Teaching American Psycho

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The student looked at me in disbelief. “No way that’s the 1980s. The apartment, the furniture, the design is too modern and fashionable.” All the other students of my Film Analysis 101 seminar agreed. As an exercise to discuss setting as part of mise-en-scène, we had just watched the first scene following the opening sequence of American Psycho (Mary Harron, 2000). In his spacious and highly stylized yet impersonal New York City apartment, protagonist Patrick Bateman goes through his daily morning routine: placing an ice pack over his eyes, doing stomach crunches in just his white underwear, taking a shower, and applying a facial mask. The film’s main theme of a perfect exterior that masks the hollowness on the inside is emphasized by the immaculate appearance of both the apartment as well as Bateman himself, which is reinforced by his first-person narration 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.” The students had no problem recognizing and identifying the elements that supported this main theme. They just could not believe the film was set in the 1980s.

For the sake of clarity, I am not bemoaning the lack of historical consciousness of my students, although it was disappointing to find out that none of them had seen the film or read the novel. I wrongly assumed that most people would be familiar with American Psycho or at least had heard of Patrick Bateman – the yuppie turned serial killer. Yet I cannot blame my students for not sharing my historical frame of reference. Unlike my students, I have lived through the 1980s, read the novel when it came out in 1991, and watched the film adaptation in 2000. Moreover, back in 1994, I wrote my MA thesis in American Literature on the novels of Bret Easton Ellis. [1] One decade later, Tarja Laine and I co-authored an essay on American Psycho, both novel and film, arguing that “by striving to embody both the image of a yuppie Wall Street stockbroker and a serial killer, Bateman becomes a dark double of the 1980s New York yuppie subculture that reveals nothing but meaninglessness.” [2] The problem was not that my students failed to recognize the decade that American Psycho had defined (as the above-quoted Netflix tagline claims), but that they insisted that the film could not take place in the 1980s, merely because the setting seemed too modern and fashionable.

As stated in the textbook that we use (Film: A Critical Introduction by Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis), the “primary functions of setting are to establish time and place, to introduce ideas and themes, and to create mood.” [3] Recognizing time and place is a standard practice when discussing setting, even if it is not always the most significant in relation to the film’s main theme. The failure of my students to identify the 1980s setting of American Psycho can be compared to another exercise we did in class: analyzing the opening sequence of A Single Man (Tom Ford, 2009). Although the films are quite different thematically and stylistically, the two sequences are remarkably similar: both show the daily morning routine of the white male protagonist, including him taking a shower; both show the protagonist’s home – living room, bath room, bed room, and kitchen – as a highly stylized and designed space; and both use a first person narration voice-over reflecting on the protagonist’s state of mind. This time my students immediately recognized that A Single Man was set in the early 1960s. As they explained, the “vintage design” (their words) of the house and its furniture, together with the use of desaturated colors, reminded them of the television series Mad Men (not coincidentally, the design team of Mad Men also worked on A Single Man).

The difference between the students’ identifying the 1960s of A Single Man and not the 1980s of American Psycho has little to do with historical knowledge of these decades. Instead, the difference seems to be based on the distinction between “vintage” and “modern,” in which the aesthetic datedness of vintage is placed in opposition to the contemporariness of the modern. My students perceive Patrick Bateman’s apartment as modern – meaning contemporary – and therefore the film cannot be set in