Journal of American Studies, **42** (2008), 1, 19–33 © 2008 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0021875807004355 Printed in the United Kingdom

The Generic American Psycho

DAVID ELDRIDGE

Following Elizabeth Young's 1991 analysis of the controversy surrounding the publication of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, this article discusses the efforts of the makers of the 2000 film adaptation to "rehabilitate" the novel. It explores the recognition of Mary Harron and Guinevere Turner that Patrick Bateman was constructed from the literary debris of a variety of "debased" genres, how they responded by constructing a specifically cinematic Bateman and how, in doing so, they renegotiated the "pigeonholes" of genre fiction originally used in hostile reviews to dismiss Ellis's authorial intent.

Clearly one of the most controversial contributions to contemporary literature, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) was met with an extreme critical reaction which sought to discredit the work entirely. Over time, of course, the novel's reputation has improved. Indeed, the hostile reception itself inevitably marked *American Psycho* as a text in need of rehabilitation, and in academic circles it is now often regarded as a postmodern classic – a process led by Elizabeth Young's essay "The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet," which asserted that "not since *The Satanic Verses* had a book been so poorly read."[1] Following the tradition of all good horror stories in spawning sequels, this article is offered as a follow-up to Young's work – by way of analysing the discourse that surrounded the film adaptation by Mary Harron and Guinevere Turner, released by Lions Gate in 2000. Specifically, on both occasions, the inherent power of genre classifications was a constant concern, with Ellis accused of the "crime" of having "transgressed … against genre,"[2] and Harron's version similarly disconcerting some critics as she "blithely tap dance[d] along the faultlines separating genres."[3]

Dr. David Eldridge is a lecturer in American Studies at the University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX. E-mail D.N.Eldridge@hull.ac.uk.

[1] Elizabeth Young, "The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet," in Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 85–122, 88.

[2] Naomi Wolf, "The Animals Speak," *New Statesman and Society*, 12 April 1991, 33.

[3] Stephen Holden, "*American Psycho*: Murderer! Fiend! Cad! (But Well Dressed)," *New York Times*, 14 April 2000, E1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The tumult surrounding the release of the novel should be a familiar story. The leaking of grisly passages, self-evidently out of context, to *Time* and *Spy* magazines; uproar from the National Organization of Women (NOW), calling for a boycott of Ellis's publishers; said publishers, Simon and Schuster, reneging on their contract and dropping the novel just weeks before it was due to be released; Random House stepping into the fray and picking up the rights to ensure publication; and critics, such Roger Rosenblatt of the *New York Times*, following the lead of NOW and calling upon would-be readers to "snuff this book."[4] A full accounting of this media tirade is rendered in Young's essay, as well as in Julian Murphet's recent "Reader's Guide."

One of the most interesting aspects of Young's analysis of the novel's reception comes when she points out how reviewers repeatedly sought to deny that *American Psycho* was actually "literature." Rosenblatt specifically asserted that Ellis's text was "subliterary" – a "fake," not a "real book."[5] *Saturday Night*'s Alberto Manguel repeated this charge of fraud, warning the public not to be "duped" by the fact that *American Psycho* was being published by a respectable press, with an artistic cover and a quote from Dostoevsky on the first page. This, said Manguel, was simply a "set-up" to "make readers believe that the story that follows is of a literary nature."[6] Others simply dismissed it as "artless" "junk."[7] Even *Publisher's Weekly* agreed that the book was not "acceptable in mainstream publishing."[8] Yet if it was "no literary work," where did it belong?[9]

The strategy of the majority of critics was one of containment – to try to confine *American Psycho* to genre, reclassifying it as really belonging to implicitly "debased" forms of writing. NOW began the process, condemning it as a "how-to-manual" on the "torture and dismemberment of women."[10] Then, even before publication, *National Review* explicitly categorized the book

[4] Roger Rosenblatt, "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get away with Murder?," *New York Times Book Review*, 16 Dec. 1990, 3.

[5] Ibid., 16.

[6] Alberto Manguel, "Designer Porn," *Saturday Night*, July 1991, 46.

[7] "Junk" was one of the epithets applied by Rosenblatt, and appeared in numerous other "reviews" including John Leo's opinion piece on "Marketing Cynicism and Vulgarity" in *U.S. News and World Report*, 3 Dec. 1990, 23. Brad Miner of the *National Review* apparently found "artless" and "degrading pulp" to be more appropriate (Brad Miner, "Random Notes," *National Review*, 31 Dec. 1990, 43). It is worth noting that all of these statements appeared before *American Psycho* was actually in print.

[8] Quoted in John Berry, "*American Psycho* is not the Problem," *Library Journal*, January 1991, 6.

[9] Manguel, 46.

[10] See Julian Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's* American Psycho*: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2002), 68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as "pornography, not literature."[11] This assessment was reiterated when Manguel entitled his review "Designer Porn," and when Naomi Wolf agreed that Bateman's actions mirrored the "things usually done to women under the shade of pornography."[12]

Other reviewers sought to define the text as horror fiction – only then to argue that *American Psycho* did not rate well even within this genre. The novel was compared unfavourably with the works of Thomas Harris, whose *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs* were held up to be better examples of the genre because they were "purely popular novels about serial killers" that made "no pretence to literary seriousness."[13] Ellis's graphic physical horror – including scenes of Bateman masturbating with the decapitated head of one female victim, and forcing a starving rat into the vagina of another – reminded one or two critics of the extreme "splatterpunk" horror writing of the late 1980s which was designed to be "stomach-churning" in its effect.[14] But since most "splatterpunk" authors, like those represented in Paul Sammon's 1990 anthology, had been marginalized and were largely unfamiliar to "mainstream" critics, many struggled to place *American Psycho* in a convincing context of print. Instead, reviewers fell back on their awareness of film, asserting that Ellis must have had "Freddy Krueger fixed in his head" to produce a book "as ridiculous in its excesses as the horror films it purports to emulate."[15]

Of course, Ellis never "purported" to be emulating any horror movie or "video nasty." Trying to make sense of this rather sub-intellectual line of criticism, his own conclusion was that "for many people" the problem with *American Psycho* was that it did not easily "fit" the confines of genre fiction. Identifying the work of authors Poppy Z. Brite and James Ellroy as containing material "incredibly more violent" than anything in his book, Ellis argued that the difference in critical reception derived from the fact that Brite's fiction was marketed as "horror" and Ellroy's as "crime" – and both produced texts which "fit" within the parameters, and hence the critical expectations, of their respective genres.[16] The insistence on relabelling *American Psycho* as (sub-)genre fiction thus presented a way of suspending normal critical engagement with the text itself; if it was not "literature" then it did not need to be reviewed as such.

[11] Miner, 43.
[12] Wolf, "The Animals Speak," 33.
[13] Terry Teachout, "Applied Deconstruction," *National Review*, 24 June 1991, 46.
[14] Manguel, 46.
[15] Pagan Kennedy, "Generation Gaffe," *Nation*, 1 April 1993, 426.
[16] Quoted in Joshua Klein's "Interview: Bret Easton Ellis," *The Onion*, 17 March 1999, now archived at http://avclub.com/content/node/24229 (accessed June 2005).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While this attitude was challenged and overturned by subsequent academic re-evaluation, steps towards mainstream recognition of the poverty of initial criticism were only tentative. Notably, in 1996 James Gardner of the *National Review* revisited the book to award it the more positive label of "transgressive fiction" and admitted that it "is not nearly as bad as many had supposed or hoped without having really read it."[17] That same year, however, Harron and Turner began work on their screenplay, itself embodying a much more positive assessment of Ellis's intentions and achievement, which was to have far greater influence on public awareness. Faced again with protests from NOW during filming, and the insistence of the Feminist Majority Foundation that there could be "no redeeming qualities to a misogynist product like this," the discourse surrounding and justifying the film was deliberately shaped to retrieve the novel from its "trash" reputation.[18] In doing so, the filmmakers specifically challenged the genre labels that had been attached to Ellis's novel.

Ellis's friend and fellow author Dennis Cooper led a direct challenge to the dismissal of *American Psycho* as "subliterary" – being accustomed to having his own work marginalized as sadomasochistic "gay fiction" (most notably in the case of his similarly disturbing *Frisk* (1991)). Afforded the chance to review the film in the pages of *Art Forum*, Cooper argued that *American Psycho* was tricky to adapt precisely because the novel "functions in a way that is entirely literary," with its "originality so language-based … that one can assume the movie-rights were bought on something like a dare."[19] Indeed, the novel consists of a profoundly alienating first-person narrative, in which Ellis adopts and remains in the persona of Bateman, resulting in a seemingly endless litany of grooming products, restaurant menus and designer labels – a text which only really comes "alive" when Patrick kills someone. It was this deadening prose which at first allowed to stick the accusation that *American Psycho* was "not literature," with the work dismissed as "ineptly" written. Yet the assumed style was evidently a deliberate aesthetic choice, one which satirized "the absolute banality" of the yuppie culture Bateman represents.[20] Media professor Christopher Sharret picked up on this assessment in *USA Today*, asserting that far from making the book "boring," Bateman's "incessant account of his dutiful consumption of all the latest *au courant* consumer goods … [and] the emphasis on personal excess to

[17] James Gardener, "Transgressive Fiction," *National Review*, 17 June 1996, 56.
[18] Quoted in Linda Kauffman, "Reviews: *American Psycho*," *Film Quarterly*, 54, 2 (2001), 45.
[19] Dennis Cooper, "More than Zero," *Artforum*, March 2000, 29.
[20] Interviewed in Roger Cohen, "Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of *American Psycho*," *New York Times*, 6 March 1991, C13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the exclusion of all other values" is what made the book "one of the key social testaments of our age."[21]

This perception of the novel's satiric and allegorical qualities became the general focus of film publicity, and repeated descriptions of Ellis's writing as "satire" restored a sense of seriousness of purpose and literary merit. Ellis himself was given an opportunity on the film's official website to reassert that he had written a "narrative built up of satirical riffs about greed, status, and the business values of the 1980s."[22] Both Harron and Turner agreed. Harron saw *American Psycho* as "a brilliant social satire,"[23] while Turner encouraged people to rethink their attitudes towards the book:

> I was definitely freaked out by the violence. It had pages and pages of stuff you wish you'd never read, but I also thought that it was funny, and I saw the satire and it was really sharp and timely.[24]

How "sharp" Ellis's satire might be is debatable, but with the film released as the dot-com boom came to its end, his portrait of Wall Street greed possessed a renewed resonance. In his fictive culture in which "surface" is everything, and "must have" designer suits and restaurant reservations are valued more than the life of a man, woman or child, Bateman the serial killer seems to act with impunity, presenting his increasingly excessive violence as an allegory for the consumerist excesses of the 1980s. His main victims (as Fay Weldon originally pointed out) are "the powerless, the poor, the wretched," those who "don't rate" in Reaganite America.[25] And embarking on cannibalism, Bateman literally consumes those he kills (frying the breasts of one in the novel; storing a severed head behind the sorbet in his fridge-freezer in the film). Both novel and film raise the question of whether Bateman does kill or whether it is all in his deranged head – but ultimately the satirical horror of both texts lies in the possibility that it might be real. For Bateman to actually get away with murders that are so grotesque as to be absurd it requires the people around him to be so cold and self-absorbed as not to care or not to notice. Indeed, society would actually have to clean up

[21] Christopher Sharrett, "American Psychosis," *USA Today* (*Society for Advancement of Education*), July 2000, 67.

[22] Bret Easton Ellis, "View to a Killer," from official film website http://www.americanpsycho.com/, now archived at http://homevideo.universalstudios.com/americanpsycho/index2.html (accessed June 2005).

[23] Quoted on official film website, now archived at http://homevideo.universalstudios.com/americanpsycho/index2.html (accessed June 2005).

[24] Quoted in Randall King, "Guinevere Turner Does Double Duty as Victim," *Winnepeg Sun*, 14 April 2000, 24.

[25] Fay Weldon, "Now You're Squeamish?," *Washington Post*, 28 April 1991, C4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the mess after him – and, as is suggested when Bateman is confronted with a real-estate agent who may have literally whitewashed the scene of his most horrific crimes, the only possible reason for this to occur would be to prevent any interruption to the making of profits. Harron was careful to preserve this scene and its implications.

Retrieving the text from the "pornography" pigeonhole proved to be relatively straightforward. The novel had graphically detailed Bateman's perpetration of sexual violence against women, but Ellis had always stressed that this was a realization of the misogyny of his protagonist. Harron again agreed, arguing that *American Psycho* was "a portrait of misogyny rather than misogynistic itself" and that it was "quite a brilliant attack on male behaviour."[26] Harron's reputation as a "feminist" filmmaker implicitly challenged assumptions (for how could the book be "porn" if a feminist was embracing it?) and drew renewed attention to Ellis's somewhat dubious claim that he had intended *American Psycho* to be a "feminist novel."[27] A key difficulty with the novel is that it aggressively requires the reader to provide the critical condemnation of Bateman's attitude and actions – for, in the first-person narrative, no such condemnation can be found within Bateman's own perspective. In the film, however, the camera is outside of Bateman, and so provides an alternative gaze that serves to convict him. This is particularly true in the most "pornographic" scene, in which Bateman has sex with two prostitutes. As Harron films it, it is comically evident that Patrick is utterly narcissistic, getting off on his own image in the mirror as he literally "performs," while the girls are singularly unimpressed and rather bored. Harron also ensured a greater identification with these women. When Patrick approaches the prostitute Christie to persuade her to go with him again, we see her scared of the danger but desperate for the money he offers. In the novel Bateman tells us that she acts "like a total sex kitten," but the "objectivity" provided by the camera instead delivers a "moral gaze" which Ellis, confined to writing from inside the misogynistic, self-obsessed mind of his character, could rarely provide.[28] Moreover, all directly sexual violence takes place off-screen, thus avoiding the potential titillation that haunted the novel. As a result, the only object in the film that could be described as pornographic is Bateman himself, fetishized in the display of Christian Bale's buff body.

[26] Interviewed in Sarah Kendzior, "American Psycho Drama," *Fangoria*, April 2000, 40.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), 284; Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's* American Psycho, 75.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The position that the film sought to find in relation to the horror genre, however, was rather more complicated. In as far as the general public knew the novel, it was for its reputation for violence as horrific as any "video nasty." With a title invoking Hitchcock's 1960 classic and a poster dominated by a plunging knife, audiences were also prompted to expect a serial-killer slasher movie. The filmmakers, however, went out of their way to dispel such associations. As Turner told the media, "We knew from the start … that if done incorrectly, this screenplay could translate into an exploitative slasher film. That was the last thing we wanted."[29] Determined to avoid "all that stuff with dead bodies" that had led to the comparisons with splatterpunk, Harron instead chose to stylize much of the violence as "black comedy."[30] The most notable instance sees Bateman dancing in a raincoat and delivering a monologue about the merits of Huey Lewis and the News, while readying himself to swing an axe into a rival's head. Rather than show the impact of the axe as in the novel (where "a section of his brain … forces itself out, pink and glistening, through the wounds in his face"[31]), Harron simply shot bright red blood splashing on Bateman's coat. Black humour also plays through a moment in which Bateman seems set on murdering his secretary, while she remains oblivious to his intentions and interprets his warnings that he may hurt her as being about emotional rather than physical pain. The scene is fraught with tension, but not physical horror – and when the film was released, reviewers fell in line to congratulate Harron on *not* producing "three hours of stabbing, slashing, torture, guts and gore."[32] *USA Today* explicitly welcomed it as "more than a slasher film,"[33] while British critic Peter Bradshaw considered that in "having most of the slicing and dicing happen off-camera," Harron had "saved" *American Psycho* from "looking like a slasher movie with pretensions."[34]

Although Lions Gate was not then the largest independent producer–distributor in North America that it is today, it was astute enough to exploit the marketing strategies that had been developed by the "major independents" Miramax and New Line, to suggest that *American Psycho* "crossed over" the boundaries between exploitation–horror genres and "art house" cinema. Miramax had scored major successes in their campaigns to widen the

[29] "Bringing it to the Screen" on official film website, now archived at http://homevideo.universalstudios.com/americanpsycho/index2.html (accessed June 2005).
[30] Interviewed in Jeff Sipe, "Blood Symbol," *Sight and Sound*, July 1999, 8.
[31] Ellis, *American Psycho*, 217.
[32] Emma Forrest, "Laugh Til You Die," *Daily Telegraph Weekend Magazine*, 1 April 2000, 57.
[33] Sharrett, "American Psychosis," 67.
[34] Peter Bradshaw, "Nightmare on Wall Street," *Guardian*, 12 April 2000, 2.4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appeal of both *The Crying Game* and *Pulp Fiction* "from an art house audience to a wider action-thriller clientele."[35] Reversing this, Lions Gate took the "horror" audience as a given, and sought to widen the appeal to supposedly more "discerning" audiences. In interview, Harron and Turner repeatedly invoked the names of Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick and Roman Polanski – *auteurs* noted for creating suspense and terror in canonical films, reinforcing the idea that they had similarly "risen above" the sub-genre of shock horror.[36] Thus, for instance, the "black comedy" label attached to *American Psycho* in film publicity recalled Hitchcock's famous assertion that he had made his *Psycho* as a comedy. Somewhat ironically, however, this determination to place *American Psycho* in the same bracket as *Psycho*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Shining* itself reinforced the cultural hierarchies which critics had used to discredit the novel in the first place – drawing on an acclaimed "canon" rather than celebrating the "transgressive" qualities of horror that aficionados have highlighted in their defence of the genre.

Still, the effort to justify the film adaptation was a considerable success. Indeed, it created a fascinating scenario in which the discourse surrounding the film actually generated a public reappraisal of the novel – now advanced by movie critics rather than the literati. It even became a standard refrain that the book had been "poorly read" and "widely misinterpreted" in 1991 – making the exact same point that Young had argued in academic circles.[37] Demonstrating just how far things had come since Ellis had been savaged for suggesting *American Psycho* ought to be read as a satire, some film reviews actually expressed concern that Bale's Bateman might come across as too "conventional" a psychotic, putting at risk the "satirical thrust" of the original.[38]

Yet, ironically, this successful "retrieval" of the book from the confines of genre itself obscured one of the most accomplished aspects of the adaptation itself. For, in fact, in both texts the very identity of Patrick Bateman himself – as a literary and filmic character – depends upon an explicit de-stabilization of genres. As Cooper attested, Ellis's work indeed functions on

[35] Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," in Steve Neale and Murray Smith, eds., *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), 74–90, 81.

[36] See interviews in Kendzior, "American Psycho Drama," 41 and 82; and Annie Nocenti, "Adapting and Directing *American Psycho*," *Scenario*, 5, 4 (2001), 153–59, 187–90, 187.

[37] Kauffman, "Reviews," 41; Kim Newman, "Reviews: *American Pyscho*," *Empire*, May 2000, 46.

[38] Richard Porton, "Review: *American Psycho*," *Cineaste*, Summer 2000, 44. Jonathan Romney similarly missed the novel's "authentic babble of nightmare" (Jonathan Romney, "Retro Psycho," *New Statesman*, 24 April 2000, 47).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a highly literary level, with Bateman himself a narrator built from all sorts of cultural debris – specifically from "writing" usually regarded as debased literature. He is, to quote Ellis, literally "a mixture of *GQ* and *Stereo Review* and *Vanity Fair* and *Fangoria*."[39]

Almost everything Bateman has to say is a "recycling" of such texts. While apparently he can identify the difference between an Armani tie and one by Bill Blass, or between wool-crepe suits by Bill Robinson and Alexander Julian, his incessant description of what everyone is wearing simply consists of an inane regurgitation of minutiae from fashion magazines. When one of his colleagues even describes him as "totally *GQ*," it actually makes Patrick "feel proud in a way."[40] Such "style bibles" similarly inform his knowledge of what particular body moisturizers and facial creams will do, as if he absorbs their advertising through his skin along with the product. His knowledge of restaurants is guided entirely by reviews in the *New York Times*, but he will change any opinion, without any sense of contradiction, to bring it in line with what he is told about Donald Trump's tastes and preferences. Moreover, the chapter-long evaluations of Huey Lewis, Whitney Houston and Genesis, which punctuate the novel, suggest the voice of a conservative music journalist, not Bateman himself. When expressing any other opinion, his language is pure media-speak, delivering strings of soundbites with no sense of consistent political philosophy:

> We have to end apartheid … And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger … prevent the spread of communism in Central America, work for a Middle East peace settlement, prevent U.S. military involvement oversees … At the same time we need to promote economic growth and business expansion *and* hold the line against federal income taxes …[41]

This monologue was specifically preserved in the film, with Harron and Turner intuitively understanding that the absurd "mechanical recitation of correct attitudes" was about Bateman "trying on that identity."[42] The satiric conceit underlying all this is that Bateman has no identity beyond that which he consumes.

This gains particular significance when it comes to the novel's violence. Ellis's Bateman tells us directly that his reading matter consists of the biographies of real-life serial killers (Ted Bundy, Ed Gein and so on), and that he compulsively watches "video nasties" (time and again he rents Brian DePalma's *Body Double* (1984) to masturbate over the scene in which a woman is killed with a power-drill). He is also well aware of Tobe Hooper's

[39] Interview in Robert Love, "Psycho Analysis," *Rolling Stone*, 4 April 1991, 49.
[40] Ellis, *American Psycho*, 90. [41] Ibid., 15. [42] Interviewed in Nocenti, 154.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), losing his cool when a colleague mistakenly refers to Leatherface as "Featherhead." Critics in 1991 had noted that "the violence is second-hand, stolen from slasher films"[43] – but used this to dismiss Ellis, rather than to understand the ambiguous implications: as to whether Bateman's violence re-creates what he sees and reads, just as he repeats everything else he reads, or whether it is another identity he is trying on in his mind. It is worth noting that the scenes of graphic violence and mutilation are, on the authorial level, specific interjections from other texts – Ellis drew upon the FBI case files of real serial killers in providing the horrific level of detail.[44] Moreover, the equally explicit descriptions of sex, which usually precede (and overlap with) Bateman's vicious attacks, are themselves "replays" of the hardcore pornography Patrick reads and watches and then cannibalizes.

Once again, Harron and Turner had arrived at this interpretation and publicized it, noting how "the killing and sex with strangers are part of the same thing, part of the fantasy person that he is, the porn and horror movie character that he's made into one thing in his mind."[45] And, as Turner acknowledged, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Ellis's writing was his "tricking [readers] between genres" – having them read "a four-page description of a sex scene that reads just like a *Penthouse* letter [as] it slowly slips into the horrible violence."[46] Their adaptation therefore adopted the same disquieting strategy, destabilizing Bateman and his perspective on events by constructing his world from a variety of cultural debris.

Certainly the acknowledged "debts" to Kubrick, Hitchcock and Polanski are in evidence. Polanski's compositions in creating a malevolent environment in *The Tenant* (1976) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) are mimicked in shots of Bateman's apartment. The spiral staircase down which Bateman drops a chainsaw, for instance, is shot in the same way as the stairwell in *The Tenant* – an apt reference given that both films concern a protagonist whose sanity unravels until he (and the audience) no longer know what is real. Likewise, nods to Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) associate Bateman's descent into madness with the mania of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson). There are stylistic similarities, such as the way that stainless steel kitchens in both Bateman's apartment and the Overlook Hotel are used to create the atmosphere of a morgue. In particular, Harron mirrors the moment that tips Torrance into his final frenzy, when he "meets" Delbert Grady and the

[43] Kennedy, "Generation Gaffe," 428.
[44] Jaime Clarke, "An Interview with Bret Easton Ellis," http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/8506/Ellis/clarkeint2.html (accessed July 12 2005).
[45] Interviewed in Nocenti, 188.
[46] Ibid., 189.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

long-dead Grady's controlled, expressionless face and equally controlled statements serve to undermine Jack's grasp on reality. In the similarly crucial scene near the end of *American Psycho* where Bateman meets the realtor, the agent adopts the same mask-like face and controlled language, to disrupt again the authority of what we have seen through the protagonist's eyes.[47]

References to *The Tenant* and *The Shining* are additionally appropriate, given that Harron and Turner interpreted *American Psycho* as a dissection of masculine identity and machismo. In *The Tenant* Trelkovsky loses his grasp on his gender, "trying on" the identity of a woman to self-destructive effect; while Jack Torrance's homicidal rage – like Bateman's – can be interpreted as the product of his inability to "resolve the various social roles" associated with masculinity.[48] Intimations of Hitchcock's films are used to similar effect, bolstering the idea that Bateman's violence (whether real or imagined) is driven by an impulse to carve out an individual, masculine identity for himself. As his gloved hands reach out to strangle colleague Louis Carruthers, John Cale's score becomes very reminiscent of Bernard Hermann's compositions for Hitchcock. Invoking Bruno's strangulation of Miriam in *Strangers on a Train*, the scene thus prompts consideration of the similarities between Bateman and Bruno: both rich, spoilt and murderously destructive.[49] When the moment turns comic and Louis mistakes Patrick's advance as a declaration of homosexual desire, one is reminded too of Bruno's implied sexuality – suggesting that Bateman's excessive machismo may be yet another mask of denial. A further nod to Hermann's scores, especially of *North by Northwest*, accompanies shots of Bateman dwarfed by the buildings of New York City. Again, this is wryly appropriate since the protagonists of both films are iconic representatives of hegemonic masculinity in their respective times (Roger O. Thornhill, a Madison Avenue advertising executive in the 1950s; Patrick, the Wall Street yuppie of the 1980s), yet both are men who effectively lack an identity beyond that label. Bateman tells us that there "is an idea of Patrick Bateman" but he is "simply not there," akin to Thornhill's admission that the "O." stands "for nothing."[50] Moreover, questions of mistaken identity are crucial in both *North by Northwest* and

[47] Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's* American Psycho, 76.

[48] Mark Jancovich, *Horror* (London: Batsford, 1992), 104.

[49] *Strangers on a Train* was actually scored by Dmitri Tiomkin, but since Hermann provided the classic scores of *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest* and, of course, *Psycho* (itself referenced musically and visually at the very start of the film), Cale presumably found his compositions to be more immediately evocative of Hitchcock.

[50] For discussion of Hitchcock's dissection of Thornhill's masculine identity see chapter 1 of Steven Cohan's *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American Psycho – an issue which Harron particularly stressed. Bateman appears to get away with killing Paul Allen because Allen mistakes him for Marcus Halberstram – but then Bateman's climactic confession is meaningless because his own lawyer first mistakes him for "Davis" and then claims to have seen Allen alive and well in London (with the ambiguity remaining – for if the lawyer has misidentified Bateman, he could have easily misidentified Allen).

The actual murder of Allen itself offers another allusion to Kubrick's influence – Bateman dancing to "Hip to be Square" as a precursor to the kill, owes much to Alex (Malcolm McDowell) performing "Singin' in the Rain" as he viciously assaults the writer and his wife in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Yet the sequence also draws on another film indelibly associated with "ultra violence": with Allen seated and disoriented while Bateman makes quirky moves to the music, there are clear echoes of the ear-slicing scene in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). Indeed, the "cultural debris" apparent in *American Psycho* is much more diverse than the trinity Harron openly acknowledged. For instance, as in Abel Ferrera's *Driller Killer* (1979), Bateman's first victim is a wino sheltering in a dark alleyway. The shiny axe used against Allen may be like Jack Torrance's, but it is also the weapon of choice in *Friday the 13th* (1980), with victims similarly receiving a blow to the face. Tim Lucas has also identified a notable resemblance to 1969's *Hatchet for the Honeymoon* by Italian horror maestro Mario Bava. Just as in *American Psycho*, *Hatchet* features an early scene in which the handsome, successful businessman looks at his reflection and proceeds to tell the audience, directly, that not only is he psychotic but that he is in full realization of that fact. Furthermore, the scene when Bateman decides not to kill his secretary is also present in *Hatchet*, with Bava's protagonist delivering the exact same line, warning his date that he does not want to hurt her.[51] Thus, while publicity sought to disassociate *American Psycho* from "low" slasher horror, aspects of the genre were always present in the film itself.

Indeed, Harron's most explicit reference to "shock horror" is obvious in *American Pyscho*'s most nightmarish sequence, as Bateman wears nothing but his sneakers, splattered in blood, to chase Christie down dark, empty corridors, while brandishing a buzzing chainsaw. The blatant homage to Leatherface's extended chase of Sally through the dark woods in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* could not be plainer – reinforced when Christie finds bodies of women hung up like animal carcasses, just like Leatherface's first

[51] Tim Lucas, "DVD Review: *American Psycho*," *Video Watchdog*, 65 (November 2000), 40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

female victim.[52] Again, there are apt parallels to be drawn – like Leatherface, Bateman is seen wearing a mask, his being an ice-pack designed to preserve his youthful looks. And just as Leatherface's mask denies audiences any insight into his features or his personality, so Bateman's identity (or lack thereof) is hidden behind a self-described "mask of sanity." Most significantly, this chainsaw sequence is the first point at which audiences are directly prompted to question Bateman's reality. Until this moment, the murders and tortures have been presented in a realistically plausible manner, but the Grand Guignol of Christie's murder defies belief. Moreover, the audience has earlier seen *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* playing on Bateman's VCR as part of his daily routine. Are his crimes "copycat" killings inspired by media violence, or are they simply fantasies as Bateman projects himself into the visual culture he consumes? The same questions are raised of the sex scene, since we see Patrick watching a hardcore porno entitled *Inside Lydia's Ass* prior to his effort to replicate it with hired girls. Even his efforts to be suave with the girls seem to be an emulation of James Bond movies (a pertinent choice again, in view of Bond's misogyny and complete lack of remorse about killing people). Horror, porn and action films are all integral to who Bateman is (or wants to be) – with each referenced genre culturally associated with male aggression, violence and misogyny.

Thus it is entirely fitting that Ellis's novel and Harron's film converge directly in the most absurdly "cinematic moment" evidenced in the "Chase, Manhattan" chapter.[53] As Bateman's sanity really unravels, Ellis's narrative switches into third-person for a moment (in mid-sentence in fact). Patrick then becomes the star of the action thriller playing in his head, chased through New York City by police cars and helicopters. Harron faithfully depicts Bateman's exchange of gunfire with the cops until – "like in a movie," according to the book – a bullet hits the fuel tank of the police car to cause an explosion of atomic proportions.[54] The film even increases the surrealism, as Bale gives the gun in his hand a look of disbelief – having the character himself doubt the exaggerated parody of action genre clichés. It is on this level that Harron's adaptation offered real insight into the text. Ellis's Bateman is constructed out of everything he reads and consumes – which is then used to key the reader into his unreliability as a narrator. Harron's Bateman too is an intertextual creation, a fictive persona. But since Harron is constructing a cinematic Bateman, she draws on cinematic references, rather

[52] The DVD release removes any doubt, as the "chapter" title for this sequence is "Chainsaw Massacre Pt 2." [53] Murphet, 43. [54] Ellis, *American Psycho*, 350.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

than "literary" sources, to achieve the exact same undermining of his identity.

Some critics remained discomfited or unpersuaded. *Commonweal*, for instance, recognized Harron's "genre riffs, from chainsaw massacre to mean streets gumshoe, to porn," but saw no purpose in this, concluding that the film "can't decide whether it is satire, merrily gruesome allegorical farce, or the nightmare of a man trapped in his own violent delusion."[55] *Cineaste* agreed, additionally perceiving a "warped parody of television advertising" in Bateman's voice-over stylings, but finding the film's balance "between satire and genuine horror" to be "precarious."[56] Yet many more critics understood the intent. As the *New Statesman* reviewer threw out terms such as "slasher thriller," "yuppie comedy," "costume drama" and "black comedy" to signal to audiences how they could interpret the film, he also acknowledged that the power of Ellis's original novel lay in it being "a genuinely cacophonous text."[57]

Having been abandoned by his publishers, Ellis had effectively lacked the cultural weight to challenge NOW and critics like Rosenblatt and advance better readings of his "authorial intent," but the filmmakers had had more power in disseminating their interpretations. Undoubtedly their determination to do so was sharpened by the $8 million investment represented by the movie, but their success also partly lay in the nature of film reviewing. In contrast to book reviews, film magazines offered free publicity, covering the making of the movie prior to release, and thus giving Harron and Turner, along with Bale and Ellis too, a chance to shape the way in which the film would be received and talked about. Movie critics were more accustomed to dealing with graphic horror than book reviewers were in 1991, and could also avail themselves of the subsequent academic literature when commenting on the original text (indeed, direct – if unacknowledged – quotations from Young appeared in *Film Quarterly*'s review).[58] Moreover, during the 1990s the "major independents" – the ranks of which Lions Gate was just entering – had already established the cultural credibility of independent films which transgressed or blurred the boundary between art and mainstream cinemas – and the film critic community frequently responded positively to movies which did just that. *American Psycho*'s references to both "high" and "low" culture genres were not only crucial to the construction of Bateman, but from a marketing perspective they enabled the film to find a much broader

[55] Rand Richards Cooper, "Committed," *Commonweal*, 19 May 2000, 21.
[56] Porton, "Review," 43.
[57] Jonathan Romney, "Retro Psycho," 46–47.
[58] Kauffman ("Reviews: *American Psycho*," 41) directly repeats Young's observation that "no book since Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* had been so poorly read."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"crossover" audience – making it the first of Lions Gate's major successes (and encouraging the company to dedicate itself to distributing films deemed too controversial for American studios to handle).

Whatever one's opinion of the merits (and deficiencies) of both book and film, it is evident that Ellis's novel required interpretation before it could be filmed, and that Harron's and Turner's interpretations were very similar to those suggested by Young *et al.* They thus produced an adaptation which explicitly emulated Ellis's transgression of genre boundaries, even as they sought to use specific genre labels to channel and shape a more positive critical discourse. Ironically, the filtration of scholarly reappraisals of the novel into mainstream readings of the book was in large part due to the recognition that neither version of *American Psycho* was a tidy fit for any genre.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004355 Published online by Cambridge University Press