# The Fear of Freedom in Hyperreality and its Adverse Effect on Identity in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*

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## ABSTRACT

Neoliberal ideology immensely celebrated individual and collective freedom, yet fell short of realizing that freedom itself can sometimes be the cause of fear and anxiety. In seeking to "liberate" the processes of capital accumulation, neoliberalism essentially created a form of hypercapitalism: a relatively new form of capitalism marked by the advancement in technology, media, and virtual reality. This economic system lead to a fragmentation of social life by allowing commercial or business interests to penetrate every aspect of human experience, leading to, what Jean Baudrillard called, a *hyperreal* mode of existence. In Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991), the notorious Wall Street banker, Patrick Bateman follows an apparent decline from a cynical misanthrope to a psychotic serial killer within the free-market hyperreal environment of the Reagan era. The novel portrays a nightmarish vision of freedom, the unbearable anxiety it creates, and individual's psychological urge to flee from it. Through three socio-psychological mechanisms, Erich Fromm calls, *automation conformity*, *authoritarianism*, and *destructiveness*, Patrick attempts to flee from the freedom that brings anxiety with itself. Although these unconscious attempts are employed to sooth Patrick's loneliness and alienation, they do not solve the underlying problem. The cost is a crisis of Patrick's individuality, subsequently forfeiting all comprehension of his own selfhood and identity.

**KEY WORDS:** Freedom, Free-Market Economy, Hyperreality, Identity, Social-Psychology

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

As one of the most controversial contributions to contemporary literature, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) encountered numerous negative reactions, which, initially, turned a blind eye to the satirical undertone the work carried. The novel received extreme critical reactions due to its detailed and graphic descriptions of violence. The *New York Times* states, "'Snuff This Book!'" (Freccero, 1997, p.46). The National Organization of Women (NOW), similarly, "called for a boycott of [the novel]" (Murphet, 2002, p.68), believing that the work was nothing other than "a how-to novel on torture and dismemberment of women" (qtd in.

Murphet, 2002, p.68). However, *American Psycho* was later revised as a great transgressive work and a sharp satire of the 1980s consumer society. James Gardner reread the novel "to award it the more positive label of 'transgressive fiction'" (Eldridge, 2008, p.22) through violence and gore to depict human insanity in postmodern and contemporary capitalist societies. Patrick Bateman, the protagonist, floats between his two personae: the "boy next door" and the "psychopath." By day, he is a wealthy investment banker, who cares about fashion, women rights, and politics; by night, a psychotic killer who murders women, animals, and a homeless man because he is ". . . a fucking loser . . ." who "[does not] have anything in common with [him]" (Ellis, 2011, p.138). *American Psycho* draws heavily from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in making extensive use of the subjects of doubles and duality. The idea of doubling portrays Patrick's mental decline as well as the clash between his social and individual identity.

In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm examines how freedom and self-awareness develops from the Middle Ages to the modern era. Using socio-psychoanalytic methods, he

examines how modernization-related tendencies propel individuals to go back to totalitarian regimes like Nazism and repress their own freedom. Fromm (1969, p.128) maintains that ". . . capitalism not only freed [the individual] from traditional bonds, but it also contributed tremendously to the increasing of positive freedom, to the growth of an active, critical, responsible self. However[,] . . . at the same time[,] it made the individual more alone and isolated. . ." In other words, the more freedom individuals gained, the more alienated they became. Fromm assumed that individuals in modern consumer societies deal with immense anxiety and identity crisis due to capitalism upholding freedom as absolute. During 1980s, the neoliberal economic policies promoted by U.S. President Ronald Reagan advocated and preferred the free-market economics. His ideology, also known as *Reaganism*, was to blame for the imbalance and fragmentation of social life because it permitted commercial or economic interests to permeate every aspect of the human experience. This new kind of capitalism, also referred to as *hypercapitalism*, evolved towards an extreme laissez-faire capitalism, characterized by exploitation, destruction, and wars. Hypercapitalism is also related to the term *late capitalism* originated by Fredric Jameson, who linked specific economic processes to postmodernism. According to Jean Baudrillard, this postmodern form of capitalism creates hyperreality in the way that intoxicating, prepossessing and rapidly shifting images become more powerful realities than the immediate physical and social environment. This is why he refers to the late capitalistic environment as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 2006, p.4) to refer to the people who are seduced and bedazzled by media's false depiction of reality. This very process of deregulation and expansion of neoliberal economic visions, which is disguised as globalization, has led to a deviant form of capitalism. Ultimately, the cultural movement from modernism to postmodernism and to advanced capitalist communities is characterized by alienation and fragmentation.

Due to the psychological inability to cope with the freedom that neoliberal or hyperreal societies provide, individuals unconsciously want to recreate a sense of belonging and escape from this freedom which brings along anxiety. Fromm explores the socio-psychological mechanisms known as *automation conformity*, *authoritarianism*, and *destructiveness* that individuals employ to escape from freedom. They, respectively, appear as a tendency to behave like a social automaton conforming to society's roles and values, and/or as a desire of submission or domination, and/or a drive to destructiveness towards others or oneself. The sad irony, however, is that while all three mechanisms of escape stem from the need to alleviate one's fear, anxiety, or

isolation, in reality, they only exacerbate these feelings: "[It is] the complete surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self . . ." (Fromm, 1969, p.162). In *American Psycho,* despite his affluence and high social status in Wall Street, Patrick is plagued by feelings of anxiety and loneliness. He attempts to escape these feelings by turning into a robotic conformist who can only define himself through labels and brand names. He, then, projects his frustration towards others as a sadist before completely morphing into a psychotic destructive character. Patrick employs all three mechanisms to escape from the neoliberal freedom of the 1980s yet fails and loses his sense of individuality in the way.

## 2. ROBOTIC CONFORMITY AND BRAND-ORIENTED IDENTITY

Amidst the eruption of late capitalism in the United States, Patrick Bateman is a young 1980s "yuppie" who works as an investment banker at Wall Street. He is "ethical, tolerant," and "extremely satisfied with [his] life" (Ellis, 2011, p.6). He is the humble "boy next door" (Ellis, 2011, p.11) but, at the same time, "a fucking evil psychopath" (Ellis, 2011, p.20) who "[is] into . . . murders and executions mostly" (Ellis, 2011, p.216). Feelings of fear, alienation, and isolation in the excessive mode of commercialism and advertisement push Patrick to conform to societal expectations. Patrick's display of conformity is portrayed in long and tedious descriptions of brand names, restaurants, and his morning facial routines. Although the typical expectation for a worker at Wall Street is that he should be abound with work and labour, the novel's description shows a situation completely otherwise. There is not much focus on Patrick or the other characters' labour. Instead, descriptions throughout the novel stress Patrick's boredom mostly in his office "busy" reading magazines and drawing sketches. The only "labour" Patrick and his colleagues go through is discussing over others' restaurants, clothing, and households. Within the society, where consumption of popular cultural items of the1980s, including Hollywood films, Broadway, and tabloid talk becomes the new trend, Patrick finds it crucial and necessary to hold on to these values and to fit in. Despite the fact that his family's wealth makes it unnecessary for Patrick to work at all, he still does because, as he states, "I … want … to … fit … in" (Ellis, 2011, p.247). Patrick conforms to a broader society due to the anxiety brought by vapid commercialism and economic freedom. By believing in the same principles, purchasing the same things, and upholding the same ideals, he can avoid his feelings of loneliness and powerlessness. Yet he gives up his individual self and turns into a robot identical to everyone else.

The preservation of social status is extremely crucial to Patrick, and other characters of the same economic background. This becomes apparent when Timothy Price, one of Patrick's colleagues and an investment banker, says, "'I'm resourceful[,] . . . 'I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivate, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot *afford* to lose me. I'm an *asset*'" (Ellis, 2011, p.3; emphasis added). Price considers his personal attributions to society extremely valuable. Society cannot "afford" to lose him because he is the type of personality that society prefers: ". . . highly motivate, highly skilled." Price is the poster child for avarice and moral depravity; he makes fun of the destitute and is racist and homophobic. Additionally, he comes out as an elitist who thinks the wealthy deserve a better life than the rest of society. He is embracing the neoliberal economic system; therefore, the system needs him to maintain itself. Ellis explains that he was faced with an intimidating prospect of becoming a media celebrity, a spokesperson, or a prophet when his novel's sales increased. As he says: ". . . I sort of got sucked up into this whole yuppie-mania that was going on at the time and I think in a lot of ways, working on *American Psycho* was my way of fighting against myself slipping into a certain kind of lifestyle" (qtd. in Murphet, 2002, p.14). Similarly, through hiding in mass culture, Patrick does not need to acknowledge his freedom or responsibility because he follows the same lifestyle and becomes identical to everyone else. Dressing like others, watching the same television programs, and consuming the same culture as everyone else give Patrick a temporary relief, yet soon what he calls his "mask of sanity" (Ellis, 2011, p.289) will slip. Young (2003, p.49) calls Patrick the "[e]very yuppie, indifferent to art, originality or even pleasure except insofar as his possessions are the newest, brightest, best, most expensive and most fashionable."

Much to the consideration of conformity, characters in *American Psycho* have either emblematic names or no names at all. Stylistically, the character's names highlight their robotism and lack of individuality. When with his friends, Patrick is frequently confused for someone else, and he also confuses or arbitrarily names other people. He randomly names a prostitute, "Christie" as he adds, "(I don't know her real name, I haven't asked, but I told her to respond *only* when I call her Christie)" (Ellis, 2011, p.179; emphasis in original). Later, "Christie" refers to Patrick as "Paul": "'You have a really nice place here…Paul'" (Ellis, 2011, p.181). Then Patrick states how Paul Owen also mistook him for someone else:

> [Paul] Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam (even though Marcus is dating Cecilia Wagner) but for some reason *it really doesn't matter* and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P&P also, in

fact *does the same exact thing I do*, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable; it doesn't irk me. (Ellis, 2011, p.93; emphasis added)

Taking into account Fromm's idea about the conformist individual who becomes ". . . identical with millions of other[s] . . ." (*Escape* 209), Patrick becomes identical with *all* his colleagues, lacking a clear senses of self. Patrick believes that it "doesn't matter" if he is confused for Halberstam because he "does the same exact thing as [Patrick does]." This indicates that it is the job that defines the characters, not their human characteristics. These thoughts are in the early phases of Patrick's fragmented identity and his psychosis towards his acts of violence and destruction. His identity is best described through his own narration: "my personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago" (Ellis, 2011, p.406). Patrick has trouble understanding humanity, and only mimics what he sees: "I was simply imitating reality" (Ellis, 2011, p.56). Patrick is a mirror image of how the modern age brings out the worst in individuals and how this finally leads to the abandonment of his real identity:

> [T]here is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory[.] . . . *I simply am not there*. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent . . . (Ellis, 2011, p.385; emphasis in original)

Patrick's essence of himself resides in objects of the material world and, therefore, his ideological death is meaningless. He is a postmodern "noncontingent" human being who is completely "illusory" and "fabricated." This is portrayed in the above existential and anarchic paragraph, and, similarly, when he arrives at the conclusion that his look is all what matters: "All it comes down to is this: I feel like shit but look great" (Ellis, 2011, p.111). Eldridge (2008, p.12), in his analysis of the novel and its film adaptation, point out to the mentality of the culture by explaining, "'must have' designer suits and restaurant reservations are valued more than the life of a man, woman or child." Since Patrick has effectively relinquished his personality of mass consumption, he receives his ideas of a good, successful individual from the media. His constant admiration of Donald Trump (the owner of "Trump Plaza") verifies how he is under the influence of mass media. Eventually, Patrick holds a spectrum of unexplainable emotions and motivations, resulting in a character, that Eldridge states, is constructed from "a variety of cultural debris" (2008, p.8). That is, his

conformity to the consumer culture creates a false identity through which Patrick sees reality.

A distinctive feature of *American Psycho* is its long, tedious, and scrupulous references to brand names. His repeated descriptions of music or extensive line of skincare products, come out as a continuous repetitive advertisement. Patrick is very fashion-conscious, and appears as an authority on high-end consumer goods and brands. As it is clear in his description:

> I have taken out a gold Cross pen to write down the name of the restaurant in my address book. Dibble is wearing a subtly striped double-breasted wool suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Bill Blass, a mini-glen-plaid woven silk-tie by Bill Blass Signature and he's holding a Missoni Uomo raincoat[.] . . . I am wearing a mini-houndstooth-check wool suit with pleated trousers by Hugo Boss, a silk tie, also by Hugo Boss, a cotton broadcloth shirt by Joseph Abboud and shoes from Brooks Brothers. (Ellis, 2011, p.66)

Many critics have pointed out to the "boring" aspect of the novel, as it is bombarded with long paragraphs describing designer labels and restaurant names. The descriptions of brand names come out as a satire of sign-value, which Baudrillard believed was the value accorded to objects because of the prestige (name) rather than its use-value. Throughout the novel, Patrick points out to brand names of his and others' clothes and other superficialities such as booking tables at chic restaurants, and meticulously describing his morning facial routines. Patrick's items have sign-values, which signify his social status. He uses the brand names to imitate the rich people he sees on television and media; to give the idea that he is similar to the rest of the Wall Street bankers. Eventually, through becoming a robot in the hyperreal consumer society that celebrates sign-value, Patrick unconsciously aims to terminate his own freedom (the reason of his anxiety and frustration); however, he loses his own individuality as he can only define himself through brands and labels.

In most literary works, the environment serves only as a backdrop for the action. In *American Psycho*, however, New York with its neoliberal ideology has its own personality. It is a perverse metropolis that, like a black hole, transforms individuals into ungrateful and apathetic copies of themselves. Wall Street in New York and its culture demonstrate how, as a result of New York's toxic influence, "everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same" (Ellis, 2011, p.64). Furthermore, Patrick later gets away with his murders because everyone in the city is so obsessed with themselves that neither his obvious craziness nor the missing people around him are noticed.

## 3. SADIST-AUTHORITARIAN'S ILLUSION OF POWER AND INDIVIDUALITY

Patrick's actions at the beginning of the novel are mild, passive and relatively harmless. Although the novel follows a non-coherent narration style, contains fragmentation, and is full of uncertainty, his violent acts escalate gradually. When *American Psycho* was published in 1991, the novel was initially harshly criticized for its lengthy, explicit (some critics would call it "pornographic") descriptions of torture and sexual violence. Nevertheless, nothing could compare to the slurs that were unwarrantedly hurled at Ellis when it was published, from crude hate mail labeling him "racist," "misogynist," and "a hack" to elaborate on murder in such a fashion. Some saw the novel as well-timed feminist and cultural satire, critiquing the sadist-authoritarian character created under the intensely pro-capitalist Regan administration that resulted in the crash of Wall Street in 1987. In *American Psycho*, Patrick is a sadist who wants complete domination through the incorporation of another into himself. Ultimately, his sadism stems from the need to destroy the self as a means to relieve it from the weight of freedom.

Patrick's typical way of resolving his fragility is through the redirection of all his panic and nausea upon ethnic minorities. He shows extreme racist class hostility against a Jewish waitress and towards a Black man, referring to him as a "crazy fucking homeless nigger" (Ellis, 2011, p.9). Additionally, he mistreats and objectifies women, and for no reason, tells a woman at a bar: "'You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab to death and play around with your blood,' but I'm smiling" (Ellis, 2011, p.62). It is not only Patrick who mistreats women but also his colleagues, as they are of the same social status. When Patrick tries to visit his fiancée Evelyn, he tells Price whether they "'[s]hould . . . bring flowers'" (Ellis, 2011, p.7), to which Price replies: "'Nah. Hell, *you're* banging her, Bateman. Why should *we* get Evelyn flowers? You better have change for a fifty'" (Ellis, 2011, p.7; emphasis in original). Patrick tortures and belittles others to acquire the strength that he himself is lacking. However, he becomes so dependent on his subject that he completely loses his self because "he needs [his subject] very badly" (Fromm, 1969, p.166). Patrick's sense of strength is rooted in the fact that he masters over others and tortures them.

What defines the essence of the authoritarian personality is an inability to rely on one's self, to be independent, or in other words, to endure freedom. Patrick receives plenty of admiration from his secretary, Jean. Along with this need for being loved, there is a latent emergency for feeling superior. He is unable to "return . . . her love" because of his fear of dependence. Patrick ends his relationship with Jean because he cannot practice his sadism with her. As he says, "[f]or the first time I see Jean as uninhibited; she seems stronger, *less controllable*" (Ellis, 2011, p.387; emphasis

added). Patrick senses that he cannot "control" Jean anymore. This becomes a threat because, as a sadist, he always needs someone to control and to victimize. When she becomes "less controllable," Patrick moves away from her. This is an unconscious act of moving away from anything that threatens his identity and once again sets him free and alienated. However, he consciously responds to this situation through believing that "[the] relationship will probably lead to nothing" (Ellis, 2011, p.387).

Patrick uses his obsession with appearance and meticulous attention to detail to compensate for his anxiety. In an effort to gain some "control" over his otherwise chaotic life, he shops for the most stylish, pricey clothing and accessories he can find such as "Hermès," "Gucci," "Indochino," "SuitSupply," "J. Crew," "Armani," "Bill Blass," "Ralph Lauren," and "Calvin Klein." The authoritarian notion of being dependent on others is reflected in Patrick's composition of his *self* through institutions: from the corporate structure of "Pierce & Pierce" to the esoteric enigmas of video-store rentals, form the idea that he does not work to earn a living but in order to "fit . . . in" (Ellis, 2011, p.247). In fact, as the body count rises throughout the novel, Patrick's feelings of paranoia intensify noticeably, but at this instance, he is still in the early stages of psychosis. He is not yet as impetuous as he will become in the later chapters, where he will murder without thought.

## 4. DESTRUCTIVENESS AND THE PERVERSE SENSE OF SELF

What differentiates destructiveness from sadistic thriving is that while the sadist needs the subject to practice power and domination, destructiveness aims at a total elimination of the subject. The motive behind it is, still, individual powerlessness and an attempt to escape from it. Throughout the novel, Patrick involves in numerous acts of grotesque murder. Making a dent in society is Patrick's final way of finding solace and individuality. As he states: "My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact, I want my pain to be inflicted on others" (Ellis, 2011, pp.385-86). His destructiveness in such case leads to the "slippage" of his meticulously maintained, what he calls, "mask of sanity" (Ellis, 2011, p.289). The failure to conform to the culture that values independence, achievement, and hedonism will lead Patrick to a darker place. As a result, Lasch (1991, p.69) points out, the value of reason would be underestimated in such society: "Reason can [then] impose no limits on the pursuit of pleasure [or] on the immediate gratification of every desire, no matter how perverse, insane, criminal, or merely immoral." Lasch's comment is central to

Fromm's claim about destructiveness, which becomes "the last, almost desperate attempt to save [the individual] from being crushed by [the world]" (Fromm, 1969, p.202). At this stage, Lasch maintains, there is "no limit" for sexual gratification or destruction. This becomes apparent in Patrick's uncontrolled impulses of objectification and brutalization of others, especially women:

> [S]he passes out again and vomits, while unconscious, and I have to hold her head up so she doesn't choke on it and then I Mace her again . . . I start to cut off her dress and when I get up to her chest I occasionally stab at her breasts, accidentally (not really) slicing off one of her nipples through the bra. . ., [I] force her mouth open and with the scissors cut out her tongue . . . Blood gushes out of her mouth and I have to hold her head up so she won't choke. Then I fuck her in the mouth, and after I've ejaculated and pulled out, I Mace her some more. (Ellis, 2011, p.255)

As Patrick descends into madness, the line between sexual gratification and destructiveness blurs. He derives gratification from brutal and perverse acts of violence such as butchering his victims, and then copulating with their bodies. This is Patrick's final attempt to cope with his own powerlessness. His actions have gone beyond infliction of physical pain as in sexual sadism; now he uses "drills," "nails," and "knifes" to butcher his victims' bodies. It is crucial to note, however, the acts of destructiveness is not only towards women—an affirmation that his violence is not sexually motivated—but towards black homeless men, animals, and an anonymous "old queer" as well. Young states that "Ellis has . . . created the most unusual creature, a serial sex-killer who is also, at the same time, prepared to kill absolutely anyone" (qtd. in Murphet, 2002, p.42). What motivates his necrophiliac acts, then? It is, in fact, an unconscious attempt to remove all subjects with which he has to compare himself. Through this, Patrick remains alone and isolated, but his isolation is a splendid isolation, one which he would not be threatened by anyone. As he states, ". . . would the world be a safer, kinder place if Luis was hacked to bits? My world might, so why not? (Ellis, 2011, p.134). By destroying Luis, his Wall Street colleague, Patrick attempts to restore lost feelings of power. However, by destroying him, he eliminates him and many others of the outside world, and thus acquires a type of perverted power and selfhood.

The more the drive towards life is thwarted, the stronger is the drive towards destruction. Patrick realizes that his compulsion is out of control when he states, "I feel aimless, things look cloudy, my homicidal compulsion . . . surfaces, disappears, surfaces, leaves again" (Ellis, 2011, p.306), before giving up and sobbing to himself that he "just want[s] to be loved" (Ellis, 2011,

p.355): "And later my macabre joy sours and I'm weeping for myself . . . "just want to be loved," . . . All it came down to was: *die or adapt*" (Ellis, 2011, p.355; emphasis added). The economic system propels Patrick to "fit in". There is "NOT AN EXIT" (Ellis, 2011, p.408) unless he "adapts" to the world of consumption and materials. This becomes the reason why he cannot keep a stable relationship, and eventually separates with Evelyn when he tells her, "'I don't think we should see each other anymore'" (Ellis, 2011, p.349). Prior to this, he mentions the reason why he wants to separate with her: "'My … my *need* to engage in … homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected,' I tell her, measuring each word carefully. 'But I … have no other way to express my blocked … needs'" (Ellis, 2011, p.347; emphasis in original). *American Psycho* is similar to *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* in the portrayal of a nihilistic protagonist, a vaguely anti-capitalist story, and the cultural decline of America. Perhaps the most striking event in the novel is when Patrick murders his business rival, Paul Owen. Paul functions as simulations of power and dominance and is the dominant simulation of hegemonic masculinity. Paul owns the "Fisher account," a prestigious financial account at Wall Street whom Patrick is obsessed with. The name "Fisher account" is repeated seventeen times in the novel, indicating Patrick's obsession with it, and he frequently "wonder[s] about how Owen got [it]" (Ellis, 2011, p.51). Paul, gradually (with his financial success), becomes a threat to Patrick's self-image. As Fromm states, "[the individual] react[s] to this threat with intense aggression, as if it were a threat to his body or his property. The aggression in such cases has one aim: to destroy the witness who has the evidence" (Fromm, 1973, p.206). By "evidence" here, Fromm means anything that makes the individual feel inferior or questions his identity. Therefore, Patrick responses to this threat of his own image by brutally killing Paul: "The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up" (Ellis, 2011, p.227). Patrick, out of rage during this action, screams at him: "'[f]ucking stupid bustard. Fucking bastard'" (Ellis, 2011, p.227), intensifying his excessive jealousy and rage. As an additional view of Patrick's action towards Paul, Paul can be viewed as Patrick's alter-ego. Since Paul "is exactly [Patrick's] age, twenty-seven" (Ellis, 2011, p.225), and their voices "to someone hearing it over the phone [are] probably identical" (Ellis, 2011, p.228), by killing Paul, Patrick symbolically kills himself. He murders that part of himself which he detests. Paul can be viewed as the materialistic side of Patrick. Accordingly, Patrick escapes from anything that reminds him of his consumer identity through various ways—in this case, in the form of total destruction. Yet this form of escape is nothing

more than an annihilation of the self. What is left is a broken or fragmented self, made up of a real self and a social self, leading to the conclusion that "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (Ellis, 2011, p.408). For Patrick, there is no exit from his chosen lifestyle, no exit from the prison of psychosis, no exit from the 1980's of which he has embraced so fully to the point of being iconic. The cycle consumerism continues, but what has changed is that he is aware of it now and can do nothing.

## 5. REALITY OR HALLUCINATION: INTERACTION BETWEEN NARRATIVE FORM AND THEMATIC CONTENT

The ending of *American Psycho* reveals that Patrick, in an attempt to escape from reality, invented a sadistic universe in which he denied all known morals and social norms. Towards the end of the novel, there is an indication that horrific, gratuitous renderings of brutality were part of Patrick's imagination. After leaving a message on a telephone, Patrick returns to the residence of Paul Owen, whom he previously "killed," to remove the evidence. To his surprise, however, it transpires that Paul never resided in that apartment, serving as a clear indication that all (or the majority of) Patrick's murders were the product of his fantasy. This finally becomes confirmed in the climatic confrontation with Harold Cranes, where Patrick confesses that he has killed Paul Owen: "'No!' I shout. 'Now, Carnes. Listen to me. Listen very, very carefully. I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can't make myself any clearer'" (Ellis, 2011, p.397); to which Cranes replies, "'that's simply not possible' […] '[b]ecautse … I had … dinner … with Paul Owen … twice … in London … just ten days ago'" (Ellis, 2011, p.397). Similar to James' ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw*, Patrick is both real and unreal. He is an idea that may only be perceived through reading literature and character creation. The text suggests that not only environment is a hyperreal consumer society of the 1980s, but also the text itself is hyperreal. *American Psycho* does not offer its readers the serial killer as consoling fantasy; instead, as Patrick himself remarks, in a moment of near-revelation at the end of the novel, "Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in" (Ellis, 2011, p.383). Ellis explains: "'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'" (Cohen, 1991, p.51). Murphet (2002, p.50) mentions that the text is also a kind of meta-fiction, which is another postmodern element, evident in Patrick's philosophical, self-reflective thoughts. "The very clarity of the phrases, the philosophical nuance of the exposition, rubs against [Patrick's] otherwise

imbalanced and disordered language games." That is, just as freedom of the hyperreal or late capitalist society creates a state of confusion and identity crisis in Patrick's personality, the freedom in the structure and writing style of the novel creates the same confusion and uncertainty for the reader. Ultimately, the narrative form interacts with the thematic content and conveys the notion that freedom, in the form and content, leads to fragmentation, uncertainty, and confusion.

What occurs in *American Psycho* can be sorted as the following: First, Patrick tries to escape his feelings of isolation within the free-market hyperreal society that defines individuals through brands, labels, and simulations. He escapes this freedom by adapting the conformist, authoritarian, and destructive character. These attempts to escape his feelings of anxiety do not drag him out of his misery but only add to them, as he loses his identity in the way. Second, Patrick seems to have hallucinated his violent acts (at least, partially), indicating how the consumer environment ultimately turns him into a seemingly psychotic or schizophrenic character. These states of confusion are reflected in the thematic content as well as the narrative form. Syntactically, Patrick's actions as well as the manner he expresses his thoughts to the reader show that he is increasingly mentally unstable. He begins to speak to himself in the third person and hears voices: "'It's fine,' I emphasize. Something gives way. 'You shouldn't be smitten with him...' I take a breather before correcting myself. 'I mean … me. Okay?'" (Ellis, 2011, pp.372-73). Additionally, in a paragraph where he runs from the police towards the end of the novel, the point of view suddenly changes from a first-person to a third-person narrator: "*Patrick* tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, *he* staggers out of the cab, leaning against it, a nerve-racking silence follows. . ." (Ellis, 2011, p.358; emphasis added). The literary fragmentations, confusions, and narrative structure along with the murder of Paul Owen and female brutalization all demonstrate Patrick's unreliability as a narrator. The basic assumptions and ideology of materialism and neoliberalism in such hyperreal capitalist societies suggests that freedom not only is not a blessing for Patrick but a heavy burden. Patrick's schizophrenic and unreliable character is the product of the postmodern and contemporary capitalist community marked by excessive economic freedom. Yet regardless of whether Patrick actually committed the crimes that he described to the reader or has imagined them, both views emphasize the impairment in identity and mental stability in the extremes of the capitalist world.

## 6.  CONCLUSION

Patrick Bateman's attempts to fit in, to gain control over others, and to destroy fails to give him psychological security. Instead, these seemingly social psychological solutions create an individual lacking a sense of selfhood or identity. This, in *American Psycho*, is hyperbolized by the depiction of the schizophrenic Patrick, who, first, fantasizes about violence, then, takes part in it, and finally, admits to have hallucinated them. The novel does not make it clear whether *all* the murders and violent acts were hallucinatory, leaving the reader with the proposition that they may have been partially committed and partially imagined. One of the most common misunderstandings about *American Psycho*, however, stems from its ambiguous ending, painting Patrick Bateman as an unreliable narrator, and the story as surreal and meaningless. However, the fact that the ending calls Patrick's integrity into question is exactly the point, as it feeds into the notion of capitalism and freedom leading to identity crisis and insanity. Patrick's attempt to flee from anxiety draws him back into a much worse void of emptiness; it creates the insane, selfless individual in an American society—or the ultimate "American Psycho."

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