

## Manufactured Identities

“Champagne wishes and caviar dreams. Welcome to the lifestyles of the rich and famous.” No phrase better characterizes the superficial values of American society in the 1980s. The 1980s was a time dominated by extravagance, greed, envy and egocentrism. People were obsessed with their outward appearance, social standing and fitting in with society. They cared more about the brand names, fancy import cars and luxury apartments than inner values and core ethics. Americans were judged by the value of their material objects, rather than by their true personality and moral character. In the movie “American Psycho” produced by Mary Harron, the main character, Patrick Bateman, is mentally torn by these 80s values and forced to construct a “fake” version of himself to better fit in with society. Harron uses three 80s pop culture songs, “Hip to be square,” “Greatest Love of all” and “Invisible Touch” to expose just how ludicrous the obsession with conformity, egocentrism, and consumerism was during the 1980s.

Along with the general narcissism of the 1980’s, people had an overwhelming desire to fit-in, or conform. If you were not the spitting image of wealthy celebrities and pop culture, driving BMWs, living in expensive homes, and maintaining a “perfect” body, then you were no one. You were an outsider; an outcast shunned for your uniqueness, personality and individuality. In the film “American Psycho,” in order to avoid these potential risks, Bateman spends hours each morning perfecting his “costume” in order to better integrate with his peers. He literally molds himself into the person society wants him to be, carefully constructing himself an artificial identity. Bateman’s procedure begins with his daily morning routine; placing ice mask on his face, using deep pore cleansers, training his abdominal muscles, applying anti-aging eye balm and

finishing off with a herb-mint facial mask. While applying the mask, the movie makes it appear as if the mask is literally molding Bateman's face into a copy of society's ideal person. This mask only creates an "idea of a Patrick Bateman, a kind of abstraction. But there is no real [Bateman], only an entity, something illusory." His routines have depleted away his own personality and entity. Bateman is now merely a duplicate of every other Wall-Street executive, with no real substance inside him. Although Bateman has and conforms with everything - the perfect cars, a great job, nice house and clothes - this is not good enough for him, and no matter how much he conforms with society, he has jealous urges and is internally torn.

The repercussions associated with Bateman's emptiness can be seen in the scene of the film where Bateman murders his coworker and supposed friend, Paul Allen. Like Bateman, Allen is also an executive at Pierce and Pierce and seems to fit-in very well with society. In fact, maybe just a little too well for Bateman's liking, which causes Bateman to become jealous of Allen. Allen has the better business cards, the superior apartment with views of Central Park, and is able to get the better dinner reservations at the higher-scale restaurants. Because of the 1980 society's materialistic and hedonistic values, these petty differences torment Bateman and cause him to murder his own "friend." During this scene, Bateman's apartment is filled with the music of Huey Lewis and The News echoing the words: "It's hip to be square, it's hip to be a square... But there is no denying that, its hip to be a square." This popular 80s song echoes a dominating belief of that culture: the need to fit-in with and be accepted by society. Unfortunately, in the 80s, conformity was with materialistic extravagances, rather than with moral values. Mary Harron uses this song to show how foolish and inane these core

values are. Handsome, rich and smart, a man of Bateman's stature was seen as perfect in the eyes of the 80's society. However, because Bateman has managed to seamlessly mesh into society he has lost himself and his own identity. In reality, he is a morally empty person who is frustrated by his emptiness and thus, in order to create a sense of individuality and fill the void inside him, Bateman has urges to partake in actions inconceivable to any other upwardly mobile Wall-Street Yuppie. By killing Allen, Bateman is opposing the meaning of the song and turning into a "renegade" denying the fact that it is "hip to be a square." Ironically, as Bateman is murdering his friend and rebelling against society, this idea that "it's hip to be a square" and a conformed part of society is continuously ringing in the viewers' head. The viewers realize how foolish this idea of total conformity is, and that conformity has driven Bateman insane. By murdering Allen, Bateman is literally and figuratively killing this idea of conformity by radically going against society and taking a risk that no other Wall-Street type would ever dare take.

Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All" preaches the importance of self-respect, dignity, self-worth and individuality. Houston urges society that "learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all" and the most important thing in life is learning to be yourself and "never walk[ing] in anyone's shadow." Ironically, Bateman once again twists the lyrics of the song in order to make it echo the egotistical nature of the 80s. Bateman says that the song is saying "since it's impossible in the world we live in to empathize with others, we can always empathize with ourselves." Here Harron has Bateman purposely misinterpreting the lyrics of song to expose to the viewer how egocentric and ignorant society has become. People are no longer capable of feeling

empathy towards anyone but themselves, contradicting the true meaning of the word, which is to feel for others. People of the 80s have become so obsessed with their own self-worth, net worth and personal advancement that this song's literal words have become accurate; we do only love ourselves. Bateman shows his lack of empathy for others and his self-absorption through the way he treats his friend Elizabeth and his prostitute. Bateman feels no emotions for them and treats them like entertainment objects, rather than humans. He degrades them to where they lose all of their dignity and self-worth. In the scene Bateman tells the girls that he "would like to see the two of [them] get it on" in front of him on his couch. Initially Elizabeth says no claiming that he is making her "feel weird" and that she is "not in the mood for a lewd conversation." Eventually, however, Elizabeth gives in and as the scene progresses, Elizabeth and the prostitute fail to maintain their self dignity and end up performing sexual acts on one another. Harron is portraying the girls as the exact opposite of the song. As the scene progresses, the girls become fully dismantled, both physically and emotionally. The girls have become nothing more than wasted objects, with no self-worth or pride. All the while, Bateman is really more obsessed with himself than with the girls, as he simply looks at himself in the mirror, mostly ignoring the girls and focusing on himself. Harron takes the scene even further, when both girls fall into having rough sex with Bateman, ending with both of their deaths. During this scene, by twisting the true meaning of the lyrics of Whitney Houston's popular song "Greatest Love of All," Harron shows how imbecilic society's narcissism has become. Harron shows us that society's self-centered nature is destroying other's self-worth and the self-worth of society as a whole.

Aiding to the destruction of self worth, the 1980's consumer-based society even

allowed for the purchase of intangible goods, like emotions. In the 1980s, if one had the money and the social status one could do anything, even purchase love. Although popular songs, like “Invisible Touch” by Genesis spoke to its audience about the power of true love, in the film “American Psycho”, Bateman portrays the exact opposite of this idea. In the song “Invisible Touch” the speaker says that although his love has “got something [he] cannot trust” and “the ability to take everything she sees” he loves her so much that no matter what she does he still “seems to be falling, falling for her.” The speaker is so in love with this girl that she has total control over him and he does not even care. He knows that she has an invisible touch that “takes control and slowly tears [him] apart”, but because he loves her so much he stays with her. It is true love that is felt, not purchased. Bateman’s relationships are totally different. Although Bateman has a fiancé, whom he does not love, but rather only dates to improve his outward image of perfection within his very important 1980s social standing, he pays for two prostitutes to love him and construct false emotion. While this song speaks of deep, true emotions, Bateman is simply buying his “love” because, in the 1980s, one could buy anything. Also, unlike the song, Bateman does have the control and the “invisible touch” over his “purchases.” He is not lovesick like the speaker in the song, but conversely he is sickening and is destroying the meaning of love. In this scene, as “Invisible Touch” is playing in the background Bateman has total control over his prostitute. In fact, as soon as he mentions the name of the song “Invisible Touch,” the girls get up off the couch like robots and do as he commands. Here, Harron is paradoxically using the song to expose the ridiculous nature of the consumer culture of the 80s. Bateman’s emotions that he experiences through his prostitutes are no longer intangible items, like the speaker’s love in the song,

but they are Bateman's own possessions that he purchases, like everything else in the 80s. Thus, the girls are very easily controlled and manipulated by Bateman, obeying his every command because they know they are his objects, his purchases. Harron shows through the contradiction of the true meaning of this song that the consumer culture of the 80s has gotten so bad that people no longer even need to wait for love, they can simply buy it like any other good. This consumerism has destroyed our society and has even made intangible feelings, like love, become objects that can be controlled, purchased and sold, thereby eliminating the validity and naturalness of love and emotion.

Although in society's eyes Bateman appears to be the perfect person, he is truly nothing, but a façade, an illusion. Bateman's obsession with conformity, his egoism, and his fashion-dictated materialism have left him with nothing. Once the facial masks and the Valentino suits are removed, Bateman is an empty entity. He is a person with no core substance or value. In the movie, Bateman turns to murder and oppression as the only ways to fill the void inside him. The reality that Bateman has become so homogenous to his peers that only a deed so harsh like murder can differentiate him is despicable. Harron overtly exposes this to her viewers through her use of pop culture. Each song Harron chooses ("Hip to be Square", "Greatest Love of All", and "Invisible Touch") speaks of a different 80s value (conformity, egocentrism, and consumerism) where she then has Bateman twist the lyrics to show society the idiocy behind these ideas. During the 80s, Americans truly were "living in a material world" (Madonna) that was overtaking our culture and destroying our society.

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