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Desire, Bad-faith and Being-for-other — Existential Thought in American Psycho

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Abstract: Existentialism is a prominent intellectual movement that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, profoundly influenced modern and postmodern philosophy. Some of Sartre‘s important ideas on freedom, commitment, responsibility, anxiety, and identity are artistically expressed through his fictional work, inspired countless later writers. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, initially criticized for its graphic depictions of violence, has proven to hold deeper philosophical significance. The large number of direct and indirect references to the classics of existentialist fiction demonstrates the solid foundation of existentialist thought, delving into the pathology of the postmodern individual, demonstrates the different manifestations of existential crisis in different times. By *American Psycho*, Ellis intertwined this new expression of existential thought with the social critique advanced. Through Sartre's existentialist ideas, this dissertation examines the novel's satirical depiction of the empty banality of modern consumer culture, disturbing scenes of excessive violence, and the internal logic of the psychology of the characters' behavior. The novel demonstrates the unique development of the existentialist novel, by exploring the existential state of the postmodern subject in the late twentieth century. It also shows the existential crisis in the postmodern society, through the pathological psychology and behavior of the novel's protagonist.

Keywords: Existentialism, Consumption, Being-for-other, Bad Faith, The Look

1. Introduction

America in the 1980s was a cutthroat decade marked by stark contrasts. Some view it as a golden age, with Reaganomics, conservatives, and baby boomers reviving the U.S. economy, while others see it as a gilded age, characterized by selfishness and destruction. The 1980s gradually ushered in a wealthy society, as symbols became so oversupplied that the real disappears, the world has become increasingly anthropomorphic, drowning in a sea of symbolic mimesis. In this context, the quest for equality was replaced by the equality of consumption, turning consumerism into a cultural ideology that exerted control over people [1].

American Psycho, published in the 1990s, features an ironic character who embodies this extreme consumer society of 1980s America. Defined by consumerism and marked by emptiness and madness, Patrick Bateman reveals the absurdity of consumer culture through his ironic character. Bret Easton Ellis, through Bateman’s chaotic psyche, critiques the pathological emptiness that defines a society obsessed with materialism. However, *American Psycho* was heavily criticized after its publication. Roger Rosenblatt's article in *The New York Times* described the book as "the most loathsome offering

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of the season" [2]. As the initial shock of the violence subsided, some critics found the rest of the novel dull and unworthy of attention. Yet, as Elizabeth Young said, “Bret Easton Ellis spent three years writing this novel, and it is a novel—not a ‘How-to-manual’, nor true-crime, not a manifesto or a tract—and it seems reasonable to give it more than three minutes consideration.”[3] Beneath the protagonist's never-ending repetition of words and uninterrupted violent thoughts lies the social reality that Ellis is trying to criticize. This dissertation will explore the causes of Bateman's pathological behavior through an existentialist lens, shedding light on Ellis's satire on consumerist society.

2. Desire, Possibility and Consumption

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre concludes that being-for-itself is defined by lack: “The for-itself can not sustain nihilation without determining itself as a lack of being.” [4] This theory underpins explanations of phenomena such as desire and suffering. In Sartre's view, deficiency arises not only when desires are not fulfilled but when individuals experience a fundamental lack of something. The object of desire has a transcendence that can be argued in this way: “Consequently the being of psychic thirst will be the being in itself of a state, and we are referred once again to a transcendent witness. But then the thirst will be desire for this transcendence but not for itself; it will be desire in the eyes of another.” [4] What the thirsty consciousness desires is not thirst itself, but the possibility of drinking. Self-actualisation throws itself at the quasi-existence in the form of “desire for worldly objects”, which leads to the emergence of the “Possible” in the world. What is manifested as the inherent lack of each self, and what is specified as the lack of a particular self and of any other self, is the possibility of "being for itself". Possible can not be reducible to a subjective reality, nor does it precede what is real, but it is a specific property of an already existing real. A feature of the Possible is that it needs to come into the world through human reality, “the possible comes into the world through human reality. These clouds can change into rain only if I surpass them towards the rain, just as the crescent moon lacks a portion of the disc only if I surpass the crescent towards the full moon. " [4] Another feature of possibility is that there is a possibility in the world only if it comes into the world through a being that is its own possibility.

American Psycho presents a distorted picture of this existential framework within the context of an extreme consumerist society. The protagonist, Patrick Bateman can be identified as a satire addressing his obsession with luxury, his judgment of others who appear in the book, and the standard that measures the worth of everything in terms of money and power. The manifestations of Bateman's poisoning by consumerism keep coming up throughout the book: when he sees a man, he is able to accurately recognize the brand of the person's clothing, but lacks confidence in who the person actually was; Over and over, Bateman lists luxury items, and his obsessive pursuit of high-end restaurants—his anxiety about securing a reservation—further illustrates his attempt to “fix” his being-for-itself through the consumption of commodities. His frantic pursuit of luxury items represents a desperate effort to solidify his transcendence in a process of self-reflection. However, this attempt failed to achieve the desired results. Sartre argues that narrating *our* life requires a fundamental revision of actual lived experience, in the fiction *Nausea*, the main character complains, “This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were telling a story. But you have to choose: live or tell” [5]. Bateman is unable to distinguish between his living and his telling, which is evident in the chapter *Chase, Manhattan*, where his narration changed from first person to third person and back to first person again. His obsession with consumer goods is also a testament. Equating life exclusively with narrative, explain the process through the results, that is to say, the nature of consumer goods is articulated through their cultural nature. Don DeLillo has commented on media consumption, notes that the media itself becomes a

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source of fiction: “In the past, people looked to fiction for plot and character, drama and action, they now turn to television.” Advertising establishes an artificial and arbitrary relationship between the nature of culture and commodities through countless symbolisations, Bateman desires the cultural nature of goods (i.e. identity such as respectability, elegance, etc.) when he consumes them, yet “We forgot the future was not yet there” [5]. Since we can't articulate an event in terms of the future when it first occurs, a story that presupposes a future ending is, in a sense, bad faith. A narrative like Bateman's, which pursues referentiality through floating referentiality, cannot succeed. Bateman's way of transcending the desire for a noble identity is to choose to consume, he sees the possibility of this cultural nature as the possession of expensive commodities; However, there is no objective correspondence between the nature of culture and the price of commodities, commodities are not the Possible of a cultural nature, Bateman's attempts thus failed.

3. Being-for-other, Bad Faith

In the third volume of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explores the relationship between the self and the other and illustrates the inevitability of interpersonal conflict, individuals perceive others as a violation of their liberty, because others see the individual as an object, solidified individual’s transcendence. However, individuals also need others as spectators, because the way they become the person they wish to be can only be realized through the behaviors and attitudes others direct toward them. This inability to know myself through myself alone, and my existence apart from my suffering, becomes a source of bad faith. A form of bad faith is the assertion that “I am the thing which others have made of me, which is sufficient to define my identity, and there is no need to become more than this given identity”.[6] This mentality traps people in a group identity, preventing the formation of an individual self. This thought is embodied in consumerist societies as de-personalisation.

In *American Psycho*, the yuppie class is a perfect embodiment of this phenomenon, where everyone is indistinguishable and interchangeable. When Bateman asks his girlfriend why she didn't choose Price as a lover, his girlfriend, Evelyn, questions, “Why Price? *Price*?” Bateman lists Price's virtues: rich, handsome, in good shape; And Evelyn answered: “Everybody’s rich, …Everybody’s good-looking, Patrick, …Everybody has a great body now,” [7]. As Bateman looked around the pub, “The chandelier room is packed and everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same.” [7] Bateman and his friends misidentify each other, and this misidentification occurs throughout the book. For example, he was mistaken for Marcus Halberstam, “but for some reason, it really doesn’t matter and it seems a logical faux pas” [7], because they share the same physical appearance, wear the same clothes, and work for the same company. This avoidance of anxiety-inducing transcendence (That is, to escape suffering by alienating our freedom, either by trying to see ourselves externally, as another person or thing, or by thinking of ourselves as forced or determined) completely deprives man of the possibility of establishing his own identity. Placing the *other* in a dominant position in the companionship of *self* and *other*, conceiving his own consciousness on the basis of the model of the other, depersonalizing himself through complete equivalence to his role in the eyes of others [8]. In this sense, when others fulfill the duty of defining identity for *us*, *we* are forced to look at ourselves through other people's eyes; “But on principle the object thus defined stands as the pole of alienation of my pain; it is, on principle, that which I am without having to be it and without being able to transcend it toward anything else.” [4] Bateman will never be able to perfectly live up to the standards of group identity, as Evelyn remarks, “You know, you can always be in better shape.” [7]

Bateman's life is a continual attempt to escape the existential anxiety of freedom by conforming to an identity that is imposed on him. He cannot transcend his bad faith because he is caught in an endless cycle of striving to meet external standards, and in doing so, he remains trapped in a state of alienation. In this way, his identity as defined by consumerism and social status will always be incomplete, as it is always contingent on the judgments of others.

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4. The Look, Love, Sadism and Violence

In Sartre's theory of being-for-others, the other is the key to *my* own emergence; When the look of the other appears, the other becomes the center of the world, I was made aware of "the other as subject", the resulting shame "is shame of self; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging." [4] Under the watchful eye of the Other, *I* know that my possibilities are outside of me and dependent on others, under the look of the Other "suddenly I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities, which are now associated with objects of the world, far from me in the midst of the world." [4]. When *I* want to subjugate the other and constitute the other as an object, exploring within this object my inherent objectivity, others lose their subjectivity; *I* cannot be the object of the object, therefore my subjugation ceases and gives way to domination. The presence of others reveals to *me* the presence of what *I* am, on one hand, "The Other looks at me and as such he holds the secret of my being, he knows what I am. Thus the profound meaning of my being is outside of me, imprisoned in an absence. The Other has the advantage over me." [4] On the other hand, being a free other is the basis of *my* self-existence; When I reject the Other, the Other shrinks to an object and ceases to be a subject, thus undermining *my* self-affirmation. In order to repeat the realization of the source self-affirmation, the self has to resurrect the other as a subject frequently, and therefore the other as a subject is important for self-affirmation.

However, the very presence of the other—and their freedom—creates insecurity "I am in danger in this freedom. It molds my being and makes me be, it confers values upon me and removes them from me; and my being from it a perpetual passive escape from self." [4] One phenomenon for the unwillingness to accept the Other as a subject is that I begin to recover my freedom by absorbing or assimilating the freedom of the Other, which is the logic behind the desire to be loved. The lover wants to take possession of a subject's right to be free, and to be loved by a subject who has the capacity to be free so that to possess their subjectivity; Through the love of others, the lover is rescued from instrumentality, thus escaping the objectification brought about by the gaze of others.

In *American Psycho*, Bateman shows fear of the look of others, and when he saw the janitor looking at him, he was filled with nameless terror, because the janitor may have jumped to a conclusion about him (the man who was dating the secretary); Bateman's attempts to master the freedom of the beloved and his attempts to fit into group relationships fail simultaneously, when his lover Bethany says she's having an affair with the chef at Dorsia and points out that Bateman hung Onika's painting upside down. When his love becomes love among many, his freedom is limited by the artificiality of the beloved and his own artificiality; And the upside-down paintings are likely to be defined in the look of others as Bateman's inability to understand the meaning and value of the paintings, thus threatening his group identity. When Evelyn and Bateman have an argument about the image of a strange man, he is enraged by Evelyn's gaze because he believes that in Evelyn's gaze he becomes a jealous man of others. Bateman's obsessive attention to his appearance—his hair, skin, muscles, clothes—demonstrates how his life is dictated by the desire to be seen and judged in a particular way by others. Almost every day, his routine includes skincare, beauty salon visits, workouts, shopping for luxury items, and dining in fancy restaurants—all to maintain his carefully crafted image. In the chapter *Tries to Cook and Eat Girl*, he weeps and sobs as he eats the flesh of a dead woman and says, "I just want to be loved." [7] He wants to be rescued from the spotlight by a lover who can make him the ultimate goal, and he wants to take the lead in the relationship. Patricia puts him on hold when he calls, so he purposely doesn't answer Patricia's calls to make her wait as well; When he hears that Patricia is going to a concert in order to meet her ex-boyfriend, he goes to great lengths to make Patricia go to the appointment by lying about that he's booked into a top restaurant which Patricia won't refuse; He goes to great lengths to trick Evelyn into eating chocolate-covered pee-doo scones; all of these behaviors reflect his desire to rise above the beloved. In his

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relationship with his lover, however, Bateman fails to find any genuine affection. His lovers, like Bethany, Evelyn, and Patricia, remain distant, and he is unable to truly transcend the objectification he experiences. His relationship with Bethany, for instance, is marked by a complete lack of intimacy; he doesn't even know that she smokes. To Bateman, love is not an authentic connection, but a mechanism for gaining control over the other's subjectivity. When the attempt to absorb the freedom of the Other to restore *my* freedom fails, another phenomenon is that I ignore the freedom of the Other, this is manifested in sadism and violence. Sadism seeks to use other people's bodies as tools, "That is why the sadist wants to make the flesh present to the Other's consciousness differently. He wants to make it present by treating the Other as an instrument; he makes it present in pain. …But at the same time, the pain is procured by means of instruments. The body of the torturing For-itself is no longer anything more than an instrument for giving pain." [4] The sadist attempts to possess the freedom of the other through the flesh. However, this attempt is ultimately a dead end and doomed to failure, because the abuser rejects his own flesh and reduces himself to an "instrument for giving pain" (reducing oneself to an instrument of inflicting pain and thus rejecting one's physical existence), thus one's grasp of the freedom of the Other is only an illusion. As a result, the sadism does not gain transcendence; Instead, Sartre concludes, the body of the Other "is there, and it is there for nothing" [9].

When Bateman fails to absorb the freedom of the other, he resorts to violence. He tries to take complete possession of his victim's freedom and endows himself with God-like omnipotence. However, as the victim's death approaches, Patrick "already knew it was going to be a typically useless, meaningless death". The sadist, in reducing the other to an instrument of pain, also denies his own subjectivity. This results in a paradox: the sadist cannot achieve transcendence because he has rejected his own freedom and reduced the other to an object.

Bateman's violent acts are a manifestation of this sadistic desire. His killings, whether of prostitutes, hobos, or friends, are marked by an initial exuberance followed by emptiness. For example, before killing Paul Owen, Bateman prepares the tools for the murder in meticulous detail, describing the process of inflicting harm on Owen's body. However, the murderous exuberance fades quickly, once the murder is over, the exhilaration fades, and Bateman is left feeling empty. When he revisits to Paul Owen's flat at the end of the novel, all of Owen's presence disappears. Through Paul Owen's death, he became completely objective, Bateman identifies his subjectivity to the dead who will never become subjects. Yet by emphasizing the importance of the subjectivity of the Other in the previous section, Bateman loses all possibility of revealing himself as a subject to an Other. When "The sadist, … requires his victim to be a mere instrument, no longer a source of 'the look': …he no longer has a human being before him, nor therefore a human freedom in his possession." [10] The victim's deadly, fixed gaze, his attempt to reclaim his freedom from the gaze of others, failed completely; "What I was for the Other is fixed by the Other's death, …The Other's death constitutes me as an irremediable object exactly as my own death would do." [4] This is also clear when Bateman kills Bethany: his attempt to fully grasp her objecthood through violence—attempting to make her confirm his own recognition—fails. In the moment of her death, Bateman's subjectivity is framed by her gaze, highlighting the paradox of his existence: he cannot transcend the objectification imposed by others, even in the act of trying to eliminate their subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

In *American Psycho*, the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is depicted as a figure desperate to establish his identity within the confines of a consumerist society. Based on the theory of lack and being-for-itself, this paper analyses the reasons for Bateman's desire for consumer goods. Bateman's attempt to fix his own self-actualisation through the frenzied pursuit of commodities is, in Sartre's view, unsuccessful. Bateman is unable to distinguish between his life-dominated by external narrative and

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the true nature of his being. His consumerism becomes a form of self-enslavement, as it is driven not by his genuine self but by a distorted, superficial image created through the consumption of cultural symbols. However, the price tag on these commodities bears no intrinsic connection to the cultural meanings they are meant to represent, further underscoring the lack of authenticity in Bateman's quest for identity. Through his immersion in group identity, Bateman attempts to escape his pain by alienating his freedom, but fails to perfectly meet the criteria for group identity.

The paper concludes with a discussion of Sartre's exploration of the relationship between the self and the Other in *Being and Nothingness*, and how this theory is reflected in *American Psycho*. According to Sartre's theory of the Other and being-for-other, the look of the Other makes the individual aware of one's existence as an object, which creates a sense of shame. The freedom of others is the basis of the individual's existence, but it also constitutes a threat to the self. Individuals try to restore their own freedom by absorbing or assimilating the freedom of others, but this is bad faith. Another phenomenon is the neglect of the freedom of the Other, which manifests in sadism and violence, but this attempt is also doomed to failure.

The pain caused by other people's look makes Bateman want to master them, yet after failed attempts to absorb the freedom of the Other through love and to dominate the subjectivity of the Other through violence, Bateman was unable to escape the cold society prescribed by consumption and loses the ability to construct itself. He became "an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me" [7] Eventually he gave up trying, stopped rebelling against the group identity and the look of others, and accepted the bad-faith.

Due to space constraints, the integration of Sartre's theories of choice and freedom, which are highly valued in Sartre's theory of existence, with the theory of consumerism has not been fully discussed, and the integration of identity theory has been insufficient. Future research could build upon this analysis, offering a more detailed exploration of how Sartre's existential philosophy intersects with the dynamics of consumer society, identity formation, and the notion of freedom in the modern world.

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