface thinking that allows Patrick and his class to get away with murder. Reagan's public apology for the Iran-Contra-affair is portrayed in the book as the ultimate two-faced hypocrisy in American Psycho: " 'He presents himself as a harmless old codger. But inside...'[Tim Price] stops. My interest picks up, flickers briefly. 'But

inside...’ Price can’t finish the sentence, can’t add the words he needs: *doesn’t matter*” (397). As long as the numbers are right and the economy booms, it doesn’t matter how the money was made and to whom the weapons were sold to, or if the politician’s inside is wretched: “The TV is tuned to a press conference Reagan is giving but there’s a lot of static and no one pays attention, except for me,” relates Patrick. Most people simply don’t care about someone’s inside, as long as their bank account balance blossoms and they or certain politicians don’t get caught making the money through illegal channels (142). Public perception and private actions do not correspond; therefore identities are defined by the public, not the self anymore, which leads to a lack of insight. The implication here is, of course, that Reagan is yet another ‘American Psycho,’ whose appearance belies his dangerousness. The greed-inspired politics of the 1980’s are not only the backdrop of American Psycho, but also what has shaped the humanity and identity of the characters or the lack thereof.

Fredric Jameson, in Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, offers an historical explanation for a character such as Bateman’s disordered state within late capitalism, also called ‘spectacle society’ by Jameson. As someone who exists in the middle of spectacle society and has lost all sense of distinction between the real and the artificial, Bateman himself is unaware of the historical causes for his schizophrenia. Jameson explains the three stages of capitalism as the move from competitive capitalism (producing to service industry at the turn of the century) to monopolist capitalism, and then into late capitalism or multinational capitalism. Late capitalism has information and technology as its major mode of commodity, is “all-pervasive,” (Jameson xxi) and is also called “infantile capitalism” by Jameson, “inasmuch as everyone has been born into it,

takes it for granted, and has never known anything else, the friction, resistance, effort of the earlier moments having given way to the free play of automation” (Jameson 367).

Patrick exists during the third stage of capitalism, at which time he has been so far removed from natural instincts that he is horrified and alienated by it: “Nearby a mother breast-feeds her baby, which awakens something awful in me” (297). While people during competitive and monopolist capitalism were still aware of how much and what was being commodified, people in the age of multinational capitalism are so immersed in their over-commodified surroundings that they don’t question them any longer.

According to Jameson, the new elements of late capitalism include “new forms of business organization (multinationals, transnationals) beyond the monopoly stage” (Jameson xviii-xiv), internationalization of business- “the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale”, “new dynamic in international banking,” “new forms of media interrelationship,” in which the media constitutes one of the more influential new products of late capitalism (print, internet, television, film) and a new means for the capitalist take-over of our lives (Jameson xix). Jameson agrees with Baudrillard when he claims that, due to the mediatization of culture, we become increasingly reliant on the media's version of our reality, a version of reality that is filled predominantly with capitalist values; “computers and automation” (Jameson xix) have allowed for an unprecedented level of mass production; planned obsolescence is “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods,” and last, American Military domination: “this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is

the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror" (Jameson). The latter is exactly the kind of culture that the protagonist of American Psycho returns to, without being aware of why he does so.

Patrick asserts his alienation from others when he admits that he can only feel compassion for another human being by imitating what the media has predigested for him:

“There wasn’t a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being—flesh, blood, skin, hair—but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality” (282).

Patrick Bateman reveals a self-awareness that belies his self-professed vacuity in some rare moments of epiphany. He repeatedly senses that something is missing in his life, but the tragedy is that he cannot figure out what it is. American Psycho hints at the deterministic aspect of everything that resists late-capitalist logic: Patrick is capable of introspection and critique by accident alone, but in the end it doesn’t matter because he can only exist in a world dominated by late capitalist-logic if he plays according to its rules. He is the schizophrenic individual within multinational capitalism whom Baudrillard describes as a passive screen or receptacle of media inundation in Simulacra

and Simulation: "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning"⁹ (Baudrillard). Patrick appears to be powerful, but he is essentially a cog in the wheel of corporate logic.

Baudrillard, after having analyzed the role played by consumerism within late capitalism, argues that there exists a system of objects that are subject to a process of commodification, during which they develop into signs. Products are consumed as much for their sign-value as for their use-value. Late capitalist culture is organized around consumption and display of products through which individuals gain identity, social status, and prestige. The more prestigious one's commodities (Bateman's apartment, clothes, gym-equipment, as examples), the higher one's social status in the realm of sign value. Latter 'sign-values' undergo a process of replication and mass production, which not only (seems to) fulfill the needs of consumer society, but also creates those very needs in the first place. The way Patrick Bateman functions is dictated by what the media deems 'right' at the moment. He lives in what is considered the best neighborhood, he wears what are considered the best clothes, and he frequents what are considered the best restaurants, but it is never *he* who is doing the considering:

"Van Patten is wearing a double-breasted wool and silk sport coat, button-fly wool and silk trouser with inverted pleats by Mario Valentino, a cotton shirt by Gitman Brothers, a polka-dot silk tie by Bill Blass and leather shoes from Brooks Brothers. McDermott is wearing a woven-linen suit with pleated trousers, a button-down cotton and linen shirt by Basile, a silk tie by Joseph Abboud and ostrich loafers from Susan Bennis Warren Edwards" (31).

American Psycho bares its textual fangs when it describes the surface-obsession of the 1980's with things: people do not go to a restaurant, they go to Dorsia. They do not dress in a suit, they dress in Valentino Couture, and they do not drink water, but Evian.

Baudrillard, as Jameson, finds the causes for the lack of touch with reality in the media and multinational capitalism: the media is not satisfied by giving information to the public, but wants to interpret the public's selves for them, thereby forcing people to see each other and the world through the lens of these media images. Patrick has no qualities that distinguish him from the people around him. In fact, his identity is created by others and split into a million designer brands of the clothes he wears, the names of the restaurants he frequents, and the music he listens to: "a feeling that others are creating my fate for me will not leave me" (370). The novel reflects a consumer society that is drowning in a shallow hole where heart used to be. As opposed to creating greater variety and choice, the overabundance of products breeds confusion and consequently conformism. Everyone looks the same in Bateman's circle: "everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same" (61). As Patrick's girlfriend Evelyn points out: "Everybody's rich...Everybody's good-looking...Everybody has a great body," and yet, everybody is estranged from each other, because all they have in common are surface articles (23).

Bateman wants to be treated as an individual and express his real personality, but, as Baudrillard describes it in The Consumer Society Myths + Structures: "to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, to label oneself by reference to an abstract model, to a combinational pattern of fashion, and therefore relinquish any real difference, any singularity"¹⁰ (Baudrillard). Free will has made space for corporate dictatorship. Hence American Psycho's running joke that exposes all the Wall Street

bankers as clones who confuse each other has a bitter aftertaste because others are, in fact, creating these characters' fate, namely corporations: "Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam" (89); Madison, who thought I was Ebersol.." (55); "Marcus! Merry Christmas," Paul Owen says to Patrick" (186). Everyone is diligently filed away into his or her social layer: the era that appears to be an era of individualism is really the era of conformism to the will of corporate America. As Patrick states in his hilarious excursion on Huey Lewis and The News's Song Hip To Be Square: "It's not just about the pleasures of conformity and the importance of trends--it's also a personal statement" (357). The novel emphasizes that Bateman has no idea how funny he is at times or that he contradicts himself because he doesn't have the necessary introspective to make the distinction. Patrick's commentary is delivered as deadpan because he cannot make the connection between the real and artificial. All of Bateman's connections are solipsistically made through work or class-identification leaving him unfulfilled because he only sees what he already knows: "Since it's impossible in the world we live in to empathize with others, we can always empathize with ourselves," states Patrick, voicing consumer narcissism perfectly (254).

Marshall McLuhan points out in Understanding Media that narcissism has morphed from a psychological problem into a social one. Narcissism, to McLuhan, is a self-infatuation of man with the electronic gadgets he created, which leads to narcosis by the technological extensions of the body: "the Greek word *narcosis*, or numbness" is the etymological root shared by the words "narcotics" and "narcissism."¹¹ To fall in love with one's own mirror image means to identify with the mediated image of oneself to the extent of not being able to tell oneself apart from it anymore. In latter state, a clear

perspective is impossible, as Patrick demonstrates when he cannot act on his accidental epiphanies. Patrick's attempts to develop a unique self, to "become a closed system" and stand out are futile. (McLuhan). In Understanding Media, McLuhan revives the myth of Narcissus in electronic terms to explain both the breakdown of subjectivity and the "autoamputation" triggered by the move into an all-mediatized environment. According to McLuhan, Narcissus's dilemma is not that he falls in love with himself, but that he doesn't recognize his own image anymore: "The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by the mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image... Now the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extensions of themselves in any material other than themselves" (McLuhan). To McLuhan, narcissism is less about self-love, but about the inability to discern the self from others, the subject from the object.

McLuhan asserts that "the sense of the Narcissus myth" is that the "young man's image is a self-amputation or extension induced by irritating pressures" (McLuhan). As an antidote to the irritating pressures the image produces the kind of numbness that doesn't allow self-recognition: "Self-amputation forbids self-recognition... The principle of self-amputation as an immediate relief of strain on the central nervous system applies very readily to the origin of the media of communication from speech to computer" (McLuhan). The latter has a consequence the implosion of the private and public spheres, as the public media (TV, radio, ads) insidiously weaves its way into private living rooms and thereby both blurs the distinction between the two spheres and accelerates the disintegration of the unique and private self. As a consequence, someone as Patrick

becomes schizophrenic, because his self can no longer be properly distinguished from the multiplicity of circuits that blaze through it. He resides in a media-simulated reality that keeps him one step removed from the reality of the world around him. The media is, therefore, responsible for the breakdown of reality in Bateman's existence, since it only provides him with simulated, artificial events.

In America, Baudrillard explains an urban existence such as Bateman's as surface screen without core: "You should not begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city" ¹² (Baudrillard). In Bateman's world, reality has disappeared beneath glamorous surfaces of simulation. In Understanding Media, it is the city and media-society that Marshall McLuhan depicts as "electronic global village," in which information technologies and the increasing convergence between media have become extensions of the city-dwellers' senses (McLuhan). However, Bateman's urban surroundings are the negative aspect of McLuhan's global village, who states that being globally connected will cause people to develop a sense of responsibility, because each human action is universally felt due the masses' extended senses: "As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed at bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree" (McLuhan). Through Bateman's lack of humanity American Psycho reveals the detachment McLuhan ignores in his unifying theory of the electronic global village. There is a great difference between making love to someone and watching pornography, between being part of a social network and sharing the same products, and between caring for a person and a thing. In multinational capitalism, goods are divorced from their origin, in urbanization

humans are separated from the natural world, and language is often used to obscure rather than reveal reality. As the things Patrick uses are products of increasingly complicated industrial processes, he has lost touch with the underlying reality of the goods he consumes, just as he has lost touch with himself and other people.

Elizabeth Young, in her essay of 1997 “Shopping in Space” notices that Bateman’s becomes more and more unreliable as narrator throughout the novel. His confident product-lists with designer names begins to fall apart at the same time he does: shoes by “Susan Warren Bennis Edwards” turns into shoes by “Warren Susan Allen Edmonds” and then shoes by ‘Edward Susan Bennis Allen. “For such a tiny detail this is conspicuous in its effects. What ego-madness possesses a designer (and she's certainly not the only one) that she will inflict an insanely complex name on an entire retinue of stockists, advertisers, fashion-journalists and consumers”¹² (Young 94). To Bateman and his contemporaries, the proliferation of communications media has obliterated the meaning behind the name. The era of rampant consumption has turned into the era of alienation where the market governs all of culture, products, sexuality, human relations, people’s fantasies and desires. Patrick’s thoughts move schizophrenically from consumer products to violence and back, and his only glimpse of a spiritual idea (infinity) is reduced to a misspelled car brand by the same name:

“warrants, stock offerings, ESOP’s, LBO’s, IPO’s, finances,
refinances...infinity, Infinity...the Christmas Eve when I was fourteen and
had raped one of our maids...envying someone’s life, whether someone

could survive a fractured skull...credit cards...a book of matches from La Côte Basque splattered with blood, surface surface surface, a Rolls is a Rolls is a Rolls” (342).

By satirically abusing a quote by Gertrude Stein (“a rose is a rose is a rose”¹³), Patrick reveals consumer society’s malaise: a Rolls is forever a Rolls, because there is no meaning behind the brand anymore. What stood for mobility in its original meaning during capitalism’s first stage, and then meant prestige during the second stage, now stands alone as a sign-value during the third stage.

There also is no meaning behind the sign Patrick Bateman anymore as he states at the end of the novel by manipulating another Gertrude Stein quote: (“There is no there there,”¹⁴) into his nihilistic comment: “*I simply am not there*” (377). So fragmented is Patrick’s self that he points out “how truly vacant” he is and that “there is no evidence of animate life” within him (275). In a culture where media entertains the individual everywhere, there is no distinction between the signifier and the signified anymore or between a sign and its referent. Instead, as Frederic Jameson points out: “when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers” (Jameson). The fact that there is an overload of products that confuses people, that “there are too many fucking movies to choose from” does not escape Patrick. He is described as a robot, a machine that acts like all the other things that only possess sign-value, and therefore only refer to themselves: he picks up on the fact that he has been programmed, but it doesn’t sink in below Patrick’s surface. He never fights corporate logic, but, as the damned souls in Dante’s Inferno, he files neatly back into his determined circle of hell. As an example, he resorts to renting the same old video

due to product-confusion: “Then, almost by rote, as if I’ve been programmed, I reach for *Body Double*-a movie I have rented thirty-seven times” (112). The fact that Patrick repeatedly rents a movie that has as its theme a body double, a substitute for the credited actor, reminds of Patrick’s double life, and that everybody in Patrick’s world is replaceable and interchangeable.

As an example, every statement by Timothy Price, Patrick’s co-worker, could be Patrick’s. Their life styles and way of speaking are exactly the same, leading to the conclusion that Price is Patrick’s body double. Price leaves at the beginning of the book because he is overwhelmed by spectacle society, and he comes back toward the end, seemingly mellowed. The novel implies, however, that even if Price is Patrick’s reformed alter ego who returns around Easter (when Inferno concludes as well) with the smudge of penitent ashes on his forehead, Patrick still won’t make the necessary connection between Price’s self and his own. Patrick’s self blends into other selves within his circle just as much as it doesn’t distinguish between life as a banker and killer or between reality and fantasy. As Patrick states at the end of the novel: “This confession has meant nothing” (377). A confession or realization is only helpful when it can be applied to a unique self and consequentially to others. When latter kind of insight into the self cannot be made, all experiences are not part of a learning process, but become unhinged and float in space, leading nowhere. The film Body Double’s tag-line “You can’t always believe what you see” also warns of Bateman’s unreliability as a narrator. Bateman is so absorbed by his materialistic surroundings that he cannot perceive anything outside of it.

Patrick’s failure to desist from indulging in corporate-dictated, impulsive retail-therapy against his realization of being programmed reveals latter consumer culture-

absorption. Patrick can only explain his inner fragmentation through more circular product-thinking that likens people to products:

“Some kind of existential chasm opens before me while I am browsing in Bloomingdale’s... I head toward the Clinique counter where with my platinum American Express card I buy six tubes of shaving cream...and I decide this emptiness has, at least in part, some connection with the way I treated Evelyn at Barcadia the other night, though there is always the possibility it could just as easily have something to do with the tracking device on my VCR” (112, 179-180).

Patrick picks up on the root of the problem over and over again without acting on it:

“I count three silk-crepe ties, one Versace silk-satin woven tie, two silk foulard ties, one silk Kenzo, two silk jacquard ties. The fragrances of Xeryus and Tuscany and Armani and Obsession and Polo and Grey Flannel and even Antaeus mingle, wafting into each other, rising from the suits and into the air, forming their own mixture: a cold, sickening perfume” (110).

Patrick, of course, smells the scent of market fundamentalism within multinational capitalism that is indeed “sickening” to him and everyone else. Since he has been born into the media-assault, he cannot figure out why he is so unfulfilled: “all I can see is the red Lamborghini and all I can hear is my own even, steady panting. I’m still standing, drooling, in front of the store, staring, minutes later (I don’t know how many)” (114).

Since: “All vestiges of Patrick have vanished in the veneer of promotion,”¹⁵ his surface and one-upmanship-thinking carry on in a vicious cycle (Murphet 29).

It gets harder and harder for Patrick to compose himself in front of others:

“sweat-drenched, I find myself back downtown in Tower Records and I compose myself, muttering over and over to no one, “I’ve gotta return some videotapes, I’ve gotta return some videotapes,” and I buy two copies of my favorite compact disc ...and then I’m stuck in the revolving door for five full spins and I trip out onto the street, bumping into Charles Murphy from Kidder Peabody or it could be Bruce Barker from Morgan Stanley, *whoever*, and he says “Hey, Kinsley” and I belch into his face, my eyes rolling back into my head, greenish bile dripping in strings from my bared fangs” (151).

By consistently juxtaposing late-capitalist consumerism with violence, and product overload (CD’s, videotapes) with the primitive (belching, bile, baring fangs), *American Psycho* implies that the life in pursuit of things is inherently connected with Patrick’s violence. Patrick has to stare at his designer shoes (a thing) to calm himself down. Only a thing can bring him to his senses anymore, and not just any-thing, but a designer-thing: “I’m able to compose myself by simply staring at my feet, actually at the A. Testoni loafers” (152). *American Psycho* makes fun of Patrick’s product-driven anxiety attacks that can only be eased by more products and by literally buying into the corporate lie of things bringing fulfillment.

The novel becomes even more blatant in its ridicule of rampant consumption

when, in a satiric twist of fate, Patrick's beloved credit card breaks in half: "My platinum American Express card had gone through so much use that it snapped in half, self-destructed" (279). In spite of all his financial and physical advantages, Bateman is imprisoned in a closed circuitous hell: he lives a life of instant gratification in which he fills his inner void with products, only to wind up as spiritually empty as before. Clearly, something is rotten in the state of Reaganomics-reification, in which a consumer in society is supposed to feel satisfied both materially and spiritually after buying a product: "Something horrible was happening and yet I couldn't figure out why - I couldn't put my finger on it. The only thing that calmed me was the satisfying sound of ice being dropped into a glass of J&B" (282). The novel demonstrates that capitalist society has turned on itself by immersing its populace in a looping vicious cycle of materialistic answers to philosophical questions that leaves everyone feeling fragmented and clueless, and in Patrick's case, savage.

Bateman seeks satisfaction in things, because he cannot find it in people. He even kills to find solace in a thing, taking consumer culture to a literal level: a thing being a person reduced and cut into pieces because only then can Patrick relate to 'it.' Only then is 'it' as fragmented as Patrick: "Disintegration—I'm taking it in stride" he says when his schizophrenia has reached the limit and an Automated Teller Machine tells him to "Cause a Terrible Scene at Sotheby's," to "Kill the President," and to "Feed me a Stray Cat" while a park bench is following him (395). Bateman allegorizes the inherent barbarism in the power dynamic of an almost-unregulated market within late capitalism because his violence is a reaction against something he cannot see from his vantage point in the middle of it: unfulfilled consumer promise. Bateman's rage is largely caused by his lack

of understanding of his own situation: he feeds into the circular logic of corporations, thereby perpetuating it, and consistently buys products expecting them to fill his inner void as promised by commercials and magazine-ads, but they don't:

“Desire—meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface surface surface was all that anyone found meaning in” (375).

Bateman's Nietzschean notion that “God is dead”¹⁶ demonstrates that he has come to embrace the wrong universal truths, such as selfish market fundamentalism over altruistic connections with other people or a God.

With the consumption of things (and people) as his only meaningful connection, Bateman is trapped in a perpetual circle of lack. As late capitalism turns on itself, Patrick turns on other human beings by killing them. US Senator Barbara Boxer's statement about the failure of Reaganomics gets to the heart of what American Psycho actualizes through its protagonist, namely that Reaganomics “doesn't work, it has never worked,” ... “It's killing us”¹⁷ (Katzanek). Patrick's cannibalism reveals the close affinity between extreme consumption and savagery, calling to mind Montaigne's warning in his essay “On Cannibalism,” in which he points out how civilized people may be no better or worse than savages: “I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead... under

colour of piety and religion”¹⁸ (Montaigne). Westerners, even in the early stage of capitalism, were more savage than actual cannibals because they consumed living people in the name of ideology and money, and worse, found joy in torturing people publicly until they died a slow, painful death. Montaigne also questions if artificiality within civilized culture creates a more savage person than the one in the wilderness, and if civilization has repressed the natural instincts of human beings: “whereas really it is those that we have changed artificially and led astray from the common order, that we should rather call wild” (Montaigne). The cannibals prefer nature to artifice, whereas Western culture has separated mind from senses, hearts from intentions, and words from meaning. Before belittling the cannibals’ practices, Montaigne concludes, it were better Westerners analyzed their very own artifice and cannibalistic tendencies.

Before hypocritically blaming the serial killer, American Psycho similarly relates, a closer look at how the individual killer resembles most people within consumer culture is necessary. Bateman’s one-upmanship and extreme consumption are matched by the other Yuppies around him who indulge in the same savage decadence as he does. They all treat earning money as a game of un-social Darwinism that only rewards the survival of the richest: “I hope Armstrong doesn’t want to pay because I need to show the dim-witted bastard that I in fact *do* own a platinum American Express card” (139). There is a kind of cannibalism in the bankers’ wanting to outdo and destroy each other. In their world, money has become the weapon with which they mutually consume each other. The primal rage with which Bateman takes out the co-worker he is most envious of, Paul Owen, transcends a cannibal’s need for revenge. Bateman uses an ax and strikes Paul while the latter is talking: “The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick

blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up” (217). The need to “shut up” Paul Owen, to not only cut him into pieces, but also silence him forever as competition heavily savors of too-long suppressed primal instincts. Underneath Patrick’s polished surface that has sublimated the primitive into what is culturally acceptable, his greed for money and power is more barbarian than any tribal cannibalism.

If Bateman is viewed as an allegory for the crimes of a deregulated market, and if he is considered from Frederic Jameson’s perspective, who understands literature as a symbolic reflection of political and social thought and institutions, American Psycho is a strong indictment against Reaganomics, the media assault of late capitalism, and the schizophrenia it incurs in people. Therefore the novel has been misunderstood and falsely condemned as “moronic ... themeless ... pointless...everythingless”¹⁹ (Rosenblatt), “superficial”²⁰ (Sheppard), “not literature ... immoral, but also artless”²¹ (Miner), “flat...tedious...boring”²² (Lehmann-Haupt), “the essence of trash,” and “serving no purpose save that of morbidity, titillation and sensation ... pure trash”²³ (Yardley), “garbage”²⁴ (Gurley Brown), “the single most boring book I have ever had to endure”²⁵ (Woolf). The overreaction of many critics also reveals a kind of apolitical expectation that doesn’t appreciate a novel’s social commentary, particularly if it includes traces of Marxist critique. Jameson’s approach of analyzing literature from an historically-grounded point of view helps to expose the profound and unapologetic condemnation of greed and market fundamentalism the novel has at its core: The serial-killing, raping, raving, racist protagonist Patrick Bateman gets away with murder because his white male

moneyed social layer does. American Psycho exposes the hypocrisy of Reaganomics in respect to wealth by revealing that the money of Patrick's class is made at the expense of the poor: the more emotionally-bankrupt the ruling class becomes, the more financially distraught do the poor.

Patrick's many monotonous excursions on sartorial etiquette, restaurants, gym and stereo equipment that have bored so many of the novel's critics are, in fact, essential to prove possible what Jameson leaves open in his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Culture," in which he asks if "there is also a way in which [postmodernism]... resists" ²⁶ the logic of capitalism (Jameson 125). Jameson is asking if a work such as American Psycho, which is postmodern in its self-conscious and self-referential quality, in its skepticism of the inevitability of progress and of all-encompassing cultural theories, can establish a social critique of its time and society, and thereby resist the logic of late capitalism. By portraying Bateman as one of the doomed souls of a postmodern Inferno who glimpses the fact that he is trapped, but is too immersed in the late-capitalism-trap to do anything about it, the novel exposes the historical and socio-political reasons why Bateman remains stuck. American Psycho also resists the logic of late capitalism by not turning Bateman's murders into an easily digestible thriller. By imposing its endless shopping-lists as unapologetically as it does its gruesome murder details in direct, first person narration, the novel resists the logic of capitalism and implicates an entire social layer for Bateman's killings.

The novel's "aesthetics of boredom [is] more than the white noise it appears to be" because Ellis bores us on purpose (Murphet). The novel offers no safe outside-scapegoat to pin the blame on, but accuses everyone within late capitalism as having

somehow, at some point contributed to its logic. The narrator offers “an interminable monologue of the non-self, which is, at some hypothetical socio-psychological limit, the lived self in contemporary America” and should also be seen “as a corrective to literary escapism” (Murphet 25, 27). By not omitting the horror of the murders, the novel exposes what Reaganomics did to its threats; by denying a childhood-etiology of why Patrick kills, but instead revealing an obvious pattern – he kills all the threats to Reaganomics - the novel clarifies where the blame lies: Patrick Bateman is the zeitgeist of the Eighties. By being obviously tedious, sarcastic, cruel, and exaggerated in its long descriptions, American Psycho will not let the resistance to Reaganomics and late capitalism go unnoticed: “Tandoori chicken and foie gras, and lots of jazz, and he adored the Savoy, but shad roe, the colors were gorgeous, aloe, shell, citrus, Morgan Stanley” buzzes Evelyn at a “pitch that cannot be ignored” (122). The novel’s epic ad-catalogues are clearly presented in a satiric manner to evoke both ridicule and self-reflection.

John Conley writes in his essay of 2007 “The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis” that “Bret Easton Ellis is not a writer of the glittering fantasies of consumer society, nor is he a writer of excruciating violence or graphic sex: rather, he is first and foremost a writer of capitalism, which is to say, he is first and foremost a writer of poverty”²⁷ (Conley 119). Ellis describes urban decay, poverty, the homeless, the problem of gentrification, urban renewal gone bad, rising rents, factory closures, evictions, class resentment and struggle, racism, and homophobia: “Ellis uses run-on sentences; his work does not only depict its own period, it speaks the commodified language of its own period” (Conley 120). It “is the language of commodity culture, it is the language that has been always-already read” (Conley 121). The novel plunges into the capitalistic life style immediately, describing

how the rich erase the poor through gentrification or literal painting-over them: “Another bus appears, another poster for *Les Misérables* replaces the word – not the same bus because someone has written DYKE over Eponine’s face” (4). Victor Hugo’s novel Les Misérables has been ‘gentrified’ into a musical for the middle and upper classes that makes the content of destitution and poverty more easily digestible. American Psycho regularly mentions musicals such as Les Misérables or The Threepenny Opera to draw attention to New York’s underworld and the massive amount of poor people, who only exist to the ruling class if they have been zip-locked into a Broadway musical. The novel portrays Patrick’s class as walking all over the ‘miserables’ of his city while poking fun of them: Eponine’s face has been painted over with a derogatory term and is therefore being erased.

To emphasize how little concerned and even disgusted Patrick’s social layer is with the poor side of life, Patrick’s co-worker and likely alter-ego Timothy Price obsessively rants about the homeless in New York and the city’s general destitution in the opening passage of the book: “... the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city really is and you know and I know that it is a sty...strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis...baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets” (4). The city’s gap between the wealthy and the poor is getting wider while Bateman and his cronies attempt to accept the existence of the homeless by humiliating them, ignoring them or, literally eliminating them. Bateman tells the homeless man Al to “Get a goddamn job” (130). He also lays out the rift between his class and Al’s when he tells the latter: “I don’t have anything in

common with you” before he attacks him and his dog in the most vicious manner (131). “Affronted by Al’s being there and being poor, Bateman attacks,” and yet, “though dehumanized, Al stubbornly remains all-too human” (Conley 129).

As John Ehrmann points out in his book on The Eighties – America in the Age of Reagan: “Job displacement had a terrible impact on black men”²⁸ in the Eighties (Ehrmann). “The decline in industrial jobs meant that blacks in the cities had few prospects, and social writers began to speak of a growing black underclass – poor, unemployed, uneducated, and trapped in urban poverty” (Ehrmann). Meanwhile, Patrick and his co-workers are getting drunk on champagne at Harry’s, convincing each other that “white guys” cannot get AIDS,” implying that their social layer is too powerful to fail (34). Al stands in for all the other poverty-stricken and homeless people in the city who have no access to lavatories due to the strategic removal of the latter to gentrify city streets: “Al’s body is revealed to be ravaged by the exact conditions that all the signs of his existence figure him out to be, his rashes indicating a bio-historical texture to his destitution, the acidity of urine and the grime of feces ground into his ‘flabby black thighs’: the harsh symptoms of repeatedly being denied access to lavatories or simply fresh water with which to wash, much less bathe” (Conley 129-130). The urban poor are victims of the raging greed of Patrick’s class: the desire to transform all of Manhattan into a consumer wonderland pasted with dollar bills and without the poor. As John Conley puts it: Ellis’s work “isn’t about a world of capitalism without poverty, it is an example of its impossibility, an impossibility that, as Adorno would say, is the genuine content of Ellis’s work” (Conley 134).

The homeless are victimized by Patrick and his friends again and again:

“McDermott’s eyes are glazed over and he’s waving a dollar bill in front of the woman’s face and she starts sobbing, pathetically trying to grab at it, but of course, typically, he doesn’t give it to her. Instead he ignites the bill with matches from Canal Bar and relights the half-smoked cigar clenched between his straight white teeth—probably caps, the jerk. ‘How gentrifying of you, McDermott,’ I tell him” (210).

When Bateman tells Al to get a job, he does exactly what his class did: he blames the homeless and poor for not trying hard enough and for being in their destitute situations. Bateman inflicts on the poor and homeless exactly what Reaganomics inflicted upon them: he gentrifies them or eliminates them altogether. The excessive amount of homeless people, just like the excess of products, is another allegory American Psycho employs to show that the signifiers have lost the meaning of what they were signifying: Al, as all the homeless people in the novel, is a statistic without meaning to Patrick and his class: “I beat up a girl today who was asking people for money on the street,” Patrick tells one of his dates nonchalantly (213); or “I pass an ugly homeless bum—a member of the genetic underclass” (266). A poverty-stricken person doesn’t evoke empathy anymore, but resentment.

Price is hysterical in his description of the many homeless in the novel’s opening chapter:

“we get some crazy fucking homeless nigger who actually *wants*—listen

to me Bateman—*wants* to be out on the streets, this, *those* streets, see, *those*’—he points—‘and we have a mayor...who won’t let the *bitch* have her way—Holy Christ—*let* the fucking bitch *freeze* to death” (6).

Price’s reaction is likely based on a class-conscious and derogatory quip the park commissioner of Tompkins Square Park, Henry J. Stern, made on one of the coldest days of winter, right after the police had raided the park and evicted all its homeless on December 14th, 1989: “It would be irresponsible to allow the homeless to sleep outdoors” (Conley 117). The latter quote occurred while Ellis was finishing American Psycho, and it relates the fear of ‘the other’ very well and the desire to erase them as they present a threat to Patrick’s class’s power. The quote also exposes the arrogance of Patrick’s social layer in the face of hardship.

The Reagan Administration had cut \$26 billion in federal funding to major cities because the increasing value of land in cities such as New York hinged on the removal of old industrial neighborhoods. By displacing factories to the Third World, and by allowing multi-national corporations to erect office buildings, cities gained a fortune by selling and renting out space: “There is a nearly 1000 percent spread between the rent received for factory space and the rent landlords get for class A office space. Simply by changing the land use, one’s capital could increase in value many times over” (Murphet 59). The consequences of the latter are speculations in land rent, evictions, factory closures, and unemployment. When Patrick revisits one of the scenes of his crime, Paul Owen’s apartment, in which he claims to have murdered two prostitutes, the real-estate agent is only interested in re-letting the apartment; if she has to cover up a major crime to make

money, she will do so and remove all evidence of the horror that took place in the apartment, where “the smell from the roses [is] thick, masking something revolting” (369). Apart from the obvious murders of the prostitutes, what the smell of the roses masks is the murder of downtown by finance capital, which Patrick represents; what happened to Owen’s apartment is an allegory of what happens to the entire city. Julian Murphet fittingly calls the meeting of the real-estate agent Mrs. Wolfe and Patrick an “allegory of abstractions,” because it is what a deregulated market does to people: Mrs. Wolfe represents spatial abstraction and Patrick monetary abstraction. Together they allegorize the capitalistic vortex that strips the lower classes of their existence.

By portraying the serial killer as a respectable member of society who unapologetically removes the threats to the ruling class such as the poor (so to gentrify), foreigners (to remove economic threats such as the Japanese), women (suppress threats to patriarchy), or homosexuals (threat to masculinity), American Psycho implicates late-capitalism-society itself for indulging the killer’s acts and looking the other way. As opposed to depicting the ostracized serial killer with the unfortunate upbringing through an omniscient third-person-narrator who can leave out the cruel murder-passages to win sympathy for the killer, the novel is narrated by Bateman himself, who impresses his first-person narration of detailed crime descriptions onto memory, thereby ruling out American serial-killer glorification awarded to the individual who is not a part of society, because he can be explained away as the ‘other.’ Patrick Bateman is ‘Every-Yuppie’ and his crimes therefore hit too close to home: “North America has produced some 80% of all known 20th Century serial killers,”²⁹ but prefers to view them as “other” than themselves—as outrageous, alien creatures (Newton 95). American Psycho portrays Patrick as the

warning sign of what will happen if multinational capitalism doesn't find a balanced way of returning to consumption for real need.

David Schmid, author of Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture, explains the serial killer cult: "By emphasizing their creepiness, we can deny that they share many of our values and obsessions"³⁰ (Gale). Schmid also observes that the public follows the serial killer's crimes on TV, ruminates about their patterns, watches TV crime shows based on them, and is relieved when they go to prison because all of the public's guilt over their own obsession with these killers is thereby placed behind bars: "We do it all because we are compelled to resist the idea that these characters, so familiar, so endemic to America, are at all like the rest of us" (Gale). The serial killer is like Baudrillard's description of Disneyland. She or he enables the belief that the rest of the country is real, and that bad things such as mass-murder only occur in fantasy-land: "The Disneyland imaginary is neither true or false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real" (Baudrillard). Baudrillard's theory points out that actions such as Bateman's conceal that "the real is no longer real," because reality has been replaced by a kind of artificial Disneyland or Las Vegas Casino-experience, in which the laws of cause and effect seem to not be in place, but actually are in place (Baudrillard).

As the protagonist of Showtime's popular television series Dexter about a serial killer observes: "There's something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide scene in the daylight of Miami. It makes the most grotesque killings look staged, like you're in a new and daring section of Disney World: Dahmerland"³¹ (Dexter). Disneyland exists "to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly

among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness,” just like serial killers help make believe that they are the unreal other (Baudrillard 175). The desire to believe that “what happens in serial killer-kingdom, stays in serial killer-kingdom outweighs the truth, namely that the fantasy-land is more real than the rest of the country. As long as the serial killer is only the protagonist of a TV-Show, and as long as the show is entertaining, the facts the show is based on can be rationalized as something that only happens on television. The fact that Dexter, as example, has been running to great success for almost five years is explained by one article as Dexter Morgan being “the blood-splattered face of a generation,” “North America’s favorite serial killer,” “a veritable Fred Flintstone for a more cynical age,” and as “TV’s most unlikely Everyman”³² (Bonnell). The New York Times calls Dexter “eroticized violence on television,” but defends the nation’s proclivity to obsess over serial killers: “We envy their ability to get away with their desires and our own darkest and most sadistic impulses, which we ritually disavow by identifying with their prey”³³ (Stanley). Dexter is made digestible for the TV-nation because he is, for one, only a television serial killer, a kind of Disney-character. Secondly, the serial killer is really a good guy who practices “vigilante law enforcement” and “only kills people who deserve to die” (Stanley). American Psycho is offensive because Patrick Bateman has not been turned into a Disney-character, but exposes the nation’s violent side in an unfiltered manner.

Schmid theorizes “that people's fantasies and compulsions represent values embedded in our culture, values that permeate our institutions and entertainments: the utter and often brutal supremacy of the white patriarchal system; misogyny; deep

ambiguity and anxiety about the body, sex, and sexual orientation; a relish for violence; fear of powerlessness and loss of control; and obsession with celebrity” (Gale). American Psycho makes no excuses for the serial killer that would distance him from his society, such as an etiology of a bad childhood, poverty, outsider-status, or the omission of the cruelty of his crimes by an omniscient narrator. Instead, the novel lingers on all the facets of Patrick that make him one with his society’s power politics, which leaves no possibility to shift the blame, but enforces a thorough look at the self by repeatedly pointing out that Patrick and his friends represent American greed: “Courtney reaches over and touches my wrist gently, stroking my Rolex” (98). In her fondest moment, Patrick’s mistress Courtney strokes his expensive watch as opposed to his wrist in a failed attempt at compassion.

Bateman repeatedly oversteps his boundaries in the crimes he commits; he practically asks to be found out and heard, such as when he repeatedly confesses his crimes: He tells his girlfriend: “My...need to engage in...homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot, um, be corrected,” of which she “misses the essence” (338). He confesses to his lawyer: “I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can’t make myself any clearer,” to which his lawyer responds: “But that’s simply not possible” (388). Nobody believes that someone with Patrick’s looks, money, social standing, and boy-next-door-personality could be so thoroughly corrupted: “Patrick is not a cynic, Timothy. He’s the boy next door, aren’t you honey?” “No, I’m not,” I whisper to myself. “I’m a fucking evil psychopath” (20). In addition to the ignored confessions, the novel shows that nobody listens to anyone. Patrick cannot make himself heard even though he says the most outrageous things to people: “And by the way, did anyone ever tell you that you look

exactly like Garfield but run over and skinned and then someone threw an ugly Ferragamo sweater over you before they rushed you to the vet” (95). Latter statement is met by: “where did you find Patrick? He’s so knowledgeable about things” (95). At a night club he confides in a model: “I’m into, oh, murders and executions mostly,” to which she replies: “Do you like it? ...most guys I know who work in mergers and acquisitions don’t really like it” (206). Patrick has become so used to people not listening - “naturally he doesn’t hear” (157) - that he cries out on the verge of a meltdown: “does anyone really see anyone? Does anyone really see anyone else? Did you ever see me? See? What does that mean? Ha! See? Ha” (238). Patrick lacks any kind of valuable connection to the people around him, and therefore attempts to find meaning in his fantasized alter ego-existence.

Dreams promise an escape from Patrick’s vacant and schizophrenic existence. In his day-to-day-life on Wall Street, Patrick is incompetent and nothing special. His narration is unreliable throughout the entire novel to hide the fact that he is not the suave sophisticate he paints himself as: he embarrasses himself at a club when he tries to imitate a rapper; he embarrasses Jean and himself when he lies about a dinner reservation; he cannot get anything done at work and really only works “to..fit..in” (237); his sex life is pathetic: “When [their couple-therapist] asked about [Evelyn’s] preferred sexual act,” Patrick responds: “Foreclosure” (334); while sleeping with Courtney, he fusses over the right condom long enough to kill the mood or he refuses to wear one because he won’t ‘feel’ anything, to which Courtney replies: “If you don’t use one you’re not going to feel anything anyway” (105). Patrick acts out his sexual fantasies with prostitutes that are inspired by the pornographic videos he watches, because he has no

sense of what natural sexuality is. As Baudrillard puts it in The Illusion of the End: “At the heart of pornography is sexuality haunted by its own disappearance” (Baudrillard). Everything Patrick thinks he wants has already been created and made popular by others. Both his natural and creative instincts are virtually non-existent and he has to watch films to teach him how to be human. He is, essentially, an alien in his own world.

The other identity Patrick creates for himself manifests a lot of the qualities he so conspicuously lacks in reality. Patrick casts himself into a movie that plays in his head with him as the star, which fulfills the ultimate consumer-fantasy, a Hollywood existence. American Psycho demonstrates that Bateman’s perceptions of the world are based on Hollywood film-techniques: “I...dissolve into my living room” (24); “As in a movie, I turn around” (61); “it’s played out in slow motion” (86); “but in slow motion, like in a movie—the sun goes down” (114); “her dialogue overlaps her own dialogue” (123); “this is all happening in slow motion” (231); “Scene Two” (236); “As if in slow motion, like in a movie, she turns around” (245); “I’m moving in jump-cut, walking along a beach, the film is black-and-white...I’m looking into the camera, now I’m holding up the product” (372). Not even in his dreams can Patrick truly escape the curse of his media-cultured upbringing. Hence there is no coming in touch with his unconscious or access to a complete self. There is no interior life. Sublimation has become the self. As Marshal McLuhan called it in Understanding Media: “The medium is the message” (McLuhan). The medium of Hollywood films impacts how Patrick perceives himself. He sinks further and further into his own nightmare of product-mania, in which he creates himself the only identities (which are second-hand-identities) he can dream up.

The novel explicitly reveals that – even when Bateman’s imagination is given free reign – he can only piece together a dream world made up of pop culture and media because that is all he knows: he casts himself in the role of serial killer and porn star. Both horror-films and pornographic videos are popular consumer items that Bateman has grown up with. The fact that he cannot dream up anything creative that doesn’t pertain to the world he knows reveals that, as Jameson explains, Bateman cannot differentiate between his ‘self’ and the world: reality is a kind of hallucination to Bateman: “I hallucinate the buildings into mountains, into volcanoes, the streets become jungles, the sky freezes into a backdrop...Lunch at Hubert’s becomes a permanent hallucination in which I find myself dreaming while still awake” (86). When he confuses the fashionable college girl with a homeless person, only to recognize that he has just dropped a dollar bill into an expensive coffee cup, the novel clarifies that Patrick perceives everything on a sign-basis. Only what the surface shows counts in Patrick’s world. He only sees the coffee cup in the girl’s hands and links it to what he knows, a homeless person, not to the person herself. Patrick’s chain of signifiers breaks down more and more; the fact that there is no meaning behind the signs he perceives makes his quest for meaning impossible and leads him to find solace in his other identity within his imagined dream-reels.

American Psycho, with its many references to Patrick’s “only dreaming,” establishes that Patrick’s serial-killer-life is his imagination. The way in which he kills people often appears to be inspired by popular culture, such as murder mystery-, action-, and horror-film-conceits, such as a scene from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Patrick murders a prostitute by throwing a chainsaw down flights of stairs, which is impossible to

do in reality; he uses an ax to kill Paul Owen, another overblown horror-movie-conceit; Detective Kimball appears as the stereotypical Hollywood detective; in the chase scene, the switch in narration from first to third person makes it obvious that Patrick is watching himself star in his own imagined action movie. Everything he encounters during the action-scene is inspired by the films he has watched, and Patrick himself describes it as an “optical illusion” (352). He turns himself into an action-hero and adheres to all action-movie-genre-conventions: when he fires at the cop car, it explodes, because there has to be an explosion; there is a car-chase; he knows that the bad guy in a film never gets away with murder, so “the dream threatens to break” (350) while he imagines an outrageous gunfire-exchange and then a chase into his own office building, from which he confesses all his crimes onto his lawyer’s answering machine: “I decide to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia” (352). Patrick’s alter-ego-existence as a smooth and ice-cold serial-killer is, in fact, nothing but ‘dementia,’ a self-constructed dream to find meaning and a unique self that stands out amongst all the other clones on Wall Street. Violence has become the only self-distinguishing option for Patrick.

In reality, Patrick is the ineffective and nearly impotent “boy-next-door” his girlfriend and acquaintances describe him as (20). His lawyer Harold Carnes is the one who checks Patrick back into reality by clarifying why he is not a serial killer: “you had one fatal flaw: Bateman’s such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody, that I couldn’t fully appreciate [Bateman’s confession]” (387). Carnes tells Bateman that he thought the latter’s phone-confession of the murders was a joke. However, far from using the double life and dream as an excuse for Patrick’s gruesome deeds, American Psycho documents part of the etiology of how Patrick’s schizophrenia, loss of touch with

reality, and construction of a double life came about through the consumer-culture of late capitalism: Patrick's identity is pieced together solely through consumer-culture objects, which cause his split personality and violence. Through the character of Patrick Bateman, American Psycho relates that American late capitalism consumer-ethos is fundamentally violent. Consequently, neither can the serial killer be blamed for his deeds as an individual outsider of society, nor can his imagination be used as an excuse to describe what he would like to do to people, because all of Patrick's thoughts, dreams, and actions have been culturally transmitted. As Patrick's excursion of on a Huey Lewis pop-song reveals: Some of my Lies are True (Sooner or Later) (353): Sooner or later, the novel implies, Patrick's schizophrenia will lead him to act out his dreams of serial-killing, and when it does, no one will believe his confessions.

In this sense, Patrick exists in a Dantesque circular hell as one of the damned souls: the circle doesn't open, because Patrick is born into multinational capitalism with media and corporate dictatorship that doesn't enable him to create his own identity. The circle doesn't close, either, because, both in reality and in his world of dream-reels, Patrick only knows how to employ pre-programmed consumer mindsets, which can never fill his inner void. Patrick's general dissatisfaction is caused by his inability to consume a product for real need, the way it was originally meant to be consumed. Patrick only knows how to consume so to identify himself as the richest, handsomest, best dressed Yuppie. His evening with the prostitutes was orchestrated as the perfect romantic date according to consumer-mindset: Patrick served chardonnay, made small-talk, had on the right clothes and played the right music, and yet, the evening leaves him as dissatisfied as before. Bateman has derived from multinational capitalism that consumption can fill his

void, that it will absorb him into the status-symbol-world of its brand, and that it will help him identify and distinguish himself. He is not aware of it, but his inner void is caused because product-consumption can never help him establish a self. Since Bateman is impervious to any interior self-knowledge, he cannot relate to others, which is exactly what would help him fill his void: to empathize with or love another. Instead Bateman is only programmed to consume and products and therefore equally treats people as possessions. Once a person is possessed, Bateman can no longer relate to them as a separate entity because they have become part of him. Consequently, for Bateman, to consume is indeed to kill.

“THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (399) reads the last line of American Psycho, after Bateman has given in to his mindless consumer-existence in the “what’s in it for me”-culture (398). The tragedy of the novel is brought to its climax at this point, because it clarifies that Bateman, unless he were to relate to *someone* else, not *something* else, is stuck in eternal dissatisfaction. American Psycho doesn’t claim that there is ‘no exit,’ only that “this”-“how life presets itself [to Patrick]...at the end of the century,” within late capitalism, is not an exit (399). Patrick is even dimly aware of what “this” is. His only attempt at running away from his world of things occurs at Evelyn’s Christmas Party when he tells her: “I want to take you away from all *this*...From Sushi and elves and...*stuff*” (188). The hold “this” world has on Patrick is too strong, however. But *that* exit (into a meaningful existence) would be to relate, not consume, as shown in his exchange with Jean who tells him: “a lot of people seem to have...lost touch with life” (375). Jean offers Patrick a glimpse of hope of finding ‘that’ exit, but Patrick is too detached from reality that he would notice that there was an actual meaning behind Jean’s

message: “there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory...I simply am not there” (377). Patrick realizes during a short epiphany that Jean “wants to rearrange my life in a significant way,” but he concludes that “one day, sometime very soon, she too will be locked in the rhythm of my insanity” (378). Thus Patrick implies that, as opposed to him finding love with Jean and both of them escaping from spectacle-society, spectacle-society will eventually envelop and consume them both.

Having been raised with extreme consumer-culture as his next-door-neighbor, it is unlikely that Patrick will find *that* exit. The tragedy of American Psycho lies in Patrick allegorizing that love within market fundamentalism may no longer be an option, because in an affectless, soulless world connections cannot be made anymore. Love cannot be bought and is therefore a foreign concept in Bateman’s consumer-driven world. His disconnection from genuine emotions embodies how his entire social layer has lost the ability to relate to others because concepts such as love have become functions of the lost interior at this point that have lost their meaning. As Umberto Eco describes the loss of the original, innocent meaning of love, and the problem of it having been trivialized: “a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her, ‘I love you madly’, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland...He can say, ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, ‘I love you madly.’ At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman”³⁴ (Eco). In American Psycho, however, not even a trivialized emotion can be achieved anymore. Late capitalism is, as Patrick says: “no time for the innocent” (382).

END NOTES

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⁴ In Tom Reich's The Silence of the Lambs the serial killer is a man on the fringes of society who wants to be a woman, but wasn't granted the sex change he sought. Dexter Morgan of Showtime's Dexter is also an outsider.

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<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/economy/jan-june04/reagan_6-10-04.html>.

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³¹ "Dexter." Dexter: Season One. Writ. Jeff Lindsay and James Manos Jr. Dir. Michael Cuesta. Shotime. 6 Oct. 2006. DVD. Clyde Phillips Productions, 2006.

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