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COG 444

The American Nightmare: The Semiotics of American Psycho

Introduction

Understanding art is a function of understanding the meaning derived from components of that art. To this end, semiotics [47] serve as a splendid tool for deriving greater meaning from a text [63]. *American Psycho*, a 2000 film adaptation of Brian Ellis' novel of the same name, is ripe for a semiotic analysis, due to its strong use of signs [51] to convey a more rich and layered artistic experience.

The film, set in Wall Street during the 1980s, a so-called 'Decade of Greed', follows the life of Patrick Bateman, a VP at his father's company. Patrick is physically fit, engaged to a beautiful woman, and obscenely wealthy. He is also a serial killer, who takes great pleasure in murder and dismemberment. His status as a Wall-Street socialite affords him cover for his crimes, as he primarily targets lower-class members of society. As the film progresses, he descends further into his insatiable bloodlust.

The semiotic understanding of *American Psycho* begins with a look into the narrative [30] structure of the film. Namely, the postmodern [39] structure of the film and how it helps the film further convey its messages of insanity and irreality. While the chronology of the film remains stable, the blurred line between what is actually happening on a narrative level and what is depicted as fragments of Bateman's mind leaves both the viewer and Bateman himself wondering what is truly happening.

Bateman is a deeply disturbed individual, displaying many symptoms [59] of severe mental illness. Such illness would explain either his hallucinations, or his homicidal rampages, or perhaps both. In any event, his psyche as a whole is deeply fascinating to any student of semiotics, film, or psychology. Bateman is narcissistic and has almost no empathy for others. He is brazen in his murders, making almost no attempt to hide his nature from those around him.. The people Bateman interacts with are similar to him in many ways. They are entirely self-centered, oblivious to the world around them, even when their lives are threatened. This relates heavily to ideas of self-centeredness and narcissism, traits that culturally are connotated [6] heavily with the 1980's materialistic culture. The film explores these concepts through the presentation of signs that fully engrosses the viewer in the film experience.

The Postmodern Psychopath

Before a semiotic analysis begins, it is important to understand the basic philosophical background of *American Psycho*, namely its deep roots in postmodernism. By deciding to take these aspects of postmodernism into the film, the messages and semiotics of the film are greatly strengthened. Indeed, some of the film's ideas and concepts are directly and irrevocably tied to postmodernism, namely in the context of critiques of modernist [28] thought. The film shows these critiques through the hideous actions of its protagonist, who some may consider to be a symbol [58] of modernist American ideals circa 1980.

The film's plot is necessary for any sort of discussion of the film itself. Bateman, the protagonist, is established as an extremely wealthy stockbroker who achieved his position through nepotism. He is self-characterized as an individual who has no 'real' version of himself. The viewer first sees the true evil of Bateman when he stabs and kills a homeless man and his dog at night. Although the reason is not stated, it is implied that Bateman was deeply upset by his colleague, Paul Allen, having a somehow superior business card than himself. Shortly after, Bateman has dinner

with Allen, before murdering him in a fit of rage. The film continues to display Bateman's emotionally insecure and murderous nature. The film's climax is highly important, as Bateman goes on a violent rampage, one that cannot have a basis in reality. He sees an ATM command him to feed it a cat. He then goes on a shooting spree before engaging in a standoff with police. He then destroys all of their vehicles with a single shot from his pistol. He makes it back to his office with police helicopters outside, and makes a tearful confession of his many acts of murder and madness to his lawyer. The movie then cuts to its ending scenes where it is as if the events of last night never happened. Bateman's lawyer appears to mistake him for Paul Allen, despite Bateman's desperate insistence that he is not. The film ends similarly to how it began, with a monologue from Bateman, this time expressing how his "confession has meant nothing."

To construct a true semiotic analysis of the film, one must look deeper into its postmodern structure. One key aspect of postmodern film is a certain level of uncertainty in the plot. That is to say, what is actually being depicted on screen may not be the 'real' events of the story. The conclusion to the film is the broadest example of this, where Bateman somehow manages to destroy police cars with a single pistol shot. Even Bateman is taken aback by this event, giving the viewer a hint that what is on screen may not be what is truly occurring. This jarring sense of irreality permeates the film throughout. Another crucial aspect is postmodernism's general trend towards challenging the established notions of the society. This includes taking hyperbolic views of certain societal topics. Take, for example, the Wall Street banker, who some may view as the paragon of a capitalist, meritocratic America, whereas others will view them as greedy, predatory men. The film takes the extreme approach by making this particular iteration of a Wall Street businessman into a murderous psychopath.

Postmodern traits are embodied within *American Psycho's* structure. Bateman's brazen actions create a sense that he should have been caught long ago. Indeed, this is something that the film is

intentionally creating. For example, when Detective Kimball is interviewing Bateman over Allen's murder, the filmmakers shot three scenes: one where William DaFoe, the actor playing Kimball, was told to act as though Kimball knew Bateman was innocent, one where he knew he was guilty, and one where he was unsure. Then they spliced these scenes together, creating a deep sense of uncertainty for the viewer. Many times throughout the film, Bateman will frankly tell somebody his intentions of murder and violence, to which their reaction is always neutral. These details, and many more, run throughout the film, creating a dissonant sense of the film's true events. These details throw into question what would be basic facts in any other film. Is Bateman actually saying these awful things, or is it a delusional fantasy that he creates? Perhaps those around him, due to their involvement and expectations regarding language [26], in the sense of linguistic and conversational norms, do not process Bateman's particular parole [36]?

This is not the only example of postmodernism in *American Psycho*. Intertextuality, as established, is strongly present throughout *American Psycho*, most primarily through Bateman's near obsession with music. He speaks eloquently about contemporary 1980s pop, oftentimes to the same people he is about to murder. Fascinatingly, Bateman's particular way of speaking about music invokes the idea that perhaps he is repeating something he has read in a magazine, as opposed to his own thoughts. Not only this, but periodically, while Bateman is interacting with his peers, contemporary global issues will be brought up in conversation. Bateman's responses are always broadly appealing, almost as if they have been pre-selected to garner the least amount of controversy. During one such conversation, he expresses a wish to see the world bettered, saying that world hunger, apartheid, terrorism, and nuclear war must all be averted (Halon). In a strong showing of postmodernist irony, he also admonishes his peers for not doing enough for the homeless and for women's rights. Considering that, in short adjacency to this scene, Bateman kills a homeless man and a woman, as well as admitting in a soliloquy that the only emotions he feels are

greed and disgust. The inclusion of outside texts, such as music or world issues, contrasts sharply against Bateman's violent insanity. One interesting idea held within both postmodernism and *American Psycho* is the idea of desire. Postmodernism, simplistically speaking, generally holds that indulging one's desires is a positive thing. Crucially, it is specified that in Lacanian thought that "productive use of desire is advocated, not one based on lack, tension-reduction, and stasis" (Milovanovic). This perfectly describes Bateman. His indulging of his desires, including cocaine, non-consensual sado-masochicism, and homicide, are all based on a lack of productive desire. He cannot act in a way to better his life, or so he perceives, and so this meaninglessness leads him to satisfy his bloodlust. He has everything he could possibly want, at least in the context [7] of America's materialist society, yet finds himself without a way to find true satisfaction.

The film's inclusion of these specific postmodernist ideals lends a great deal of heft to its impact and importance. One benefit of a strange, surreal narrative structure is the effect it has on the viewer. Being confused about the events of the plot leave viewers questioning what they just saw. This forces the viewer to think deeper about the film and, therefore, about the movie's deeper messages and implications. By breaking up the expected syntagmatic [62] structure of dialogue, the viewer is simultaneously puzzled, amused, and disturbed. By destroying expected results, the film creates an intended atmosphere of dark comedy. The film's use of intertextuality also crafts a sense of dissonance that perpetuates these feelings. Comparing Bateman's conscientious and thoughtful words on world events to his psychopathic murderous rampages is a fine use of postmodern ideals that further relates to Bateman's unhinged nature, as well as his stated desire to "fit in." It also highlights Bateman's hypocrisy. This hypocrisy is linked to greater societal criticism present in the film. By including these postmodern ideas in the film, the viewer is essentially made to focus more on what is actually happening and what those happenings could mean, leading to a deeper conceptualization of the movie's ideas.

The Personality of a Psychopath

Patrick Bateman's personality and psyche are central to the film's expression of its ideas. He is shown to be deeply disturbed, a malignant force that inhabits the world. The film is deliberate in its choosing of a member of the one percent act in such a way, as this pairing of madness and wealth is central to the film's ideas. Understanding Bateman is necessary to understand *American Psycho*.

Understanding the semiotics behind *American Psycho* necessitate an understanding of its titular protagonist, Patrick Bateman. The deepest possible understanding can only truly be ascertained through a thorough viewing of the movie, but for the purposes of this paper, a few instances from the film may be analyzed. Perhaps the best scene to embody Bateman's nature is the infamous business card scene. Here, he and his colleagues compare business cards, much like men of a lower class may compare garments of clothing. Interestingly, to the viewer, there are few observable differences between the cards. The cards, as signs [52], contain unique interpretants [22] for the businessmen versus the viewer. Indeed, the use of secondness [46] to compare the mens business cards directly gives a sense of amusing absurdity to the weight Bateman places upon his peer's opinions and reactions to his card. Throughout the scene, Bateman's internal monologue reveals a deep sense of dismay at the thought that their cards may be perceived as 'superior' to his. He grows so hateful towards the idea of this that he actually begins to uncontrollably shake. This intense overreaction reaches a zenith when he decides to murder Paul Allen, whose business card trumped his own, to Bateman's tremendous humiliation. This scene encapsulates a few key ideas regarding Bateman's personality. He is neurotic to the extreme, taking minutiae about business cards and having a meltdown over them. He also deeply craves the approval of his peers, and cannot stand being bested in anything. To Bateman, his perceived place in the social hierarchy is supreme. Another scene that is crucial to understanding Bateman is a rather simple one, wherein he goes through his daily beauty routine. He has a broad variety of high-end soaps and scrubs, as well as a

strong regiment of diet and exercise. This idea is compounded upon later in the film, where while having sex with a prostitute, Bateman takes the time to flex for himself in the mirror, admiring his own body. These scenes indicate that Bateman has a narcissistic need to look as good as he can. He expresses disgust and loathing for others who do not match his high standards of beauty. These aspects of his personality are broadly applicable to many people, but it is his bloodlust that separates him from others. His propensity for murder is extreme. In fact, he explicitly tells his fiancée, Evelyn, that his “need to engage in homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be corrected”. Bateman’s hatred of the world stems from a hatred of himself. He holds himself to impossible standards, and takes great and terrible pains to make sure he is at the head of his peer group. His murders are characterized, by him, as inevitable results of the general disgust and hatred he feels for all people around him. In his own words, “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”. It is this self-loathing that transmutes into a hatred for the world around him, and that is why he kills.

At least, that is one interpretation of the film. The strange idiosyncrasies within the events of the film indicates that perhaps all is not as it seems. The climax and ending are the strongest examples of this, but as previously stated, the entire movie makes it seem as though Bateman is a hair’s breadth from being caught. It seems impossible for him to escape the consequences of his actions, yet by the end of the film, he has managed to get away with everything. Paul Allen’s apartment is even completely renovated, covered with white wallpaper. The movie uses the firstness [14] of the white room to mirror Bateman’s shock at seeing his victim’s entire life seemingly disappear. The stark white coloration of these shots helps to get across to the viewer that Bateman’s actions will have absolutely no repercussions for him. Although this scene is the best example of this, many more scenes hint that Bateman is perhaps not entirely within reality. He chases a screaming woman, naked, through an apartment building, where nobody answers her screams for

help. He then drops a chainsaw from the top of a stairwell, hitting her at the bottom. The idea that nobody even opened their doors or called the police indicates that perhaps Bateman dreamed the entire scenario up. Certainly the climax strongly suggests that Bateman is hallucinating. An ATM demanding to be fed a cat is not possible, unless an extremely far-fetched prank was executed to trick Bateman. There is still evidence that he is an actual killer, such as blood stains on his mattress cover, noticed by a dry cleaning clerk. Nevertheless, the core idea of the movie, being that Patrick Bateman is a serial killer, is not necessarily true. His personality remains unchanged, but it must be seriously called into question whether his homicidal activities are truly happening in the context of the plot.

Certainly, regardless of whether or not he is truly a murderer, Bateman is suffering from some level of mental illness. One possible hint at this is the presence of a prescription bottle addressed to Bateman. Although a minor role, the presence of the pill bottle as a signifier [56] implies heavily that Bateman is prescribed something for a psychiatric need. One possible illness he has is antisocial personality disorder. Antisocial personality disorder is characterized by symptoms including a lack of empathy, a greatly inflated sense of self, and doing harm to others (Mayo Clinic). These are all traits Bateman has in spades. He is also narcissistic, and he himself admits that his only two identifiable emotions are greed and disgust. Another symptom of his mental instability are his obscene, violent drawings, generally depicting the murder of women. To a viewer, all of these hints signal [54] that, regardless of whether or not Bateman hallucinates the homicides he commits, it is undeniable that he is a fundamentally disturbed individual.

Bateman as a character is the core of the movie, and thus where much of its semiotic components trace their roots to. His insanity, hatred, and insecurity serve as the driving force behind every event in the film's plot. These traits, in the context of Bateman, serve as a conceptual metonym [5], invoking in the viewer ideas of a parasitic, predatory upper class. This serves as the basis of the

film's social critiques. His "mask of sanity" is what links him to society, but behind it lies a monstrous soul. The film seeks to demonstrate that a man of Bateman's stature is irregular not because he is a psychopath, but because he acts out on those desires in such a violent, apparent way. He is also a man who is deeply unhappy and hateful, one who takes out his insecurities and pains on the denizens of the world around him. The idea that a man like that could not only be walking among us, but also living comfortably at the peak of society, is inherently critical of that society.

The Decade of Greed

The specific society addressed by *American Psycho* through Bateman is obviously America, but more specifically it is the America of the 1980's where the movie is set. This time, otherwise known as the decade of greed, is characterized by rampant materialism and consumerism. These traits are shown to be present in this time period through historical documentations. Predatory practices exhibited in the 1980s are referenced by Bateman's literal predatory actions in the film.

Materialism as a concept is best defined as the valuation of the physical above all else. As a paradigm [34], it exhibits ideals relating to greed, wealth, status, and power. A materialistic worldview or culture does not crave spiritual satisfaction, or the simple pleasures deriving from time spent with loved ones. Rather, it demands acquisition of the physical. It is a desire and a hunger which cannot be satiated by definition. If there is something to be had, materialism demands one has it. It can lead one to malicious actions. As materialistic instincts grow stronger, one changes their thoughts from creating for themselves, to taking from another. Predation and greed become the paradigm through which a truly materialistic culture operates, one where the strong succeed at any cost and the weak are made to suffer for it.

In the United States, the paradigm of materialism is a large component within the sign systems of American values. In this country, it is better to have than to have not, and this thought drives much of the American consciousness. Beautiful houses, splendid cars, and prestigious

occupations are all signs that signify one's success, and therefore one's superiority. When this idea is taken to an extreme, it is to the detriment of the societal fabric. A selfish individual who only cares about their own well-being may decide to indulge in dishonorable and dangerous business practices in the interest of leveraging their own wealth over the well being of others. This practice has resulted in much suffering in American history, from the Gilded Age of the 1800s, to the Great Recession of 2008. The pertinent period of American history that *American Psycho* examines is the 1980s.

The 80s are considered to be a decade of infamy in regards to America's worst materialistic tendencies. They are characterized as opulent, consumerist, and predatory, especially in regards to Wall Street. The role models derived from those in the 80s are often taken from "accounts of Wall Street traders earning unimaginable sums of money" (Relin) The Wall Street of the 1980s was summed up when arrests were made for insider trading and illegal manipulations of the stock market, both of which had sent the markets into a self-strangling spiral. Those predatory practices led to the Black Monday of October 1987, where the stock market suddenly and catastrophically failed, ending the gilded dreams of so many Wall Street socialites. Poor business practices also permeated the decade. American Express, experiencing great deals of financial success and cash flow, elected to "waste it on a buying spree" (Taylor), wherein they soon began to spend more than they earned, forcing layoffs. These shortsighted and malicious practices, on a semiotic level, were signals of a culture that valued short term success over a sustainable, healthy economy. At their worst, Americans adopt these same traits, forming an image schema [21] within the collective consciousness that sees the transient glory attained by those at the top of the economy and seeks to emulate it through their own lives.

American Psycho is the very embodiment of this time period. It's setting of the 1980s serves as a symbol to the viewer, wherein the brazen, short-sighted and malicious business practices of that time and place mirror Bateman's own increasingly deranged killing sprees. Here, Bateman serves as a

conceptual metaphor [4] for the 1980s as a whole, specifically those at the very top. Bateman's deeds, words, and status all mirror those of the criminal Wall Street moguls. Like many of these moguls, he is never caught nor suitably punished for his actions. To ask why Bateman is the way he is misses the point. He does as he does for the same reason Wall Street in the 80s behaved as it did: he seeks to serve his own interests at the sharp expense of others beneath him. At the end of it all, his "punishment eludes [him]", and he is free to prey upon the denizens of his society, just as the wealthy elite of America are able to.

The Codes of Comprehension and Identification in Side Characters

Bateman's importance to the film is principal for its analysis, but the other characters of the movie serve as the background for his actions. Without their reactions and lack thereof to his actions, there is no conflict and thus no film. The secondness exhibited here is paramount. Bateman is held up against and exists in relation to those around him, and so his hideousness is displayed more fully. The semiotic aspects of the film are enhanced by the presence of the other characters, even though their role in terms of plot are relatively minor.

Central to the film's deeper meanings is the way characters react to and interact with Patrick Bateman. When Bateman speaks outside of the accepted social code [2] of high-society conventions, he is ignored or misheard. In a conversation with Paul Allen over dinner, Bateman informs Allen that he likes to dissect women, and that he is "utterly insane". Allen inanely replies that the restaurant he would have preferred to eat at has a "great sea urchin ceviche". In high society, an important part of the code is to remain subtle and minimize problems. Bateman so flagrantly breaking that code is reflected in Allen's lack of reaction. One interpretation is that, in Allen's mind, what Bateman said was so unthinkable that it simply did not parse. Allen cannot comprehend what was said, and so, subconsciously, chooses to ignore it. Another scene of importance is in a nightclub,

where Bateman goes up to a bartender and aggressively threatens her. She ignores him and continues about her duties, to the mild disappointment of Bateman. These two scenes in particular draw attention to the social commentaries the film seeks to make.

A fascinating facet of other character's interactions with Bateman is the way they tend to mistake him for other characters in the film. Especially after Allen's murder, his colleagues keep confusing Bateman for Allen. Allen himself thinks Bateman is a man named Halberstram. Bateman does not choose to correct these mistakes, nor does he especially seek to further his unintentional deception. He simply accepts them as they are. The only time where he truly tries to get out of these cases of mistaken identity is at the end, where he attempts to get his lawyer to realize that he is Bateman. The lawyer dismisses Bateman's words as a prank, and Bateman simply resigns himself to his lack of recognition.

The non-reaction of the bartender at Bateman's threat is a sign, but one that is differently deciphered from Allen's. Thirdness [64], in its role as an "intellectual mould" (Gupta), differentiates between these two interactions when they are taken as signs. Allen's reaction is indicative of a higher society, one that eschews displays of outward emotion or flaws. Allen is indeed in grave danger in this scene, and Bateman has just given him a warning of what might happen to him should he not flee. Instead of reacting appropriately, Allen takes the opportunity to subtly denigrate Bateman's choice of restaurant. Allen is so enamored with himself, with his status, and with his own interests, he cannot notice the serial killer sitting right across from him. In his inability to parse Bateman's words, Allen puts his life at risk. This hyperbolic example is used to criticize the social codes of the upper classes, as well as society's self-obsession that leads to ignorance of their surroundings. These motifs are mirrored in many other interactions in the movie. The people around Bateman, as a whole, do not see him for what he truly is. Whether that is a case of mistaken identity, or their own self-obsession making them blind to the danger lurking in their midst, nobody seems to realize what

Bateman is doing right in front of them. The scene with the bartender takes on a different signified due to the social power differential between Bateman and the bartender. Here, the viewer understands that Bateman is the wealthy man being served, and the bartender is the worker serving him. Service workers often suffer verbal abuse from those they serve, especially in the context of such a disparity in social standing. Bateman's abuse, in this case, is far more dangerous than most, though sadly not quite as unrealistically hateful as one may assume. The bartender's lack of reaction does not stem from an inability to parse what he is saying, rather from an acceptance of her place in this interaction and in society at large. She has no social power in this dynamic, and so accepts Bateman's abuse placidly. Bateman constantly being confused for another person relates back to these themes. Names and identity are powerful signs. By not correctly applying those signs to Bateman, people fail to recognize the danger he presents, as well as grant him the punishment he deserves. The film uses this lack of recognition to convey ideas regarding the power of identification. By incorrectly applying the signifier to the appropriate signified, the characters of the film fail to stop Bateman's murders or prevent their own deaths. These interactions serve as another significant component of the film's commentary regarding class and culture.

The 1980s, within the conceptualization of a decade of greed, exhibits these characteristics of the film's side characters. They were defined by their inability to identify the truth around them. In essence, the market had created a sort of simulacra, wherein money and value was being produced where there was none. When this simulacra inevitably crumbled under its own weight on Black Thursday, net suffering increased appropriately. People were so enamored with the glamor of wealth during this time, that they could not see the danger approaching them. Much like the characters in the movie, who are so focused on their own lives, they cannot realize what Bateman is. Those who have an inkling of his true nature, such as the bartender, do not have the power to stop

him, and so remain victimized, much like the lower classes of the 1980s were used and deceived by the elite above them.

The Modern Psychopath

The concepts surrounding *American Psycho* are characteristic of the 1980s, but not exclusive to that particular period. A diachronic [11] analysis of the themes of the movie is best, to indicate that these negative aspects of society have not disappeared. Looking at the breadth of American cultural history, many of the film's themes can still be found today. Contemporary American society still exhibits the same flaws that were found and criticized within the 1980s by *American Psycho*.

The evil traits exhibited and criticized by the film in the context of the 1980s are still present today. Financially speaking, in 2008 overleveraged mortgages crushed the economy. Much like Bateman, the banks responsible for so much loss eluded their punishment, and were bailed out by the public who they had wronged. In the current year, get rich quick schemes through cryptocurrency have been popularized, with billions of dollars being made and lost through the whims of an arbitrary market. Non-fungible tokens, essentially a receipt for a piece of artwork, have massively grown in popularity, forcing some artists to participate in this market scheme if they hope to turn a profit. Entrepreneurial billionaires have become the new standard of elite wealth and high society. Worker conditions and wages are low, while the profit margins of a mere fraction of the one percent have increased by trillions this past year alone. The environment is crushed under the weight of an ever-expanding need for resources. The lack of profitability in sustaining the planet has, in all likelihood, doomed millions to crushing effects of climate change and pollution. In the modern day, the only change in behavior from the 1980s has been a greater awareness of the suffering caused, with no significant increase in attempts from the society's peak to curtail this trend of reckless consumption.

Bateman's particular brand of self-absorbed cruelty and selfishness is similarly not absent today. Narcissism has become profitable, with 'influencers' earning great wealth through sponsorships and advertising deals due to their large audience. These cults of personality form and dissipate quickly with the whims of the public, for whom novelty is held in extremely high regard. Bateman's obsession with himself, and with the things he owns, comprise a large portion of the contemporary paradigm surrounding the self. Today, as in the 1980s, many define themselves by what they own, and what groups they attribute themselves to. Vanity is a tremendous industry, as beautiful young people dominate the collective consciousness of so many, especially adolescents. Advertising fuels huge parts of the information economy, such that what is reality and what is advertised as reality blurs together, in a Baudrillardian example of hyperreality [19]. Much like the film itself, a participant in either the movie or in society cannot ascertain exactly what is happening around them, and thus cannot make decisions that best reflect the reality around them.

The film is intended, in part, as a critique of the specific culture that emerged from the 1980s. This does not mean that the ideas it explores are exclusive to that time period. The story is told in such a way that its subject matter is applicable to a broad variety of times and places. Although connotational signs within the film, such as music, cars, and styles date it to the 1980s, the signifieds and connotations behind those signs remain pertinent. An expensive car is a status symbol, in 1980 or in 2020. With wealth inequality at one of its all-time highs, the elite class has far from disappeared. The signifiers have changed from *American Psycho*, but the paradigms and codes they belong to have remained unchanged at their core. Bateman follows a set of codes and conventions, such as his wealth, pristine home, and outlook, that make his character archetype broadly applicable. The same archetype of Bateman the Wall Street serial killer can be found in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, wherein a member of the elite preys upon and consumes the flesh of the lower classes. This conceptual metaphor linking the elite in society to conceptualization of the murderer is

broadly applicable to a variety of times, including today. It is important to consider that “culture always determines the meaning a sign or code communicates” (Reeper). Thus, when considering the semiotics of Bateman’s behaviors and character, a changing culture will reflect changing connotations behind those signs. The meaning derived from the signs he represents is not greatly changed from the release of the film. Therefore it can safely be said that the culture has similarly not undergone significant changes in regards to the concepts the film embodies.

The signs derived from the behavior of characters in *American Psycho* are still applicable to much of the collective consciousness today. Those interacting with Bateman in the film display a significant degree of self-centeredness that makes it impossible for them to realize Bateman’s criminal activity. They display many of the same narcissistic traits Bateman does. As Bateman’s personality traits can be considered signs that are therefore projected upon contemporary society, so too can the behaviors of *American Psycho*’s other characters be similarly projected. Indeed, Bateman himself is not necessarily meant primarily as a critique of the wealthy, and in some lights may be characterized as sympathetic, in a similar fashion to the other characters. Bret Ellis, the author of the book *American Psycho* upon which the film is based, has indicated that Bateman was not conceived as a critique of high society’s predatory nature but instead as a reflection of his own “consumerist kind of void that was supposed to give me confidence and make me feel good about myself but just made me feel worse” (Baker, Ellis). Although the book and film are different texts and therefore portray different renditions of Patrick Bateman, it is indicative of Bateman’s overall character archetype that he was originally conceived of as a cry for help in regards to feelings of being lost in a pit of self-loathing brought about by materialism. In this lens, he is as much of a victim as anybody he killed, for he is tormented and crushed beneath the society that spawned him. Likewise, the broader contemporary society’s traits can be viewed as a kind of langue, wherein the structure and syntagm [61] are arranged in such a way that an individual’s parole, or their personal operation within the

semiotic structure of society, is rife with suffering. Even as they participate and perpetuate the negative aspects *American Psycho* seeks to criticize, much like Bateman himself, the contemporary soul cannot escape the prison of their own making.

This Is Not a Pipe

American Psycho's use of misdirection and irreality help to further its themes of insanity and hyperreality. A strong way to visualize these thoughts is the famous painting by René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*. That painting's particular set of themes and ideas, although not nearly so morbid and cynical, echo and relate to those of *American Psycho*. As the painting may help a viewer understand the film in a deeper way, so too might understanding the film lead to the illumination of the self.

The Treachery of Images is a rather simple painting, in terms of its representamen [44]. It displays a pipe, serving as the icon, with text beneath stating "This is not a pipe." The painting's import upon semiotics is a crucial concept. The caption, initially confusing, makes sense in the context of semiotic interpretation. The pipe being depicted is not actually a pipe. Rather it is an icon of a pipe, or a depiction of a pipe. It is not a real, physical pipe one may smoke out of. This fact is so obvious that it may escape notice to a first-time viewer of the painting. Understanding that deeper, yet simultaneously surface-level meaning, is a key component of a semiotic study.

American Psycho as a film poses similar thoughts to the viewer. The narrative structure of the movie essentially means nobody, not Bateman nor the viewer, can be certain as to what is actually occurring in the plot. As one thinks deeper as to what truly happened in the film, they may come to the realization that none of the film's events transpired. Of course, this is known to be true, as it is a movie, not a found footage film. This simple realization comes across in the same manner as in *The Treachery of Images*. It is so obvious that it is hard to spot, but once one understands the concept, they can then reach a deeper understanding of some of the film's meanings. Namely, that since none of

the events truly transpired, it makes no difference to the film's messages whether or not Bateman actually murdered anybody. The film can be viewed as Bateman's confession, as hinted at in the ending where Bateman himself realizes "this confession has meant nothing". With this in mind, one understands that the denotative events of the film, taken at face value, have no true significance. What is truly important is Bateman's internal thoughts, and his perception of events. Bateman's experience is an example of hyperreality, where neither he nor the viewer can tell what the real events are. Of course, the viewer must understand that there are no 'real' events of the plot, just as there is no pipe. It is a series of signs, signs wherein the reality or irreality of the signifiers have no impact upon the signifieds. It does not matter if Bateman is a killer, because his nature, and thus the nature of the society he reflects, is unchanged by the 'real' events of the movie.

This lack of truth, the ultimate meaninglessness of the details of the plot as a denotative sign, is closely related to the film's postmodernism. The vague narrative structure is not present to only further a feeling of strangeness, but also to support its messaging. Bateman is an evil person not because of what he does, which ultimately is of little consequence. Rather, he is evil because of how he thinks. Assume that the events of the plot are not 'real' in the sense that in terms of the text, it is intended for the viewer to feel as though none of the murders occurred. Does that truly change who Bateman is? If he perceives himself as a murderer to the point where his reality can be said to be a simulacra of the true 'reality' of the film, then he may as well be a murderer. Thus, even though the events of the film are fiction, Bateman's evil reflects upon the paradigm of the culture around him, regardless of if the film were fiction or nonfiction.

Once it is understood that the film's 'true' events are irrelevant to the overall meaning, one then comprehends that it is simultaneously unimportant if Bateman himself is real or not. Inevitably, a viewer will compare themselves, or those around them, to Bateman. In this case, the viewers may be considered to be 'unmarked', while Bateman is 'marked', due to his central role in the film. This is

one of the “binary oppositions which we employ in our cultural practices help to generate order out of the dynamic complexity of experience” (Chandler). This is a simple distinction to make, the viewer versus the viewed. If Bateman can be said to be a set of signs, a text in and of himself, then those signs would still retain their core meaning regardless of his status as a fictional character. Therefore, that binary opposition of viewer versus viewed is weakened, and the difference between the two is blurred, much like the difference between ‘reality’ and ‘irreality’ is blurred in the film. In this way, the film presents one of the strongest, most compelling characters-as-critiques in fiction. By so strongly blurring those lines, the delineation between the viewer and Bateman himself are weakened, and so the viewer begins to truly empathize, and see themselves within, the abhorrent and monstrous character of Bateman. His sympathetic traits, such as his insecurity, and his need to fit in, can be shared by many audience members. Where empathization with such a villainous character may end there, this breakdown of opposition brings the viewer closer to truly being forced to recognize themselves within all aspects of Bateman. After all, there is no Bateman. It is only Christian Bale, portraying a character. If there is no Bateman, nobody could have been killed. If the great barrier of empathizing with an evil character is their actions, and one realizes there were no actions, then they become much closer to seeing themselves in that character despite the initial aversion to it.

Conclusion

Semiotics can be described as the science of derived meaning (Denasi). The ideas of insecurity, madness, murder, and greed are all present in *American Psycho*, and are best understood through a semiotic context. The various social codes and conventions shown throughout the film, and the way Bateman both violates and embodies them, helps a viewer to deconstruct the ideas surrounding those codes, and ask themselves why they are so slavishly dedicated to them. Using Peircian semiotics, and analyzing scenes through the paradigm of firstness, secondness, and

thirdness, the viewer gains a much deeper understanding of the film than its slasher aesthetic might suggest. The film's rich critique of culture, class, and the ideas we hold regarding those things from an American point of view, viewed through the semiotic lens, along with the historical and psychological context that the film undertakes, brings the viewer to one of the best possible readings of the movie.