

Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* as a Palimpsest of the Theories of Girard, Gans and de Andrade

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Abstract

Brett Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* may be seen as a literary attempt at creating the ultimate account of the nineteen-eighties yuppie era. As a broader statement on desire, capitalism and ritual, the narrative—probably partly subconsciously—opens up both a blatant and a more subtle critique of patriarchal dominance. The article analyses the novel by means of a hyper-theoretical space, which has three distinct but overlapping and co-existent layers. The Girardian layer conveys violence as mimetic desire and the quest for a scapegoat. In combination with Baudrillardian ideas about a sign taxonomy and commodity fetishism, this stratum funnels violence towards the protagonist identifying the scapegoat as one of his identical colleagues. The ritual means that Bateman tries to eliminate himself. In the Gansian layer, the narrative's overall ambiguity in terms of what is "real" and what is "fiction" maintains the deferral of the appropriation of the appetitive object and preserves language/fiction/art as the sublimation of violence. The de Andradian layer presents anthropophagy as a vision of an escape from the enslavement of the conquered that would be the basis of a capitalist and hierarchised society.

Keywords: violence; mimetic desire; sign taxonomy; commodity fetishism; appetitive object; deferral; anthropophagy

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Brett Easton Ellis's modern classic *American Psycho* (1991) has distinctly time specific aspects in its setting. As suggested by Mattius Rischard, "Bateman's 'yuppie' identity could [...] be considered a commodity, meticulously cultivated like that of any celebrity artist, actor, or director (Bateman imagines himself as all three) meant to convey to others his indomitable sense of taste in more commodities" (438). That description constitutes one possible holistic understanding of Ellis's novel. Everything is a commodity—or on the way to becoming one— including the protagonist and the actual materiality of the book in the reader's hand, and in addition its potential electronic materiality in our time. However, the

novel also has dimensions that probe into capitalism and human desire on a more universal level. These are aspects that cannot be limited to the yuppie era, which stereotypically highlights the frivolous celebration of the capitalist carnival as an aesthetic phenomenon, albeit a brutally empty one. I would claim that the narrative is extreme in such a way that it creates a specific theoretical space that cannot be completely contained by metaphor, symbolism or allegory. That space will be roughly mapped out in what follows. By theoretical space I mean neither something abstract nor something concrete. It is rather a minimalist space of nodes, vectors and forces. However, these forces potentially affect any type of reality, either real or fictional, thus they are not abstract in the sense of being completely cut off from everything else. The present analysis shall depict the space through a palimpsest of theories by three scholars: René Girard, Eric Gans and Oswald de Andrade. The last one, being a perhaps lesser known figure, is a Brazilian twentieth century philosopher, who presented anthropophagy as a key to matriarchy, and that in turn as an important component of the conceptualisation of a possible decolonisation project. Thus, what follows below outlines three parts and each one represents one thinker and one layer in the theoretical space. Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida will contribute further context to the analysis.

The analysis boils down to three overlapping readings that do not exclude each other. The Girardian layer reveals mimetic desire in full swing, which combined with commodity fetishism accumulates violence. A possible outcome of this stratum is that the killing of Paul Owen is in fact a ritualised elimination of the scapegoat, which in the same commodity logic would mean the killing of Bateman himself, since the characters largely are depicted as interchangeable. The second level is the Gansian reading that relies heavily on the ambiguity of what is to be regarded as fiction—daydreaming, perverse fantasies etc.—and what should be seen as actually happening in novel's "real", which in toto displays the deferral of the appropriation of the appetitive object. Language/art/fiction constitute a deferral of real violence. In the third stratum of the theoretical space, Oswald de Andrade's theory of anthropophagy as an instigation of matriarchy shows the way towards the vision of decolonisation. The ritual of anthropophagy escapes the enslavement of the subjects after any conquest.

Girard

The first stratum might seem to be the most obvious one. Girard's theory about mimetic desire is blatantly present in the narrative's overall structure. For the present reading it will suffice with a rather cursory definition of the Girardian theory. Girard states that mimetic rivalry can be observed in animal power structures and that such a phenomenon essentially resembles what goes on in the dynamics of human social life.

Mimetic rivalry is already observable in animal life. Even when food or females are not scarce, when many identical bananas, for instance, are available to a group of

monkeys, fighting may erupt. We say that the purpose of these conflicts is dominance, prestige, etcetera. But the postulate of such a complex, purposeful activity is unbelievable. The cause of the fighting is simply that two or more monkeys have set their sight on the same banana, and no one wants to yield to someone else. There is nothing special about the disputed banana, except that the first to choose selected it, and this selection, however casual, triggered a chain reaction to mimetic desire that made that one banana seem preferable to all others. (Burkert, Girard, Smith 123)

Mimetic desire appears in several specific situations in Ellis's novel, but one could also argue that it makes up the macro-structure of the entire work, obviously in combination with Baudrillardian ideas about the existence of a sign taxonomy. It is primarily among his colleagues that the protagonist reveals his being involved in the full-fledged Baudrillardian sign-value economy, which is intimately intertwined with Girardian mimetic desire. The pent-up violence becomes almost comical in conjunction and contrast with the seemingly superficial brand name and prestige economy.

Reed Thompson walks in wearing a wool plaid four-button double-breasted suit and a striped cotton shirt and a silk tie, all Armani, plus slightly tacky blue cotton socks by Interwoven and black Ferragamo cap-toe shoes that look exactly like mine, with a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* held in a nicely manicured fist and a Bill Kaiserman tweed balmacaan overcoat draped casually across the other arm. He nods and sits across from us at the table. Soon after, Todd Broderick walks in wearing a wool chalk-striped six-button double-breasted suit and a striped broadcloth shirt and a silk tie, all by Polo, plus an affected linen pocket square that I'm fairly sure is also by Polo. McDermott walks in next, carrying a copy of this week's *New York* magazine and this morning's *Financial Times*, wearing new nonprescription Oliver Peoples redwood-framed glasses, a black and white wool houndstooth-check single-breasted suit with notch lapels, a striped cotton dress shirt with spread collar and a silk paisley tie, all of it designed and tailored by John Reyle. (Ellis 108-109)

The detailed brand economy that is displayed becomes endowed with an uncanny aura in relation to the materials, mainly fabrics, being mentioned with almost the same frequency. Armani, Bill Kaiserman, John Reyle, Oliver Peoples and Polo are juxtaposed to (but also inevitably interwoven with) wool, cotton, silk and linen. These materials have to be extracted out of natural resources and they have to be prepared mostly by workers, most certainly and generally in much poorer parts of the world. There is of course a basic level of economic violence involved here already, that is, basically colonial violence in its semi-new shape of global economy. The signs added to the products map out another aspect of violence, which is revealed in the interaction between the characters, and which constitutes our first level in the stipulated theoretical space. It takes the form of a vaguely humorous quibbling about details of the manufactured materiality that the characters have in hand, but this hair-splitting is mainly about the sign-value. The uncanniness is enhanced by the

presence of the powerful press items, magazines and newspapers, that are used seemingly merely as accessories in the arduous performance work needed for the participation in the spectacle of becoming the perfect image of masculinity in this historical moment. The violence in the games of distinction is even enhanced by the utter meaninglessness that they seem to grow out of and what they are able to produce. What does the layout and paper quality of a business card really mean?

The maître d' stops by to say hello to McDermott, then notices we don't have our complimentary Bellinis, and runs off before any of us can stop him. I'm not sure how McDermott knows Alain so well—maybe Cecilia?—and it slightly pisses me off but I decide to even up the score a little bit by showing everyone my new business card. I pull it out of my gazelleskin wallet (Barney's, \$850) and slap it on the table, waiting for reactions.

"What's that, a gram?" Price says, not apathetically.

"New card." I try to act casual about it but I'm smiling proudly. "What do you think?"

"Whoa," McDermott says, lifting it up, fingering the card, genuinely impressed. "Very nice. Take a look." He hands it to Van Patten.

"Picked them up from the printer's yesterday," I mention.

"Cool coloring," Van Patten says, studying the card closely.

"That's bone," I point out. "And the lettering is something called Silian Rail."

"Silian Rail?" McDermott asks.

"Yeah. Not bad, huh?"

"It is very cool, Bateman," Van Patten says guardedly, the jealous bastard, "but that's nothing...." He pulls out his wallet and slaps a card next to an ashtray. "Look at this."

We all lean over and inspect David's card and Price quietly says, "That's *really* nice." A brief spasm of jealousy courses through me when I notice the elegance of the color and the classy type. I clench my fist as Van Patten says, smugly, "Egg-shell with Romalian type..." He turns to me. "What do you think?"

"Nice," I croak, but manage to nod, as the busboy brings four fresh Bellinis.

"Jesus," Price says, holding the card up to the light, ignoring the new drinks. "This is really super. How'd a nitwit like you get so tasteful?"

I'm looking at Van Patten's card and then at mine and cannot believe that Price actually likes Van Patten's card better. Dizzy, I sip my drink then take a deep breath. (Ellis 43-44)

Again, there is a distinct materiality that blatantly pushes the reading in the direction of raw colonialism, as in the crude reference to the wallet of "gazelleskin". In addition to the aggression pulsing just under the surface, the micro-level of minimal distinction is noteworthy. The miniscule differences between the cards enhance the force of mimetic desire. It is almost as if the object disappears and the cards could be equated with the identical bananas in Girard's example above. It just has to be there as a minimal node-point of reference, since the agents are occupied by the competition of ranking each other in relation to one another, as yet another level of commodification, but which is itself meaningless since the characters are next to identical. For instance, Owen consistently refers to Bateman by the name Halberstam, but this does not seem to matter (Ellis 111). Explicitly articulated, the competition is based on becoming the owner of the ideal card, or the banana that has been endowed with the metaphysical power of being the object everyone wants. The passage clearly illustrates the autonomous character of this force. In addition we notice how the object becomes bestowed with value as a consequence of the powers of desire, which in all is a phenomenon we recognise from situations of children's play. The dark side of *homo ludens*, so to speak. A certain toy may suddenly become the most precious thing on the playground, but not until the trajectories of desire become explicit. Bateman's whole existence seems to hang in the balance. He reacts physically on the ranking of the cards by croaking and feeling "a spasm of jealousy" run through his body.

The above is intimately intertwined with the capitalist logic and fetishism that Jean Baudrillard has thoroughly analysed. Just a short summary will be enough in our context.

In effect, our hypothesis is that needs (i.e., the system of needs) are the equivalent of abstract social labor: on them is erected the system of use value, just as abstract social labor is the basis for the system of exchange value. This hypothesis also implies that, for there to be a system at all, use value and exchange value must be regulated by an identical abstract logic of equivalence, an identical code. The code of utility is also a code of abstract equivalence of objects and subjects (for each category in itself and for the two taken together in their relation); hence, it is a combinatory code involving potential calculation [...]. Furthermore, it is in itself, as system, that use value can be "fetishized," and certainly not as a practical operation. It is always the systematic abstraction that is fetishized. The same goes for exchange value. And it is the two fetishizations, reunited—that of use value and that of exchange value—that constitute commodity fetishism. (Baudrillard 102)

Commodity fetishism can then easily utilise brand labels as shorthand for the structuring of a particular prestige economy. *American Psycho* is completely immersed in such an

economy. We must attempt to understand the narrative's violence in combination with Girard's theory. Does this kind of capitalist regulation of desire produce violence or is it an underlying violence that the system tries to repress? It seems that the theoretical space would allow for a few different responses to this question. For instance, the scapegoat in Girard, violence turned into language and fiction as deferral in Gans's originary scene, or as decolonisation through anthropophagy and matriarchal resurrection in de Andrade's theory.

The theme of pent-up violence is emphasised in the narrative by the protagonist's ludicrous motivations of subjective rankings of popular music works. However, what is clear is that at least on a superficial level, violence is depicted as the underlying force of the seemingly tidy capitalist organisation of desire. When Bateman has brought Paul Owen—one specimen of his circle of near identical "friends" to his home—he either wants to eliminate a competitor or he wants to ritually eliminate an image of himself, potentially himself as a commodity. It does not matter to Bateman that such an image is incarnated in another human being. In his pathological haze, he does not see human beings. Whether this whole incident is "real" at all on the novel's plane of "reality" is something I will attempt to approach further below.

"Why are there, um, copies of the Style section all over the place?" he asks tiredly. "Do you have a dog? A chow or something?"

"No, Owen." I move slowly around the chair until I'm facing him, standing directly in his line of vision, and he's so drunk he can't even focus in on the ax, he doesn't even notice once I've raised it high above my head. Or when I change my mind and lower it to my waist, almost holding it as if it's a baseball bat and I'm about to swing at an oncoming ball, which happens to be Owen's head.

Owen pauses, then says, "Anyway, I used to hate Iggy Pop but now he's so commercial I like him a lot better than—"

The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up. Paul's eyes look up at me, then involuntarily roll back into his head then back at me, and suddenly his hands are trying to grab the handle, but the shock of the blow has sapped his strength. (Ellis 217)

The explicit violence ties in with the explicit sex scenes and the semi-pornographic descriptions of popular culture items, which encompass artists as well as fashion and clothing. The world constructed in *American Psycho* is precisely world or matter through and through. It constitutes a material entity in which God could not exist, which reminds the reader of the very first sentence of the novel, "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE", which is actually a billboard text seen from a taxi and arguably it becomes the caption for what will unfold in the novel, the depiction of nineteen-eighties New York as an earthly inferno (Ellis 3).

Remaining on this level of our theoretical palimpsest in hyper-theoretical space, we could explain the whole narrative in terms of it making explicit the violence that underpins any capitalist civilisation. In that theoretical scenario, Patrick incarnates the patriarchal phallos and on all levels of the narrative he just confirms his masculine status. He incarnates the aggressive phallos. In having ritualised, emotionless sex with women that are looked upon as empty dolls, Bateman would further consolidate the validity of such a theory. It would be a depiction of the capitalist machine as primarily following the principle of the father, the male phallic violence at the core of the capitalist order. In Mary Harron's film version, this is stressed by means of the narcissist behaviour of the protagonist, which is a behaviour that perhaps is best illustrated in the medium of film, since Narcissus was precisely infatuated with his own image. Mirrors and fictionalised filming within the film that reify the kingdom of projection, that is, the order of commodification made manifest and sustained. In all, this phenomenon partly explains why images and filmclips were and are so dominant in our late capitalist era. Moreover, the rather macabre and seemingly "real" splitting of the victim's mouth, actually also in "midsentence", illustrates the more violent deconstructive move. If we think of Girard's theories of the scapegoat, this particular killing could be seen as a desperate action on the part of the protagonist. Perhaps this act does not have any grounding in envy and competition. Bateman wants to eradicate himself, or himself as a commodity by murdering a colleague who is identical to himself. He would of course not be fully aware of this: "No group addicted to scapegoating will knowingly publicize the fact. Its arbitrary scapegoats will be presented, if not as culprits deliberately bent on evil, at least as individuals unwittingly responsible for some disastrous event" (Girard 82). In Bateman's world, Paul Owen is made guilty of revealing the arbitrariness and hollowness of the commodity economy they belong to. That is unbearable. In order to find a more pacifist understanding of the "split", we need to turn to Gans and Generative Anthropology.

Gans

The violence already detailed above pushes us in the direction of Gans's primary scene. The deferral of appropriation of the appetitive object gives rise to language as a means of negotiation and avoidance of immediate violence. This deferral is different from what we find in for instance deconstruction. In *New Way of Thinking: Generative Anthropology in Religion, Philosophy, Art*, Gans makes the distinction in relation to Derrida clear.

Postmodernism rejects the claimed "purity" of the phenomenological intuition. In *La voix et le phénomène* (1967), Derrida showed the unexamined presupposition of phenomenology to be the speaking subject's self-presence in his *voix*; this deconstruction of the linguistic subject was subsequently extended to the whole metaphysical-religious universe of "(phal)logocentrism." Deconstruction shows that the phenomenological subject is not alone with the object he "intends"; his experience is in fact mediated by language. Yet instead of seeking the ground of both language *and* phenomenological intuition in the human community, deconstruction limits itself

to demonstrating the dependence of the (metaphysical, religious, ideological) *discourse* guaranteed by this intuition on the philosophical original sin, the usurpation of the (sacred) center of the scene of representation by the Subject of metaphysics, which parallels the *big-man*'s similar usurpation in the politico-economic sphere. Derrida shows that the "pure" self-presence of the Subject is in fact mediated by *différance*, the deferral/difference that always already inhabits the sign itself, which he attributes to its dependence on a paradigm of differences. (Gans 170)

Derrida would claim that the split constitutes a split in the sign, which would generate deferral in terms of meaning. For Derrida, the split in the sign mysteriously precedes any idea of a situation in which humanity would have felt the need for communication, hence his convoluted responses to, for instance, what arche-writing really is. Gans places a much more concrete and specific cultural value to the deferral of appropriation of the appetitive object. In relation to *American Psycho*, the difference between the deferrals is significant. Oddly enough, the originary split of action and language, and language giving rise to fiction and narrativity, can constitute Generative Anthropology's response to *American Psycho*. The deferral of violence is partly achieved in terms of the ontological ambiguity that underpins the whole narrative. The audience or collective of readers cannot know what is fiction and what might potentially be real on the narrative's stipulated plane of the real. What is in Bateman's mind and what actually happens on the plot-level of the narrative? That question could only be answered by adding more fiction to the existing fiction. However, in the hyper-theoretical space, we do not have to—indeed we cannot—eradicate any layer. The strata are complementary to each other. A scholar well versed in Gans's theory would realise that the actual consumption of the female as the appetitive object would collapse the whole set-up, it would paradoxically be the end of fiction. The object of desire cannot be actually eaten, but it could very well be fictionalised as being eaten. This layer of our theoretical space then confirms and partly explicates the prevailing fictional-vs-real ambiguity and aesthetic oscillation. If the cannibalism is fictionalised by the arguably schizophrenic Bateman, then the primary scene may be the layer in our theoretical space that holds up the whole building. But, what about the father? Is the bottom line that *American Psycho* solely confirms the domination of the patriarchal phallogocentric logic? The shift is only from concrete violent masculinity to symbolic masculinity in the shape of the production of fiction.

In any case, our analysis could easily find an ample amount of evidence for the idea that much of the violence is sublimated through fantasy and day dreaming, in short, various modes of fiction. The clearest case is the denial of Paul Owen's death, since Carnes claims to have had lunch with Owen in London, not only once but twice, chronologically after Bateman must have killed Owen, if he actually committed the deed (Ellis 388).

De Andrade

It is in terms of the explicit cannibalism that this narrative adds yet another layer to the already established ones. The patriarchal logic of the master/father is strongly manifested after the anthropological step from anthropophagy to conquering and enslaving. As formulated by Luis Felipe Garcia:

[The] contrast can help us understand how Andrade presents the transition from the economy of a matriarchal society to the one of a patriarchal one. Indeed, as affirms the Brazilian philosopher, 'the historic rupture with the matriarchal world happened when man stopped devouring his Other in order to enslave him' - from the advent of this practice of enslavement, derived 'the division of labour and the organization of society in classes' (Andrade 1978, p. 81). In other words, the transition from a tribe-based society with no private property to a patriarchal family-based one with private property is operated *through the enslavement of the members of the tribe, so as to force them to work not for themselves, but for a master who will profit from the fruits of their labour*. (Garcia 131; italics in original)

De Andrade and Garcia's point here sheds an interesting interpretative light on the cannibalism in *American Psycho*. Since most of the narrative reads as a manifestation of patriarchal capitalism, the anthropophagic aspect needs to be explained. As mentioned, if it only symbolises the devouring of the appetitive object, the whole fiction would collapse. But if we take the layer of de Andrade into consideration, we get another outcome. We need this explanation available in the third stratum of the hyper-theoretical space. This elucidation has to be able to co-exist with the aforementioned theories of mimetic desire and the originary scene. Interestingly, the cannibalism of the written work could not be represented in the film, or perhaps they were rather chosen not to be. If they would have been, they would have had to be strongly veiled by fictionalising filters. Otherwise, such outrageous rituals would potentially jeopardise the ambiguity tensions that are so carefully built up.

However, in our posited theoretical space, de Andrade and Garcia's suggestion becomes relevant. The ultimate transgression is adorned with the same absurd consumerist and popular cultural references as much else in the narrative.

In the kitchen I try to make meatloaf 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, then I rest by watching a tape of last week's new CBS sitcom, *Murphy Brown*. After that and a large glass of J&B I'm back in the kitchen. The head in the microwave is now completely black and hairless and I place it in a tin pot on the stove in an attempt to boil any remaining flesh I forgot to shave off. Heaving the rest of her body into a garbage bag—my muscles, slathered with Ben-Gay, easily handling the dead weight—I decide to use whatever is left of her for a sausage of some kind. (345)

If we disregard the almost comedy-like layer of the narration and the simplistic reading of capitalism as the beast under the polished surface, we need to process also what this means in the hyper-theoretical space, which actually does not have any facile ethical conclusions in itself. Not even that it is the ultimate taboo to eat your own kind. Anthropophagy then has to be seen as a pure ritual that governs this layer in hyper-theoretical space. So philosophically, the reader is either consciously or subconsciously being made aware of a vision that functions as a challenge to the patriarchal, capitalist, phallogocentric order. As formulated by Garcia:

The culture opposed to *Messianism* is, as we have seen, the one that is consolidated within matriarchal societies, namely, *Anthropophagy*. It is important to highlight, as the Brazilian philosopher carefully does, that Anthropophagy is not to be understood as the practice of pure cannibalism, that is, the practice of eating human flesh out of gluttony or hunger, but rather as something associated to the ritual practices of native tribes for which the consumed flesh represents a vision of the world, a vision that, through the ritualized process of deglutition, is incorporated and transfigured into a new vision within a sort of epistemic metamorphosis. As a consequence, Anthropophagy is to be understood as a *Weltanschauung* aiming at perceiving existence from the perspective of alterity, a vision according to which the world is a space containing numerous perceptual bodies that should be incorporated so that we can progressively engender more comprehensive visions of existence. (Garcia 134)

Thus, it is as a layer of vision or *Weltanschauung* that we may see anthropophagy as an escape-way out of the capitalist nightmare. Moreover, this vision is strongly dependent on the fictional ambiguity. Presumably, cannibalism is not even 'real' on the fictional plane of the narrative about Patrick Bateman. Thus, the thought of the excess of consumerism contains the vision of its self-destruction, the abandoning of all enslavement.

However, we must also acknowledge the narrative's own existential darkness. This tension comes out in the hyper-theoretical space too. The positive aspect of the narrative and anthropophagy can only reveal itself as an idea. Indeed, Patrick Bateman is obviously an idea.

If Bateman is an idea, we are able to confirm one of the layers in hyper-theoretical space, which is the production of fiction as an outlet to Gans's primary scene. To be sure, this also draws attention to the human obsession with fictive violence. Thus, *American Psycho* can perfectly well be read as a dream rather than a nightmare. The vision of anthropophagy as the restoring of matriarchal alternatives is a *Weltanschauung* worth acknowledging. The dark ending is then not so dark. The no-exit is of course denoting the no-exit from fiction:

"Well, though I know I should have done *that* instead of not doing it, I'm twenty-seven for Christ sakes and this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in a club in New

York, maybe *anywhere*, at the end of the century and how people, you know, *me*, behave, and this is what being *Patrick* means to me, I guess, so, well, yup, uh . . .” and this is followed by a sigh, then a slight shrug and another sigh, and above one of the doors covered by red velvet drapes in Harry’s is a sign and on the sign in letters that match the drapes’ color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. (399; italics in original)

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