Bradley Clark

Sue Muecke

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American Psyche: A Rhetorical Analysis of American Psycho

“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." (American Psycho) In this soliloquy, Patrick Bateman effectively summarizes *who* he is by declaring *what* he is not – normal. The mind of a psychopath is woven in mystery, but it is this mind that Mary Herron attempts to penetrate in her cinema interpretation of the novel, *American Psycho,* originally written by Bret Easton Ellis. After striving without reprieve for perfection in both the business world and in regards to his physique, Bateman plays out fanciful acts of brutality and is confronted with the grueling realization of his true nature which ultimately fails to cure his lust for fulfillment – allowing the director to argue through striking imagery, scene choice, and through Patrick Bateman himself that both human perfection and true fulfillment are unattainable

Patrick Bateman is a psychopathic vice-president for a banking firm on Wall Street who is ridden with an insatiable bloodlust for young, attractive women. He spends his days hard at work before transitioning to a night life full of clubs, fine dining, and prostitutes. One moment that is highlighted in detail which serves to give great insight into the mind of Bateman is his morning routine. “I believe in taking care of myself and a balanced diet and rigorous exercise routine. In the morning if my face is a little puffy I'll put on an ice pack while doing stomach crunches. I can do 1000 now. After I remove the ice pack I use a deep pore cleanser lotion. In the shower I use a water activated gel cleanser, then a honey almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub. Then I apply an herb-mint facial mask which I leave on for 10 minutes while I prepare the rest of my routine. I always use an after shave lotion with little or no alcohol, because alcohol dries your face out and makes you look older. Then moisturizer, then an anti-aging eye balm followed by a final moisturizing protective lotion.” (American Psycho) From this, it is made apparent that Bateman strives for physical perfection, and is willing to go to absurd extremes to accomplish that. What seems to elude him, however, is the fact that perfection is unattainable and that human beings are inherently flawed. This, however, is merely the surface level of who Patrick Bateman is. Within him lies a psychopathic mind so twisted and deformed that no fantasy is left unexplored.

Patrick Bateman leads a double life. While at a night club, Bateman says to the bartender: “You’re a fucking ugly bitch. I want to stab you to death, and then play around with your blood.” (American Psycho) This is only one of several encounters with prostitutes, hated co-workers, and result in grotesque murders, cementing the idea of who Patrick Bateman is into the mind of the viewer. Ultimately, Bateman reveals that the entirety of his killing spree and frequent verbal assaults are nothing more than a confession of his darkest desires in his closing soliloquy: “There are no more barriers to cross. 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 toward it I have now surpassed. My pain is constant and sharp 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, but even after admitting this there is no catharsis, my punishment continues to elude me and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself; no new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant nothing.” (American Psycho) Though he is able to see the ripple effects of his actions, he has found no emotional release from this knowledge, so he has decided to commit them nonetheless – rendering his confession useless.

Bateman is a relatable character, contrary to what he states in the film: “I have all the characteristics of a human being: blood, flesh, skin, hair; but not a single clear, identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust.” (American Psycho) Humans have and relate to human emotion, and, though he states that he lacks those emotions, he is struggling to find his identity. While it may not be a struggle with the same issues, the struggle, in-and-of-itself, is very relatable. Everyone has boundaries that must be set, and Bateman is the personification of one who removed these boundaries altogether.

The choice of what scenes to include in the film and in what order played a huge role in the execution of the movie. Herron’s choice to leave many scenes where weapons physically penetrate the bodies of Bateman’s victims out and simply showing the before and after was a very smart tactic on her part. This allows the viewer to use their imagination as to what the attack looked like, and these are often more violent and effective than anything that could be portrayed in a film.

Because of the choice of medium – a movie, verses any other – I find the arguments of the director very strong and effective. Bateman was a psychopath, and, without a conscience to stop him from his actions, as well as having those actions woven into who he was, I think there is little room for Bateman to do anything but fulfill his desires. Having the chosen medium for conveying this message a film, the viewer is able to see what Bateman sees, and, to an extent, live what Bateman lives. We are able to understand the mind of Bateman, as well as his struggles, much better than we would have should the director have chosen to write a graphic novel or have this as a stage play. It is through the medium of a film that the striking imagery across the film is able to be fully grasped.

Within the first few minutes of the film, the viewer is taken on a tour of Bateman’s residence. The first aspect of his house that is noticed is the fact that most of his furniture is white, with the rest being black. This theme of black and white resounds throughout the movie, ranging from Bateman’s attire to his office. The clarity and contrast presented by the two colors may be something he strives for, due to the lack of definition he has within himself.

*American Psycho* was a disturbing tale of a psychopathic man living a fanciful life with an insatiable bloodlust for young, attractive women. He is a man seeking perfection, but a perfection that is unattainable. Everyone is flawed, but Bateman cannot seem to grasp that realization. Throughout the movie, Bateman tries to keep his life as a woman killer a secret, and even tries to suppress the urges to kill the women altogether. What he soon realizes is that, in the end, he failed to suppress his lust for fulfillment. After reaching a state of ultimate perfection and accomplishment – after caring for all of his worldly needs – Bateman was left with one yearning that was much worse. He was left with a hunger that could not be fed and a thirst that could not be quenched. Not a thirst for blood, but a thirst for purpose and meaning. With nothing left for him, and abandoned by the ideals of which he had achieved, Bateman sought the opposite extreme in a desperate attempt to achieve fulfillment. In the end, through her use of striking imagery, scene choice, and the personification of Patrick Bateman himself; Mary Herron is able to successfully argue that human perfection and true fulfillment are impossible.

Works Cited

*American Psycho.* Dir. Mary Herron. Perf. Christian Bale, Justin Theroux, Reese Witherspoon. Lions Gate Films, 2000. Film