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Sex, Guts and Gore: How Bret Easton Ellis Manipulates the Reader Through Pornography and Horror in *American Psycho*

MA dissertation

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Abstract

This thesis explores the novel *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, focusing on several key concepts. The first chapter delves into the depiction of gender in pornography and its reinforcement of harmful gender stereotypes. It critically examines the portrayal of women and men in pornography, highlighting how such depictions perpetuate societal expectations. Through an analysis of *American Psycho*, I demonstrate how these gender stereotypes are embedded within the narrative and contribute to the overall theme of the novel. I also argue how the male murders, which consistently have been neglected in the study of the novel, are similarly rooted in the aesthetics of pornography and serve to further demonstrate pornography's disdain for women. The second chapter investigates the mechanisms of manipulation and the appeal of the horror genre. It explores the intricate techniques employed by Ellis to engage readers with the horrific world inhabited by Patrick Bateman. By carefully examining the psychological aspects of reader-text interaction, I shed light on the reasons why readers find pleasure and enjoyment in *American Psycho* despite its unsettling content, which, I argue, comes down to the allure of taboo topics, explained by theories of abjection and body horror. Overall, I argue that *American Psycho* not only embodies and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, prevalent in pornography, but also appeals to taboo subjects inherent to the horror genre, to manipulate readers despite its unsettling content. The reader's engagement with the text further perpetuates these stereotypes. This dissertation will contribute to the understanding of how literature and pornography shape our perceptions of gender stereotypes and offers insights into the complexities of reader engagement with erotic and disturbing narratives.

Keywords: Pornography, abjection, body horror, reader-text interaction, *American Psycho*, gender, stereotypes, manipulation, taboo

0. Introduction

The controversy surrounding *American Psycho (*1991) began before the novel even made its way to the mainstream market. Ellis had already found commercial success with his debut novel *Less Than Zero* (1985) which earned him instant fame and a place in the industry during a time in which emerging authors were among the most successful celebrities (Baelo-Allu, 2011: 10). With his growing success rate, Ellis quickly achieved celebrity status and was compared to authors such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald (Bealo-Allu, 2011: 10). Therefore, when Ellis announced he was working on a new manuscript, everyone eagerly awaited this mysterious new novel. Before Simon & Schuster even received a single page, the publishing house advanced Ellis $300,000 (Baelo-Allu, 2010: 15). Even though *American Psycho* catapulted him into stardom, he also started to receive an overwhelming amount of negative attention. Once the staff of Simon & Schuster started reading Ellis' manuscript, they became repulsed by the highly graphic, violent and seemingly misogynistic content and leaked it to the media. After the leak, eliciting an extremely negative response from the public and the media, Simon & Schuster decided to drop the project, forfeiting the $300,000 they had already paid in advance (Murphet, 2002: 67). However, this was not the end for Ellis' manuscript as Vintage agreed to take on the project and publish it under their name. Even though the commercial success of the novel has been undeniable, particularly after the release of its film adaptation in 2000 and Patrick Bateman becoming one of the most iconic figures in pop culture, the public's and critics' reception of the novel was anything but favourable at first.

American Psycho, published in 1991, is undoubtedly the most controversial novel by writer Bret Easton Ellis. It is a dark and disturbing exploration of the American psyche and the excess of consumer culture. Written as a first-person account, the novel is narrated by Patrick Bateman, a

wealthy investment banker living in Manhattan, New York during the late 1980s. On the surface, Bateman appears to be a successful, intelligent and attractive businessman who flaunts his yuppie lifestyle which consists mostly of going to fancy bars, eating at the most exclusive restaurants and showing off his material possessions. However, he is also a psychopathic serial killer who enjoys torturing and killing men and women in the most inhumane ways imaginable for his own personal and sexual gratification.

The outrage upon publication was immense and the novel immediately fell under extreme scrutiny. People were disgusted by the extremely violent and pornographic content of Ellis's new novel, calling it "'moronic', 'sadistic', 'loathsome', 'pointless', 'themeless', 'everythingless', 'lame and unhealthy', 'worthless', 'junk'" (Murphet, 2002: 68). Especially feminist groups crucified the novel and accused Ellis of exploiting the real-life threat of male violence against women and denounced it as a mere "how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women" (Murphet, 2002: 68). Tammy Bruce, the president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) stated about the novel that "'This is not art. Mr. Ellis is a confused, sick young man with a deep hatred for women who will do anything for a fast buck'" (Bruce qtd in Cohen, 1991: 14). Readers sent various death threats to Ellis and even demanded that he should be subjected to the same atrocities that Patrick Bateman inflicted on his victims. Ironically, this tendency for violence by the readership perhaps proves society's capacity for cruelty and the dark side of the human psyche that Ellis supposedly sought to criticise, exhibiting the same sadistic thoughts and imagination as the murderous Patrick Bateman. Nevertheless, despite this overwhelming negative criticism, the overall reception was divided. Some critics even praised *American Psycho* for the realistic portrayal of our patriarchal society and saw it as a work of literary satire that exposed the harmful effects of toxic masculinity and consumerist culture. In this regard, Fay Weldon says "This

man Bret Easton Ellis is a very, very good writer. He gets us to a 'T'. And we can't stand it" (1991: 5).

However, one cannot look past the extreme violence in the novel. Not only are the scenes in which sexual acts are performed so explicit and detailed that they resemble a porn script, but sex becomes a precedence for the violent torture and murder of women. Those porn scenes are instantly juxtaposed with horror and gore, blurring the lines between sex and torture, pleasure and violence. One term that comes to mind is 'torture porn'—a term coined by Edelstein (2006) that mainly refers to a subgenre of torture-based horror films. Long before the term 'torture porn' even emerged, Jane Caputi (1992) described this genre as 'gorenography' (Jones, 2013: 132). Jones explains that the genre is generally understood to be "fixated on sex ('porn') and violence ('torture')" (2013: 14) and "critics allege that torture porn's violence is depicted in such prolonged, gory detail that its aesthetic is comparable to hardcore pornography" (2013: 14).

While this definition fits Ellis' novel perfectly, the film adaptation is far less explicit. Even though the murder and torture do occur in the film, the viewer has to imagine the violence; it happens off-screen and only blood splatters allude to the murders. The producer of the film adaptation received praise for his deliberate choices to not turn the film into "three hours of stabbing, slashing, torture, guts, and gore" (Eldridge, 2008: 25). It was only after the release of the film (Harron and Turner, 2000), which had clear satirical and humorous elements that were impossible to overlook, that the public's opinion of *American Psycho* started to turn around and critics advocated for the novel to be read as a satire (Eldridge, 2008: 27). The film has thus been classified as a 'black comedy' whereas the novel falls under the 'torture porn' category while simultaneously being considered a satire. This genre fluidity, as Wolf points out, contributed to the hostile reception of the novel as she accuses Ellis of having "transgressed … against genre, by dragging the things usually done to women under the shade of pornography into … daylight" (2019: 33). It is worth mentioning, however, that most of the

outrage was caused because the novel was marketed for a mainstream audience and mostly consumed by readers that were unused to the horror genre. Viewers/readers familiar with this particular type of content were not as affected by the grisly scenes because, likely, they had read/seen far worse. I believe that due to the subtlety of the satirical undertones, which are obviously not as evident as in the film adaptation, the satire tends to get lost and overshadowed by the extensive imagery of sex, torture and killing.

American Psycho is undoubtedly a satire and I do not mean to imply otherwise. In fact, this dissertation will go off the premise that *American Psycho* is a satire. However, I will argue that, even with the novel being satirical in nature, it manipulates readers to such an extent that they gradually come to experience and endorse harmful gender stereotypes surrounding the pornographic display of sexual violence against women. It is important to note that not only does Bateman kill women, but he also murders men. Many scholars such as Messier (2004), Moore (2012) and Ettler (2012) focus on female murders but neglect in-depth analyses of the male murders, which I aim to address in this dissertation. As most of the male victims can be reduced to the homeless, the poor, and children, I will argue that even though the male murders are not inherently sexual, they still serve to fulfil popular and harmful porn tropes such as the hate and destruction of women in lieu of reinforcing patriarchal power structures. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1994), Andrea Dworkin researches this phenomenon of the male desire to destroy women and their femaleness and elaborates on the damaging effects of pornography on not only women but also men.

The manipulation of the reader is multilayered and encompasses many different psychological areas. It can be explored around these main ideas: narrative and language, identification, and ambiguity. The use of language in *American Psycho* and the way the scenes are constructed play a major role when it comes to the manipulation of the reader. In relation to

narrative and language, the manipulation occurs through the pornographic language used to describe both sex and torture, through the intertwined relationship between pleasure and violence due to the juxtaposition of porn and gore, and through the boredom-inducing descriptions of fancy dishes, brand clothes and personal hygiene routines which incite the reader to look forward to the exciting, violent and arousing scenes, perhaps even finding pleasure in them. Moore argues that "one of the ways the reader becomes seduced and 'trained' to read the novel is through the lure of the sex that precedes the killing in the earlier moments of violence" (2012: 232). Serpell, however, seems to suggest that the alternating use of repetition nullifies the meaning of sexual violence: "the repetition of all events, even the murders, ensures that they take place in a vacuum, without consequence, without notice, and crucially, without any kind of memorializing effect" (2010: 59) and that eventually, the boredom that is caused through endless repetition makes us become desensitized to said violence (2010: 61).

Then, when it comes to the manipulation through identification, the narrative is laid out in a way that the reader becomes a participant in all the sex and violence. Laura Tanner suggests that "there is no distance between the 'I' in the text and the personal 'I' … the reader 'imaginatively becomes the violator'" (Tanner qtd in Messier, 2012: 79). In other words, the reader is being manipulated into inserting themself into the text through the 'I'. As Patrick Bateman violates and murders women, so does the reader in their imagination. This is also associated with Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject as the reader comes to identify with the dark side of human nature that is embodied by Patrick Bateman. Through Bateman, it is made possible for the reader to act out any dormant desires or fantasies that they might have but would not be otherwise possible as the reader is confined within the boundaries of what is socially acceptable, lawful and moral. *American* Psycho unlocks the possibility for the reader to identify with the violator.

Then lastly, the reader is manipulated by the ambiguity of the text. Throughout the novel, identities become mingled into one, a man that was previously murdered by Bateman was allegedly sighted elsewhere and dead bodies suddenly disappear without a trace. It is, in fact, very unclear whether the torture and the murders are only a figment of Bateman's imagination or if they indeed happened. This ambiguity, I will argue, further contributes to the manipulation of the reader as the reader is made to feel that they have been unnecessarily tormented by being put through hundreds of pages of horror and gore.

Methodologically, Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of the 'abject' serves as a useful theoretical framework as it dives into the human psyche, more specifically into the dark side of human nature that we do not seem to fully understand. This framework can be utilised to study the reader's active involvement in Patrick Bateman's universe. The abject refers to something that is excluded but not entirely separate from the self. It is something that we find repulsive, disgusting or even taboo but yet it is a fundamental aspect of the human experience because it disrupts our understanding of conventional rules and presents a chaotic alternative, which is what makes the abject so terrifying. Abjection is caused by "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules …. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the killer who claims he is a saviour" (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Or, in Patrick Bateman's case, a relatable serial killer. The abject involves an encounter with one's sense of self. In *American Psycho,* the reader discovers aspects of the self in Bateman and is manipulated to relate to the horrors represented by him. This sexually violent material has until thus far been regarded as something that holds no material substance, that is unreal, almost like a fantasy, or, as Wolf calls it, "an immaterial catharsis" (2012: 33). *American* Psycho disrupts this belief system as it revels in shining a light on these taboos which, consequently, generates discomfort and revulsion.

Similarly, in *Body Gothic* (2014), Xavier Aldana Reyes explores the genre of 'body gothic' and its subgenres such as 'splatterpunk', 'body horror' and 'torture porn'. Reyes argues that the body— 'corporeality'—becomes the focal point of these genres and is an essential part of the consumer's viewing or reading experience (2014: 17). Its allure lies in the excess of bodily representation and that it aims "to have an effect on the bodies of their consumers" (Reyes, 2014: 17). Corporeality, thus, does not only involve the realistic representation of mangled and mutilated bodies in the text but also aims to trigger excitement, revulsion or fear in the bodies of the spectator. This corporeality in body horror is turned into a spectacle in which the consumer somatically or viscerally comes to empathise with the victims. Much like Kristeva's (1982) abject, the body gothic relies on the grotesque and it terrifies its consumer because "they either refuse absolute human taxonomies or destabilise received notions of what constitutes a 'normal' or socially intelligible body" (Reyes, 2014: 17). A body ceases to be intelligible when it becomes tortured and mutilated to the point of unrecognition. This corporeal extremity is what drives *American Psycho*. Representations of extreme bodily mutilation either render the novel repulsive to some as it goes against what we define as within the boundaries of normal, or an enjoyable spectacle that incites pleasure.

I will divide my analysis into two main parts. The first part will deal with sexual violence against women and men and how this leads to the reinforcement of harmful porn tropes and gender stereotypes. In the second part of my dissertation, I will focus on the manipulation of the reader through the aforementioned main three areas: narrative, identification and ambiguity.

1. Hardcore Pornography: The Use of Porn Tropes, Gender Stereotypes, Violence and its Harmful Impact

"In the bedroom she's naked and oiled and sucking my dick and I'm standing over her and then I'm slapping her in the face with it, grabbing her hair with my hand, calling her a 'fucking whore bitch,' and this turns her on even more"

Ellis, 1991: 314

This section will focus on exploring the issue of sexual violence against both women and men. I intend to analyse the similarities between *American Psycho* and pornography and the ways in which the harmful portrayal of sexual violence reinforces sexist and misogynistic conceptions surrounding both women and men.

Looking at only the sexually explicit scenes, *American Psycho* reads like a script for a hardcore pornography film. Bateman narrates his sexual encounters with such explicit and elaborate detail that they become hard to distinguish from typical porn flicks. There is not the same level of exuberant, thrilling or extreme violence in those sex scenes as in the torture and murder sequences. At first, the violence remains confined within the boundaries of traditional sexual violence commonly exhibited in mainstream pornography. By this, I mean to say that the early sex scenes might include some acts of aggression, roughness or forceful encounters, which, if exposed outside the realm of and into mainstream media, might challenge notions of good taste and decency. However, these scenes lack the extremely gory nature of later instances of sexual content, in which women are mutilated, tortured and murdered. This is not to imply that these initial sex sequences are less problematic or damaging to how women are socially perceived. On the contrary,

they are inherently problematic in their own right as they serve to endorse harmful porn tropes and reinforce gender stereotypes pertaining to women, as well as the pornographic display of sexual violence inflicted upon them. These scenes evoke the troubling idea that women are mere objects and exist solely for male pleasure, perpetuating the false belief that they somehow enjoy being victimised, and subjected to acts of violence, such as slapping, spitting at or even rape. As mentioned in the introduction, much of the discomfort is caused by the fact that the atrocities done to women in pornography are brought to a mainstream audience through the narrative of *American Psycho* (Wolf, 2019: 33).

The sequences of sexual violence gradually intensify and escalate in frequency and severity, transcending the boundaries of pornography and venturing into the realm of torture, gore and horror, in a phenomenon which is commonly referred to as 'torture porn'. While the most extreme forms of sexual violence are inflicted upon women, they are not the only victims of Patrick Bateman's brutality. Bateman also targets male individuals of different races, the homeless and children. Even though the violence inflicted on them may not have a visible sexual nature, meaning that it does not specifically target their sexual organs nor does Bateman receive any sexual gratification from these murders, it is still deeply rooted in the aesthetics of pornography as it shows a profound disdain for women and a desire to destroy femaleness in lieu of reinforcing patriarchal power structures.

In order to build my argument, it is essential to understand what pornography actually is and what it entails. For the sake of this dissertation, I will be referring to mainstream, heteropatriarchal pornography. Seida and Shor define mainstream pornography as pornography that "includes sexually explicit, easily accessible content created for mass consumption and usually catered toward heterosexual men" (2018: 1). Dworkin analyses the etymology of the word

"pornography" and explains that it is a derivation of the ancient Greek word "porné", meaning "whores", and "graphos", meaning "writing" (1994: 199). Therefore, it is no surprise that the term "pornography" literally translates to "writing about whores". No wonder then, that this linguistic connection sheds light on the ongoing reality within the porn industry, which still continues to be disproportionately female-centred, in the sense that it graphically depicts women as 'whores' in this context, as sexual slaves to their male counterparts, and that they solely "exist to serve men sexually" (Dworkin, 1994: 200), being reduced to mere objects or as sex toys utilised by men for their own gratification. Corsianos adds to the discussion by saying that heterosexual sex depicted in pornography is "promoted in very specific ways[1] by the pornography industry, instilling in the minds of men what 'women' look like and how they perform sexually" (2007: 864). MacKinnon understands pornography as "the subordination of women through the depiction of explicit/abusive sex acts" (MacKinnon qtd in Schauer, 2005: 45) and advocates for its censorship. In a recent wave of feminism, some argue that there is a need for more ethical porn that caters toward a female audience in what Schauer (2005) calls 'women's porno' in an attempt to divert from past pornographic conceptions that represent women as objects, in order "to unsettle the normative boundaries and categories set up by existing pornographic traditions" (48). In my view, the pornography industry as a whole is intrinsically harmful to not only the ways in which women are perceived in society but also to the how female performers, especially, are treated and exploited. If not for its abolition, I would call for more regulation within the industry.

[1] The "specific ways" that Corsianos mentions, refer to the 'female aesthetic' in which the actresses "often have long hair, are thin, often Caucasian, 'young' (usually between teens and 30's), have breast implants, wear lingerie, high heels and plenty of make up. Their legs are shaven and their vaginal area is usually partly shaven with the remaining pubic hair trimmed short" (2007: 865). In reference to the actress' performances, women are expected to promote "a particular female sexual personae" (2007: 865). Corsianos also explains how different types of sexual relations are favoured in mainstream pornography: Straight sex takes center stage, but, of equal importance are lesbianism and multiple partnerships which often include two or three women and one man…women are encouraged to engage in sex with other "women", but not to seek lesbianism as a form of self pleasure and/or empowerment, but, rather to seek it as a tool to please their male partners. (2007: 865-866)

American Psycho conforms undeniably to the patriarchal conceptions of mainstream pornography and its depiction of women as sex toys and objects. The majority of Bateman's victims fall into what pornography would define as 'whores': prostitutes lured into his apartment with the promise of monetary compensation in exchange for their sexual services, reinforcing the stereotypical and derogatory portrayal of women in porn as 'whores': "I dial the number for Cabana Bi Escort Service and, using my gold American Express card, order a woman, a blond" (Ellis, 1991: 163). Bateman adds "not as young as Christie but not too used up either. In short, she looks like she'll be worth whatever it is I'm paying her" (164). Bateman buys these women as if they were commodities, measuring their worth only in terms of their ability to fulfil his sexual desires. However, at the same time, he also degrades and belittles these women who have had a lot of sex, insinuating that a woman who is "used up" is less worthy than others, all while profiting from the services she offers. In contrast, Bateman, the man, who partakes in the exact same acts, is portrayed as a successful, rich and powerful businessman who, instead of being shamed for his sexual promiscuity, is praised for it. *American Psycho* quite literally reduces the women to the archetype of "whores", the earliest and most primitive portrayal of women in porn.

Dworkin's definition of pornography continues as she defines it "as the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures and/or words that also includes women presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities" (1994: xxxiii). She goes on to explain that pornography often includes violent depictions of women as tied up, bruised and injured or women being put in degrading positions, compared to animals and penetrated in violent ways, even being shown to be raped and enjoying it (xxxiii). She adds in a fleeting comment that "If men, children, or transsexuals are used in any of the same ways, the material also meets the definition of pornography" (xxxiii). The most violent variant of pornography is described as 'hardcore

pornography' or 'gonzo' which depicts "body-punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased" (DeKeseredy, 2016: 17). Note that all these definitions revolve around the dehumanisation, punishment and violation of women, whereas men or even the act of sex itself is marginalised or even excluded from the definitions. Even though categories for self-pleasure in porn exist, the majority of popular porn videos still depict sexual acts between male and female actors, as the primary appeal of porn is the viewer's ability to identify with the male actors and to be able to fantasise about having sex with these beautiful women seen on screen (Purcell, 2012: 3). Yet, it is only the actresses that are constantly degraded and at the receiving end of stigma, prejudice and judgment. That is, because pornography is rooted in male culture which, by definition, is "the commitment to violence: conflict is action; action is masculine" (Dworkin, 1994: 53). Consequently, women are defined in pornography by their perceived inaction, victimisation, and passivity. Barbara Creed affirms that the patriarchal definitions of women "represent and reinforce the essential view that woman, *by nature*, is a victim" (1993: 20). The pornography industry itself exploits women for the purpose of sexual gratification, catering to the arousal of men who derive pleasure from witnessing women being tortured, in pain, and suffering. These definitions, in essence, reflect the dynamics and patterns prevalent within the industry.

The similarities between the sex scenes in *American Psycho* and certain popular porn videos are striking. In her book *Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary* (2012), Natalia Purcell transcribes some of the decade-specific hardcore pornography films and identifies the problematic violence in them. We may look at an excerpt taken from the porn film *The Arrival of Buttman* (Stagliano, 1989):

> He orders to get her on her knees and tells her to slap herself. "Harder!" He barks. He grabs a dildo and … tells her to fuck herself with it, as he watches and masturbates. "See these?" he snarls, handing her a set of large, stringed beads: "Shove them up your ass." She starts to process, and he takes over, forcing all of them into her anus … As he pushed them in, she moans ambiguously—a kind of whimpering … He grabs her roughly by the hair and

> orders her to open her mouth and lick his penis … He forces her head up and down, and thrusts deeply: "Open your mouth and suck the dick, bitch." … She moans in apparent affirmation and tells him it's good. (Purcell, 2012: 82-83)

There is a clear power imbalance between the man and the woman in this excerpt. The man is the one giving the instructions and ordering her around like a mere puppet or an object as if she were his possession. His words are forceful; he orders, he barks, he snarls and he tells. The man clearly occupies the dominant position while the woman assumes the submissive role, obediently following his commands. When she refuses, he immediately takes over and forces himself upon her, insinuating rape. He belittles, humiliates and degrades, calling her a "bitch". Not only that, but the portrayal also suggests that she is apparently liking it—or at least that is the impression the actress is meant to convey to the viewer. She appears to derive pleasure from being subjected to these humiliating and painful circumstances. As Bader puts it "women appear to be in situations that would hurt or degrade them, but lo' and behold! – they get turned on instead" (Bader qtd in Purcell, 2012: 3).

Now, we may look at an excerpt from *American Psycho* which mirrors the *Buttman* scene and its misogynistic power dynamics:

> Christie is on all fours facing the headboard, her ass raised high in the air, and I'm straddling her back as if I was riding a dog or something … I'm facing Sabrina, who is staring into Christie's spread-open ass with a determined expression. Her smile seems tortured … With both my hands I keep Christie's ass and cunt spread open and I urge Sabrina to move in closer … "Smell it," I tell Sabrina and she moves in closer … "Lick her cunt first," I tell Sabrina and with her own fingers she spreads it open and starts lapping at it like a dog. (Ellis, 1991: 166)

The similarities are apparent. The only noticeable difference in the scene lies in the number of people taking part in the sex acts; while in *Buttman*, the focus is on Buttman and the prostitute, in *American Psycho* the sexual encounter involves Bateman and two prostitutes named Sabrina and Christie. However, the power dynamics between Bateman and the prostitutes mirror those depicted

in the previous excerpt. Bateman assumes the role of ordering, commanding and exerting force, while the women endure humiliation, degradation and coercion. Both women are forced into animalistic poses, compared to dogs and the focus is solely on their genitals and bodies. Bateman issues orders to Sabrina who, reluctantly, has to obey. The phrase "Her smile seems tortured" is more than telling. Sabrina feels forced to perform sexual acts against her will, enticed by the promise of monetary compensation. Even amidst this sexual humiliation, she must fake a smile as if she were an active and willing participant. It is evident that this scene does not depict a realistic sexual encounter but rather sex that is unique and central to pornography. In mirroring pornographic material, *American Psycho* perpetuates the same damaging stereotypes and reinforces porn tropes in which dominant men assert their power over submissive women—derogatorily referred to as 'whores' or 'bitches'. These women, despite being humiliated and most likely in pain, are forced into pretending they enjoy this type of violent treatment. Consequently, this may have negative consequences on real women who have been exposed to this type of content as they might internalise these pornographic tropes: "These realities have a huge impact on all 'women' … they are also vastly affected as they either accept some, most or all of them without questioning them" (Corsianos, 2007: 867).

Ellis has repeatedly stressed that these pornographic and explicit depictions of sexual violence in the novel were the mere realisation of Bateman's misogyny. This perspective is shared by critic Harron who asserts that *American Psycho* is "a portrait of misogyny rather than misogynistic itself" and that it was "'quite a brilliant attack on male behaviour'" (Harron qtd in Eldridge, 2008: 24). However, as shown in the previous section, the pornographic scenes in *American Psycho* are not an outrageous exaggeration of the explicit material depicted in mainstream pornography. On the contrary, the sexually erotic scenes in the novel are an exact

replica of hardcore pornography, which leads me to believe that these events might not be as satirical as Ellis claims them to be, but rather so, a realistic portrayal of porn that invites the reader to indulge in the fantasy—an issue which will be dealt with in the second chapter.

Even the sex acts that Bateman performs seem to be a simple replica of the fictitious videotapes that he watches. *Inside Lydia's Ass* is only one of the many videotapes that Bateman rents but is perhaps the most obvious example of this:

> I watched as Lydia … while on all fours gave head to this guy with a huge cock while another gorgeous blond little hardbody with a perfectly trimmed blond pussy knelt behind Lydia and after eating her ass out and sucking on her cunt, started to push a long, greased silver vibrator into Lydia's ass and fucked her with it. (Ellis, 1991: 94)

The premise and the setting of *Inside Lydia's Ass* are identical to the sexual reenactment between Bateman and the two prostitutes, Christie and Sabrina. It is a *ménage a trois* between the male lead actor and two female actresses—which is a common trope in pornography as Corsianos[2] (2007) has previously established. Just like Christie, Lydia is depicted on all fours, assuming an animalistic posture, while the other actress kneels behind her, engaging in analingus. The resemblance is strikingly uncanny. It would not be unfeasible to suggest that Bateman orchestrated and meticulously planned the sexual encounter between himself, Sabrina and Christie, drawing inspiration from one of his favourite porn films. This allows him to experience the scenes observed on-screen and indulge in this fantasy. In later scenes, this assumption proves to be true: "Elizabeth is making out with Christie, both of them naked on my bed, … while I sit in the Louis Montoni chair … watching them very closely, occasionally repositioning their bodies" (Ellis, 1991: 276). He narrates this part in a cold, somewhat distanced tone as if he is not taking part in the scene but

[2] "Straight sex takes center stage, but, of equal importance are lesbianism and multiple partnerships which often include two or three women and one man…women are encouraged to engage in sex with other 'women', but not to seek lesbianism as a form of self pleasure and/or empowerment, but, rather to seek it as a tool to please their male partners". (2007: 865-866)

simply directing it. Rather than feigning to be an actor, he now takes on the role of a porn director, carefully placing the 'bodies' in a way that mirrors the actresses in his videotapes.

Maintaining a degree of emotional detachment is vital in the realm of pornography as it allows viewers to act out their fantasies without becoming emotionally involved with the performers, thereby preserving the necessary boundary between reality and fiction. Walker explains that pornography benefits from the lack of emotions that exists within it (Walker qtd in Messier, 2004: 78) and Blader argues that "Pornography provides a needed release for the contemporary American man who otherwise bears 'special psychic burdens' of responsibility toward women" (Blader qtd in Purcell, 2012: 3). This is precisely why the absence of emotion is so crucial to the success of pornography. Men need to feel an emotional distance between themselves and the anonymous women on screen in order to fully engage in the fantasy, objectify them and find pleasure in their humiliation and torment. It is crucial to recognise that this detachment remains confined to the realm of fantasy, as in real life, men bear the responsibility to treat women with respect and empathy. *American Psycho* conforms to this industry standard of emotional detachment. As evident from the previously mentioned examples, Bateman narrates all of his sexual encounters, along with everything else, in a distinctly unemotional and matter-of-fact way. He shows a clear absence of emotion towards the women involved, viewing them solely as instruments for his sexual gratification, thereby depriving them of any kind of humanity.

It almost seems like Bateman is unable to experience any other form of sex than pornographic sex; he is entirely immersed in the world of porn: "Last night I had dreams that were lit like pornography and in them I fucked girls made of cardboard" (Ellis, 1991: 92). Even his dreams are influenced by pornographic staging and lighting. Most notably, the girls in his dreams are not real women, but they are made of cardboard—an artificial material, an object—just as porn

teaches men to perceive women. Moreover, Bateman constantly repeats the phrase that he must either rent or return videotapes: "I return two tapes I rented on Monday… but I rerent *Body Double* because I want to watch it again tonight" (67) and "doesn't give me enough time to return yesterday's videotapes, so if I don't stop by my place I can just go in and rent another videotape" (220). The sheer frequency and repetition suggest that the act of renting out videotapes, watching and masturbating to sexually explicit material and then returning them is a daily habit for him, exhibiting characteristics of porn addiction, which he even confesses to as he says, "I'm beginning to think that pornography is so much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this lack of complication, so much more pleasurable" (254). Pornography has led to a situation in which men have difficulty experiencing sexual intimacy with women as genuine partners. Instead, from porn, they have learned to seek and prefer emotionless sex and the objectification of women from a detached perspective, often through the medium of a screen.

There seems to be a concerning trend in the porn industry in which the scenes become increasingly more violent and degrading over the decades to the point in which what was initially perceived as 'harmless' slips into the dangerous territory of actual violence[3] and harm (Purcell, 2012: 83). Hardcore pornography only becomes "rougher, harder and more frenzied… and continued to showcase the flesh and the faces of his performers with exceptional attentiveness—their screams, their gasps, and moans captured in exquisite detail" (Purcell, 2012: 92). It seems as if both audience and filmmakers, having been exposed to sexual violence over and over again, have become desensitised and therefore started to demand even greater intensity, heightened violence and increased excitement; there is a desire to witness women in increasingly vulnerable, demeaning and cruel positions. Serpell argues that the boredom induced by repetition in *American*

[3] One of the erotic videotapes that Bateman rents is Brian de Palma's *Body Double* (1984) in which the woman is killed by a power-drill. She "gets drilled by the … power driller in the movie … the best" (Ellis, 1991: 109).

Psycho causes us to become more desensitised to sexual violence (2010: 61)[4]. This is also applicable to porn. It stands to reason that repeated exposure to this type of imagery, in which women are depicted in these demeaning positions, can desensitise the viewer and, occasionally, evoke feelings of boredom. Shor and Seida share this perspective, coming to the conclusion that porn viewers "become desensitized to 'soft' pornography, and producers are happy to generate videos that are more hard core" (2018: 1). As a result, there is a growing desire for more extreme forms of this sexually explicit and violent material. This is concerning precisely because this viewer demand will inevitably lead to real women in porn being subjected to even more dehumanising and violent situations in order to satisfy consumers' voyeuristic glee.

After the very explicit sex sequences, Bateman progresses to materialise his fantasies of torturing and murdering women, taking sexual violence to new and extreme levels. Whereas the initial sex sequences focus on sexual acts—albeit in a pornographic context—the subsequent scenes shift focus to sexual torture and mutilation, which grant Bateman his desired sexual release. These scenes no longer fit into the conventional pornographic categories but instead, it transcends into the realm of 'torture porn', a genre that combines elements of sex, specifically pornography, and violence, particularly torture (Jones, 2013: 14). Some scholars, such as Xavier Reyes, believe that this genre has been misread and that the intense torture scenes were mistakenly seen as "voyeuristic glee" (2020: 405), meaning the viewer derives sexual pleasure from watching explicitly detailed torture scenes. According to Reyes, this is not, in fact, the case. However, due to the clear alignment with pornography and its aesthetics, it is difficult to classify *American Psycho* as anything other than 'torture porn'.

[4] I will discuss this in more detail in section 2.

In the novel, there is a blurring of boundaries between sex and violence, reaching a point at which they become interchangeable. Bateman's ability to perform sexually or "to reach arousal is closely correlated with the acts of mutilation and torture he carries out on his victims" (Messier, 2004: 82), which marks the interchangeable nature between sex and violence. Consequently, the most extreme form of violence is thus always directed at the sexual organs of his female victims:

> I occasionally stab at her breasts, accidentally (not really) slicing off one of her nipples … She starts screaming again once I've ripped her dress off, leaving Bethany in only her bra, its right cup darkened with blood, and her panties, which are soaked with urine, saving them for later … I have to hold her head up so she won't choke. Then I fuck her in the mouth, and after I've ejaculated and pulled out, I Mace her some more. (Ellis, 1991: 236-237)

Even these gory scenes remain deeply rooted in the aesthetics of pornography. Bateman rips off her dress, proceeds to cut off her nipples and exposes her vulnerable naked body. Throughout the ordeal, the girl named Bethany, screams, retches and chokes—elements that have been established as common points of arousal in previous sections. Then, to make matters worse Bateman engages in sexual intercourse with her mouth and ejaculates within it. The violence in this scene is eroticised; substituting the usual bodily fluids with blood while the parts of the body intended to evoke arousal, like her breasts, are subjected to mutilation and degradation.

As we have already discussed, viewers of pornography seem to become desensitised to violence after prolonged exposure, resulting in diminished arousal and satisfaction and an ongoing craving for more violence, intensity and explicitness. In *American Psycho,* Bateman is affected by the same kind of stagnation. Messier states that "there is a gradual increase of these acts [torture and mutilation] both in incidence and intensity, the reader sees that violence becomes progressively the only way in which Bateman is able to fulfil his sexual drive" (2004: 82). While it is true that the increase in frequency leads Bateman to grow accustomed to the acts of torturing and murdering women, it also fuels his cravings for greater intensity in order to reach his full

potential of sexual stimulation: “But even her sobs fail to arouse me. I feel little gratification when I Mace her, less when I knock her head against the wall” (Ellis, 1991: 314). Then follows what is, arguably, the cruellest and most gruesome torture sequence as of yet in which Bateman inserts a tube into the woman’s genitals and guides a rat into her abdomen, causing her to be eaten from the inside. And only after this extreme violence does Bateman finally manage to reach his sexual climax.

Throughout this discussion, it has become evident that the core essence of pornography is the degradation and humiliation of women. However, it is not only women’s bodies and souls that pornography seeks to attack but femaleness[5] in general. Pornography prides itself in showing the powerful, dominant man in all his might, exerting power over the vulnerable, submissive woman as “Men are distinguished from women by their commitment to do violence rather than to be victimized by it” (Dworkin, 1994: 53). Men do everything to “renounce whatever they have in common with women so as to experience no commonality with women” (Dworkin, 1994: 53). Men, therefore, cannot embrace feminine characteristics that they are inclined to reject, as they are perceived as a threat to their masculinity. Therefore, men possessing traits typically associated with womanhood are seen as abnormal, unworthy and targeted for destruction. Specific characteristics or circumstances that render men less powerful than others, and thus more feminine, are youth, race and poverty. Youth, because it is “not yet fully dissociated from women and children” (Dworkin, 1994: 58) and poverty, because money is associated with power and “poverty,

[5] While ‘femaleness’ or ‘female’ refer to biological and physiological traits that define female sex, ‘feminine’ and ‘femininity’ refer to social or cultural attributes, behaviour and roles associated with being a woman. When I use the term ‘female’ I am talking about biological markers whereas when I use the terms ‘feminine’, ‘femininity, or ‘feminine men’, I am talking about characteristics, roles and behaviours that are typically associated with women based on gender stereotypes such as being nurturing, submissive, powerless etc.

is a humiliating, and therefore a feminizing, experience" (59). Men occupying such social positions are not only more vulnerable to sexual violence but also more susceptible to violence in general.

Applying this concept to *American Psycho,* the men targeted by Bateman are mostly poverty-stricken, homeless, of a different race or children. Fay Weldon writes "Those who are killed, don't rate—they are the powerless, the poor, the wretched" (1991: 7). This is significant, considering that the novel serves as a satire of the consumerist culture prevalent in 1980s America, which is based on individualism, the exploitation of people and capitalism. Within this cultural framework, the unproductive members of society—the poor and the powerless—are deemed unworthy and therefore disposable.

These male murders in the novel serve as a reflection of enduring gender stereotypes that persist in pornography, with men assuming the role of aggressors and women as victims. Caputi points out that "When Bateman murders men, the scenes are relatively short, take place outside and are asexual. When women are murdered the sequences are extensive, take place in private and frequently follow upon several passages of basic sadomasochist sexual description" (1993: 103). Although I do not entirely disagree with Caputi's assertions, her view on the male murder sequences seems rather simplistic. While it is true that the violence inflicted upon men may not involve explicit sexual violence directed at their genitalia and Bateman may not derive sexual gratification from these acts, the scenes are nonetheless explicit and meticulously detailed. An illustrative example of such explicitness of the male murders can be observed when Bateman carries out his first act of violence against a male victim. The description spans several pages and does not lack explicitness: "His eye, burst open, hangs out of his socket and runs down his face and he keeps blinking which causes what's left of it inside the wound to pour out like red, veiny egg yolk" (Ellis, 1991: 126). These lines contain elements of both pornographic and allegorical

language. The word “burst” is not an uncommon word in pornographic texts to allude to the male orgasm; while the phrase “runs down his face” may evoke associations with ejaculate streaming down someone’s face. It is not unheard of to describe a male sexual organ as being “red” and “veiny”. Although the violence depicted in this scene may not necessarily possess explicit sexual connotations, the language used is undeniably explicit. Furthermore, the male-on-male violence depicted in *American Psycho* stems from pornographic views of masculinity and femininity and serves to further demonstrate the hatred towards women, their femaleness and perceived femininity. Bateman’s male victims come to represent the annihilation of women and the reinforcement of patriarchal values related to power dynamics.

The first act of aggression against a male victim occurs when Bateman attacks a black homeless person that he encounters on the street. Ironically, this marks the first act of violence Bateman commits against another human being. It is no coincidence that the first victim is an impoverished black man—both social and cultural attributes that are typically associated with women. As seen before, money is associated with power and those without financial means often find themselves lacking power: “the poor male is less powerful than the wealthier male” (Dworkin, 1994: 58). Traditionally, women have always been confined to the domestic sphere and excluded from professional realms, which has rendered them reliant on men as providers for themselves and their families. Consequently, the inability to financially provide for oneself gradually became associated with women, and is thus a feminine trait. This association holds true for the setting of *American Psycho* in the 1980s United States.

Additionally, the fact that the homeless person is black is a crucial factor. Blackness, similarly to poverty, is linked to femininity. Historically, black men have faced oppression, victimisation and slavery; they have been overpowered by other men and confined to a status of

powerlessness. Much like women became the "dreaded She, or as Simone de Beauvoir expresses it, 'the Other.'" (Dworkin, 1994: 50), black people have categorically been 'othered'. This form of racial alienation and powerlessness is related to femininity because masculine men are never deemed powerless, as masculinity is defined by power, strength and violence. A black man, who has historically been undermined, can therefore never readily be associated with traditional masculinity. Bateman's first victim, Al, embodies both poverty and blackness, which makes him the epitome of a feminine man.

Examining the description of Al and his murder, the feminisation of the man becomes evident and illustrates this pervasive, pornographic illustration of the hatred towards women. Bateman calls Al "The bum, a black man" (Ellis, 1991: 126). While the word 'bum' is a derogatory term for a homeless person, at the same time it refers to human anatomy, namely the buttocks. Especially in women, the 'bum' is a part of the female body that is sexually attractive to men; the larger the buttocks, the more female and attractive they appear. It is not an arbitrary decision that the 'bum' is shot from various angles and becomes a centrepiece in many porn films. The use of the term 'bum' to refer to the homeless man, Al, serves to highlight the link between homelessness, poverty, and women. Then, Bateman snarls, "Do you know what a fucking loser you are?" He starts nodding helplessly" (126). The power dynamic in this scene is similar to that of men and women in pornography; Bateman is in a position of power whereas Al is powerless, nodding helplessly. As a man without a job, homeless and having to depend on others to provide, Al is fully reduced to a female role, a role which Bateman audibly despises as he calls him a "loser". Al has failed in his masculinity and as a man. Therefore, he cannot be considered a dominant man and must be destroyed as feminine qualities in men pose a threat to the patriarchal conception of masculinity. Much like the women are humiliated and degraded in both porn and *American*

*Psycho'*s murder sequences, Bateman humiliates and degrades Al. Bateman's statement, "I keep stabbing at the bum" (126), not only refers to the act of stabbing the homeless man but also carries figurative allusion to a female, seductive body part, symbolically representing the destruction of women.

Childhood, or the state of being a child and therefore the epitome of absolute innocence, similarly relates to women. A child "is raised and birthed by women" (Dworkin, 1994: 48) and thus a young child, even if it is a male child, is "not yet fully dissociated from women" (Dworkin, 1994: 58). The mother is the primary caretaker of her children; she nurtures them and instils in her children the needed values and morals so that they hopefully grow up to be functioning members of society. As boys are primarily cared for and brought up by their mothers, they are perceived as being closely connected with them; not only inheriting their values and morals but also their femininity. Furthermore, children symbolise absolute innocence; when they are born, they are a blank slate, devoid of any human cruelty or malice. Children rely on others to take care of them, which places them in the same vulnerable category as women, leaving them defenceless and powerless against powerful, dominant figures, often men. It is only as a young boy grows older that he consciously chooses to dissociate himself from his mother "in order to fully ally himself with other men in the hope that they will not treat him as a child, that is, as one who belongs with the women" (Dworkin, 1994: 49).

One of Bateman's male victims is a five-year-old little boy visiting the zoo with his mother. From the beginning it is clear that this child has not yet fully distanced himself from women: "His mother tells him to throw the wrapper away, then resumes talking to another woman, who is with a child around the same age, the three of them staring into the dirty blueness of the penguin habitat" (Ellis, 1991: 286). Not only is the boy literally surrounded by women, but he, figuratively, belongs

to them. He has not yet clearly demarcated himself from them and by inheriting their characteristics, making him more feminine. In contrast, Bateman fully embraces and performs his masculinity, as he states, “my sudden lack of care crests in a massive wave of fury and I pull the knife out of my pocket and I stab him” (286). The phrasing employed here is interesting. The act of looking after children is commonly associated with femininity as women are traditionally perceived to be caring and nurturing. By expressing his lack of care, Bateman is attempting to distance himself from women. This lack of care culminating in anger and violence serves as an attempt to affirm his masculinity, which can only be achieved by destroying the supposed threat to said masculinity, the child and, by extension, femininity.

2. Abjection and Body Horror: The Subsequent Manipulation of the Reader

"Excited, I slap her, then lightly punch her in the mouth, then kiss it, biting her lips. Fear, dread, confusion overwhelm her".

Ellis, 1991: 314

According to Van Dijk, the manipulation of individuals typically occurs through cognitive manipulation in which those in a higher position of power exploit their discursive influence (2006: 360). Manipulation, essentially, involves influencing the manipulated to believe, feel or act in ways that primarily serve the interests of the manipulator (2006: 360). Often, the manipulated fall victim to such tactics because they fail "to see the full consequences of the beliefs or actions advocated by the manipulator" (361). Deeney asserts that "psychological manipulation is a type of social control that seeks to alter others' behaviour or opinion through deceptive, indirect, or underhanded strategies" (2020: 33). As evidence, he refers to a 2012 study in which Facebook altered the newsfeeds of its users to exclusively show either positive or negative content. The result was that users "mirrored the mood of the updates and posts they had been subjected to" (Deeney, 2020: 41), showing the influential role media plays in the coercion of its consumers' habits.

In the case of *American Psycho,* Ellis abuses his discursive authority by structuring his narrative in such a way that effectively shapes the readers' experience. In this chapter, I will focus on the psychological manipulation of the reader, shedding light on the precise techniques through which this manipulation occurs: narrative structure, identification mechanisms, and the strategic use of ambiguity. When it comes to the narrative and language of *American Psycho,* the reader undergoes manipulation through the use of explicit and pornographic language depicting both sex and torture scenes. The abrupt juxtaposition of porn and gore elements coupled with lengthy and

catalogue-like descriptions of fancy dishes, brand names and personal hygiene routines that might bore the reader, potentially prompt them to look forward to the more exciting and violent scenes. With regard to identification, the reader is maneuvered into inserting themselves within the text through the use of the first-person pronoun "I," which facilitates identification with the perpetrator, Patrick Bateman. Lastly, the ambiguity of the surrounding murders—with suggestions that they may have merely been figments of Bateman's imagination—engenders further manipulation of the reader, compelling them to endure the most gruesome imagery of horror and gore, seemingly in vain. To analyse the mechanisms of manipulation, I will draw from Julia Kristeva's concept of the 'abject' (1982) and Xavier Aldana Reyes's 'body horror' (2014), both of which explain the occurrence of visceral reaction upon confrontation with horrifying images.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the parallels between pornography and the explicit sex scenes in *American Psycho.* In this chapter, I would like to analyse the undeniable similarities between the language used in the sex scenes and that employed in the murder sequences. This analysis will illuminate how such stylistic parallels effectively blur the lines between pleasure and violence, creating a complex and disconcerting overlap of these contrasting experiences. The pornographic way that violence is construed in the novel becomes clear when comparing the following two scenes:

> Her breasts are high and full and firm, both nipples very stiff, and while she's choking on my cock while I'm fucking her mouth roughly with it, I reach down to squeeze them and then while I'm fucking her, after ramming a dildo up her ass and keeping it there with a strap. (Ellis, 1991: 314)

In this scene, Patrick Bateman is shown engaging in sex with another woman. Ellis uses words such as "firm", "stiff", "choking", "cock", "fucking", "dildo" and "ass" which, as we have discussed in the previous chapter, are pornographic descriptors for sexual organs and intercourse. The objective of pornography is to incite pleasure and grant its viewer/reader of sexual release.

American Psycho's affinity with the aesthetics of pornography, especially the language used to describe the sex scenes, leads us to infer that these scenes are "intensely attractive and feed voyeuristic impulse" (Messier, 2004: 73) in the reader. This suggests that readers are expected to experience arousal while reading these sexually alluring scenes, primarily due to the evocative pornographic images that they elicit.

In the following scene, Ellis adopts the same pornographic language to describe the gore of the murder scenes:

> While Tiffany watches, finally I saw the entire head off – torrents of blood splash against the walls, even the ceiling – and holding the head up like a prize, I take my cock, purple with stiffness, and lowering Torri's head to my lap I push it onto her bloodied mouth and start fucking it, until I come, exploding into it … While Tiffany's still conscious, I roll her over, and spreading her ass cheeks, I nail a dildo that I've tied to a board deep into her rectum. (292-293)

In this scene, Bateman tortures, mutilates and murders two women in graphic detail. He uses the same pornographic language to narrate his murders as he does in the sex scene depicted above. The emphasis remains on explicit words such as "cock", "stiffness", "fucking", "ass" and "dildo", mirroring the language used in the previous scene. In the prior scene, he is "fucking her mouth roughly with it" (314) while in this scene, he pushes "it onto her bloodied mouth and start[s] fucking it" (292). The only difference is that Bateman has decapitated Torri before using her corpse for his own gratification. In both scenes, Bateman uses a dildo. However, whereas in the first scene, the purpose of the dildo is used to deliver pleasure, in the second scene, it is transformed into an instrument of torture. Through two scenes, the gradual intertwining of sex and pleasure with violence and gore becomes evident. The lingering question is why Ellis would choose to adopt the same aesthetic for the torture sequences as he does for his erotic chapters. Walker defines pornography as aspiring to "arouse sexual excitement" (Walker qtd in Messier, 2004: 78). By consistently maintaining the same language, style and aesthetic throughout the torture-murder

scenes as he does in the sexually arousing scenes, I infer that Ellis may be attempting to condition the reader to find sexual pleasure in gore.

The instant juxtaposition of sex and violence similarly reinforces Ellis' attempt to coax his audience into deriving sexual pleasure from violence. Most sexual encounters are instantly followed by violence, and all torture scenes are preceded by sex that gradually escalates into violence:

> Tiffany hungrily tongues her pussy, wet and glistening, and Torri reaches down and squeezes Tiffany's big, firm tits. I'm biting hard, gnawing at Tiffany's cunt, and she starts tensing up. "Relax," I say soothingly. She starts squealing, trying to pull away, and finally she screams as my teeth rip into her flesh. Torri thinks Tiffany is coming. (Ellis, 1991: 292)

The sex sequence seamlessly segues into violence. One second, they are immersed in a seemingly erotic and pleasurable experience, the next Tiffany screams in pain as Bateman mutilates her body. This shift is, in fact, so seamless that even Torri initially mistakes Tiffany's cries of pain for pleasure. Turner argues that Ellis is "'tricking [readers] between genres'—having them read 'a four-page description of a sex scene that reads just like a Penthouse letter [as] it slowly slips into the horrible violence'" (Turner qtd in Eldridge, 2008: 28). Readers, while experiencing a state of ecstatic pleasure from the erotic content, would suddenly be hounded by violent imagery, making them potentially more sexually receptive to this manipulation. When the readers are first exposed to this abrupt shift, they might enter a stage of confusion, oblivious to this sudden change: "Excited, I slap her, then lightly punch her in the mouth, then kiss it, biting her lips. Fear, dread, confusion overwhelm her" (Ellis, 1991: 314). Unable to quickly withdraw from their state of catharsis, their pleasure might consequently prolong into the moments of violence. Additionally, in later scenes, as readers become accustomed to this juxtaposition, they may start recognising the signs of erotic allure and actively indulge in this perverse pleasure derived from being exposed to these horrific images. They might even perceive sex and violence as interchangeable much like

Bateman does. Creed supports this claim by suggesting that experiencing horror "signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity" (1993: 25). Moore rightly claims that "One of the ways the reader becomes seduced and 'trained' to read the novel is through the lure and sex that precedes the killing in the earlier moments of violence" (2012: 232). In other words, the immediate juxtaposition of the erotic scenes with gore seeks to manipulate the reader into finding pleasure in this perversity, thereby enjoying the horrific representations of violence in a sexual context.

Furthermore, the lengthy and boredom-inducing descriptions coupled with the monotonous language, contribute to manipulating the reader into deriving further enjoyment in the violent scenes: "Endless name-dropping, label-listing, cataloguing of exercise and grooming routines, descriptions of household items, run-down of restaurant settings and menu descriptions, the typical *Rolling Stone* or *Billboard* pop music reviews[6]" (Messier, 2004: 85) all contribute to a sense of boredom in parts of the novel. In fact, significant portions of the story are defined by inaction and are only interrupted by the erotically violent scenes—the sole action-packed sequences of the novel:

> I've been a big Genesis fan ever since the release of their 1980 album, *Duke.* Before that I didn't really understand any of their work, though on their last album of the 1970s, the concept-laden *And Then There Were Three* (a reference to band member Peter Gabriel, who left the group to start a

[6] I selected only one passage as evidence. However, there are many more of these occurrences, such as the following:

> Whitney Houston burst onto the music scene in 1985 with her self-titled LP which had four number one hit singles on it, including "The Greatest Love of All," "You Give Good Love" and "Saving All My Love for You," plus it won a Grammy Award for best pop vocal performance by a female and two American Music Awards, one for best rhythm and blues single and another for best rhythm and blues single. She was also cited as best new artist of the year by *Billboard* and by *Rolling Stone* magazine. (Ellis, 1991: 242)

> Huey Lewis and the News burst out of San Francisco onto the national music scene at the beginning of the decade, with their self-titled rock-pop album released by Chrysalis, though they really didn't come into their own, commercially or artistically, until their 1983 smash, *Sports.* Though their roots were visible (blues, Memphis soul, country) on *Huey Lewis and the News* they seemed a little too willing to cash in on the late seventies/early eighties taste for New Wave. (Ellis, 1991: 339)

> lame solo career), I *did* enjoy the lovely "Follow You, Follow Me." Otherwise all the albums before *Duke* seemed too artsy, too intellectual. It was *Duke* (Atlantic; 1980), where Phil Collins' presence became more apparent. (Ellis, 1991: 128)

Ellis dedicates an entire chapter to Bateman's review of his favourite band, *Genesis*, which extends over several pages. Many readers, myself included, would find their interest waning after several pages of such descriptions, even prompting them to skip over these passages. Serpell shares this perspective, observing how "we are slogging through the initial descriptions of consumer culture, the first few lists of items" (2010: 61), which "soon allows us to accelerate, to skim, and for less conscientious readers, even to skip" (61). Serpell further suggests that these endless lists of things "undermines the reader's capacity to *see* any of them" (58). After several pages and chapters filled with tedious descriptions, slow-moving plot, reviews and uninspiring conversations, the reader starts to long for some action. They crave the introduction of sex and violence, which stirs anticipation and makes them increasingly more "drawn to and expectant of the gruesome scenes" (Moore, 2012: 231).

Serpell also argues that, due to its endless repetition, the violence can grow tiring and dull: "when violence is made banal through large-scale repetition, through seemingly endless reiterations of gruesome scenes, the flattening of violence begins to veer dangerously close to taking aesthetic pleasure in it, or perhaps worse—numbing oneself to it" (2010: 56). In other words, Serpell suggests that readers may experience boredom due to the overexposure and redundancy. This is exemplified in Bateman's later accounts in which he himself, exhibits obvious signs of boredom while engaged in the acts of killing and mutilation: "I'm used to the horror. It seems distilled, even now it fails to upset or bother me" (Ellis, 1991: 316). To escape this repetition-induced boredom, the reader might start to crave more of these violent scenes. I have already discussed this phenomenon in Chapter 1, in which after prolonged exposure to hardcore

pornography, readers/viewers may become desensitized or accustomed to sexual violence, thereby longing for an increase in the intensity, severity and frequency of such scenes. Ellis delivers exactly what the reader craves; each scene is more gruesome and more violent than the one before. This, as Serpell states, "ensures that even if we get used to Bateman's murders, to their perversions and their graphic depictions, Ellis one-ups each scene of violence with the next, an inescapable escalation that ensures that the reader is continually shocked" (Serpell, 2010: 62). Therefore, violence becomes the climax of *American Psycho* and the main source of the reader's pleasure.

This perverse and grotesque enjoyment of the horrifying aligns with both Kristeva's studies of abjection and Reyes' concept of 'body horror'. Kristeva defines the abject as "something rejected from which one does not part … what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982: 4). The abject is excluded, cast off, as it is considered abominable yet inherent in the self, in the subject. It repulses and disgusts and allows us to confront our deepest desires and taboos. Reyes explains that abjection "monitors taboos about the body, especially its cleanliness[7], but also the patterns of human behaviour associated with it that are seen as correct and proper" (2020: 396). Kristeva clarifies that "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (1982: 3). The encounter with the sickening makes the individual feel "at the border of [their] condition as a living being. [Their] body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (1982: 3). These taboos, respectively abjection, encompasses "corporal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily waste" (Creed, 1993: 23) and upon confrontation with these taboos, are cast off and ejected by our mind and body.

[7] This might explain the excessive focus and emphasis on hygiene in *American Psyho* as it constitutes an important part of abjection. Not only are Bateman's hygiene routines overtly extravagant but he also places importance on the cleanliness of his victims' bodies and the absence of bodily fluids. Almost ritualistically, Bateman instructs the women to bathe before he engages in sex with them, stating: "'I want you to clean your vagina'" (Ellis, 1991: 163). This highlights the disgust with bodily fluids that Kristeva considers as part of the abject.

Abjection constitutes "what is deemed 'other', 'monstrous' or 'disgusting'" (Reyes, 2020: 396). It is the fear of the unknown, of what is outside of the border of natural order and "therefore, when one is confronted with a body that has been outcast, the threat of that fate may render them uneasy" (Stopenski, 2022: 2).

American Psycho not only tackles these taboos but revels in their display. Ellis portrays these taboos as sexual fantasies, prompting his readers to actively imagine themselves in Bateman's shoes. In a study conducted by Lehmiller (2022), he found that a majority of people fantasise "to express or fulfil a socially taboo sexual desire" (4) but don't want to actively act on their fantasies because they are either "physically impossible, illegal, inconsistent with moral values, unsafe/risky" (3). Fitzpatrick (2019) poses the question whether there is an ethical way to fantasise or if there are right and wrong ways to feel desire. Although he claims that there might not be a straightforward or satisfactory answer to this ethical issue (7), he similarly acknowledges that our inner sense of morality or code of conduct denies us to consciously experience fantasies that might be considered unacceptable, yet they happen nonetheless (5) and we should not be shamed for them as we are not responsible for the images or thoughts our subconscious creates (7).

It is these taboos that the reader might find captivating in *American Psycho.* Bateman freely engages in sex, violence and murder – actions that are socially sanctioned, disapproved of, considered immoral, or even illegal. Beyond the realm of imagination, the reader is forced to conform to societal standards. However, *American Psycho* allows the reader to engage in sadistic fantasies from the safety of their own home and without consequence. In this fantasy, they come to recognise and confront their deepest desires, which might not be dissimilar from those acted upon by Bateman. As we have seen in Chapter 1, pornography is an industry that mostly exploits

women and profits from the display of women in vulnerable positions who are sexually demeaned and violated. Dworkin writes "The eroticization of murder is the essence of pornography" (1985: 288). Therefore, considering its profitability, largely driven by male consumption, and Bateman's reenactment of scenes from popular porn films, it would not be unfeasible to suggest that some readers, especially male ones, derive pleasure, at least subconsciously, from not only the sexual encounters but also the erotic depiction of torture.

According to Freud, a fantasy capsulates "a partly present, but partly hidden wish – something at the tip of our awareness but with roots in the unconscious. This wish relates to some object that we don't or can't have—like forbidden sex" (Freud qtd in Purcell, 2012: 19). This applies aptly to *American Psycho* as the sex performed in the scenes is categorically "forbidden"—whether it is prostitution, coercive sex or violent sex culminating into torture and murder. The allure lies precisely in its being a desire or fantasy because it is improper and forbidden. Tait has examined the distribution of imagery containing torture, death and suffering on certain underground gore fetish websites, nicknamed 'gore porn' or 'death porn', which give people a platform for the consumption and distributions of gore, catering to morbid tastes (2008: 92). Elizabeth Dauphinee concludes about these websites that "pain is fetishized …we 'cannot escape the voyeurism and the objectification associated with [the imagery's] circulation'" and that "there is no ethical way to circulate images; they are a kind of pornography" (Dauphinee qtd in Tait, 2008: 92). Tait argues that looking at images portraying body horror cannot be considered moral because over-exposure either leads to "'compassion fatigue'" (Moeller qtd in Tati, 2007: 94) or "looking involves pleasure and is thus pornographic" (Tait, 2007: 94), implying sexual enjoyment in witnessing the suffering of other individuals. She adds that body horror has become "the

category of spectacle that the culture most fears and vilifies" (2007: 97), thereby making it a cultural taboo, which in turn makes it even more alluring to its consumer.

This is also what Kristeva means by the 'border of her condition'. It is a feeling, an emotion, a desire in oneself that slightly peeks through but remains suppressed as it is too disturbing for the human mind to fully confront and acknowledge. In reality, these desires cannot be enacted without consequences. In *American Psycho,* however, they can be, which makes it so alluring. This is also reflected in the lack of punishment or consequences that Bateman encounters. In the end, Bateman's life resumes as normal; "On a Friday evening, a group of us have left the office early, finding ourselves at Harry's" (Ellis, 1991: 379) is the introductory line of the last chapter in which Bateman engages in conversation with his colleagues as if nothing had ever happened—not to mention that the murders might not even have occurred and merely exist in Bateman's imagination as his own personal fantasy. Ellis thus unlocks that possibility for the reader to take part in this sadistic fantasy, to engage in the violent and gruesome scenes that mirror their deepest desires, the taboos, but still keeping a distance by taking "refuge in the fantasies of others" (Person qtd in Purcell, 2012: 36)—specifically Bateman's—thus absolving the reader of any culpability.

An important aspect to consider is that *American Psycho* is a first-person narrative, which effectively facilitates identification with Bateman. Throughout most of the novel, the story is told from Bateman's point-of-view, and thus he uses 'I' pronouns to narrate his actions. This usage of the 'I' invites the reader to identify with Bateman's persona. Through the 'I', the readers experience the novel as if they were part of it, thereby becoming active participants. Laura Tanner suggests that "there is no distance between the "I" in the text and the personal "I" … the reader imaginatively becomes the violator" (Tanner qtd in Messier, 2004: 79). In other words, the "I" allows the reader to easily slip into the identity of Bateman and experience the sex, gore and torture

not just alongside him, but through him. As Bateman tortures, mutilates and murders women, so does the reader in their imagination. Moore claims that the reader takes on "Bateman's permeable identity in the scenes that contain another irresistible, but dark, desire" (2012: 232). Through this mechanism, readers are manipulated to easily align themselves with Bateman's sexual urges and erotic desires, which they might already harbour subconsciously, or not: "The reader is seduced and aligns himself or herself with what many would presume to be completely outside of him or herself" (Moore, 2012: 238).

Reyes claims that abjection is crucial to 'body horror', a form of horror which presents 'corporeality' as "the main catalyst for fear, revulsion and disgust for the characters and, by extension, the reader" (2020: 393). While abjection explains our repulsion when confronted with the imagery of mangled bodies, 'body horror' and 'corporeality' can be explained as the mechanisms of abjection to cause these visceral reactions in the reader. The 'normal' body is transformed into a negative or painful version of itself brought about by mutilation and torture (Reyes, 2020: 393). Much like abjection, these realistic yet disgusting representations of the body aim to generate disgust in the viewer/reader (Reyes, 2020: 395) and encourage the consumer "to throw up, throw out, eject the abject" (Creed, 1993: 3). Scenes in which Bateman rips out a girl's intestines through her mouth (Ellis, 1991: 293) or destroys her teeth and jaw with a power-drill would then easily conform to corporeal representations of disfigured and mutilated bodies. When the body is altered beyond recognition, beyond what aligns with the boundaries of 'normal'—such as intestines outside their designated body cavity—physical and visceral reactions occur in the reader, eliciting feelings of repulsion, fear and disgust. Yet it is also this that delivers a pleasurable experience, as Creed identifies this as 'perverse pleasure'. Moore visualises this perverse pleasure through the "common image of the viewer covering his or her eyes, yet still looking at the screen

through gaps between his or her eyes" (2012: 228). This reflects the dual experience of disgust while watching/reading, yet an inability to stop due to the fascination and pleasure derived from confronting the suppressed abject.

Tanner argues that the responses to *American Psycho* "imply a 'sense of powerlessness and complicity in the reading experience, a sense of being at once subjected to and guilty of violence'" (Tanner qtd in Serpell, 2010: 66). However, this is not to say that every reader will be complicit with the violence, come to identify with Bateman or have sadistic fantasies about torturing and killing women. Nevertheless, this type of material is "enticing because they feature a strong visceral component" (Reyes, 2014: 13). Upon being confronted with the excessive imagery of torture, many readers will likely experience a sense of dread while reading the novel and be shocked, repulsed and disgusted by the detailed descriptions of dismemberment, mutilation and murder. Instead of relating to Bateman's gallery of horrors that Ellis has created, readers might then start to feel empathy for the victims and experience visceral reactions without feeling any sort of identifying qualities with the perpetrator.

Readers might even experience a "vicarious feeling of pain (a "what if" sensation)" (Reyes, 2014: 13) in relation to the victims. However, although this type of reader might not engage in the perversity of erotic arousal when confronted with these horrifying images, they still participate in the spectacle as their bodies are directly affected through "somatic empathy through pain or disgust" (Reyes, 2014: 125). Reyes writes that "It is not necessary to identify with the punisher … or even with the action itself, but instead with the corporeal outcome" (2014: 127). However, I would like to point out that even though this might be the case for most torture-based horror films—as they are typically shot from the point-of-view of the victims' perspective[8], making it

[8] See the *Saw* or *Hostel* franchises.

easier to identify with the victims and harder to identify with the torturer—in *American Psycho* we experience the torture scenes through Bateman and from his point-of-view. This offers little opportunity for empathy with his victims. Bateman's victims, often nameless, become mere instruments to his atrocities, and we do not necessarily empathise with them as much as we would if the text had been written from their point of view. The reader is offered a one-sided experience through Bateman's narration and personal thoughts, which invites the reader to identify with him instead of the victims.

Lastly, one of the ways the reader is psychologically manipulated and deceived is through the ambiguity of the killings. While the reader takes for granted that Bateman murders these women in his universe, the novel's final chapters introduce the possibility that they are only a figment of Bateman's imagination and that he merely hallucinates the murders. There are many instances which would support this theory. For example, when Bateman revisits Paul Owen's apartment, his prime murder scene, and where he stored many of his victim's bodies, he finds that the bodies have disappeared without a trace and the apartment is void of any incriminating evidence; "the large-screen television set had been moved into the living room and it's been turned on … but it doesn't make me forget what I did to Christie's breasts … the torrents of gore and blood that washed over the apartment, the stench of the dead" (Ellis, 1991: 354). Also, "There has been no word of bodies discovered in any of the city's four newspapers or on the local news" (352). It appears as if the bodies had never existed and that none of the murders had occurred. However, the peculiar exchange between him and the real estate agent, Mrs Wolfe encourages speculations on whether she was aware of what happened and cleaned up the evidence to uphold the market value of the apartment.

Not only do the corpses disappear but the character's identities intermingle and become interchangeable, contributing to the ambiguous nature of the ending. Throughout the novel, identities are constantly mixed up as "everyone is interchangeable anyway" (Ellis, 1991: 365). The clearest evidence of this is when Bateman confronts Harold Carnes about the message[9] he left on his phone, but Carnes does not even realise he is talking to Bateman and mistakes him for Davis. "'So Harold,' I say, 'did you get my message?' Carnes seems confused at first and, while lighting a cigarette, finally laughs. 'Jesus, Davis. Yes, that was hi*lar*ious. That *was* you, was it?'" (372). Bateman tries to convince Carnes of his identity and that the confession he left on his voicemail was indeed true: "'I killed him. I did it, Carnes. I chopped Owen's fucking head off. I tortured dozens of girls. That whole message I left on your machine was *true*'… 'But that's simply not possible… Because… I had… dinner… with Paul Owen… twice… in London … *just ten days ago*'" (373). This is the crucial revelation which prompts many critics and readers to argue Bateman's murders are simply hallucinations, or even argue his non-existence (Serpell, 2010). However, this once again leaves room for interpretation and ambiguity as Eldridge argues "if the lawyer has misidentified Bateman, he could have easily misidentified Allen[10]" (2008: 29). This occurrence is plausible as it is not the first instance of Carnes confusing identities. Just moments before, Carnes declares, "'Good to see you. Oh my, is that Edward Towers?' I crane my neck to look, then turn back to Harold. 'No,' I say" (372), clearly having mistaken another man for Edward Towers. It is these inconsistencies that render the novel deeply ambiguous.

[9] During his killing spree, Bateman left a voicemail on Harold Carnes' phone confessing to all his crimes.
[10] In the film, that character is named Paul Allen whereas in the novel his name is Paul Owen. This is because the name had to be changed as the production team did not want to risk legal sanctions due to a broker named Paul Owen working on Wall Street. Eldridge is referring to the film, but it is nonetheless applicable to the novel as these scenes are identical.

Whether his crimes are imaginary or not matters less when it comes to interpreting the text or its reception. On the contrary, I believe it only contributes to the manipulation of the reader, leading to further frustration. Reyes argues that "To a certain extent, whether the violence is real matters less than the fact that the films may be consumed as potentially so" (2020: 406). Entering this novel, the reader is aware that it is not based on a true story and that all the events portrayed in the novel are merely a fabrication of Ellis' imagination, or even a reiteration of existing literature and films. After all, the novel opens with "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" (Ellis, 1991: 3), a line from Dante's *Inferno*—a work of fiction. However, that does not prevent the reader from experiencing somatic and visceral reactions when consuming the depicted violence and gore. To the reader, this violence might very well feel real, and the reader experiences it as if it were, in fact, real. Therefore, the reality of Bateman's crimes within his own universe holds little significance to the reader.

Reyes adds that "This is enough to grant their various flirtations with abjection an additional layer of complicitous guilt for viewers" (2020: 407). However, the ambiguous revelations in the novel's final chapters might lead to feelings of frustration, as some readers might feel deceived. *American Psycho* delivers a somatically and viscerally exhausting experience for the reader, so the possibility that these crimes might be merely a figment of Bateman's imagination might cause the reader to feel as if they had read the novel in vain. This platitude can be linked to the common trope of a story ending with the main character waking up and realising it was all a dream. As Serpell claims "words have effects on readers, even when they are merely fictional" (2010: 52).

3. Conclusion and Further Research

In this dissertation, I have focused my analysis on how the sexual violence depicted in *American Psycho* is rooted in the aesthetics of pornography and how this harmful portrayal subsequently leads to negative repercussions and reinforcement of gender stereotypes pertaining to both women and men. I have also analysed how *American Psycho* manipulates the reader into actively engaging with the narrative and attempted to explore the appeal of the horror genre. My initial research question was why readers were so fascinated by *American Psycho'*s extreme violence and why they enjoyed or continued reading the novel while simultaneously being disturbed by it.

In my view, it comes down to the appeal of taboo topics and the allure of the forbidden. *American Psycho* unlocks the possibility for readers to engage in a fantasy that lurks deep in their subconscious, at the border of their existence. It provides a release, as readers are not allowed to actively engage in that fantasy beyond the realm of fiction, as they are confined within the boundaries of societal norms, conformity and laws. The visceral component also contributed to the enormous success of the novel, as part of the appeal of the horror genre is the opportunity to be able to experience physical and somatic reactions when confronted with horrifying images of abnormal corporeal representations.

My aim was not to argue that *American Psycho* is not a satire or should not be read as a satire. Many scholars have identified the satirical elements in the novel, and I agree with the premise that *American Psycho* is, in fact, a satire. However, that is not to say that one should just blindly disregard the issues or negative consequences that the novel elicits. As per the public's reception, many readers have overlooked the satirical undertones because the sheer explicitness and severity of the pornographic and violent imagery eclipse the satire. I believe that if the novel had featured less explicit and violent content or decided to forgo the eroticisation of murder, the

effects of the satire would have been more powerful and more readily visible as has been proven by the film adaptation. The film successfully communicated the satirical depiction of the 1980's American lifestyle rooted in individualism, consumerism and capitalism, precisely because the viewer was not distracted by the over-indulgence in pornography and gore.

Chapter 1 outlined the novel's commonality with hardcore pornography and how depictions of women in porn influence the ways in which they are perceived by men in society—mainly as 'whores' or objects whose sole purpose and value lies in their ability to satisfy men sexually. Although many scholars before me have discussed the pornographic language and the erotic portrayal of violence in *American Psycho,* I have taken it a step further and approached it from a different angle by explicitly highlighting the similarities between modern-day hardcore pornography and Ellis' sex scenes.

Women in porn are compelled to endure humiliating and degrading situations in which they are often tormented and tortured for the sake of pornography but are expected to maintain the illusion that they enjoy being subjected to this type of violent treatment. I have also argued that pornography conforms to harmful patriarchal definitions that confine men to the role of the aggressor and women to that of the submissive victim. I even suggested that the connection between pornography and the erotic scenes in *American Psycho* share a resemblance that cannot be dismissed as being merely satirical. Seemingly, Ellis uses the aesthetics of pornography to his advantage to excite and lure in the reader. Then, finally, I turned my attention to the male victims in *American Psycho,* which have often been disregarded by many scholars or merely used as a juxtaposition to the female murders, which are visibly more sexual. I argued that, even though the violence may not be sexually explicit, it is still rooted in the aesthetics of pornography as the male victims reinforce pornography's hatred towards women and its need to destroy them.

Chapter 2 explored the ways in which the reader is manipulated throughout the narrative. I have argued that the conflation of porn and violence, the resulting identification, and the ambiguity of the murders all contribute to the psychological manipulation of the reader. I have focused on how the horror genre aims to evoke visceral reactions in its readership/viewership through the confrontation with the subconscious self and abjection. I also suggested that the reader might come to identify with Bateman and find pleasure in the enacted violence, imaginatively becoming the violator. However, I have also proposed an alternative explanation in which it is not necessary to identify with Bateman, and that enjoyment is derived solely through the corporeal outcome. Therefore, the reader can enjoy the violence and be repulsed by it without harbouring any identifying feelings for Bateman.

I believe my dissertation allows for interesting further research. More attention could be given to the male murders, as not every victim can be explained by pornographic conceptions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, the murder of Paul Owen, who mirrors Bateman in appearances, behaviour and performed masculinity, ends up as a victim of Bateman's brutality despite not possessing any of the typical feminine traits seen in his usual male victims. Interestingly enough, Luis Carruthers escapes Bateman's violence despite his attempts to sexually seduce Bateman, which I believe could open the door to a different discourse—namely the suggestion that Bateman might subconsciously harbour homosexual desires that threaten his own masculinity and therefore he lashes out at the women and feminine men in his life because he cannot accept his own supposed brittle masculinity.

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