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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.

To discuss *American Psycho* on a semiotic level, first, care should be taken to explain the basic plot of the film to a reader. 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 highly successful, living the crem-de-la-crem lifestyle that so many Americans seek to reach. He 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 yuppie 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, and at the climax of the film, he confesses all of his crimes. The next morning, however, all evidence of his crimes have been wiped away. In Bateman's own words, 'This confession has meant nothing'. Further analysis of the film, more specifically certain pertinent scenes, will take place as this paper progresses, but it is important to have a generalized understanding of the content of the film itself.

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

In any case, Bateman is a deeply disturbed individual, displaying many symptoms [59] of severe mental illness. Such illnesses 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 extremely narcissistic towards those around him, and has almost no true empathy for others. He is brazen in his murders, making almost no attempt to hide his nature from those around him. On several instances, he even confesses to his peers and colleagues that he is a murderer. Fascinatingly, their reactions do not at all seem congruous with his grisly admissions, instead, they simply brush him off.

Indeed, the reactions to Bateman by those around him affect an air of nonchalance, or willful ignorance. People seem too preoccupied with themselves to give Bateman any real thought, even mistaking him for another man on several occasions. The people Bateman interacts with seem 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 in such a way as to fully engross the viewer in the film experience.

First Section: *American Psycho* as postmodern film

I **want to write about** *American Psycho*'s existence as a postmodern film. I **plan to write about** how the film's existence as a postmodern film affects the way the story and narrative are conveyed to the viewer, and how that affects the message obtained by the viewer. I **would like my reader** to have a strong understanding of postmodern film as it applies to *American Psycho*, and to also understand the way postmodernist qualities greatly affect the film's overall messaging.

- I will summarize, briefly, the film's plot, including the vagaries of what is actually happening in the story.
- I will write about postmodernism in film, and its characteristics.
- I will write about how *American Psycho* exemplifies these characteristics.
- I will write about how *American Psycho*'s postmodernism better helps to clarify the points the film is trying to make.

Second Section: Patrick Bateman's mind

I **want to write about** Patrick Bateman, or more specifically, the character's personality and psyche. I **plan to** illustrate Bateman's symptoms of madness, as well touch upon the cultural connotations that arrive from a member of the 1% being a murderer. I **would like my reader** to have a strong understanding of who Patrick Bateman is, as well as why his specific characteristics are crucial to the meaning of the film.

- I will use specific scenes to illustrate aspects of Bateman's personality.

- I will use the film's loosely interpretable plot structure to call into question certain assumed parts of Bateman's character.
- I will use evidence, within and without the film, to indicate that Bateman exhibits certain qualities of mental illnesses such as antisocial personality disorder, among others.
- I will show why these specific characteristics of Bateman's are crucial to a true, deeper understanding of *American Psycho*.

Third section: The decade of greed

I want to write about the 1980's as the 'Decade of Greed', using historical sources to detail how the culture of the 1980s was characterized by materialism. **I plan to** write about how materialism as a cultural component in America leads to the criticisms found in *American Psycho*. **I would like my readers to** feel as though American materialism can lend itself to predatory practices, as shown by the film.

- I will write about materialism as a concept, and how it relates to ideas of predation and greed.
- I will write about how America has a culture of materialism.
- I will write about the 1980's, and characterize them as a 'Decade of Greed', taking into account historical evidence for and against this idea.
- I will write about how *American Psycho* embodies, due to its setting and content, the two ideas above.

Fourth Section: The other characters of *American Psycho*.

I want to write about the people around Patrick Bateman, and how they interact with him. **I plan on** looking at the people around Bateman, their reactions to him, and how that ties back into previously discussed aspects of the paper. **I would like my reader to** appreciate the impact the other characters have in defining and illustrating the greater themes of the movie.

- I will write about the character's reactions towards Bateman, using specific examples from the film.
- I will write about how characters mistake Bateman for other characters throughout the film.
- I will write about how these actions are highly abnormal given the context.
- I will write about how these actions relate back to the ideas of the 'decade of greed'.

Fifth Section : The Modern Psychopath

I want to write about how the ideas of *American Psycho* still have relevance to modern American culture. **I plan to write about** the concepts behind the film, and how they relate to contemporary society in the United States. I will show how the things criticized and mocked in the film are still culturally relevant today. **I would like my readers** to understand *American Psycho* as not just a criticism of the 1980's yuppie culture, but culture in the United States in general.

- I will write about how predation and greed, as seen in the film, are still serious parts of American culture.
- I will write about how the self-centeredness, vanity, and narcissism exhibited by Bateman is still a component of culture, using phenomena such as social media as evidence.

- I will write about how even though the film points these flaws out in the context of the 1980s, the critiques are perfectly applicable regardless of time period due to the method by which the story is told.
- I will write about how the film indicates that, although Bateman is an extremely evil person, when he stands in contrast to those around him, those around him are also shown to be morally lacking, thus indicating that certain aspects of Bateman's character are applicable to everybody.

Sixth Section: This is not a pipe.

I want to write about how the film's vague sense of reality is intricately linked to its themes of insanity and identity. **I plan to** relate the film to the famous painting, *The Treachery of Images*, linking that painting's themes to the ideas of *American Psycho*. **I would like my readers** to better comprehend how irreality can lead them to applying the critical lens of *American Psycho* to themselves.

- I will write about *The Treachery of Images* and the painting's greater meaning, especially in a semiotic context.
- I will write about how *American Psycho* poses similar questions due to its own strange narrative structure.
- I will write about how the painting's ideas apply to *American Psycho*'s particular blend of postmodernism.

- I will write about how these ideas may indicate to a reader the benefit of scrutinizing themselves in the context of the film.

Conclusion : The ideas of insecurity, madness, murder, and greed are all present in *American Psycho*, and they 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 it's 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.

