

Simply Not There: Externality versus Internal Identity in *American Psycho*

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The executive world of 1980's New York is not commonly considered one of discord and debauchery. Instead, trends of modernity, class, and style may color images of such times. Although not wholly untrue, these visions are not nearly so limited or so innocent. In her 2000 film, *American Psycho*, Mary Harron depicts characters living at the peak of grandeur, with a heavy underscore on the grotesque. Due to their overtly extravagant lifestyle and obsession with appearance, the characters have largely become stark, empty canvases incapable of individuality and able only to perform the simplest of actions: consume. Not only are the characters entirely absorbed in the microcosmic world of privilege and substance they've created, but they are completely oblivious to the actions of those around them. This creates a distorted reality where internalization becomes meaningless, if not impossible, and only concepts such as conformity and exteriority prevail. It is in this plane that the film attempts to explore its characters and make sense of their situations. Rather than relying on traditional internal characteristics, *American Psycho* develops and defines its characters entirely through the use of external objects and consumerist actions, poignantly demonstrating the superficiality and emotional shallowness that ultimately leads to an eroding of self definition and ability to form meaningful relationships.

While in the traditional sense of literary practice characters are typically constructed and discerned through their unique characterization and individual personality traits, this method simply does not hold true for the characters of *American Psycho*. At first this idea appears strange and off-putting. How, it could be argued, is it possible for a story to be told using characters that essentially lack identity? Though a perfectly logical and debatable point, it is exactly because of this reason that the story presented in the film is told. It is why the characters in the film exist and function as they do. As Vartan P. Messier suggests in his article, "Visual Poetics, Intertextuality, and the Transfiguration of Ideology: An 'eye' for an 'I' in Mary Harron's Cinematic Adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*", the abnormal characterization articulates a concept "which criticizes the underlying strictures of late capitalism."¹ Although Messier largely discusses the ways Harron's film diverges from its novel inspiration, he also investigates the cultural criticisms explored by both. The film itself draws attention to the difficulties and essential breakdown that occurs when individuality and internalization fade away and physical and external markers are the only remaining sources of identification. Throughout the film, the various characters are continually confusing each other. Since they all basically look the same, and because they have no other methods of distinguishing themselves, they have no way of definitively telling who is who. Potentially the only reason why Patrick evades the unearthing of his crimes as long as he does is this extreme lack of differentiation. Not only does no one appear sure that Paul Allen is missing, but some even attest to seeing him in various locations since his death. Likewise, even after his

¹ Vartan P. Messier, "Visual Poetics, Intertextuality, and the Transfiguration of Ideology: an 'Eye' for an 'I' in Mary Harron's Cinematic Adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal Of Criticism And Theory* 11, no. 1 (2009): 96. *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 21, 2011).

confession, Patrick's lawyer refuses to believe he could commit such crimes and doesn't even realize it is Patrick with whom he is speaking. This confusion not only shows the inherent problems of internally hollow characters, but also sets the scene for considering what constitutes important and significant traits within the convoluted world of the film.²

Although the many characters of *American Psycho* may appear to be severely lacking in personality, this notion arguably does not stand up. The identity of the characters is exclusively constructed by external objects and actions. Therefore the personas of the characters are not reliant on who they are or what they think, but rather are solely dependent on what they do or possess. One superlative example of this idea is the film's central character Patrick Bateman. Patrick spends copious amounts of time throughout the film crafting and shaping his physical image into the societal view of perfection. He accomplishes this by adhering to strict and rigorous routines that dictate his daily life. In an early scene of the film, Patrick provides insight into his lifestyle and habits. He details the exercises and numerous products he uses to prepare himself every day. While this assortment of products is itself an important testament to his externally defined identity, what stands out as most interesting about Patrick's monologue is his assertion that he is merely an "abstraction...something illusory."³ This uncharacteristically unanticipated flash of self-realization provides substantial insight into Patrick's personality. In this moment, he suggests that although there is a constructed idea of his character, it is an external, piecemeal creation. At an internal, core level, he fundamentally does not exist. Rather

² Ibid., 96-7.

³ *American Psycho*, DVD, directed by Mary Harron. (2000; Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Films).

his only identifiable traits are those prescribed by outside objects or people. This idea is crucial for understanding the erratic personalities and actions of Patrick and the other characters.

Further accentuating the critical importance of objects in defining the characters of the film is the authoritative and absolute power of the business card. Repeated suggestions are made throughout the film implying Patrick's relative indifference toward actually maintaining his job and succeeding at his work. Instead he reads magazines, listens to music, and plays crossword puzzles. At one point, Evelyn reveals that the position is entirely unnecessary and completely for show. However, while Patrick remains totally apathetic toward the notion of his occupation, he viciously grasps at the idea of prestige that comes with it, manifesting itself in the form of business cards. It means nothing that he actually holds the position or can perform it well, rather it only matters that he owns a quality business card that states he can do these things. Patrick and his colleagues continually compare cards to determine the best, thereby deciding who is superior. In this sense, the actual job becomes irrelevant. The physical, tangible marker of the card becomes the only discernable identification of employment or performance. It is not through the position, but instead through the representative object of the card that the characters define their work and their success.

Although it is relatively simple to see the significance of objects in defining and crafting the characters, it may be more difficult to comprehend why such importance is placed on them. One way to understand the object-obsessed nature of the characters is through examining their materialistic and highly consumerist lifestyles. The characters consume a wide array of products almost incessantly throughout the film. These products vary broadly, consisting of anything

from designer clothes to illegal drugs to potentially even other humans. In his article "The Generic American Psycho", David Eldridge acutely sums up the mentality of the culture by explaining, "'must have' designer suits and restaurant reservations are valued more than the life of a man, woman or child."⁴ While Eldridge's article more broadly discusses both the novel and its film adaptation and investigates their varied manipulations of genre, his assertion is no less pointed. This societal emphasis on products and consuming only intensifies the exteriority of the characters and their object-based forms of identity. Patrick and the others define their relationships and statuses firmly on possessions and appointments. One example of this is the elusive Dorsia restaurant which, due to its immense exclusivity, holds a mesmerizing power over the characters. Anyone lucky enough to obtain reservations at the restaurant is automatically revered by their peers. Again, the characters are identified solely by what they consume and where they go. Any other merits used to extrapolate the quality of a person are simply not considered, not present. It is within this obsession with consumption that the characters identify and relate themselves, explaining their warped and explicitly objectified sense of personality.

When analyzing and considering the characters of *American Psycho*, it is not only important to investigate their completely external identities, but also imperative to consider their lack of internalization. One substantial idea to consider is how an increase in one form of identity can positively or negatively affect the other. Although materialism and consumerism have obviously and considerably altered the characters externally, the consequences involving

⁴ David Eldridge, "The Generic American Psycho," *Journal of American Studies*, 42, no. 1 (April 2008): 4. *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 19, 2011).

their internal definitions of personality are more subtle and harder to see. It is certainly possible to conceive that at one time the characters were not the void, emotionless beings the film presents them to be. However, the steadily increasing necessity of consuming and the growing societal emphasis on products and material things eventually leads to a disintegration of the significance of self and relationships. The importance of these ideas is underscored by Patrick's vehement declaration that he "want[s] to fit in."⁵ This incessant drive for success and acceptance becomes, basically, his only motivation. Huey Lewis' upbeat mantra that it's "Hip to Be Square" blasting in the background while Patrick viciously slaughters Paul Allen adds a degree of comedic affect while also accentuating the harsh philosophy the characters have come to live by. Essentially, the drive to consume becomes so great and the power of objects so substantial, they eventually replace people, relationships, and emotions. Patrick has no concern for his connection with Evelyn, or anyone else, because it cannot get him anywhere, unlike the approval or recognition he receives from owning expensive clothes or being in peak physical condition. Although a strong sense of self or emotional association with others may at one point have held weight, it is no longer considered critical and is effectively set aside.

Eventually, the idea of consumption and objectification becomes so great it moves beyond the obvious treatment of products and begins to effect human interactions. Not only have the characters' emotional and interpersonal abilities become completely debilitated, but they are no longer capable of distinguishing between inanimate consumer goods and fellow humans. This notion could provide insight into the motivation behind Patrick's brutal and

⁵ *American Psycho*, DVD, directed by Mary Harron. (2000).

excessive killings. Although potentially troublesome to view through the same lens as using scrupulous amounts of skin creams, the murders could arguably be regarded as an extreme form of consumption. As Eldridge points out in his article, Patrick “literally consumes those he kills.”⁶ While Patrick does confess to eating some of his victims, there may be another level within his violence. In his article “Judgment Is Not an Exit: Toward an Affective Criticism of Violence with *American Psycho*”, Marco Abel queries that “it is not so much violence as such, but the state of *not knowing* what violence is that constitutes *the* experience of horror.”⁷ Through this idea, Patrick’s actions traditionally defined as violence take on a new significance and, likewise, his rampant consuming can appear just as sinister; the boundaries are increasingly blurred. Being effectively stripped of any form of internal personality or emotional expression leaves him with only one known way to articulate his identity: through consuming. Since he lacks the ability to express himself or his emotions, they manifest in the more simplistic, strictly external, physical forms of violence and murder. This potentially explains why Patrick kills after failing to produce the best business card among his coworkers. His anxiety over the inadequacy develops in the only way his externally defined personality can understand. Although extreme, Patrick’s demented perception simply comprehends his actions as using up or disposing of unwanted products.

While increased consumption and preference for physicality may be to blame for the erosion of the characters’ personal identities and feelings, it is also equally responsible for

⁶ Eldridge, “The Generic American,” 4.

⁷ Marco Abel, “Judgment Is Not an Exit: Toward an Affective Criticism of Violence with *American Psycho*,” *Angelaki*, 6, no. 3 (December 2001): 148. *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 1, 2011).

instilling them with their new senses of behavior and acceptability. Since they have effectively relinquished their personalities in lieu of mass consumption, they readily turn to this new external culture to teach them how to feel and live. This result yields characters, as Eldridge maintains, constructed from “a variety of cultural debris.”⁸ Patrick continually turns to the media or other forms of culture to inform how he is to perform. This information enlightens his understanding of feelings, relationships, and proper human interactions. He essentially “has no identity beyond that which he consumes.”⁹ Although he likely could have previously held concepts of what constituted healthy or appropriate relationships, these notions are replaced by what he deems more standard or culturally accepted. His ideas of sexual relationships come from viewing pornography, which he then attempts to directly recreate by hiring prostitutes. Similarly, his actions of violence appear informed and performative as well. In one scene, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* plays in the background while Patrick exercises. Later he kills Christie in a clearly imitative style, wielding his own chainsaw and chasing her through an apartment building. This warped reconstruction of behavior and interaction clearly demonstrates the influences and negative effects of a solely externally informed identity. Additionally, it further suggests the results of the consumer-driven lifestyle and shows its ability to effectively dissuade and alter the personality of the characters.¹⁰

The disintegration of the characters’ internal definition of feelings and concept of relationships proves severely negative and detrimental to their personalities. As a result, the characters are almost entirely unable to communicate or relate to each other in any way beyond

⁸ Eldridge, “The Generic American,” 7.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 7,10.

their simplified, superficial exteriors. One example of this is their empty forms of conversation. They are incapable of expressing personal feelings or opinions, but rather only regurgitate pre-rehearsed ideas of what they should say or think. When at dinner at Espace, Patrick delivers a stunning speech outlining all of the most pressing social and political issues of the time.

However, the inherent contradictory nature of his thoughts and the apparent indifference and preparedness with which he speaks suggests he obviously lacks an understanding of these ideas, but merely presents previously heard thoughts he is expected to care about. Similarly, when Detective Kimball first interrogates Patrick about Paul Allen's disappearance, rather than focus on their relationship, his questions almost exclusively focus on status. Kimball inquires about Patrick's age, where he lives, and where he went to school, none of which will incriminate him as the murderer of Paul Allen, but all of which accentuate his position and success, gaining him the respect and admiration of the detective.

Additionally, the emotional and empathetic elements of the characters appear equally damaged by their lack of internalization. When Courtney asks Patrick if they can talk, he simply and confusedly replies, "...You look marvelous."¹¹ The notion of holding a serious conversation about weighted, consequential matters does not even begin to register. Courtney is merely, and unfortunately, another item that Patrick mechanically and inconsiderately uses. Regarding her as a thinking, feeling being with whom the possibility of an intimate connection could exist is utterly inconceivable. Likewise, the thought of dialogue representing a

¹¹ *American Psycho*, DVD, directed by Mary Harron. (2000).

meaningful interaction stands equally imperceptible, instead being utilized only as a vehicle for exchanging empty compliments of superficiality and vanity.

Another unsettling consequence brought about by the incapacitated emotional states and critically frayed relationships of the characters is their overwhelming self-absorption. Since they have relinquished the ability to efficiently relate to one another, this energy is redirected inward, toward themselves. Essentially, due to the numbing and demeaning effects of overconsumption, they no longer regard other people as willing or capable of attachment or complex interaction. Patrick oddly expresses this sentiment through his interpretation of Whitney Houston's song "Greatest Love of All". "Since...it's impossible in this world we live in to empathize with others, we can always empathize with ourselves," he explains to Elizabeth and Christie shortly before killing them.¹² For Patrick, others are incapable of accepting his terms of consideration or sympathy, therefore his uninhibited narcissism is decidedly natural, even expected.

Although the characters do readily and often interact with each other, they do so only for their own personal benefit. Indeed, Patrick frequently proves that he neither needs nor particularly enjoys anyone he cannot associate with. He uses people for his own personal gain or as an audience to preen and expand his inflated self-image. Again, Patrick's sexual relationships disturbingly shed light on his warped ideology. Rather than maintaining a healthy, monogamous relationship with Evelyn, which he arguably only preserves since itself is an informed societal convention, Patrick hires prostitutes and calls upon Courtney at his leisure.

¹² *American Psycho*, DVD, directed by Mary Harron. (2000).

This blatant disregard for connection or compassion in lieu of total personal satisfaction works as an ultimate objectification of others, clearly equating them to products worthy only of using and expending.

Even though Patrick stands at the forefront of the film's portrayal of self-obsession, the other characters are far from innocent. All of the characters adhere to similar principles and arguably each function solely within their own narcissistic realms, catering to their own self-satisfying needs. The contexts of Patrick's killings serve as an excellent and chilling example of the overall ambivalence of the characters. Eldridge points out that "for Bateman to actually get away with murders...it requires the people around him to be so cold and self-absorbed as not to care or not to notice."¹³ When push comes to shove, everyone remains indifferent to the happenings around them unless they are somehow directly affected or benefited. For example, Louis has nothing but praise for Patrick's chic overnight bag when they meet just after Paul Allen's brutal death. That the bag is blood-soaked and in the shape of a human corpse are irrelevant details when compared to its designer label. Even when Patrick attempts to confess, the other characters remain completely oblivious. So entranced by the expensive bracelet she notices across the restaurant, Evelyn utterly ignores Patrick's confessions of "homicidal behavior" and the morose crayon drawing of his most recent victim.¹⁴ The characters are so focused on their products and desires, all other events become obscured and void. The complete lack of internalization and inability to relate to others has left them wholly disconnected from

¹³ Eldridge, "The Generic American," 4.

¹⁴ *American Psycho*, DVD, directed by Mary Harron. (2000).

the world of relationships and compassion and only able to interact via their shallow, externally defined realms of objects and consumption.

The widely pessimistic, disturbing, and thoroughly chaotic reality brought to light through *American Psycho* certainly means to fulfill several roles. On one level, it invariably shocks and alarms, for the characters are truly maniacal and monstrous, whether literally homicidal maniacs or stuck-up, status-hungry businessmen. Yet, debatably, the film is equally encouraging and satirical. As much as they are meant to terrify, the characters are undoubtedly so ridiculous and incredible they almost cannot be taken any other way but comical and pathetic. In this vein, the film perhaps takes on its truest function: to promote and facilitate introspection. These detached and purely external beings have moved beyond the point of realization or retribution. However, unlike the corrupted and emotionally numb characters of the film, its audience remains aware and concerned. The grim demonstration of what can happen when the importance of objects replaces people continues to resonate throughout an increasingly desire-driven society. The film ultimately stresses the necessity of maintaining individuality and sustaining relationships so that the audience may avoid becoming merely another commodity for someone's consumption.