

An exploration of how male materialism and consumership in Wall Street drama films, such as 'American Psycho' (2000) and 'The Wolf of Wall Street' (2013) represent power and wealth.

My area of examination is Wall Street drama films. I will be examining the characters of Patrick Bateman from Mary Harron's *'American Psycho'* (2000) and Jordan Belfort from Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). I will be exploring how they are represented to have power through their material possessions and wealth. I have chosen these two texts because they are both set in 1980's Wall Street and they both exhibit good examples of the representation I wish to explore. *'American Psycho'* exploits male materialism through the character of Patrick Bateman, who uses designer brands to exert self-gratification and conformity where as *'The Wolf of Wall Street'* shows how material gain equates to power and success. The two films are 13 years apart, so the representation may vary, due to the change in time. *'American Psycho'* is a book adaption by the author Bret Easton Ellis, where as *'The Wolf of Wall Street'* is based upon the memoirs of famous stock broker "Jordan Belfort". This is important as the representation of Patrick Bateman is built upon fiction, where as the character of Jordan Belfort was based on a real life figure.

In film, Wall Street New York represents wealth and elite power. From the release of the first Wall Street drama film, *'Wall Street'* (1987), directed by Oliver Stone, it has been represented as a place of corrupt business, ambition driven by material greed, all held in the hands of male executives. The infamous quote from the film, "greed is good"<sup>1</sup>, anchors this convention. These male characters are represented as the ideal form of masculinity. Wall Street drama films tend to reinforce the ideology of a patriarchal society, without much recognition of the female sex. The only recognition female characters receive in these

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<sup>1</sup> *Wall Street*. (1987) Oliver Stone. [Film] United States: 20th Century Fox.

films is objectification of their bodies and how they are an asset to men. This reinforces Mulvey's "Male Gaze" theory (1975)<sup>2</sup>, that women are shot through the male lens.

With reference to theorists, such as R.W Connell's Masculinity Hierarchy (2005)<sup>3</sup>, where masculinity is categorised into four sections (Hegemonic, Complicit, Marginalised and Subordinate) by their various attributes and the Traditional vs. Contemporary masculinity theory where certain features of the male sex falls into either the traditional view of masculinity (rough looking, emotionally detached, physically strong) or the contemporary view of masculinity (smooth, more emotionally understanding and have a concern for appearance) I will analyse the characters of Jordan Belfort and Patrick Bateman

For my investigation, I looked at several online sources, journals and books to aid my research. I particularly looked at gender academia that happened to cover one of my key texts. Sources such as 'Peter De Voogt's' "*Boys will be boys*" paper explores the masculinity of Patrick Bateman and his relationship with consumerism. In terms of '*The Wolf of Wall Street*' I looked at specific articles addressing the central protagonists behaviour. These forms of secondary evidence help me clarify my own opinions on the two characters in my primary textual analysis'.

I have chosen these two texts due to fact they are both set in 1980's Wall Street. Both explore material greed and excess through their main male protagonists. They address Yuppie consumerism and how it equates to wealth and respect among colleagues. For example, Patrick Bateman uses material brands to "fit in"<sup>4</sup> with his colleagues at Pierce

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<sup>2</sup>Hein, C. (2006). Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

<sup>3</sup> Connell, R. W., & Connell, R. (2005). *Masculinities*. Univ of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Easton Ellis, B. (1991). *American Psycho*. London: Picador.

and Pierce. De Voogt states<sup>5</sup> that according to Robert Brannon<sup>6</sup>, Bateman conforms to ‘The Big Wheel’ dimension. This is a trait of the 20th century male. It states that as Bateman is in a high position in society, he can afford luxuries. This gains him respect from his colleagues. He also abides the “The Sturdy Oak” dimension. This is the category of “Manly air of toughness, confidence...” is shown in terms of his work out routine. In chapter 8 of “*Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*”<sup>7</sup> Gauntlett states that there is a “masculine pride which is to be bought”. In Bateman’s case, designer products grants him this form of “masculine pride” as he is able to conform to his social status. ‘*The Wolf of Wall Street*’ also exploits this “masculine pride” as Belfort uses his earnings to surround himself and his wife in luxury, particularly in the wedding sequence when Jordan buys Naomi a yacht. Belfort subverts Earp and Katz “Masculinity and violence theory”<sup>8</sup> due to fact he becomes more masculine through his wealth. Bateman conforms to this theory as he asserts his masculinity through violence.

My key sequence from ‘*American Psycho*’ subverts the stereotype of the female gender being consumers by representing the main male protagonist to be very body and health conscious. The sequence opens with a tracking shot of a minimalist apartment. The lighting is high key, low contrast, this connotes a very tense atmosphere. The lack of items and ornaments in Bateman’s apartment suggest he is a very clean and tidy person. As a male, living on his own, we assume he would not keep up his housecleaning duties, yet instead, his apartment is spacious and lacks any form of rubbish or general clutter. This subverts the stereotype of men being messy. In terms of Connell’s Hierarchy of

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<sup>5</sup> De Voogt, P. (2014). Boys Will Be Boys - The manifestation of male gender identity in contemporary perfume commercials. Journal. [Print and online]. Gerrit Rietveld Academie. [Accessed 2nd September]

<sup>6</sup> David D. S., & Brannon, R. (Eds.). (1976). *The forty-nine percent majority: The male sex role*. Addison Wesley Publishing Company.

<sup>7</sup> Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, Gender and Identity: An introduction*. London: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Katz, J, Earp, J. (1999). *Tough guise: Violence, media, and the crisis in masculinity*. North Hampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Masculinity<sup>9</sup>, this aspect of Bateman represents him as a complicit character, due to his cleanliness. The sequence continues to a shot where Bateman is looking at reflection in photo frame. This connotes his identity crisis. This is also a recurrent motif that accentuates Bateman's narcissism.<sup>10</sup> As the narration introduces the character and we gather a sense of Bateman's hedonistic lifestyle. The face mask used in this sequence is associated with women's beauty. This suggests that Bateman is very conscious of his appearance, not for others but for himself. This act of self gratification shows his strive to "fit in" with society. In this exert, Bateman would classify as a complicit male as he cares about his appearance. This is not a feature of the hegemonic male and is associated to the complicit category. The use of heavy product description in the narration again shows how deeply Bateman is concerned with his appearance. Arguably, Bateman is considered to be a metrosexual because of this. The various different skin products subvert the idea of men not caring about their appearance. Bateman takes pride in his large collection of products, alongside the non-diegetic narration "litany"<sup>11</sup>, proving that he is a male consumer and has bought into the "masculine pride". The continuation of the morning routine shows how Bateman has been sculpted into the representation of the Yuppie lifestyle. This tedious description of every aspect of the morning routine acts as a selling point, as if Bateman is selling us as the audience a lifestyle. This introduction to the character instantly indicates that Bateman is a very self-conscious figure who holds the hegemonic attributes of a well built body and a lack of emotion. Although, his complicit attributes conflict with this hegemonic image, making him an example of a metrosexual male. Unlike Belfort, Bateman uses his wealth for mainly self-gratification purposes. Bateman believes his masculine status can only be confirmed through the eyes of his peers.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Connell, R. W., & Connell, R. (2005). *Masculinities*. Univ of California Press.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, B. (2008). *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres, 1945-2000*. A&C Black.

<sup>11</sup> Baker, B. (2008). *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres, 1945-2000*. A&C Black.

<sup>12</sup> Ferry, P. (2014). *Masculinity in Contemporary New York Fiction*. Routledge.

The bachelor party and wedding scene in '*The Wolf of Wall Street*' opens with a shot of Jordan proposing to his wife. There is a detail shot of the ring as he slips it upon her finger, emphasising the beauty and size of the ring. There is a fast paced tracking shot of multiple men (assumed to be Belfort's associates) lacking clothing, engaging in sexual activity with hookers. Belfort's attitude in the narration encourages us to indulge in whatever you like<sup>13</sup>. The narration "50 Hookers plus 50 more waiting when we've landed" shows how money can buy anything to Belfort. There is a slow motion tilted shot of the turbulence where cocaine flies through the air, showing carelessness and lack of value for money. The use of cocaine in the sequence also presents Belfort to be an immoral consumer of drugs. This is a stereotype of Yuppie greed, as there is nothing left to buy, other than recreational drugs such as cocaine. '*American Psycho*' also harbours similar traits, as Bateman and his colleagues regularly consume cocaine in club toilets.

In the hotel room, the aftermath is shown to be one of destruction. Jordan picks himself up from a bed surrounded in naked women, connoting that women are disposable pleasures. Several cuts occur as he walks through the room, unveiling broken furniture, left over drugs and more naked women. The shot of Belfort overlooking the Las Vegas skyline, naked, shows lack of care and a sense of pride in who he is. The narration states it cost him two million dollars plus paying for a refurbishment of the whole 28th floor. This shows a lack of care for his actions and money is not an issue. The camera is at a high angle, making him the same height as the buildings in the background. This could connote how big his ego is as he is being compared to be as big and tall as some of the hotels in Vegas.

Later on in the sequence, there is a shot of Belfort unmasking his wife to reveal her wedding present. The use of the extreme long shot of the yacht, cutting to a long shot

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<sup>13</sup> Benincasa, S. (2014). *A Lady's defence of The Wolf of Wall Street*. [ONLINE] Available from: <http://jezebel.com/a-ladys-defense-of-the-wolf-of-wall-street-1492397853>

emphasizes the size of the boat and the expense. The name "Naomi" is printed on the haul, showing that both Belfort and his wife are very much consumed by materialism. The dream like lighting highlights the boat's features and suggests that this kind of material wealth is only achieved in dreams. The following shot acts as an advertisement style tour of the boat with a professional sounding narrator. This sequence acts as an advert that would appear on game shows - again, as like '*American Psycho*', we are being sold the Yuppie lifestyle. The yacht itself has been furnished and equipped with its own onboard staff. This promotes the idea that his wealth has put him in a such powerful position, he has his own onboard staff. '*The Wolf of Wall Street*' uses the theme of the American Dream to push forward its messages and values. The American Dream ideology that anything is possible and the sky is the limit, could perhaps inspire the intended audience to pursue their own career goals. This in turn gains Belfort respect from his colleagues.

To conclude, my primary and secondary have confirmed the correlation of materialism and wealth in the Wall Street genre. '*American Psycho*' serves for both the consumer and material side of masculinity with the beauty products and routine, whereas '*The Wolf of Wall Street*' obtains more materialism than consumerism. Both films act as a promotion to male audiences to lead such an extravagant lifestyle. There is more of an inspiration factor in '*The Wolf of Wall Street*' opposed to '*American Psycho*', but this is due to the subject matter. Bateman seems to adopt more of a subordinate approach to masculinity due to his effeminate attributes, this makes him a metrosexual male. Although, his attention to his physique is regarded one of a hegemonic male, Bateman's character conflicts with Connell's Hierarchy. Belfort on the other hand adopts more of a hegemonic approach with lifestyle. His lack of emotion towards anything other than himself shows that he is a dominant male figure who thrives through wealth to gain power. Both characters exert self

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gratification through their lifestyle, making them perfect examples of male consumerism and materialism.

**WORD COUNT OF ESSAY WITHOUT CITATIONS: 1,910.**