



10.2478/abcsj-2025-0009

Escaping the Absurd.
The Corporation and Form in *American Psycho*

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to explore the representation of the Corporation in *American Psycho* and to affirm its very existence as a type of formal system of signs, language, and discourse that sets the boundaries of the characters' world. The "corporate form" is a self-stabilizing system that absorbs all subversive elements and disruptions within it and reintegrates them into the larger whole of absurd and unproductive discourse that numbs and alienates Ellis's characters. The essay shows how the characters in Brett Easton Ellis' novel are simply formal entities themselves, whose only purpose is to endlessly reproduce and reinforce the aforementioned corporate form through the symbolic overuse of certain language and behavior, akin to how characters traditionally do in plays and works in the theatre of the absurd. Focusing on Patrick Bateman, the main character, and his attempts to escape this symbolic system, the essay will show how his efforts to do this represent instances of the Lacanian Real that surface in radical contrast with the general symbolic framework, and how, in doing so, he touches upon experiences that are fundamentally detached from it and unavailable to the other characters, in his attempt to reach a form of non-subjectivity.

Keywords: alienation, absurd, the corporation, form, aesthetics, symptom, the Real, the Symbolic

1. Introduction

At first glance, Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* is constructed as a brutal satire of 1980s yuppie America, a novel where Patrick Bateman is

meant to be a stand-in for the vacuous, self-absorbed young professional, whose life, by virtue of having already achieved 'success,' becomes devoid of any true meaning. The particular reading of the novel presented in this essay will focus on the corporate form – the system, or symbolic arrangement, that allows the character of Patrick Bateman to emerge - and how Bateman's series of violent murders represents an exercise in escapism from its rigid norms and an encounter with the Lacanian notion of the Real, in an attempt to evade the forced subjectification he undergoes. In *American Psycho*, the investment firm of Pierce & Pierce, as a corporate entity within the historical context of the late 1980s, comes to be portrayed as the nexus from which a series of systematizing principles emerge, establishing a methodology for individual and collective behavior. This is conceptualized as a specific 'corporate form,' "an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning or shaping" (Levine 3), that not merely produces the normative framework that the characters internalize and abide by in their day-to-day material activities, but also designates, on a more metaphysical level, the symbolic arrangement that regulates their culture, vernacular, and relationships.

This, as far as the main theoretical framework goes, can be found at the intersection of Jacques Lacan's notions of the Symbolic and Imaginary registers. For Lacan, "If there is anything in man that corresponds to the imaginary function . . . it's everything that . . . relates him to the general form of his body" (*The Psychoses* 11). In *American Psycho*, the operation of the imaginary function is predicated upon idealized images of the self, through the use of certain elements from the story's historical period, such as designer clothes, social spaces, or the subjectification and alienation for which male and female bodies are vectors (Evans 84). As is observed throughout the novel and film, this creates a specific aesthetic vocabulary that constructs imagery whose repetitive use by the novel's characters plays an important role in the reproduction of the corporate form.

However, Lacan insists on the ultimate domination of the symbolic over the imaginary, as he states that, "While the image equally plays a capital role in our own domain, this role is completely taken up and caught up within, remolded and reanimated by, the symbolic order. The image is always more or less integrated into this order" (*The Psychoses* 9).

For Lacan, “it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject – by demonstrating in a story the major determination the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier” (*Écrits* 7). Here, Lacan refers to *The Purloined Letter*, and how the characters in Poe’s short story are essentially ruled by the letter as a signifier, “It is not only the subject, but the subjects, caught in their intersubjectivity . . . who, more docile than sheep, model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain that runs through them” (*Écrits* 21). In the case of *American Psycho*, the role of the signifier is taken by the specific instance of the Corporation itself; it is by its rules and demands that the images of bodies, products, clothes, luxury brands and restaurants, and even class and race, circulate amongst the characters and construct a symbolic structure.

Moreover, this system inherently produces certain boundaries and entails several limitations; the role of the corporate form in *American Psycho* is to assemble an enclosure of signs, norms and images that transforms and distorts all interactions within it, so as to maintain and reproduce itself. For this reason, an ontological question arises about the characters’ existence simply as empty forms, fully interchangeable, in constant self-reflexive, yet unproductive interaction and competition, while fully integrated within the larger symbolic system as cogs that enable the overarching corporate form to indefinitely self-replicate and, most importantly, regenerate and restabilize when faced with eruptions of the Real, that which is radically foreign to the system of meaning it proposes.

The necessary consequence of this is alienation, which becomes a central theme in Ellis’ novel as soon as Bateman starts to be conceptualized as a “symptom” of his surroundings, or as Slavoj Žižek describes it, an “element that subverts its own universal foundation” (*The Sublime Object* 16). Through the murder and torture of his victims and his efforts to confess to these actions, defying and transgressing his paradigmatic boundaries, Bateman essentially attempts to break the limits of the symbolic realm, “society’s unwritten constitution” (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 8), thus endeavoring to escape the conditions of his alienation. The element that proves an obstacle to this is the way in which the characters interrelate, since one of the corporate form’s characteristics in

American Psycho is the absurdity that characterizes all dialogue and interactions; Bateman's truth cannot come out because no one will listen to it. Essentially, Bateman's existence is split between what appears as his formal self, the way he is constructed as a subject through the image and role he performs alongside his peers in order to fit in and function within the system, and his real self, with its own two poles, the homicidal maniac and the confused, brooding melancholic, both symptoms of a psychosis that attempts to radically disturb the symbolic order. As such, Bateman finds it impossible to "maintain himself . . . in the symbolic real" (Lacan, *Formations* 6). He enjoys his transgressions, which are purposeful insofar as they might offer him respite from his alienation. He is, thus, chasing an existence not burdened by any symbolic ordering. His actions, in other words, serve to dissolve his identity and help him to return to a primal, unencumbered, and purely radical position - a form of subjecthood that is paradoxically defined by non-participation and non-subjectivity.

When speaking about corporations at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, one can position them within the context of globalization, that of the "hegemonic culture" (Thompson 154) that the United States has been exporting ever since the aftermath of World War II. The idea of hegemony presupposes that the epicenter, the American metropolis, was inherently the most aligned with this culture, as corporations were the drivers of an economic model based on consumption and the motive of infinite growth. In the 1980s, the "model of expansion driven by US multinational capitalist corporations" (Thompson 154) led to a point where "capitalism promotes and reinforces itself through the circulation of the culture it produces and distributes" (Thompson 155), while being spearheaded by multinational corporate giants. However, this corporate expansion does not seem to only function outwardly towards new markets and economic opportunities, but also tends to metastasize to private existence, where corporate practices and aesthetics traditionally used by companies become internalized and appropriated at the level of the individual. From this perspective, corporations are not their assets, their employees, their products or their business strategies; rather, they are a series of social and personal

practices that no longer seem to be linked only to their large-scale economic capacity.

The participation of corporate entities in the free market implies constant competition and the ruthless contention over clientele, visibility, and market share, in the interest of maximizing profits. At the same time, the people directly involved in the ‘production’ process – as far as the term can be attributed to the posturing performed by the characters in Ellis’ novel – are left, as Hannah Arendt puts it, “with the rather distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom” (105). The characters, bound up in their role within Pierce & Pierce, are examples of Arendt’s productive slavery, which in *American Psycho* only refers to their constant contribution to the general framework of signs. A substantial proportion of the dialogue in Ellis’ novel is derived from and centered around topics like material wealth, lifestyle, brands, and luxury goods; the pointlessness and absurdity of conversation cannot allow for any development except the constant reinforcement of the corporate form itself; at the same time, Bateman and the other characters internalize the norms of the corporate form to the point where these injunctions become self-sustaining. However, there is no force that explicitly compels them to act in a certain way, only a framework that presents itself as the only alternative. For Byung-Chul Han, “the absence of external domination does not abolish the structure of compulsion. It makes freedom and compulsion coincide. The achievement-subject gives itself over to freestanding compulsion in order to maximize performance” (49). The performance to be maximized, in this case, refers to the ownership of products and the ostentatious display of status, both of which are instrumental in the sustaining of the corporate form.

Furthermore, the repeated errors in distinguishing one character from another points to Alain Badiou’s claim, quoted by Bruno Besana, that “every one (being a pure multiple) is equal to anyone else, and each one counts as one” (41). The characters’ identities are interchangeable precisely because their specificity is altogether irrelevant; the roles they play within the larger system are simply quantitative, and, even though in their own personal interactions they exhibit the will to compete, they are simply unaware that their opposition is, in fact, futile. In Bateman’s case,

though, we can see glimpses of his real self, which constitute him, at first sight, as a subject that radically escapes its determined position as a yuppie in 1980s New York City. Going back to Badiou, his notion of the subject as “rare” (392), means that it can only emerge, as Besana puts it, “in the form of a symptom - of an excessive element (namely desire), which at the same time displaces its actual configuration” (39). This means that a subject can materialize exclusively as an exception, a subversive element that breaks the deterministic patterns of the symbolic order. Bateman’s desires seem to be incompatible, one way or another, with his formal role within this configuration. The homicidal maniac will not fit in because it would tarnish the tidy, hip, aesthetically pleasing lines specifically associated with the yuppie subculture, and the insecure melancholic will not be accepted because it would go against the dogmatic masculinity norms specific to his social circle. Paradoxically, however, what becomes apparent is that this unique subject’s main characteristic is its pursuit of a radical non-subjectivity; in other words, what makes it irregular is its absolute failure to integrate within the symbolic framework.

This is why, in Bateman’s attempt at (non)-subjecthood, the Lacanian notion of the Real is encountered as something that “resists symbolization” (Fink 25). For Lacan, “The real is beyond the automaton, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 53-54). Additionally, the encounter with the Real is always determined by a traumatic event, as “The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter . . . first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 55). In other words, the actions that define Bateman’s attempt at non-subjectivity simply cannot be represented within the corporate form, as their traumatic nature cannot penetrate the opaque veil of signs and absurd dialogue that helps sustain the symbolic framework. This is why, when he tries to confess to his crimes, he is met with skepticism or indifference, if not intentionally ignored. For this reason, Bateman’s plight is ultimately existential, as he essentially strives for non-subjectivity, but, paradoxically, *wants* to be recognized as a non-

subject by the Lacanian Big Other, “the subject who is unknown to us, the Other who is symbolic by nature” (Lacan, *The Psychoses* 56), which is embodied in his social circle.

Bateman’s pursuit is, at the same time, burdened by perpetual encounters with the absurd; Martin Esslin claims that plays in the theater of the absurd contain in their themes a “sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition” (xix). In *American Psycho*, Bateman is, at the same time, part of the play of the absurd and an external observer. His self-consciousness is what differentiates him, for example, from Vladimir or Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, and that is perhaps the main reason why he is alienated. Whereas Samuel Beckett’s characters propose to go, but do not move on the slight chance that Godot might come the next day, Bateman will keep moving and acting, while still essentially remaining in place. Bateman’s failure can be attributed to a defining characteristic of the symbolic order in *American Psycho*: its capacity to either seamlessly assimilate foreign or disruptive elements into its structure or to eject them entirely, rendering their presence nonexistent. This mechanism of containment ensures that any threat to the system’s coherence is either neutralized through incorporation or removed through symbolic erasure, as though it had never existed at all.

2. What Belongs in the Corporate Form

Among various readings of Ellis’ novel (or Harron’s film adaptation), we can see that Berthold Schoene, for example, attributes Bateman’s psychosis to an “effort to reclaim masculinity’s entitlement to determine the general order of things” (384), painting Bateman as a character “straitjacketed by masculine norms and ideals” (384). Schoene attempts to develop an analysis of Bateman’s psychopathology within the framework of gender conflict, using “autism as a metaphor to capture the psychopathological aspects of masculinity . . . in a binary opposition to hysteria” (380). In this case, while Bateman does exhibit a clear psychopathology, it is more along the lines of a psychosis alternating between maniacal acts of murder and depressed, introspective melancholy, both acting as radical denials of the symbolic configuration. Furthermore,

the version of masculinity that Schoene contends Bateman seeks to reclaim is never truly absent; rather, it remains embedded within the symbolic framework, which is saturated with misogynistic tropes and the systemic objectification of women. This objectification is both facilitated and sustained by hegemonic masculine identities, whose dominance is neither disrupted nor subverted, but instead reaffirmed through the language used by Bateman and his peers – “this chick was a little hardbody” (Ellis 32):

While the hardbody stands there we check her out, and though her knees do support long, tan legs, I can't help noticing that one knee is, admittedly, bigger than the other one. The left knee is knobbier, almost imperceptibly thicker than the right knee and this unnoticeable flaw now seems overwhelming and we all lose interest. (Ellis 46)

Thus, Bateman's murderous acts are, in fact, not an attempt at reclaiming, but an intensification to the point of the traumatic impossibility of representation of the very masculinity that structures and legitimizes the narrative's gendered hierarchies.

Alternatively, Casey Moore considers, in a larger sense, that “the repetition of violence in *American Psycho* is a testament to something consistent and true within all subjects . . . – a fascination with the horrific, the abject, unnamable and indefinable” (244). Bateman's murders are the immediate and unregulated response to the life-draining emptiness of the corporate form. On the other hand, his melancholic musings are the return to a seemingly lost humanity that is the outcome of the dialectics between the blankness of his formal self and the life-affirming experience induced by his enjoyment of the abject. For Žižek, the psychotic is “directly immersed in *jouissance*” (*Plague of Fantasies* 45). In this light, Bateman's actions can be seen as expressions of a psychotic structure in which he accesses a form of pure, unregulated enjoyment - *jouissance* - that is unaffected by any moral or symbolic constraints and make his crimes, however grotesque, become sites of unfiltered pleasure.

In order to begin the analysis of the corporate form Bateman is attempting to escape, geographical position becomes the first critical characteristic in its construction. The novel begins in a New York City

cab, with Bateman's colleague Timothy Price's tirade: "'I'm resourceful,' Price is saying. 'I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*'" (Ellis 3). As the setting, New York City has the function of explicitly declaring a specific aesthetic and symbolic framework for the novel and film. This is both at the level of space, through qualities like its "Iconic architecture . . . defined as buildings and spaces that (1) are famous for those in and around architecture and/or the public at large and (2) have special symbolic/aesthetic significance" (Sklair 138), but, more importantly, at a more metaphysical level, through the production of a separate enclosure, a self-contained normative system within which the events of the novel and film unfold.

One of New York's main signifiers is its portrayal as a bustling financial and business center; the form of the city as a business powerhouse imposes many of its particularities on other processes pertaining to its functioning. Whether it be the rhythm in which New York's various businesses, corporations, and other institutions work, the congested traffic in which Bateman and Price find themselves at the beginning of the story, or the contrast between New York's polished, corporate image and its gloomy underground, the setting of New York City contributes heavily to the image of an entropic, yet captivating corporate *mise-en-scène*. The incongruity between the corporate form and the real fabric of the city is shown as Price, a distinguished businessman, notices a "*cluster of bums*" (Ellis 6); this is only one of many instances in which homeless people are represented throughout the novel, along with multiple references to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in the form of advertisements and billboards scattered around the city.

Price's reference to himself as an "asset" immediately poses a hint towards his ontological position, since his very existence is equated to his function within the corporate whole. As he enumerates his qualities and insists that society cannot afford to lose him, it becomes evident that the societal framework he refers to is configured as a corporate entity, where value is found in the act of the reduction of identity to utility. One of the first relevant scenes is Bateman's direct encounter with an element that could destabilize this order. At dinner, Stash, an "artist friend" (Ellis 10),

“looks nothing like the other men in the room – his hair isn't slicked back, no suspenders, no horn-rimmed glasses, the clothes black and ill-fitting, no urge to light and suck on a cigar, probably unable to secure a table at Camols, his net worth a pittance” (Ellis 12).

Unlike Price, Stash is not seen as an asset, but rather a liability, an alien element that stands in for deviant alterity. His radical contrast to the other characters renders him unintelligible within their symbolic coordinates, disrupting their capacity to position him within the established social order. As such, Stash functions less as a character to be integrated than as a symptomatic excess that draws attention to the limits of the symbolic framework's coherence. Bateman comments that he is “lumpy and pale and has a bad cropped haircut and is at least ten pounds overweight; there's no muscle tone beneath the black T-shirt” (Ellis 15), while Price addresses Bateman's friend, Evelyn, saying, “I mean I doubt Stash makes the society pages of *W*, which I thought was your criterion for choosing friends” (Ellis 18). These remarks return to a Lacanian Real “in its imaginary dimension” (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 66), through a “horrifying primordial image” (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 66) of a “haircut that's bad because it's cheap” (Ellis 20) that warrants Bateman's satisfaction when finding out that Stash “tested positive for the AIDS virus” (Ellis 22).

On the other hand, Stash's girlfriend Vanden can be conceptualized and integrated within the symbolic framework insofar as she adopts aesthetic markers associated with the corporate form - most notably through working on her body and the appropriation of designer fashion. This would allow her to become aligned with the values of commodified femininity that the men view as normal. In doing so, she becomes a figure whose alterity is mitigated through performative conformity, “Vanden, who if she got rid of the green streak and the leather and got some color – maybe joined an aerobics class, slipped on a blouse, something by Laura Ashley – might be pretty” (Ellis 15). Stash's status as an element of the Lacanian Real is consolidated by Bateman's confusion regarding Vanden, “But why does she sleep with Stash?” (Ellis 15). There is a “mysterious *je ne sais quoi*” (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 66), or what Lacan called “Object (a), . . . the scrap that evades the grasp of symbolization” (Fink 94)

that is at play in describing Vanden, which intrigues Bateman in his inability to fully understand it. Although this object cannot be symbolically represented, it exists as a structural necessity as “cause of desire” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 168). In other words, it is what makes an entity appealing and distinguishable, thus transforming it into an object of desire.

As far as Bateman knows, Stash cannot exist in the same symbolic framework as himself or his aestheticized image of Vanden, but, at the same time, he evokes within Bateman a feeling of unease and concern. This is due to the fact that, in the scene, Bateman is acting within his formal subjective position; in this case, Bateman’s opinion on Stash is dictated to him by the Big Other, as Stash’s radical alterity poses a threat to the stability of the corporate form. In Lacanian terms, the Big Other is, in this case, “the locus, seat or witness that the subject makes reference to as the locus of speech, in his relationship with any kind of little a” (Lacan, *Formations* 294). The “little a” is, for Lacan, any Other directly encountered, while the locus of speech designates precisely the construction of the corporate form, the place where Bateman finds the origin and validation of his signifying process. However, another reason why Bateman fixates upon Stash is that he embodies the radical otherness Bateman himself is striving to attain. In a sense, Bateman harbors a sentiment of envy towards Stash, although, for Lacan, “envy is usually aroused by the possession of goods which would be of no use to the person who is envious of them, and about the true nature of which he does not have the least idea” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 116). Bateman cannot conceptualize what Stash *is* and what exactly he possesses and knows that being him would completely erase his position in the symbolic structure, but he nonetheless desires it for the pure difference residing in its radical otherness.

Stash’s expulsion from the symbolic structure by everyone’s refusal to integrate him points to the stability and self-conservation of the corporate form. This is also presented in the sequence where, after having killed two prostitutes in Paul Owen’s apartment, Bateman returns to the scene of the crime after some time, only to find Mrs. Wolfe, a real estate agent, in an immaculate apartment that shows no signs of any previous

incident. In the apartment, “the furniture, the mural, the glass coffee table, Thonet chairs, black leather couch, all seem intact” (Ellis 354). Bateman, exhibiting discomposure and surprise, is met with Mrs. Wolfe’s denial that Paul Owen had ever lived there, advising him to go and not make “any trouble” (Ellis 355). In this particular scene, Mrs. Wolfe acts as a regulatory agent for the corporate form. She effectively censors Bateman’s escape into his real self, by denying that his actions ever happened and covering the evidence, only to re-integrate the scene of the crime in the general symbolic framework by bringing it back to its original, aesthetically pleasing and socially acceptable form. In the most pragmatic sense, an apartment known to have been a crime scene would be hard to rent or sell, so Mrs. Wolfe’s interest is to expunge everything that would link the place to any such past events, as she again asks Bateman not to make any trouble and not to come back (Ellis 356). This theory is further substantiated by the name of the chapter where the scene takes place, “The Best City for Business” (Ellis 352); the city is so good for business precisely because it has the power to absorb or disregard even the most horrific acts, such as the massacres orchestrated by Bateman, without enduring any lasting disruption. This structural indifference enables even the urban landscape to continually reassert its intended form, preserving the smooth operation of exchange by expelling or rendering invisible any threat to its coherence.

Another instance where the same process is witnessed is towards the very end of the novel and film, where Bateman leaves a message to Harold Carnes, his lawyer, confessing his crimes: “I leave a message, admitting everything, leaving nothing out, thirty, forty, a hundred murders . . .” (Ellis 318). After some time, Bateman meets Carnes at the World’s End club, and, upon asking him whether he has gotten his message, Carnes responds by saying: “Jesus, Davis. Yes, that was hilarious . . .” (Ellis 372). The following exchange involves Bateman trying to explain to Carnes that he had truly committed all the crimes he told him about, while the latter, uninterested in and irritated by Bateman’s confession, is trying to evade the conversation:

"Wait. Stop," I shout, looking up into Carnes' face, making sure he's listening. "You don't seem to understand. You're not really comprehending any of this. *I killed him. I did it, Carnes. I chopped Owen's fucking head off. I tortured dozens of girls. That whole message I left on your machine was true.*" I'm drained, not appearing calm, wondering why this doesn't feel like a blessing to me.

"Excuse me," he says, trying to ignore my outburst. "I really must be going." (Ellis 373)

At this point, Bateman's emotions surface, as he is forced to face a most surprising fact. Upon his further insistence that he had indeed killed Paul Owen, Carnes tells him that it is impossible, "'Because . . . I had . . . dinner . . . with Paul Owen . . . twice . . . in London . . . just ten days ago'" (Ellis 373). Firstly, continuing the previous line of thought, Bateman finds himself once more trapped within his 'formal' subjective position by Carnes' detached disinterest. Interrupting Carnes as he is drinking champagne and discussing the news, "'the Japanese will own most of this country by the end of the '90s'" (Ellis 371), Bateman is effectively trying to directly break through the layer of vacuous dialogue, to unequivocally confess his crimes through direct contact with another participant in the corporate form. His failure is caused by the exact same self-stabilizing mechanism mentioned earlier, as Carnes promptly refuses to believe him and starts searching for a way to distance himself from him. There are interpretations of Ellis' novel that suggest the murders are simply fabrications, existing only within Bateman's imagination. However, even within these readings, the impact of the denial of acknowledgment for his admission of guilt remains unchanged. Whether Bateman is denied the experience of having been engaged in a 'real' situation or the immersion in an artificial scenario, the result is the same: he is still obstructed from escaping the symbolic order. In both scenarios, Bateman's attempt to transcend or subvert the confines of the system is prevented, reinforcing the idea of his entrapment within its structures.

3. The Fantasy of Recognition

The fact that Carnes calls Bateman "Davis," and later, at the very end of the discussion, "Donaldson" (Ellis 374), makes it appear unclear whether

Carnes really had dinner with Paul Owen in London, since it might have been entirely possible for him to mistake him for someone else. This confusion is also depicted in Harron's adaptation, in the scene where Bateman and his colleagues compare their business cards (*American Psycho* 00:18:37 – 00:20:05). The distinctions between the business cards are nearly imperceptible, with the only noticeable variation being the names printed on them. All of the men are Vice Presidents, working within the same department of the same corporation, sharing identical telephone and fax numbers. The color palette of the cards consists of only slight variations of white, while each of the men wears the same type of suit and sports similar glasses and hairstyles.

Their business card becomes, within the context of their homogeneous visual presentation, a symbol of status, "I'm looking at Van Patten's card and then at mine and cannot believe that Price actually likes Van Patten's better" (Ellis 43); being seen as possessing an inferior card elicits an emotional response from Bateman: "My card lies on the table, ignored next to an orchid in a blue glass vase. . . . I'm still tranced out on Montgomery's card – the classy coloring, the thickness, the lettering, the print – and I suddenly raise a fist as if to strike out at Craig and scream . . ." (Ellis 44-45). However, since all of the characters share the same formal, empty existence, they become mirror images of each other, essentially making it clear that Bateman's reaction is, in fact, directed towards himself and his own inability to produce a more impressive business card. In the same vein, Bateman is humiliated by not managing to get a reservation at Dorsia for quite a long time; thus, he makes it one of his goals: "My priorities before Christmas include the following: (1) to get an eight o'clock reservation on a Friday night at Dorsia with Courtney . . ." (Ellis 170). This is not necessarily due to his own personal desire, but rather a socially constructed one, since it is again the Big Other, the public opinion, that holds Dorsia in the highest regard; in this context, his longing is not an authentic expression of self, but a reflection of the external expectations that govern his actions. Bateman's self-image is impacted by his inability to secure a reservation at the restaurant, as it underlines his failure to meet the standards imposed by his social group. The 'objet a' described earlier is not exempt from existing in the creation

of the idealized self-image. For Žižek, “*objet petit a*, as the object of fantasy, is that ‘something in me more than myself on account of which I perceive myself as ‘worthy of the Other’s desire’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 9). In other words, Bateman’s failures provoke within him the realization that he is unqualified to occupy a legitimate space within the symbolic structure. His inability to meet the external standards - whether through the business card competition or the Dorsia reservation - reveals his deep sense of inadequacy and lack of self-worth, exposing the fragility of his position.

These moments portray Bateman’s other struggle for recognition; although, as mentioned earlier, he primarily intends to be recognized as radically different, he still accesses the symbolic system through the fantasy of inhabiting a privileged space within it. While Bateman is envious of Stash, he is also envious of Van Patten; in the latter situation, Bateman’s desire is the feeling of achievement that would validate him and make him feel symbolically recognized. Lacan calls this “true envy - the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 116). For Žižek, “fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates; that is, it literally ‘teaches us how to desire’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 7). In Bateman’s case, his subjective position within the corporate form is predicated upon his desiring of recognition and validation, thus taking the same form described by Žižek, “The original question of desire is not directly ‘What do I want?, but ‘What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 9). For Bateman, this fantasy functions simultaneously on two levels of recognition; the way he sees himself through the eyes of the Other within the corporate form is manifested both in his idealized image that he believes he needs to uphold in order to belong, and, in the complete opposite, the renouncing of all symbolic meaning and becoming impossible to integrate. Nonetheless, both levels are predicated upon the desire of recognition.

However, even if he sometimes wants it, Bateman simply cannot sustain his existence in the symbolic; Bruce Fink explains this, claiming that “psychosis, according to Lacan, results from a child’s failure to assimilate a ‘primordial’ signifier which would otherwise structure the

child's symbolic universe, that failure leaving the child unanchored in language, without a compass reading on the basis of which to adopt an orientation" (55). This appears to be the origin point of Bateman's pathology. For Lacan, psychosis marks "a stage at which it is possible for a portion of symbolization not to take place" (*The Psychoses* 81). Furthermore, Lacan points out that "In the subject's relationship to the symbol there is the possibility of a primitive *Verwerfung*, that is, that something is not symbolized and is going to appear in the real" (*The Psychoses* 81). Throughout the story, Bateman keeps slipping into this state and alternating between his apparent formal belonging and his non-subjective existence in the Real. At times, Bateman himself recognizes this in moments of self-reflection, ". . . there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration" (Ellis 362).

The quick alternation of Bateman's attempts at integrating with moments of desperate confession, violence, and self-reflection points to the thinness of the veil between Bateman's subjective positions, as he suffers the trauma of constantly straddling the line between them. In one of his violent outbursts, immediately after beating up and maiming a homeless man named Al, Bateman is infused with the relief and pleasure of a real experience, "Afterwards . . . I feel heady, ravenous, pumped up" (Ellis 127). Instead of going to an extravagant restaurant with his friends, he chooses to do what he thinks the homeless man he killed would, "So I decide to go somewhere Al would go, the McDonald's in Union Square" (Ellis 127). This is one of the times where Bateman explicitly inhabits his real self. For a brief moment, the walls of his enclosure come down as he enjoys his order of milkshakes and watches the people inside McDonald's, with a sense of detachment from the rigid demands of the corporate form. In this fleeting moment, he experiences a sense of freedom, unencumbered by the constraints and performances that otherwise define his formal identity. However, he just as quickly reverts to his default state, "after two more milk shakes my high slowly dissolves" (Ellis 127), as he begins to regret not having gone to "that Salvadorian bistro with Reed Thompson and the guys" (Ellis 127).

This scene captures Bateman in a setting where he would ordinarily avoid being seen, consuming food he typically rejects, and surrounded by individuals who fall outside the carefully curated circle he typically inhabits, like “An old, crazy woman, wrinkled, chain-smoking, [who] sits near us, nodding at no one” (Ellis 127). Elements pertaining to the Real all stand out when put against the backdrop of Bateman’s usual lifestyle. He is in a McDonald’s, surrounded by people whom he cannot identify by the luxury brands they are wearing, while having some milkshakes, which are fundamentally different from the kinds of food he regularly consumes, like the “roast rack of veal with shallots and gnocchi gratin” (Ellis 174) he would later have at a Christmas party with his colleagues.

In opposition to the raw and vivid character of the fast-food episode, Bateman is previously seen at a dinner party with his work friends and their partners, where the established symbolic setting is yet again present in full force, as Timothy Price “turns around and straightens his Versace tie ready to face whoever. Courtney opens the door and she's wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and silk-satin d'Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik” (Ellis 8). Moreover, the clean, sleek spaces of Bateman’s apartment, as shown especially in Harron’s film adaptation (*American Psycho* 00:04:41 – 00:05:00), or his office and the restaurants he dines in, all enforce and specifically overstate an aesthetic vocabulary that makes the more unpleasant scenes in the novel so much more radical and unsettling. By contrasting these images with the ones of the homeless people Bateman torments and kills or the recurring references to *Les Misérables* – “Once outside, ignoring the bum lounging below the *Les Misérables* poster . . . I pull the tease-the-bum-with-a-dollar trick and tell him, ‘Jesus, will you get a fucking shave, please’” (Ellis 109) – Ellis manages to amplify the effect of both.

Going back to Žižek’s symptom, the element that subverts the larger form is ultimately Bateman himself, through the radical alterity of his true subjective position. As his formal self, a wealthy, young, and handsome Wall Street banker, Bateman is seemingly presupposed to be in control of his fate and able to shape the world according to his will. Nevertheless, as Žižek puts it, “one really reconciles oneself with some objective content not when one still has to strive to master and control it,

but when one can afford the supreme sovereign gesture of releasing this content from oneself" (*Sublime Object of Ideology* xxi), so it is not Bateman's status as a 'master of the universe' that may set him free, but actually his attempts to radically escape it.

This is, then, the main reason for Bateman's acts of torture and murder. After getting him drunk and drugged, Bateman takes his colleague Paul Owen back to his apartment and kills him with an axe, "Owen pauses, then says, 'Anyway, I used to hate Iggy Pop but now that he's so commercial I like him a lot better than—' The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face'" (Ellis 208). The abrupt switch between the characters' empty dialogue and the plastic, violent description of Bateman's murderous rampage is a recurring motive throughout the novel. Akin to the scene mentioned above, wherein closely after a discussion about CDs and newspapers comes a detailed description of Owen's killing, the aftermath of Bateman's mutilation of two prostitutes is also immediately followed by a passage in which he casually considers canceling lunch with some acquaintances. Upon looking at one of the girls' dead bodies, Bateman ponders, "I get very tired looking at it . . . I still have a lunch appointment at Odeon with Jem Davies and Alana Burton at one. That's very important to me and I have to debate whether I should cancel it or not" (Ellis 279). This also happens at the level of the novel's chapters, where the one right after Bateman's confession of his murders to Carnes includes a review of the band Huey Lewis and the News (Ellis 339).

Bateman's violent experiences in the Real are fleeting because the corporate form quickly swallows and makes them dissipate; however, the even more subversive tool he uses in his attempt to escape is a self-reflection process that opens within him a new perspective on himself. Upon having a brunch date with his secretary, Jean, Bateman seems uncomfortable and pensive, as the flow of conversation seems deeper and more personal than the usual empty dialogue. At one point, Bateman disconnects from the discussion and, in an inner monologue, reflects upon the bleakness of his world, revealing how he "saw a desert landscape that was unending, resembling some sort of crater, so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it . . ." (Ellis 360). It is in the

same passage that he accurately diagnoses and describes, for the first time, the corporate form itself, "Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. . . . Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in . . . this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged . . ." (Ellis 360).

Bateman's perception of Jean and the way he interacts with her stand in complete contrast to his usual treatment of women. One of the first impressions he gives of Jean is much more in line with his usual perspective: "My secretary, Jean, who is in love with me and who I will probably end up marrying, sits at her desk and this morning, to get my attention as usual, is wearing something improbably expensive and completely inappropriate: a Chanel cashmere cardigan, a cashmere crewneck and a cashmere scarf, faux-pearl earrings, wool-crepe pants from Barney's" (Ellis 61).

However, his attitude at the end, while still riddled with signifiers of his formal self, is unlike his typical objectification and violent detachment, as his relationship with Jean reveals a momentary shift that seems to allow for a more genuine connection, "I get an odd feeling that this is a crucial moment in my life. . . . For the first time I see Jean as uninhibited; she seems stronger, less controllable, wanting to take me into a new and unfamiliar land" (Ellis 364). Bateman continues:

When I find the strength to look back at her, it strikes me how useless, boring, physically beautiful she really is, and the question *Why not end up with her?* floats into my line of vision. An answer: she has a better body than most other girls I know. Another one: everyone is interchangeable anyway. One more: it doesn't really matter. She sits before me, sullen but hopeful, characterless, about to dissolve into tears. I squeeze her hand back, moved, no, touched by her ignorance of evil. (Ellis 364-365)

This is one of the very few instances where Bateman refrains from relating to a woman in a purely sexual way. He imagines Jean "smelling clean, like tea" (Ellis 364), and, as he touches her, Bateman envisions and seems to attune to an authenticity of the world that is very rarely described through his inner monologue:

. . . and in the southern deserts of Sudan the heat rises in airless waves, thousands upon thousands of men, women, children, roam throughout the

vast bushland, desperately seeking food. . . . a child with a face like a black moon lies in the sand, scratching at his throat, cones of dust rising . . . the child is covered with sand, almost dead, eyes unblinking, grateful . . . there is a school bus in the distance somewhere and somewhere else, above that, in space, a spirit rises, a door opens, it asks “*Why?*” – a home for the dead, an infinity, it hangs in a void, time limps by, love and sadness rush through the boy . . . (Ellis 365)

The passage poses its very own aesthetic qualities that contrast with the almost non-literary tone of the rest of the novel. The prose becomes more sophisticated, as Bateman seems to undergo an emotional identification with the suffering boy in his reverie; it is, yet again, a form of the Real that erupts in his image of the boy, a traumatic experience with an “effect of total foreignness . . . produced at moments of rupture in the psychotic's delusional dialogue” (Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious* 6). These sentiments are as incompatible with the symbolic framework as Bateman's murders. Their rootedness in authenticity and vulnerability clash with the way he is forced to project and perform his masculinity within his social circle, and, although he never confesses his feelings for Jean to anyone, the way this would be met can be imagined as similar to Carnes' detached ignorance, if not a more violent ridicule. However, the novel ends with him having dinner at a restaurant with his colleagues, having the same type of inane, absurd dialogue, as if nothing had happened at all. This cyclical return to meaninglessness underscores the futility of his attempts at a deeper identification with his own self and a reconciliation with his repressed trauma.

Ultimately, Bateman's homicidal mania and emotional self-reflection are two sides of the same coin. They are both reactions to his position within the corporate form; they both stand in opposition to its established symbolic and imaginary norms, and they are both outlets for Bateman's escape from alienation that are heavily impeded by the absurdity that characterizes all relationships and events in Ellis's novel. Eugène Ionesco's definition of the absurd, as quoted by Esslin, “that which is devoid of purpose” (xix) is a fitting description; all of Bateman's actions do nothing but bring him back to his original state. It is perhaps the same with the characters in *Waiting for Godot* or Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, who all follow a circular trajectory, but Bateman is over

and above cursed with a type of self-consciousness, as primal and stunted as it is, that allows him to acknowledge his position and understand that there is simply no way out of it.

Bateman is immersed in his fantasy of recognition as an “‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* 45). This kernel is precisely the absurd rigor and impenetrability of the corporate form. The fact that he is alienated is withheld from him until the very end, as the corporate form continues to reference Rolex watches and how restaurants “rate in the new Zagat’s” (Ellis 381), while he is left contemplating his fate:

Someone has already taken out a Minolta cellular phone and called for a car, and then, when I'm not really listening, watching instead someone who looks remarkably like Marcus Halberstam paying a check, someone asks, simply, not in relation to anything, "Why?" and though I'm very proud that I have cold blood and that I can keep my nerve and do what I'm supposed to do, I catch something, then realize it: Why? And automatically answering, out of the blue, for no reason, just opening my mouth, words coming out, summarizing for the idiots: "Well, though I know I should have done that instead of not doing it, I'm twenty-seven for Christ sakes and this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in a club in New York, maybe anywhere, at the end of the century and how people, you know, me, behave, and this is what being Patrick means to me, I guess, so, well, yup, uh . . . " and this is followed by a sigh, then a slight shrug and another sigh, and above one of the doors covered by red velvet drapes in Harry's is a sign and on the sign in letters that match the drapes' color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. (Ellis 383-384)

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