Consumerism and Madness in Mary Harron's American Psycho

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Abstract:
Situated in a different watershed era, in the booming 1980s, the film *American Psycho* focuses on the negative effects of consumerism in the milieu of the so-called "yuppies". This article traces the debilitating pressure to conform, and the resulting superficiality that drive the protagonist of the movie to murder. Here, the focus lies on the male psyche, as "engaging in commodified recreational activities started to lose its stigma as being a women's domain", and men began to be specifically targeted as consumers in the second half of the 19th century.

1 Every day in our lives we are surrounded by objects that we have acquired. These objects can represent a memory, a tie to one's identity, or a symbol of someone's social status. But what happens in a culture where the surplus of goods leads to excessive consumption and commodification not only of objects, but of people as well? Consumerism has become a point of concern for many in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Miles 9). And at the beginning of the new millennium, its effects are more present than ever.

2 The media are overflowed with images of the next 'it'-thing: be it a new bag, a new gadget, or a new hip location. The medial portrayal of modern consumerism ranges from light and comedic, such as The Shopaholic novels by Sophie Kinsella or the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) to the rather dystopian view of Western consumerism that one can find in the films *Fight Club* (1999) or *American Psycho* (2000).

3 Mary Harron's film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's novel, which was written in the context of a growing concern about the 1980s consumer culture, depicts this darker side of consumerism and the inner emptiness and isolation to which it leads its characters. For many people consumerism has been the only societal practice that they have ever experienced, hence, it is difficult to separate oneself from it without looking into its origins and examining the phenomenon in its entirety.

4 The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine the evolution and the establishment of the present-day consumer culture. I would like to give a critical analysis of the impact of the media in creating and promoting consumer culture and the influence it exercises on consumers through the medium of advertising, particularly, on male consumers since the protagonist of Harron's film is male and a member of a men-only clique. Specifically, I would like to focus on media's negative impact on the consumer psyche because Easton's novel was created during the heyday of the Wall Street yuppie culture and the rise of a new kind of narcissist.

The Evolution of Consumer Culture: from town fairs to globalized dream consumption

5 In order to proceed with the topic, it is necessary to point out that there are different approaches to the term ‘consumption’ among theorists. According to Douglas J. Goodman and Mireille Cohen, it is “the set of practices through which commodities become a part of a particular individual” (Goodman & Cohen 2). These theorists, therefore, emphasize the connections between people and the goods they consume which means that even mass-produced commodities, once acquired, become instantly individualized. This, certainly, corresponds with the model of ‘traditional consumption’.

6 ‘Traditional consumption’ refers to the period when consumed goods were either produced within a family or, at least, locally. Hence, there was a personal connection to the consumed goods. The closest equivalent to modern-day shopping were weekly markets or bigger seasonal fairs which were “virtually international markets” (5), however, with several great differences: most goods were not displayed and the main practice was bargaining, not browsing (5).

7 In contrast to the above-mentioned definition, Mark Swiencicki defines “’consumption,’ ‘consume’ and ‘consuming’ as the mere use of manufactured goods or services, whereas a ‘consumer’ is one who acquires such goods or services by exchanging money” (Swiencicki 774). He does not stress any connection that is established between a consumer and the acquired goods, focusing more on the monetary exchange and the utility of such goods: a definition that corresponds to the modern state of consumerism.

The origins of modern consumption and its establishment

8 The exact transition period from traditional consumption to consumer culture is difficult to pinpoint. Most theorists and historians agree that the change occurred after the Industrial Revolution (Stearns 44). There are, however, those who argue that this development took place “anywhere between the sixteenth century and the 1980s” (Miles 6). Whether the origins of consumerism are to be found at 17th century French fairs or English markets in the 18th century, it is indisputable, among scholars, that any phenomenon similar to consumer culture was not present in the Western world before the 19th century (Goodman & Cohen 6).

9 Such development is linked to the rise of a ‘mass society’ where the population is concentrated in urban centers, rather than in isolated locations. This transition from a rural to an urban environment was accompanied by loosening of the communal ties and the shift from a collective to an individual self (Cushman 600). Evidence exhibits a “radically different way

of life in terms of social structures, social values and attitudes, [...] a society built upon the thirst for novelty" (Miles 6ff).

10 The increase in population fueled the increase in demand for production which, in turn, had to be matched by changes of supply in an expanding marketplace. The growth of working class purchasing power, thanks to the industrial employment, played a crucial role in the emergence of the new consumer society (Swienicki 786). The increase in consumption accelerated while the gap between producers and consumers widened. First, standardized goods became available at low cost and then "gradually, luxurious consumer goods became everyday items" (Miles 6ff). According to Ralph F. Bogardus: "Youth had already bought into modern taste by 1926, so consumer culture was in place" (513) and Peter Stearns confirms: "The symptoms accelerated fairly steadily into the 1920s, when much of the characteristic contemporary apparatus of consumerism was either fully established or, at least, clearly sketched" (Stearns 45).

11 After the Second World War, "consumerism appeared to be emerging as a way of life on an uprecedented global scale" (Miles 8). In many post-war countries, consumption was a way in which a society could display that it could restore itself after a difficult time. Especially in the US, people felt the need to indulge rather than to save money (Cushman 600). Consumption was easy, efficient, and, often, pleasant (Goodman & Cohen 22ff). Not only a consumer society, but a consumer "culture" was emerging: thanks to the rise of advertising, the visual world of commodities was accessible to the working majority.

12 Consumerism had had the ability to transcend social classes, it had been significant not only on the economic and social, but on the cultural level as well (Stearns 53, Reisch 228f). This progress was greatly facilitated by the evolution of mass media, particularly, in the way the advertising industry, a "major ideological tool" (Jhally 78) of the marketplace, was using the means of mass media in order to reach closer to consumers via magazines, radio, and, later, television and the World Wide Web.

The development of advertising: selling of desire in an image-based society

13 At the end of the 19th century, advertising was changing greatly as society was shifting from traditional consumption to consumer culture. New printing techniques were introduced to create visually more appealing advertisements to elicit a more emotional rather than a reasoned response, to induce feeling rather than thinking (Jhally 84). By the turn of the century "'an image industry' [as Jackson Lears calls it] had emerged [...], and advertising was the 'quintessential institution' in its development" (qt. in Bogardus 511).

14 Visual advertisements were placed on posters, in newspapers and, of course, in magazines. The evolution of media eventually allowed to include radio into the spectrum and to reach consumers directly in their homes (Stearns 46, Bogardus 514). Sut Jhally takes the implementation of the new media into advertising strategies even further: "The [...] integration of first radio and then television into the advertising/media complex ensured that commercial communication would be characterized by the domination of imagistic models of representation" (Jhally 78).

15 Due to the growth of the manufacturing industry and the introduction of new leisure goods, such as sports equipment or uniform, the advertising industry needed to find a way to persuade consumers to buy products that were outside of the scope of their basic necessities, particularly in the post-war period. The intention was to shift buyers' objectives, to identify what people wanted as opposed to what was necessary, to single out their longings. Once identified, they could be substituted and satisfied through commodities and consumption of countless objects (Bogardus 518). Advertising assumed a kind of therapeutic role by providing an illusory cure (Cushman 605). By using fantasies and unfulfilled desires, advertisements were able to create emotional involvement in commerce (Michael 119, 139). The commodities, as depicted in advertisements, played multiple psychological and social roles in relations to people. Sut Jhally describes these relations in the following way:

> The object world interacts with the human world at the most basic and fundamental of levels, performing seemingly magical feats of enchantment and transformation, bringing instant happiness and gratification, capturing the forces of nature, and acting as a passport to hitherto untraveled domains and group relationships. (Jhally 80)

16 It is apparent that with this description he refers to a certain symbolic nature of commodities. As John Beynon explains: "'Desires' replaced 'needs' and what people were became increasingly based upon what they owned" (14). Selling desires fueled the development of consumerism at an ever-increasing rate. Aloysius Michael characterizes it as "voracious consumption" (Michael 129).

17 It has been mentioned before that the advancing consumerism was able to blur class lines, but it was able to transcend gender, as well. Given the choice and freedom to consume, who profited more from this opportunity: men or women?

Men as active consumers: stylish dandies vs. domestic goddesses

18 For a long time after the rise of consumerism, there has been a widespread misconception in the Western world, especially in America, that women were major

consumers since they did most of the shopping (Swienicki 773). However, some historians agree that this view is misconstrued: “consumerism began to be [mistakenly] pinned on women” (Stearns 44). Men consumed as well: “They almost certainly spent more on consumer goods than women did, and certainly they controlled more of the resources, but they did consume differently” (44). And this difference was significant: women would typically buy the goods in retail outlets, from grocers or in department stores. Whereas men, who without doubt could visit a department store, would also have non-retail outlets at their disposal, such as saloons (for drinks and tobacco), lodges (for uniforms), clubs (for books), athletic clubs and various associations (for equipment and supplies) (Swienicki 790). From the late Victorian men’s clubs to masonic clubs to American health clubs in the 1980s: the history of lavish male consumption goes back more than a century. In fact, the evidence would suggest “that late-Victorian men probably did consume about twice the value of personal/recreational commodities as women” (776ff).

19 And while men were seen as workers and rational consumers in the public spheres, women were associated with more private, domestic leisurly consumption (Goodman & Cohen 83). Mary Roberts supports this hypothesis: “For men, an acceptable form of consumption was the collecting of art [...]. For women, consumption became attached to the rising cultural ideal of female domesticity” (825). Women as weaker, more susceptible sex were even encourage to channel their proclivity for shopping into “appropriate domestic outlets” (826), especially after the new disease of kleptomania became largely attributed to middle-class women.

20 To promote consumption, advertisements targeted male and female consumers separately. Jackson Katz goes as far as stating that “advertising, in a commodity-driven consumer culture, is an omnipresent and rich source of gender ideology” (135). Indeed, advertisements in women’s magazines were predominantly for fashion items and domestic products (Bogardus 511, 518), whereas men’s journals portrayed masculine consumption as both “glamorous and manly” (Swienicki 775). The striking fact was that men openly used cosmetics, such as “shaving soaps, aftershave lotions, pomade oils, and hair dyes, to cosmetics for training one's mustache” (781). The new healthy and muscular male ideal emerged in the late-Victorian era. Fitness became rather fashionable, as well as sports uniforms and equipment and health club membership (782). The exclusive athletic clubs in the late 19th century promoted conspicuous consumption more aggressively than any other institution, with hefty membership fees, strict dress code, and elaborate driking parties (783f).

We shall see later that this ideal never fully disappeared; the yuppies of the 1980s only perfected this masculine icon.

21 During the second half of the 19th century, ostentatious consumption transcended not only gender, but also class: working-class men started using clothing, jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles to express themselves. The New York City B'hoys, dandified street toughs, were searching for "women, fights, commercial entertainment and alcohol. [...] Such flamboyant displays suggest that working-class men linked the public display of consumption with class and gender pride" (Swienicki 787). Thus, engaging in commodified recreational activities started to lose its stigma as being a women's domain.

22 Advertisers sought to cater to this market of a new fashion-conscious male consumer. To quote John Beynon: "The male body became the peg on which to attach new fashion codes" (103). He confirms that this change was due to commercial pressures rather than changing sexual politics. Retail outlets for men, magazines for men, cosmetic products for men were reliving a renaissance since the time the late-Victorian fashion introduced the new ideal. By the 1980s the male body began to be objectified and eroticized as much as the female body before. It marked the emergence of the new "man-as-a-narcissist": a playboy who wore great clothes and acquired beautiful cars and women (Beynon 102f). A narcissist projects certain charm and success, creates a winning impression without forming any emotional attachments. The protagonist of Mary Harron's film is exactly this specimen of the 1980s consumer culture.

23 As noted above, by the second half of the 20th century, consumer culture was firmly in place. The post-war economy depended "on continual consumption of nonessential and quickly obsolete items and experiences" (Cushman 600f). Consumerism penetrated innumerable aspects of social life: holidays, courtship, and, even, divorce (Stearns 54). And practices of consumption came to dominate social relations while all aspects of social life were consituted as commodities (Wyllie 63). Whilst the intensity of consumption increased, so did the cases of neurosis and psychosis "and a gnawing sense of emptiness in the self" (Cushman 601). Next, I will explore the harmful effects of consumer culture on consumers' mental health.

Consumer madness

24 Aloysius Michael approaches the topic of mental desease with following words: "Neurosis and psychosis are the products of culture, [and] our culture has found many roads

to insanity" (151). Despite the pessimism of such approach, it is clear that consumerism was, unarguably, a new road that society set itself upon.

25 One of the reasons for the anxiety was the direct influence that living in consumer culture had on mental health. Such terms as 'money madness' or 'consumer madness' are used metaphorically, however, in certain cases, excessive consumption and obsession with material possessions has led to psychological trauma (Haubl 203ff).

26 Society and social dynamics changed in the course of transition from traditional consumption to consumer culture. Aloysius Michael refers to it as "suffocating artificiality" of society (85). He names technological progress as the catalist for creating the chasm between "the warm humanity" (85) that lived as a community and the new society where men and women lived through artificial, surrogated emotions in separate, yet identical houses, shopped at the same stores, and watched the same films (86). Philip Cushman also describes a world "in which flash is valued over substance, opportunism over loyalty, selling ability over integrity, and mobility over stability" (603).

27 This view of society in the second half of the twentieth century was supported by the thriving image-based culture. And popular culture was full of images of glossy, eroticized objects available for consumption. Even films adopted this visual style from advertising; it featured quick cuts, stylized shadows, and close-ups (Taylor 147). Carla Freccero supports this theory by referring to it as "the MTV-style postmodernist aesthetic of surface adopted by Generation X [for which Ellis has been dubbed a spokesperson]" (51). Devoid of substance, appearance was, and still is, all that counts (Michael 158).

28 The remarkable feature of mental illness of that time was that the need for the perfect appearance imprinted onto the symptoms: it created an image of a mentally healthy individual on the outside hiding the illness on the inside: a kind of 'surface sanity'. To quote psychologist and writer Douglas LaBier: "What looks like normalcy and successful adjustment for these people is actually adaptive sickness" (53). Consumers immersed themselves in the illusory world of surfaces and appearances, as a result, a growing sense of disorientation was experienced (Jhally 85). The adaptive sickness of these, for the most part, successfully employed people allowed them to appear quite 'normal' to their colleagues and family, exhibiting only a few slight quirks. In private, however, they were undeniably disturbed, inclined toward sado-masochism, grandiosity and in extreme cases to dismemberment, cannibal lust and drinking enemies' blood (LaBier 52f).

29 Mass consumption entered and influenced everyday lives at a psychological level, according to Lunt and Livingston, "affecting the construction of identities, the formation of

relationships, the framing of events" (qt in Miles 9). The focus on exterior and appearances is a leitmotif in Ellis's book, and it will be analyzed more closely in the third part.

Patrick Bateman, an ideal psychotic yuppie consumer?

30 Though the dominance of the yuppie culture was short, from 1983 when the term was first mentioned by a Chicago Tribune columnist until 1987 when the stock market crash marked the beginning of the end of the yuppie heyday, the term is still present in the modern vocabulary and culture[1] (Manning 2000). Though caricatured by the media that described the yuppie, a term that stands for "young urban professional" (Piesman & Hartley 2), as a new kind of ruthless careerist who takes everything for granted with greed and lack of concern for others (LaBier 139), this distinctly new kind of business professional emerged on a large scale in the City and on Wall Street.

31 The yuppie was a byproduct of the expanding financial sector (Beynon 105) that was remarkably transformed into a glamorous, even sexy, profession during that time (Taylor 25). Though the job itself could mostly be described as lacking substance and meaning, giving it up was not an option for most young businessmen (LaBier 140). These glorified accountants and salesmen were enjoying the benefits of their bloated salaries because the paycheck was in itself "the criterion for value" (Michael 116) and the measure of success, while satisfaction had to be sought elsewhere (Stearns 56). Consumption, or, more notably excessive consumption, was the primary outlet. It was a kind of "satisfaction achieved via the marketplace" (Jhally 79).

32 John Beynon described a typical '80s yuppie in the following manner:

> [...] posing, parading and swaggering around the City in his pinstripe and power-look suits, ties and accessories, swinging his attaché case, talking animatedly on his mobile phone, endlessly flickering the pages of his Filofax, slicking his hair and using every excuse to get into and out of his suit, his tie, his striped shirt and, of course, his Porsche. (105).

Hence, the yuppie, a term with a mainly masculine connotation (Beynon 105), could literally be distinguished by his clothes, accessories, and labels attached to them: he wore Armani, drove a Porsche, and carried a Gucci briefcase (Manning 2000). Thus, in the commodity image-system, a worldview typical for the twentieth century capitalism, one is defined by possessions rather than personality (Jhally 80). In the yuppie cosmos of the 1980s, brand-

[1] Geraint Anderson's novel *Cityboy: Beer and Loathing in the Square Mile* focuses on a stock broker in London who leads a life of excessive consumption, and it even references *American Psycho* in one of the characters who likes to be addressed to as "Patrick" because of his affinity for the protagonist of Ellis's novel (Anderson, Geraint. 2008. *Cityboy: Beer and Loathing in the Square Mile.* London: Headline Publishing Group, 167f).

name commodities became the only referential authority. And the fictional embodiment of the yuppie lifestyle, a total consumer Patrick Bateman lives his life under the governing principle of commodity (Weinreich 66). He is the hollow center of Ellis's novel that the author wrote while living in New York City, conflicted by temptation and glamour of the conspicuous consumption of his sleek rich friends on the one hand and the aversion to greed and superficiality of that world on the other (Murphet 1).

The world of appearances

33 The milieu of mostly white, excessively consuming young men that Ellis found himself in during his stay in New York, was the kind of place, where "the notion of appearance, once linked to notions of self-respect, gradually came to have less to do with character and reputation and more to do with simply looking good" (Haskell 128). Claire Wyllie concurs: "[...] the image is the currency of consumer culture" (67). Substance was replaced by style and surface, and it triumphed "in the ultimately illusory world of appearences" (Jhally 85). Ellis exposes this setting in his novel. He explains: "I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface – food, clothes – that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action" (quoted in Freccero 51). The visual medium of film had the ability to translate this kind of world of perfect facades onto the screen.

34 The smooth shiny surfaces are the first aspect of set design that attract viewers' attention in the scene in which the camera pans through Bateman's impeccably decorated lifeless apartment. The spectator notices the multitude of hard polished sufaces, from the living-room coffee table to the black-and-white framed poster of a falling businessman, to the ultra-modern stainless steel kitchen, to protagonists's reflections in the poster of Les Mis and in the bathroom mirror. Bateman is surrounded by reflections of himself and his reflection is a blank, but glossy veneer.

35 The apartment looks like it has been copied out of an interior design catalogue, most likely *The Sharper Image* that was in vogue in the eighties (Manning 2000). Advertised commodities, once source of enjoyment, became stepping-stones to social status (Roberts 829). Thus, a space that in the time of traditional consumption would have reflected the personality of the owner turns into a random collection of popular and trendy pieces which, in turn, still characterizes the owner in a way. According to Douglas Goodman & Mireille Cohen: "In consumer culture, it is not what you produce that defines your individuality, but what you buy. Our individuality is expressed through what we consume and display"

(Goodman & Cohen 93). Here one could draw a parallel to David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) where the nameless narrator discusses his fetish for IKEA merchandise in the monologue that reflects a "sad juxtaposition of personal identity and consumer goods" (Windrum 305). This film also deals with the problem of excessive consumption and its impact on consumers' identity and expresses anti-consumerist critique that is vocalized in Tyler Durden's discourse: "You're not your job, you're not how much money you have in the bank, you're not the car you drive, you're not the content of your wallet, you're not your fucking khakis" (qtd in Windrum 305). In the case of *American Psycho*, you literally are what you consume.

The socialized body

36 The consuming protagonist Bateman is introduced during the scene in which he presents his apartment before introducing himself: "I live in the American Gardens Building on West 81st Street, on the 11th floor, my name is Patrick Bateman, I am 27 years old" (TC 0:05:29). In Mary Harron's adaptation, the main character, played by the perfectly-cast Christian Bale, is "beautifully dressed, hardbodied, and a psychopath" (Freccero 51f). His body is perfection, as polished and smooth as the furnishings in his apartment. It is a product of rigorous exercise and the excessive use of cosmetics. His first monologue, which is intercut with some subtle product placement by Yves Saint Laurent and L'Occitane, is a mind-numbingly detailed description of his morning routine, complete with enumeration of all the beauty products that he uses to look and stay young:

> [...] if my face is a little puffy, I'll put on an icepack while doing my stomach crunches. [...] After I remove the icepack, 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 leave on for ten minutes [...]. I always use an aftershave 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. (TC 0:05:48-0:07:02).

37 Bateman puts a lot of effort into perfecting his exterior. The basis for such rigourous self-care practices lies in the socialization of a modern body and its perception in a system of desires "that inspires a deeply internalized duty to discipline and normalize one's body. To be thinner, more toned, less gray, and less wrinkled, and to hide a variety of imperfections" (Thompson & Hirschman 150).

38 The cultural ideology of a socialized body enforced through mass media, social relations, and advertising is responsible for consumers' image of the ideal or more desirable

body, and the consumption practices that these self-concepts encourage (151). Staying fit means exercising control over one's body, whereas fat becomes a sign of laziness and weak character (Stearns 69). The image-based culture reinforces the myth of youth and the desire to look young by all means available. Indeed, visuality, the display of the self as a commodity is primary in constructing social relations and identity (Wyllie 67).

39 Craig Thompson and Elizabeth Hirschman note that the implemented self-care practices are defined by "a dialectic between asceticism [...] and the hedonistic pursuit of gratification and pleasure" in the contradictory consumer culture (150). The scene in the film that depicts this dualism in the most vivid manner is the workout scene which starts with a shot of the most healthy-looking snack of berries and fruit and mineral water and then proceeds to Bateman violently doing crunches to the video of a murder scene from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Bateman's body stays fit and healthy without contributing to his peace of mind, but his inner desires run amok projected on the screen: he is torturing himself with this extreme exercise routine, but he would rather be torturing somebody else.

Consuming identities

40 In the credits sequence, the camera moves slowly through a chic restaurant over the plates of exquisitely arranged dishes past fashionably dressed men and their dates and over to Patrick and his friends with their hair slicked back, clean-shaven fresh young faces, despite the alcohol and drug consumption. They are distinctly dressed in the best Italian suits with clever accessories, but they cannot tell each other apart: "Is that Reed Robinson over there? - [...] That's not Robinson. - Well, who is it then? - It's Paul Allen. - That's not Paul Allen. Paul Allen's on the other side of the room over there" (TC 0:02:57 – 0:03:06). They are all dressed according to exchangeable fashion-models, and, consequently, all characters become virtually interchangeable, subject to Ellis's device of deindividualization of the yuppies (Weinreich 70). As Patrick explains himself:

> Allen has mistaken me for this dickhead, Marcus Halberstram. It seems logical because Marcus also works at P&P, and in fact does the same exact thing I do. He also has a penchant for Valentino suits and Oliver Peoples glasses. Marcus and I even go to the same barber, although I have a slightly better haircut. (TC 0:18:00 – 0:18:19)

41 Their trendy clothes are without doubt very stylish, and "style is the way that people express their individuality in consumer culture" (Goodman & Cohen 93). Unfortunately, this expression of individuality has value only if it is recognized by others, and the reflected recognition is what influences a person's self-esteem (93). But Bateman and his entourage

keep mistaking each other: Paul Allen calls Patrick Marcus and his lawyer – Davies (TC 0:27:07, 1:32:19). Thus, the absence of recognition leads to his frustrated search for identity through consumption and murder (Weinreich 72). Patrick's obssession with getting reservations, being with the most beautiful woman, or living in the most exclusive building are parts of a commodified identity construct. Indeed, in consumer culture "identities become commodities to buy, and like other commodities, there are competing identities on the market" (Goodman & Cohen 37).

42 The identity of a banker is supplemented by the most desirable status symbols, which can be something as small as a business card. Bateman and his colleagues present their new business cards in an attempt to impress each other by their unique style and taste. Ironically, the comic duel of the business cards only affirms the interchangeability of the characters. Everyone, including Bateman, is a vice president in the department of mergers and acquisitions, and, remarkably, they are all listed under the same phone number. The scene is full of exaggerated drama as they draw the business cards and the camera zooms in on the elegant fonts. Bateman nearly faints at the sight of Paul Allen's card and his heart pounds: "Look at that subtle off-white coloring. The tasteful thickness of it. Oh, my God. It even has a watermark" (TC 0:20:11 – 0:20:19). Enraged by his failure to procure the best status symbol, he commits his first on-screen murder in the next sequence. He stabs a homeless man saying: "You know what a fucking loser you are?" (TC 0:22:28). He is addressing the homeless man, though it is possible that he is talking about himself and his own dissatisfaction with his life and work.

The inner madness

43 The most noticeable peculiarity about the work of the Manhattan yuppies is that they seem to never be doing any work. As Martin Weinreich puts it: "The only business activities described are lunches in expensive restaurants, a demonstration that socializing is the only labor being exerted" (65). When in his office Bateman either watches TV or listens to music, or pretends to be doing a crossword puzzle. And in an attempt to look busy in front of a detective, he starts giving styling advice into an empty phone, as if quoting from a style section: "John, you've gotta wear clothes in proportion to your physique. There are definite do's and dont's [...] of wearing a bold-striped shirt. A bold-striped shirt calls for solid-colored or discreetly patterned suits and ties" (TC 0:32:27 – 0:32:39). As much as providing comic relief, this particular scene illustrates the fact that the job is only a money source to provide for the hedonistic pleasures pursued. Evelyn, Bateman's fiancé, states that he hates the job,

but when asked as to why he insists on working, he angrily replies: “Because I want to fit in!” (TC 0:10:20). Because he does not have a true distinctive identity, he strives for conformity.

44 However, combined with a constantly growing competitive environment in the workplace, the cutthroat corporate world is the catalyst for creating what Annalee Newitz describes as “capitalism’s monsters” (2):

> Mutated by backbreaking labor, driven insane by corporate conformity, or gorged on too many products of a money-hungry media industry, capitalism’s monsters cannot tell the difference between commodities and people. They confuse living beings with inanimate objects. And because they spend so much time working, they often feel dead themselves. (Newitz 2006: 2)

Ellis’s characters, rather caricatured versions of the real Manhattan yuppies, do not waste their precious time on work, they are fully occupied with dining and partying. Nevertheless, Bateman does struggle with feeling pressure. His emotions are close to those experienced by his real life counterparts of the 1980s: “Narcissism as well as feelings of fraudulence, inner emptiness, terror, and self-disgust” (LaBier 61). He is, unarguably, a narcissistic type who is indulging in his fantasies.

The consumerist psycho

45 The title of the novel and the film is strikingly unambiguous about the nature of its main character: he is, indeed, a psychopath. And while the film leaves a lot of the violence of the novel either completely out, moves it off-screen, or stylizes it (King 131f), there is no doubt that the protagonist is gravely disturbed. He himself recognizes that, without a hint of irony: “I'm into, uh, well, murders and executions, mostly”, he says when asked about what he does for a living (TC 0:56:33).

46 Despite his seemingly perfect life and all the commodities he possesses: his spacious apartment, a high-paying job, an attractive fiancé and a mistress, he is driven to extreme violence. Neither the author nor the director offers an explanation or even a reason for Bateman’s behaviour. He does admit to being “a child of divorce” (TC 0:25:55), though it is not clear if he is talking about himself or about Marcus Halberstram who he is impersonating for Allen. But there is no apparent history of abuse or trauma. Hence, contrary to the tendency to psychologize and to narrativize the serial killer in the media by turning their killings into comprehensive patterns, American Psycho provides the spectacle of killing without delving into Bateman’s backstory. This trend is typical for what Mark Seltzer called “a wound culture [...] a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (qtd in Rarick 214).

47 Annalee Newitz offers an interpretation of the serial killer narrative in the twentieth-century by attributing violent behaviour to being "socialized by watching movies or television [...] in a culture which is saturated by mass produced, alienated images that can be consumed by anyone, anywhere – repeatedly and meaninglessly" (21f). Indeed, Bateman listens to pop music on his way to work, at work, and on the way to a restaurant. He works out to a slasher film and murders to the sound of *Huey Lewis and the News*. And his excuse to escape from an unpleasant situation, such as Luis's confession of love or Evelyn's crying involves returning "some video tapes" (TC 0:49:42, 1:18:46), an answer that is as absurd as it is true to the satire of "the shallowness and cruelty of 1980s American capitalism" expressed in the novel and magnified in the film (Abel 42). The critique is succinctly demonstrated in the scene when Bateman while having dinner with friends, delivers a seemingly heartfelt speech where he lists all the things they could do to make the world better, e.g. "end apartheid", "stop terrorism", "promote civil rights" and "equal rights for women", and "most importantly [...] less materialism" (TC 0:12:00-0:12:33), at which point Bryce simply snorts at the absurdity of the statement. And though his other friends are listening with serious expressions, nod, and seemingly acknowledge the truth in his words, nobody changes their patterns of consumer behaviour. In fact, the next shot is of Patrick withdrawing a big amount of cash from an ATM and following a woman he presumably kills later.

48 The inability to attain the coveted commodities frustrates and enrages him because in consumer culture money and material possessions are the only solutions to dealing with psychological problems (LaBier 9). As the film progresses, Bateman's insanity seeps onto the surface like sweat through the cracks in his perfect veneer: he murders Paul Allen because he has a better business card, was able to get reservations at Dorsia, and the fact that he is the one handling the 'Fisher' account and not Bateman. This is followed by the near murder of Luis Carruthers because of an even more sophisticated business card. The symbolic creation of the capitalism's monster is shown when the ATM asks him to feed it the stray cat. This sequence culminates in an epic shoot-out after which Bateman breaks down in an elevator; his insanity is no longer controllable. This leads to a lengthy emotional confession to his lawyer on the phone.

49 As a matter of fact, Patrick tries to come clean about his crimes several times during the film. Firstly, to Paul Allen: "I like to dissect girls. Did you know I'm utterly insane? (TC 0:26:37), then to Evelyn: "My need to engage in homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be corrected, but I have no other way to fulfill my needs" (TC 1:17:04), and, finally, as I have mentioned, to his lawyer: "I guess I've killed maybe 20 people. Maybe 40!" (TC

1:23:40). But his interlocutors are distracted by superficial things and do not hear him. Allen only notices Bateman's tan and boasts about his own tanning bed at home, Evelyn is distracted by complementing a friend's bracelet, and Carruthers only asks where he bought the overnight bag (it's Jean Paul Gaultier). As for his lawyer, not only does he not see Bateman for who he is, but he also claims to have seen Allen in London. With this statement the narrative comes full circle to Bateman's characterization of himself at the beginning of the film: "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman. Some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me only an entity, something illusory" (TC 0:07:03-0:07:14). As a character, he is "stark and vacuous, filled only with signifiers of murder and indulgence" (Soar 11).

Patrick Bateman: a vacuous entity

50 After having characterized Bateman as an illusory entity, the film deprives the audience of any kind of certainty. In the end, neither Bateman nor the spectator is sure if the preceeding violence and disturbance happened in reality and were ignored by the society, or if all of it was restricted to Bateman's imagination, and the single outlet for his homicidal tendencies was the notebook his assistant found in his desk. And his final voice-over speech which offers no prospect of "resolution, redemption, or retribution" is just as unsettling (King 133f). As the camera moves in on an extreme close-up of Bateman's blank eyes, he concludes:

> 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. (TC 1:36:30-1:37:23)

51 Indeed, his friends continue talking about reservations and acquaintances, drinking, laughing, and speaking on the phone. The restaurant is still full of well-dressed polished yuppie men and women, who are unaware of any of the horror that Bateman has inflicted on them and on himself. This outcome supports the fact that "there is no truth to be found beneath appearances, and the accumulation of Bateman's successful, unnoticed, and ultimately deeply unsatisfying torture-murders that do not teach him – or the rest of us – anything" [...] (Freccero 52).

52 Unfortunately, Bateman's ostensible, unapologetic superficiality and neglect for the human emotional interaction fit perfectly within the milieu of the Wall Street yuppies. They

are incapable of seeking intimate contact because of absense of self in them (Michael 106). Philip Cushman states that the empty self "may be expressed in many ways, such as low self-esteem [...], values confusion [...], eating disorders [...], drug abuse [...], and chronic consumerism [...] (604). In the film, the characters fill the void with violence, drugs, and noise. Julian Murphet describes the protagonist as an "ideal consumer [with] mental substance composed entirely of messages emanating from commodities" (64). And there is no outside beyond the smooth surface world; therefore, Bateman cannot be alienated from it (Weinreich 77). He is trapped in this commodified surface world of voracious consumers and the symbolic "This is not an exit" sign in the restaurant only emphasized the fact that there is no escape.

Conclusion: "This is not an Exit"

53 In this paper I explored the origins of the modern consumer culture and the negative impact it has on consumers, focusing on the screen adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and its real-life setting: the Manhattan world of yuppies in the 1980s.

54 It is evident that the nature of consumption has changed in the course of history due to the industrialization and the increase in population in the late 19th century. In order to make profit, manufacturers involved advertising as a way to attract consumers and convince them to buy the products they did not necessarily need. By using evolving print technology to focus on fantasies and desires of the public, advertising industry was able to create images of coveted objects: objects of desire. Thanks to advertising, its major ideological tool, consumer culture was able to transcend both class and gender. Male consumers were equally as active as female though they consumed differently.

55 With evolving consumption and its promotion, a new problem began to arise: excessive consumption had a destabilizing effect on the mental state of many consumers. Due to the visual nature of advertising, the focus shifted onto appearances and image. People with mental illnesses reacted to this by overadapting: suppressing their symptoms under the mask of sanity.

56 The developing marketplace and the rise of corporations in the 1980s in the United States put a new kind of pressure on business professionals. Many tried to deal with anxiety and depression by consuming excessively: an activity that was able to alleviate the psychological state only temporarily. A new kind of individual thrived in such environment: a narcissist. They were charming and appealing and completely detached emotionally. Ellis based his main character on this new type of careerist.

57 In Ellis's fictional world of appearances, narcissistic Bateman is the central figure. He is perfect-looking and devoid of any positive human emotion. A psychopath in the superficial environment of the Manhattan yuppies, he soothes his rage, albeit unsuccessfully, by murdering and consuming, sometimes simultaneously. With no discernable identity, this protagonist is a paper-mâché of a man comprised of layers of labels, advertisements, logos, and bits of pop music trivia. If one could peel these layers, in the end one would see that there is nothing left to find, only a hollow center.

58 A BBC documentary *The Century of the Self* (2002) suggests that consumer culture emerged as a tool of controlling the masses driven by primitive impulses of sex and aggression postulated by Freud. In order to function as a society, its members have to be controlled and soothed by commodities, even if it directly contradicts the principals of democracy. Psychoanalysis played a crucial part in constructing the modern self. As Philip Cushman points out: "Applied psychology was used in advertising, marketing, and personnel work". But if controlling primitive drives is the main point of consumer culture, then Bateman is a failed experiement: his urges cannot be assuaged by consuming commodities.

59 Consumerism is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. Modern consumer culture is based on polar opposites: on indulgence and abstinence, on pleasure and guilt. Consumer is a 'king' who, in reality, reacts to advertisers' subconscious suggestions. And while most consumers are aware of being subtly manipulated they still participate in consumer culture. The undisputable fact is that everyone is involved in consumer culture in one way or another. We both desire and hate consuming. And while American Psycho is a satirical cautionary tale for consumerism - extreme consumption traps one in a shallow world of empty commodities from which there is no escape - at the moment, there are few alternatives to consumer culture. Alhough there have been endeavors to change it in the past fifty years, e.g. the hippie movement in the 70s, the materialistic 80s proved them unsuccessful. Philip Cushman suggests that in order to change the society, it is necessary to reshape political relationships and cultural forms, to put emphasis on community and tradition (607). In the past few years, there has been a growth in popularity of artisanal production, sustainable agriculture, small local brands, etc. – a phenomenon that can be viewed as an attempted reversal to 'traditional consumption'. Unfortunately, these changes have been too small and insignificant to be considered a paradigm shift.

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