Movie review on final film critique - american psycho

Final Film Critique: American Psycho

The 2000 film, American Psycho is based on the book of the same name, written by Bret Easton Ellis and is fundamentally preoccupied with the idea of wealth, sex and success as being significant drives behind human behaviour. Its central protagonist, Patrick Bateman is a mass-murdering psychopath whose actions are driven almost singularly by his desire to be the best: the richest, the most successful, the most popular and somewhat bizarrely, the man with the best business card. Set in 1980s New York, the film is a discussion of yuppie culture taken to its absolute extreme and is hugely successful in its dissection of human desires. It does not need to rely upon special effects, particularly eloquent dialogue or modern day endorsements to add strength to its subject matter, but rather is borrows from basic psychological theory to convey its message.

The film's storytelling is told entirely from the point of view of Bateman as he sees the world around him. The viewer is put into the (sometimes) uncomfortable position of being in Bateman's shoes and witnessing the stupidity and inanity that he observes almost constantly. The story focuses on Bateman's murderous desires and it is as the film progresses that the viewer realised that these desires are driven by fundamentally normal things (wealth, sex etc.) which are perpetuated to the extreme by the yuppie lifestyle. Bateman thinks of himself as being a clever and popular individual who is held in high esteem by all of his peers. However, as the film progresses, it is clear this is a self-perception which is not shared by others as he is mistaken for another man by other people who say, to his face, that

Bateman is " such a dork" and is actually thought of as being boring and rigid. It is this, in part, which drives Bateman to murder as it allows him to re-establish himself as the dominant alpha male figure he is in his head. The film's storytelling revolves around Bateman and his perspective as he is a symbol of what is wrong with yuppie culture – albeit an extreme one, but he is the bread and butter of the film's metaphorical take on the extremes that young men go to in order to establish themselves on the pecking order of life in business.

The film's acting is to be praised as the actors all portray the arrogance of young, yuppie men, living in the 1980s and enjoying the lavish lifestyle of businessmen extremely well. It is often a hard task to portray characters that have already been epitomised in their original incarnation such as these from the novel, but they are well brought to life on the screen. Christian Bale, who plays Bateman, is to be especially praised as portraying a man who straddles the worlds of sanity and insanity whilst maintaining a strong public presence and still fulfilling his insane bloodlust. As the film progresses, Bale unleashes more and more of the crazy in order to demonstrate how Bateman's character progresses and slips further away from humanity. The character is incredibly deep in terms of psychological layers and Bale's acting lends itself to this excellently as he manages to portray the soullessness, and deadness behind Bateman's eyes – no mean feat for someone who isn't themselves a psychopathic killer. The film requires Bale to be both charming and personable whilst also being hideous and terrifying

– something he manages spectacularly well, veering into mania on more than one occasion.

Its cinematography is focused on enhancing the film's depiction of yuppie life. The characters are all adorned in expensive suits, they are seen in scene after scene in impressive looking bars and restaurants – their offices are all equipped with modern (1980s modern) mod-cons and the characters are all portrayed as having flashy and beautiful apartments. The film's entire emphasis is placed on ' expense being no object' and it succeeds in doing this purely to enhance the yuppie lifestyle. Cleverly, the film does not show Bateman as being a figure who exists in the shadows – unlike most films with murder as their subject du jour, American Psycho encourages the viewer to think of Bateman as being a man who quite openly lives as a murderer by playing on the idea that he is more intelligent than everyone; in one scene, Bateman is sat in a bar and tells a woman that he works in " executions and murders" and she, mishearing him and assuming he said ' acquisitions and mergers', she asks if he enjoys his work. This conversation is symbolic of the entire film: Bateman is clearly insane whilst his friends are all too self-involved to really notice and the film's light colours and settings really add to this overall idea.

Along with its cinematography, the film's editing also helps with this because it is done to aid the juxtaposition between Bateman's private and public personas. As the film progresses, these two sides become closer and closer and this is shown through the progression of his mania as becoming more and more prevalent. At the start of the film, his fantasies are kept private but

by the end of the film, his fantasies are spilling out into real life: in a scene where he breaks up with his girlfriend, he is drawing a picture of a naked woman with a chainsaw in her back and blood spilling out on the tablecloth. The film is edited to enhance this idea of his two worlds converging. In another scene, when he is chasing a young woman from his apartment, it interjects between her trying to escape from him – banging on doors whilst he runs, naked and covered in blood, chasing her with a chainsaw. It is edited to create a greater sense of tension and fear. It is designed to heighten the sense of mania as the film progresses – Bateman gets crazier and the audience become more entangled in his criminality.

Bateman's character's psychopathy is highlighted in his obsessive interest in music. He regularly plays famous 1980s music to his victims before murdering them – Huey Lewis and the News, Phil Collins and Whitney Houston all feature and their music helps to enhance the film's 1980s emphasis and the yuppie fascination. The film's soundtrack also serves to help demonstrate Bateman's insanity as the juxtaposition between his discussion of music and his murderous actions. His discussion of the songs is actually disturbingly prescribed though – even when he is trying to be normal, he just isn't. Music (and therefore the film's sound) is yet another resource used by the film to emphasise how Bateman is simply just desperate to fit in and be ' normal' but he is fundamentally unable to – his love of music, like everything in his life, borders on obsession and his discussion of it is prescribed and textbook – it lacks warmth and passion: he talks like a book. The film relies heavily on its soundtrack to place the

impetus on this and to demonstrate the innate monstrosity of him. It also uses its soundtrack to further establish the film's setting – it is important that the audience knows it is set in the 1980s and is it serves to compound the idea of yuppie culture.

Furthermore, the film is styled to be very stereotypically 1980s: the characters are all placed into situations which are accompanied by 1980s music and outfits although it is not overdone which lends itself to the wealth and ' class' which yuppie culture is supposed to exude. Its direction is clearly focused on emphasising Bateman's drives to murder as being the product of the lifestyle he has been thrust into. However, far from being held against his will, Bateman clearly enjoys his life and as such, his actions are of as much his own derision as they are the lifestyle he feels the need to conform to. The film's style is entirely based around money and the fact that Bateman and his friends have it – whether it's the all-chrome kitchen that he has in his luxury apartment or the $50 note that his friend slips to the doorman of a club, it is all about being rich and highly sexed young men in the 1980s – the greed that fuels that is arguably what fuels Bateman's nocturnal activities. The film's style is designed to compound this idea – enhancing the images of its characters and accentuating the drives that cause them to act in a certain way.

The societal impact of American Psycho is arguably one of its most important attributes. The book was banned in various countries across the world (Block, 2011) and whether this is because of its graphic nature or the fact that it makes a number of very stark social comments, remains unclear. In practice,

this film is one which appears to be about gory and horrid murder but it is actually a metaphor for the innate human drives which we all experience and which some of us will achieve no matter what the cost. Bateman's motivation is that he wants to be the best, the most popular, the richest and the most attractive man in his circle and he will stop at nothing to achieve this. He is convinced of his own genius (whilst he is engaging in intercourse with a prostitute, he is more engrossed in flexing his muscles and adoring his own reflection) and when this view is contradicted by the views held by others, he is driven to ' correct' them by any means necessary. The film addresses yuppie culture as being a materialistic and ghastly lifestyle but its commentary can be applied to most areas of society in as much as all human beings desire sex, wealth and fame.

Its genre is a difficult one to pin down as it is fundamentally a very black comedy (Buchholz, 2008, p13) but equally, it can be held up as an example of horror too. It certainly borrows elements from both – the scene, for example, as discussed earlier where Bateman discusses the nature of his work is comically brilliant and it is the repeatedly ridiculous scenarios which Bateman finds himself in where, despite his own self belief in his genius, he literally cannot get arrested for murder – he is that poorly thought of. Even the film's goriest scene in which he kills a prostitute by dropping a chainsaw on her from a great height is bordering on comic: it is ridiculous that a screaming woman and a naked, chainsaw-wielding man would not be confronted whilst in the public hallways of an apartment building. The impracticality of her murder, coupled with his horrific appearance lends

humour to the scene as it is bordering on the ridiculous. However, that scene is widely considered to be one of the most horrific scenes of all time and as such, the film has very strong horror credentials too. Dark humour is never supposed to make for easy viewing and American Pyscho certainly is not that but it is very comical in certain places – but equally, it is truly horrific in others.

Overall, the film is an excellent one as it provides the audience with a deeper thought than simply ' that man killed lots of people.' It addresses the very real social issues which many of us encounter on a regular basis: the desires to succeed, to become rich and famous, to have sex, to live a luxurious lifestyle which precious few of us could ever afford. Its social commentary is one which delves deeper into the social consciousness than most horrors and it explores the idea of what would happen if the motivations behind our behaviour were driven to the absolute extremities of humanity. Bateman is a metaphor for every young business man who has ever wanted to succeed in life – he represents every person who has ever done something immoral in order to get ahead in life. The film utilises all of its resources to emphasise this point to the audience: Bateman goes out of his way to appear normal – he ' keeps' a girlfriend, he works hard, he goes to bars and restaurants with his friends, he takes an interest in music and exudes charm too. But as he correctly states about himself, there is all of this going but he's " just not there." Bale portrays the character beautifully and demonstrates the coldness of Bateman – there is nothing behind the eyes and how Bale achieves that is impressive; his actions and his words are all carefully chosen

and it is not until the end of the film, as he feels the threads of his life begin to unravel that we see the real Bateman – panic-struck, sweating, crying, manic and entirely insane. However, it is the result of this reaction as his own lawyer mistakes him for another man and laughs at the ' joke' of the idea that Bateman would be capable of carrying out these crimes that the audience is able to see the true message of the film: the culture in which Bateman exists is not that different from our own and the truth is that nobody really cares – as long as it's not happening to them.

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