
The Representation Of Male Body In American Psycho In Relation To Film's Criticism Towards Capitalist Society

Introduction

In 2000, the director Mary Harron released a thriller film based on Bret Easton Ellis's most well-known book called *American Psycho*, which was published in 1991. This movie is not only a portrait of the capitalist society satirically by giving an exaggerated stereotype of 1980s' Chief Executive Officer of Wall Street who is holding an axe in the finest CEO suit and tie as a serial killer, but it also criticized the Yuppie culture which is the social value that young people yearned for success, and the success was measured by how many material goods you have, also how much money you earned. At present, the materialism became a new religion, people began to lose their soul and worship the deception of the society. However, *American Psycho* is a critique of the hollowness perspective of the materialist society, and it also examines the representation of the American masculinity both physically and psychologically.

Historical Context

First of all, it is much better to take a look at the historical context of the film in order to understand the movie, as the movie takes place in New York City in the late 1980s period, the society reached almost the end of the Wall Street boom of the decade, and it was Ronald Reagan's second term as the President of the United States. Reagan's policies were to increase economic growth immensely, deregulation of industry, the stimulation of growth and investment, the expansion of capitalism, and a subjugation of violence, crime and drugs. The American lifestyles changed dramatically during the 1980s, the music video emerged in this period pioneered by the Beatles in which people focused on the visual pleasure of the music video rather than the quality of the music itself. The MTV also played a big role by promoting pop music into the mainstream, and this led to the highly consumption of the mass products, so the popular culture flourished in this period. The most well known culture of this decade was the Yuppie culture in which it is totally the opposite to the Hippie culture from the 1970s period, the word Yuppie derived from 'Young Urban Professionals.' Due to the advancement of the technology, which is the main factor of the emergence of the Yuppie culture, the Yuppie culture is about graduating from a great university, and having a well paid job, for example, the audience will see Patrick Bateman who graduated from Harvard University and work as a Wall Street Chief Executive Officer. The idea of being a self important and materialistic lifestyle by using well known brands, meanwhile the Hippie culture was the social liberation by being non-conformist, they did not even go to college or get a job; therefore, the next ten years after the Hippie culture, the society has turned upside down. There was also the ending of the Cold War which is the conflict between the capitalist represented by America and the communist represented by China and the Soviet Union. As a result, the Soviet Union ended in the 1990s, so this shows that America won this war, and it is the only remaining superpower in the world with the best government system.

Capitalism and Yuppie satire in American Psycho

Next, the film shows its comment on Yuppie culture in a very satirical way, and the audience can get the sense of mocking the capitalist society. Obviously, this movie is not the celebration of capitalist society at all, it is kind of biting the capitalist society by giving the characters wearing similar Valentino Couture clothes in which it shows the 'fit in' culture that everyone has to fit into the society in order to survive, being conformist was normalized in this period, so the fashion, music and lifestyle are that everyone was just trying to fit in (Edward 2020, 1-2). As the first scene shows the protagonist Patrick Bateman having dinner at a luxurious restaurant, and when he and his friends put the credit cards on the bill plate, and all his friends have their own credit card, so this is not only showing that credit card is one of the component material to measure people's success, but it also suggests that everyone has to have the same tastes, and it is kind of an exaggeration because the audience can see it right away. Before the shower scene, it starts with describing the address where Patrick lives before saying his name, this tells the audience how people in this period value the high class district rather than his own identity, Paul Allen does not even remember Patrick's name, Paul Allan always carelessly called Patrick as Marcus Halbertstram (Suwicha 2020, 1). After the shower scene, Patrick began to describe the skincare products he used in which it appeals to the audience to feel wanting to buy the products, the camera angle and music of this scene is similar to the advertisement, it is the use of fetishism in which it allows the audience to fetishise and indulge with the material objects. Thus, there are uncountable scenes that attempt to criticize the capitalist society and Yuppie culture, and how it possesses people in the society by making people obsessed with the luxurious stuff.

Male Body in American Psycho

In spite of the name the movie has the word 'Psycho', but it also depicts Patrick's physical body thoroughly. For the morning routine scene, the audience can see Patrick's body is fit, clean, perfect and full of muscle, this emphasis of the male body suggests the stereotype that other people have towards the male body that men should be strong, and the audience will likely get the visual pleasure through the film, but this pleasure of the aesthetic of the male body could be replaced by the sexual attractiveness by the idea of male gaze in which his body is objectified and being a threat of eroticizing. Patrick's body is attractive to most women in the movie, and Patrick himself views his body narcissistically, for example, he boasts about doing a thousand push-ups a day (Alexandra 2018, 3). There was a scene where Patrick is doing light therapy which will give him tanned skin, and I think that he is doing tanned skin in order to make his muscle more stand out in a way to attract women's attention. Hence, appearance plays a big part in the depiction of masculinity, so it is not only the female body that is portrayed as a visual pleasure, but the male body is also the victim of the stereotypical of the male and female bodies in patriarchal society.

American Masculinity From the Point of View of Psychology in American Psycho

Superficially, psychopath plays a significant role in this movie, the audience can see the protagonist's stream of consciousness and his anxiety or jealousy towards the things that he confronts, sometimes he reacts to it aggressively. However, these reactions are surreal because people cannot murder anyone just like what Patrick did in the movie, but it is not far from the truth that everyone wants to be the best in their society, and competitiveness without caring for others has become common in the capitalist society, so it is the metaphor. The

competition is the meaning underneath the protagonist's feelings and reactions. For example, the meeting room scene that Patrick and his friend are bragging about the name card, and when Patrick saw Paul Allen's name card, his stream of consciousness said that "Look at that subtle off-white colouring. The tasteful thickness. Oh my God. It even has a watermark," this shows Patrick's anxiety because he began to sweat, the audience can see obviously that he feels envious of Paul Allen. His feeling of jealousy absolutely disturb his mind all day because when Patrick on the way home after his work, he sees a homeless guy sitting at a side street, Patrick express his aggression by stabbing the beggar's stomach, also this scene could give the sense of self centered which is the idea that care for people themselves not the others, Patrick feels that this beggar is not even deserve to be alive and not worth to respect and care (Thomas 2001, 11-19); thus, this shows the selfishness and the dark side of the capitalist society, but it portrays in a exaggerated way, and it is open to discuss whether he fantasized of he really did it.

Identity and Alienation in American Psycho

The issue of identity is a big deal of this film, as it portrays capitalist society as an evil that tempts to possess people in the society. In my opinion, this movie portrays an ironic capitalist appropriately by involving black comedy into the story that will make the audience laugh easily, however, the movie engaged with the viewers properly because the capitalist society still exists in the present day. Although the word "Yuppie" is extinct, the Yuppie culture has not gone anyway. It is just the word that disappears, but the people's behaviour does not differ from what people do in the Yuppie society, so it makes the audience start to question and notice themselves even more. Besides, Patrick also said that "But there is no real me" in which this quote describes that Patrick's life is entirely materialistic, as he is surrounded by the expensive and hi-end products, so the products labeled Patrick's identity, and Patrick's true self was swallowed by materialist society because the products give him value as a person, and this movie offers idea of existential crisis, loneliness and nihilism that believes in the emptiness. Additionally, the audience could see that Patrick's friend always greeted him by saying "nice tie" or talking about the name of the suit brands he wears before boasting the name card, so this shows that his name does not matter, what really matters for them is how nice and expensive the suit and tie he wears. Moreover, all the facial masks Patrick used in this movie is the mise en scene which could symbolize surrendering to the illusion of the society that people hide the truth behind each other, and Patrick himself does not really care about his own identity. Therefore, capitalism is not only swallowing people's souls, but it is also trying to label people's identity.

Conclusion

All in all, American Psycho talks a lot about the negative side of capitalist society, and it also represents the American masculinity both physically and psychologically. Ellis's protagonist was designed to be the people who live in capitalist society, and Ellis did it very well, the audience can get the sense of humor and pain of struggling in capitalist society at the same time. The portrait of the 1980s American's youth is accurate in this movie, so it is worth watching.

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