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Bret Easton Ellis American Psycho and Hitchcock's Psycho: Dramatic Irony, Iconography of a Modern Psychopathy or the Legacy of American Transcendentalism

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American Psycho and Hitchcock's *Psycho* mirror each other, creating distorting effects of modern desires for subjecthood and identity while symbolising the end of the American dream. Patrick Bateman from Bret Easton Ellis' novel far surpasses Norman Bates from Hitchcock's 50-year classic in terms of cruelty and psychopathy and entangles the viewer in a disturbing dialectic of subjectivism and individualism. Against the backdrop of psychoanalysis and transcendentalism, the American morality tale of modernity is deconstructed and re-examined.

The Myth of America Between the Pilgrim Fathers and the American Dream

What is America? A former British crown colony that threw off its shackles in a bitter war of independence? A rebellious son who broke away forever from the nurturing mother of England in a fierce rebellion? A new land of ancient biblical promise, where milk and honey flow? An almost extraterrestrial magnet of attraction for pilgrims, dissidents and sectarians who emigrated from the courtly-rigid England of the 17th and 18th-centuries, among others, and associated their religiously over-heated fantasies of redemption with this New Found Land, or rather equated them with what they found? [1]. An inseparable amalgam of redemption mania, destruction fantasies and violent excesses? One only sees what one knows. This axiom is of eminent importance in the psychopathological mapping of the Pilgrim Fathers [2]. What did the first Puritans who travelled from Plymouth, England to America on the Mayflower in 1620 see? According to their meticulous daily diary entries, they saw the entire monumental spectacle of a primal biblical drama unfolding before their very eyes. Sent out to distant shores, hearing God's voice, the Puritans first had to appropriate the land, acculturate it, make it habitable, like a new act of creation [2]. The fact that it had already been inhabited for thousands of years was of no interest to anyone at the time. Where there is light, there is shadow. No promise, no matter how monumental, without those demonised beings with whom the creation story, in the personification of the snake once set the world drama in motion.

The transgressors of God's prevailing order in the new Americas were a multitude of indigenous peoples, baptised simply as Indians

in complete ignorance of their geographical destination [3]. For the white settlers, they were all too quickly the devil if they vehemently resisted the imperial occupation. The first Puritans were eager hermeneuticians against their will: Sign interpreters [4]. They searched for the most important sign of all, the so-called master-signifier: God. Has God redeemed them? Are they among the chosen, the happy few? Strangely enough, the signs that the Pilgrim Fathers found were worldly signifiers, insignia of wealth, power and, of course, money [4]. Whoever possessed the latter must therefore already possess the former. Sigmund Freud was able to recognise compulsive traits in the circularity of religious thought. In the Salem witch-hunt of 1692, the violent-religious element boiled over, combined with secular jurisprudence and gave birth to horrific horrors that heralded the white man's campaign of conquest over everything that existed on the new continent [5]. Over the centuries, the formula of promise was nolens volens rechristened as something else that would captivate even more people: the American Dream. In its profanation and secularisation, the Promised Land heralded the birth of the American Dream. What was this dream? In the founding document of the Declaration of Independence of 1776, the idea that everyone could achieve prosperity through hard work seems to have already been laid out. 'From rags to riches' or in the catchy German phrase 'Vom Tellerwäscher zum Millionär'. Absolutism may reign in Europe and force serfs to eke out an existence, but in America citizens are supposed to be endowed with inalienable rights, at least some of them. The American dream is the material dimension of the immaterial idea of a land promised by God. The two are intrinsically linked. Separating one from the other gives birth to monsters that have become truly legion under capitalism, and thus we enter the cultural arena of 1950s America.

Hollywood, Paranoia and Film Noir

The 1940s and 50s marked a turning point for Hollywood cinema, which otherwise tended to be monumentally staged. These were years of the Cold War, anti-communist agitation, the shattering of established role models and increasingly rampant paranoia [6]. Film noir, a term used by French filmmakers to characterise the American film of these years, was characterised by loners, being lost in an urban metropolis, a labyrinth of disillusioning

experiences and a seductively staged, self-confident woman who, usually as a femme fatale, knew how to spin the taciturn male anti-hero into a web of further intrigue [7]. This misogynistic attitude also reflects men's fear of losing power within their traditional relationship patterns after the Second World War. In the so-called 'late period' of Hollywood, films were made in the climate of the Cold War that all focussed on the escape from reality. During this time, the question of an American national identity was negotiated in a new and controversial way and encompassed themes such as patriotism, freedom and loyalty. In addition, the question of political affiliation became increasingly life-threatening in the discourse on national security. The whole of Hollywood, and thus also film noir, was caught up in this political development and became a kind of negotiating ground for all these questions [7]. It is therefore not surprising that Hollywood was also perceived as an indirect player in the politics of the Cold War. The alleged defence of the national interest of the USA took on totalitarian traits in the course of the 1950s. Several agencies were founded, such as the FBI, in order to carry out invasive investigations and prosecutions of the population [7].

Freud and American Mass Culture

Interestingly, in the climate of the Cold War and rampant paranoia, the psychoanalytic profession also established itself in America with great success. The historian Nathan Hale described the 1950s in America as 'the golden age of psychoanalysis' [8]. American mass culture and public consciousness literally absorbed the teachings of psychoanalysis and consumed them as another mainstream commodity [9]. In 1955, American newspapers declared the United States to be the most psychologically aware nation in the world. The quest for mental health seemed to have become endemic [9]. This development is all the more remarkable when one considers the resistance to Freudian psychoanalysis at the beginning of the 20th century. However, the consequences of the Second World War had changed the initial reluctance and the view of psychoanalysis due to the many traumatised soldiers and veterans affected [8]. Mental illness was now recognised as a serious health problem, and the psychoanalytic profession became firmly established in public discourse with great enthusiasm [10].

William Menninger, a member of the American Psychiatric Association, promoted a positive view of mental health and founded the Group for Advancement of Psychiatry [8]. Menninger wrote in the New York Times about the positive effects of psychoanalysis. He not only saw it as the key to understanding normal behaviour, but also interpreted Freud's theories as the basis for preventive mental hygiene. In 1946, the New York Times reported that there were over 8 million neurotics in America. About a decade later, Newsweek even estimated the number of sufferers at over 10 million. More and more researchers and representatives of psychoanalysis appeared in American magazines in order to effectively report on psychoanalysis in the media [8]. The increasing popularisation cast the image of the European psychoanalyst in a new light and transformed him into a benevolent and highly empathetic American therapist who carried out treatments as an everyday routine. By 1950, there were already over 500 psychoanalysts in the United States. Those who devoted themselves to psychoanalytic therapy almost enjoyed the status of intellectuals in society [7]. In some circles, the study of psychoanalysis was even regarded as a status symbol and was tantamount to an academic degree, as it meant engaging intensively with relevant issues of the time.

The Medialisation of Psychoanalysis in America

In the 1940s and 50s, a kind of trend towards self-therapy began in America. In addition to the increasingly positive portrayal of Freudian psychoanalysis in film noir, such as *Spellbound*, *Rebel Without a Cause* or *The Three Faces of Eve*, literature also contributed to the dissemination of Freudian ideas in mass culture [11]. One of the most popular books after the Second World War was Benjamin Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, which translated analytical approaches and theories into universally understandable language. Radio programmes reported that psychoanalysis could also be helpful in everyday life situations. Women's magazines also recognised this trend and repeatedly published articles about psychoanalysis, although these mainly focused on sensationalist journalism [11]. After a while, this wave also reached 'ordinary' people, who, thanks to the influence of the media and their own success stories, came to regard therapy with a psychiatrist as completely normal.

America and the Danger of the Psychopathic Personality

As early as 1960, policy makers in the USA warned the public of the potential dangers of mental illness. Americans View Their Mental Health published a study showing that the majority of Americans, regardless of social class, felt isolated and helpless in the face of contemporary events [12]. However, psychiatric researchers were not only interested in the mental health of the average citizen, but also in particularly severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or paranoia, which distanced individuals from social reality. While many mental illnesses only affected the subject themselves, in the climate of the Cold War people also feared the consequences of a psychopathic personality, which could pose a danger to society as a whole [12]. The mentally ill therefore deserved compassion and treatment, while psychopaths should be locked up and monitored. In the year Hitchcock's *Psycho* premiered, the fear of the psychopath had already infiltrated the American imagination. The seemingly increasing incidence of psychopathology in America also coincided with the supposed collapse of traditional gender roles in the face of the loss of paternal authority. Hidden in most Hollywood films of the 1950s was a subtle advert for the 'American way of life'. *Psycho* can be seen as a fault line in the American suburban idyll, as it ruthlessly exposes a society based on illusionary assumptions. Hitchcock's sensational film *Psycho* also coincided with the emergence of a socio-cultural movement that championed the liberation of old and suppressed mentalities, namely the incipient hippie movement. There was also a major influence from European cinema, which had already made taboo subjects such as eroticism and violence visible on the big screen. Despite the European influence and its progressive mindset, American cinema was still under the control of the Production Code until the end of the 1960s, which restricted cinematic discourse on these topics [13]. The dark and threatening world of film noir was successfully replaced by the colourful mass spectacle in the following years.

Hitchcock's *Psycho* as a Disturbing Medical History

Psycho reflects Hitchcock's dual career in television and cinema. With this film project, he wanted to build on his previous success, but at the same time appeal to a wider audience through themes such as violence and sexuality [14]. Hitchcock found the inspiration for his new film in Robert Bloch's 1959 novel *Psycho*. The decision to shoot the film in black and white was not only made for financial reasons, but also because Hitchcock feared that a blood-drenched, naked murder victim would have been too gruesome for the censorship board [14]. It was also a way of shocking the audience, as most cinema-goers were already used

to colour films. The media distribution of the film is probably due to Hitchcock's famous publicity stunts [15]. To better market the film, Hitchcock shot a successful trailer in which the director gave an insight into the Bates Motel. Another measure shrouded the film in a kind of mystery: As the protagonist Marion Crane is murdered quite early on in the film, Hitchcock feared that late viewers would wonder why they had not seen the film star. He therefore demanded in the daily newspapers and from the cinemas showing the film that no more viewers should be allowed into the auditorium after the film had started. This led to long queues outside the cinemas, which was rather untypical for the cinema habitus of the time. With the help of loudspeaker announcements in the cinema auditorium, Hitchcock laid down further rules for the audience: Viewers were asked not to retell the story of *Psycho*. All these rules presumably had an intimidating and disciplinary effect on the audience [15].

The Plot of Hitchcock's *Psycho*

The plot of the film revolves around Marion Crane and her boyfriend Sam Loomis, who are unable to marry due to Loomis' poor financial situation. Crane receives \$40,000 from a client to deposit in the bank, but instead she flees with the money to solve her financial problems and her complicated love life. She stops at the Bates Motel, where she meets Norman Bates, who takes an interest in her. Bates lives only for his mother, for whom he cares deeply, and becomes angry when Crane tries to point out that his mother is self-centred. While Crane is showering, she is stabbed to death by someone who appears to be Mrs Bates. Bates finds her body and hides all evidence of the crime. Crane's sister and Loomis investigate her disappearance, and private investigator Arbogast tries to find clues to her whereabouts. He arrives at the Bates Motel, where he is killed by someone who also looks like Mrs Bates. Crane's sister and Loomis were almost killed if Loomis hadn't stopped Bates. In the end, it turns out that Bates committed all the crimes himself and killed his mother and her lover out of jealousy. Feeling guilty, he went insane and kept his mother's body in the cellar. A psychiatrist explains Bates' multiple personality disorder, and in the final seconds of the film, Bates can be seen smiling and pretending to be Mrs Bates, suggesting that he has completely transformed into his mother's persona [16].

In the first part of the film, the viewer is literally forced to identify with the female protagonist Marion. We see the world through her eyes. This effect is achieved through subjective camera work. The close-up makes the viewer aware of Marion's extreme tension and nervousness. In addition to the spatial composition of the image, the viewer can also empathise with the character's inner life through constant voice-overs. The subjectification of this scene is reinforced by the fact that everything that precedes this event is portrayed as real in the film. At the beginning of the story, time passes, which is signalled by cross-fades between the individual shots. After Marion has stolen the money, there are only cuts. From the car, neither Marion nor the spectators can see outside because of the heavy rain, so they can no longer tell the time. The light from the oncoming cars blinds Marion, who in turn is blinded by the rain-soaked window pane in a surreal effect. This reinforces the difference between the inside of the car (Marion and the spectator) and the undefined outside world [17]. Marion fantasises about the consequences of her theft. She is unable to rationally control her own actions; the viewer experiences the senselessness of her crime. After the viewer has to follow Marion's story, the shock is all the greater when she is murdered in the shower shortly afterwards.

Norman Bates as a Mirror Narrative of Marion Crane

The viewer loses his only foothold in the film and has to look for a new subject to identify with. He has no choice but to replace Marion with Norman Bates, who ultimately dominates the rest of the story as a subject. According to Slavoj Žižek, Norman is the mirror negative of Marion, which Hitchcock already hints at through the similarity of the two names [17]. Marion's world reflects everyday American life and the American dream, while Norman is the dark, nocturnal image of the same. The female protagonist stands for the positivity of the present, which is represented by symbols such as car, street, office, money, police, while her male counterpart symbolises the failure of the past, evoked by a ghostly mansion or stuffed animals [17]. Slavoj Žižek illustrates the relationship between Marion and Norman with a Möbius strip: if you walk on one side of the strip long enough, you will eventually end up on the underside of the loop. In *Psycho*, this transition is the murder of Marion. Hitchcock depicts this transition through a dissolve.

The audience sees a whirlpool of water and blood flowing down the bathtub drain. The close-up of the vortex in the drain is then cross-faded with a close-up of Marion's lifeless eye. This creates a vortex in the eye, an effect that Hitchcock had already established in the opening credits of *Vertigo* [17]. The close-up not only reflects Hitchcock's fascination with the eye, but also his affinity with surrealist art and is reminiscent of his collaboration with Salvador Dalí in *Spellbound*. Metaphorically speaking, the viewer moves through a time portal to the dark side of the Möbius strip in which Norman is trapped. These considerations can also be used to explain the Oedipus complex. The day side reflects the moral authority of the father or the 'name of the father', while the night side stands for the 'desire of the mother'. The viewer switches to Norman's side through Marion's murder. The transformation of Marion into Norman signifies a regression of desire into an instinct. Desire is always characterised by a lack, it is unsatisfied and constantly in search of the lost object. The drive, on the other hand, is by its nature always satisfied and trapped in its own closed cycle [17]. It satisfies itself through the constant failure to grasp the object. The drive always returns to the same place, which is why identification with it is impossible. Norman is also unable to identify because he cannot desire. He lacks the structure symbolised by the 'name of the father' [17].

Bates Hotel as a Reflection of Freud's Instance Model

The three levels of the Bates Villa are modelled on Freud's instance model. The id comprises the innate instincts and drives, the ego describes self-perception and self-control and mediates between the id and the superego. The superego represents the internalised social norms and values. These three instances are crucial for the child's development into a subject. In *Psycho*, the ground floor symbolises Norman's ego or what is left of it. The first floor of the house represents Norman's superego or the internalised representation of his deceased mother. Mrs Bates' room is depicted as sterile and antiquated. The basement represents Norman's id. In the course of the film, when his double game threatens to blow up, Norman pushes his mother from the first floor into the cellar, the descent metaphorically standing for the descent into his deepest psyche and his psychopathological disorder. In a figurative sense, he transfers his mother from his superego to his id.

Bate's Oedipus Complex and the Murder of his Mother

Norma, the mother, and Norman, the son, represent the epitome of a perverted mother-son dynamic, which culminates in the murder of the mother as the grand finale via imagined excesses of violence.

Not only does Norman repeatedly display his uncontrolled aggression in *Psycho*, but the son also expects his mother to feel the same jealousy he felt when he felt replaced by his mother's new lover. Norman's superego, according to the Freudian conception, should harbor his morals and social values. In his case, however, he cannot feel empathy, as his superego function has completely dissolved in favor of representing his mother. With the remark "a son is a poor substitute for a lover", Norman reflects on the concept of the Oedipus complex and unconsciously expresses that his deepest disturbance is rooted in his own childhood [18]. According to Freud, child development can only be successfully completed if the child internalizes the paternal law and its morality during the phallic phase. However, Norman's father died when he was only five years old. For this reason, it was not possible for him to adopt his father's values. Norman's deficient superego is shown again and again in the film in his dealings with other people. He neither accepts their authority nor sees others as equal, as he has never had to give up his maternal desires in favor of his father's authority. The reason for Bates' decision to kill his mother is extremely complex and multi-layered and can be explained with the help of the phallic phase of development. During this phase, Bates developed a strong attraction to his mother, which he was no longer able to redirect to other relationships. Men usually try to resolve their longing for the mother-imago by replacing her with other women, but Bates had no connection to other women because his mother taught him that they were all immoral and unworthy of his attention. Furthermore, the absence of the father caused Bates to continue living in the imaginary order of mother and child rather than moving into the symbolic order of the father. As a result, Bates developed an incestuous and possessive love for his mother, which eventually drove him into psychosis. "Bates never left the imaginary order of mother and child. Bates is always half a mother and half a Bates, a bisexual who has left both the real and the symbolic world behind, thrown back on himself and become psychotic" [17].

The Shower Scene as the Epitome of Norman Bates' Psychopathy

Another of Bates' behaviors can be explained by the psychoanalytical theory of castration anxiety. According to Freud, a male individual escapes this anxiety in two ways: voyeurism and fetishism. Bates' voyeuristic tendencies become all too clear when he removes a painting to look through a hole in the wall into Marion Crane's room. As he watches Crane undress, his fetishistic tendencies are expressed. Bellour claims that Bates' psychosis is "structured by a fetishistic goal driven to the point of madness" [7]. He had fetishized his mother's body to the point of death and will repeat this process with his new objects of desire. If we examine Bates' psychological defense mechanisms, we can see that he represses the guilt of his mother's murder at the cost of his sanity. By trying to completely repress this memory, Bates is able to maintain the belief that his mother is still alive. The shower scene in *Psycho* is the most famous part of the film, in which Bates' alter ego, his repressed second personality, which includes the internalized mother, kills Marion Crane. From a Freudian point of view, the knife figures as a representation of Bates' phallus. By killing Crane with the knife, Bates gives free rein to his sexual repression and frustration. On the other hand, if we consider Mrs. Bates as a murderer, she uses Bates' phallus to destroy Crane's threat to their relationship. This killing scene is crucial to understanding the complexity of Norman Bates' psychopathic personality. "In this brutal act, both parts of Bates' personality experience a primal satisfaction. Bates thrusts his phallic weapon into Crane's naked body, and Bates' mother is able to destroy her rival for Bates' love"

[16]. By committing this act of violence, Bates satisfies the two basic instincts of his deeply divided psychic energy.

***American Psycho* and the Morality tale of the American Psychopath**

Mary Harron's adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' scandalous novel was released in cinemas in 2000. The title and the name of the main character, Patrick Bateman, already hint at what is pursued in the novel. A morality tale of the specifically American psychopath, who has long since surpassed the singular psychopath Norman Bates from Hitchcock's 1950s classic *Psycho* and is so frequently reproduced that it also raises the question of the involvement of the American dream in this moral decay. In the New York of the 1980s, it has become almost irrelevant who you are. Only against the background of what one has does something like a sense of one's own existence emerge [19]. This moral arbitrariness leads to the interchangeability of people. And so it is not surprising that nobody seems to miss Bateman's increasing number of victims. What begins with murders of homeless people and prostitutes develops into murders of colleagues and ex-girlfriends [19]. However, the boundary that Bateman seems to cross under a looming loss of control dissolves in the lack of identity of the well-off victims of his violent excesses. A private detective finds his way to Bateman's office, but his investigation ends in an aporia when the supposedly murdered Wall Street broker is seen in London. Even Bateman's lawyer, to whom he makes a taped confession, is amused by the alleged murder. Bateman's connection to reality is increasingly called into question. Has he perhaps killed the wrong person? [19]. This is the biting punchline of the movie and the novel. The truth, and with it the legal system consisting of investigators and lawyers, have no place in a world without subjects. And it is precisely such a world that the movie shows. *American Psycho* represents the end of identity encompassing the total loss of the American dream.

American Psycho is a book about identity, its arbitrariness and loss. It is difficult to differentiate between the individuals equipped with all consumer goods, so that the concept of the individual itself is put to the test. At the lower end of the hierarchy, individuals are so characterized by the deprivation of consumption that here, too, an unrecognizability sets in that makes it impossible to distinguish one homeless person from another. Somewhere between these extremes seems to lie a middle ground that allows for the consumption necessary to maintain one's own life and distinction, but does not lead to complete self-dissolution, in which one becomes nothing more than a consumer good. But *American Psycho* lacks figures of the moderate center. Only the private detective who targets Bateman because of the mysterious disappearance of his colleague seems to represent the normal population

Bateman's violent excesses are described in just as much detail as his colleagues' clothing. The difference between these activities is therefore only a gradual one. When Bateman begins to eat the corpses, literally seeing them as consumer goods, the events reach their decisive culmination. At the same time, the boundaries between everyday work and nocturnal urges become blurred. This nihilistic cannibalism is only the logical consequence of a total consumer fetishization, which initially understands the other person during sexual intercourse as a mere means for its own satisfaction and, as a consequence, can no longer find anything morally wrong with consuming the body of the other. The only taboo that Bateman still upholds is self-consumption, autophagy. Despite all his psychoses and delusions, Bateman never begins to

hurt or punish himself. This taboo serves to preserve his own ego; consumption is not allowed to break away from the consumer, let alone start a process of reflection. The inability to build deeper relationships with other people is emblematic of this. Bateman cannot look at people detached from their feigned utility value? This judging and condemning of the people around him makes it impossible for him to see them for what they are, regardless of their consumer value. In an ironic approach, one could ask where the victims are to be mourned if Bateman only kills non-subjects?

***American Psycho*- an Illusionary Game of Hide-and-Seek?**

There is no doubt that Patrick Bateman is a psychopath with dangerous and destructive violent tendencies. But he is also an unreliable narrator who suffers from hallucinations and thus has a fragile relationship with reality. Therefore, it does not seem unlikely at first that his murders are merely the product of his pathological imagination. However, this interpretation would mean that an important message of the film would be lost, which is why both director Mary Harron and co-writer Guinevere Turner have spoken out against this interpretation. The character of Patrick Bateman has an obsessive desire for recognition, but he doesn't manage to stand out from his colleagues. They all wear the same suits and no one has a real identity. Bateman tries to attract attention through his crimes and to stand out from the anonymous mass of Wall Street, but the consumer society that created him refuses to recognize him as a subject. Whether he actually killed his colleague Paul Allen in the end or whether he was just in London with his lawyer a few days earlier becomes irrelevant in this world. In the final scene, Bateman confirms in his inner monologue that nothing has changed as a result of his murders. He has received no redemptive punishment, he continues to live without an identity in a hostile environment. He longs for recognition, but the world around him ignores him, causing him the greatest possible pain. Patrick Bateman is trapped in a seemingly endless loop of nihilistic meaninglessness, and the more he wants to break out, the more he realizes that he cannot. In the cinematic realization, a sign hangs on the door behind him, an allusion to Sartre's "Closed Society". This is not an exit". There is no (good) way out for Bateman.

American Transcendentalism

American transcendentalism was the first independent philosophical tradition to develop in the United States between 1830 and 1860. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, among others, critically opposed any form of historical or epistemological authority and advocated a philosophy based on trust in man's natural capacity for insight [20]. Convictions and theories, according to the basic intuition of transcendentalism, must prove themselves in individual life practice. According to its most important representative Emerson, transcendentalism is only the contemporary expression of one of two currents present in the entire history of philosophy, namely idealism in contrast to materialism [20]. A close reading shows that Thoreau's work makes a significant contribution to philosophical self-knowledge and human education. Thoreau's best-known work, *Walden* or, *Life in the Woods* from 1854, offers a contribution to the cultural-philosophical understanding of human education, especially in the chapters "Reading" and "Solitude". Thoreau seems to contrast the corrupting and sick society of civilization with a healthy nature. In view of the social ills of their time, the Transcendentalists invoked the ideals of the innate freedom and equality of all people as well as the individual right to self-realization, which they derived from the natural dignity and participation of each individual in the divine [20]. Drawing on Plato, German idealism

and Indian philosophers, they formulated a powerful critique of man's alienation from himself and his environment, which began to take on ever more drastic forms at the height of the industrial revolution. On August 31, 1837, at the invitation of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Harvard, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the speech that is now one of his best-known texts. "The American Scholar", as the speech was entitled, was about much more than a specific scholarly ideal. It was not without reason that the physician and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) even once described it as "the declaration of independence of American intellectual life" [20].

The scholar described by Emerson in "The American Scholar" was a new kind of person: free, independent, relying only on his own natural abilities. This was not simply a challenge to a certain way of life; rather, it was the previous culture in general that was to be reviewed. If this was based on the fact that the individual was integrated into it as part of a tradition that had been handed down, then the human being imagined by the transcendentalists was to be liberated and released from this heritage. The overloaded and traditional culture was to be replaced by an individualism that no longer suffocated human striving for self-realization in norms and conventions [20]. With this last aspect, the talented Mr. Ripley enters the American stage as the final act of this article.

The Talented Mr. Ripley and the Perversion of the American Dream

Like Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is a product of the 1950s, a hybrid of paranoia, excessive spiral of violence and seemingly naïve gaiety that re-negotiates the themes of identity, class consciousness and the American dream. The plot revolves around Tom Ripley, a young man from a poor background who becomes entangled in a dangerous game of deceit and murder as he attempts to assume the identity of a wealthy acquaintance named Dickie Greenleaf. Ripley is a virtuoso of disguise and social mimicry. The concept of the American Dream serves the novel to reveal Tom Ripley's dark motives and his irrepressible drive for social acceptance [21]. Ripley represents a perverted cipher of the myth of America in all its violence-glorifying and redemption-seeking variant of the Pilgrim Fathers. In contrast to the Pilgrim Fathers, however, he embarks on the opposite journey. It almost seems as if he is bringing the deadly spiral of loss of identity and endless desire back to the place where it all began: old Europe. Tom Ripley always wants to be an Other, to constantly escape the poverty of his non-existence [22].

He finds real life only in imitation, in the perfidious assumption of Dickie Greenleaf's identity, whom he murders in cold blood for it. Ripley lives only in the creation of a social persona, he creates a myth. He is an eternal go-getter who wants to climb the social ladder at any cost. He wants everything, in stark contrast to the protagonist Bartleby from Herman Melville's novel of the same name, whose stereotypical sentence "I prefer not to" plunges his entire world into despair at his total renunciation. Patricia Highsmith's novel from the 1950s reveals the dark side of the American dream. What counts is Ripley's economic ascent, which is tantamount to secular redemption [22]. In a profaned world in which the Lord God of the former Pilgrim Fathers has become meaningless, all that counts is the optimization mania of an all-consuming individualism that sets its own values and rules. Ralph Waldo Emerson certainly did not have this in mind, but with his concept of self-reliance he opened the nihilistic floodgates to such individualism. "It is better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody" are Ripley's words [23]. The American dream creates an

illusionary machinery of constant self-optimization, subjecting the subject to an ever-changing new projection surface.

Psychopathy and Capitalist Cannibalism: A Final Reflection

Hitchcock's *Psycho* is the first film to locate a deep psychopathological disorder in small-town America. Director David Lynch was to follow this trail of nightmarish suburbia in his dark films several decades later. Norman Bates is initially (only) a disturbing isolated case that could have been classified as such in Freud's famous sick novellas. With Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*, the disruption of identity becomes endemic in a consumer-oriented country. The subject, which defines itself solely through consumer goods, dissolves completely in the capitalist-nihilistic world of commodities and is at best itself consumed cannibalistically à la Bateman. The myth of America, which has been kept alive for many decades through the figuration of the American dream, at least in the material dimension, awakens in *American Psycho* as a nihilistic cannibal. Detached from transcendentalism, the first American philosophy, which in the form of Emerson already propagated an individual independent of tradition, a society is deconstructed that has mutated into an American nightmare. The fact that the promised land of the Pilgrim Fathers has become a nihilistic wasteland in the sense of Bateman via the psychopath Norman Bates may seem ironic at first, but it is only logical when you consider that redemption, violence and oppression were always closely linked in the original myth of America. If God is now removed from the mythical equation, all that remains are material signs, signifiers, such as money and worldly consumer goods. In Bateman's nihilistic wasteland, even subjects become consumer goods that no longer have any intrinsic value. There seems to be a significant nexus of exuberant capitalism and excessive urbanity that underlies the psychopathy and deep isolation of man in the works discussed here. At this point at the latest, the reader should wake up from the (American) nightmare. David Thoreau, a contemporary of Emerson, does not see the development of an individual in terms of pure detachment from tradition, but rather outlines a new affiliation of the individual to nature. In the metaphor of ego, dwelling and provisional, Thoreau creates an image that always conceives of people in holistic relationship systems [24].

The indigenous peoples of North America, who have always lived with and through nature and never in isolation, serve as the best example. Anyone who loses this sense of belonging to the cosmic order will always be a slave, because they will only seek their supposed happiness in the social machinery of consumption. According to Thoreau, people, like birds, should build their own dwellings; not only would there be a greater chance of creating a house that meets their own needs, but building itself would satisfy basic emotional and aesthetic needs. The finished house should have something of the openness of a bird's nest [224]. Ultimately, however, it is only the nomad, the Indian or the wanderer who leaves the house and the values of domesticity associated with it completely behind. This opens up a completely new conception of man, which can only be hinted at here and which is in complete contrast to the capitalist value system. But one thing is certain: man in Thoreau's sense is authentic, committed to inner growth and to nature as a cosmic order. He may become many things, but certainly not one thing: an *American psycho* [25,26].

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