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Teaching American Psycho

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TEACHING AMERICAN PSYCHO

Jaap Kooijman



Teaching American Psycho

from Jaap Kooijman PLUS



01:09

"The Must See Cult Film That Shocked a Nation and Defined a Decade."

–2015 Netflix trailer of *American Psycho*

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

the 1980s. There is some irony in the fact that part of the furniture that students deemed as “too modern” for the 1980s consists of iconic modernist design classics of the early twentieth century. The black Hill House chair, positioned in the left back corner of the living room, was designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in 1903; the two black Barcelona chairs with matching ottomans were designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1929. However, just like the 1981 Alanda coffee table designed by Paolo Piva and the 1979 artwork by Robert Longo, these “timeless” design classics remain fashionable today. With the exception of the (now “vintage”) stereo and television set with VHS player, Bateman’s apartment still fits the GQ ideal of the modern-day bachelor pad.

A quick online search shows how Bateman’s highly stylized apartment (as well as Bateman’s fashion sense) is used by current lifestyle magazines and websites as an attractive example for young hip men to follow. The “A Room of His Own” website, a self-described “interior design blog for the modern man and his cave,” features a photograph of Bateman’s living room, with links to online stores that sell similar furniture. [4] In 2012, *The Dallas Morning News* interviewed Kalon Joseph Reid McMahon, also known for his stint on the reality television show *The Bachelorette*, asking this “Patrick Bateman 2.0” about “how to achieve killer (*American Psycho*-like) style” in fashion and interior design. [5] In 2014, the *New York Magazine* “men’s beauty” section featured “five real-life Patrick Batemans and their grooming routines.” [6] More recently, a property developer caused controversy by explicitly referring to the urban style of *American Psycho* in its advertising campaign for new luxury penthouses in London. [7] No wonder that my students perceive Patrick Bateman’s style as contemporary.

Does it really matter that my students cannot recognize that *American Psycho* takes place in the 1980s? For one thing, by not identifying the 1980s setting, the explicit and deliberate datedness of the film adaptation is completely lost. As Elizabeth Young wrote back in 1992, the novel *American Psycho* is a social satire of 1980s hedonism and capitalist consumer culture, in which Patrick Bateman represents the “ultimate consumer, someone who is composed entirely of inauthentic commodity-related desires [and who] cannot exist as a person.” [8] The film adaptation takes this shallowness a step further by placing the fashionable in the past. Writing two years after the film’s release, Julian Murphet argues that the film’s “visual datedness” results in an “extra layer of satiric humor,” thereby creating a critical distance: “The look of an early mobile phone (enormous and ugly), a slicked-back 1980s haircut, or a restaurant’s pastel color scheme must all strike a contemporary [2000] audience with the full force of the *passé* and the faintly ridiculous.” [9] To recognize this extra layer, the viewer must be able to identify the visual datedness of the 1980s in contrast to “contemporary” time, here meaning 2000 when the film was released.

Admittedly, if we had watched the opening sequence of *American Psycho* – which takes place first in the above-mentioned pastel-colored restaurant and then in a dimly lit and outmoded nightclub – instead of the scene showing Patrick Bateman’s fashionable “modern” apartment, the students undoubtedly would have recognized the film’s visual datedness more easily. However, even if my students had done so, would they have been able to distinguish between the “outdated” 1980s and the “contemporary” year 2000? I would think not. If recognized at all, my students would probably attribute the film’s visual datedness to its being a fifteen-year-old film, as the distinction between the late 1980s and 2000 is understandably too subtle to make for a generation born in the late 1990s. Whether or not my students would realize that *American Psycho* is set in the past, the extra layer created by the deliberate visual datedness would be lost either way.

Here the distinction between vintage and modern shows its relevance again. As Kim Knowles has argued, the fashionability of vintage is based on its association with “the knowing, ethical consumer who pursues an oppositional mode of being through artifacts that hold a deeper value and meaning deriving from their historical origin.” [10] Although one could argue that “vintage” is also just another profitable form of capitalist consumerism, the contrast with the “modern” Patrick Bateman foregrounds how the ultimate consumer remains – rather intentionally – unknowing and unethical. By failing to recognize that *American Psycho* is set in the late 1980s and instead identifying its setting as “modern” and thus contemporary, my students show that the film’s critique of 1980s capitalist consumer culture remains relevant in current times. Patrick Bateman and his highly stylized yet impersonal apartment are not merely vintage relics of a post-modern 1980s past, but very much symptoms of contemporary culture in which the shallowness of consumerism prevails. Even after the 2008 economic crisis, Bateman’s style remains a fashionable example to follow, as a shopping feature of *GQ* reveals: “Is the debt ceiling disaster keeping you down? Grab these tips from *American Psycho* to master Patrick Bateman’s faultless corporate sociopath style.” [11] In a sense, then, the refusal of my students to believe that *American Psycho* takes place in the 1980s is a blessing in disguise, as it forces us to realize that the hedonistic consumerism of the 1980s criticized by *American Psycho* is still a dominant element of society today.

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Notes

[1] Jaap Kooijman, “Bret Easton Ellis – Literary Thrash Man: The Novels *Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction*, and *American Psycho* as Mass Cultural Products and as Works of Literary Art” (Thesis University of Amsterdam, 1994).

[2] Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine, “*American Psycho*: A Double Portrait of Serial Yuppie Patrick Bateman,” *Post Script* 22:3 (Summer 2003): 48.

[3] Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction*, Third Edition (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011), 96.

[4] <http://aroomofhisown.com/2012/08/08/caves-on-film-american-psycho/>

[5] Nadia Dabbakeh, “How to Achieve Killer (*American Psycho*-like) Style,” *The Dallas Morning News* (29 February 2012):

<http://www.dallasnews.com/lifestyles/style/people/20120229-how-to-achieve-killer-american-psycho-like-style.ece>

[6] Kathleen Hou, “Five Real-Life Patrick Batemans and Their Grooming Routines,” *New York Magazine / The Cut* (6 January 2014): <http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/12/beauty-secrets-from-5-real-life-patrick-batemans.html>

[7] Oliver Wainwright, “*American Psycho* Property Promo Pulled after Twitterstorm,” *The Guardian* (5 January 2015):

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2015/jan/05/american-psycho-redrow-property-promo-pulled-after-twitterstorm>

[8] Elizabeth Young, “The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,” in *Shopping In Space: Essays On America’s Blank Generation Fiction* eds. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press with Serpent’s Tail, 1992), 121.

[9] Julian Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho* (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), 79.

[10] Kim Knowles, “Locating Vintage,” *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 4:2 (Autumn 2015): <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/locating-vintage/>

[11] Amy Merrick, “The Inspiration: *American Psycho*,” *GQ* (10 August 2013): <http://www.gq.com/story/the-inspiration-american-psycho>

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