

American Psycho *Malignant Narcissism on the Screen*

Isaac Tylim, PsyD

*Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, New York
University Postdoctoral Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy,
and Maimonides Medical Center*

American Psycho (1999) may be described as a vivid screen illustration of malignant narcissism. Adapted from Bret Easton Ellis's (1991/2000) eponymous novel, the film was elegantly directed by Mary Harron, whose previous work includes *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996). Harron's films transfer the classical American myth of individualism and self-sufficiency—so often depicted in Westerns—to the urban landscape. Instead of cowboys, her films present creatures that roam around free, not in the big empty spaces of the American West, but the overbuilt and menacing jungle of America's big cities with their canyons—streets of cement. The conquest of the West is now the conquest of the Metropolis, and the brave and lone ranger of yesterday has been replaced by the greedy and lone narcissist of today.

Despite the obvious differences between *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *American Psycho*, these films share the director's sensitivity towards characters that live their lives on the edge. They are young, obsessed individuals enveloped by the endless allure of commercialism and consumerism spiced with the cult of celebrity and the hunger for power. While riding in luxury cars these contemporary urban cowboys are struggling desperately to contain the fragility of their respective selves. The frail

Isaac Tylim, PsyD, Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, New York, New York; New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy; and Maimonides Medical Center, New York, New York.

Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to Isaac Tylim, PsyD, 26 West 9th Street, Suite 2/D, New York, New York 10011. Electronic mail may be sent to ityork@aol.com.

boundaries that prevail between the internal and external world, between psychic reality and material reality, and between mind and body, are cleverly represented on film through high-tech editing and invasive sound track. The crossover or sudden transition from one realm of experience to another is effectively conveyed with efficiency and economy of means.

I Shot Andy Warhol narrates the trials and tribulations of Valerie Solanas, a disturbed young woman who, in the 70s, gained notoriety after shooting the pop artist Andy Warhol. Solanas is portrayed as an ultrafeminist whose mission in life is to spread the word of female superiority. She published the "Society for Cutting up Men Manifesto" (SCAM), which she distributed among Manhattan intellectual and artistic circles. *American Psycho* introduces a fictional Patrick Bateman, (note the reference to Hitchcock's Norman Bates in *Psycho*, 1960), a composite of a lawless 20th-century greedy misogynist and misanthrope in designer clothes who, like Solanas, follows his own moral code. He indulges in, and at times acts out, violent and sadistic fantasies. Patrick is as disturbed as Norman Bates from *Psycho*, and like Norman, Patrick is protective of his delusional world, being invested in warding off intruders that threaten to disrupt it.

Valerie tours the art world, while Patrick swims the dangerous corporate waters. Valerie and Patrick, although different in regard to their respective sociopolitical agendas, seem to represent a variety of malignant narcissism that idealizes aggression and violence. As is often true in cases of malignant narcissism, in their journey Valerie and Patrick revisit primitive states and psychotic landscapes.

The opening credits of *American Psycho* show red-berry sauce spilling on a white background. Red-berry sauce appears as a concrete reference to blood. It functions as a substitute for real blood, perhaps more akin to a symbolic equation than a true symbol. Drops of red-berry sauce have the shape of tears falling on a pristine white tablecloth. Is the director's intention to condense blood and tears into a single pristine image? The contrast between red and white sets the stage for the next image: a sharp knife cutting bread. The composition has religious tones, a stylized version of the Last Supper where the Son of God is about to be sacrificed. *American Psycho* portrays the corporate world of high finances, where "mergers and acquisitions" are blurred with "murders and executions," and a crossword puzzle consists of two words that are repeated across and down: "meat and bones." Murder, executions, and meat and bones are the main ingredients of Patrick's sexual scenarios. His devouring greed is depicted in bed where he bites his partners until they bleed.

The references to cannibalism and murder are ubiquitous throughout the film. Patrick often feels lethal, being addicted to the thrill of inflicting pain. One watches him caressing a kitchen knife stating "I don't think I can control myself." He is constantly preoccupied with food and the "in" restaurants. Even when he is not hungry he insists on getting a table at the popular restaurant of the moment. Allusions to oral cravings abound, and Patrick's yearning for fresh blood is pervasive and recurrent.

The camera follows Patrick's morning routine in his all-white apartment. The eyes are directed to smooth surfaces: fabrics, walls, and skin. Patrick is like a glossy surface with no psychological depth, a high-maintenance, quasimechanical being in need of constant grooming. The inventory of cosmetics, massages, and aerobic protocols convey that Patrick exists in a world of fetishes. Life is to him a supermarket of desires packaged with designer labels. "I believe in taking care of myself," he redundantly clarifies. Patrick Bateman is a concept, an idea, rather than a true person. "I am not there. . . . I am an abstraction of me," he goes on saying. Although Patrick admits having human characteristics, his only emotions are greed and disgust. He watches pornographic videos while doing his daily exercises. Making love is an opportunity to admire his reflection on the mirror. The libidinization of aggression and the lack of neutralization of aggressive drives sets the stage for recurrent mini psychotic episodes.

Of all art forms, cinema is perhaps the most adequate medium for the representation of violence. The core complex of Patrick's violence is an intense longing for the indissoluble union with the object. His violence aims at obliterating differences, targeting the differences between self and others, the differences between the sexes, and the differences between the generations. The fragmented images, the cuts, the editing effects, all collaborate in creating the aesthetics of violence. Cruelty and destructive actions on screen seem to be reconciled with the appeal of Patrick's perfectly built body. In the past, the Nouvelle Vague referred to this reconciliation as a "mise en scene" introduced by the film hero. In its purest form, *mise en scene* comes near to what sometimes is called fascism. Patrick is depicted with overtones of Nietzsche's Superman.

In cases of severe narcissistic pathology, objects have the power to inflict major injuries on the self. Patrick's violence appears as an attempt to resolve or find solution to the experience of being overwhelmed by the presence of the other. The film offers no reference to Patrick's—or for that matter to any of the other characters'—family of origin or upbringing. The omission of genetic material in the narrative may be interpreted as an

indicator of narcissistic self-sufficiency, denial of neediness and dependency. Time is expressed through fashion and sporadic flashes of Ronald Reagan on a TV monitor discussing the Iran Contra Affair. Patrick wants “everything”—self and other—just for the thrill of having it all. “Everything” implies no tolerance for “otherness” and betrays the perseverance of childhood omnipotence and the wish to indulge in both libidinal and aggressive striving without limitations or consideration for others. Patrick declares, “If you can empathize with others, empathize with yourself.”

Patrick’s violence attempts to freeze and control the object, establishing a sadomasochistic mode of relating. The inability to let go or mourn leads to a desperate holding on to the object through sadism or masochism. Controlling is Patrick’s mission in life: Body, mind, self, and others fall prey to his demands. He dictates to his secretary what to wear in his presence, preferring high heels on her feet. Patrick does not want to know the names of the two prostitutes he hires for the night. He renames them and talks about his favorite music while providing them with clear instructions about what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. The display of perverse sexuality informs the viewer of Patrick’s belief on having discovered the secret of desire at the expense of the other. The version of the primal scene he enacts with the two prostitutes reverses the exclusion of the child confronted with the relationship between the parents attaining an illusory victory over the defeat of exclusion.

Patrick embodies the attributes of that which Rosenfeld (1987) classified as a thin- or thick-skinned narcissism. Thin-skinned narcissists are vulnerable, feel inferior, and are oversensitive to rejection. On the contrary, thick-skinned narcissists sustain an impenetrable superiority. They are intolerant to weaknesses in themselves or others and defend aggressively against neediness and dependency. In cases of thick-skinned narcissism, the whole self becomes identified with a destructive one. External objects may be perceived as rejected internalized objects, which must be destroyed. The loss or destruction of external objects is to thick-skinned narcissists a triumph over limitations, which in terms empowers the destructive self. Patrick’s narcissism oscillates between a thick- and a thin-skinned narcissism. This oscillation leads ultimately to the danger of the self dissolving or collapsing. Patrick seems desperate to eject envy from his persecutory internal world, assuming the identity of the spoiled object, changing persona (which is Greek for “mask”) like he changes Valentino suits. Patrick shows signs of relief when realizing that Paul, the colleague whose identity he believed he stole, is alive. Patrick is “harmless on the outside . . . yet inside . . . there are no barriers. . . . I want

my pain to be inflicted on others.” However, under extreme situations, Patrick’s aggressive drives lead him to believe that his envy turned to murderous rage has obliterated Paul. The fear of retaliation renders the self vulnerable, revealing the thin-skinned dimensions of Patrick’s narcissism. Patrick is capable of killing a helpless kitten or a homeless person. He rationalizes it by considering the homeless person “. . . a fucking loser. . . . I don’t have anything in common with you.”

Shengold (1991) suggested the link between intense malignant envy of others and of the body parts of both parents to the narcissistic merging fantasy that obliterates that which is impossible to accept. Patrick gets into fits of rage when hearing that one of his colleagues was able to secure a reservation at a restaurant; he literally loses himself when, in comparing business cards, he realizes the superior quality of that of his peers’: penis-envy-seize transformed into card-design-envy.

Patrick is convinced that he has murdered Paul and that an inspector is out to get him. He suffers from persecutory guilt as opposed to depressive guilt. Depressive guilt suggests an ego where the integration of its split parts has been accomplished, thus the ego may tolerate ambivalence and the coexistence of love and hate. However, Patrick’s guilt is a derivative of the potential to damage or destroy the good object, functioning at the service of the life instinct. Persecutory guilt implies an unintegrated ego and is a corollary to excessive envy. A weak ego is not able to contain the destructive impulses, hence the projection of its contents onto external objects, which in turn threatens the self from without. Persecutory guilt predominates the conviction that the object has been attacked—either in fantasy or in reality—and that retaliation is imminent. Ultimately persecutory guilt is an attempt to mitigate or placate the persecutory object. As per Grinberg (1957), love and hate are split off in persecutory guilt functioning at the service of the death instinct.

The creation of a neoreality in the form of paranoid delusions may be Patrick’s only means to repair the damage and restore the bridge to external reality. Patrick’s attempt to repair the damage by confessing his crime to his lawyer is bound to fail. True reparation is not possible because of the prevalence of splitting and projective identification. A confession of crimes betrays the operation of manic defenses at work, which are deployed as a means of warding off persecutory anxieties. Patrick returns to the scene of his imaginary crimes, looking for evidence of his destructive impulses.

New York City with its multidimensional spaces, dark alleys, big-windowed offices, designed restaurants, and pristine apartments stands for

the sea of emptiness, the vast American West of unknown frontiers. The contrasting locations may signify the dissociation between affects and ideations. Throughout the film the dissociated states are accentuated with a soundtrack that reflects Patrick's obsessive engagement with pop music. Patrick's polymorphous perverse scenarios attempt to encapsulate the underlying threat of fragmentation and brewing of a psychotic process. When a perverse scenario fails to suspend that threat, the ego, once deprived of a buffer, begins to collapse. The end result is *American Psycho*.

References

- Ellis, B. E. (2000). *American psycho*. Chicago: Distribooks. (Original work published 1991)
- Grinberg, L. (1957). *Culpa y depression*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Paidos.
- Rosenfeld, H. (1987). *Impasse and interpretations*. London: Tavistock.
- Shengold, L. (1991). "Father, don't you see I'm burning." New Haven: Yale University Press.