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Eng 1020

27 September 2010

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." (Harron) This quote by Patrick Bateman effectively summarizes who he truly is. Within the first eight minutes of *American Psycho*, the viewer is able to have clearly established who the main character is. A mentality cannot be masked by a suit jacket.

There were several main points within the movie itself that resonated throughout. The two most prominent, however, were the idea of perfection and how everyone is flawed. Patrick Bateman, the main character of the movie, is a vice-president of a banking company on Wall Street. He lives the life of glam and glitz, juggling his time outside of work between clubs, fine dining, and prostitutes. One moment that is highlighted, in detail, is Bateman’s morning routine. He uses, in all, over twenty creams, lotions, and exfoliating scrubs; as well as an intense physical routine. Both of those come fall back to both of the main points within the movie. While the idea of perfection and the fact that everyone is flawed do seemingly go hand-in-hand, there are some differences between the two, and Bateman’s morning routine touches on those differences. His goal is to attain physical perfection through whatever means necessary. What seems to elude him, however, is the fact that perfection is unattainable and that human beings are inherently flawed. It was through his mental state of mind that he was unable to comprehend that fact, and it was that same state of mind that led him down the path of brutally killing women.

Bateman obsessed with killing women. He had an insatiable bloodlust that only grew stronger as his victim count increased. This is where the title of the movie begins to make sense. Patrick Bateman was a psychopath in all sense of the word. He had no conscience whatsoever. As quoted from Bateman, “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.” (Harron) While, on the surface, this does lead one to simply throw Bateman into the “vermin of society” category, when one looks deeper, an interesting discussion about human nature begins to develop.

Can Patrick Bateman really be blamed for killing those women? This is really what the writer was trying to ask those watching the film. It would understandable to blame Bateman for killing the women if it was out of anger or rage, but this is a different case entirely. The desire to kill these women was engrained into the fiber of his being. Just as humans breathe and the sun rises, Bateman kills women. Not only was this desire interlaced with who he was, his conscience, which typically serves as a road block to fulfilling those desires, was absent – as is within the definition of a psychopath. This leads to the argument which asks if he can really receive the full force of the blame for his actions, when the urges he had were part of who he was, and he had no conscience.

There are some moments within the movie that do appeal to the emotions of the viewer, amidst all the violence and sex scenes. At roughly 1 hour and 22 minutes into the movie, Bateman calls his lawyer and explains all the people that he killed. He is not simply telling who he killed, but is barely managing to get the words out and is crying the entire time. His maniacal persona does lash out occasionally during his confession to his lawyer, and the entire conversation just goes to further show how he is truly a psychopath. Once the movie has ended and the credits begin to roll, the viewer is left to contemplate how strong, or the lack of strength thereof, the arguments of the movie were.

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.

The arrangement of the work was perfect. It was a linear storyline which first introduced the main character along with three of his co-workers before going into detail on the main character himself, but soon after exposed the co-workers, friends, acquaintances, and love interests of Bateman in detail, too. The movie seemed to be segmented into a few key portions. The first of those was the introduction of Bateman through his daily routine. This gave great insight as to who he was as a person and his priorities on life. The next key portion, which further reinforced who Bateman was, was what Bateman noticed about people who he met first. While it is hard to say that this was a segment, for it seemed to resound throughout the entire movie, it was a very prominent method of seeing who Bateman was, too. Rather that noticing the person’s name and understanding who they were as a person by what they said, he would judge them by what they were wearing, and, above all else, what their business card looked like. He obsessed over people’s attire, wealth, and status to the point where they totally overrode who the person was and what they said.

The movie seems to come full circle when the word “psyche” is introduced to the conversation, for it is from within the mind of Patrick Bateman that all the ideas of the movie seem to stem. While he states in his opening soliloquy that “…there is no real me: only an entity – something illusory” (Bateman), I believe there is something there. He believes he has merely flesh, but I also see a mind. While his mind may be heavily distorted due to unknown circumstances, there is a mind there. He may not have a conscience, which is apparent through his actions, but he does stay consistent in both his mannerisms and life.

The movie, *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, a suit jacket cannot mask a mentality. He is under the impression that if he lives the “perfect” life, he can mask the fact that he kills women. This, however, is not true. An ongoing question to the viewer throughout the movie is whether or not Patrick should be blamed for his action. When all was said and done, I do not believe there is a clear-cut answer to that question, and I also feel that speculation as to the answer of the question will go on for many years to come.