

“I simply am not there”
Sadism and (the lack of?) identity in Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*

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Abstract

Sadism is commonly assumed to be differing from the norm. Ironically, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan’s, Lacanian, definition of a sadistic subject is that, failing to complete the Oedipus complex and thus stuck in a state of disavowal of castration, he/she „believes he/she is the phallus, the object of desire that can fill the Other’s lack and thus speaks the word of law“ (241). Thus, the perverse subject probably tries harder to become part of society than the ‘normal’ subjects. However, this paper argues that the relationship between the perverse subject and society is more complicated: for him/her, perversion is a way to act out his/her hatred for the Other, in this case the Symbolic order, as will be shown by means of the example of Bret Easton Ellis’ “American Psycho”.

Due to sadism’s relation to the invocation drive, the perverse subject conceives of him-/herself as being the instrument by which the Other can hear and make itself heard. This accounts for the protagonist’s (Patrick Bateman’s) desperate need to be part of the society in which he lives, which in this case may be considered equal to the Symbolic order. At the same time, precisely because of his perversion and the ensuing incomplete Oedipus complex, he fails to undergo a complete subjectivation, a fact that causes his hatred for the obviously lacking Other, as it fails to incorporate subjects like him. By means of torturing and/or killing representatives of this society, he can act out this hatred.

Proposing a reading of “American Psycho” grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper shows how this conception of perversion can serve as a useful analytical tool to understand how the social and the private - sexual - space interlink.

Key Words: Lacanian psychoanalysis, perversion, sadism, subjectivity, the Other

The paper I am going to present evolved as part of my doctoral thesis, which is situated within the field of perversion and US literature and film. What I intend to present at this conference is a paper that developed out of my chapter on sexual perversion, as Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* figures as my core text of that chapter. What I am trying to show is how the perversion of Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of the novel, a sadist in the Lacanian sense of the word, entails an incomplete subjectivation of this protagonist. Moreover, I plan to demonstrate that – at least in this novel – perversion actually functions as an erotised form of hatred, but that this hatred is two-fold: it is at the same time directed against an Other that fails to incorporate the subject, and against those subjects that are, so to speak, ‘living proof’ of this failure of the Other.

Before talking about the novel, permit me to begin with a brief excursion into the theoretical background that is essential to this paper. What *is* sexually deviant behaviour? According to Freud’s *Three essays on Sexuality*, all behaviour is perverse which differs from the heterosexual norm. This statement, however, contradicts his own thesis of the polymorph-perverse character of any sexual behaviour (Evans, 220). Therefore, it seems to make more sense to adhere to Jacques Lacan who solved this incongruity by considering sexual perversion as a ‘clinical structure’ and not simply a form of behaviour. Yet, according to Evans, Lacan also insists on the fact that the clinical structure of perversion does not necessarily make itself visible through a perverse act (220). The term ‘structure’ comes from Lévi-Strauss and can be described as follows: a structure consists of relations between positions, which stay the same no matter what elements these positions are filled with (289). Lacan identifies three different clinical structures, which are mutually exclusive and therefore situate every subject definitely in its relation to the Other. The dividing feature is the mechanism they use: neurosis functions by means of *Verdrängung*, psychosis by means of *Verwerfung* and perversion by means of *Verleugnung*, i.e. disavowal (Evans, 290).

What the perverse subject disavows, is castration: stuck in the third stage of the Oedipus complex, it is confronted with the fact that mother does not have a phallus, but refuses to accept this. The subject thus seems to regress to the preoedipal stage, identifying either with the imaginary phallus or with mother (Evans, 221). Yet, in identifying with mother, the subject desires the imaginary phallus, and if it identifies with the imaginary phallus it is confronted with mother’s desire for this phallus. Moreover, this means that this disavowal of castration coexists with the realisation of this.

But beside its position with regard to the phallus, perversion is also connected to the subject’s relation to the drive: the subject considers itself as the object of the drive. It makes itself the instrument of the *volonté de jouissance* of the big Other; it thus does not act for the sake of its own

jouissance, but for that of the big Other (Evans, 222), which in the present analysis is the Symbolic order. In the case of sadism, the perversion that is present in *American Psycho*, the drive to be considered is the so-called 'invocation drive', i.e. the drive of hearing, hearing oneself and making oneself heard (Evans, 312). It is this strong dependence on drives in which I ground my thesis that perversion is, after all, an eroticization of the death drive: due to the incomplete Oedipus complex, the perverse subject does not accept the pleasure principle, which is located in the Symbolic order, but is intent on going beyond the pleasure principle, striving to achieve a maximum of jouissance. However, this is also where the death drive is located, and according to Lacan, every drive is actually a death drive, because every drive is excessive, repetitive and in the end destructive (Evans, 314). Put simply, this means that the sadistic subject identifies with the voice of the Other, i.e. it perceives itself as the instrument, by means of which the Other can hear, hear itself and make itself heard.

When talking about an incomplete Oedipus complex, one question seems to come up inevitably and will prove vital to the content of this paper, namely that of the development of the superego, as it depends on the completion of the Oedipus complex. Ideal ego and superego evolve at the same time, namely in the mirror stage. But while the mirror image on the one hand suggests a future unity to the child, its result being the ideal ego (Evans, 239), the child realises at the same time its fragmentation, leading to the development of the superego through identification with the father (315). However, even though perversion arises due to a faulty third stage of the Oedipus complex, it nevertheless seems viable to assume that the superego develops all the same, as – according to Eve Ragland-Sullivan – both masochism and sadism are related to the invocation drive and the gaze, which also create the ideal ego and the superego, and disavowal means that the perverse subject realises castration while at the same time disavowing this same fact (241).

When talking about the superego, it is crucial to stress that notwithstanding its location in the Symbolic order and the ensuing symbolic and regulating function of the superego, it is still not equal to Law because of its unreasonable and blind character: “[es] ist reine Verordnung und Tyrannei” (Lacan, quoted in Evans, 315). The reason for this is that the superego fills the ever-incomplete signifying chain's gaps with imaginary substitutes, thus distorting the Law by misunderstanding it. Slavoj Žižek (*Superego by Default*, 54) explains these confusions by saying that the superego emerges where Symbolic Law 'fails'. Thus, the “[s]uperego is the obscene 'nightly' law that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the 'public' Law” (54). He gives the example of the members of Ku-Klux-Clan, who, though behaving illegally, nevertheless acted not only according to a special ideology, but even in tune with *the* ideology of the

ruling white people (55). What is particularly interesting for the purposes of the present paper, is that this author defines sadism as dependent on “the splitting of the field of the Law into Law *qua* ‘Ego-Ideal’ – that is, a symbolic order which regulates social life and maintains its social peace – and its obscene, superegotistical inverse” (*Superego by Default*, 55).

The consequence of this splitting of Law can be seen in the novel in that Bateman, the protagonist, identifies with his social environment and its rules and regulations, but that he is, at the same time, dominated by what we might call the ‘superego of the Other’, i.e. its hidden agenda. These two are inseparable, as Slavoj Žižek points out; in fact, the superego is the public Law’s “*illegal* enjoyment” that comes into being where public Law fails (*Superego by Default*, 54). This is the reason why the perverse subject is an instrument of the Other’s, Law’s, jouissance and the object of its invocation drive, i.e. its voice. And in order to fully grasp what Law actually is, I would like to introduce Žižek’s concept of ideology: according to him, every community is based on an ideology, which is in turn based on a shared guilt, or rather on the “*fetishistic disavowal of this guilt*” (*Superego by Default*, 57). This ideology lies at the heart of society because it covers the lack in the Other and consequently also governs what we consider Law, i.e. the codes, rules, regulations and laws that organise social life. I will show later on why I consider this concept so important for my discussion of Ellis’ novel.

In *American Psycho* (henceforth *AmPs*), the ‘instrumental nature’ of the sadistic subject, both to the demands of the Ego-Ideal and the superego of the Other, becomes very clear, as will be shown as I go on. For those who do not know Ellis’ novel, one could describe its content in a nutshell as the story of a serial killer, who is a highly renowned member of yuppie Manhattan in the eighties. Now, obviously, there is not much sense in investigating all his crimes in detail but, nevertheless, a certain pattern in Bateman’s behaviour is more than apparent. Roughly, one could say that they separate into two main groups: those crimes committed against the Other, expressing his erotised hatred for a system that is obviously lacking, and those executed for the sake of the Other, i.e. preserving its ruling ideology.

Let me begin this part with Bateman’s identification with both the Ego-Ideal and the superego of the Other; here, in turn, starting with his desire to conform to the Ego-Ideal of the Other. One striking feature about Patrick Bateman is that already from a physical point of view, he is everything a 26-year-old yuppie in Manhattan of the eighties should be: he goes to the right tanning studios, he uses the currently most fashionable beauty products and he has the perfect ‘hardbody’, spending quite a lot of his supposed working hours in the gym. However, there are of course other things that are equally important, as a conversation of him and a few friends of his shows nicely. To McDermott’s question “[a]nd what are these girls after, O knowledgeable

one?” (AmPs, 53), Price replies simply: ““They want a hardbody who can take them into Le Cirque twice a week, get them into Nell’s on a regular basis. Or maybe a close personal acquaintance of Donald Trump”” (54). And Pat Bateman, just like all the others in fact, fits these criteria perfectly: he *can* get into the right restaurants or clubs as often as he likes, he *has* the perfect body and he *is* ““total GQ”” (90), i.e. he knows exactly what to wear when and with what to combine it. And the fact that not getting into *the* restaurant of his time, Dorsia’s, makes him feel physically sick and like a complete loser, shows that he has integrated the codes and regulations that form the ideology governing his society to perfection.

However, beside this surface personality of perfect yuppie, there is also the dark underside to Bateman’s personality, which I consider his acting out the demands of the Other’s superego. As already stated above, some of his crimes belong to the group of crimes committed for the sake of the Other, and these can actually be further divided into crimes against homosexuals, homeless people and members of ethnic minorities such as African Americans, or Asians. These groups are a constant and clearly visible reminder for Bateman and his yuppie cronies that the ideology of their Caucasian American yuppie society is defective. It is here, that Žižek’s concept of ideology becomes relevant, especially the fact that it is always based on a disavowal of guilt. Now, even though it is tempting to read the guilt that is being disavowed by Bateman and his friends as a sign of bad conscience, I would argue that these young men and women are not really capable of feeling guilty because of this, as they tell themselves that everybody could live like they do if he/she only tried to get a real job (AmPs, 129). Rather, I would suggest looking for the guilt they share in the fact that they derive a lot of pleasure from separating themselves from these social ‘outcasts’; in fact, they need them in order to feel superior. And the fetishistic denial of this can be found precisely in their continual lamenting about all these disgusting and socially unacceptable people and in their incessant assertion that everybody could achieve what they have, that it is the others’ fault if they do not, in order to hide that these young urban professionals after all do feel superior. What differentiates Bateman from his cronies is that he acts on what they all think.

However, despite his desperate need to fit in, or as he puts it in his own mantra, ““I...want...to...fit...in”” (AmPs, 237), which manifests itself in a number of ways, Bateman continuously fails to adapt fully. As he says himself:

...there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and

maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there*. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist¹.

Bateman's desire to fit in completely and his continuous failure to do so, also become apparent through seemingly negligible facts, such as his descriptions of his most recent electronic equipment or his descriptions of the music he likes. In both cases, his narration differs notably from what the reader is used to. In fact, he sounds more like an advert for these products than like a person listing the benefits of this or that product. Another, much more ironical, aspect of of this can be found occasionally in his daily speech in public. For example, Bateman gets annoyed at a joke of one of his friends because it is racist (AmPs, 38). In another scene he claims as a short aside: “I just want everyone to know that I'm pro-family and anti-drug” (157). Obviously, what makes these statements so utterly ironical is that Bateman very clearly does not think so in the least. He tends to kill people of other races, just as he does not care anything about family; and he is doubtlessly a drug addict. Consequently, I would suggest reading these moments as ‘slips’ in which the voice of the Other comes through. Thus, I believe it is reasonable to interpret this as another sign of Bateman's need to be a part of the masses even though he obviously lacks the required mental, or rather emotional, faculties.

In fact, I would suggest that Bateman's faulty subjectivation lies precisely in his excessive identification with the Other. As Mladen Dolar points out, in the process of subjectivation there always remains some rest, a kind of “‘pre-ideological’ and ‘pre-subjective’ *materia prima*.... A part of external materiality remains that cannot be successfully integrated in the interior” (77). It seems that Bateman lacks the capacity to believe in the ideology that covers the lack in the Other. Furthermore, Bateman is also aware that he lacks this external part that cannot be integrated into the subject because he is nothing but a frame that consists of codes and conventions, but with nothing underneath; he is just “surface, surface, surface” (AmPs, 375). In the case of a ‘normal’ subject, this external part seems to form the little rest of individuality that remains besides the structure of norms and rules. Without this rest, the individual cannot function as a complete subject. Thus, one could contend that Bateman is what I would like to call an ‘empty’ subject that consists only of the codes and rules that regulate his society. Consequently, I would argue that this is also what, mainly, causes Bateman's

hatred for the Other because it is a system into which he fits, on the surface, too perfectly to be able to fit in at all.

The perverse subject's hatred, as I mentioned at the beginning, goes in two directions: one the one hand, it is directed against those that do not fit into the ruling ideology and which thus lay bare the flaw in the Other, and on the other hand, against the Other itself – this precisely due to the fact that it is lacking because it fails to incorporate the perverse subject. In the case of AmPs, Bateman gives voice to this hatred in numerous acts of torture. Generally, these acts of violence can again be subdivided into two groups, though all are directed against the members of his own social circle. On the one hand, these killings and acts of torture are relatively logical. For example, Paul Owen, a broker like Bateman, has to die because he managed to score the 'Fisher Account', which Bateman would like to tend to himself. Only adding to his 'crimes' is the fact that he wins the business-card-competition among Bateman and his peers, has got a gorgeous girlfriend and so on – in short, he is everything Bateman wants to be. On the other hand, in most cases in fact, Bateman's hatred is aimed at members of his own circle without any obvious reason, for the simple fact that they stand for an Other that Bateman can never fully fit into. A nice example, is his torturing, and in the end killing, of two prostitutes. However, it is important to stress that he asks them to wear specific fetishistic items such as an "Angela Cummings silk and latex scarf" or "suede gloves by Gloria Jose from Bergdorf Goodman" (AmPs, 173), so that they actually represent members of his own circle to him. He then gradually increases his 'creativity' as to how to torture and also the proximity of his victims to his own close circle of peers and even ends up killing his first girlfriend at the peak of the novel. Thus, I would like to conclude from this that his violent deeds offer Bateman a vent for the hatred he feels against an Other he does not conform to but of which he would desperately wish to be a fully-fledged member.

My proposition here is that what the protagonist actually tries to achieve, is to be recognised as a subject, i.e. to be subjected under its norms and laws. Yet, despite his best efforts, this simply will not happen. It is due to his appearing to be just like, or actually rather even more perfect, than anyone else, that Bateman will never be detected. Actually, he keeps trying to tell his friends various times what he is; they just will not listen because they do not expect it from him. As his fiancée says, Bateman "'is *not* a cynic,.... He's the boy next door'" (AmPs, 20). In fact, there is a general problem of recognition present in this novel: nobody really knows who anyone is, people keep confusing their interlocutors with other persons since they all appear rather similar. They wear more or less the same clothes, similar glasses, all have gorgeous girlfriends etc. Near the end of the novel, Bateman's lawyer makes this even clearer when he will not believe the confession that Bateman left on his answering machine (he also mistakes Bateman for somebody else):

..., your joke *was* amusing. But come on, man, you [Bateman whom he mistakes for Davis] had one fatal flaw: Bateman's such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody, that I couldn't fully appreciate it. ... He could barely *pick up* an escort girl, let alone ... chop her up².

These quotations show very well that Bateman's appearance is all that counts. This is what keeps him safe. But, it is also what keeps him from becoming a fully accepted – and subjected – member of the society he cherishes so much.

But it is not only Bateman's peers who fail to recognise him for what he is. There are situations in which institutions of authority also fail to acknowledge his deeds and thus his subjectivity. What he needs is an interpellation of the Other to which he can respond, thus turning himself into a complete subject. But what he gets are representatives of Law that are not capable of recognising him either. First, there is a detective supposed to investigate the disappearance of Paul Owen (Bateman murdered him, but spoke a message on his answering machine saying that he had gone to London so that nobody knows what happened to him). Despite being very nervous, Bateman performs the role of concerned loose friend so convincingly that the detective does not suspect him of anything. In fact, one of the core proofs that prevents his becoming a suspect is that he allegedly had dinner with other people on the night of Owen's disappearance. Moreover, Bateman's own lawyer claims to have had dinner with Owen in London. An even more striking instance in which the authorities fail to recognise Bateman is after another intentional killing because of which he accidentally kills a police officer. They chase him through the city, but as soon as he is in his office building, he is safe. The public persona of Patrick Bateman cannot be suspected of any crime.

Thus, as a conclusion, one could say that in AmPs, there is actually only the superego; Bateman has never been ideologically recognised. Yet, it seems that he deeply yearns for this recognition, as his surface personality that corresponds too well to the Ego-Ideal shows. Yet, he just will never attain the recognition because he is only an empty subject and lacks the necessary remainder that would make him human. He suffers from his incapability to believe in the ideology of the Other, being perfectly conscious that it only consists of surfaces, and thus wants to inflict this pain on others. This demonstrates the fragility of the empty subject that only consists of the codes that regulate the Other. All figures of authority, such as his lawyer, the detective or even the police fail to make him answer to the 'Hey you!' he

yearns for. There is no interpellation for him. His staging of the sadistic acts is his way of gaining access to a reality that he only perceives as a movie. Yet, even then, he cannot fully attain it. In the sadistic scenarios he orchestrates, he reverses the usual functioning of sadomasochistic scenarios: instead of turning instruments of torture into instruments of pleasure, he turns instruments of pleasure into instruments of torture for the victim. He is thus a true sadist who achieves the Sadean “*höchstes-Sein-in-der-Böshafteit*” (Lacan, quoted in Evans, 316). In AmPs, then, the protagonist is a pre-ideological subject who yearns to be acknowledged by the Other and to be subjected to its power in order to become a ‘true’ subject.

However, it is vital to stress that even during the acts in which he expresses his hatred for the Other most aggressively, the ‘law’ of perversion still holds true: the perverse subject is always, no matter what, an instrument of the Other’s jouissance. Put in Slavoj Žižek’s words, this is where the “two aspects of perversion” (*The Matrix*, 17) come into play: “...on the one hand, [there are] arbitrary rules that can be suspended; on the other hand, [there is] the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter instrumentalized passivity”, i.e. to the function of an instrument of the Symbolic Other. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that even when the perverse subject believes itself to be superior to the Law, to be able to create its own “universe”, it is still an instrument of the Other, despite the hatred for the Other. Thus, Žižek’s two sides of perversion are not only valid in the cases when the subject tries to conform to the Other, but also when he/she tries to rebel against it. But where is the Other’s jouissance in these acts intended to ‘flout’ the arbitrary rules of the Other? Here, it seems reasonable to go back to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, in which his argument is that both the authorities and the individuals examined by them gained pleasure from this interplay: the authorities from exercising power and the others from transgressing the conventions when indulging in ‘deviant practices’. This is also how I read the Other’s position with regard to the perverse subject’s trying to create its own universe where rules can be suspended. Thus, no matter what the perverse, or here the sadistic, subject does, there is no possibility to escape from its position on the borders of Law, neither into it as a fully recognised subject, nor out of it when suspending its rules. Consequently, I would like to conclude this presentation with the last, and very appropriate, words of AmPs: “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT”(399).

Notes

¹ B E Ellis, *American Psycho*, Picador, London, 1991, p. 377.

² _____, pp. 387-388.

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