

An unreliable serial killer in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*: textual and contextual signs

Luciano Cabral

Much has been said about Bret Easton Ellis's most famous and controversial book *American Psycho*. Since its debut, in March of 1991, the novel has been either cheerfully celebrated or heavily condemned. It was supposed to have been published three months earlier as the final literary work of "the end of the eighties" (MURPHET, 2002, p. 66). Ellis's publishers had probably planned to turn the novel into a satiric episteme of the eighties, a decade full of young urban professionals eager to exercise their right to praise competition, consumerism, and narcissism.

The publishers' plan failed altogether, though. Some pages of the novel had started to be spread around the staff at the publishing house, rapidly causing a dramatic commotion. Vivid accounts of torture inflicted upon women, mindlessly violent scenes minutely described, an uncommitted narration, and an overtly nonmoral protagonist triggered a feeling of disgust which soon forced the publishers to breach the agreement for the publication of the book. Organizations for women called their peers for a boycott of the novel and newspaper columnists asked readers to "snuff this book"¹ even before it was officially released. If taken out of its

1 Read, for instance, the piece to the New York Times offered by Roger Rosenblatt on December 16th, 1990. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/16/books/snuff-this-book-will-bret-easton-ellis-get-away-with-murder.html>. Last accessed on February 16th, 2024.

particular context, many sections of *American Psycho* are merely accounts of a disturbed, misogynist, racist, brutal, and cannibal autodiegetic narrator whose intention is nothing but depicting himself as an “evil psychopath” (ELLIS, 2011, p. 19). I surely agree with the usage of all of these derogatory adjectives to label Patrick Bateman. But he is, above all, a personage, a virtual figure created by a novelist. As such, we should apply a different critical standpoint to deal with Easton Ellis’s work.

Reviews of *American Psycho* commonly take it as a satiric portrayal of American society in the 1980s. This decade is generally defined by means of words such as Reaganomics, yuppies, MTV, and selfishness. The protagonist, one way or the other, embodies all these elements. Bateman is a New Yorker, an affluent young businessman who communicates through pop songs and mass media. The joke coined to mock his “me generation” – “Enough about me. Let’s talk about you: what do you think of me?”² – fully fits his disposition. Extremely narcissistic, he is solely concerned with himself.

Patrick Bateman is not only a product of a narcissistic decade. He is also a personification of the deadly side of it. He enjoys reading biographies of American mass murderers (Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, Son of Sam, Charlie Manson), kills homeless people, homosexuals and immigrants, tortures women, videotapes their death, and masturbates over their corpses. In a sense, he plays the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde doubleness: he is, on the one hand, an ordinary man, handsome, wealthy, intelligent, and well-educated, and, on the other, a serial killer, who beats, cuts, tortures, and kills his victims brutally and callously. Adapted to a world full of visual appeals – be it in TV commercials, outdoors, movies or designer clothes – the protagonist makes use of a narration which echoes this very tendency. It is true that he describes, in graphic details, the assassination of Paul Owen,

2 This joke is mentioned in an article by Elspeth Reeve for the online magazine *The Wire*. Available at: <http://www.thewire.com/national/2013/05/me-generation-time/65054/>. Last accessed on February 16th, 2024.

Al, Torri, Tiffany, Bethany, Christie and Sabrina. It is also true that Easton Ellis's style is depthless and blank, so that the sentences he uses become crude and unrefined.

When it comes, nonetheless, to that dramatic commotion which took place on account of the publication of *American Psycho*, some may feel surprised at that turbulent overreaction. It is so especially due to the fact that Patrick Bateman is an unreliable narrator. Thus, this article aims at attesting the psychotic credibility of the protagonist's narration. For this reason, it debates the narratological implications of unreliable narrators in a broader sense, and then it scrutinizes the textual and contextual elements that signalize Bateman's unreliability.

Since its publication, *American Psycho* has been issued with many different covers. While some of them display just a small amount of blood scantily mixed up with water, others display a handsome white man's face, with eyes looking at us. Other editions show a roughly-painted drawing of the novel's protagonist, dressed in a suit, with a bloody and frightening face with no eyes. The cover for the Brazilian edition presents a scene from the movie adaptation, with the actor holding a shining knife. One of the most recent covers, on the other hand, displays a figure of a man standing, whose outline is blurred and obscure, thus preventing the onlooker from seeing him clearly³.

This particular cover portends an interesting aspect of the novel's narrative: a protagonist who offers plenty of unreliable statements. Patrick is surely an obscure character, not only for his lack of personal and family background, but mainly for his discourse. The moment we readers decide to confront his utterances, we are unable to affirm safely whether he is being true or only picturing the scenes he narrates. Some dialogues are themselves evidence of a narration that has been inconsonant all along.

3 For a better understanding of this cover, see the edition published by Picador in 2011.

The medicine he takes also contributes to the perception of a narrator whose mind is troubled. The symptoms of such condition can be textually noticed too, particularly in those incoherent sentences we can find on some pages. The chapter “A glimpse of a Thursday afternoon”, for example, begins and ends in the middle of a sentence, causing the lines to be syntactically broken. The television program *The Patty Winters Show* Bateman regularly watches (and records) becomes another source of narrative unreliability. Although we may take many of those bizarre topics broadcast daily as quite possible, it is hard to believe that “a Cheerio sat in a very small chair and was interviewed for close to an hour” (p. 371).

These instances can be seen as signs of the protagonist's inconsistent narrative. At the very beginning of his story, Bateman appears to be true, but, in the long run, we readers notice he is a narrator we might as well not trust. We cannot fully rely on the words he says or believe the scenes he describes. Patrick Bateman is, to a great extent, an unsteady character telling a one-sided story. As an autodiegetic protagonist, he provides readers with a restricted point of view – there is no other narrator to come up against his statements. This is the reason why I focus on Patrick Bateman's narrative unreliability. Suspicious as they are, his narration has a considerable impact on the way we interpret this protagonist.

The first theorist to label narrators “reliable” and “unreliable” was American literary theorist Wayne C. Booth in 1961. Discussing how authors use their rhetorical skills to effectively force the fictional worlds they create upon readers, Booth is interested in unravelling the writing technique of novelists. He is not oblivious, as he underscores in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, that, by concentrating on technique alone, he is setting aside the social and psychological implications involved in the process of writing and reading. Nevertheless, by putting together a systematic set of ways of “what good novelists have in fact done” (BOOTH, 1983, p. xv), Booth's purpose is to unchain both writers and readers from those vague and abstract rules

about what novelists must do.

Even uneasy for lack of a better term, Booth adopts those adjectives to qualify the narrators' speech and behavior according to their degree of consonance with what the author in the novel has set as norms to be followed. A reliable narrator would act under these norms whereas an unreliable would not. Booth claims that unreliability ought not to be measured by mere irony or lie because narrators may become deceptive for this matter. For him, narrators are often labeled unreliable not when they tell lies or are ironic, but when they unconsciously and unintentionally contradict themselves. In Booth's own words:

[...] a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him. Or, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, the narrator claims to be naturally wicked while the author silently praises his virtues behind his back. (p. 159, author's emphasis)

The technique writers have commonly used in order to achieve reliability is "direct guidance" (p. 6). It consists of an author's voice barging into the narrative in order to let us know something. More clearly spotted when the narration is heterodiegetic, this technique allows readers to obtain pieces of information never possible otherwise. This omniscient narrator furnishes the story with characters' thoughts and feelings by telling us what is on their minds. Booth avers that such guidance was largely used in old narratives, such as the *Book of Job* in the bible, Homer's *The Odyssey*, and Boccaccio's Medieval collection *The Decameron*. We can also, however, notice this voice guiding us in Marquis de Sade's eighteenth-century novel *The Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791), for instance. While describing the sisters Juliette and Justine, Sade goes beneath the surface and discloses their opposite personalities:

Mme de Losange, then known as Juliette, was already to all intents and purposes as mature in character and mind as she was to be at 30, which was her age at the time we tell this story. She seemed alive only to the sensation of being free and did not pause for a moment to reflect upon the cruel reverses which had snapped the chains which had bound her. But her sister Justine, who had just turned 12, gloomy and melancholic by disposition yet blessed with surprising gentleness and sensitivity, having none of her sister's artfulness and guile but the ingenuousness, candour, and honesty which were to make stumble into many traps, Justine felt the full horror of her situation. (SADE, 1992, p. 50)

Who could possibly know all this about the sisters? It is reported not only what is physical and external, but also what is internal, that is, their personal features. Juliette is qualified as "mature in character and mind", and it is said, too, that she had never thought over the cruelties which were about to come. Justine, in turn, is said to be "gloomy" and "melancholic by disposition". She is not as artful and "guile" as Juliette, but on the contrary ingenuous, candid, gentle and sensible. Justine's description is even finished by a doomed prediction of her fate: these dispositions will soon lead her into traps.

Those pieces of information are delivered by someone who knows much more than any reader would ever be able to. The narrator of *The Misfortunes of Virtue* comments on what is on the characters' minds as well as foresees a ruinous destiny. As this narrator is capable of telling each and every single move characters make or thoughts they have, the entire story is under his/her control. Wayne Booth believes that an omniscient voice such as this is, somehow or other, the author's (BOOTH, 1983, p. 74-5). The intrusive speech we read giving us privileged information on Juliette and Justine is, then, a Sade's voice. It is the authority, or the reliable

narrator, behind the tale breaking into the narrative to deliver things we should accept with no questioning. For Booth, this is the very moment when narrator and author match, and this is done so to guide readers to a certain direction through the story.

Direct guidance is useful to make stories more reliable or to make readers sympathetic, or unsympathetic, to certain characters. For Booth, nonetheless, it is a technique hardly ever used by modern novelists. They have belittled it because they consider “showing” to be more artistic than “telling”:

Since Flaubert, many authors and critics have been convinced that “objective” or “impersonal” or “dramatic” modes of narration are naturally superior to any mode that allows for direct appearances by the author or his reliable spokesman. [...] the complex issues involved in this shift have been reduced to a convenient distinction between “showing” which is artistic, and “telling” which is inartistic [...]. (p. 8)

Although modern writers have generally kept direct guidance away from their accounts, there are still some novelists who make use of it in their works. Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Year of Solitude* (1967) and José Saramago’s *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) are just two examples of modern novels whose narrators, every so often, break into the tale to offer some privileged information. In reality, Booth states that this technique has never been completely abolished in fictional writings, but many authors have “renounced the privileged of direct intervention, retreated to the wings and left [their] characters to work out their own fates upon the stage” (p. 7).

This narrator who intrudes into the tale in order to inform something is named “implied author” by Wayne Booth. The critic believes that any kind of novel gives rise to an indirect image of its maker that

“stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails” (p. 151). This image is a version of the novel writer, or, in Boothian words, the author’s second self (p. 71). No storytelling comes to readers without mediation. Despite the impersonality some tales can display (Booth uses the short story “The Killers”, by Hemingway, as an example), a narrator always indicates his/her presence somehow:

[...] the inexperienced reader may make the mistake of thinking that the story comes to him unmediated. But no such mistake can be made from the moment that the author explicitly places a narrator into the tale, even if he is given no personal characteristics whatever. (p. 152)

The notion of implied author is a bone of contention in narratology. More recently, David Herman has summarized the notion of the implied author by positing that it is a role assumed by an actual author. This role can be described as a set of norms and values of which actual writers make use to create their narratives (HERMAN, 2009, p. 187). He goes on saying that a narrative interpretation based on a rhetorical approach takes into account this set of norms and values to expose, for instance, unreliable narrations. Theorist Brian Richardson, in turn, understands that an implied author should be conceptualized through a distinctive voice, or a set of distinctive traits. I object it on the grounds that the features Richardson claims to be the very ones to define the implied author similarly define the term “style”. In a dictionary of literary terms, style stands for “any specific way of using language” (BALDICK, 2001, p. 247), which encompasses diction, syntax, imagery, rhythm, and figures of speech. Linguistic devices which particularize a novelist or a poet, for example, are to be regarded as a writer’s stylistic expression. To make my point clearer, I quote a segment in

which Richardson brings up art forms other than literature, such as music, painting and the cinema, to explain the concept:

[...] we may correctly identify a piece of music we have never heard before as a work of Beethoven, and we know what kinds of things to expect when we are about to view a previously unseen Monet. Cinema has the concept of the *auteur* to designate the distinctive markers of a director's style and vision. (RICHARDSON, 2006, p. 123)

Although unsuccessfully, Booth tries to make explicit that the implied author and the real flesh-and-blood author are necessarily distinct entities. He compares the implied author to David Hume's description of an ideal reader, a reader who should be taken as a "man in general", momentarily oblivious of his "individual being" and his "peculiar circumstances" (BOOTH, 1989, p. 70). It appears to me that Booth is arguing that there are two different personas when it comes to producing a work of fiction: (a) the person (not the writer, at this moment) who holds a certain set of ideologies and principles; and (b) the person (the writer, at this moment) who has a set of ideologies and principles that might or might not be compatible with that former person's.

The implied authorship seems a dispensable and slippery concept to me. As a particular voice (or voices) through which readers can identify the author's rhetorical choices, the term style has for long been used to determine such thing. As an omniscient voice that invades the narrative to deliver privileged information, it lacks precision. A first-person narration (not to mention some genres, such as autobiographical writings), for example, would inevitably mingle narrator with implied author, consequently ruining the comprehension of the notion.

Narrative unreliability comes to the foreground, according to Booth,

through the interaction between implied authors and the narrators. But when it comes to *American Psycho* and the Boothian unreliable narration, I see at least two drawbacks: (i) the narrator in the novel is autodiegetic – and all of the examples given so far have been of heterodiegetic narrators. Can we really say that there is any author’s voice setting up norms and values when the narrative is provided by a first-person protagonist? If we can say so, how should we properly approach this?; (ii) Patrick Bateman is mentally-troubled, vicious, cannibal, and nonmoral. If I am to blend this narrator and an implied author together, even if to the smallest extent, wouldn’t I likely be stating that the protagonist and Easton Ellis share some features? These questions, by no means, should be neglected. If so, I would firstly be disregarding an obvious change of perspective. As previously debated, the effects provided by autodiegesis differ from those provided by heterodiegesis. Secondly, by merging, as Booth does, narrator and an author, I may be saying that Bateman is Ellis’s second self. Similar to the narrator in *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, Bateman, at times, addresses his talk to the reader. On his way to the dry cleaners, for instance, he steps on a blind homeless’s foot and asks us: “Did I do it on purpose? What do you think? Or did I do this accidentally?” (ELLIS, 2011, p. 79). But this does not mean that there is any author’s voice barging into the conversation. There is actually a narrator who somehow wants to get in close touch with the one who is reading his story. This narrator is trying to drag readers nearer to his narrative, and consequently make them uncomfortable, shocked, horrified, as well as suspicious.

Booth is right anyway in focusing on rhetoric because he noticed that language can be as true as deceptive. The word “rhetoric” actually holds a triple meaning⁴: (a) it is simply a verbal communication, synonymous with discourse; (b) it is an utterance used for mere effect, such as rhetorical

4 These definitions can be found at: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/rhetoric> . Last accessed on February 16th, 2024.

questions; and (c) it is also a speech that it is supposed to be meaningful, but, once it lacks truth, becomes meaningless⁵. These definitions reveal that rhetoric is able to lead to divergent contexts. Depending on the content of what has been said, who has said so, and who has received the message, discourse can be taken as either accurate or untrue. For a straightforward understanding of the narrative unreliability in literary texts, Booth believes that the relationship between implied author and narrator ought to be taken into consideration. Other narratology theorists, on the other hand, emphasize that the attention should be drawn to the relationship between narrator and the reader.

Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* had for years been the quintessential work on unreliable narrative, but structuralist approaches were strongly contested by deconstructivist philosophy, especially for their binary oppositions. As a consequence, narratology had almost been rubbed out of the literary studies. But, according to Ansgar Nünning, narratology "has recently risen like a phoenix from its ashes" (NÜNNING, 2004, p. 354). This literary field has been in part revived for making use of viewpoints deliberately rejected by the Boothian analysis: the social and psychological implications in the process of reading. Contemporary critics have even disregarded the importance of an implied author to determine the unreliability of a narration. In fact, these theorists rely on the cognitive processes or strategies to interpret a certain text, by and large, based on the reader's backgrounds. Jan Stühling (2011, p. 95), for instance, states that, to label a narrator unreliable, we concentrate on our intuition that what is being spoken in some narratives is not accurate. So, there is not only a narrator's comment, not only a voice barging into the narrative to count on, but also what readers infer from such speech. By resting their approaches upon reading processes, narratology theorists clearly break up a binary

5 The word *rhetoric* is taken here as in the sentence: "All the politician says is mere rhetoric".

opposition. They actually bridge the gap between textual and contextual elements.

There are many textual signs to determine the protagonist's mental disorder, but, if taken isolatedly, they are not enough to determine his unreliability. One of them is Bateman's intermittent incapacity to pay attention to his peers. As emphasized, Bateman is a character totally restrained by the 1980s and its consumer yuppiedom. Throughout the novel, icons from this decade bubble up to set the scene, such as electronic devices (*Aiwa, Kenwood*), artists (*Whitney Houston, Phil Collins, Iggy Pop, David Onica, Tom Cruise*), bands (*U2, Huey Lewis and The News, Genesis*), brands (*J & B, Evian, Gucci*) and songs (*Dead or Alive, Like a Prayer, New Sensation*). Furthermore, as Bateman competes for recognition, his narration consists of tediously materially-based lists. His sharp ability to foreground mass media icons and commodities, on the other hand, brings to the fore his inability to concentrate on conversations. In the chapter "Lunch", Bateman chats with Christopher Armstrong at a restaurant, but his narcissism shuts out any possibility of focusing on what it is being accounted by his workmate:

Armstrong: you are an... *asshole*. "Uh-huh." I nod. "Well..." Paisley ties, plaid suits, my aerobics class, returning videotapes, spices to pick up from Zabar's, beggars, white-chocolate truffles... The sickening scent of Drakkar Noir, which is what Christopher is wearing, floats over near my face, mingling with the scent of the marmalade and cilantro, the onions and the blackened chilies. "Uh-huh," I say, repeat. (ELLIS, 2011, p. 135, author's emphasis)

Bateman is having a conversation with Christopher Armstrong, or rather, Armstrong is talking but is not being listened. They are sitting at the same table, looking at each other, speaking, but there is no effective

interaction between them. Bateman does not hear Armstrong because his friend brags about his own activity, that is, his trip to Bahamas. Bateman ignores the talk because what interests him is what is about him. So, he starts listing things closely related to his own routine: ties, suits, aerobics class, videotapes. Like Narcissus gazing at the pool, Bateman can only be attentive to his own body, his activities, and his belongings, boasting about them proudly whenever he has the chance to:

Fuck... yourself... Armstrong, I'm thinking while staring out the window at the gridlock and pacing bums on Church Street. Appetizers arrive: sun-dried tomato brioche for Armstrong. Poblano chilies with an oniony orange-purple marmalade on the side for me. I hope Armstrong doesn't want to pay because I need to show the dim-witted bastard that I in fact do own a platinum American Express card. (p. 134)

The chapter is sprinkled with ellipses, which signal the narrator's disorder as well as the moment he stops heeding Armstrong, cuts off his narration, and immediately changes the subject: "[...] It is frequently hotter north in..." (ELLIS, 2011, p. 133) – and right after this ellipsis, Bateman goes on telling what was on *The Patty Winters Show* in the morning. Although he asks Armstrong questions (and they are promptly answered), he does not care to pay attention to his colleague's words, so much so that he does not include them in the narrative.

That the talk they are having is dull and tiresome is signaled not only through the ellipses, but also through the words used in the chapter, such as "uninterested", "disinterestedly", "fleetingly", "drone", "mournful". The protagonist openly tells us that he does not care about Christopher Armstrong or his trip at all. But if so, why does he keep up with the conversation by asking his friend about his vacations?

This intermittent inability to pay attention to his peers leads the

protagonist to an inability to recognize peers. The novel is full of moments in which characters mix up names and cannot say for sure who the person is. Bateman himself is many times taken erroneously for Simpson (p. 136), McCloy (p. 175), Batman (p. 198), Marcus (p. 137), and so on. In this same chapter “Lunch”, Bateman asks a question and Armstrong starts answering it by saying Bateman’s name wrong:

“So how were the Bahamas?” I ask after we order.
“You just got back, right?”

“Well, Taylor,” Armstrong begins, staring at a point somewhere behind me and slightly above my head – on the column that has been terra-cotta-ized or perhaps on the exposed pipe that runs the length of the ceiling. (p. 132)

All along the novel, the protagonist spends many lines describing other characters. Every time he meets someone, he offers readers a long report on clothing, devices, body shape, and hairstyle. I have underscored that, for his narcissistic behavior, Bateman is unable to heed others. But this statement is not completely true. It is worth repeating that, as a yuppie, driven by consumerism, hedonism and ephemeral trends, the protagonist is only able to describe what comes externally. Unfortunately, he cannot go any further. Bateman’s materialistic attitude blurs his evaluation and tugs him away from anything other than consumable goods. Thus, he is able to describe what he sees, but unable to go beneath the surface. The world Bateman lives in resembles a mass-production zone, where products and their corresponding brands are omnipresent. They never stop being produced, or, as in the novel, they never stop being listed by him. But, as these goods must be preferably fancy and expensive (otherwise, he will not be admired), his evaluation, consequently, turns into valuation. The protagonist is actually setting up a rule for the social class he belongs to: only

high-priced brands are allowed. By the end of the novel, Bateman comes to the conclusion, after asking himself many unconnected questions, that all of the assumptions underlying his learnings are twisted and meaningless:

[...] The smell of meat and blood clouds up the condo until I don't notice it anymore. And later my macabre joy sours and I'm weeping for myself, unable to find solace in any of this, crying out, sobbing "I just want to be loved," cursing the earth and everything I have been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer – all of it was wrong, without any final purpose. All it comes down to was: die or adapt. (p. 332)

This conclusion has made Bateman adapt to a class crowded by self-absorbed members, whose worries lie totally in always having better assets – and it is worth saying, better than any others, members or not. To take part in such an exclusive group, Bateman has been dressing in overcoats by Giorgio Armani, ties by Valentino Couture, trousers by Hugo Boss, and shoes by Brooks Brothers. He has been going to fancy restaurants and tolerating dull conversations with Christopher Armstrong as well. He has been buying costly clothes and devices, in order to look just like, or better than, his peers. As a result, all the yuppie characters end up having the same features, even though different descriptions are offered throughout: white skin, slicked-back hair, hard-shaped body, horn-rimmed glasses, and expensive garments. The members of Bateman's class can hardly be particularized. As a result, Bateman and other characters frequently mistake one person for another:

"What?" Owen asks. "Wait. Is that Conrad?"
He points at some guy wearing a shawl-collar, single-breasted wool tuxedo, a cotton shirt with a bow tie, all by Pierre Cardin, who stands near the bar, directly beneath the chandelier, holding a glass of champagne,

inspecting his nails. [...] The Chandelier Room is packed and everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same [...]. (p. 61)

A third textual sign to determine the protagonist's disorder is in the chapter entitled "Chase, Manhattan"⁶, for the narrative, which has hitherto been first-person, suddenly turns third-person. Once again at a sophisticated restaurant for dinner with friends, Bateman cannot help admitting that his "life is a living hell" (p. 333) – and again he is utterly ignored, as he himself observes. He admits his life has become hell because he can barely control his thoughts. He has just concluded that every single person, whoever that is, is a potential victim, or in his own words, "they are prey" (p. 334, author's emphasis). Such resolution forces him to leave the place (right after going to the restroom to use some cocaine) and roam around the streets late at night.

In this chapter, every ending of a paragraph and beginning of another holds ellipses. They are not being used, however, the way they were in chapter "Lunch". In that one, they had been employed to spot the moment Bateman switched off, a move from Armstrong's answers to Bateman's thoughts. But in "Chase, Manhattan", the usage of ellipses implies a brief period of blackout, signaling the moment the narrator loses his consciousness and then recovers it:

[...] at which point I use the rest room, do a line of cocaine, pick up my Giorgio Armani wool overcoat and the .357 magnum barely concealed within it from the coatcheck, strap on a holster and then I'm outside, but on *The Patty Winters Show* this morning there was an interview with a man who set his daughter on fire while she was giving birth, at dinner we all had

6 There is an intentionally ironic pun on this title. Given the novel's motifs, namely, brands and commodities, *Chase Manhattan* refers not only to a pursuit in a city, but also to one of the biggest banks of the United States.

shark...

... in Tribeca it's misty out, sky on the verge of rain, the restaurants down here empty, after midnight the streets remote, unreal, the only sign of human life someone playing a saxophone on the corner of Duane Street [...] (ELLIS, 2011, p. 334, author's emphasis)

We readers notice that there is still a link between the end of the sentence and the beginning of the other. The ellipsis does not seem to omit much of what was supposed to be told. Bateman had already said he had excused himself from the table and left before dessert, and, in so doing, we expect that his next move is to step outdoors. Following from this, by the time we find him telling us he is on the streets, walking around Tribeca, we are not likely to doubt his narration. This conclusion, logically reached, still preserves his reliability. But if we are not to regard those ellipses with suspicion, we are about to claim they have been employed pointlessly. Is this so?

Because his thoughts are getting harder to control, Bateman's narration becomes messy. Therefore, many unconnected topics are bunched together in a rather incoherent manner: morning routine, talk shows, pornographic movies, parties, dishes, tortures, brand names, killings, bloody scenes. In the previous excerpt, for instance, he called to mind what he and his friends ordered for dinner soon after he had commented on what was on *The Patty Winters Show* – he joined commonplace activities together with gory pictures. A connection such as this (and there are many others all over the novel) corroborates how far his unbalance has gone. The ellipses are instances of a mind which has turned more and more deranged. The Xanax, Valium, Halcion, and Nuprin Bateman constantly takes can no longer hold his anxiety and panic attacks back. The point worth highlighting here is that ellipses are not in the chapter's narrative to mark a voluntary disregard. In reality, they signpost an involuntary attitude, that is, the narrator's loss of consciousness. Moreover, he does not act as if he were aware of those

mental gaps, though he can notice them coming. He foresees his blackouts some lines before the first ellipsis, exactly at the moment he speaks: “[...] and during dinner I almost become unglued, plummeting into a state of near vertigo [...]” (ELLIS, 2011, p. 334). The words “unglued” and “vertigo”, more specifically, must be taken into consideration because they can help us understand the reason why the narration changes into heterodiegetic.

If I have been arguing that it is possible to determine Bateman’s mental disorder textually, thus, the word “vertigo” works as significant evidence. This symptom is defined as a sensation of dizziness or unnatural motion just as though one were feeling the surroundings spinning around, leading to a loss of balance and to a disoriented mind. Feeling he “cannot seem to control [him]self” (p. 334), the protagonist, on the verge of falling down, picks up his overcoat and gun, and leaves. Nevertheless, readers should notice that, while he had been sitting, the vertigo could not be harmful. The moment he stands up and steps out of the restaurant, he loses his balance, his mind gets disoriented, and shuts down. This instant is depicted in the chapter by the ellipsis in the end of the paragraph.

Repeated ellipses, or rather, repeated blackouts come down to a moment where Bateman does not appear to recognize his own actions anymore. He says he has just shot the busker who was on the sidewalk playing his saxophone, but cannot recollect what happens afterwards. He gets more and more overwhelmed by these lapses to the point of being doubtful about what he has done:

[...] he stops playing, the tip of the saxophone still in his mouth, I pause too, then nod for him to go on, and, tentatively, he does, then I raise the gun to his face and in midnote pull the trigger, but the silencer doesn’t work and in the same instant a huge crimson ring appears behind his head the booming sound of the gunshot deafens me, stunned, his eyes still alive, he falls to his knees, then onto his saxophone, I pop

the clip and replace it with a full one, then something bad happens...

...because while doing this I've failed to notice the squad car that was traveling behind me – doing what? god only knows, handing out parking tickets? (p. 334-5)

Such lack of self-recognition produces a peculiar narrative outcome. Incapable of perceiving his actions the way he used to, the protagonist is detached from the first-person narrator, as if he had lost touch with his self. The gunshot is heard by police officers in a car, so Bateman tries to escape from them. He hails a taxicab (driven by a young Iranian man), climbs into it, shoots the cabdriver dead, and drives away. The narration of the chasing resembles an action movie scene:

[...] and racing blindly down Greenwich I lose control entirely, the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I've been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab, leaning against it, a nerve-racking silence follows, "nice going, Bateman", he mutters, limping out of the store, the body on the hood moaning in agony, Patrick with no idea where the cop running toward him across the street has come from [...] (p. 349)

The climax of his mental disorder matches the whole piece in which the third-person narration takes place, and it seems so as long as we recall the word "unglued". This word stands for detachment, division or separation

as well as loss of emotional control or confused distress⁷. In the beginning of chapter “Chase, Manhattan”, we are told by the narrator that (i) he has lately been considering everyone everywhere a “whole host of victims” (p. 334), (ii) his life is extremely unpleasant, (iii) he has noticed nobody at the table was attentive to his confession, and that (iv) he has decided to leave the restaurant earlier because of his miserable state of mind. We readers can learn from all of this that Bateman is really searching for a way, even though temporarily, to cope with those troubles. As all of his attempts to keep his disorder down have failed, he tries a new alternative: he sets him and his self apart. Accordingly, the narrative becomes third-person.

The textual signs I have highlighted so far turned out to be useful to determine the protagonist’s mental disorder. Nevertheless, in order to trace his unreliability, we should not be so hermetic. Ellipses locating intentional and unintentional attitudes, specific words and phrases spotting a disoriented behavior, and a sudden change of narrative perspective ought not to be the only pieces of evidence to settle our assumptions because, although some readers may not believe what it is told, the tale can still be taken as true.

Even though Jonathan Culler did not bear unreliable narrators in mind, cognitive narratologists have exploited his idea of naturalization to claim that the readers’ perception is to come into play when unreliability is involved. The term “naturalization” means “to bring [a text] into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural or legible” (CULLER, 1975, p. 162). This type of discourse, or model, Culler refers to is all of the social, psychological, literary knowledge, or what linguists call “cognitive frames”, readers employ to naturalize texts (to make them readable) in fictional narratives. So, when readers come across an utterance, description, new information or scene that does not match what

7 Check this entry at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/unglued> . Last accessed on February 16th, 2024.

it is expected to be, they use their knowledge to explain it. Ansgar Nünning argues that, to identify narrative unreliability, we should first “be based on the readers’ empirical experience and criteria of verisimilitude [...] rather than on literary models” (NÜNNING, 1999, p. 67). Textual signs are important and obviously must be considered. But, in Nünning’s view, they are ranked second place. The reading process to detect unreliability is, then, no longer a give-and-take between an implied author and a narrator, but a cognitive interplay between a narrator and a reader. Textual information needs to associate with reader’s frames to make an analysis effective.

This cognitive turn in the interpretation of unreliable narrations has led Bruno Zerweck (2001, p. 155) to conclude that this reader-oriented model serves more accurately as an approach than those common theories of the phenomenon. Based on Nünning, Zerweck provides a useful summary of the major frames readers apply to texts in order to naturalize them: (i) real-world frames, which includes general and historical world knowledge, shared cultural heritage, personality theories, models of psychological coherence, social, moral and linguistic norms, and the individual values of the reader; (ii) literary frames of reference, which entails general knowledge of literary conventions, knowledge of literary genres, of intertextual reference, of stereotypical models of character; and (iii) a frame located between the two previous ones, namely, the values and norms of a text which are schematized by the reader.

Apart from the summary of major reader’s frames utilized by readers, Zerweck suggests a culturally and historically-based theory of narrative unreliability. In his article, the critic offers eight essential (or minimal, as he puts it) conditions to approach an unreliable narration. I would like, however, to concentrate on the second of them because, counting on it, Zerweck asserts that Patrick Bateman is an unreliable person, but not an unreliable narrator.

Zerweck believes that the unintentional self-incrimination of the

narrator is a necessary condition to regard a story as unreliable. In this regard, narrations must be regulated by a “detective framework”. According to Monika Fludernik, unreliability seems to be connected to “a kind of detective scenario”, a certain epiphany or revelation readers experience when they uncover “the secret about the narrator persona” (FLUDERNIK, 1999, p. 78). If this detective framework is taken as a central feature for determining narrative unreliability, Fludernik adds, texts which deliver inconspicuous contradictions are to be interpreted as displaying a limited first-person perspective. Thus, unreliability should apply only to those narrations whose inconsistency and disparity are salient in the narrative. Zerweck rejects Bateman’s incongruous accounts because he identifies neither a detective scenario nor unintentionality: “The narrator knows and openly tells of his deeds and motivations and makes no attempt to ‘hide’ his nature. There is no ‘detective framework’ involved and no unintentional self-incrimination takes place” (ZERWECK, 2001, p. 157). Unfortunately, the critic does not go any further on his examination of *American Psycho*. Indeed, Patrick Bateman does not hide his criminal nature – his descriptions are disgustingly detailed. However we readers can still apply that detective framework. The analysis that follows reinforces that those narrations of killings result from a deeply troubled mind. I additionally contend that contextual signs can help us detect discrepancies in what Bateman says. We are coping, in reality, with a narrative of a potential murderer who mentally projects vivid mayhem. Bateman might want to be read as an “evil psychopath” (ELLIS, 2011, p. 19), but unintentionally reveals his psychosis.

In *American Psycho*, it is perceptible how inconsistent many dialogues are as the protagonist’s narrative unfolds, especially when Bateman refers to his vicious desires. In a conversation with his skin technician Helga, during a beauty treatment, he is interested in knowing whose men’s loafers are those he sees by the door. So, he asks Helga about it. But, after her answer, he starts talking about his intention to switch a girl’s

blood with a dog's:

“Did I ever tell you that I want to wear a big yellow smiley-face mask and then put on the CD version of Bobby McFerrin's ‘Don't Worry, Be Happy’ and then take a girl and a dog – a collie, a chow, a sharpie, it doesn't really matter – and then hook up this transfusion pump, this IV set, and switch their blood, you know, pump the dog's blood into the hardbody and vice-versa, did I ever tell you this?” While I'm speaking I can hear the girl working on my feet humming one of the songs from *Les Misérables* to herself, and then Helga runs a moistened cotton ball across my nose, leaning close to the face, inspecting the pores. I laugh maniacally, then take a deep breath and touch my chest – expecting a heart to be thumping quickly, impatiently, but there's nothing there, not even a beat. (p. 111-2)

The two events, that is to say, the question about the pair of loafers and the fantasy about the blood transfusion, just do not match within the dialogue, making us suspicious of what has actually been said. On the other hand, once readers agree with the fact that Bateman's world is crowded with narcissistic characters who can barely pay attention to others, such segment, even if it sounds weird, may be taken as reliable. Readers end up concluding that the protagonist has really said that (he even uses the verb “speak”). But these readers should also take seriously into account the rest of the dialogue:

“Shh, Mr. Bateman,” Helga says, running a warm loofah sponge over my face, which stings then cools the skin. “Relax.”
“Okay,” I say. “I'm relaxing.”
“Oh Mr. Bateman,” Helga croons, “you have such a nice complexion. How old are you? May I ask?”
“I'm twenty-six.”
“Ah, that's why. It's so clean. So smooth.” She sighs.

“Just relax.” (p. 116)

After his comments about the transfusion, Bateman says that Helga makes that typical sound of someone requiring someone else to be quiet, to get relaxed. In addition, she asks him how old he is, and she seems to hear his answer. How can she be attentive to this dialogue and not to his raving comments on the blood transfusion? How can the skin technician and the protagonist have a conversation in which there is only a part, the oddest one, she does not pay attention to? The comment itself should make her alert, to say the least, but no reaction whatsoever is mentioned.

There are also scenes in the novel that, when confronted, may make readers doubtful. After having dinner with Paul Owen, Bateman says Owen is so drunk that he could be easily convinced to pay the bill, induced to “admit what a dumb son-of-a-bitch he really is” (p. 207), and could be easily brought over to Bateman’s apartment. The protagonist asserts Owen is killed, and offers a vivid and detailed description of the murder:

The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up. Paul’s eyes look up at me, and suddenly his hands are trying to grab at the handle, but the shock of the blow has sapped his strength. There’s no blood at first, no sound either except for the newspapers under Paul’s kicking feet, rustling, tearing. [...] This is accompanied by a horrible momentary hissing noise actually coming from the wounds in Paul’s skull, places where bone and flesh no longer connect, and this is followed by a rude farting noise caused by a section of his brain [...] I scream at him only once: “Fucking stupid bastard. Fucking bastard.” (p. 208-9)

A graphically descriptive scene such as this may lead us to take it as

a scene that really happened. The narrator particularizes every minute of the killing. He gives accounts of the direction Owen's eyes look at and his attempt to clench the ax. He even describes the sound that comes out of the wounds. But even if he does so, readers can still spot signs of unreliability.

The first sign comes up when Bateman records a message on the answering machine saying Owen has moved to London. We readers wonder if he is able to fake Owen's voice. The protagonist answers us right away by affirming his "voice sounds similar to Owen's and to someone hearing it over the phone probably identical" (p. 209). He thinks this statement is enough to convince us. On the contrary, some of us may find this hard to be possible, as it is too coincidental, and still remain suspicious.

A second sign takes place when the protagonist goes back to his apartment from Owen's, puts the corpse into a sleeping bag and utters:

[...] I zip up then drag easily into the elevator, then through the lobby, past the night doorman, down the block, where briefly I run into Arthur Crystal and Kitty Martin [...] so they don't linger, even though Crystal – the rude bastard – asks me what the general rules of wearing a white dinner jacket are. After answering him curtly I hail a taxi, effortlessly manage to swing the sleeping bag into the backseat, hop in and give the driver the address in Hell's Kitchen. (p. 210).

Bateman describes himself as a brawny man. For this reason, the moment he states he can easily drag a corpse probably as heavy as he is all the way out, we readers do not suspect him. The suspicion lies in the fact that he walks past three people and, surprisingly, none of them questions what he is doing or what is in the sleeping bag. Furthermore, he places the corpse on the backseat of the cab, and again no reaction from the driver is reported. On the one hand, believing Bateman brings a man over his

apartment and kills him when there is no one else around does not seem hard to do. On the other, accepting wholeheartedly he can “easily” and “effortlessly” get rid of the corpse the way he does is more unlikely.

Finally, the third sign of the protagonist’s unreliability is provided by Harold Carnes in the chapter “New Club”, in the latter part of the novel. Bateman is sure he has murdered Paul Owen and the escort women, but this certainty shatters altogether when he meets his lawyer. While Bateman insists on confessing he has committed dozens of murders, Carnes takes it as a joke: “Bateman killing Owen and the escort girls?” He keeps chuckling. “Oh that’s bloody marvelous. Really key, as they say at the Groucho Club. Really key.” [...] (p. 372). The lawyer does so because he is convinced that Bateman cannot have murdered Owen:

“But that ’s simply not possible,” he says, brushing me off. “And I ’m not finding this amusing anymore.”

“It never was supposed to be!” I bellow, and then,

“Why isn ’t it possible?”

“It ’s just not,” he says, eyeing me worriedly.

“Why not?” I shout again over the music, though there ’s really no need to, adding, “You stupid bastard.” He stares at me as if we are both underwater and shouts back, very clearly over the din of the club,

“Because... I had... dinner... with Paul Owen... twice... in London... *just ten days ago.*” (p. 373, author’s emphasis)

Given Carnes’s revelatory reply, we may conclude that Owen’s assassination is nothing but a mentally-shaped image, albeit minutely described. And just as a domino effect, we may re-assess all the other

killings. The prostitutes, homeless people, immigrants, the homosexual, the child, the dog, all of these victims may have been imagined, as a result of Bateman's constant and severe loss of contact with reality. Unbalanced, disordered, deranged, frantic, and insane are, thus, possible adjectives to label a mind which is totally soaked in violence, torture and bloodshed (not to mention the derangement provoked by drug abuse). So, "psycho", the very word which compounds the title of the novel, should be read as a short for either "psychopath" or "psychotic". In order to come to grips with such a complex character as Patrick Bateman, we need to take into accounts both interpretive readings.

While discussing Bateman's unreliability, Julian Murphet raises this question: "what really happens to Paul Owen?" (MURPHET, 2002, p. 46). The presence of the detective Donald Kimball, the critic says, assures readers that Owen has vanished, to say the least. Moreover, Bateman's inspections of newspapers and his inquiries about "two mutilated prostitutes found in Paul Owen's apartment" (ELLIS, 2011, p. 352) end up being a fruitless search. There are no words printed or rumors about such incidents. Murphet interestingly observes that, when Bateman returns to the apartment, his description of the surroundings is unlike that he had previously given. A different-looking building, unfitting keys and a new attendant are clear indications of an unreliable narration. The revelation Murphet experiences makes him deduce that "Bateman has never been here before" (MURPHET, 2002, p. 47). I want to reiterate that only by employing the detective framework could he reach such conclusion.

Bateman's narration furnishes readers with numerous signs of unreliability. Some of them were pointed out here to illustrate this. In Bateman's narrative, some scenes appear to be reality, others appear to be formed mentally. I do not believe that a reader's framework ought to be more significant than a textual sign, as Ansgar Nünning argues. To reach a satisfactory conclusion on the matter, the latter is to be as important as

the former. The analysis supported textually all along might be as mistaken as the one based only on the reader's perceptions. In *American Psycho*, both approaches must be practiced; otherwise many pieces of evidence to determine the protagonist's unreliability will be overlooked.

To conclude, I would like to discuss two points mentioned by Daniel Cojocaru in close relation to Bateman's unreliability. Firstly, the critic argues that, though Harold Carnes states that he had dinner with Paul Owen just ten days ago, the fact that the lawyer mistakes Bateman twice (for Davis and, some lines later, for Donaldson) indicates that readers will be never certain of what has happened indeed. I might possibly share with Cojocaru the opinion that "Bateman's role remains ambiguous" (COJOCARU, 2008-9, p. 193). Bret Easton Ellis seems to have artfully written a piece that accommodates both interpretations: the narrator can be either a murderer or a psychotic character. Ambiguity thus becomes a third interpretive option for those who choose to keep undecidability. Secondly, I cannot share the opinion that society would be exempt from responsibility for the making of Patrick Bateman once readers interpret him as psychotic. I asseverate that to break the ambiguity means to clarify analytically the mechanisms of an aesthetic phenomenon which has been reconsidered by narratology lately. The reader-oriented model of unreliability has turned into a prolific narratological approach. Yet, contextually speaking, *American Psycho* displays a nonmoral protagonist whose bloodshed is mentally projected. In this respect, Bateman is a potential serial killer. It does not mean, however, that his contingency is harmless. It actually depicts a collective desire in the form of a predatory identity. A novel that thematizes consumerism, competition and outrage against marginalized groups brings destruction, violence, and social segregation to the foreground of its narrative – some of the shameful tendencies that make up the episteme of our society. A narrator who says he is just like anyone within his yuppiedom forces an individual behavior to be read as a collective threat. As a potential

victimizer, the protagonist may represent an intention of annihilation a whole class might likely have. This interpretation seems to be as appalling as the one the critic considers.

References

BALDICK, Chris. *The concise dictionary of literary terms*. New York: Oxford University, 2001.

BOOTH, Wayne C. *The rhetoric of fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1983.

COJOCARU, Daniel. Confessions of an American Psycho: James Hogg's and Bret Easton Ellis's anti-heroes' journey from vulnerability to violence. In: *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, p. 185-200, 2008-2009.

CULLER, Jonathan. *Structuralist poetics: structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.

ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho: a novel*. London: Picador, 2011.

FLUDERNIK, Monika. Defining (In)Sanity: the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the question of unreliability. In: *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext - Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*, edited by Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach, Tübingen, pp. 75-95. Gunter Narr Verlag: 1999.

_____. *An Introduction to Narratology*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

HERMAN, David. *Basic elements of narrative*. Maiden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

MURPHET, Julian. *Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho: a reader's guide*. New York & London: Continuum, 2002.

NÜNNING, Ansgar. Where Historiographic, Metafiction and Narratology Meet: towards an applied cultural narratology. In: *Style*, vol. 38, issue 3: pp. 352-375, 2004.

_____. Unreliable, Compared to What? Towards a Cognitive Theory of Unreliable Narration: Prolegomena and Hypotheses. In: *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext - Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*, edited by Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, pp. 53–73, 1999.

RICHARDSON, Brian. *Unnatural Voices: extreme narrations in modern and contemporary fiction*. Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2006.

SADE, Marquis de. *The Misfortune of virtue and other early tales*. Translation and editorial material by David Coward. New York: Oxford University, 1992.

STÜHRING, Jan. 2011. Unreliability, Deception, and Fictional Facts. *Journal of Literary Theory Online*, v. 5, n. 1, p. 95–108, 2011.

ZERWECK, Bruno. Historicizing unreliable narration: unreliability and cultural discourse in narrative fiction. *Style*, v. 35, n.1, p. 151–178, 2001.