Arcadia University

This is Not an Exit

Abjection and Identity in *American Psycho*

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The Abject

Fear and the disturbance of the normative system have shaped the horror genre since its conception. Viewing disturbing acts - whether it be a vampire feeding from a virginal victim or a killer wearing human skin - is a natural human curiosity interweaving disgust and desire. What disturbs because it is “other” is the abject. Philosopher Julia Kristeva developed the abject as that which “disturbs order”; it is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4).

Especially in the horror genre, the abject represents something uncanny, just outside the realm of normalcy- the outside that wants to come in, or, rather, the inside that wants to come out. For example, the expulsion of bodily fluids such as vomit, blood, and feces represents the abject. They belong to us, but are meant to be contained and unseen, and upon expulsion, force us to consider their existence and attract us with their wrongness and disturbance of the natural order. You have the knowledge and meaning that you bleed, defecate, and die, but being shown abject material shows you what you *are* and *could be*. Kristeva explains that:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of *signified* death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life

> withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being (Kristeva 3).

One aspect of the abject is the deject. The deject's world is unstable, an exile whose world is not homogenous, constantly asking himself, "Where am I?" (Kristeva, qtd. in Durán) He "places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging" (Kristeva 8).

Being abject results in dejection - these two terms are importantly linked. The deject, through being abject, instead of finding catharsis through contact with the abject, becomes lost and wandering.

The Abject and Identity

Kristeva suggests that the origin of the abject is that of birth. The infant is forced out of the mother's womb in a violent expulsion of fluid. "They" becomes "I," a singular entity forced to then consider its existence and identity. Kristeva's notion of the abject suggests "that our first experience of abjection comes in the moment of birth, when we are forcibly separated from our mother's womb and forced to become distinct from our mother's body. In that moment, that which had been a space of nurturing and comfort becomes abject, and we carry that paradox with us for the rest of our lives, constantly feeling simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by abjection" (Nelson).

This instinct, according to Kristeva, goes back to the separation of child from mother, of the fear of mother and child becoming one once more. Kristeva explains, “In spitting out or vomiting that which would make us ill, we also acknowledge that the abject is not separate from us: ‘I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself’ (Kristeva 3).”

To Kristeva, this symbolic matricide is essential, though the fear of dependence on the maternal lingers. The maternal does not necessarily mean the mother in a literal sense but rather that which threatens the identity of the self with its all-consuming presence.

The abject is somewhat paradoxical. It is so terrifying because it simultaneously is and is not us. Serial killers, for example, are abject because, while they look like any “normal” person, they do things so horrible and inhuman that they exist on the boundaries of human and not. In being disgusted by such things, we are distancing ourselves from them. Marking things as disgusting creates a social order, a boundary that must not be crossed. The abject is so terrifying because “it is not only an external menace but…it may menace us from the inside” (Meagher, 33, quoted in Tyler, “What is Social Abjection).

While focusing on the complex gender relations of the abject is beyond this paper, it is important to note that the abject is a somewhat contested concept that reflects the many layers and forms abjection can take. Various critics such as Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* and Imogen Tyler in “Against abjection” critique the maternal body as a site of

the primordial abject, noting the maternal abject as being too vague and broad, failing to take into account the way “the role the maternal abject plays in intimate, inter-subjective, generational and social relations and challenge the forms and processes of abjection that are central to the social exclusion and marginalisation of women” (Tyler, “Against abjection,” 17). Theorists also note that Kristeva is working from a traditional male and female polarity that is more theoretical than real, relying on gender stereotypes and not taking into account the lived experience (Fronko 5-6).

To Judith Butler and other feminist theorists, abjection is less of an immutable fact of nature that requires matricide, but more of a contested, cultivated and lived experience dependent on social norms. Social norms, such as what type of sex, person, etc., is “correct,” creates a boundary, and thus, abjection, which Butler describes as "a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies" (Butler xi). Through abjection, the "normal" subject helps that subject to constitute its identity: "This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against, which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life" (3).

For this paper's purposes, I will focus less on the Freudian aspect of the abject that centers on the maternal and more on the fact that the abject is used to establish boundaries and represents that which is abnormal and on the periphery of what is normal. It is taboo and not socially acceptable to indulge in such practices, as stated by social norms.

The Abject, Gender, and Desire

The abject provokes desire and curiosity because one can, for example, experience death without actually dying. One can dip their toes in the proverbial waters of destruction and come out unscathed. The proclivity to be attracted to the abject is partially due to it being a new, more interesting experience than what is considered normal. As bell hooks writes in “Eating the Other,” “difference can seduce precisely because the mainstream imposition of sameness is a provocation that terrorizes” (367). The abject can provoke not just disgust and desire but laughter - for example, black comedy, which delights in poking fun at the taboo.

There are few things more abject than women. She bleeds, her womb shedding blood every month. She changes shape, her breasts and stomach expanding as a thing grows inside of her. She expels infants in a mess of bodily fluid. Her disgusting nature makes her inferior, made wrong.

Sigmund Freud, and later Jacques Lacan, pioneered the idea that the sexes were unequal, that women experienced “penis envy” because the gap in their genitalia constituted a “lack.” Women were castrated, undeveloped men, which struck fear into the hearts of man because he feared his own castration. In a more metaphorical sense, man fears becoming insignificant and submissive. The boy fears he will be castrated by his father, who competes with him for his mother's affection, and the girl sees herself as already castrated, feeling as if she has lost something important (“Castration”).

Theorist Barbara Creed argues that women are monstrous because they are not "mutilated" like a "man might be if he were castrated; woman is physically whole, intact, and in possession of all her sexual powers" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 6). Because she is whole and unknowable (Williams), she is feared but also desired due to her difference. Man fears the power women hold and that he may be castrated and vulnerable.

Women are abject and erotic all at once - as bell hooks states in "Eating the Other," difference is provocative and alluring, and experience and domination of such a subject can further solidify one's identity as belonging within the normative system. Through destruction, disgust, and desire, man forms and maintains his identity.

The Gaze

To analyze the filmic techniques and the gaze of the film *American Psycho* (2000), I will briefly explain the concept of the gaze.

The concept of the male gaze was developed by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She asserts that the cinema offers a scopophilia - a pleasure in looking, especially that which is private and forbidden. The cinema's screen plays on the voyeuristic fantasy of the spectator, projecting their desires onto the subject on screen. It also offers a sense of identification that helps solidify one's identity. The gaze is, then, not just an act of looking and enjoying what's on screen but something political that

shows the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. The manufacturer of the gaze - the camera, the director, and others involved in the production, are in a privileged position of manipulating the gaze to their liking.

A close-up shot of a villain's eyes can make it so they're staring into the spectator's very soul, scrutinizing them as they do their victims. A shot of a woman's body and little else makes the way of looking sexual and voyeuristic as we're peering into a presumably male protagonist's point of view. A superhero valiantly posed in conquering his enemies provokes a feeling of strength and dominance. A character shown from a Dutch angle can provoke disorientation and confusion. The camera does not serve as an objective viewpoint but rather how the spectator and, at times, the protagonist perceive the world around them. Thus, there is both a pleasure and a power in looking (hooks 38) that both help separate the abject from the normal, further reinforcing the spectator's role in society, and satiates the curiosity of being in a different position.

The Gaze and Gender

Cinema is particularly constructed for the male viewer, who has a privileged position in society. Thus, women are put on screen to be looked at, to be passive subjects of desire. This is reflected by how woman is viewed on screen: lingering glances at her body, and sexualizing the way she looks and moves. It also represents not only how women are objectified on screen, but the limited male view, where all characters exist to serve his interests.

The female gaze developed as a response to the male gaze. While the female gaze is still developing, and there's no one unified theory, there seems to be an accepted definition: the female gaze is a way to show the subject in aspects that aren't just physical - with tenderness, empathy, and emotion. While that may evoke the cliche that women are "feeling" whereas men are "looking," it's not so cut and dry; movies surrounding men, too, evoke their feelings, especially with action films showcasing anger, aggression, and power (Loreck). An analysis of what it means when male or female emotions are portrayed differently in cinema is beyond the scope of this paper, but it's important to keep gender differences in mind.

Using the concept of the abject and the gaze, I will explore the gaze as a vehicle through which to show Patrick Bateman's multiple layers of abjection - his own abjection, dejection, and his desire to possess the abject.

Background

Before *American Psycho* was a film, it was a novel, published in 1991 by Brett Easton Ellis. Set in Manhattan during the late 1980s, the novel follows wealthy 27-year-old investment banker Patrick Bateman, who is also a deeply disturbed serial murderer. Throughout the book, Bateman expresses an obsession with fitting in with his Wall Street colleagues. A running theme in the book and the film is the emphasis that the characters put on brands, and also characters regularly mistaking Bateman and other

Wall Street colleagues for other people - further emphasizing the conformity of yuppie culture.

In addition to his obsession with fitting in, Bateman expresses a thirst for rape, murder, and at times, cannibalism. Bateman targets those on the fringes of society, particularly women and the homeless. When he isn't engaging in heinous crimes, he enjoys fancy dinners with his described "supposed fiance" (whom he shows little interest in) and regularly tries to show up his colleagues and establish that he is the superior person in the room.

He is obsessed with Paul Owen (named Paul Allen in the film), a fellow investment banker in charge of a much-coveted account in the company, who he eventually kills. Towards the climax of both the novel and the film, Bateman goes on a frenzied killing spree, which may or may not be hallucinated - whether he did or did not commit any of his murders is up for debate in both the film and the book. He experiences hallucinations and confesses his crimes to his lawyer over voicemail, but his lawyer didn't believe his claims, claiming that he had dinner with Paul Owen the night before.

Notably, the book is written from Bateman's perspective, who fills the pages with banal descriptions of the things and people around him, and the film features much of the same in its time-constricted format:

> The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; its a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame); the audio includes built-in MTS and a five-watt-per-channel on-board amp. A Toshiba VCR sits in a glass case beneath the TV set; it's a super-high-band Beta unit and has a built-in editing function including a character generation with eight-page memory, a high-band record and playback, and a three-week, eight-event timer (Ellis 25).

The book switches from these types of descriptions to concerning, sometimes crazed descriptions of the crimes Bateman commits or wants to commit:

> I tried to make meat loaf out of the girl but it becomes too frustrating a task and instead I spend the afternoon smearing her meat all over the walls, chewing on strips of skin I ripped from her body (Ellis 345).

Of course, whenever he describes his crimes to people, he's quickly dismissed, depriving Bateman of the attention and punishment he so desires and further driving home the theme of conformity and individuality above all else.

The Film

The eponymous 2001 film, directed by Mary Harron and written by Guinevere Turner, is relatively faithful to the book in that it does not change the general plot but rather makes

stylistic and filmic choices that reinforce Bateman's position as the abject and indulgence in the abject.

The book was very controversial, and the author described it as a satire based on his life experiences, "It initiated because of my own isolation and alienation at a point in my life. I was living like Patrick Bateman. I was slipping into a consumerist kind of void" (Baker). Though it is a satire of consumerism (which I'm unable to touch on in this paper but is an important and central theme), critics denounced it for its lengthy and brutal descriptions of torture and crimes against women.

The film, in response, decided to focus its gaze less on the grotesqueness of Bateman's *actions,* such as showing explicitly what he does, and more on the grotesqueness of Bateman *himself*. The movie exemplifies his abject status in a few ways - first, by showing him through an objectified, almost comedic lens, and second by showing the taboo and gruesome acts he commits and the things he thinks about. His abjection and desire to possess the Other - something that will release him from the "confines" of his privileged position - destabilizes him.

This opening scene is a perfect representation of the multilayered abjection of Patrick Bateman: The film opens with a sinister kind of score, a swirling of red sauce on a white background, a knife cutting meat, raspberries falling onto a plate which is then placed on a table. The score becomes light and fanciful as the camera pans out to a lovely restaurant scene. There's a close-up of a waiter who lists out foods to the guests,

including “an arugula caesar salad,” “swordfish meatloaf with onion marmalade, rare roasted partridge breast in raspberry coulis with a sorrel timbale.” Another waiter offers “squid ravioli in a lemon grass broth.”

The red sauce is representative of blood, the knife cutting the meat of a killer butchering his victims, forks digging into these strange, abstract foods representative of a desire to devour the abject. The abject - the meat, the knife, the sauce, is as alluring as it is disgusting, the food (such as swordfish meatloaf, which is a fictional dish) just believable enough to resemble something real but absurd enough to be on the boundaries of normal.

Just as the diners devoured the strange abstract foods in the opening sequence, Bateman represents a desire to devour the abject, which he fears and desires - particularly, women. His devouring of the abject and his own abject status and dejection, shown through his outward displays of emotion, unusual behavior, and murderous tendencies, put him in a state of instability. His victims are not the only ones that are scared- so is he.

The most iconic scene opens with a classical score. The camera voyeuristically tracks the spectator through Patrick Bateman’s apartment. First, the spectator sees a telescope positioned on his balcony, then his living room, swathed almost completely in white: white walls, a black and white painting, a white leather couch. The camera stands in the doorway of his bedroom, looking into a minimalist bed of white sheets and white

pillows. An alcove above his bed holds a white vase-like sculpture. The camera's gaze reveals something about Bateman's character right away: a black and white painting that, upon further inspection, is from artist Robert Longo's "Men in the Cities" series. This collection depicts smartly-dressed men and women contorting and writhing in emotion (Film and Furniture).

These lean, well-dressed bodies would usually be regarded as anything but abject - they are clean, part of the normative society. However, their almost painful-looking poses are uncanny, somewhat disturbing. They're not so monstrous as to suggest inhumanity, but just strange enough that it's not *normal*, but abject.

The camera then watches Bateman from behind as he, clad in white underwear, walks barefoot through his apartment to the bathroom.

"I live in the American Gardens Building on West 81st Street, on the 11th floor," he narrates, the camera still behind him as he urinates, staring at his own reflection in a Les Misérables poster: "My name is Patrick Bateman. I'm 27 years old. I believe in taking care of myself, a balanced diet and a rigorous exercise routine. In the morning, if my face is a little puffy, I'll put on an ice pack while doing my stomach crunches. I can do 1000 now."

Occurring about 5 minutes into the film, this is not the opening scene, yet the first that sees Bateman alone and allows him to monologue. The viewers see him wholly for the

first time, and the camera takes lengths to portray him through a voyeuristic lens. The spectator watches him from behind as he showers, lathering his sculpted body, and exercising, wearing nothing but his underwear.

Bateman is an eroticized object - *almost*. There's an undertone of humor to this scene. When he puts an ice pack with holes for his eyes around his face and aggressively exercises in front of his window, remarking on his strength, it's clear that he is not supposed to be taken seriously, the audience therefore able to displace the carefully crafted image Bateman has made for himself. It's not only humorous, but he gives the audience a clue into his mind this early on in this film, admitting his lack of any sort of identity. Just like his apartment, he is a clean slate: white, expensive, yet writhing and contorting on the inside. A monster in a Valentino suit.

While Bateman peels off a face mask as part of his elaborate skincare regimen, he narrates, "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me. Only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there."

He is admitting outright that an "I" doesn't exist. There is no "I," no identity with which to base or solidify himself on, no "defining limit of the subjects domain." Bateman, through this sequence, is the abject, the "zone of uninhabitability" that Judith Butler describes the abject as. While it's understood that "to seek an encounter with the other, does not

require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality" (hooks), Bateman has absolutely no positionality to fall back onto.

Spectators get clues of his instability not just through his humorous and cryptic morning routine and decor, but his cruelty to women, and while the audience may not yet know at this point how much of a crazed murderer he is, his instability is shown early on.

"You're an ugly bitch. I want to stab you to death and play around in your blood," Bateman tells a bartender at a club as she retrieves a glass from behind the bar. She hands him the drink, and he smiles, with little indication between either of them of what he had just said. Bateman has moments like this throughout the film, where he confesses his bloodlust to absolutely no recognition or reaction from the person he's talking to. Only the audience is privy to Bateman's musings, whether it is because he's an unreliable narrator that isn't actually saying what he's shown to be saying, or because the characters only hear what they *want* to hear.

There *is* something that is noticed by other characters, though, namely his colleagues -- the characters describe him as strange, "a dork…a boring spineless, lightweight," to which he has increasingly visceral reactions. Any supposed blow to his Wall Street identity leaves him physically and visibly unwell - Bateman sputters, sweats, attempts to reject. In a scene where all of his colleagues are showing off their business cards, he sweats profusely at the thought of his coworker's card being much better than his own. In an attempt to do better, to be better, Bateman consistently falls short, his abjection

seeping through with his adverse physical reactions and inappropriate behavior towards his colleagues.

His crimes against women are a powerful show of his abjection and identity. In one scene, Bateman, finely dressed in a suit and tie, invites a prostitute he found on the sidewalk to his apartment. He gives her wine (“that’s a very fine chardonnay you’re drinking”, he notes), and instructs her to bathe in his lavish bathtub. I want you to clean your vagina.” She obliges, and he corrects. “No. From behind. Get on your knees.”

He then invites an “upper-class” prostitute to his apartment, instructs both prostitutes to perform sexual acts on each other while he watches, and informs them about his job in which they show no interest. He later has sex with both of them at the same time, during which he looks at himself in the mirror and flexes a bicep.

This scene perfectly represents his repulsion and desire for the Other. He’s so utterly disgusted by women - the ultimate and original abject - not to mention prostitutes, who exist on the fringes of society. But he also desires them, not necessarily in an emotional way, but in a way of domination. Bateman is encountering the abject to further solidify his identity, except he doesn’t have one in the first place. He monologues about music, politics, and his job but has no real existence. This also speaks to the dejection Bateman lives by. He attempts to manipulate his surroundings, attempting to demarcate the boundaries of what he is and is not, but instead, strays, unable to get “his bearings,

desiring, belonging.” instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging” (Kristeva 8). He said so himself - he is *not there*.

The film's climax follows Bateman suffering from hallucinations and going on a killing spree. Afterward, he hides under his desk and leaves a voicemail for his lawyer, sweaty, crying, and trembling. “I’ve killed a lot of people,” he says, gesturing wildly as he describes all the people he’s killed. “I even, um– I ate some of their brains. And I tried to cook a little…I’ve just had to kill a lot of people! I guess, I guess I’m a pretty sick guy.”

This is not played for sympathy, nor does Bateman express any sort of remorse. Rather, he is put into a position of vulnerability and terror, not unlike a female film character under the male gaze. Barbara Creed remarks in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film Feminism, Psychoanalysis:* “Women are chosen more often as victims because they are permitted a greater range of emotional expression. ‘Angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject terror, in short, is gendered feminine” (Clover, qtd. in Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 125).

This isn’t to say that he is comparable to his female victims, such as the prostitutes he murders - rather, his objectification and shows of abject terror and humiliation show that he is not any better than them. Rather, the prostitutes are shown in a sympathetic light. The film reflects Bateman’s attitudes towards women right back to him.

As monstrosity and femininity are inextricably linked, it comes as no surprise that Bateman is feminized to a point in the film. “The affinity between the monster and woman resides in the way in which all monstrous figures are constructed in terms of Kristeva’s ‘non-symbolic’ body: the body that gives birth, secretes, changes shape, or is marked in some way….the abject body is identified with the feminine, which is socially denigrated, and the symbolic body with the masculine, which is socially valorized” (Creed, *Dark Desires*, 130-131). Creed explains that through breaking the taboo and who allying himself and also fearing the objected maternal body, “he composite male monster confronts his greatest fear, woman, but in so doing is made monstrous through the processes of feminization” (127),

Thus, Patrick Bateman is merely an illusion, a sum of someone else’s parts, a “Frankenstein’s monster” of cultural references and vanity and cruelty. His crimes aren’t even something he can call his own. Throughout the film, he’s shown indulging in “video nasties” - low-budget horror and exploitation films, that directly reflect his crimes, as well as consuming music and other elements of 80s media culture.

He’s shown exercising in front of a television playing a scene from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), where Leatherface dances and twirls with his chainsaw. Later, Bateman pays homage to Leatherface: he chases his victim through his apartment with a chainsaw not unlike how Leatherface chases his victims, then wields it from atop a stairwell and playfully dangles it, dropping it on his victim below (Rogers 236). Even his

pseudo-suave nature towards the prostitutes he hires isn't even his- it very well could be a projection of things he's seen (Eldridge 31).

His encounters with the other are perhaps, then, an attempt to prove that there is some humanity there, to say, "That (the abject) isn't me, so I must be something," but that is incredibly far from the truth. The abject prostitutes show no care or feeling because he is even more abject than they are, living in a delusion and inflicting pain on women, the ultimate abject, to try to scramble together some semblance of an identity. He is the pinnacle of the dejected abject, "in the condition of being half inside and half outside the mother at the moment of birth — of being half dead and half alive from the start and thus undecidably (sic) in motion between logical contradictory states" (Hogle, qtd in McCabe-Remmell, vi).

Bateman is thus abjected on multiple levels - through the film's feminizing gaze, and his cruelty and crimes, all layers that contribute to his unstable identity. He seeks to make contact with the abject and come out knowing himself, but all he is is an illusion, a deject with no identity or place to call his own.

Conclusion

Bateman is so anguished, his thirst for the abject unquenched because his experience and devouring of the abject provides him with no catharsis. Bateman never experiences the solidification of identity that is expected, the "They" becoming "I" that occurs when encountering the abject. Rather, he is stuck in a loop of monstrousness.

This multi-layered approach exemplifies his status on the fringes of society, just as his victims are. This isn't to say that Bateman is a victim - he perpetuates horrible crimes such as torture, murder, and rape - but that the feminization and emasculation of Bateman in the film speaks to his alliance with the abject. His identity is wrapped up in multiple layers of abjection from which he cannot escape. Bateman suffers from an unstable identity, unable to gain a blissful climax from his actions.

This is shown best by Bateman's final lines of the film:

> There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused... and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed. 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. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this, there is no catharsis. My punishment continues to elude me... and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself. No new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant... nothing.

Bateman, abjected and dejected, is nobody. No amount of terror and horror can give an abject catharsis with no identity to fall back onto. The door behind Bateman reads:

"This is not an exit."
Indeed it isn't.

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