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Patrick Bateman, Violence and
Consumption: Bret Easton Ellis's *American
Psycho*

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Abstract

This essay investigates how Bret Easton Ellis portrays Patrick Bateman as a projection of American society, in order to criticize consumerism and capitalism in his novel *American Psycho*. By applying Marxist theory, this essay examines Bateman's consumption patterns and class-consciousness using key Marxist terms. This essay investigates the relationship between Bateman and his commodities, through the Marxist concept of value. Furthermore, this essay suggests that Bateman's consumption pattern creates his identity and that Bateman's lust for consumption has no boundaries. Bateman quenches his thirst for consumption by consuming humans of low status on the social hierarchy, by acts of violence, rape or cannibalism.

Keywords: Marxism, Consumption, Consumerism, Homogeneity, Commodities, Use-value, Exchange-value, Sign-exchange value, Socioeconomic, Class-consciousness, Commodity fetishism.

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1. Introduction

Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* was met by a massive media protest, even before it was released in 1990. Months before the novel was scheduled to be published, R.Z Sheppard published an article for *Time* which included passages leaked from the upcoming novel. The passage *Time* chose to publish depicts in graphic detail how Patrick Bateman, the novel's protagonist and narrator, tortures a woman:

I start by skinning Torri alive, making incisions with a steak knife and ripping long strips of flesh from her legs and stomach while she screams in vain, begging for mercy in a thin, high voice. I stop doing this and move over to her head and start biting the top of it, hoping that she realizes her punishment is ending up being comparatively light compared to what I plan to do with the other one. (R.Z Sheppard.)

Julian Murphet, author of *American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*, writes that after pressure following the publication of the *Times* article, Simon & Schuster, the novel's publishing company, decided not to publish *American Psycho*, forfeiting a \$300,000 dollar advance to Ellis, hoping that the book had not already scorched their reputation (67). The National Organization for Women (NOW) called it “a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women” (qtd. in Murphet 68). The critique that the novel was misogynist was based upon the passages of violence that were leaked to the press. According to Murphet, however, the novel has to be read in the context of what Ellis is trying to portray (69). In my view, Ellis is portraying an utterly extreme character used to represent the social injustices and issues of consumerism and capitalism in American society.

The novel starts with the words “ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE” (3), a reference to Dante's *Inferno*. In *American Psycho*, New York is the inferno. As we progress further in the novel, we progress further into Patrick Bateman's hell. As Bateman's mental health deteriorates the reader is presented with increasingly grotesque and graphic acts of madness. The ending of the book in which Bateman reads a sign which says “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (384) suggests the idea that consumerism and capitalism will continue to inflict chaos upon the world, that the novel's ending does not constitute a change in Bateman; the ending is not an exit. New York, and mainly Wall Street, are still the epicenters of hell.

In *American Psycho*, Ellis constructs a world, the yuppie surroundings in which Bateman resides, which highlights the flaws in modern American society, one of the flaws being how women are oppressed. The main male characters speak in a manner that suggests they are chauvinistic and misogynist, simply referring to women as “hardbodies.” In the chapter entitled “Harry’s,” the men are discussing what constitutes a good personality in a woman, and Reeves says, “A good personality . . . consists of a chick who has a little hardbody and who will satisfy all sexual demands without being too slutty about things and who will essentially keep her dumb fucking mouth shut” (87-88). Timothy Price, one of the main characters, believes that women also simply desire male “hardbodies.” One’s appearance determines everything in the shallow yuppie-world, and the men are under the impression that the novel’s women share their sexual desires and mindset. When Timothy Price is asked what women want, he answers, “They want a hardbody who can take them to Le Cirque twice a week, get them into Nell’s on a regular basis. Or maybe a close personal acquaintance of Donald Trump” (52). The quotation suggests that Price believes that women are as shallow as himself, simply caring for material objects and social status.

The males represent a patriarchal society, where women on Wall Street are seen as commodities. In *Capital*, Karl Marx writes that “The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example from the stomach or the imagination, makes no difference” (125). By objectifying women and simply wanting them to satisfy a need, in this case a sexual need, the men reduce women to commodities.

Murphet writes that the issue of female rights lay not in the hands of *American Psycho* and Bret Easton Ellis, but that “the degradation of women surely occurs first and foremost at the frontline of the fashion industry and the patriarchal logic of a nation which refuses women equal pay and full rights over their own bodies” (69). Like Murphet, I believe that Ellis is in fact criticizing the capitalist society we live in, not endorsing it. This essay demonstrates how Ellis criticizes capitalism, however the concept of patriarchy is crucial to this essay as it degrades women. The systematic categorization of individuals throughout the novel is not solely done through class but also by gender, ethnicity and sexuality. There is a social hierarchy within the novel in which females, non-Caucasians and homosexuals rank low. Bateman’s acts of violence throughout the novel are a projection of class consciousness as he systematically attacks individuals below him on the social hierarchy. Ellis uses

Bateman's violence to portray the brutality of capitalism, the bourgeoisie exploitation of the working class. S. Ossowski writes in *Marxism: The Inner Dialogues* that: "Marx undoubtedly assumes that the necessary condition for the existence of all class divisions is the existence of an exploited class and that the dichotomic divisions of society into exploited and exploiters is the source of all class divisions" (252). The individuals being persecuted by Bateman are exploited through acts of violence as they rank lower on the social hierarchy. Marxism criticizes the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the working class and Bateman is a projection of class difference, Bateman is the exploitative class, inflicting his madness upon the members of society ranking lower than himself on the social hierarchy. . Marxism represents an economic and political worldview which opposes capitalism and class-differences and instead promotes socialism.

This essay incorporates traditional Marxist theory in order to highlight how Ellis criticizes consumerism and capitalism, however, other approaches have been chosen by critics who have analyzed the novel. Alex E. Blazer writes that, "Patrick Bateman is a product of postmodern popular culture (np). *American Psycho* features many characteristics of postmodern literature; an unreliable narrator, dark comedy, intertextuality and metafiction. Blazer "argues that Patrick Bateman constitutes the postmodern, pop cultural subject carried to its logical conclusion, its apocalyptic apotheosis" (np). Blazer suggests that the further we progress into the novel, the further we travel into the realm of postmodernism, that Bateman is an entity created for the purpose of investigating post-modernist writing. A postmodern approach emphasis the characteristics previously stated; an unreliable narrator, dark comedy and so on, and investigates the relation between Bateman and American culture. In *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson writes that "the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror" (5), which could suggest that Bateman's violence is a representation of the downside of culture. Although it is possible to examine *American Psycho* from a Postmodern perspective; a more traditional Marxist reading of the novel allows me to easily define the relationship between the characters in the novel, and the motives behind their actions using Marxist concepts such as: use-value, exchange-value, sign-exchange-value, class-consciousness and commodity fetishism. Also, while it is possible to examine the relationship between Bateman and society from a Postmodern perspective, a Marxist perspective allows for a deconstruction of Bateman's motives by investigating socioeconomic factors and the relationship between the bourgeois and the poor throughout the novel.

American Psycho has also been analyzed from a psychoanalytical perspective. Christopher

Schaffer writes that Bateman shows both signs of schizotypal disorder and borderline behavior disorder (2), and moreover suggests that Bateman's violence projects how he perceives the world through his ego (7). A psychoanalytical essay investigates the mind of Bateman, through theories of human behavior. Though a psychoanalytical reading can investigate the mind of Bateman, it focuses more on the absence of his father, masculinity and his ego, as if Bateman were a real person. However, I suggest that Bateman is simply a projection of American capitalist society, and thus should not be analyzed as a living person, but rather as a metaphor for American society.

The aim of this essay is to show how Ellis represents characters, their urban surroundings, their consumption patterns and their violence in order to highlight the issues society faces when endorsing consumerism and capitalism.

2. Patrick Bateman and the World of Wall Street

The story's narrator and protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is 26 years old. He is a Harvard-graduate and is the vice president of P&P, a Wall Street Company. Bateman's occupation and working environment reflect capitalism. Wall Street is the financial center of the world and the pinnacle of capitalism in the leading capitalist nation. Acquiring money is of paramount importance, and corporate takeovers which terminate the employment of thousands of people for a stock increase happen daily, though this is not specifically addressed in the novel. The downside of capitalism is portrayed through the homeless, who appear frequently throughout the novel, almost always followed by a derogatory remark from either Bateman or his friends. Bateman's lack of empathy for the less fortunate is highlighted by his frustration over them. Instead of feeling obligated to help, Bateman sees the homeless as an unwanted entity in his city. Bateman does not realize the socioeconomic advantage he was born into, a privilege few have. The American dream is the idea that any individual can rise to the financial top, regardless of the socioeconomic situation they were born into. It is an idea that invokes hope to many, but as the name suggests it is merely a dream. Everybody does not have the ability or chance to rise to the financial top, either because of biological reasons or socio-environmental reasons, such as growing up in a poor community. Wall Street is a reflection of American society, a microcosm of American society in which there is no solidarity.

Bateman lives a luxurious life and resides in an expensive apartment on the Upper West Side. On the surface, Bateman has it all: A career on Wall Street, wealth, a great physique and a beautiful girlfriend. However, Bateman has no identity, integrity, morals or values. He is a psychopath and Ellis's

choice of the name Patrick Bateman, is a reference to either Robert Bloch's novel *Psycho* or the novel's filmatization by Alfred Hitchcock, and its main villain Norman Bates, the iconic American psychopath.

Even though Bateman is the vice president of a major Wall Street company, there is not a single instance in the novel of him working. Instead, Bateman spends his time at the office doing nothing and asking his secretary Jean to cancel his appointments (62). Later in the novel, when Bateman is talking to a female acquaintance named Elizabeth, he asks her where she currently works, in which she replies: "I don't have to work, Bateman," and after a beat she adds, "You of all people should know how *that* feels" (272). Ellis creates irony in the fact that Bateman does nothing at work, yet feels superior to the homeless who lack an occupation. Bateman's financial freedom is based upon others working hard, to secure his income and allow him to attain a high salary whilst he does nothing at all.

Ellis represents Bateman as an empty shell without substance. The void which arises from a lack of personality is filled with empty discourse, long descriptions of his material possessions and vast knowledge of the fashion industry. Bateman admits his emptiness in a monologue he holds, late in the novel:

there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable:
I simply am not there (362)

Bateman recognizes his emptiness, yet feels no sorrow over his lack of humanity. His ability to mimic his environment keeps his secret from the outside world. Bateman attempts to disguise his lack of humanity by purchasing the accessories of an identity he wants to possess: rich, successful and good-looking.

Bateman lacks a true identity and is portrayed as a stereotypical yuppie: rich, successful and good looking. Tim Stenlund, author of the essay "Different Kind of Monsters," writes "[Bateman] is robotic, trying desperately to own the right items and wear the right clothes, so that he fits in with the rest of the dark, dystopian society that is on display in the novel" (7). Bateman has no real depth and is simply a blank canvas waiting to be filled by the outside world, "Life remained a blank canvas, a cliché, a soap opera. I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage" (268). Bateman

admits that his “mask of sanity” is about to slip, his whole identity being a facade. Bateman identifies his life as “a cliché, a soap opera” and in many ways, it is. Meaningless gossip, infidelity and actions of mayhem are his everyday life. Bateman is a cliché, as Ellis is using him to ridicule the wealthy yuppies working on Wall Street. Ellis mimics popular culture to create Bateman, a figure composed of pastiche, a common feature in post-modern literature. Though, Bateman can be perceived as a postmodern character created to mock the culture he resides in, I argue that Ellis uses Bateman to criticize American capitalist society by addressing core issues such as class-consistences and socioeconomic differences. Further, Bateman is also an expression of nothingness, an entity created for the purpose of portraying emptiness and shallowness.

Bateman's true passion throughout the novel lies with commodities. Bateman is obsessed with material items and describes in excruciating detail, for an entire chapter, the contents of his apartment. The listing of his personal items and the descriptions of them are similar to those of a sales catalog: “TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC...” (24). Bateman is unable to convey emotions and thus instead chooses a highly informative approach. While at dinner with Patricia at Bacardi, Bateman recommends a dish by saying “New York magazine called it a 'playful but mysterious little dish’” (75). Bateman is unable to express his own genuine opinion, as he has none, and instead resorts to magazines for guidance and quotations. His speech mirrors the fact that he has no authenticity, and simply mimics popular culture in order to appear normal.

In a late capitalist society consumption patterns confer an identity. Bateman's consumption gives him an identity, an abstract identity which functions on a surface level, but Bateman possesses no depth. Charles Jason Lee, author of the essay, “Wall Street Jekyll: Identity and Meaningless Pleasure in American Psycho(s),” writes that:

Bateman 'exists' in a world defined through a hierarchy of labels, which work as definitions of identity and status. They consume the consumer by their desirability, leaving nothing, the attempted satisfaction of pleasure leaving only absence and meaninglessness. (26)

Bateman simply does not exist in terms of personal identity, but his lust for status allows him to create an identity for himself. We rarely see Bateman using his commodities, however, implying that their only purpose is their sign-exchange value, the amount of status the commodity brings the owner. In

Critical Theory Today, Lois Tyson writes that sign-exchange value depends on “the social status it confers on its owner” (62). Hence, an item of large sign-exchange confers a high degree of social status, whilst an item of small sign-exchange value only confers a slight degree. Marx writes that:

Men do not[...]bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as value, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it. Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristics which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language (167).

Sign-exchange value does not naturally exist; it is a production of society, like language. Society creates sign-exchange value and capitalism encourages its citizens to purchase commodities of high sign-exchange value. Capitalism promotes consumerism; it is an economic necessity for a capitalist society that its population constantly consumes items or services. Production is linear with the demands of the population, referred to as supply and demand. Consumerism is the foundation of capitalism, the illusion that we never can have enough commodities and that we must continue to consume products and services. This illusion is fabricated by the bourgeoisie; the executives of a company whose financial income is a direct reflection of how much society consumes.

The following subsection will revolve around one of the negative effects of consumerism: homogeneity. In a society where everybody is trying to be a better version of each other, the members of the population ironically lose their individuality.

2.1 Homogeneity

The male characters’ striving for perfection and being the best has made them into similar versions of each other. Consumerism has molded them into copies of one another. Tyson writes that:

we believe that it is natural to want to “get ahead,” to want to own a better house and wear better clothes. The key word here is *better*, which refers not only to “better than I had before” but

also to “better than other people have.” That is, embedded within the belief in “getting ahead” is the belief in *competition* as a natural or necessary mode of being. (57)

The main characters in the novel are competing against each other for social status. However, the world they reside in is so focused on surface, that the only way to achieve social status is by being generic. Clothes have sign-exchange value, but only a certain type of clothes, that all resemble each other. There is no possibility of standing out and being perceived as high on the social hierarchy; instead the characters simply try to be better versions of each other. The most successful character in the eyes of Bateman is Paul Owen. Owen resembles Bateman and the rest of the main characters in many ways: he works at P&P, he is the same age as Bateman and he visits the same venues, but Owen is different. Owen handles the mythical Fisher-account. Murphet describes the Fisher-account as “the Holy Grail of investment-banking world all these men inhabit: presumably worth billions, and carrying with it arcane secrets and privileges, it is the secret of Patrick’s desire” (44). Owen is almost identical to any other yuppie, but his career success allows the other characters to perceive him as the pinnacle of success, even though he is only slightly different than themselves.

Bateman competes against his friends and colleagues about having the highest status through the act of consumerism, the irony being that Bateman and all the other characters are lost. In their struggle for individual superiority and being the best, they have sacrificed their individuality, becoming almost indistinguishable from each other. Charles Jason Lee writes that, “By attempting identity formation by the consumption of designer goods Bateman, along with everyone else, is consumed” (23). The loss of individuality is frequently addressed by the characters constantly confusing one person for another, as everybody looks similar due to consumption of designer goods. Even the male character's personalities are alike: greedy, shallow and chauvinistic. Modern day consumerism has de-individualized the main characters, and made them into copies of each other. In the following section I will explain the issues of consumerism and consumption in the novel from a Marxist perspective by applying the theories of use-value, exchange-value, sign-exchange value and commodity fetishism.

3. Consumerism and Commodities

Ellis portrays Bateman and the rest of the characters in the novel as obsessed with the act of consumerism. Bateman is constantly trying to gain higher status than his friends, by acquiring items of great sign-exchange value. In *Capital*, Marx writes about two types of value: use-value and exchange-

value. The usefulness of an item gives it a use-value (126). A pen without ink has no use-value, however were the ink to be refilled the pen would have a use-value: the ability to write. Marx describes exchange-value as “the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind” (126). Exchange-value is the equation of an item's worth in exchange for another item. If a pen is bought for (x) amount of money, and is kept in mint condition, it can later be traded for an item or several items which amount to the same exchange-value, (x) amount of money. Lastly, sign-exchange value is a form of exchange-value, it is the social status the commodity's owner attains from his commodity. If I were to purchase an expensive, name-brand pen I would be purchasing it for the social status it would confer to me, it's sign-exchange value.

At one point Bateman calls his secretary, after hearing that Timothy Price owns a tanning bed, instructing her to “keep your eyes open for a tanning bed” (63). Bateman could easily continue to acquire his tan at the tanning salon, it would be cheaper, yet it would not result in the same social value. The social status lies within what the possession of a tanning bed signifies: freedom. The luxury of not having to leave the house for a tan signifies great sign-exchange value, as a tanning bed is expensive and a rare commodity to possess. Bateman does not contemplate purchasing a tanning salon for its use-value but for its sign-exchange value, the social status it would transfer to Bateman. This is what Marx calls the fetishism of commodities, referred to as commodity fetishism in Marxist discourse:

The impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things (165).

A commodity has no objective exchange-value; exchange-value is an abstract term created by man to simplify trading. A commodity's exchange-value depends on how obtainable it is. Marx wrote that if carbon could easily be morphed into diamonds, the exchange-value of diamonds could fall below the exchange-value of bricks (130-131). A society's perspective on a certain material depends on how

obtainable it is and the amount there is available. An example is how oil prices have been heightened throughout the years, as oil is not an infinite resource on earth. The amount of a certain material that exists and its attainability determine its exchange-value.

By purchasing expensive items of great sign-exchange value, Bateman is purchasing social status. Bateman lives in a world where his commodities determine his social value. Bateman takes great interest in material objects, and describes products more vividly than social relations. His lack of identity has manifested into a desire to fit in by acquiring products of high sign-exchange value.

Bateman's relationships with women throughout the novel are based upon sign-exchange value and exchange-value. The beautiful women Bateman dates confer sign-exchange value to him, their appealing appearance functions as sign-exchange value as the women are desirable and wanted. In exchange, Bateman offers sign-exchange value in the form of reservations at expensive restaurants and exclusive venues. The relationship is simply an exchange of social status. However, when Bateman purchases sex from prostitutes the action is based on exchange-value. Bateman exchanges money for sex. Bateman's need to consume has manifested into purchasing human relationships, objectifying the women and reducing them into commodities.

Bateman rarely uses his other commodities and simply consumes possessions in order to gain social status. At one point in the novel, Bateman is confronted by a homeless man who repeats the words "Money please help mister money please help mister" (156) which Bateman says resembles a Buddhist chant. Bateman ridicules the beggar by advising him to get a job and contemplates killing him, as he finds him annoying. Only sentences later, Bateman describes the following: "[I] move on, stopping at a automated teller to take three hundred dollars out for no particular reason, all the bills crisp, freshly printed twenties, and I delicately place them in my gazelleskin wallet so as not to wrinkle them" (156). This scene works on juxtaposition and it is one of many such scenes throughout the novel. Ellis uses juxtaposition throughout the novel to create situational irony. After Bateman's killing spree, the next chapter usually plays out at an expensive lounge or restaurant where Bateman has long winded conversations with his friends about clothing and money. The structure of the novel is created in a way that highlights the contrast between Bateman and the poor people and/or minorities he resents.

Bateman feels no empathy for the homeless man, his only concern is his social status. By withdrawing the money, Bateman feels he gains status, as the freshly printed twenties convey sign-exchange value. Money is simply exchange-value in paper form; however, Bateman does not seem to withdraw money for its use (to act as exchange-value) instead, Bateman withdraws the money to

reinforce his belief that he is superior to others, as he is richer and of a higher social status.

When Bethany, an old girlfriend of Bateman's, accompanies Bateman back to his apartment, she notices his expensive David Onica painting. The painting has great sign-exchange value as it is an original from a famous painter and thus should display high social value. However, Bethany is not impressed and whilst giggling says, "You've hung the Onica *upside down*" (235). Bateman's failure to hang the painting correctly conveys to Bethany that he is not eligible to own a commodity of such great sign-exchange value. Seconds later, he attacks Bethany with a nail gun, enraged. The fact that Bethany ridiculed Bateman for failing to display his commodity properly was enough for him to kill her. In Bateman's world, value is everything, and if Bateman feels that his value or position on the social ladder is threatened, he will not hesitate to eliminate whoever he feels threatened by. Bateman tortures and murders Bethany for denying him the social status his expensive painting "should" have conferred to him.

As previously stated, Bateman buys and consumes in order to advance socially. An item's use-value serves little purpose in comparison with the status it confers on the owner and Bateman is not the only one throughout the novel to feel this way. In the beginning of the novel, Bateman has scheduled a date to eat dinner at a restaurant with Patricia, a girl with whom he is cheating on his girlfriend Evelyn. Patricia changes her mind at the last second and decides not to accompany Bateman to dinner. However, when Bateman says "Don't worry. I'll just go to Dorsia alone then. It's okay" (71), Patricia rapidly changes her mind and decides that she does want to meet Bateman. Dorsia is an exclusive restaurant and one has to make a reservation months in advance. Bateman has actually never successfully got a table at Dorsia without help; the only time he visits Dorsia in the novel is when his brother reserves a table (216). The single act of eating is not what attracts Patricia to meet Bateman, but it is Dorsia's sign-exchange value that increases Bateman's value, and thus attracts Patricia. Bateman even refers to Patricia as "Restaurant Whore" (72) showing disgust for Patricia's change of heart, even though he himself only desires to eat at Dorsia for the sign-exchange value the restaurant offers.

Bateman is greatly informed about the fashion industry and clothing etiquette and throughout the novel Bateman's friends turn to him for advice with clothing. Bateman also describes the clothing his friends wear, in excruciating detail:

He's wearing a linen suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Ike Behar, a silk tie by Bill Blass and cap-toed leather lace-ups from Brooks Brothers. I'm wearing a lightweight linen suit with

pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds (29).

I choose to end Bateman's observation midway, as he continues to explain what his party is wearing for another eight lines. Bateman and the rest of the characters repeatedly mistake people for other people, but Bateman is never unsure of what someone is wearing. In Wall Street's shallow world, people get forgotten but labels are remembered. In an interview published online, Ellis answers a question regarding how he knows so much about designer clothing:

Also, what a lot of people don't realize, and what I had a lot of fun with, is that if you really saw the outfits Patrick Bateman describes, they'd look totally ridiculous. He would describe a certain kind of vest with a pair of pants and certain kind of shirt, and you think, *He really must know so much*, but if you actually saw people dressed like this, they would look like clowns. It was a subtle joke. If you read it on a surface level and know nothing about clothes, you read *American Psycho* and think, *My God, we're in some sort of princely kingdom where everyone just walked out of GQ*. No. They look like fools. They look like court jesters, most of them (Dave Weich.)

Ellis explains how he uses irony to ridicule and mock the yuppies in the novel. By explaining how bizarre the characters must look, one can grasp how pretentious they really are. Bateman lives in a bubble in which irregular and court-jester like clothing are a part of his normal day. The humor lies in the fact that the pretentious main characters dress like fools. Bateman's clothing allows him to gain social status in his social group, but the amount of sign-exchange value Bateman's clothes confer to him is relative to the social group he is present within. In his social group, there is a clothing codex that one is assumed to follow: horn rimmed glasses, suits and slicked back hair. However, while at an underground night club a girl screams at him "Go back to Wall Street[...]Fucking yuppie" (190) because of the way he is dressed. The social status a commodity converts to its owner, in this case Bateman and his clothes, is subject to the environment it is present within. The night club follows a different clothing codex and therefore Bateman receives no sign-exchange value from his clothing and appearance. Thus, Bateman's commodities of high sign-exchange value are purchased in the interest of acquiring social status from other yuppies, in a Wall Street environment. Bateman's class determines his taste in clothes, it is a reflection of the environment he resides in. The other guests at the night club

belong to a different class, and thus their taste is different, as it also reflects the environment they reside in. The socioeconomic situation one is born into and the environment one grows up in, rich or poor, determines how one perceives the sign-exchange value a commodity confers on its owner, however, expensive items signify that one belongs to an economic class which can afford the item in question. The unfair distribution of wealth allows for only the bourgeoisie to afford certain items of high sign-exchange value.

Bateman has an exceptionally large quantity of commodities in his living room, none of which are used with high frequency, except his television. One could assume that Bateman does not need all his belongings, and that some of them are merely bought to still his craving for consumption. Jameson writes that, “We must therefore also posit another type of consumption: consumption of the very process of consumption itself, above and beyond its content” (276). Bateman represents a society addicted to the act of consumerism.

Bateman's constant need for status has altered his way of perceiving items and services. At a dinner party, Bateman explains that Stash, a guest at the dinner party, has an “admittedly cheap, bad haircut. A haircut that's bad because it's cheap” (20). Bateman perceives items or appearance only through its cost, its social value. An item or service that is expensive is good as it has high sign-exchange value. The more expensive an item or service is, the lesser the chance that someone can afford it and hence the more desirable it becomes.

In conclusion, Bateman purchases commodities for their sign-exchange value in order to convey high social status within his social group. Bateman's lack of identity is the basis for his commodity fetishism in which he purchases products of high sign-exchange value to create an identity for himself. He consumes the commodities for their sign-exchange value, but items are not the only thing Bateman consumes. In the following section I will discuss Bateman's need to consume humans through acts of violence, even consuming them by cannibalizing them.

4. The Violence of Consumption

As the narrative progresses, Bateman's traits of insanity grow more vivid and are portrayed in a larger extent. In the chapter entitled “Chase, Manhattan”, Bateman allegedly goes on a rampage killing several people. Later on, while hiding in a building Bateman describes how “a SWAT team leaps out of the helicopter, a half dozen armed men disappear into the entrance on the deck of the roof, flares are lined up what seems like everywhere” (338). However, throughout the rest of the novel, nobody

mentions the occurrence of a murder rampage in central New York, followed by a helicopter chase. The fact that nobody mentions the event suggests the murders in the chapter do not occur.

At the end of the novel, Bateman returns to Paul Owen's apartment. Roughly six months have passed since Bateman last was there, with two escort girls who he killed. While at the apartment, Bateman is met by a real-estate agent named Mrs. Wolfe. She asks Bateman if she can help him to which he replies "I'm looking for ... Doesn't Paul Owen live here?" (354). She answers no, but when Bateman continues to question something happens. "She realizes something that causes the muscles in her face to tighten. Her eyes narrow but don't close" (355). Bateman continues his questioning until Mrs. Wolfe says "Don't make any trouble" (355) and asks Bateman to leave the apartment and follows up by saying "Don't come back" (356), an order Bateman follows. Did the murders occur? If they did, the next question is: did Mrs. Wolfe hide the evidence in hope that the apartment would not lose any value? As many real-estate agents work for commission, the higher the price of the estate, the more it would benefit Mrs. Wolfe financially. It leaves the reader to imagine what actually happened. Lee writes that Bateman could be perceived as an unreliable narrator (23). Whether or not Bateman is an unreliable narrator, and whether or not the murders occurred, the underlying principles of Marxist analysis may still be applied to Bateman even if the novel is only a representation of his darkest fantasies. Even if Bateman never actually murdered anybody, his fantasies are still projections of misogyny, racism and class-hatred.

Bateman almost exclusively murders people who are lower than himself on the social hierarchy either because of economic status, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Murphet writes that Bateman has "a general class violence towards everything that is not white, male and upper-middle class" (43). In a society where people low on the social hierarchy are oppressed, Bateman is the projection of society's cruelty. Bateman murders his victims differently depending on their gender. Men are stabbed to death and die within seconds of being attacked whilst the women are tortured and sexually violated. Bateman is highly chauvinistic and misogynist throughout the novel and his actions of violence and torture upon women reflect this. Bateman is a projection of a patriarchal society which favors men, his abuse toward women is a reflection, however extreme, of how women are exploited in society.

The number of murders preceding the chapter "Chase, Manhattan" are eleven, following in chronological order: a homeless black man, a homosexual man, an Asian delivery boy, Paul Owen, his ex-girlfriend Bethany, a model named Elizabeth, a prostitute named Christie, a child at the zoo, two prostitutes named Tori and Tiffany, and two other unnamed women.

Bateman's first act of violence in the novel is aimed towards a racial minority. While Bateman is walking home at night, he is confronted by a homeless black man with a dog, who begs Bateman for money. At first Bateman seems to care about Al, the homeless man who lost his job, and offers him advice: "You've got a negative attitude. That's what's stopping you. You've got to get your act together. I'll help you" (125). Bateman does not account for the unfair distribution of wealth in America, as his life revolves around Wall Street. Because Bateman is born into a different class and lives a luxurious lifestyle; he fails to perceive money as something hard to acquire. From Bateman's perspective, Al is simply not trying hard enough, and Bateman believes killing him is therefore justified. Bateman takes no consideration to the fact that he was born into a different socioeconomic class than Al and thus had an advantage in life. Finally Bateman says "Al ... I'm sorry. It's just ... I don't know. I don't have anything in common with you" (126). Shortly after this denial of a common humanity, Bateman stabs Al and stomps on his dog. Ellis portrays the issues of the American dream through the mindset of Bateman. Tyson describes the American dream as "the discourse of the self-made man, which held that any poor boy in America, if he had the right personal qualities, could rise to the top of the financial world" (300). Bateman's obliviousness projects the flaws in the American dream; everybody does not have the starting means needed to advance to the social top.

Furthermore, the two other men Bateman kills before murdering Paul Owen are members of minority groups. The first murder is a homosexual man and the second a delivery boy of Asian descent. Murphet writes that the cause of the murders is "the precise mixture of envy and hate which determines Patrick's class consciousness as a yuppie" (42). Bateman displays both envy and hate when murdering the homosexual man. He shows envy for the expensive sharpei-dog but he resents the man's sexual orientation (42). The murder is a projection of Bateman's class hatred; the man's sexual orientation ranks him lower on the social hierarchy and thus Bateman's class hatred is manifested as a murder.

An Asian delivery boy is murdered after Bateman has met Charles Murphy, a friend who explains that the Japanese have just bought the Empire State Building and Nell's (173). Moments after the discussion, Bateman leaves the table and finds himself crouching in the doorway of what used to be an old Japanese restaurant. A delivery boy of Asian descent passes by and Bateman instantly slits his throat only to discover, by examining the food he was transporting, that the boy was Chinese. This irritates Bateman who complains about "accidentally killing the wrong type of Asian" (173). Bateman feels resentment toward the Japanese for purchasing Nell's, a venue he frequently visits, and the Empire State Building, a building which represents America. Murphet writes that "In this regard, the

boy's murder is an enactment of the racist fear and envy contained in that exasperation; with the stupidly comic denouement that Bateman of course can't tell a Japanese from a Chinese" (43). Bateman's killing is a result of envy. If America is no longer the pinnacle of capitalism, Bateman loses his position as high on the social hierarchy in a global sense. The Japanese global capitalist advancement undermines Bateman, as America is being sold out. The murder is justified by Bateman as he believes the boy to be Japanese; however when he notices that he killed "the wrong type of Asian" he feels disappointed, as he has done nothing to stop the Japanese advancement. The killing of a Japanese boy will hardly stop the Japanese industrialization; the murder symbolizes how Bateman generalizes about minorities and fails to see their individuality.

Bateman's hate is misplaced. Tyson writes about misplaced class-hatred, as people with economic stability tend to hate the poor, as a large part of their tax-money goes to government programs to help the poor (57). However, they fail to see the socioeconomic reality: that it is the wealthy in positions of political power that decide who pays the most taxes and how they should be spent (57). Bateman neglects the fact that poor people do not have political power; instead Bateman punishes the poor. With AI, Bateman fails to understand the socioeconomic situation he is within. A homeless person is at a great disadvantage to secure an occupation against other home owning applicants. A person tends to stay within the class he or she is born into, and even with dedication only a few of many can advance further. All the previous murders can be perceived as class-hatred, as Bateman targets minorities that rank low on the social hierarchy.

Bateman fails to attack the root of society's issues; instead he attacks the victims of society. The boy had nothing to do with the Japanese economic advancement; he was not even Japanese. The murder portrays Bateman's thought process, that Bateman generalizes minorities and fails to see individuality. Instead his victims are simply part of a problem that Bateman believes he is solving.

Clearly, Bateman has a chaotic urge to inflict pain upon others which he explains late in the novel:

All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference towards it, I have now surpassed. I still, though, hold on to a single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless. Each model of human behavior must be assumed to have some validity. Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do? My pain is constant and I do not hope for a better world for

anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape (362)

Bateman lacks control over himself and allows his emotions, the few he can feel, to guide him through his insanity. He is rich and successful, yet feels empty. Bateman feels pain which he wants to inflict upon other, less fortunate members of society. Bateman attacks children, women, people of different ethnic minorities, and even animals in his attempt to inflict his misery upon others, by ending their lives. Bateman confesses his inability to ignore his needs when he breaks up with Evelyn: “My ... need to engage in ... homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected[...]But I have no other way to express my blocked needs” (325). However, Evelyn ignores or does not hear Bateman's confession and keeps up the dialogue, without reference to his statement. Bateman's acts of menace are impulsive and are primarily inflicted upon people of a lower social class, different gender or ethnicity – minorities. Bateman kills several people, yet only one successful businessman, Paul Owen. Owen is a colleague of Bateman who also worked at P&P and is the same age. Owen constantly mistakes Bateman for a person called Marcus Halberstam, who also works at P&P and resembles Bateman. The basis of Owens success lies in him handling the Fisher-account. Bateman is obsessed with Owen, constantly asking his friend if Paul Owen is still handling the Fisher account (140). Not even at a U2-concert in which Bono, the lead singer, kneels before Bateman and sings in front of him does Bateman forget about the Fisher account: “now more then ever I need to know about the Fisher account that Owen is handling and this information seems more vital, more pertinent than the bond I feel I have with Bono (141). The irony is that Bono is dedicated to helping the less fortunate through charity, whilst Bateman exploits and murders the less fortunate.

Paul Owen is the only adult white male to be a victim of Bateman's crimes, with the exception of his random killing spree in the chapter entitled “Chase, Manhattan.” The jealousy Bateman felt for Owen was affecting his personal life and needed to be corrected. In order for Bateman to advance in the world, he had to consume Paul Owen. By wiping out the competition, those of greater status than himself, Bateman furthers his social status. If there are fewer people in the world of higher status than Bateman himself, the higher he ranks on the social hierarchy. The Fisher account's sign-exchange value heightened Paul Owen's social status so high that Bateman felt he had to kill him.

Bateman has a need to kill, an urge that builds up inside of him, that can only be partially quenched by acts of violence upon others. Bateman uses his victims to satisfy his needs, he consumes them in order to function and continue his life. In the chapter “Tries To Cook And Eat Girl,” Bateman

actually consumes parts of a human body (331). The body is dismembered and Bateman is allowed to investigate the inside of a human in a literal way. Ellis is using Bateman as a metaphor to signify the issues of consumerism. With the constant need to consume more; how far will people go to satisfy their needs? Bateman is a reflection of a society that has no boundaries, in which one consumes whatever one desires.

Bateman's constant need to inflict violence upon others seems unwanted, and that he actually tries to suppress his madness, even though he admits his need to inflict chaos upon the world (362). One night, when Bateman is accompanied by a female guest back to his home, he begins to slip "I think I might ... hurt you,' I tell her.' I don't think I can control myself' (205). Daisy, the girl in question, is under the impression that Bateman is speaking about getting too involved romantically and thus answers "I don't want to get involved anyway" (205). At which Bateman answers "I think something bad is about to happen[....]I think I'm losing it" (205). Bateman actually suppresses his madness and allows Daisy to live. However, she was not provocative and most of Bateman's acts of violence play out whilst Bateman is frustrated.

In conclusion, Bateman's need to consume has gone to the point at which he starts to consume humans, by the act of killing, raping or eating them, to satisfy his needs. Nothing is off-limits and quenching his needs is of the greatest importance. Bateman acknowledges people by their sign-exchange value and is constantly trying to uphold his status and achieve greater social status. The most important thing in Bateman's life is his appearance, both physically and through value.

5. American Dream/American Nightmare

Patrick Bateman's acts of violence are a projection of the society he resides within. Capitalism is an economic system which benefits the wealthy and promotes social barriers, and Bateman is the brutal downside of capitalism. Lee writes that "Bateman is American society" (22). His violence is inflicted upon those which he deems to be of a lower social class, either because of their income, race, gender or sexuality. The only white, rich male Bateman murders his colleague Paul Owen, whom Bateman considers to be a threat to his social status. Because Paul Owen is handling the Fisher-account, he has a higher social status than Bateman. In order for Bateman to continue to uphold his high social status, he murders Paul Owen.

Bateman's bloodlust increases throughout the novel and his acts of violence and torture become more and more frequent and vividly explained. His mind is slipping, and so is his mask of sanity. As

previously noted, Stenlund writes that “[Bateman] is robotic, trying desperately to own the right items and wear the right clothes, so that he fits in with the rest of the dark, dystopian society that is on display in the novel” (7). He is the stereotypical yuppie, and in a world where surface is everything, the fact that Bateman has no substance matters little. As Bateman said, “...there is an idea of Patrick Bateman[...]but there is no real me” (362). Patrick Bateman is simply an abstract construction of a person’s identity based on commodities and consumerism in a brutal capitalist society epitomized as Wall Street. Ellis’s characterization and use of commodity discourse and violence exposes the grim nature of Bateman and American capitalism.

Ellis uses irony throughout the novel, at Bateman and his friends’ expense, to expose how extreme their values are. In the first page of the novel, Timothy Price says, “I mean am I alone in thinking we're not making enough money” (1). Soon after, Price shows resentment as his eyes lock onto a beggar on the street corner whilst he says, “That's the twenty-fourth I've seen today, I've kept count.” (2). The contrast is clear: in the comfort of his cab, Price shows no signs of empathy or desire to help the poor: instead he is simply interested in his own net-worth. Bateman does not object; instead he promotes Price behavior (7). Price also whistles “If I Were a Rich Man” (7) whilst strolling down the street with Bateman, which creates situational irony.

Furthermore, the clothing the characters wear is a subtle joke implemented by Ellis for the reader to understand how truly ridiculous the main characters are. Ellis says that they are dressed as “court jesters”. In a world where social value in the form of sign-exchange value is everything, and the irony is that the clothes in question which hold such high value, are foolish and look funny in the eyes of the average citizen.

Ultimately, Bateman's acts of violence upon the less fortunate are a representation of the brutal society he lives in. In a rich man’s world where acquiring money, commodities, status and quenching one's desires is everything, the social underclass must pay the price. Bateman consumes his victims, as he consumes his commodities, in an attempt to quench his thirst for menace and chaos. Bateman is a cliché, an ironic character created by Ellis to portray the problems with a society focused completely on consumerism and social status, in which the ego is centered and solidarity forgotten. Ellis uses irony throughout the novel to portray the social injustices that capitalism creates in the city, whilst simultaneously ridiculing Bateman and his yuppie-friends, in order to show the violent and dehumanizing side of capitalism and consumerism.

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