

OF CAPITALISTS AND CANNIBALS: A BIOPOETICAL APPROACH TO MARY
HARRON AND BRET EASTON ELLIS' *AMERICAN PSYCHO*

Nicholas Paul Cavallo

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Thesis Committee:

Kenneth Jurkiewicz, Ph.D.

Committee Chair

Ron Primeau, Ph.D.

Faculty Member

Ben Urish, Ph.D.

Faculty Member

June 21, 2010

Date of Defense

Roger Coles, Ed.D.

Dean
College of Graduate Studies

October 18, 2012

Approved by the
College of Graduate Studies

ABSTRACT

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by Nicholas Cavallo

Using the latest theories and models of human nature gathered by evolutionary psychology, this study attempts to elucidate the meaning structure of *American Psycho* (1991/2000) arguing that close textual analysis can be improved when both biological and cultural theories are taken under consideration.

Since its publication in 1991, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* has enjoyed substantial publicity and critical attention, the vast majority of which has focused primarily on the book's controversial subject matter. Set in New York City in the late Reaganite 1980s, Ellis' novel is a first-person account of twenty-six-year-old Wall Street Stock Broker Patrick Bateman.

This study demonstrates the usefulness of the Biopoetical approach to analyzing literary and cinematic work and finds that, when prudent, its inclusion alongside culturally based theories of analysis provide a fuller, richer understanding of a work of art.

This study is split into four parts, each of which examines the text from a different perspective. Firstly, I argue that in addition to social commentary, *American Psycho* illustrates the dangers posed by a small group of individuals who possess exceptional social skills, intelligence and an almost uncanny ability to make people like them yet lack the ability to empathize with others or indeed possess the most basic sense of right and wrong.

Secondly, an analysis of Theory of Mind is applied to the text demonstrating how this integral component to human cognitive functions is utilized for artistic means in Mary Harron's film.

The final two chapters examine *American Psycho* from more culturally based theories, the first of which argues that the film uses the human body as a center point for metaphors regarding the central character's mental state and lastly, the case is given that the cultural milieu of the film is in large part an offspring of a particular branch of revanchism known colloquially as Giuliani-time.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF SCREENSHOTS	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Theoretical Overview.....	3
Methodology	9
Reductionism and Determinism.....	12
Literature Review.....	15
II. THE BOY NEXT DOOR OR: HOW EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES ON EGALITARIANISM MAY HELP EXPLAIN ARTISTIC CONVENTIONS	23
III. PERSPECTIVE TAKING, FALSE BELIEF AND VIEWER PERCEPTION: WHY THEORY OF MIND MAY OFFER RENEWED INSIGHT INTO CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING	41
IV. THE MALE BODY AS METAPHOR.....	57
The Male Body	57
Surfaces and Labels	61
V. REAGANOMICS, REVANCHISM AND THE NEW SOCIAL DARWINISTS	66
Reaganomics	67
Social Darwinism.....	69
Misogyny.....	71
The Poor.....	77
Revanchism.....	79
VI. CONCLUSION.....	83
WORKS CITED	85

LIST OF SCREENSHOTS

Screenshot	PAGE
1. Bateman Shares His New Business Card.....	48
2. Bateman on a Dark and Foggy Evening	48
3. Al's POV looking Up at Bateman	52
4. Al looks up at Bateman.....	53
5. Bateman and Al Share the Frame	53
6. Al's POV looking up at Bateman	54
7. The Smoky Alley as Bateman Leaves	55
8. Bateman Exercising	58
9. Bateman Removing his Protective Skin	59

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study argues that as the theory of evolution is the most accurate model of human nature, any analysis of a work of art must include its premise, theories and findings if it is to be complete. Using the latest theories and models of human nature gathered by Evolutionary psychology, Anthropology and other, culturally based theories, this study tries to explicate some of the possible meanings of *American Psycho* (1991/2000).

Using Brian Boyd's four-level approach to artistic analysis as a guide, this study employs Biopoetics—an approach similar in nature to cultural anthropology in terms of its inclusiveness—that examines artistic works in light of humanity's evolutionary past and the important effects it has played in shaping the emergence of the world's many and diverse cultural landscapes. Taking an inclusive approach to artistic analysis, Biopoetics endeavors to engage a myriad of different approaches that all work together to explicate different kinds of meaning from a text. That is, nature *and* nurture, biology and culture working together to influence the form and structure of the artistic work.

Set in New York City in the late Reaganite 1980s, Ellis' novel (1991) is a first-person account of twenty-six-year-old Wall Street Stock Broker Patrick Bateman. In 2000, Mary Harron (*I shot Andy Warhol*) directed a cinematic adaptation of Ellis' novel. While Harron's film adaptation is significantly less violent than its literary predecessor, many of the same themes and scenes of the novel are depicted in the film version. Due to their similarities, this study examines both Ellis' novel and Harron's film adaptation.

As evolution is the most accurate theory to describe human origins it must be an essential part of any analysis of human creativity and artistic expression. Using the latest theories and models of human nature gathered by Evolutionary psychology, this study tries to elucidate the meaning structure of *American Psycho* (1991/2000) arguing that close analysis of the text is greatly improved when it makes use of both biological and cultural theories. The aim of the Biopoetical approach and of the present study is to argue for the inclusion of biological theories, when prudent, alongside cultural ones when analyzing works of artistic creation in an attempt to provide a fuller, richer understanding of a particular work.

Since its publication in 1991, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* has received a large amount of publicity and critical attention, the majority of which focused primarily on the book's controversial treatment of its subject matter. Set in New York City in the late Reaganite 1980s, Ellis' novel is a first-person account of twenty-six-year-old Wall Street Stock Broker Patrick Bateman. In place of a cohesive narrative so accustomed in the novel genre, *American Psycho* primarily consists of Bateman's first-person narration of the daily minutia of his life. Much of the book's four-hundred pages are dedicated to descriptions of Bateman's excessive exercise routine, making reservations at trendy restaurants, details on the fashions of literally every character he meets and, as if that wasn't disturbing enough, the sadistic torture and murder of men, women, numerous animals and at least one small child.

In 2000, Mary Harron (*I shot Andy Warhol*) directed a cinematic adaptation of Ellis' novel and co-wrote the screenplay with Guinevere Turner. While Harron's film adaptation is significantly less violent than its literary predecessor, many of the same

themes and scenes of the novel are depicted in Harron's film. Due to their similarities, this study examines both Ellis' novel and Harron's film adaptation, comparing when necessary and juxtaposing the differences when it proves helpful.

Theoretical Overview

This overview begins with a discussion of the attempts made to reconcile science with art. After having provided a broad background on this perspective, I will then turn to a more specific discussion of a group of authors who have used this premise in their work.

Perhaps the first and best known text written in the modern era on the question of reconciling art and science is C.P. Snow's *The Two Cultures*. In his book-length essay, Snow argues that the humanities and natural sciences constitute about half of all intellectual pursuit yet are being driven apart by the structure of academia. In order to fully address the complex issues and questions posed by real world problems, Snow proposed the creation of a third culture, one that would bring together both science and art under one academic roof. Picking up where Snow left off some forty years later, biologist and two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author E.O. Wilson wrote the controversial book *Consilience* which offers a similar challenge to the academy of higher learning. Like Snow, Wilson sees the educational system as fracturing knowledge between the natural sciences and the humanities. Also like Snow, Wilson's solution—as referenced by his title—is to combine the two areas of inquiry in an attempt to more fully address real-world problems.

Snow and Wilson both wrote about an intellectual wall dividing academia, but is this wall purely one fabricated from the compartmentalizing of academic fields or is there a fundamental gap between the naturalism of science and the complexity of art? Two important scientific discoveries may lead to an answer; Darwin's discovery of natural selection and Watson and Crick's discovery of DNA. Both of these two theories tie humans to a purely materialistic, rather than spiritual or supernatural beginning, however the debate over whether humans continue to adhere to their biological make-up or have evolved out of evolution into an environment founded solely on cultural facets continues to attract interest. On this topic eminent evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins offers that "if genes really turn out to be totally irrelevant to the determination of modern human behaviour, if we really are unique among animals...it is...still interesting to inquire about the rule to which we have so recently become the exception (*Selfish Gene*, 3). As evolution and DNA indicate, we no longer need to rely on a super-natural entity to explain complex human cognition and creativity. However, the use of evolution and genetic theories to explain variation in individual and cultural behaviors remains a topic of much debate and discussion. Among those engaged in this debate is A.C. Grayling.

In a collection of essays from a 2004 symposium on human nature entitled *Human Nature: Fact and Fiction*, Grayling lays out the rationale for approaching literary criticism with an eye toward Evolutionary psychology arguing that at its most basic level a Darwinian approach to literature and the arts assumes a certain set of shared human universals (xii).

Starting with the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1946, contributing author A.C. Grayling notes that after WWII, with its ruined cities and frightful prison camps, it was evident that humans share a general understanding of what is required to live happily and peacefully (xii). A reliance solely on biological foundations however, often leads to the denial of culture which equally misses the point (xii). Simply put, evolution and culture are two equally valid perspectives that mutually consist and influence each other (xiii). Human biology prevents us from jumping fifty feet into the air without the aid of machines, however our culture also helps to influence this biology (xiii). In other words, every organism has evolved—and continues to evolve—to best fit its own environment.

In the introduction to *Human Nature*, editors Wells and McFadden delve into the history of biological approaches to understanding human nature citing the Enlightenment and Rousseau, specifically the latter's claim that without an accurate understanding of human nature we would never be able to solve inequality, war etc. (3). Wells and McFadden end their introduction by noting that with the catastrophic failure of the Eugenics movement in the early 20th century, science was banished to the forests to study chimps and ants and left the study of humans to the fields of sociology and anthropology (15). However, with E.O Wilson's *Sociobiology* and Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* in the 1970s it became increasingly difficult to argue that the two authors' observations about animal behavior could not also be applied to humans (16). Now with the advent of genetic engineering and gene therapy, we have more control than ever to eliminate various diseases such as muscular dystrophy or cystic fibrosis (19). The ethical issues we face today require an intimate understanding of who we are, where we came from and what exactly makes us *tick* (19). In a sense, if we are to meet these challenges we must

follow the admonition over the gates at Delphi to ‘know thyself’ (xi). Several literary critics have taken up this challenge and have tried to apply the theory of evolution to their analyses of literature as a way of bridging the gap between science and the humanities.

One of the most important works in the evolutionary approach to literature is Joseph Carroll’s *Literary Darwinism*. There, Carroll describes himself as subscribing to the Adaptationist paradigm meaning he is concerned with universal, species typical array of characteristics that are genetically constrained and are thus mediated through “anatomical features and physiological processes, including the neurological and hormonal systems that directly regulate perception, thought, and feeling (vii).

Literary Darwinism (hereafter referred to as LD), argues Carroll is a far more accurate theory than most other literary theories because LD criticism is founded upon “facts much larger and more robust than the conceptions that characterize...postmodern theory” (215).

In viewing the human mind as a product of evolutionary adaptations, Carroll is convinced he can “more adequately understand what literature is, what its functions are, and how it works” (vii). Carroll is so confident in the Adaptationist program of that he predicts the social sciences will “within two decades...have advanced far enough so that the modifying term “Darwinian” will be quietly dropped from the substantive term “social science” (x). Carroll goes on to argue that LD has the power to overwhelmingly influence the social sciences in the future as “all educated people will take it for granted that no reputable psychologist or anthropologist (could) ignore the findings of biologically oriented study (and will have to) accommodate themselves to the reality of what is empirically known about the biological basis of human behavior” (x).

In support of his claims Carroll cites various contributions to Evolutionary psychology including most notably Richard Dawkins, E.O. Wilson, Cosmides and Tooby and Ekman. For Carroll, the evidence is overwhelming. Perhaps most convincing for him is the fact that all the other branches of learning have adapted to include Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection and leave only the humanities clinging to now "obsolete" models of human nature such as those proposed by Freud, Marx and Saussure (x). Carroll likens the conceptual shift that occurs when moving between the Darwinian social sciences and the humanities as like traveling from the United States or Europe to a Third World Country (x).

Carroll's distaste for the current trend in the humanities is palpable to say the least. However, much of the rest of Literary Darwinism is dedicated to more positive pursuits, most notably his chapter on *Pride and Prejudice* where he lays out a species typical Darwinian reading of Austen's work. In his analysis Carroll recognizes certain "characteristic(ly) innate constraints and distinctive latent capacities" within the novel including mate selection, parenting systems, social interaction, cognitive behavioral systems and other such species-wide or 'universal' traits that are shared by all human beings (200). Carroll uses these evolutionary based categories to illustrate first how they apply to the characters within Austen's work and second to argue that Austen herself is playing a type of game with her readers in which she invites them to recognize and mock the ignorance displayed in such characters as Mr. Collins and Elizabeth's mother while simultaneously demonstrating the benefits of intelligence, genuinely benevolent upper-class authority and ultimately of choosing a mate based on these rather than other

superficial qualities (200). Carroll sees *Pride and Prejudice* as an instructional manual for a happy life with Elizabeth and Darcy as the normative ideal and Austen's authorial control aimed at instructing as well as entertaining her readers in avoiding the pitfalls of romance and marriage (200).

I want to point out that Carroll is not just saying *Pride and Prejudice* is an instructional manual for young men and women in the same way some critics have read Fielding's novel *Pamela*, but rather that he reads a distinctly Darwinian impulse running through Austen's pages that provides the biological foundation for her choices as author. Whether the reader agrees with Carroll's interpretation of Austen's work or not, it is important to note here that this is merely one side of LD criticism. In fact, many other literary researchers including Carroll have pointed out that humans, let alone literary works of fiction in no way conform perfectly to a simple Darwinian approach summarized as: eat, mate, sleep, repeat. In his article on Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, Carroll brilliantly takes account of this fact in a paragraph that I feel warrants quoting in full:

The simplest and most obvious way to use this information is to examine the behavior depicted in literary texts and to correlate that behavior with "human universals," that is, with forms of behavior that appear in every known culture and that thus appear to be embedded in the nature of the species. Seeking depictions of universals has produced valuable results for literary study, but this first move in Darwinian criticism does not exhaust the range of possibility in the analysis of literary meaning. Human nature is complex and sometimes divided against itself; individuals vary, and some variations depart from species typical patterns, even in

the most adaptively crucial aspects of survival and reproduction. Moreover, literary meaning involves more than the represented subject matter. Authors imbue texts with meanings and affects peculiar to themselves; authors engage in communicative transactions with audiences; and texts have formal and aesthetic properties that are not reducible to represented subject matter. All of these aspects of the total literary situation are part of literary meaning, and all of them can and should fall within the range of analysis available to Darwinian literary study.” (2)

The present study is an exercise in this second approach as it recognizes the highly fantastical nature of *American Psycho*.

Methodology

The methodological basis of this study is constructed out of two seemingly divergent yet ultimately similar approaches. First, I'll apply Brian Boyd's four-level approach to artistic analysis which will act as an overarching method or paradigm for how the study is conducted. Secondly, I will be using a recent blog-post by David Bordwell on the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image in which he lays out the method behind cognitive film theory.

Boyd's paradigm for how one actually goes about conducting a evolutionary or, as he prefers Bio-Cultural analysis of a textual artifact is remarkably inclusive. Boyd begins at the largest possible perspective and with the longest possible time-scale; the biological and the evolutionary and works his way down to the particular. Boyd's first level is labeled the Universal as it uses evolutionary and cognitive theories to understand a particular text in terms of human biology and neurology. Next,

Boyd moves onto the Cultural using the widest possible definition of the word. Here Boyd is concerned with the ecology of a text, that is, what environment it was created in and how it effected the production of the work. Boyd's third level of analysis focuses on the Individual and is primarily concerned with the author as an individual human being with personal influences, affects and personality that may or may not effect the text he or she constructs. Finally, Boyd's fourth level of analysis is the Particular. Here Boyd considers the intricate details of a particular text in relation to the author's life and the cultural climate in which it was produced. At this level Boyd is interested in the importance of a single work at a single time produced by a single or small group of individuals.

I refer to Boyd's model of the four levels of analysis as highly inclusive because it does not limit or exclude cultural factors in favor of biological and evolutionary ones. The primary purpose of using Boyd's model is that any artistic criticism is improved when it acknowledges the relevance of both the biological and cultural factors at work within a text. Boyd's model of analysis is sufficient because it provides adequate representation from both biological and cultural theories. Rather than following his model exactly, I have broken up the present study into two levels, first the scientific and then the cultural each with two chapters.

The second model of criticism serving as methodology comes from esteemed film critic David Bordwell. In a blog post entitled *Who Will Watch the Movie Watchers?* Bordwell describes the chief methodological foundation of the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image (SCSMI) and lays out the rationale for what he calls "Cognitive Film Studies" (hereafter referred to as CFS) explaining what researchers of

this branch of criticism look for when analyzing films. CFS and its critics focus on “emphasiz(ing) explanations over interpretations” arguing that human motives, goals, means and ends are vitally important to understanding films (Bordwell). Accordingly, the CFS approach is in contrast with more traditional humanistic studies that tend to focus on critics’ interpretation of the text rather than addressing causal or functional processes.

Describing the CFS approach as “mentalistic” Bordwell argues that in studying the human mind, not cut off from, but rather very much in tune with culture, experience and interaction, we can come to better understand viewer response. CFS is also distinctly naturalistic as it is informed by a current understanding of human nature as analyzed by the social sciences. The CFS approach will inevitably supersede other mentalistic theories such as psychoanalysis which has not “proven a source of reliable explanations” (Bordwell). The fundamental methodology behind CFS is “rational inquiry” that is, “formulat(ing) clear-cut questions and to seek answers that have empirical grounding and conceptual coherence” which stands in contrast to “much current film theory...consist(ing) of more or less free association and the rote citation of major thinkers” (Bordwell). For film scholars applying the CFS model, the post-Chomskyan view provides an accurate model of human nature in arguing that all learning involves “innate predispositions and mental structures” the idea that we “need active engagement with the environment, both physical and social, to let our intrinsic capacities develop to their full strength” or to put it another way “Nature *via* nurture” (Bordwell).

It is important to note that although the literature scholars mentioned above such as Carroll or Boyd tend to use terms such as ‘Evolutionary’ or ‘Darwinian’ and Bordwell, writing primarily on film prefers ‘cognitive’, the two camps are in fact very much in line with one another. As Bordwell notes, having a set of mental and physical predispositions, the very foundation of CFS methodology, actually makes sense in evolutionary terms given that we are born into the world ready to “have our biases fine-tuned by experience” (Bordwell).

In Summary, this study follows Boyd’s multi-level approach using both anthropological as well as culturally based theories in exploring new ways of examining artistic texts.

Reductionism and Determinism

Before turning to the next section I want to take the opportunity now to address some concerns about the approach outlined above, namely reductionism and determinism.

According to E.O. Wilson in his book *Consilience*, well-funded science often primarily consists of reductionism and for good reason (54). Wilson argues that in order for one to understand complex systems, it is inevitably required to reduce them to their components for easier analysis. Reductionism pre se is not the problem, rather the ignorant over-simplifications that are associated with reductionism are due to misunderstanding one level’s operational organization when applied to an altogether different and more complex level (55). For example, at the level of the cell and above there exists a need for more complex laws and theories than are used on the molecular level. Currently there exist no theories capable of describing organization at two highly

divergent levels, say living organisms and atoms or molecules. Perhaps, as Wilson notes, “prediction of the most complex systems from more general levels is impossible” regardless however, of whether such theories can exist, any good reductionism takes account of the increasing complexity and organization involved when moving from one level of explanation to another.

Similar to Wilson’s concept of two types of reductionism, Daniel Dennett also argues that there are two types, good reductionism and greedy reductionism. For Dennett, good reductionists insist that everything can be explained without the use of skyhooks, that is, without resorting to supernatural claims that explain nothing in their attempt to explain everything. Greedy reductionists however believe that they can explain everything without using cranes, that is, without having to rely on physical constructions or explanations of natural phenomenon (82). Dennett sees the second type of reductionism as greedy because it occurs in a hasty rush to explain everything. Dennett explains that the greedy reductionists “underestimate the complexities, trying to skip whole layers or levels of theory in their rush to fasten everything securely and neatly to the foundation” (82). In their greediness this type of reductionism prematurely reduces complexity and falsifies phenomenon in their haste. It is in such haste, explains Dennett—and not the desire to merely reduce for the sake of understanding—that the greedy reductionists commit their most egregious sin (82). Like Dennett, Wilson sees good reductionism as the mainstay of scientific research and the underlying principle behind a consistent worldview, namely that “all tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the working of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics” (266).

While I agree with both Dennett and Wilson that we need not rely on there being skyhooks to answer our difficult question or ghosts in the machine that beguile us, I want to add two additional points. Firstly—and I think this was covered somewhat by Dennett’s point—while it is conceivable that we would be able to reduce everything to its physical properties, it is not in the best interest of the humanities to perform such a task. Surely no one is interested in the molecular structure of Shakespeare or the atomic formulae of Kubrick. As the Wilson quote noted, the problem is not reductionism in and of itself, the real problem occurs when trying to explain one level of analysis by using the tools and methods of an entirely different level.

However, while we need to keep in mind the limitation of and pitfalls resulting from the misuse of reductionism, we must also recognize what Wilson argues when he says everything is reducible to the laws of physics and what Dennett expresses in his skyhook/crane dichotomy which is that there is no need for supernatural beings to populate scientific thought. This brings me to my second point which is that while Biopoetics does not require a god or any other supernatural being, it does not necessitate an atheistic worldview. As Carl Sagan once pointed out “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (210) implying that just because a claim hasn’t been proven true doesn’t mean it must be false.

Whenever one evokes evolution or a biologically cognizant view of literature one inevitably runs up against the argument of determinism. In his immensely successful *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins comments on determinism describes living things in general and human beings specifically as “passive receptacles” carrying our genes unchanged through time from one generation to the next (46). However, genes only

determine our behavior in a statistical sense such as a red sky being a good indication that the weather on the following day will be pleasant (n.2). Any prediction, such as what the weather will be like tomorrow is subject to error and based only on statistical models. Such models, though highly complex, are inevitably subject to error and other outside factors that may dilute their power to accurately predict the weather, or in the case of genes, our behavior (n.2). Applying the analogy to a larger framework, though we are comprised of genes, the majority of which are selfishly trying to survive and reproduce, we need not follow their example and plan our societies around those same selfish tendencies (3). Rather, by understanding what our selfish genes are up to we can work against their ends and teach generosity, altruism and promote an environment of cooperation (3).

Literature Review

The majority of scholarly research written about Ellis' *American Psycho* has tended to follow one of three approaches. Firstly, due to the extraordinarily large amount of controversy surrounding the novel when it was first published in 1991, several studies were produced analyzing how its initial reception was shaped by social and feminist critics who accused Ellis of misogyny, lack of artistic talent and pervasive depictions of violence (Eberly). Secondly, as the novel seems to transgress genres, many scholars focused on the need to categorize the novel in relation to other literary works. Third and finally lie the psychoanalytical approaches. As there is significantly less academic writing on Harron's film, it will be discussed at the end of this section.

It is perhaps most appropriate to begin with the issue of controversy as it surrounded the novel's publication and was the rallying point of much of the initial discourse concerning *American Psycho*. Four studies regarding this issue are examined here. First is Eberly who studied some "sixty articles about the book that were published between October 1990 and April 1991 in eight major metropolitan daily newspapers and eighteen magazines" (106). Secondly are Freccero, Messier and Allué who I place in one category as they all focus less on the reactionist fervor that occurred within the first several months leading up to the book's release and more on the importance of calmly addressing the issue of explicit violence, pornographic detail and broader questions of censorship in a free society.

Eberly documents the feminist cultural backlash that occurred before *American Psycho*'s publication. Beginning in the Spring of 1990 "four months after Bret Easton Ellis submitted his final version of *American Psycho* to his publisher, Simon and Schuster" reaction to the novel was already taking shape (104). Eberly argues that the publication of some of the novel's more graphic sections in *Spy*, *Time* and *Vanity Fair* helped solidify the public outcry of censorship that culminated in a call for boycotting the novel lead by the Los Angeles chapter of NOW (The National Organization for Women).

Arguably one of the most important articles in shaping public opinion of the novel before it hit bookshelves was an article by Norman Mailer in *Vanity Fair* which featured one of the most violent excerpts of the novel in which Bateman viciously kills a bum named Al and his dog Gizmo. Similarly, Roger Rosenblatt of the *New York Times* also published an article condemning the novel's violence calling it a gratuitous degradation

of human life (paraphrased in Eberly, 3). Consisting primarily of negative polemics, articles like those written by Mailer and Rosenblatt condemned the novel even before its release and helped shape how scholarly researchers would later consider Ellis' work (Eberly).

Although Eberly admits the articles in her study do not represent “the totality of discourses” (106) concerning *American Psycho*, they are illustrative of how several influential authors helped shift debate, namely Rosenblatt and Mailer, “from pragmatic political and social concerns—public concerns—to concerns over the book as art in isolation” (108) before the public had a chance to see and read it for themselves. For Freccero, Mailer's argument is that talented authors have the right to create whatever they want yet because *American Psycho* is not artful enough to warrant enduring its extreme violence, it is not art (124). Eberly mirrors Freccero when she comments that Mailer's verdict proclaims “Ellis is a talented writer but not an artist; thus, his book is not art” (124). Eberly sees Mailer's article as seminal in shifting the debate over *American Psycho* from issues of misogyny and violence posed by social and feminist critics in the public forum to a question of aesthetic value posed by literary critics (109). According to Eberly, the consequences of Mailer's article helped shape not only public discourse about *American Psycho* but also scholarly research as well (109). Eberly's study makes interesting and indeed important observations on how public discourse on *American Psycho* was shaped.

Similar to Eberly, Freccero focuses on the social outcry over *American Psycho* but argues that its manifestation was due to the perception that the book violently disrupted the social doxa (45). Using Ice-T's 1992 song “Cop Killer” as an example,

Freccero notes the apparent threat such messages pose when centered in a genre already deemed threatening to society, e.g. rap music (45). *American Psycho* however cannot share the same classification precisely by virtue of its medium (46). Unlike rap music which is seen as the expression of marginalized minority young black males, literature is viewed as a medium dominated by rich older white socially promoted men (46). Thus *American Psycho* is all the more shocking as it is written by a twenty-seven year old white male from a rich Southern Californian suburb and contains far more violent and disdainful sentiment of the American capitalist system than anything seen in the black dominated anti-establishment world of gangster rap (46). And what is more, Patrick Bateman, the novel's protagonist, symbolizes the uppermost crust of American society while at the same time carrying out the most horrifically violent and hateful acts against others (47).

An inversion of the "American Dream" Freccero sees the icon of the serial killer as shielding against all the fears and atrocities of the state by collapsing them into a single comprehensible individual (48). The serial killer's wrath and destruction, though abhorrent, acts as consolation for the far greater horrors of the modern industrial consumerist ethic which are committed on such a scale as not to be easily comprehended (48). In other words, by focusing fear on the serial killer, who in all actuality may only kill a few dozen people, societies are able to cope with the far greater horrors posed by famine, disease and war (48). Like Eberly, Freccero acknowledges the importance of violence in shaping the novel and engages with the social implications to make conclusions about serial killer fiction as a genre. In Summary, Freccero addresses what she sees as Ellis's commentary on the social classes and how controversial texts are interpreted depending on their author's social class.

Allué reiterates Freccero's argument that serial killer stories become popular because they individualize in a singular physical embodiment conceptions of social violence (11) and thus act as consolation to the society at large. Differing from Freccero however, Allué sees *American Psycho* in direct correlation with the serial killer genre yet without its narrative tropes, conventions or edifying mores (11). That is, Bateman is set in opposition to the existing model of what other fictions have said a serial killer must look like (17). For example, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* turns the investigation of a serial killer into a game-like mystery for the reader. Whereas *American Psycho* deglamorizes serial killer fiction by refusing to paint Bateman or his crimes in an exciting manner (12).

In other words, the novel is a powerful mirror that reflects, mocks and most significantly condemns the social ideology rather than the actions of a lone individual.

With the public's first glimpse of *American Psycho* in *Time*, *Spy* and *Vanity Fair* magazine featuring some of literature's most horrific torture scenes, it is clear why so much early attention focused on trying to understand the novel's violence.

Likewise, Messier approaches the novel focusing on violence but also examines the issue of pornography and voyeurism (73). In addressing the novel's prevalence of sex, violence and misogyny, Messier identifies voyeurism as the overarching device that informs the narrative of *American Psycho* (74). Through the commoditization of people, things and even characters' names, the novel parodies Reagan era consumerism and mass capitalism (75). Sex, like consumerism, takes the form of a commodity that is bought and sold (77). Likewise, the various sex scenes throughout the novel take the form of pornography as bodies are raised to the point of perfection and sexual climax emphasized

as the ultimate goal (77). Both voyeurism and the male gaze lie as the basis of the novel's sexual commoditization (78). With the majority of the sexual intercourse acted out in terms of financial transactions with paid streetwalkers or call girls, the sex act itself becomes just another commodity that shapes and modifies the consumer's status (78).

Similarly, as the novel is told in the first person by Bateman women exist outside of the central sphere of the protagonist's realm and thus become consumer objects to be bought and sold (79). By commoditizing women, Bateman also fragments them into parts symbolic of a whole (79). Women become 'blondes', 'hard bodies' or are prized for having 'great tits' or 'a nice ass', regarded as a sum of their parts lacking a cohesion or whole (79). Messier notes that some critics found the violence not only excessive but also deeply disturbing as so much of it involves women and sexual intercourse (80). A rationale for the connection between sex and violence is that in Bateman's world there is no difference between being a Wall Street hotshot and a psychopathic murderer as their ideologies are essentially the same (81). Messier views the novel as self consciously aware of the material it is satirizing and does not in anyway endorse the behavior it depicts (89). Messier concludes that the novel is a commentary on the commoditization of sexual acts that are based on capitalism and cause the eventual loss of individuality (92). Like Freccero and Allué, Messier's focus is on the novel's violence. However, unlike the previous two authors, he notes the symbolical underpinnings of the violence and misogyny as representing another, deeper meaning.

The move toward reading the signs and symbols of *American Psycho* is illustrated in several other studies as well. Through close critical readings of Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter* and Ellis's *American Psycho*, Söderlind traces the question of genre and

self-fashioning throughout American literary history. Söderlind argues that the self-fashioning depicted in *American Psycho* is explicitly tied to an idea of the America state and is based on typological exclusion (63). Analyzing the novel's many labels, logos and signs instills the importance of the semiotic approach that taps into the novel's obsession with the relationship between surface and depth, signifier and signified (64). Söderlind argues against the reading of the novel as a universal existential narrative on the modern human condition (65). Rather, in acknowledging the importance of the title's signifier we note the novel is primarily American in form (65). As such, the title acts as a type of symbol itself for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and its lead character Norman Bates i.e. Bates/Bateman (65). Söderlind also goes into great detail to explicate what he sees as the semiotic meaning behind the constant changing of clothes (66) the dependence on designer labels (67) and the use of the city as character (75).

The research studies in this third and final category use what can be categorized as the psychological or psychoanalytical approach. As seen in Allué's study of the serial killer genre, the novel's appearance as a psychological investigation into sociopathic behavior cannot be avoided. Indeed, famed literary critic and author Norman Mailer went as far as to question the novel's artistry under the belief that Ellis failed to provide an historical cause explaining the killer's dementia (220), an argument Allué sees as evidence of Mailer's longing for conventional endings such as seen with Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (21).

Although there are only a few studies done on Harron's film, they will be discussed here.

In his MA thesis, Kennett argues that Bateman's monstrous misbehavior is due merely to his location within space and time and as such is unable to enact reform (105). In other words, Bateman's narcissistic personality prohibits him from attaining an epiphany (106). Tylin's study is one of the few scholarly articles that focuses primarily on Harron's film adaptation. Tylin argues that Bateman is a narcissistic individual precariously living in a world ready to fall apart and destroy his ego (742). Storey uses the term "pomophobia" (po = post, mo = modern) from Thomas B. Byers arguing that Ellis's characters are reacting to a fear of postmodernism which represents feminism, late capitalism and generally any swerving from the accepted sexual norms.

Despite its popularity, Harron's film has not received nearly the number of scholarly publications as Ellis' novel. Due to this disparity the present study will address both film and novel.

CHAPTER II

THE BOY NEXT DOOR OR: HOW EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES ON EGALITARIANISM MAY HELP EXPLAIN ARTISTIC CONVENTIONS

This chapter begins with a discussion of Evolutionary psychology (EP) and presents its pragmatic implications for literary and cinematic textual analysis under the heading of Biopoetics. Having established EP as a theoretical foundation, I will then turn to a discussion of Christopher Boehm's research on egalitarianism in small hunter-gatherer groups. Boehm's concept of the "upstart" is then discussed in connection with crime fiction and the potential for the genre to act as a type of natural hegemonic device helping to maintain order and stability within large social groups. This model of crime fiction is then set in contrast to an altogether different model of social hegemony as presented in *American Psycho*. In an attempt to explain the seeming conflict between the two genre models—one presented by most crime fiction, the one by *American Psycho*—Robert Hare's research on psychopathy is examined and lays the foundation for the chapter's two central arguments. First, that Hare's theories about psychopathic behavior fit perfectly with Ellis' depiction of Patrick Bateman's character and secondly—due to this correlation—Hare's research can help explain how the film and novel structure meaning in terms genre conventions.

Having established these arguments I then offer my central thesis that *American Psycho* inadvertently informs readers about the very real danger psychopaths represent in society. And that, despite their rarity, psychopaths can infiltrate the highest levels of business and public service and in some cases pose a far more dangerous threat to society

than more visible criminals. In closing, I argue that one possible reading of *American Psycho* is as a signpost warning readers against the hidden dangers posed by well-seeming individuals with psychopathic tendencies.

Evolutionary psychology (EP) is a division of human psychology that attempts to give evolutionary explanations for how current anatomical and neurological structures were formed in the human brain and body. At the heart of EP lies the understanding that human beings were—and continue to be—formed by evolution through a process known as natural selection; the natural process by which individual organisms compete for the chance to bear and raise offspring. Individuals who can adapt to their environment will produce and raise more offspring than ill-adapted individuals and will thus have the statistical advantage in passing on their genetics to future generations. Using research about human ancestors and their environment, evolutionary psychologists try to explain why the current human form functions the way it does. Although Evolutionary psychology often involves informed guesswork rather than verifiable science, it does provide a way of better understanding who and what we are as human animals. In a sense then, Evolutionary psychology is a theory about human nature as it focuses on the how and why questions of human evolution.

Due to its powers of explication of human mental and physical processes—what in common language is referred to as the human condition—, Evolutionary psychology offers a compelling new approach to understanding how artistic works are constructed. Along these lines, author Brett Cooke coined the term Biopoetics as a way of describing an approach that would bridge the gap between the sciences and the arts. Biopoetic practitioners like as Cooke attempt to integrate EP theories on human nature with

relevant cultural theories in their textual analysis of artistic works. In this way Biopoetics does not attempt to eradicate all other theories and place itself as the preeminent paradigm for thinking about art. Rather, the Biopoetic approach is inclusive as it attempts to synthesize cultural theories with evolutionary understanding. Providing the EP foundation for this chapter is Christopher Boehm's work on egalitarian power structures.

In his book *Hierarchy in the Forest*, Boehm discusses egalitarian structures in small hunter-gatherer groups. Focusing primarily on the power struggles within groups, rather than between groups, Boehm identifies an interesting character-type he labels "upstarts". Characterized by an intense personal greed, deliberate resistance to performing their share of the community's workload and a desire to control or dominate others with no rational justification, an upstart is any individual who threatens the autonomy of the group by violating the core set of values in which the community deeply believes (43).

According to Boehm, small bands of hunter-gatherers remain ever vigilant and ready to take action against upstartism or any rule-breaker who violates the values of the group (43). However, individual members of a tribe are usually already aware of the cultural ethos and so episodes of punishment or sanctioning are relatively rare (112). Furthermore, group members tend to remember the harsher episodes of sanctioning against upstarts and are themselves deterred by gossip and negative public opinion expressed about selfish or undesired behavior (113). When negative public opinion fails to deter unwanted behavior, however ostracism and even desertion can act as leveling mechanisms for group members who try to dominate or control others.

Although Boehm's research is addressed specifically to small egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups, I will argue that the concept of the upstart can also be seen in contemporary American society in a characterization I will call the "visible-criminal".

For this study I'll use a fairly broad definition and argue that the visible-criminal is comprised of loosely assembled set of character definitions that, when taken together, embody what a society imagines a criminal to look like. Whether the individual is in actuality a criminal or not is irrelevant, the important concept here is that whatever a society imagines a criminal to look like at any one time in their history, that is their visible-criminal. A cultural construction, the image of the visible-criminal varies from one society to another as well as across time. However the visible-criminal is most often characterized according to a variety of different cultural signifiers that include, but are not limited to, religion—or the absence of one— race, nationality, intelligence, socio-economic status, sex, and genealogy. Given the large numbers of people living in metropolitan areas across America today, there is probably no one individual the average middle-class American knows personally that they can identify as fitting Boehm's description of an upstart. However, the visible-criminal need only exist in the collective zeitgeist as an approximation of the type of behavior characterized by Boehm's upstart: selfishness, rule-breaking and unearned control over others.

Unlike members of small hunter-gatherer groups, individuals living in highly populated city centers often are not able to have first hand knowledge about each member of their society. Due to this lack of personal interaction, most members of large societies cannot point to a single individual as the cause of crimes against society, instead they can buy into the concept of the visible-criminal, a culturally determined list of personal

characteristics that provides them with a roadmap to discern what potential upstarts may look like. In a society as large as the US, public opinion cannot always be directed toward a particular individual guilty of violating the community's ethos. Instead, a set of moral allegories or value-tales narrativize accounts of fictional upstarts that in turn provide a model against which other members of the society can shape their own behavior. These didactic narratives play the same role as do negative public opinion and gossip in small hunter-gatherer groups in deterring upstartism but must rely on metaphor and allegory framed within fictional narratives rather than direct inference due to the large population size and lack of direct personal contact between members of the society.

Along with demonstrating the negative effects of unwanted behavior, fictional narrative may also provide pleasure to audiences as they demonstrate the benefits of conforming to the socially shared rules of the society. This is not to suggest that the narratives are overly preachy or moralistic but rather illustrative of what types of behaviors are encouraged in a society and which are discouraged. One of the most important elements essential to these fictional tales is that they utilize the visible-criminal as the locus around which other members of the society rally against in protest. This would explain why so many fictional novels and films feature the same themes and tropes and concern an individual rule-breaker who is ultimately captured and punished for their crimes or repents and is forgiven; such fictions reinforce a social ethos and provide pleasure to readers and viewers by providing evidence that validates their trust in social cooperation.

In her examination of serial killer fiction as genre, Carla Freccero argues that serial killers “typify an individualistic conception of violence, singularly embodied and psychically caused” (48). She further states that what is “somatized in the figure of the serial killer, then, is also an ideology of violence that presents violence as something originating in the private sphere” (48). Although Freccero does not explicitly refer to the serial killer genre as a hegemonic device for preserving order as I suggest, she does acknowledge that “The solution to the problem of violence...(in serial killer fiction is)...relatively simple: kill the serial killer and your problem goes away” (48), for if the source of violence is always located within a single individual, the group can achieve vindication by scapegoating that individual with all perceived problems and thereby restore order once he or she is removed from the community or is killed.

As Freccero suggests, a common theme in serial killer and other crime genre fiction is that the rule-breaker—upstart—is eliminated or rehabilitated, community members learn firsthand the dangers of rule-breaking and the community itself is purged of the perceived threat. To summarize Freccero’s point, serial killer fictions usually focus around a single perpetrator who, acting alone, commits an injustice against the safety and wellbeing of other members of the group. Through the hard-work of some community leaders or law enforcers, the criminal is eventually caught and punished for their crime, thereby restoring order and cohesion to the society. If we take this to be the standard model of crime fiction as Freccero suggests, what then are we to make of *American Psycho*, which so blatantly ignores so many of the elements common to other serial killer and crime fictions?

In Ellis' novel there is no social justice, no redeeming morality and no closure for the killer's victims. Unlike other serial killer fiction that deals centrally with a cat and mouse type game between a rule-breaker and a law-enforcer, *American Psycho* contains no such narrative component. Furthermore, Patrick Bateman is not a loner on the fringes of society but rather is one of the very mainstays of his community, a captain of industry and a member of the social elite. In the novel's conclusion, Bateman is not brought to justice and there is even less of a threat of his being caught than previously feared. If Freccero is correct in arguing that the model of most serial killer fiction is such that audiences and readers gain comfort in the idea that violence is isolated within a single, socially outcast individual, what model will explain the absence of these traits as in *American Psycho*? To help answer this question, I will turn now to the work of Robert Hare and his research on psychopaths in the workplace.

According to Robert Hare—the leading expert on psychopathy—his book *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths go to Work* evolved out of a growing realization that the public lacked knowledge about how psychopaths are able to cheat and deceive others, especially in the work place and that this ignorance is partly to blame for why psychopaths are so successful at conning others (XIII). Similarly, in this section I will argue that if Hare's claim about psychopaths' ability to hide in plain sight is valid, it will not only explain why the meaning structure of *American psycho* works the way it does, but will also explain how perception of the book is influenced. In order to do this I will begin with an analysis of Bateman's character using a checklist Hare devised for identifying psychopathic traits.

In an attempt to make identification methods more readily available to researchers studying psychopathy, Hare devised the PCL-R (Psychopathy Checklist-Revisited), a test created specifically for “qualified psychologists or psychiatrists” to assist mental health professionals in assessing an individual’s mental state “based on an in-depth interview and a review of information contained in the person’s records” (25). Hare strongly discourages his readers from assessing their own friends, family and relatives as even if a particular individual shows signs of one or two traits associated with psychopathy, that does not make them a psychopath. In fact, Hare notes that out of a possible forty points a score of at least 30 is needed to identify a true psychopath using the PCL-R. Compare that with most convicted criminals who would only score in the low twenty’s and the rest of the population who would score only three to five points (27). Hare stresses the importance of not labeling others as psychopaths as it can often exasperate the situation.

Given Hare’s warning not to use the PCL-R without proper training, I want to make clear that my analysis of Patrick Bateman for psychopathic traits is not directed toward a particular individual living or dead, rather, it is an analysis of a fictional character devised purely through the imagination’s of Ellis and Harron.

When testing or screening for psychopathy within the general population Hare suggests using the PCL:SV (Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version) which is split into four domains, each with three corresponding traits describing the domain’s characteristics. Using these twelve identifiers, as well as several contextual comments Hare makes about the personality of psychopaths throughout his book, I will attempt to make the case that Patrick Bateman fits Hare’s definition of a psychopath.

Hare's first domain is labeled *Interpersonal* and defined broadly "describes how psychopaths present themselves to others" (27). Under this domain Hare places *Superficial, Grandiose and Deceitful* as three defining characteristics that factor heavily in how a psychopath presents themselves to others in interpersonal relationships. In the chapter entitled "Detective" in Ellis' book, Bateman describes himself sitting in his office "doing nothing" except for wearing "a Walkman with a soothing Kenny G CD playing in it" (267) when his secretary Jean alerts him to a detective's arrival. Sensing the importance of his visit, Bateman tries to avoid a confrontation telling his secretary "Tell him I'm at lunch" to which she responds "it's ten-thirty" Bateman sighs "stalling again, and in a contained panic" instructing her to show the detective into his office (267).

Bateman's lie is a blatant attempt to avoid his responsibilities, a common deceitful tactic of psychopaths who, according to Hare, will go through great lengths to avoid doing any hard work or face any responsibility if they feel they can get others to do it for them (52). Bateman's deceitfulness is also depicted in Harron's film as he is shown watching *Wheel of Fortune*, reading pornography and listening to music while sitting in his office during working hours. In fact, Bateman never actually mentions doing any work or even what exactly his job entails.

The two other central aspects of a psychopaths personality in terms of social interaction are grandiosity and an inflated sense of superficiality. Bateman's narcissistic personality comes out particularly well in one scene from Ellis' novel in which he pays both an escort girl and a street-walker to come to his apartment for sex. Before the three conduct their business transaction however, Bateman engages them in conversation "Don't you want to know what I do?' The two of them stare at me for a long time... 'No,

not really.’ (...) ‘Well, I work on Wall Street. At Pierce & Pierce.’ A long pause. ‘Have you heard of it?’ I ask... She thinks about it for a minute then says, ‘Is it connected with Mays...or Macy’s?...Isn’t P& P a shoe store?’ (171-2). Although Harron shortens this scene in her film by cutting some of the dialogue she preserves the humor by showing that Bateman’s inflated sense of self-worth extends only as far as his own ego. Bateman clearly demonstrates a grandiose personality and a superficial attachment to his own ego when it comes to showing off to others. Both Harron and Ellis undercut Bateman’s egoism however, placing him in backward and embarrassing situations that expose his narcissistic personality as fragile and easily punctured

Hare’s second domain is labeled *Lifestyle* and contains three personality traits: *Impulsivity*, *Lack of goals* and *Irresponsibility* (27). Hare explains that all psychopaths rely on charm and their ability to win over people through their good looks and sycophantic façade. However, when their charms and linguistic skills aren’t enough to acquire the desired control, power or fame that they seek, psychopaths will often resort to impulsive violence against others (184). Bateman seems to fit into the first category as he uses his charm and commanding demeanor to impress other people and to make a good first impression. However, Bateman also speaks in first person narration of his impulsive and often times uncontrollable urges to hurt or maim others in violent acts. In Harron’s film Bateman describes his contempt for others in a voice-over narration as he receives a manicure, skin treatment and artificial tan “‘I have all the characteristics of a human being, flesh, blood, skin, hair, but not a single, clear identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust. Something horrible is happening inside of me and I don’t know why. My nightly bloodlust has overflowed into my days. I feel lethal, on the verge of frenzy. I

think my mask of sanity is about to slip.” It is not clear whether Bateman’s bloodlust is fueled by self-loathing or general misanthropy, he does however seem to direct his aggression outward. As in a scene in Ellis’ novel where Bateman entertains similar violent thoughts when having a heated argument over some stained sheets in a laundry mat. Failing to communicate with the shop attendant, Bateman muses to himself “I have never firebombed anything and I start wondering how one goes about it—what materials are involved, gasoline, matches... or would it be lighter fluid?” (83). The striking nature of this passage and the scene described above illustrate a constant inner struggle Bateman faces throughout his daily life to not lash out violently at others. What is particularly poignant about Bateman’s appetite for committing acts of violence does not subside, rather he appears capable of violence without warning or provocation.

Along with his impulsivity, Bateman also displays attitudes of irresponsibility. Hare notes that psychopaths avoid taking responsibility even when they are at fault and will only profess remorse if caught red-handed (51-52). This trait is exhibited in Bateman’s character in the penultimate scene of Harron’s film as a teary eyed Bateman, having frantically alluded pursuing police in a shoot-out, escapes to the security of his office where he calls his lawyer to confess his numerous murders. Something particularly significant about the scene is that despite his seeming remorse, the only thing Bateman truly regrets is that he might not “get away with it this time” illustrating his inability to take responsibility for his own actions.

Hare’s third category of psychopathy is *Antisocial* and is characterized primarily by *Poor behavioral controls* and *Antisocial behavior* (27). A perfect example of Bateman’s poor social skills involves Paul Allen who, despite being a relatively minor

character, is mentioned by Bateman and his colleagues nearly twenty times throughout Ellis' novel for his handling of the coveted "Fisher account" a fact that everyone in Bateman's professional circle is keenly and jealously aware. Although there is never any mention as to what the Fisher account actually is or why Bateman wants it, the fact that Allen is handling it is a source of tremendous jealousy for him.

Similarly, the fact that Allen is able to get a reservation at Dorsia—the most exclusive restaurant in New York City—while Bateman cannot, further antagonizes him into a rage. Incensed that anyone would have more control and prestige than him in both the social and business world, Bateman lures Allen back to his apartment and murders him in cold blood. Harron's depiction of this scene is made humorous as Hewey Louis' *It's Hip to be Square* plays on the diegetic soundtrack. Despite Harron's injected humor, the filmic version of the scene retains Ellis' original intent portraying Bateman as so overly egomaniacal as to resort to violence when someone offends or humiliates him in a social situation.

Hare's final personality domain is *Affective* and describes psychopaths as lacking in *Remorse, Empathy* and the ability to *Accept responsibility* for their actions (27). In illustrating this point Hare notes that recent studies suggest that psychopaths may be unable to recognize emotions and are only feebly able to copy others in a ploy not to appear apathetic and callous (46). Using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) machines to study brain imaging, Hare found that "emotional words and unpleasant pictures did not produce in psychopaths the increases in the activity of brain (limbic)

regions normally associated with the processing of emotional material” (55). In other words, psychopaths are unable to sense emotional cues from stimuli where others could easily identify an intended emotional response. Psychopaths, notes Hare, “know the words but not the music”(55) indicating that psychopathic individuals are unable to locate emotional significance within emotive stimuli such as paintings or music.

Following Hare’s classification, Bateman also appears to lack emotion. In addition to the scene quoted above from Harron’s film in which Bateman states ““I have all the characteristics of a human being...but not a single, clear identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust”” a clear example of Bateman’s lack of emotional feeling is illustrated in an earlier scene in which he is shown exercising in his apartment while *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* plays on the TV in the background. It is not clear whether Bateman is using the horror movie as motivation for his exercise routine or just lacks any emotional response to the violence depicted in the film whatsoever. In yet another scene Bateman is shown in his living room casually talking on the phone while a sexually explicit pornographic film plays on his TV. It is interesting to note that in these two scenes the visual stimuli is commonly associated with evoking certain types of emotions in viewers. For Bateman however, the films evoke no emotion whatsoever.

Although this has been a rather cursory analysis, I feel it is important to point out the correspondences between Bateman’s character and Hare’s definition of a psychopath as it provides a substantiated foundation for looking at Bateman’s character. The Biopoetic approach requires that we examine artistic work as the production of human minds and experiences, which are themselves subject to the fields of anthropology and sociology. By using Hare’s research on psychopaths in the real world, we can better

understand some of the input Ellis may have had when he created his character. Hare's research also provides an external eye on *American Psycho* illustrating how its author may have formulated the structure of his text. The next section deals with how Hare's research may provide a more in-depth analysis of the particular text. However, before moving on I want to summarize what I have already laid out as the previous sections lay the foundation for my argument.

The central tenet of any scholarly analysis employing the methods of Evolutionary psychology must always begin with an anthropological theory dealing with the evolutionary past of human beings. Boehm's research on what he terms "upstarts" and the group-intimidation used to squash their behavior from becoming overly destructive provided this chapter's anthropological foundation. From Boehm's detailed and enriching research, I extrapolated the theory of the visible-criminal, a concept I described as being used primarily in large societies where inter-personal communication is not possible between all members of the group. When direct confrontation and intimidation don't or can't work to quell the threat of upstarts, the concept of the visible-criminal comes into play and is employed in didactic narratives and myths as a way of maintaining order. Commonly the figure of the visible criminal is depicted in crime fiction novels and films. Author Carla Freccero reiterates this point adding that the characters portrayed in these fictions often exist on the outside of the social order. One example of this is the depiction of the visible-criminal as a social introvert. Fictional characters such as Jame Gumb in Thomas Harris' novel *Silence of the Lambs* or Francis Dolarhyde in the same author's earlier novel *Red Dragon* speak to this point as do the main characters of Fritz Lang's *M* and Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Fictional accounts such as the ones listed above illustrate the visible-criminal principle. That is, the fictions portray criminals as socially awkward and existing on the fringes of society in an effort to point out the potential dangers they pose to the group as a whole. The dissemination and effect of these narratives occurs on two levels.

First, the average members of a society who read or enjoy fictional crime genre narratives can live out their upstart fantasies of cheating the system for personal gain, doing less than their share of community work or using the passivity of others to gain power and control over resources by vicariously living through the upstarts depicted in the moralistic tales. Secondly, after having experienced the thrills of upstartism, the average reader comes off their temporary high and returns comfortably to their original position within the group, believing that upstarts always get their comeuppance. Anyone tempted to live out their fantasy of becoming an upstart need only look to the final chapter of these tales to learn the—more often than not—unpleasant fate of the social upstart.

The visible-criminal as social type is often based on statistical evidence and legitimate police screening tactics. However, more often than not, a society's concept of a visible-criminal is directly related to its xenophobia, racism, sexism and a host of other fears directed at the Other, the unknown and the seemingly frightening. The term visible-criminal here is apt because it illustrates how the criminal narratives mentioned above depict persons most likely to be *perceived* as criminals, not those who are statistically more likely to commit a violent or malicious crime.

We come now to the case of *American Psycho*, for unlike the other crime or serial killer fictions mentioned above, it is drastically different in structure and plot. To begin

with, there is no cat and mouse game between good and evil. The only semblance of justice is a private detective that pesters Bateman about the absence of one of his victims, but even here there is no real threat of being caught or facing justice for crimes committed. Similarly, Bateman is never held up as a dynamic, thrilling or even interesting person as is so often the case with the antagonists of other crime fiction narratives. In fact, both Ellis and Harron systematically undercut Bateman's egotistical mannerisms by making him the brunt of their jokes. Consider the scene from Ellis' novel in which Bateman attempts to kill one of his colleagues named Luis Carruthers, only to be perceived a closet-homosexual attempting to come 'out' and pronounce his love to Carruthers. When Luis misreads Bateman's intention, he takes the opportunity to express his own homosexual love for Bateman proclaiming "I've noticed your...hot body" and "You don't know how long I've wanted it" (159), this only infuriates Bateman further and paralyzes him out of sheer humiliation. The humor of this scene is clearly directed at Bateman and illustrates the disgust Ellis and Harron feel towards his homophobia.

Yet if *American Psycho* is really so different from the other crime films and novels written about serial killers, can we still explain its structure? I offer that half of the answer lies in cultural theories. That is, when Ellis first wrote his novel and when Harron adopted it for the screen, they were writing social commentaries on the greed, racism, xenophobia and sexism they saw prevalent in the late 1980s and early 2000s. However, as with everything, nurture (read culture) cannot subsist without nature (biology), thus it maybe possible that there is an additional biological component involved that will help explain the structure of *American Psycho*.

According to Pitchford in his study on the origins of violence “Given the paucity of evidence in favour of developmental instability and brain damage in psychopaths the suggestion that psychopathy is an adaptation is worthy of further exploration” (36). Similarly, Larsson, Andershed, Lichtenstein found similar results in their study of 1090 adolescent twin pairs that *A Genetic Factor Explains Most of the Variation in the Psychopathic Personality*. They concluded that “genetic effects accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in the latent psychopathic personality factor, which makes it a promising target for future research” (228).

In a study of 3687 twin pairs, Viding, Blair, Moffitt and Plomin found “the core symptoms of psychopathy are strongly genetically determined” (quoted in Hare, 24). Hare concludes that although there are genetic influences, they are not immutable and uses the analogy “the potter is instrumental in molding pottery from clay (nurture), but the characteristics of the pottery also depend on the sort of clay available (nature)” (25, inserts added). For my purposes this is a satisfactory answer, psychopathy need not solely be genetic—what is?—in order for me to make my point which is that much can be gained from using both cultural and biological theories when analyzing a text in so far as each is employed correctly and not to replace the other.

But what significance does this have for our understanding of *American Psycho*? To put it simply, although Ellis and Harron may have set out to write social commentary, they stumbled across a deeper truth, that the biggest irritants of a civil society are not always those at the bottom but rather, may sometimes be those at the top. Of course, I don’t mean to imply that *all* world leaders, politicians and CEOs are psychopaths, but merely that it is in those positions that the rare one-percent of the population that is

psychopathic can flourish and ultimately cause the most damage to society. To conclude, *American Psycho* can be thought of as unknowingly warning readers and viewers of the hidden threat psychopaths present to the public at large.

If we consider the novel from the perspective argued above, we can see that it is doing more than just social commentary, rather it acts as a warning device for readers to guard against those individuals who seem too good to be true. Those individuals who appear to be the boy next door, smart, handsome, charming, successful, may in fact be master manipulators. Of course, not everyone who is handsome or successful is a psychopath but because we tend to fear only the visible-criminals, those who appear as upstarts without even opening their mouths, we tend to forget the hidden danger psychopaths pose to society due to their ability to manipulate and strategize their way to the top of a corporation, business ladder or political structure. This may explain why in *American Psycho* Bateman doesn't get caught and why there is no social justice.

In conclusion, Evolutionary psychology provides biological explanations that work with cultural analysis rather than against it. Using both tools we can establish several different ways of explaining the structure of literary or cinematic works of art. For *American Psycho* I suggested that its meaning structure can be explained and understood when we bring in Boehm's theories on social cohesion and egalitarianism and Hare's research on psychopathy. As Bateman so closely fits with Hare's definition of a psychopath, we can read the novel as a warning to readers to be on the lookout for dangerous psychopaths, many of whom do not fit our culturally constructed image of what an upstart should look like.

CHAPTER III

PERSPECTIVE TAKING, FALSE BELIEF AND VIEWER PERCEPTION: WHY THEORY OF MIND MAY OFFER RENEWED INSIGHT INTO THE CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

This chapter begins with a discussion about the scope of culturally based theories as compared to Biopoetics and offers one way of reconciling them to form a more inclusive perspective on cinematic analysis. Using Biopoetics, I then introduce Theory of Mind and discuss the insights it offers in understanding how meaning is constructed in Mary Harron's *American Psycho*.

Studies about how meaning is structured in the cinema have typically approached the issue from one of several positions. Whether it be Saussurean Semiotics and the study of objects in accordance with their culturally defined meanings, a Marxist analysis of the influence of economic systems, or the Foucauldian examination of power structures within society, past studies examining how meaning is shaped, structured and internalized through the cinematic medium have often provided a tremendous wealth of analytical tools for recognizing and decoding the influential pressures society and cultural have had on the artistic mind. As enlightening and exploratory as these approaches have been in elucidating the arts, they have, for the most part, ignored or neglected interpretation from a broader—indeed perhaps the broadest—perspective, that of the evolutionary.

The primary complaint of the Biopoeticists has not been that the other culturally based theories have wholly misinterpreted historical context, but rather that they have too narrowly limited their scope in defining what exactly they mean by History. For

Biopoeticists, history does not begin with the earliest human records, rather it describes a concept of all things past, be they human or otherwise. Likewise, the Biopoetic approach does not necessitate an attack on other social and culturally based system of analysis. Instead it implies an opening-up of perspective that will allow for a much broader range of historical viewpoints ranging from pre-cultural and pre-language human ancestors all the way up to the present. To come to the point then, this chapter takes an inclusive approach to the application of Biopoetics, choosing to build upon—rather than throw out—the previous forms of analysis used to elucidate meaning in the cinema. It is in this perspective that Theory of Mind should be viewed. Not as a replacement but rather as a more versatile tool that encompasses other theories such as the Feminists and Marxists while at the same time attempting to move beyond looking at “Historical” as purely a cultural term and recognize the long evolutionary past that all human beings share.

Like the traditional cultural theorists mentioned in the paragraph above, Theory of Mind takes as its conceptual starting point the concept that no organism can exist in isolation from its environment. The primary difference between TOM and other traditional and culturally based theories is that they tend to begin with human consciousness in its present form and examine the effects of human interaction without regard for the architecture or scaffolding of the mental and physical faculties that make culture—in all its varied forms—possible. This is precisely where Biopoetics and TOM provide insight. Acknowledging the gradation by which humans acquired their current form, TOM attempts to shed light on the structure of human mental capability as a way of getting at the structure of the very elemental units of social interaction.

For readers unfamiliar with the term Theory of Mind— it is mostly used in developmental psychology and the treatment of autism—I will now give a brief overview of what TOM is all about.

Theory of mind (TOM) is a mental capability that enables humans to recognize the internal mental states of others. TOM allows us to identify human intentionality and emotions like desire, hatred, anger and pleasure and differentiate active agents such as humans animals from passive objects such as rocks, trees and telephones (Flavell & Zunshine). The process by which humans use TOM is called mindreading as it literally involves trying to discern what someone else is thinking.

Leading the field in TOM research, psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen argues that humans “mindread all the time, effortlessly, automatically, and mostly unconsciously” (3). Furthermore, Baron-Cohen notes that mindreading makes sense from an evolutionary perspective as in social situations “it pays to be able to come up with a sensible interpretation of the causes of actions quickly if one is to survive to socialize for another day” (4). To illustrate Baron-Cohen’s argument, consider just a few examples of the mindreading skills needed to navigate romantic and social relationships: “I *think* that she *thinks* that I like her.” Or “I *wonder* what he will *think* if I don't call him back, will he still *think* the same way I *think* he *thinks* now?”

Our ability to read the minds of others is enormously helpful in social interactions as it gives us the mental tools to formulate a narrative out of the actions we perceive going on around us. For instance, one of the primary tests used in determining if a child has a fully formed sense of TOM is something called the Sally-Anne test. The test is administered with an experimenter, a subject—usually a child—a marble, a box and two

dolls named Sally and Anne. The experimenter introduces the child to the two dolls and indicates that the marble belongs to Sally and the box to Anne. The experimenter then plays out a skit in which Sally places her marble in a basket and leaves the room. After Sally has left Anne removes the marble and places it into her box out of view. Sally then reenters the room and the experimenter asks the child where she (Sally) will look for her marble. Children over the age of four who are not autistic often pass the test correctly in stating that Sally will look for her marble in the last place she put it—in the basket. Children under the age of four or with varying degrees of autism will often state (incorrectly) that Sally will look for her marble in the box even though it would have been impossible for Sally to know that Anne had moved it when she left the room.

The purpose of the Sally-Anne test is to determine two mental capabilities, the concept of false belief and the notion of perspective taking. In order to successfully pass the test the child must be able to recognize Sally's false belief. That is, possess "knowledge that others can hold false beliefs about the location or contents of an object, and that these beliefs produce undesired behavioral consequences" (Woolfe et al.) or in our case understand that Sally's belief about the location of the marble does not conform to reality. False belief is a vital part of TOM and the foundation upon which we communicate with others for without it we would assume everybody held the same ideas and opinions as ourselves (Woolfe et al.). Furthermore, any child without the ability would be unable to explain why Sally does not look for her marble in the box. In addition, in order for someone to determine false belief, they must be capable of practicing something else known as perspective-taking. Perspective-taking is rather straight forward in that it describes our ability to take on the perspective of someone else.

In order for a child to recognize Sally's false belief, they must be able to place themselves in the doll's perspective. Children who pass the Sally-Anne test do so because they are able to mentally place themselves in the doll's position and observe things from their perspective. Although the skill to recognize false belief and take on the perspective of another is used primarily in our daily lives, these abilities are also used to understand and enjoy film. To help illustrate this point I will turn now to several examples from Mary Harron's *American Psycho*.

In what is probably the film's most quoted scene, the murder of Paul Allen provides a ready-made example of how the cinema makes use of the viewer's ability to recognize false belief and take on the perspective of on-screen characters. Paul Allen (Jared Leto) is the younger, more handsome and more popular version of Patrick Bateman. Because of this fact Bateman plots to kill Allen for reflecting his own inadequacies. Bateman invites Allen to dinner and succeeds in getting him very drunk before the two return to Bateman's apartment. Harron's first shot within Bateman's apartment is of Allen sitting on a large white chair under which several layers of newspaper have been placed in a rectangle about ten feet square. Viewers familiar with gangster films will recognize the newspapers as the first sign that Bateman plans to murder Allen and does not wish to stain his flooring. Despite the clear foreboding nature of the newspaper under him, Allen remains ignorant of Bateman's intent. Harron's camera follows Bateman around his apartment as he dons a clear raincoat, swallows some medication and deftly removes an axe from the bathroom and places it in the living room behind Allen without his noticing.

Allen remains remotely detached from what is going on around him and does not notice what Harron makes overtly clear to her audience; Bateman plans to murder him with the axe. The explicit quality of all this makes it hardly seem worth discussing. However, it is precisely because our TOM works as well as it does that we do not stop to think about the implications. To refer back to the Sally-Anne test discussed earlier, the ability to recognize false belief through perspective taking is a vital part of our ability to understand the actions of others and what is going on around us. In order to fully understand how TOM shapes how the viewer perceives what is going on within this scene, we must break down its elements.

Firstly, Harron's attention to the axe and raincoat signal to the viewer that Bateman intends to kill Allen. The viewer is able to come to this conclusion using TOM and taking Bateman's perspective. The ability of the viewer to recognize Bateman's intent is a vital part of the scene's construction for without it the scene would lack suspense. If the scene were constructed differently with neither Allen nor the viewer aware of Bateman's intent, there would be no suspense, rather the viewer would feel shock and surprise. Here we see the importance of TOM as a fundamental aspect of suspense. The viewer's ability to foresee action as dictated by intent is what creates suspense, a facet of the cinema that would be impossible without TOM.

Secondly, in order to complete the plausibility of suspense, the viewer must be aware that Allen is *unaware* of Bateman's intent. If the viewer is not thoroughly convinced that Allen is oblivious to Bateman's intent, the scene would not be believable. Thirdly, in order for the scene to work the viewer must be able to recognize Allen's false belief. That is, like the child in the Sally-Anne test, the viewer must be able to

differentiate their own perspective from Allen's. Without this skill the viewer would be confused as to why the same cues they received were not alerting Allen to Bateman's intent. The ability to take on Allen's perspective—that is, his ignorance about Bateman's intent—and distinguish it from their own viewpoint about what Bateman's intends to do determines the viewer's ability to appreciate the scene's suspense. Recognizing how TOM functions allows us to break down the components of a cinematic scene and take apart its structure. It alters us to how film structures meaning and how suspense is created. The next section deals with the issue in expanding upon the idea of perspective taking and applying it to the camera.

About twenty minutes into Harron's film is business card scene. The business card scene is probably so well remembered because it perfectly encapsulates the character of Bateman and his colleagues. Sitting in a conference room in the middle of the day, Bateman and about half a dozen other Pierce & Pierce employees discuss their plans for dinner before the conversation eventually turns to a show and tell of their business cards. As each card is presented, it becomes obvious that this is no friendly interaction, each is trying to one-up his friends by showing off, the business cards become status symbols of wealth and popularity. The climax of the scene occurs when Bateman asks to see Paul Allen's (Paul Owen in the book) card. And has a difficult time contain his rage at being one-upped by Allen.

The business card scene is set in Bateman's office building and is well lit as it takes place during the day (See Screenshot #1). Bateman appears congenial and friendly with his co-workers and is careful not to allow his jealousy to show upon seeing Allen's superior business card. It is important to point out the visual cues and narrative context in

which Harron shoots this scene as it captures Bateman's social personality. By visual cues I mean to suggest the fact that the scene is set during the day and is well-lit, the importance of this will become clearly shortly.



Screenshot #1. Bateman Shares His New Business Card

Immediately following the business card scene Harron cuts to a long-shot of a street at night with Bateman walking away into the distance. The frame is now filled with darkly lit shadows. As compared with the previous shot in which Bateman and his colleagues are shown in a medium long-shot, we now see only Bateman from behind, small and insignificant in contrast to the looming grey building with Greek columns beside him (See Screenshot #2).



Screenshot #2. Bateman on a Dark and Foggy Evening

I have described the scenes I wish to talk about (and given still-frames) to enable the reader to fully appreciate the visual tools Harron employs in constructing each scene. I have also given such detailed descriptions to help illustrate an argument about how we use perspective taking when watching a film. In order to lay out this argument I will first need to discuss another psychological development test that will lay the ground-work for my argument.

Similar to the Sally-Ann test, the Mountain-Scene test is used to test whether children can perceive a perspective other than their own viewpoint. To begin the test a child subject is shown a picture of three mountains in the foreground and a doll in the background facing towards them. From the child's point of view the mountain in the middle is closest while the other two—the one on the right and left—are farther away. The child is then asked to draw what she thinks the doll sees. If the child draws the three mountains in the opposite configuration as depicted on the page she is said to be able to imagine the perspective of others—or in this case that of the doll.

The point I wish to convey by relying the Mountain-scene test is that when we take on the perspective of others as demonstrated in the Sally-Anne test, it is not merely a fleeting or vague concept, rather we are capable of imaging concrete spatial diagrams of what we think others are seeing. In other words, we create mental images of what we think others see. This mental image acts as a theater of the mind dictating how we are able to relate to others. This has important implications for the cinema as it means that we can think of film as an exercise in *directed* perspective-taking. That is, rather than creating a mental image of what we think someone is seeing, we are shown a particular point of view the director and cinematographer wishes the audience to receive. Simply

put, everything seen through the camera, that is everything *within* the frame—the mise en scène and how it is presented through movement, zooming, panning, editing etc.—can be seen as influencing the directed perspective-taking exercise of movie watching where the director constricts and colors how viewers perceive what is going on within the frame.

To return to the *American Psycho* scene discussed above, how the two shots are constructed shapes how we perceive the action within the frame. For instance, the difference in lighting between the two shots—the brightness in the first shot and the darkness of the second— contrasts significantly as they depict and juxtapose two alternate aspects of Bateman’s personality; his bright and public personae that he shows to the world and a darker side coded by the onset of night and the absence of other people on the darkly lit street. Juxtaposing two alternately lit scenes, Harron is asking her audience to consider two very different aspects of Bateman’s personality. We are, in a way, ‘seeing’ Bateman in two different lights, both the literal difference and also as a metaphorical expression of his moral character.

Of course, some readers may argue that this is all just hypothetical speculation that does not have a corollary with our TOM skills outside the cinema. While this complaint is somewhat justifiable, there is in fact an evolutionary-psychological explanation that can help us understand exactly why Harron’s juxtaposition works as well as it does.

Essentially the explanation goes like this. Through evolutionary history, individuals better equipped at hiding and avoiding the prey that stalked at night made more offspring and reproduced more than those who did not hide at night. Individuals who made the least amount of noise and made the biggest precautions when going out at

night had better survival rates and were less likely to be eaten. In terms of today's social behavior, this can translate into a heightened sense of awareness and precaution when at night (Sidebottom). With this in mind it is possible to see why Harron's juxtaposition between light and dark seems to work so well. That is, we tend to correlate certain mental and moral traits with what light someone happens to be under. This is true not only in the metaphorical sense but also to some degree in the literal sense given our evolutionary history.

Viewing the camera and *mise en scène* as the viewer's perspective within the narrative diagesis of the film, we can extrapolate further the implications of Harron's choices as director. For instance, after disappearing behind the tall building shaded in a cloud of fog, Harron places her camera facing Bateman as he walks towards the camera along an alleyway. As he approaches the camera and begins to fill up the frame, Harron slowly moves her camera back in sync with his step. As Bateman stops walking however, the camera continues on for a moment before stopping and then pushing in on him. The camera's movements reflect a perspective that seems to be drawn to Bateman. In the previous shot Harron has Bateman walking away from the camera, becoming ever smaller in the frame. Here however, he faces the camera almost as if the camera—and by extension the audience—is preemptively following him in hopes of discovering his sinister intentions.

It is not until Bateman begins to fill up the frame that the camera begins to move backward giving the viewer a physical reaction to the feeling of being pushed back by Bateman's encroaching movement. The following shot centers the viewer's perception even further around Bateman as Harron places her camera at a low angle looking up at

him making him appear larger. Through moving and placing her camera at certain positions and angles Harron shapes how the viewer perceives Bateman.

As Bateman stops in the alley it becomes clear that a bum named Al (Reg E. Cathey) and his dog Gizmo have caught his eye. In both shot and counter-shot in the conversation between Al and Bateman, Harron strategically places her camera at two opposite angles, first facing up at Bateman and then down at Al in a pattern that appears to visually reinforce their socio-economic difference. I do not mean to claim that the film is necessarily supporting a class centered view, rather that Harron is challenging the viewer to confront socially accepted modes of perception. Namely that we look up Bateman and down to street bums like Al.

Consider the dialogue and camera shots from the rest of this scene. After introducing himself to Al, Bateman crouches down next to him and begins engaging him in conversation.

Action: Two-shots and then over-the-shoulder for dialogue; camera approximating the perspective of the character speaking.

BATEMAN: ...what's your name?



Screenshot #3. Al's POV looking Up at Bateman

AL: Al

BATEMAN: Mm? Speak up, come on!

AL: Al!

BATEMAN: Get a goddamn job Al. You've got a negative attitude, that's what's stopping you. You've got to get your act together, I'll help you.

AL: You are so kind mister, you're kind. You're a kind man, I can tell...



Screenshot #4. Al looks Up at Bateman

BATEMAN: It's okay.

AL: Please! You've got to tell me what to do!

Action: Al grabs Bateman's left leg and pulls himself closer



Screenshot #5. Bateman and Al Share the Frame

AL: You've got to help me, I'm so cold! I'm hungry!

Action: Bateman disgustedly removes Al's hand from his leg.

BATEMAN: (Laughs) Do you know how bad you smell? You reek of shit! Do you know that? (laughs) Al? I'm sorry, it's just that (Pause) I don't know...

Action: High-angle POV shot looking up at Bateman as he stands, looks down at Al and then around the alley to see if anyone is around.



Screenshot #6. Al's POV Looking Up at Bateman

BATEMAN: ... I don't have anything in common with you.

Action: Cut back to a two-shot as Bateman crouches again and opens his briefcase rummaging for something inside.

AL: Oh, thank you mister, thank you. I'm cold out here, its...

BATEMAN: Do you know what a fucking loser you are?

AL: What?

Action: An over-the-shoulder perspective of Al as Bateman stabs him with the knife he's just removed from his briefcase. Bateman plunges the knife into Al's stomach several times and throws him against the wall. Cut

back to Al's perspective looking up at Bateman as he stomps on Gizmo the dog (out of frame) crushing him to death. The final shot in the scene is a medium-long shot filmed from a crane about thirty feet in the air looking down at Bateman as he returns the knife to his briefcase and walks away down the alley.



Screenshot #7. The Smoky Alley as Bateman Leaves

Something particularly interesting about the camera work in this scene is how Harron shapes and controls the viewer's attention by manipulating their perspective. Alternating between over-the-shoulder and POV shots, Harron places the viewer in the perspective of first one character and then the other. For most of the verbal exchange between Bateman and Al, they talk on an equal plane, both crouched together on the side of an alley. This feeling of equality is visually reflected in the level camera angles used to shot both characters. Both Bateman and Al it seems are on an equal playing-field for the short time that they briefly enter each other's worlds and attempt verbal communication (See Screenshot #5). Harron inserts some discrepancy however when Bateman stands up and proclaims, "I don't have anything in common with you" an explicit indication that he

is unable to establish any social or human connection with Al. This sentiment is reflected in the camera's angle as Harron places the camera low to the ground approximating Al's perspective—and at a steep angle facing directly up at Bateman making him appear larger than life. (See Screenshot #6).

Moving out of Al's direct visual perspective and assuming a position of superiority, Bateman aborts his attempt to connect with Al, this action is visually replicated for the viewer as the camera is placed at an extremely low angle facing up at Bateman. Placing the camera at such a low angle, Harron ensures that viewers cannot help but take on Al's perspective and to sympathize with him. Harron personalizes Al and challenges viewers to consider the scene through his eyes. It is only after Bateman has murdered Al that Harron cuts back to a wide crane-shot that returns viewers to a safe distance of contemplation over what they have just seen, and presumably judgment for what Bateman has done (See Screenshot #8).

In Conclusion, TOM is all about Perspective-taking, to place oneself in the mind's-eye-view of another as a way of understanding what they are feeling, thinking and experiencing. We use TOM in our social lives as a way of sympathizing with others but we can also use it to analyze how a film constructs and shapes meaning through the application of various filmic techniques. Harron uses perspective to shape how viewers perceive actions and situations and relies on our mind-reading skills to place ourselves in a mind's eye-view of her characters.

CHAPTER IV

THE MALE BODY AS METAPHOR

This chapter examines concerns of body image, personal identity and political ideology as components of a multi-layered metaphor. Through textual analysis and interviews, this chapter examines the text's images of masculinity and social commentary. Two aspects of the text are examined; the male body and label and surfaces.

The Male Body

This first section addresses Bateman's body image as a metaphor for consumerism.

In Harron's film *Bateman* states "I believe in taking care of myself, eat a balanced diet and a rigorous exercise routine." As Harron's camera follows Bateman around his lavish apartment, he performs various stretching exercises and begins his beauty regimen. Over the digetic soundtrack a melodic non-vocal piano piece is played that has a calming effect on the viewer. In addition, Harron places her camera in front of the window to allow sunlight to flood the frame and accent the shadows from the vertical blinds almost as if the audience is watching a sunset (See Screenshot #1). In this way she attempts to present Bateman as the idealized consumer. The scene plays very much like a television commercial for men's fragrance. Harron pokes fun at the idyllic world presented in such ads that consist of impossibly fit and handsome men stoically going about their daily lives as if the product somehow contributes to the visual perfection they represent. Moving among his fine furniture and immaculately clean apartment, Bateman

is in his own private commercial for the happiness of his life. Despite the calming look of this scene, Bateman's inner state of mind is strained and conflicted over living up to the visually perfect life he aspires to maintain.



Screenshot #8. Bateman Exercising

Remarking on his character, actor Christian Bale noted in an interview with Barnes and Noble that what stood out for him was “his (Bateman) fixation on minutiae, and absolutely needing to get an answer for every little tiny thing, even though all the things he's interested in are completely shallow” (Barnes). Bateman's obsession with the details of his physical routine are illustrated in the following scene in which he describes in detail every lotion and balm saying, “I always use an aftershave lotion with little or no alcohol, because alcohol dries your face out and makes you look older. Then moisturizer, then an anti-aging eye-balm followed by a final moisturizing protective lotion.” Bateman is highly concerned with the physical up-keep required in maintaining his body in top-physical form and in doing so he adheres to a highly detailed beauty regimen that allows him to maintain complete control over his physical form. However, despite all his

concern over his physical features, Bateman makes it clear that the flesh and blood that make up his body is merely a façade covering his empty existence. In what is perhaps the film's most brilliant merging of image and message, Harron shoots Bateman in close-up as he slowly removes a facial mask while giving the following in voice-over "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman. Some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there" (See Screenshot #9).



Screenshot #9. Bateman Removing His Protective Skin

What is particularly interesting about this shot is that it can be read metaphorically along several different lines. First, we can consider the imagery of skin and how it covers and protects the body from the outside world. Bateman says that there is no real him, merely an abstraction. The imagery reflects this sentiment as Bateman slowly peels away his extra layer of skin that is provided by the cosmetic product he symbolically reveals his true self. But the image that is left is itself a constructed image.

As noted above, Bateman meticulously sculpts his body in an effort to maintain a picture-perfect life like the ones seen in television commercials, however just like the image created in those advertisements, Bateman's existence is entirely superficial. In peeling off what looks like his own skin Bateman illustrates the idealized view of his life is merely a mirage constructed for the benefit of an image projected out for others. In a sense, Bateman's body has become just another product in a long series of cosmetic coverings that try to put substance over the vacuum. Although Harron operates within a primarily visual medium and thus has the benefit of creating poignant images illustrating her concern, she is merely extrapolating upon what Ellis laid out in his novel.

In a very lengthy description of his morning beauty routine, Bateman discusses every product and its use:

Then I use the Probright tooth polisher and next the Interplak tooth polisher (this in addition to the toothbrush) which has a speed of 4200 rpm and reverses direction forty-six times per second; the larger tufts clean between teeth and massage the gums while the short ones scrub the tooth surfaces. I rinse again, with Cepacol. I wash the facial massage off with a spearmint face scrub. The shower has a universal all-directional shower head that adjusts within a thirty-inch vertical range. It's made from Australian gold-black brass and covered with a white enamel finish. In the shower I use first a water-activated gelcleanser, then a honey-almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub. Vidal Sassoon shampoo is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older. (26)

I quote this passage—only a fraction of the entire monologue—in order to illustrate how both Harron and Ellis are aiming at similar goals, though through different mediums. In Harron’s film, the scene comparable to the one quoted here involves Bateman applying creams and ointments (See Screenshot #2) and has a cinematography very similar to a television commercial for a fragrance or shampoo. For Ellis, the issue is not about imagery but rather the language itself that becomes the instruments in which he paints a world ruled by products and written in the same bland style-less prose of a label on a conditioner bottle. Just as in Harron’s film, Ellis is concerned with the effects of products on Bateman’s body. In both scenes Bateman’s body is finely tuned and regulated according to the dictates of male hygiene products promising to transform and sculpt the body to fit some prefigured image of what an attractive man should look like. Furthermore, both Harron’s film and Ellis’ novel capture the monotony with which Bateman relates his beautifying routine and undercut his seriousness with long excerpts of his monologue on the fine details of every element involved with each cosmetic product. Bateman’s attention to detail also figures heavily in the following section.

Surfaces and Labels

In an interview given in 1991 when his novel was first released, Ellis remarked that “I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface -- food, clothes -- that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action: no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive” (Times). Ellis’ commentary on his own work accentuates the importance of surface as metaphor. From the dialogue to the food to the clothes, surface is indeed what

defines Ellis' characters. One brilliant illustration of this occurs in a chapter entitled *Lunch* in which Bateman eats with a fellow colleague at Pierce & Pierce Christopher Armstrong, who has recently returned from a vacation in the Bahamas. When Bateman asks Armstrong how his vacation was, Armstrong launches into a paragraph-long monologue without seeming to care whether Bateman is listening:

Travelers looking for that perfect vacation this summer may do well to look south, as far south as the Bahamas and the Caribbean islands. There are at least five smart reasons for visiting the Caribbean including the weather and the festivals and events, the less crowded hotels and attractions, the price and the unique cultures. While many vacationers leave the cities in search of cooler climates during the summer months, few have realized that the Caribbean has a year-round climate of seventy-five to eighty-five degrees and that the islands are constantly cooled by the trade winds. It is frequently hotter north in. (137)

As Armstrong is mindlessly prattling on about his vacation, Bateman begins to think about his day and completely ignores his friend. This however does not seem to stop Armstrong from continuing his rant:

Like the United States it celebrates the summer months with festivals and special events including music concerts, art exhibits, street fairs and sporting tournaments, and because of the vast number of people traveling elsewhere, the islands are less crowded, allowing for better service and no lines when waiting to use that sailboat or dine in that restaurant. I mean I think most people go to sample the culture, the food, the history..." (138)

Although I have only quoted a small portion of Armstrong's monologue, even in this segment readers can identify the monotony and repetitiveness of his prose. However it is not the monotony *pre se* that I wish to address. Rather, I offer that Armstrong's rant about his vacation is the essentially a type of Muzak one often hears in a shopping center or corporate promotional video. As noted in the previous section, Bateman's monologue about his daily beauty treatment and ritual is written as if it came directly off the back of a shampoo bottle. The same could be said of Armstrong's vapid ramblings regarding the Bahamas. The passage gives the reader the feeling that they have just stopped reading a novel and are now being forced to endure the prose of a time-share promotional or AAA guidebook. To refer back to Ellis' quote from the New York Times article, Bateman and his friends live in a world of surface value, where substance and depth are replaced by commercial and superficial value. Armstrong's recounting of his trip to the Bahamas illustrates this wonderfully as it contains almost no personal anecdotes or experiences and instead reads as if it were written by committee for advertising purposes.

Although Harron cut Armstrong's bit of dialogue from her film, she did retain a very insightful aspect of Ellis' book that captures the superficial quality of Bateman's social circle. Towards the end of Harron's film Bateman eludes police in a deadly chase and is able to hide in his office where he calls his lawyer to confess all his murders. The following day Bateman spots his lawyer in a bar and approaches him:

Bateman: So, eh, Harold...did you get my message?

Carnes: Jesus yes, that was hilarious! That was you, wasn't it?

Bateman: Yeah, naturally.

Carnes: Bateman killing Allen and the escort girls, that's fabulous, that's rich.

Bateman: What exactly do you mean?

Carnes: The message you left. By the way Davis, how's Cynthia? You're still seeing her right?

Bateman: Wait, Harold, what do you mean?

Carnes: Oh, excuse me, nothing! It's good to see you! Is that Edward Towers?

Bateman: Eh? Wait!

Carnes: Davis? I'm not one to bad mouth anyone, your joke was amusing, but come on man, you had one fatal flaw; Bateman is *such* a dork, such a boring, spineless, lightweight. Now if you had said Price or McDermott, otherwise it was amusing. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must be going.

Bateman: Wait...um...stop!

Action: Bateman tries to explain to Carnes that *he* is in fact Bateman—not Davis—and has indeed killed Paul Allen.

Bateman (Con't): I killed Paul Allen...and I liked it. I can't make myself any clearer.

Carnes: But that's simply not possible, and I don't find this funny anymore.

Bateman: It was never was supposed to be. Why isn't it possible?

Carnes: It's just not.

Bateman: Why not? You stupid bastard!

Carnes: Because I had dinner with Paul Allen twice in London just ten days ago.

Bateman: No! You...didn't...?

If there is any point in the film that can be regarded as an epiphany, this is certainly it. Bateman realizes that the man he himself has killed may in fact be someone

else. From the audience's point of view this is not so hard to believe given so many characters misidentify each other throughout the film. In the scene quoted above Carnes refers to Bateman as Davis and even unknowingly badmouths Bateman to his face. The ultimate superficiality behind Bateman's world then is the inability to acknowledge or recognize fellow human beings. In many ways characters become nothing but their names which are then traded freely as they are all interchangeable and indistinguishable from one another.

This chapter briefly discussed the importance of the male body in *American Psycho* and the role it plays in shaping Bateman's character. Like all the other products Bateman buys, his body is the result of much sculpting and altering according to an idealized view of the male form. Similarly, surface image plays a major role in Bateman's life as it defines the desired presence one must put forth. In Bateman's world, this love of surface translates into personalities reminiscent of commercials and prefabricated advertisements lacking depth. Similarly, names are of the utmost importance while the personalities behind them are interchangeable and nearly identical.

The purpose of this chapter has been to illustrate the use of metaphor throughout the text to deepen the meaning behind the novel and film and to demonstrate the importance of examining the text from a cultural viewpoint in regards to reflecting the opinions and viewpoints of those involved in creating the text.

CHAPTER V

REAGANOMICS, REVANCHISM AND THE NEW SOCIAL DARWINISTS

This chapter examines two pivotal concepts central to the construction of *American Psycho* as an historical text. Beginning with an evaluation of Reagan era domestic policy, I'll argue that much of what went into Ellis creating his characters may in fact have been born out of the public discourse held throughout the 1980s on a variety of issues relating to concern over the government's role in helping the lower classes and the creation of a national identity born out of a *neo*-social Darwinist paradigm. In the second section I will refocus several years into the future during the mid and late 1990s in New York City where I will argue that the phenomenon known colloquially as Giuliani-Time or academically as revanchism, was in fact an outgrowth of Reagan's domestic policies in the 1980s and probably played a significant role in shaping the cultural atmosphere leading up to the release of Harron's film in 2000.

Although I will be examining two historical time periods—the first being 1980 through 1991, the period from when Reagan was first elected president and Ellis published his book and secondly, 1991 through 2000 which covers the rise of revanchism in New York city under Mayor Giuliani up through the release of Harron's film—I will move back and forth fairly freely between both the novel and film as—I have noted earlier—both share a lot in common. The reason then for demarcating the historical time lines is to help illustrate the cultural influences that may have played a part in first inspiring Ellis' original work and secondly, lending a sense of relevancy to Harron's cinematic adaptation some nine years later.

Reaganomics

Reagan era economic policies were decidedly conservative and consciously business friendly. Theorizing that if individuals and corporations were uninhibited by government regulation and control the country would enjoy financial growth and independence, Reagan supported a supply-side economic model that attempted to promote the unrestrained growth of business as the national value. Remarking on the speed with which the Reagan administration enacted these plans, one author wrote in 1986 about Reagan's first 100 days in office that "Not since Franklin Roosevelt's days had anyone so boldly attacked the status quo. What no one reckoned with, though, was that a compliant Congress would so willingly embrace the new Chief Executive's call for sharp reductions in social spending, deep cuts in taxes and a massive build up in defense" (Duke, 13). Indeed Reagan's plan to revitalize America seemed very much on track and ready to take on the 80s. Despite this optimism however, there were many who saw Reagan's tactics as harmful to the lower classes and saw fit to voice their opinions. In a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* one citizen remarked that:

Presumably, the erosion of these (social) programs is aimed at making poverty and unemployment so intolerable that wage earner will accept more readily a return to substance wages under the pressures of Government-encouraged industrial recession. Meanwhile, it is the health of poor children that will suffer. Whether deliberately or not, of the Administration implies an unsavory core of social Darwinism (Luria)

Similarly, another *Times* reader noted in response to an article entitled “U.S. Asserts Key to Curbing Births is a free Economy”:

It is indeed ironic to see an Administration that has shown little but contempt for our understanding of nature, not to mention its contempt for the natural environment itself, turn to the concept of “nature” in defense of a population policy that could most charitably be termed social Darwinism. (Flory)

The public wasn't the only one using the term ‘social Darwinist’ however as one article in *The Progressive* by Sidney Lens entitled “Blaming the Victims” ironically noted “It’s all our fault, you see, that the economy is in such a severe disarray: We’ve grown fat and lazy, lusting after consumer goods but unwilling to work hard for them. Instead, we look to government for more and more handouts” (27). Lens goes on to say that “Blaming the victims has been a favorite pastime of our power elites for about a century” (27) and “the handy device of blaming the victims rather than their exploiter—or the system—remains entrenched in the Establishment’s rationale for its privileges” (27).

Clearly the term ‘social Darwinism’ held some importance with Americans during this period, enough so that many felt compelled to use the term in public discourse. However, just because the term was used does not mean that the charges were warranted. In the following section I will briefly discuss what social Darwinism is and how it was perceived in the 1980s, however, I will not evaluate the validity of the claims that the Reagan administration’s policies on domestic issues were in any way part of social

Darwinism. The point of this chapter is merely to present the evidence that the term social Darwinism was in fact an active and actively transmuted meme often used in reference to Reagan's policies and that these views may have influenced Ellis in writing his novel.

Social Darwinism

As indicated in the passages quoted above, the term social Darwinist or social Darwinism is almost exclusively used in negative terms. And it should be no wonder why as the actual term itself was coined not by a proponent of the philosophy but one of its detractors, Joseph Fisher who in 1877 coined the term with a pejorative connotation. The term did not gain popularity however until the first half of the 20th century and then largely in response to a book published by Sir Francis Galton published in 1883 where Galton argued that "The investigations of human eugenics—that is, of the conditions under which men of a high type are produced—is at present extremely hampered by the want of full family histories, both medical and general" (30). Galton's call for eugenics—a field of research that would study individual's physiological adaptive capabilities within society—began to gain prominence in the early half of the 20th century as political movements saw it as a scientific justification—eugenics borrowed and arguably distorted Darwin's idea of natural selection—for their ideologies. One passage from Galton's work that seemed to have particular resonance with political movements read:

One of the effects of a civilization is to diminish the rigour of the application of the law of natural selection. It preserves weakly lives, that would have perished in barbarous lands. The sickly children of a wealthy family have a better chance of

living and rearing than the stalwart children of a poor one. As with the body, so with the mind. (326)

Using Galton's views on the form and structure of population dynamics, the Nazis sought to justify establishing the Aryan race as the quintessential master race of all humanity in beating out other races and ethnicities, not only the Jewish people but also the handicapped, homosexuals and anyone who didn't fit in with their homogeneous view of humanity. Subsequently, any mention of the topic of eugenics is usually dismissed without thought or concern for the validity of the argument, a point Evolutionary Biologist Richard Dawkins made in 2006 when he argued the case for the friendlier side of the eugenics movement saying:

I wonder whether, some 60 years after Hitler's death, we might at least venture to ask what the moral difference is between breeding for musical ability and forcing a child to take music lessons. Or why it is acceptable to train fast runners and high jumpers but not to breed them. I can think of some answers, and they are good ones, which would probably end up persuading me. But hasn't the time come when we should stop being frightened even to put the question? (Brockman)

I have made a point of quoting Dawkins here, despite the fact that he is writing some twenty years after the historical scope of this paper, in order to illustrate the overwhelming influence the Nazis had in constructing the connotation of social Darwinism and the eugenics movement. That is to say, while there are certainly some good arguments for conducting eugenics research, the term social Darwinism has been so jaded by the Nazis that for those in the 1980s, any mention of it would conjure up horrible visions of forced-sterilizations, death camps and gas chambers rather than the

productive and systematic removal of harmful or deadly genetic factors which Dawkins promotes. This is an important concept to point out because it is precisely this vitriol that Ellis picks up on and uses in constructing the predominantly negative main character of his novel.

In the previous few sections I discussed the use of the term social Darwinism in 1980s public discourse and gave a short history of the term along with a possible explanation as to why it carried a predominately negative connotation. In the following section I will turn to the text of *American Psycho* and argue that the popularly held view of social Darwinism is prevalent throughout the text. In order to help clarify what exactly the term social Darwinism meant at the time Ellis wrote his novel I want to briefly discuss two areas thought to encapsulate the term.

Misogyny

The first category discussed here is misogyny and addresses the male centered view expressed by social Darwinism. For one contributor to *The New York Times*, social Darwinism in 1984 consisted of “The enrichment of the economically fittest, the end of measures to uplift minorities. Most important, I think, there will be further falling away from the country’s commitment to civil liberties” (Lewis). Implicit in this statement, particularly within the term ‘minorities’ is the belief that women were to be subjected to the same mistreatment as non-whites and the poor—coincidentally both of whom will be discussed in the following two sections.

Throughout *American Psycho* Patrick Bateman expresses hatred and animosity of many different types of people, ideas and things. His hatred of women however is

perhaps the novel's most central theme. For the purposes of clarity, I will divide Bateman's hatred of women into two sections; social misogyny and murderous misogyny, call it high and low if you like. On the one hand Bateman encapsulates the typical male chauvinist who pals around with his friends, putting women down and referring to them as sex objects. On the other hand however, is a much darker hatred of humanity that Bateman reserves especially for women. To begin with Bateman's social misogyny, one scene from Harron's film perfectly captures this sentiment.

Sitting in a posh New York smokers' club that seems to serve a predominantly male clientele, Patrick Bateman and his friends Craig McDermott (Josh Lucas) and David Van Patten (Bill Sage) discuss the value of women:

McDermott: If they have a good personality and they are not great looking, then who fucking cares?

Bateman: Well let's just say hypothetically ok, what if they have a good personality?

Action: (All three laugh)

Bateman: I know, I know...

Together: There are no girls with good personalities!

Action: The three friends high-five each other

Van Patten: A good personality consists of a chick with a little hardbody who will satisfy all sexual demands without being too slutty about things and who will essentially keep her dumb fucking mouth shut.

McDermott: The only girls with good personalities who are smart or maybe funny or halfway intelligent or talented,—though god knows what the fuck

that means—are ugly chicks.

Van Patten: Absolutely!

McDermott: And this is because they have to make up for how fucking unattractive they are!

Bateman: Do you know what Ed Gein said about women?

Van Patten: Ed Gein? Maître d' at Canal Bar?

Bateman: No, serial killer, Wisconsin in the fifties

McDermott: What did Ed say?

Bateman: He said ‘When I see a pretty girl walking down the street I think two things. One part of me wants to take her out and talk to her, be real nice and sweet and treat her right.

Van Patten: And what did the other part of him think?

Bateman: (laughs) What her head would look like on a stick!

Action: Van Patten and McDermott look at each other in silence as Bateman laughs to himself.

I have transcribed the entirety of the dialogue from this scene in order to illustrate the different intensities to Bateman’s misogyny. On the one hand, Bateman and his friends espouse classic patriarchal views about the role of women in society and their value in personal relationships. Essentially they see women as sexual playthings that hold no real status or purpose for men or for society. For Bateman, women exist purely for sexual gratification. And those who are less than physically perfect are discarded as talentless, pitiless creatures who deserve to be shunned. In addition to this damning view of women, Bateman’s misogyny has a second, more intense layer.

Even to dedicated misogynists like McDermott and Van Patten, Bateman is radical to an alarming degree. Although there are several scenes throughout *American Psycho* that suggests Bateman's friends are misogynistic, nowhere is it implied that their hatred of women has become murderous. Conversely, Bateman openly voices his violent feelings of aggression toward women. The fact that he laughs at his Ed Gein quote rather than finding it shocking as his friends do, illustrates his misogyny is especially acute, even within the male dominated circle of his colloques.

To turn now to this more violent form of misogyny, there are many indications throughout the novel besides the one quoted above that illustrate Bateman's violent thoughts towards women. One such scene occurs in Ellis' book when Bateman finds out he cannot use his drink tickets while at a nightclub and tells the waitress "You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab you to death and play around with your blood" (59). The first really intense scene of murder that is described in detail occurs after Bateman meets Bethany, an ex-girlfriend and the two share a lunch date to learn what each other have been doing. During the course of their lunch, Bateman learns that Bethany is dating the chef of the hip restaurant Dorsia which was continually denied Bateman a reservation. Upon learning this devastating news, Bateman describes his internal reaction noting "my brain does explode and my stomach bursts open inwardly—a spastic, acidic, gastric reaction; stars and planets, whole galaxies made up entirely of little white chef hats, race over the film of my vision" (239). Their lunch takes an odd turn as Bateman—struggling to hide his rage—begins to insinuate that Bethany's boyfriend is a homosexual:

"Robert Hall, Robert Hall, Robert Hall," I mutter to myself, trying to remember. "Scholarship student? President of our senior class?" I think about

it a second longer, then add, "Weak chin?" "No, Patrick," she says. "The *other* Robert Hall." "I'm confusing him with the *other* Robert Hall?" I ask.

"Yes, Patrick," she says, exasperated. Inwardly cringing, I close my eyes and sigh. "Robert Hall. Not the one whose parents own half of, like, Washington? Not the one who was"—I gulp—"captain of the crew team? Six feet?" "Yes," she says. "*That* Robert Hall." "But..." I stop. "Yes? But *what*?" She seems prepared to wait for an answer. "But he was a *fag*," I blurt out. "No, he was *not*, Patrick," she says, clearly offended. "I'm positive he was a fag." I start nodding my head. "Why are you so positive?" she asks, not amused. "Because he used to let frat guys—not the ones in my house—like, you know, gang-bang him at parties and tie him up and stuff. At least, you know, that's what I've heard," I say sincerely, and then, more humiliated than I have ever been in my entire life, I confess, "Listen, Bethany, he offered me a... you know, a blow job once. In the, um, civics section of the library." "Oh my god," she gasps, disgusted. "Where's the check?" (240)

This scene deserves to be quoted in full as it illustrates Bateman's transparent attempt to ridicule Bethany is driven by his own insecurities and anxiety over not being able to get a reservation at Dorsia. Bethany and her boyfriend Robert Hall are clearly a danger to Bateman's worldview as they threaten his dominance as an alpha male. This scene and the graphic depiction of Bethany's murder that follows it, wonderfully illustrate how Bateman's ego is so fully joined with his homicidal nature that he must take violent revenge. After luring Bethany back to his apartment, Bateman makes his intention clear:

"What in the fuck are you doing with Robert Hall?" I whisper. "What did you say?" As if in slow motion, like in a movie, she turns around. I wait until she's seen the nail gun and the gloved hands to scream, "*What the fuck are you doing with Robert Hall?*" Perhaps on instinct, perhaps from memory, she makes a futile dash for the front door, crying out. Though the chardonnay has dulled her reflexes, the Scotch I've drunk has sharpened mine, and effortlessly I'm leaping in front of her, blocking her escape, knocking her unconscious with four blows to the head from the nail gun. I drag her back into the living room, laying her across the floor over a white Voilacutro cotton sheet, and then I stretch her arms out, placing her hands flat on thick wooden boards, palms up, and nail three fingers on each hand, at random, to the wood by their tips. (245)

Although I have neglected to quote some of the more gruesome scenes from this murder, I feel the quotation above captures the full breadth of Bateman's hatred and aggression toward Bethany and the barbarity with which he murders her. The scene is in fact so graphic that it appears a grotesque commentary on the more common forms of misogyny as discussed above. As there are so many other scenes in which Bateman objectifies or tortures women for no other apparent reason other than to punish them for being different, they cannot all be brought to bare here, though the scenes I have quoted above are, I feel an accurate representation of Bateman's views and actions regarding women.

The Poor

The second section discussed here in relation to social Darwinism is Bateman's views on the poor and lower income classes. In a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* entitled *It's Time We Stopped Blaming the Homeless*, the author argues that although there is an active effort to provide help for the homeless:

Many urban dwellers, perhaps a majority, have become increasingly "fed up" with the homeless. The immediacy of this kind of poverty, the explosion in panhandling, the increase in people sleeping on the street or in bus stations, the smell, the inconvenience, the esthetic effect of all this has traumatized people and led to the ultimate rejection, the ultimate blaming of the victim. (Unger).

Although this author does not tag social Darwinism explicitly in his indictment of the social zeitgeist towards the lower and homeless class, he does express a sentiment that reflects a similar letter to the *Times* editor printed two year earlier (1986) entitled *The National Psyche in Post-Reagan America* in which that author argues that:

President Reagan and his Administration have fostered an unbridled free-enterprise system and might-makes-right foreign policy that is no more or less than social Darwinism, a basic survival-of-the-fittest mentality. Domestically, those who are poor or disabled must work or perish (be damned as the Puritans of the 1500's believed)" (Loffredo).

The view expressed in the above two letters illustrates a sentiment deeply concerned with how the rich and ruling class were mistreating the government. This has a direct correlation with several scenes in *American Psycho*, most notably in the encounter between Bateman and a bum named Al. As I have already discussed this scene in an

earlier chapter I want to focus specifically on the dialogue as it helps illustrate several of the concerns voiced in the *Times* letters. For example, the fact that Bateman tells Al:

BATEMAN: Get a goddamn job Al. You've got a negative attitude, that's what's stopping you. You've got to get your act together, I'll help you.

Reflects the sense of perceived laziness held by the rich and upper classes toward to poor and homeless. The idea being that if you are poor or without work it was because you were lazy or had a "negative attitude." The fact that his lavish lifestyle and extravagant income could be implicated in contributing to Al's misery never crosses Bateman's mind. Indeed as the author of the first *Times* letter noted, those of Bateman's ilk, that is the super rich and those in government power, are literally blaming the victims for their own crimes.

The rest of the dialogue continues this line of thought:

AL: You've got to help me, I'm so cold! I'm hungry!

BATEMAN: (Laughs) Do you know how bad you smell? You reek of shit! Do you know that? (laughs) Al? I'm sorry, it's just that (Pause) I don't know...

The fact that Bateman responds with such indifference to Al's pleas for mercy and for food illustrates a point that was also made in a letter to *Times* which argued that many in the city view homelessness as "merely an eyesore on the(ir) way to work, (it) has become something to complain about, an imposition on the lives of people who have to see it rather than live it, something to joke about on automatic teller lines (Unger). Indeed, it seems as though Al is no more to Bateman than a smelly imposition whose suffering and very existence is an inconvenience.

In these past few sections I have discussed the use of the term social Darwin in public discourse through the 1980s and offered that the perception of the theory was accurately reflected in Ellis' characters and narrative. In this final section I will turn to New York city during the mid and late 1990s and argue that much of what was going on during that time, the thoughts, values and governmental regulations were in fact born out of what many saw as the Reagan inspired social Darwinism of the previous decade. Furthermore, I will suggest that it is this new form of Reaganomic themed policies that influenced Harron to make her film adaptation when she did.

Revanchism

In November 1997 Rudolph Giuliani was reelected Mayor of New York City. During his second term Giuliani would introduce what urban theorist Neil Smith would later regard as a vicious reaction against the idea that the government should supply a basic minimum level of daily living conditions (1). In his article *Giuliani Time: The Revanchist 1990s*, author Neil Smith examines a phenomenon that he sees as helping to fill "Vacuum created by the dismantling of liberal urban policy since the 1980s" which is that "New York City has increasingly been governed by a vicious revanchism synonymous with 'Giuliani Time.'" Defining revanchism as the blending of "Revenge with reaction" Smith argues that the Giuliani Mayorship was highly revanchist in nature as it represented:

A reaction against the basic assumption of liberal urban policy, namely that government bears some responsibility for ensuring a decent minimum level of daily life for everyone. That political assumption is now largely replaced by a

vendetta against the most oppressed-workers and "welfare mothers," immigrants and gays, people of color and homeless people, squatters, anyone who demonstrates in public. (1)

Smith goes on to note that not only were these minority groups targeted:

They are excoriated for having stolen New York from a white middle class that sees the city as its birthright. Blaming the victim has been raised from a common political tactic to a matter of established policy. If elements of this revanchism also mark national policy—anti-immigrant legislation, the dismantling of welfare, the near cessation of public housing construction, and so forth—what distinguishes New York is that the loss of these "entitlements" is matched by a parallel assault on rights. (1)

While Smith sees 1997 as the pivotal point at which the public outcry over minorities began in earnest, he points out that the trend in public policy can be traced back specifically in New York city to 1994 when Giuliani—in his first term as Mayor—and police chief William Bratton's issued *Police Strategy No. 5: Reclaiming the Public Spaces of New York* (1). The central tenants of *Strategy No. 5* according to Smith are that New York City and in particular its public and communal spaces are the natural birthright of the middle class (1). Blaming the victims of society's biggest flaws thus becomes official police policy (1). An increase in the arrest and prosecution of those deemed guilty for lowering the quality of life such as graffiti taggers, reckless drivers and intermittent car alarms, was thought to see the return of decency and civility to the city (5). Of the eight central types of offenders outlined in *Police Strategy No. 5, American Psycho* comments on six, all of which will now be discussed now briefly.

According to *Police Strategy No. 5*, those leading the downward spiral of urban decay are the loud noses emitting from nightclubs and discos, such as the ones frequented by Bateman and his friends throughout both Ellis' book and Harron's film. Graffiti, which shows up several times in the novel's first chapter reading "FEAR" and "DYKE" and most famously in the novel's opening line taken from Dante's *Divine Comedy* "ABANDON ALL WHOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" (3). Street prostitution is also present in *American Psycho* playing a major role in supplying women for Bateman's slaughter. Poor traffic conditions are also commented on in the novel's first chapter.

The final two categories noted in *Strategy No. 5* as causing social decline are, dangerous mentally ill street people and peddlers, panhandlers and squeegee cleaners. As discussed before, Al certainly fits the description of a street person, however, other varieties of bum are present in *American Psycho* and are especially subject to the ridicule and hate of Bateman and his collogues.

Both *Police Strategy No. 5* and Bateman espouse the same ideology that those at the bottom deserve the most punishment for ruining the city's spaces for its natural owners, the wealthy elite. What is particularly interesting about *Police Strategy No. 5* as an historical document is that it illustrates a continuation of what was seen in the 1980s as social Darwinist attacks against the poor and lower classes of society. Although Giuliani did not take office until 1994, some six years after Reagan left office, his administration seems to have endorsed similar policies as the previous presidential administration which may have been a contributing factor in giving Harron's 2000 adaptation of Ellis' novel more relevancy to film audiences.

In this chapter I made the case that the term social Darwinism was readily used in the public discourse of the 1980s when referencing Reagan's domestic policies and probably played a significant role in influencing how Ellis conceived of his characters when he wrote his novel in 1991. Similarly, I argued that the term Giuliani-Time was probably born out of the public's dislike of what they perceived as social Darwinist policies, a phenomenon that may have contributed to lending Harron's film more relevancy when it was released in 2000.

As I noted before, it has not been my intention to argue that either the Reagan or Giuliani administrations were in anyway social Darwinist in nature. Rather, it has been my goal to examine the public's perception of the two leader's domestic policies and bring to light some of the similarities these perceptions share with the fictional representations in Ellis' book.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This project has introduced a relatively new paradigm to literary and cinematic studies known as Biopoetics. The Biopoetic approach combines previously established theories and methodologies of artistic analysis with those found in anthropology, Evolutionary psychology and sociology. The foundational assumption behind the Biopoetics approach is to view all artistic creations as products of the ever changing, ever developing interaction between human beings and their environment. According to Darwin's theory of evolution, all human beings share a common ancestor and a common biology we now refer to as DNA.

Although biology influences human action it by no means determines it absolutely. Evidence for this claim is apparent when we look at the wide range of cultures that exist throughout the world and have changed throughout time. Accordingly, the Biopoetic paradigm acknowledges the importance of other, more culturally based views and—as I have tried to show here—works to include a wide range of theoretical approaches so as not to privilege on the one hand but also to insure that each theoretical approach is utilized to its full effect according to the particular text in question. That is to say, the Bio suffix knows its place and will not intrude where it is not valid or can say something new and *true*. The same is true of course of theories of culture and in this study I have been careful about how my theories are used as well as *where* so as not to allow them territory best covered by some other approach.

In this study I have tried to provide a well-rounded approach Biopoetics by avoiding some of the negative attacks of its more popular proponents and by providing a multifarious selection of chapters that demonstrate a wide range of inquiry. I have tried to demonstrate the benefit of including scientific theories with cultural ones and the remarkable synergy that can result when both are used according to their means. Similarly, I have tried to remain inclusive and dispassionate regarding Biopoetics and do not wish to provide fuel for any ongoing argument on either side of the fence. In conclusion, it has been my desire to provide a balanced and positive account of the Biopoetical approach as one among many. In no way should this work be considered as the final or best attempt at exposition. Rather, I offer *an* approach to artistic analysis and *American Psycho* that I feel presents an exciting view that is all too often neglected or discounted without proper consideration.

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