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Postmodern
Identity
in
American Psycho

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Introduction

American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis was published in 1991. It portrays the daily routines and events occurring in the life of Patrick Bateman. His identity, outlook on reality and the world he inhabits can all be analysed from a postmodern perspective. While a product of postmodernism, his character nevertheless offers a problematised take on the postmodern identity and some of its key components. One of those key components, which will be the starting point of this paper, is the postmodern take on fragmentation. As Peter Barry argues: “For the postmodernist ... fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon” (81). While the postmodern critic celebrates fragmentation, it can be argued that Patrick does not. Throughout the novel, Patrick feels trapped inside his postmodern configuration and the limits of his postmodern reality. The novel’s telling last words “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (384), illustrate this lack of escape. As a character, Patrick is continually struggling to find out who he is, how he feels and how he should behave towards others. His search for substance and attempts to move beyond the superficiality of the daily human interactions he is subjected to are manifested in various ways.

The first chapter of this paper will examine the role of language in the process of postmodern fragmentation. The second chapter, then, will examine more closely the role of communication and the way in which it influences Patrick’s identity and sense of self. The third chapter will analyse how the dichotomy between surface and depth has collapsed in Patrick’s postmodern reality and how this binds his struggle against fragmentation together with a search for substance and meaning through reoccurring outbursts of extreme violence.

This paper brings forth the argument that Patrick problematises the basic notion of the postmodern identity and offers a complex persona that actively resists his postmodern configuration. As a protagonist, he is rarely at ease in his own world, struggling to cope with the confusion which stems from the inability to self-reflect, which he so desperately needs in

order to build a stable and reliable identity. Due to the various – and at times conflicting – definitions that can be used to explain postmodern configuration in a text, the different elements belonging to the postmodern condition that are of relevance to this paper will be explained in the chapters where they are first introduced.

1. Language

1.1 Introduction to Language

... 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 comparable: *I simply am not there.* (362)

This passage exemplifies the paradox of both language and the postmodern identity. It mirrors the Cretan paradox, as explained by Hans Bertens, of a Cretan who states that all Cretans always lie. This means that either the Cretan is right, but falsifies the statement by uttering it; or that he is wrong and the statement is false because there is at least one Cretan who at some point did not lie (105). Patrick's soliloquy is problematic in a similar way, because by insisting "*I simply am not there*" (362) the presence of an *I* can be assumed. C. Namwali Serpell argues this passage denotes an "ontological impossibility" (50). Patrick continues with: "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." (362). Patrick proves to be a complex puzzle by claiming to be heartless, which implies *being* someone, albeit being someone immoral. On a literal level, however, *being* someone becomes an impossibility without having an actual heart (Serpell 50). There is no clear answer as to whether Patrick is someone or not, moreover, that is not the point: Patrick's identity is constantly challenging the notion of *existing*. Since he is not *there*, he must be *here*, existing in the present. Moreover, by showing his awareness on this issue, by telling the reader *he knows he's not there*, Patrick further problematises the postmodern identity.

What the Cretan paradox and Patrick's confession have in common is that they illustrate the impossibility to *step outside* language. The French poststructuralist Jacques

Derrida deems this is problematic because “language is inherently unreliable” (Bertens 108). He argues that “language operates on the basis of differentiation” (108): meaning a novel is called a novel because it is not a magazine, newspaper or poem. He continues by adding that “those words function within a linguistic system (a language) that never touches the real world” (108). A language, then, is a string of signifiers that are all connected and that give each other meaning. The relationship between the signifier and what it represents – the signified – is arbitrary. Therefore, a signifier can never truly connect with what it signifies. This leads to meaning being forever postponed, because there are always new signifiers that add meaning to the preceding discourse. The inability to step outside language and the nature of language itself also has implications for the ability to articulate “our perception of reality and ... formulating our knowledge of that reality” (121). As any poststructuralist would argue: “human perception and knowledge are fundamentally flawed” and “genuine knowledge of our ‘self’” (121) is impossible due to the unstable nature of language.

Poststructuralists transpose their critique on structuralism’s belief in stable systems to other areas by applying “linguistic insights to culture in general” (105). For instance:

the subject, too, is only a temporary arrangement – an interruption in the flow of meaning. If we appear to be stable, we appear so because at an unconscious level we have set up oppositions, because out of both external and internal differences we have constructed oppositions and have then privileged certain poles. (119)

This idea of “oppositions” (119) was pioneered in structuralism as a way to systemise the world. The subject, too, tends to stabilise itself using these poles. Poststructuralists try to “demonstrate that the apparent either/or patterns ... mask both/and situations” (115). For example, in reference to *American Psycho*, one could argue Patrick is intelligent, as opposed to unintelligent. This is problematic, because the word *intelligent* has no stable signified it is

connected to. The best it can do, is form a temporary bond with whoever *he* is referring to, creating the illusion of a stable connection between signifier and signified, and of a stable identity where there is none. Patrick as a textual impossibility forms an excellent example of the language paradox by simultaneously showing signs of stability and self-knowledge on the one hand; and signs of the unreliable, unstable self on the other. Patrick struggles to keep his sense of self intact, despite the structuralists' claim that the stable self is a given and the poststructuralists' claim that the self is inevitably going to fall apart.

1.2 Sounds

The unreliability of language can be seen in several instances where words or sentences that sound similar cause a great deal of confusion. At Nell's, Patrick is talking to a model:

“I'm into, oh, murders and executions mostly. It depends.” I shrug.

“Do you like it?” she asks, unfazed.

“Um ... It depends. Why?” I take a bite of sorbet.

“Well, most guys I know who work in mergers and acquisitions don't really like it,” she says.

“That's *not* what I said,” I say, adding a forced smile, finishing my J&B. “Oh, forget it.” (197)

Even though the signifiers of his job description and the signifiers he utters sound alike, they are not referring to the same signified. These two elements of his identity collapse into one another through language, causing the poles they represent to become less clear. The “either/or” is turned into a “both/and” (Bertens 115). Patrick tries to show a distinctive element of his identity, trying to stand out from the crowd, but is seen as yet another guy with the same job as everyone else.

Besides being misheard, Patrick also frequently mishears what people say to him. When in bed with Courtney, the girlfriend of Luis Carruthers, he confuses something Courtney is asking about the condom with an insulting remark about Luis:

“Luis is a despicable twit,” she gasps, trying to push me out of her.

“Yes,” I say, leaning on top of her, tonguing her ear. “Luis *is* a despicable twit. I hate him too,” and now, spurred on by her disgust for her wimp boyfriend, I start moving faster, my climax approaching.

“No, you idiot,” she groans. “I said *Is it a receptacle tip?* Not ‘Is Luis a despicable twit.’ Is it a *receptacle tip?* Get off me.” (99)

Patrick, too, is a subject whose identity is constructed around privileged poles (Bertens 119). Patrick is a heterosexual male: this is the stabilised version of Patrick’s identity. His identity rapidly destabilises, however, when he thinks he hears Luis’ name during sex. Luis is always mocked for his bad fashion sense: “dressed as if he’d had some kind of frog attack this morning” (150) and is absolutely hated by Patrick, who loathes him for not being as manly, as stylish and as suave as himself. Patrick, however, generally finds it surprisingly difficult to ignore him: “I keep watching Luis and whenever he looks over at our table I tip my head back and laugh even if what Van Patten or McDermott’s saying isn’t particularly funny, which is practically always.” (150). Patrick even follows him into the men’s room (151-52). Here, Patrick unconvincingly tries to kill Luis, who confesses he is attracted to Patrick (152-54). Patrick seems to be obsessed with Luis *because* he destabilises his identity. Instead of avoiding this threat to his perceived sexual identity, he cannot help but to be drawn towards him. Patrick is trying to understand how his identity is constructed and why he feels threatened.

At the drycleaners, the destabilising effect of language through sounds becomes even more apparent. Patrick is unable to understand the women, who only speaks Chinese. What he

is left with, is noise: “The Chinese woman keeps squealing something, grabbing at the arms of the jacket with a tiny fist. I brush her hand away and, leaning in, speak very slowly. ‘What are *you* saying to *me*?’” (79). Becoming frustrated, Patrick stops trying to understand the woman and tries to make her understand him:

“Two things,” I say, talking over her. “One. You can’t bleach a Soprani. Out of the question. Two” – and then louder, still over her – “*two*, I can only get these sheets in Santa Fe. These are very expensive sheets and I *really* need them clean ...” But she’s still talking and I’m nodding as if I understand her gibberish, then I break into a smile and lean right into her face. “If-you-don’t-shut-your-fucking-mouth-I-will-kill-you-are-you-understanding-me?” (79)

He continues talking to her, about his lunch meeting, where it is, and who he is meeting there (79-81). Julian Murphet notes that: “The Chinese woman’s speech receives no notation, apart from the repeated words ‘gibberish’ and ‘jabbering’, while Patrick’s speech is carefully detailed, and armed with stage directions.” (32). As Murphet points out, this dialogue is all about Patrick. The sentences spoken by the Chinese woman are reduced to descriptions of unpleasant noise or racist impersonations (79-80). As the conversation progresses, Patrick starts to realise he is unable to impose his demands on the woman due to their mutual lack of understanding. While losing his temper, “I have never firebombed anything and I start wondering how one goes about it”, he is still able to acknowledge he *is* out of his debt: “I *can’t* cope with this.” (80). Patrick’s frustration regarding his inability to communicate reveals a deeper frustration: Patrick feels this bad – “red-faced, on the verge of tears. I’m shaking” (80) – because, from his point of view, the Chinese drycleaners do not understand him as a person. Both the drycleaners *and* Patrick fail to grasp Patrick’s sense of self-entitlement as part of his identity, causing great turmoil in the inner-realm of Patrick’s identity.

Due to this inflated sense of self-entitlement and masculinity, Patrick's sexual identity is similarly a mixture of overconfidence and lingering insecurity. Excessive use of manly braggadocio is a recurring feature among Patrick and his colleagues. When Patrick casually drops "“You know, guys, it's not beyond my capacity to drive a lead pipe repeatedly into a girl's vagina,”", this is regarded as boasting about having "a big dick" (312) and not as the factual remark it actually is. Patrick's identity is not just threatened by insecurities about his manliness, it is constructed around these insecurities. The duality of his persona is vital to understanding his postmodern identity. All of Patrick's insecurities originate within himself and function as the essential second half to his privileged surface-identity.

1.3 Pronouns

The complexity of Patrick's identity is also illustrated by the pronouns that are used. Whereas Serpell argues the pronouns "heighten this destabilized identity" (58), they also emphasise moments of stability and self-reflection. In "April Fools" (3), the first chapter, Patrick is first mentioned "in a double removed mode: a second-person pronoun in a quotation" (Serpell 58): "“I mean the fact remains that no one gives a shit about their work, everybody hates their job, *I* hate my job, *you* 've told me you hate yours.” (3). In the first few lines it is still unclear the novel is written from Patrick's perspective, because Patrick is introduced as the person Timothy Price is talking to. Before the name *Bateman* is mentioned, several other names and brand names have been mentioned by Timothy, such as: "Paul Owen", "Luis Carruthers"; "McDonald's", "Panasonic", "Ralph Lauren" (3-5). After a few attempts to converse with Timothy, who is rambling more to himself than conversing with Patrick, the first instance of the first person pronoun that denotes Patrick is the telling "I shiver" (8). Immediately after the introduction of the I-pronoun Patrick grows more confident in his discourse:

“It’s good to see you,” I tell Courtney. “You look very pretty tonight. Your face has a ... youthful glow.”

“You really know how to charm the ladies, Bateman.” There is no sarcasm in Courtney’s voice. “Should I tell Evelyn you feel this way?” she asks flirtatiously.

“No,” I say. “But I bet you’d like to.” (8)

It seems the introduction of this particular pronoun has a stabilising effect on Patrick’s identity. He flirts with Courtney, while his fiancée is hosting the dinner they are attending, which shows a self-assured and daring side of Patrick. His self comes more into focus and moves from being on the periphery of the text to now being at the centre.

After this deceiving introduction, the “first person, present tense voice in the indicative mood” (Murphet 24) actually becomes the standard, with a few deviations. According to Murphet, “Where a first person voice ... fixes itself to habit with a ferocious determination, the effect is quite the opposite from the usual literary conception of a ‘self’. Rather, what the voice gives us is a kind of *non-self*, a self not defined by freedom ... but by repetition and tunnel vision.” (25). It is in these moments that Patrick loses his selfhood and disappears in discourse:

Afterwards splash cool water on the face to remove any trace of lather. You should use an aftershave lotion with little or no alcohol. Never use cologne on your face, since the high alcohol content dries your face out and makes you look older. One should use an alcohol-free antibacterial toner with a water-moistened cotton ball to normalize the skin. (26)

Patrick is not so much describing *his own* morning routine, as he is giving advice on how to structure and optimise *yours*. As Murphet analyses: “the first person ... has given way to a third person/second person singular in the imperative mood, straight from the pages of an

instruction manual or advice column” (27). Patrick tends to disappear in discourse, even though these lectures paradoxically also serve to maintain his sense of self and self-entitlement. While at a textual level Patrick disappears – the I-pronoun turns into the you-pronoun – these moments also show how Patrick tries to control the world around him. Whether it is about morning routines, clothes, food or gadgets, his factual knowledge is impressive. Patrick once again demonstrates an uncomfortable duality: while tightening his grip on the outside world, he disappears into language.

The importance of the word *I* as a framework for Patrick’s identity is never more clearly seen as in the chapter called “Chase, Manhattan” (333). Patrick murders a saxophone player, but is seen by the police, and what follows is mad chase through Manhattan. As Serpell argues: “this moment signals ... the disintegration of Patrick. His integrity, in the sense of self-wholeness ... has been compromised.” (59). Patrick starts referring to himself in the third person:

then he’s running like crazy, running full tilt, his brain locked into the physical exertion of utter, sheer panic, helter-skelter, now he thinks a car is following him down a deserted highway, now he feels the night accepts him, from somewhere else a shot is heard but doesn’t really register because Patrick’s mind is out of sync (337)

Patrick is soon able to find his calm, however, and with it reclaims his self-wholeness, which can be seen through the reoccurrence of the I-pronoun (346).

2. Social Contacts

2.1. The Other

For the first time I see Jean as uninhibited; she seems stronger, less controllable, wanting to take me into a new and unfamiliar land ... her eyes tell me this and though I see truth in them, I also know that one day, sometime very soon, she too will be locked into the rhythm of my insanity. All I have to do is keep silent about this and not bring it up – yet she weakens me, it's almost as if *she's* making the decision about who I am (364)

After having admitted that he's not there (362), Patrick starts to realise his identity is changing. He is on a second date with Jean, his secretary. Patrick's realisation illustrates how the construction of an identity is dependent upon others. Building on Derrida's theory on language, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues that: "we need the response and recognition of *others* ... to arrive at what we experience as our identity" (Bertens 135). This poses similar problems to the notion of a stable and reliable sense of self as those described by Derrida. Firstly, because "identity is constituted in interaction with what is outside of us and reflects us, it is *relational* – a notion that introduces the idea of difference into the process of identity construction" (135). Like the signifier, the *other* is connected only to other *others*. Like language, an identity is shaped through the interaction with other identities, which leads to the risk of an unstable, fragmented self. Secondly, the construction of an identity never reaches its conclusion, "it is a *process* that will never lead to completion" because "the social and personal configuration in which we find ourselves at a given point will inevitably change" (135).

Patrick's relationship with Jean shows this shift in dynamics, marking the inevitability of change in any relationship. Still far removed from his epiphany on identity and the *other*, Patrick usually treats Jean in an objectifying and sexist manner: "My secretary, Jean, who is

in love with me ... sits at her desk and this morning, to get my attention as usual, is wearing something improbably expensive and completely inappropriate” (61). However, their relationship starts to evolve quickly from there. In accordance with his longing for self-knowledge and his tendency to be drawn towards people who disrupt his sense of stability – like Luis, for instance (150-54) – or who shine a new light on his identity, Patrick asks Jean out on their first date. When Patrick’s scheme of using another name on the reservation list – because he was not able to secure a reservation himself – falls through, he and Jean quickly leave the restaurant: “and then we’re outside and I’m utterly devastated ... but Jean skips down the street laughing” (251). Jean tells Patrick she thinks the whole affair was extremely funny, ignorant of his self-loathing. Afterwards, Jean invites Patrick inside her apartment, but he makes up an excuse and leaves. For some reason “something quells the bloodlust” (254). He declines because he cares for Jean and wants to protect her from any harm he might inflict on her. When saying goodbye Jean hugs him, which “emanates a warmth I’m not familiar with” (254), and then kisses him, which makes him realise “that the havoc raging inside me is gradually subsiding” (255). Jean triggers a moment of self-reflection, but more importantly, by spending time with Jean, Patrick’s identity starts to change. The version of Patrick that Jean sees is slowly overtaking the self Patrick has grown accustomed to.

Mark Storey characterises Patrick’s relationships with women “by indifference, and at times hostility; he also assumes that all women are instantly attracted to him, even in love with him” (65). Although Storey’s point is mostly valid, Patrick’s relationship with Jean shows signs of sincerity and attempts to establish a lasting connection. Even though Patrick tries to resist it – because it makes him uncomfortable – she is able to connect with him at their dates, proving Patrick is not merely a stereotypical postmodern entity, but someone who shows signs of stability and self-knowledge.

2.2 Women

Various components of Patrick's postmodern habitat are causing the restrictions in interaction that frustrate his need for depth and character-development. One of these is exclusive to his relationships with women, but does not apply to Jean. Often these women are models – like the model at Nell's (191-205) – or prostitutes. Patrick's relationships with women often include a sexual component and their contact is often centred around their physical appearance. This helps to explain why Patrick objectifies almost every woman. Moreover, as Ruth Helyer notices, Patrick *himself* is often asked if *he* is a model (728). Most of Patrick's social interactions tend towards *reification*: “the transformation of relationships between human beings into relationships between things” (Murphet 37). The effects of reification are clearly visible when Patrick picks up a prostitute in the aptly chosen *meat-packing* district (161). Upon seeing the girl, who he names Christie – “I don't know her real name, I haven't asked” (163) – Patrick notices her surroundings: “Behind her, in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned brick warehouse, is the word M E A T” (161). Patrick is packing meat. The abandoned warehouse symbolises the objectifying manner Patrick looks at and interacts with women. Instead of meeting women, Patrick is *meeting meat*, a homonym that captures the loss of distinction between the animate and the inanimate that characterises the world Patrick inhabits. Through reification everyone has become an object. Back at his apartment, Patrick has a threesome with Christie and a call-girl:

Tired of balancing myself, I fall off Christie and lie on my back, positioning Sabrina's face over my stiff, huge cock which I guide into her mouth with my hand, jerking it off while she sucks on the head. ... I still haven't come and Sabrina's doing nothing special to my cock so I pull it out of her mouth and have her sit on it. My cock slides in almost too easily (167-68)

Sexual contact is presented as pornography. The only emotion shown is boredom. There is no spontaneity or affection and the entire affair seems rather hollow and surreal (Murphet 38-39). At best it is a sexually satisfying re-enactment of a pornographic film – perhaps “*Inside Lydia’s Ass*” (94). However, the boredom and emotional disconnection suggest Patrick is discontented. As Murphet points out: “If there is pleasure, it is a pleasure purely of reification” (39).

Even when Patrick has sex with someone he knows, reification disturbs the natural process and causes the intercourse to end unsatisfyingly. At Courtney’s apartment – before she freaks out about the condom (99) – Patrick has some concerns of his own:

and while still humping but lightly now I realize there ... is ... a ... problem of sorts but I cannot think of what it is right now ... but then it hits me while I’m staring at the half-empty bottle of Evian water on the nightstand and I gasp “Oh shit” and pull out. (98)

Patrick forgot the “water-soluble spermicidal lubricant” (98) and runs to the bathroom to put it on. In there he notices he cut himself while shaving and immediately starts searching for a product that can heal and disguise the small cut. While doing all of this he even finds time to comb his hair, before returning to Courtney (98-99). Again, products and the physique – as yet another product – interfere with maintaining any form of genuine contact: “pleasure is knowing you’re using the right lubricant” (Murphet 39).

Sexual intercourse forms an obstacle to entertaining any form of connection between two subjects. The sexual nature of Patrick’s relationship with most women renders those relationships void of any possibility to establish a real and enduring connection. Murphet states Lacan uses the phrase “*there is no sexual relation*” as a fitting way to describe a lack of contact between the sexes: “men and women in this textual world exist on parallel, untouching and opposed planes of reality; each sex satisfies for the other only preconceived

and fixed expectations” (31). Both men and women seem so wired up and reified they lose touch with their identities and how they relate to the other sex. Murphet continues: “With the lines of demarcation drawn so inexorably, there can be no relation or dialogue.” (31). These relationships are a merger of products – objects, something to be consumed and then discarded.

2.3 The Cultural and Ethnic Other

Another obstacle between Patrick and the *other* are ethnic and cultural differences. Apart from gender and sexual relationships, these form the most prominent cause for misunderstanding, confusion and an altogether lack of communication. At times Patrick tries to bridge the cultural gap by adopting the speech and customs of the *others* he encounters. At the drycleaners his impersonation of the woman holding his sheets is blatantly racist, adding “-ee” to certain words: “‘Bleach-ee?’ I ask her. ‘Are you trying to say *bleach-ee*?’ I shake my head, disbelieving. ‘Bleach-ee? Oh my god.’” (79). In this case he is clearly mocking her: “‘Stupid bitch-ee? Understand?’” (80).

At a nightclub called Chernoble, Patrick has a similar experience:

But it’s later now and the crowd has changed – it’s now filled with more punk rockers, blacks, fewer Wall Street guys, more bored rich girls from Avenue A lounging around, and the music has changed; instead of Belinda Carlisle singing “I feel free” it’s some black guy *rapping* (190)

Patrick tries to flirt with two “rich” girls, even though they are wearing “skanky Betsey Johnson-type dresses” (190). One of them responds by telling him to “‘Go back to Wall Street,’” which is followed by the other one exclaiming: “‘Fucking yuppie.’” (190). Patrick, who by all possible definitions is a *young urban professional*, nevertheless thinks it is strange they call him that, because they say it “even though my suit looks black in the darkness of the

club and my tie – Paisley, Armani, silk – is loosened.” (190). He responds by telling them: ““You may think I’m a really disgusting yuppie, but I’m not, *really*,”” (191). Patrick clearly does not want to be seen as an outsider, even going so far as to deny he is a yuppie. Although the girls do not believe him, it can be argued that Patrick *is* telling the truth, giving these girls a rare insight into his personality. Patrick is a yuppie, yet his persona is not limited to that description: his yuppie appearance disguises a complex identity that defies narrow character descriptions of any kind. Moreover, this complex identity consists of interconnected yet unrelated elements that make up a *temporary self* that deconstructs as soon as it is forced into unwanted longevity or is incorrectly described as a coherent entity. After his failed attempt to persuade either girl to go home with him, he notices “two black guys ... sitting with them at the table” (191). He only notices the men after talking to the girls, because the girls are more recognisable to him – wearing fake designer clothes – and signify an opportunity for intercourse. Feeling he has something to prove, he now tries to imitate the slang and gestures of a rapper:

I stick out my hand at a crooked angle ... “Hey,” I say. “I’m fresh. The freshest, y’know ... like uh, def ... the deffest.” I take a sip of champagne. “You know ... *def*.” To prove this I spot a black guy with dreadlocks and I walk up to him and exclaim “Rasta Man!” and hold out my hand, anticipating a high-five. But the nigger just stands there. (191)

On both occasions Patrick fails to realise his identity coincides with the quintessential New York yuppie on too many grounds to still credibly portray someone from another cultural background. Both occasions also quickly lead to Patrick revealing his racist mentality. Patrick fails to bridge any cultural or ethnic divide, despite his best attempts to adapt and keep his cool. The cultural or ethnic *other* further redefines Patrick as a yuppie, stabilising his identity while at the same time showing the limits of his arguably charming persona (Murphet 57).

Patrick seems unable to add new elements to his collage-like identity when these stem from other cultures. Although Patrick is presented as a postmodern identity, his ability to shape his own identity is restricted to those elements already culturally appropriated to the Caucasian upper-class male.

2.4 Men

At the Yale Club, Patrick describes himself and his colleagues as follows:

Van Patten is wearing a glen-plaid wool-crepe suit from Krizia Uomo, a Brooks Brothers shirt, a tie from Adirondack and shoes by Cole-Haan. McDermott is wearing a lamb's wool and cashmere blazer, worsted wool flannel trousers by Ralph Lauren, a shirt and tie *also* by Ralph Lauren and shoes from Brooks Brothers. I'm wearing a tick-weave wool suit with a windowpane overplaid, a cotton shirt by Luciano Barbera, a tie by Luciano Barbera, shoes from Cole-Haan and ... (150)

The description of the three gentleman is so detailed and full of brand names it not so much *describes* as *obscures* them. Nothing can be said about the personality of the colleagues. Their identity remains limited to what they are wearing. Most of their conversations are also about what people are wearing, what people *should be* wearing and where to make dinner reservations (147-50). The reification of their identities obscures their personalities, focussing instead on the outer appearance. As Murphet argues: "Armani and Oliver Peoples are in some sense more stable and identifiable characters in the text than Bateman himself" (27). This also applies to all of his colleagues. Their competitiveness – they are constantly trying to outsmart one another one topics ranging from clothes and restaurants to the women they date – pressures them into becoming the best version of their *collective* identity, which in turn leads to *all* of them turning into unremarkable and interchangeable versions of one another.

Technology is another factor that obscures and blurs the identity of Patrick and his comrades. In the chapter called “Another Night” (297), Patrick is conference calling with some of his colleagues. Now literally just voices in empty space, dinner reservations are made and cancelled but no conclusion is reached:

“But wait, we’re not having Mexican, are we?” I say. “Am I confused? Aren’t we going to Zeus Bar?”

“No, moron,” McDermott spits. “We couldn’t get into Zeus Bar. Kaktus. Kaktus at nine.”

“But I don’t *want* Mexican,” Van Patten says.

“But *you*, Van Patten, made the reservation,” McDermott hollers.

“I don’t either,” I say suddenly. “Why Mexican?”

“It’s not *Mexican* Mexican,” McDermott says, exasperated. (308)

The voices of McDermott, Van Patten and Patrick blur into one endless conversation (Murphet 29). Patrick and his colleagues are *suits*, objects; and in the end: soundbites. They have become interchangeable and no longer identifiable as clear separate identities. Genuine communication relies on the interchange between identities and when these identities collapse under the constant reification and assimilation forced by the dominant and *competitive* yuppie-culture, everybody becomes so similar that the self starts to fade before disappearing altogether.

2.5 Jean

It can be concluded that the impossibility of contact cannot be inextricably linked to Patrick as a postmodern identity. It is Patrick’s postmodern *reality* that offers him little chance to interact with others, isolating him and making it difficult for him to reflect on his own identity. Patrick wants to connect and learn more about himself, but everyone he encounters

except for Jean is unable or unwilling to help him. Patrick and Jean seem to be the only characters who do not celebrate the postmodern configuration of their reality. Jean functions as a vehicle to achieve self-knowledge and enables character-building in Patrick, yet it remains unclear whether she herself is able of self-awareness or reflection. Patrick is out of his comfort-zone in this postmodern reality, frustrated in his attempts to determine who he is and how to fit in. However, the challenges Patrick faces can be overcome and although his scope is limited, genuine contact – and thus self-knowledge – is still a possibility for him. Jean personifies this possibility. Even though the postmodern fragmentation of his identity might be one reason why Patrick has difficulties connecting with others, this in itself does not render it impossible *nor* does it constitute the main reason why Patrick fails when he does. More importantly, his relationship with Jean is not hindered by sexual contact – even though she is a woman – cultural or ethnic differences, or the competitiveness and unification of identity he and his colleagues suffer from. Therefore, Jean is able to penetrate Patrick's psyche – without even realising it. She makes him re-examine himself and his relation to others and she achieves this by telling him she loves him (361). It may be only a brief glimpse of a stable and self-reflective identity, but Jean demonstrates Patrick is primarily out of sync with his *reality* and not necessarily with himself and his own identity. She has provided him with the possibility of a rare personal insight, something Patrick still needs to become accustomed to. Nevertheless, her influence has had a stabilising and shaping effect on his sense of self.

3. Violence and the Body

3.1 The Body

and it's midafternoon and I find myself standing at a phone booth on a corner somewhere downtown, I don't know where, but I'm sweaty and a pounding migraine thumps dully in my head and I'm experiencing a major-league anxiety attack, searching my pockets for Valium ... and swallow them down with a Diet Pepsi and I couldn't tell you where it came from if my life depended on it. (143)

The transition from Patrick attending a U2 concert in the previous chapter (136-42) to his chaotic ramblings in this chapter are not explained. Right from the start of "A Glimpse of a Thursday Afternoon" (143) Patrick seems to have lost his bearings. Although no particular reason is given, it can be assumed the overall nature of Patrick's postmodern world has caused a disturbance in his mind. His sanity succumbs to the pressures of postmodern living and the entire chapter is best described using the words of Berthold Schoene: "Patrick's sense of self collapses, hurling him into an experiential maelstrom that leaves not a single intelligible reference point intact and causes his body to erupt in a riddle of hysterical symptoms" (382). Patrick's relation with the world he lives in is constructed around several destructive habits which, although adopted to ease his living conditions, gradually worsen the fragmentation of his identity. Schoene's remark on the effect it has on the body is of importance, because it seems the state of Patrick's identity is directly connected to his body through the symptoms of suffering he experiences when his stable sense of self comes under pressure. These habits, too, focus on the body over the mind.

The first of these habits is the use of drugs, especially tranquilisers, as described at the beginning of "A Glimpse of Thursday Afternoon" (143). Patrick's colleagues often use drugs

and their competitiveness drives them to use cocaine nearly every time they visit a club.

Patrick often joins them as well:

But Price is furious, red-faced and sweating; he screams at me as if this was my fault, as if buying the gram from Madison was *my* idea. “I want to get high off this, Bateman,” ... “Not sprinkle it on my fucking All-Bran!” (56)

The use of drugs is made socially acceptable through Patrick’s work environment where a high degree of competitiveness also requires extreme ways to blow off steam. This same competitiveness is also the reason for Patrick resorting to drugs to keep away any feelings of anxiety or pain, since these symptoms halt his ability to keep up and ahead in the world of business as well as in his social life. However, as Helyer notices, Patrick’s “becoming more and more reliant on large quantities of drugs and alcohol” (743) to keep his feelings under control.

The second habit is caused by “the regime of commodities in which he functions” (Murphet 40), as described in the continuation of the chapter:

I walk toward a nearby Connan’s to buy a teapot, but just when I assume my normalcy has returned ... my stomach tightens and the cramps are so intense that I hobble into the nearest doorway and clutch my waist, doubling over with pain (144)

Patrick’s kitchen already features every conceivable household appliance (27-28), yet he feels the need to buy another teapot. However, when he momentarily contemplates buying it, he is stricken by intense physical pain, which then gradually turns into a vicious cycle of buying products and physical suffering (144-45). Patrick is instinctively drawn towards the various shops downtown, because the act of buying has evolved into a ritual, which he employs to recreate a false sense of continuity and therefore security in his otherwise fragmented reality.

Uncontrolled consumerism, with the illusion of progress and control through consumption, is an integral part of this postmodern world.

This reified world also regards the body itself as a product, an object, and this reification is closely linked to Patrick's third habit. After the individual is turned into a consumer – limiting the terms through which the self can be defined, it is then turned into a product. Both definitions cause great internal conflict in an individual who tries to define its self in broader terms and is searching for a reliable, stable and self-defined way of expression. Whereas the use of drugs blurs the image of the self for both the subject and others, the narrowing of the definition of the self squeezes the inside out into the open, as can be seen through the maniacal behaviour of Patrick when continuing his walk downtown:

I'm outta there, outside, throwing up all the ham ... bumping into Charles Murphy from Kidder Peabody ... and I belch into his face, my eyes rolling back into my head, greenish bile dripping in strings from my bared fangs (145)

The body is reduced to a mere surface. The inside is equated with sick. This object-like approach leads to excessive grooming of the body and working out. Maintaining an impeccable physique is seen as the only relevant asset and the ultimate product:

I leave the office at four-thirty, head up to Xclusive where I work out with free weights for an hour, then taxi across the park to Gio's in the Pierre Hotel for a facial, a manicure and, if time permits, a pedicure. I'm ... waiting for Helga, the skin technician, to facialize me. (110)

The person working at the beauty salon is called a "skin technician" (110), emphasising that the body is seen as an object. These treatments are used by Patrick to make him feel better, but do not address the issues concerning his identity underneath. Patrick and his colleagues often refer to attractive women and handsome men as "hardbodies" (51). This is fitting as the term not only refers to how their bodies feel, from the outside, with muscles worked out to the

max, but also gestures to a sense of impenetrability. Since the inside-outside dichotomy is replaced by a surface-only approach, there is no longer a need for a way in.

3.2 Surface and Depth

Whereas everyone in Patrick's postmodern world "seems happy to be nothing *but* surface" (Barry 81-82), Patrick is tormented by the lack of substance and meaning. French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard calls this world "a culture of 'hyperreality'" (84). Using Derrida's ideas on language, Baudrillard explains the concept of hyperreality by separating the sign as "a surface indication of underlying depth or reality" (84) from that underlying reality, which leaves a system of interconnected surface structures. The postmodern configuration of Patrick's world has turned everything and everyone into surface structures. The lack of interiority is arguably a liberating phenomenon, but the postmodern *identity* is now in constant danger of being squeezed out or falling apart under the relentless fragmentation and negation of depth. According to Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, this is because "the idea of the self ... has conventionally relied on such an opposition: the subject or self is constituted as a relation between surface and depth, inside and outside" (284). All relations in this world, however, are fragmented and temporary and random in nature. The opposition between inside and outside is substituted by "a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 1).

Patrick's surface structure starts to burst, showing his inner panic and the fragmentation of his identity. Although his habits serve to maintain a composed self, Patrick starts to lose willpower and his ability to keep his composure slowly declines. These outbursts manifest themselves through acts of extreme violence.

3.3 Violence

Patrick's acts of violence show the extent to which his identity is being torn apart, "bombarded by postmodernity's self-splintering insecurities" (Schoene 383). These outbursts are inevitable, given the extreme amount of pressure that is applied to keep Patrick in line with its postmodern world, as seen in the emphasis on working out, the mindless buying of products and the use of drugs. The routines of his daily life, as well as most of the people he encounters, are consumed by the postmodern nature of their world. Their interactions are limited through reification and no longer offer the possibility of genuine contact.

Violence is on one level an escape – an ability to vent some of the frustration and pain he is feeling. On another level, it is a way for Patrick to overcome the pressure of postmodern living. He is able to find substance and meaning in the connection he makes through the use of violence with whoever is on the receiving end. It is due to the superficial and narrowed definition of the self that governs his world that Patrick resorts to violence. In order to connect, he has to peel away the skin until he finds what is hidden underneath.

3.3.1 Paul Owen

The murder of Paul Owen shows how Patrick uses violence to simultaneously release all of his anger and satisfy his need for information. In this context, his murder becomes a search for meaning. Patrick and Paul meet up at a restaurant for dinner. The reason for Patrick to dine with Paul has to do with Paul's possession of the Fisher account (207), which is "something like the Holy Grail of the investment-banking world ... presumably worth billions, and carrying with it arcane secrets and privileges" (Murphet 44). Patrick wants to learn more about the elusive Fisher account, but Paul is not revealing anything to him:

When I press for information about the Fisher account he offers useless statistical data that I already knew about ... Every time I attempt to steer the

conversation back to the mysterious Fisher account, he infuriatingly changes the topic back to either tanning salons or ... (207)

Since Patrick is unable to gather the information he needs through the use of language, he turns to violence. Patrick needs to know why Paul has possession of the Fisher account, and what he needs to do to gain access to it. At Patrick's apartment Paul is still talking and too drunk to be fully aware of what Patrick is about to do:

The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth ... and when I pull the ax out ... and strike him again in the face, splitting it open ... blood sprays out in twin brownish geysers ... and this is followed by a rude farting noise caused by a section of his brain, which due to pressure forces itself out (208-09)

Patrick attacks Owen's head because this is the place where the mind usually resides, but all that is shown to Patrick is Owen's *physical* inside: his brain. This attack, while horrific and gross, is a genuine attempt to figure out why he is unable to be as successful as Paul, exemplified by the Fisher account.

3.3.2 Christie

The murders of Christie and Elizabeth are far more graphic and detailed than Paul's. Patrick's attempts to create a connection with women – Courtney, for instance (97-101) – often results in disappointment, which is disguised by anger and frustration. This anger, in turn, at times leads to acts of extreme violence. However, as with Paul, Patrick is not just inflicting harm on others in order to have an emotional release. Since men and women are unable to form a connection due to the reification of their identities and the impossibility of lasting and reliable relationships, Patrick is desperate to find another way to connect with the other sex. The attacks are more graphic and also last longer, because the female sex represents the *other*, and

in that capacity creates an extra layer of fear that needs to be compensated by asserting dominance through violence. Whereas Paul in many ways is a copy of Patrick, and is thus familiar to him, women are not. As the sexual *other*, women are able to provide Patrick with new meaning on who he is. Patrick is looking for a relationship with depth, because it can give him new insights into his postmodern self, while at the same time transcending the superficiality of that postmodern configuration.

Christie, the prostitute from the meat-packing district, and Elizabeth, an old friend, are having sex at his apartment when all of a sudden Patrick is depicted attacking them (276-78). Elizabeth is trying to escape, so Patrick chases her across the apartment and murders her first: “After I’ve stabbed her five or six times – the blood’s spurting out in jets; I’m leaning over to inhale its perfume ... and I hold down her head, rubbing my dick, stiff, covered with blood, across her choking face” (278-79). Patrick is trying to learn about women by smelling Elizabeth and smearing her blood on his own body. Patrick then turns to Christie, who is tied to the bed:

I start kneading her breasts with a pair of pliers, then I’m mashing them up ...
and I have to open the venetian blinds which are splattered with burnt fat from
when Christie’s breasts burst apart, electrocuting her ... and her lungs are
visible beneath the charred ribs (279)

Patrick focusses his assault on her breasts, a physical characteristic associated with the female sex and thus a possible source of information. Again, all Patrick sees are the mangled remains of his victim.

3.4 Conclusion

Patrick's attacks do not provide him with the answers he is searching for, they do not help him in his quest for meaning and depth and, in the end, leave him wondering about the use of it all:

My pain is constant and sharp ... But even after admitting this – and I have, countless times, in just about every act I've committed ... there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling (362)

Even though Patrick is right about the uselessness of his acts when it comes to his personal benefit, these acts are of use when framing the struggle of Patrick as an unwilling postmodern identity in a postmodern world. Unable to sustain his moments of transcendence, Patrick is trapped in his postmodern configuration, but also unable to fully adapt to its rules. It makes Patrick a struggling and unhappy individual, and someone who longs for a world that enables him to develop a more sustainable and reliable identity. This, in turn, problematises the idea of the postmodern self, because it *should* feel free and happy in its own reality-bubble, yet Patrick clearly does not.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate how Patrick Bateman problematises the postmodern identity. Patrick's use of language reflects the state of his self. Firstly, sounds in conversations prove to be exemplary in emphasising the instability and unreliability of language and therefore of the self. Secondly, pronouns prove to be an accurate marker of his state of self as well: the I-pronoun marking a stable self, the you-pronoun marking his disappearance into discourse and the third person singular marking the fragmentation of his identity. Theories drawn from poststructuralism help to explain the importance of language as a marker of fragmentation and undecidability. To conclude, language draws attention to postmodern fragmentation as well as Patrick's attempts at self-reflection.

Language is a vital tool in communication and through communication the influence of the *other* in the shaping of an identity can be seen. The obstacles Patrick is confronted with in his need to connect turned out to be largely caused by his postmodern reality and not his postmodern identity. The reification of everyone in this world blocks genuine interaction between the sexes and nullifies the interchange between individuals with the same sex altogether. Patrick also proves unable to cross cultural boundaries, failing to connect due to the limits of his persona. However, his contact with Jean illustrates Patrick's ability to connect, showing he is able to transcend the postmodern configuration of his identity. Through Jean Patrick's identity changes, showing the influence of the *other*.

Contact is also analysed from a different perspective, showing how Patrick's outbursts of extreme violence are aimed at seeking a connection with the other. The self transitions from an individual to an object through the reification of the body. A distinction between surface and depth can no longer be made which in turn changes the definition of the self to denote a mere exteriority. Patrick is pressured into conforming to this postmodern emphasis on surface structures in various ways. These habits, while there to keep Patrick under control,

also portray the extent of fragmentation and pressure Patrick's identity is under, proving the body to be an excellent marker of the state of his identity as well.

Patrick's ongoing struggle with his postmodern self leads to his use of violence. It is rooted in both anger and desire: Patrick wants to escape his postmodern reality but is trapped while at the same time unable to conform or feel at ease. Since his habits all lead him further into chaos, Patrick starts to lose control and lashes out. At the same time, however, Patrick's attacks are a sign of his desire to transcend his postmodern configuration. He wants to find out who he is and how he can be freed from this postmodern superficiality.

Although Patrick's violence does not result in what he had hoped for, offering no release from his postmodern prison, it exemplifies someone who is determined to add meaning and depth to his life. He proves to be more than a stereotypical postmodern identity: his willingness to reject his own world for its lack of substance, resulting in continual torment, is far removed from the rejoicing nature of the usual postmodern self and the world he inhabits.

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