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Out of Control: The Representation of
Hegemonic Masculinity in Mary
Harron's *American Psycho* and Steve
McQueen's *Shame*

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Abstract

Hegemonic masculinities define standardised forms of manhood, and they have been historically linked with violence in western societies as a way to establish male dominance and control over women and those men who do not adjust to that ideal model. In fact, hegemonic forms of masculinities, while imposed to all male members of a social group, are only attainable by a select few, and even then, not without considerable effort. Hegemonic masculinity is, indeed, essentially constructed in strict opposition to versions of manhood that are sternly condemned by the patriarchal discourse as weaker, deviant, or inferior. Nevertheless, despite the rigidity of the social limits that surround the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, gender roles are subject to diachronic change. International cultural productions have played a crucial part in (re)presenting said evolution and helping to establish that hegemony as the social standard. This essay aims to analyse the differences in the representation of hegemonic masculinity in two films from two different decades of the 21st century: Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000) and Steve McQueen's *Shame* (2011). In particular, I intend to approach these texts from the theoretical perspective of Masculinity Studies, and to analyse the various ways in which the main characters in these films—respectively, Patrick Bateman and Brandon Sullivan—embody the conflict between the individual and idealised masculinity. That conflict seems to physically unfold into violent outbursts against other characters, which works as a way to either establish the male character's dominance or to evade from the social pressures that the patriarchal discourse imposes over them. I conclude by arguing that both films showcase the conflicted relationship between a model of manhood that relies on dominance, aggression and sexual conquest, and the feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, disgust and shame that individual men experience as they struggle to imitate the ideal.

Keywords: Masculinity; Hegemony; Violence; *American Psycho*; *Shame*.

Resumen

La masculinidad hegemónica define los estándares sociales de la masculinidad, y ha estado históricamente vinculada a la violencia en las sociedades occidentales como forma de establecer el dominio y control masculino sobre las mujeres y aquellos hombres que no se ajustan a ese modelo ideal. Sin embargo, esas formas de masculinidad no son alcanzables para todos los hombres y pertenecen más bien a un grupo selecto de hombres. De hecho, la masculinidad hegemónica se construye en estricta oposición a aquellas versiones de masculinidad que el discurso patriarcal condena como más débiles, desviadas o inferiores. A pesar de la rigidez de los límites sociales que rodean el ideal de masculinidad hegemónica, los roles de género están sujetos a cambios diacrónicos. Esas masculinidades alientan a los hombres a adoptar ciertas prácticas sociales que establecen su soberanía. Las producciones culturales internacionales han jugado un papel crucial a la hora de (re)presentar dicha evolución y de ayudar a establecer esa hegemonía como estándar social. El presente ensayo tiene como objetivo analizar las diferencias en la representación de la masculinidad hegemónica en dos películas pertenecientes a dos décadas distintas del siglo XXI: *American Psycho* (2000) de Mary Harron y *Shame* (2011) de Steve McQueen. En concreto, pretendo abordar estos textos desde la perspectiva teórica de los Estudios de la Masculinidad y analizar las diversas formas en las que los personajes principales de estas películas, Patrick Bateman y Brandon Sullivan, encarnan el conflicto entre el individuo y la masculinidad idealizada. Ese conflicto parece desarrollarse físicamente en estallidos violentos contra otros personajes, lo cual ayuda a establecer el dominio del personaje masculino o a eludir las presiones sociales que el discurso patriarcal les impone. Concluyo argumentando que ambas películas muestran la relación conflictiva entre un modelo de masculinidad que se basa en el dominio, la agresión y la conquista sexual, por un lado, y, por el otro, los sentimientos de impotencia, vulnerabilidad, repugnancia y vergüenza que experimentan los individuos en su lucha por imitar el ideal.

Palabras clave: masculinidad; hegemonía; violencia; *American Psycho*; *Shame*.

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1. Introduction

Hollywood films, as the cultural productions they are, reflect the ideological and political forces that shape their socio-cultural milieu. From a gender perspective, this means that the patriarchal discourse that has dominated U.S. society and western culture in general for centuries has also influenced the way in which masculinity has been depicted by the films produced by the 'Big Five' Hollywood production companies. It has been extensively argued in the Academia that mainstream films offer a representation of masculinity that corresponds to idealised conceptualisations of manhood and that, consequently, they contribute to disseminate a specific definition thereof. As a consequence, Hollywood presents masculinity as, ultimately, a set of practices that legitimise an *idea* of manliness as hegemonic. In the following pages, I will specifically analyse the representation of hegemonic masculinity in Hollywood films *American Psycho* (2000) and *Shame* (2011), respectively directed by Mary Harron and Steve McQueen. The aim of the present dissertation is to argue that the violent 'nature' of said ideal seems to be morphing, decreasing in intensity, and evolving into a less aggressive form of masculinity. In particular, I will examine the reasons for the aggressive attitudes of the male characters in those films. To this end, I will analyse the circumstances in which violence is used by the male characters, as I contend that violence originates as a coping mechanism to resist the social pressure to become an alpha male. This social pressure ultimately evolves into pervasive feelings of vulnerability, disgust and shame.

Even though the ideas and cultural ideals reproduced by films reflect the social distribution of power in a society at a given point in time, there might be ideological differences among the different ideological discourses simultaneously present in society and competing for hegemony and representation (Davis et al. 54). Given Hollywood's institutionalisation as one of the most influential producers and reproducers of popular culture, the various representations of masculinity included in their films are inspired by mainstream ideologies. After all, Hollywood production companies seek to appeal to the widest possible audience. Yet, the masculine ideal itself is subject to the ebbs and flows of diachronic cultural evolution. It follows that films from different eras can be used as case studies to analyse the evolution of mainstream cultural discourse. For my dissertation, I have selected two films that are about a decade apart precisely because my

analysis will also seek to compare their respective representation of masculinity and discuss any differences that may indicate a change in masculine ideal(s).

Violence is the leading force in the narrative of *American Psycho* and it is also the vehicle for its resolution. In this film by Mary Harron—released in the year 2000, but set in 1980s New York—spectators are presented with a character who is slowly falling into a spiral of insanity. He is initially depicted as a successful upper-class businessman who takes great care of his physical appearance and public persona, and who is obsessed with his social status. Patrick has refined taste, is constantly making reservations at expensive restaurants, and possesses an extensive knowledge of music, with which he seems to engage at a philosophical level. Indeed, he fulfils all the requirements that are expected of the masculine ideal of the 1980s, as he is independent, competitive, almost unemotional, dominant, muscular, and skilled in business (Franklin 5). As a result, he embodies hegemonic masculinity, which provides him with the highest status in society, far above that of those men who do not comply with that standard, and, of course, above women, who are not even eligible to attain that status. The attitudes that accompany his prestigious social position in society—his sense of entitlement and of superiority, among others—become particularly conspicuous in his relationships with individuals who are lower on the social scale, individuals such as laundry workers, waiters, homeless people and prostitutes. Viewers accompany Patrick throughout a crescendo of violence and destruction against said individuals, witnessing various murders and attempted murders. Surprisingly, the ending of the film reveals that all his monstrous violence was but the product of deranged delusions. As we shall see, his psychotic break from reality is a consequence of the rigid standards that Patrick Bateman has to follow in order to be perceived as a successful man. He envisions himself carrying out unspeakable acts of violence to express his repressed anxieties and desires. This seems to be also the case with Brandon Sullivan in *Shame*. Like Patrick, he is a very successful and apparently accomplished young man. He also shares a passion for music, patronises expensive restaurants and clubs, is preoccupied with his appearance and takes good care of his image, his entourage and his privacy. Nonetheless, he does not seem to be playing such a hyperbolic character as Patrick, although his façade will have also collapsed by the end of the film. Yet, Brandon does not burst into such atrociously violent paroxysms as Patrick does, and, unlike him, he will actually attempt to amend past actions that he regrets and deal with the addictions that tie him to a circle of self-destruction.

2. Theoretical Framework

The term “gender”, according to Kimmel, has to be distinguished from “sex”, as the latter term is related to biological differences based, among other things, on the reproductive organs. Gender, however, is concerned with the signification that is attributed to that biological distinction in a given culture. Male and female are, therefore, sexual categories, whereas masculinity and femininity correspond to gender classifications and they are used to articulate what it means to be a man or a woman in a social system (3). While sex is generally identified at birth, gender is acquired throughout life. Children are confronted with great amounts of gendered input which they are presumed to imitate; in fact, they may refer to themselves at an early age as a “boy” or a “girl”, even if those labels may not carry much meaning to them. Yet, those terms are used to classify and organize society, and children must learn the gender roles associated with their sex so as to function properly in social interactions. As those roles are so intricately woven into the very fabric of society, it is easier for children to assimilate into social groups if they “belong” to a certain gender (94). Those configurations of gender have developed into complex systems of inequality. In societies in which there is a strict binary system of gender classification, the generalisations linked to each gender are polarised and endowed with distinct social functions and status. While men are seen as empowered and dominant, women are seen as powerless and dominated. That is the reason why much of the research done on gender has focused on explaining said inequality, although manifestations of gender roles and degrees of inequality vary cross-culturally. Due to the rigidity of the binary gender division in Western societies, scholars believe that the rise of a dominant gender is inevitable (16). Dominance is established by the social assimilation and internalisation of those predetermined gender roles that are generalised in a given culture. This is the case in all social groups in which individual identities are forcefully defined through social relationships (Foucault 102). Gender ultimately becomes a crucial part in defining a person’s personality because it determines many if not most aspects of their social conduct, their self-perception and the way in which they are perceived by others. As the cultural constructs they are, gender roles are subject to change and evolution over time. Yet, it seems as if the rules of masculinity are exceptionally rigorous and the limits of what is acceptable for men are not being challenged as vehemently as those applied to femininity. This is so because the guidelines that shape masculinity are designed to resist change, as those guidelines are set, for the

most part, to establish and perpetuate male control and dominion over society (Kimmel 158).

In the same way that there exist various differences among genders and their respective roles, there are also differences among the different iterations of masculinity that exist synchronically between different cultures, and diachronically within the same culture. Masculinities may be defined as “the pattern or configuration of social practices linked to the position of men in the gender order, and socially distinguished from practices linked to the position of women” (Connell 2). That being so, boys are encouraged to follow a set of accepted attitudes that are understood to be properly masculine. Given, however, the aforementioned dynamic and multifaceted nature of gender, multiple forms of masculinity are present in influential societies that involve great cultural diversity. In such circumstances, masculinities may even vary according to the workplace, social group and neighbourhood. Masculinities seem to interact with each other, and there seems to be a sense of status that orders them hierarchically. In other words, there are some forms of masculinity that are more accepted than others (i.e., the masculinities of famous athletes *versus* the masculinities of private homosexual individuals). Masculine identities, it follows, are far from the simplistic models often depicted in popular culture. On the contrary, they may consist of various forms of masculinities in continuous interaction with one another; for example, a man who engages in multiple heterosexual sexual relationships may be actually trying to suppress hidden homosexual drives which he fears would make him lose his social status (Connell 7). There is one form of masculinity that is more socially accepted than the rest, regarded as “hegemonic masculinity”; this is the form of masculinity on which I will focus in this essay.

Hegemony refers to the dominance that one social group establishes over the rest through the legitimization of its ideals. The term came into use after Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci set out to understand how capitalism came to be established in western countries. He formulated the idea that ruling systems obtain power through social consensus (Rosamond). The same formula applies to the establishment of hegemonic masculinities in a society. As a form of masculinity itself, hegemonic masculinity is also understood as a set of characteristics and behaviours that would favour a small minority of men to establish their rule and dominance over society at large. Since, as we have seen,

hegemonic masculinity is not a shared form of masculinity, it only represents the most legitimised model of being a man. For this form of masculinity to obtain its status, all other forms of masculinity need to be subordinated to it.

While hegemonic masculinity does not then only impose its dominion over women, but also over all subordinate forms of manhood, the dichotomous construction of genders makes it so that, in most western cultures, one of the most visible ways in which hegemonic masculinity asserts itself is in opposition to femininity and via the sexualisation of the latter. Sexual conquest is often construed as the badge of honour of privileged men in patriarchal societies. Sex is thus weaponised and wielded as an ultimate form of control over women's bodies, to limit women's sovereignty over them, but also other men's access to them (Nicholls 26-27). Therefore, domination through sex becomes an intrinsic part of the power dynamics in patriarchal societies, which has been and ostensibly still is the case in the societies presented in the diegetic reality of *American Psycho* and *Shame*. Defining violence can be a daunting task, as social institutions classify and define various forms of violence differently. In order to provide a definition of violence, the nature of the violent act and the consequences that it produces need to be taken into consideration. There is physical violence, such as homicide, and there are other forms of violence that might not be against the body, such as verbal and emotional violence. There are also other factors that are important for its study, *e.g.* whom it has harmed and who has committed it (Walby et al., "Different Forms of Violence"). Violence can be viewed as an event in which both victim and perpetrator engage in a social relationship in which the perpetrator commits an action—which might be intentional or not—and which causes different degrees of harm. The damage can be physical and/or psychological, but, for it to be considered the result of a violent act, it must have been inflicted without the consent of the victim. The victim's consent, even when apparently granted, may be affected by their age, psychological conditions, and/or by their being intoxicated (Walby et al., "Conceptualising Violence and Gender"). There might be forms of violence that are normalised and even carried out by diverse social institutions. Those forms of violence are referred to as "structural violence". In fact, Nicholls classifies violence as "Personal violence"—violence that involves an active subject initiating the event—, "structural violence"—violence in which there need not be an explicit agent perpetrating the action— and "cultural violence"—forms of violence that help legitimise personal and structural violence— (38-39). I will, however, focus on

personal violence rather than structural violence, even though much of personal violence is often supported by political systems. Violence can be used as a mechanism to establish control over somebody else and thus exploit them, but it may also be used preemptively as a way to deal with the possibility of being harmed. In other words, a strong fear or vulnerability may drive individuals to use violence as a defence mechanism to protect themselves from being hurt.

The four emotions on which I will be focusing in my analysis, powerlessness, vulnerability, disgust and shame, emerge when Patrick and Brandon find themselves in situations in which their dominance and hegemony are challenged. Somebody else's refusal to acknowledge the main characters' superiority or attempt to escape from their control is the trigger for their aggressive and self-destructive behaviour. The dichotomous construction of social roles in general and of gender identities in particular entails an all-or-nothing view of their position: if they are not completely *in* control, then they must be completely *out of* control. If they are not exerting power, they must be lacking power altogether. If they are not wounding others, they must be the ones on whom wounds are being inflicted. The feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability that arise from these perceived attacks should not be confused. On the one hand, powerlessness stands for the physical inability to react or operate, for example, after a traumatic event. On the other hand, vulnerability is applicable to those situations in which someone is susceptible to being harmed either physically or psychologically, thus referencing the literal wound, the *vulnus*, at the heart of its etymological meaning. Disgust is, in turn, a socially constructed emotion that enforces rules regarding social 'purity' and moral 'cleanliness'. It might be felt for oneself or for others, depending on the person who behaved immorally, and deviant behaviours that are perceived as 'contaminating' are met with a strong physical rejection, often even a literal gag reflex, which will keep individuals who are objects of that emotion from engaging in such acts. Disgust, then, is a gut reaction provoked by the manifestation of the social anxieties present at any given period in history. Shame, on its part, consists in the knowledge or realisation of something that is not socially appropriate. Similar to disgust, it also has its roots in social norms, as it works as a marker of what is appropriate and what is not. However, while disgust conveys a physical and external rejection against that which is not socially accepted, shame does not create such rejection; it rather creates an internal feeling of distress which is not always physically exteriorised, and if it is, it takes a much more subtle form. Whether induced by one's own actions or

by those of others, shame can be such a powerful emotion that it can encourage or cause individuals to change their behaviour.

3. Analysis

3.1. Powerlessness and vulnerability

Both Patrick Bateman and Brandon Sullivan are examples of hegemonic masculine accomplishments. They are both affluent, muscular and have great success with women. However, their imperious personalities seem to be a product of their desperate fight against their feeling of inferiority as they share one more characteristic: they have a deeply-seated feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability. This seems to be one of the tragic flaws of these characters. Patrick and Brandon are constantly trying to assert their dominance in order to counterbalance said intense sense of insecurity. The insecurities that torment them are mainly rooted in their need to belong to a social group and to commit to the social rules that shape their character; in other words, they have to live up to the standards of a social group that they associate with success. It follows that they cannot allow themselves to be outside the sphere of the normative for said social group. The need to fit in creates the potential for situations where they may not be up to the standard, as they are desperate to portray themselves as someone they are not: the perfect representatives of an impossible ideal. Thus, their social identity is fragile because, ultimately, it is fake. In order not to feel vulnerable under their shaky façade, they need to protect themselves by reinforcing their social disguise, which they both do by externalising their insecurities on those around them. In Patrick's case, by inflicting pain on others, not only does he establish his authority—especially when he feels challenged by someone—but he also extrojects what he perceives as unacceptable parts of himself, thus exorcising his fear of personal inadequacy as far as the aforementioned perfect social standards are concerned. In Brandon's case, the assertion of dominance is achieved through sexual relationships, in which control over the other is equated to control over the fragile self, which is consequently perceived as stronger, dominant, and successfully masculine. Since they are ultimately designed to hide their vulnerable self, these coping mechanisms make them emotionally unavailable because they create a disconnection between the real self and the exterior world. Showing one's emotions constitutes the maximum example of vulnerability, as they would be giving away their

anxieties. Indeed, their emotional availability is so low that when some other character behaves kindly towards them or shows some affection, their shield of protection shatters and their insecurities materialise in physical violence, rejecting intimacy as a threat to the ego. In some cases, the affection they are shown prevents them from behaving normally, while in others, the consequences are self-destructive.

In *American Psycho*, Patrick's vulnerability is portrayed much more intensely and graphically than in *Shame*, as Patrick is more explicitly driven in all his actions by the way in which others might perceive him. This is displayed during a scene in which he is constantly asking two prostitutes to fulfil his commands: "I want you to clean your vagina. No. From behind. Get on your knees" (00:39:20-00:39:35). Patrick is humiliating the prostitute by implying that she has poor hygiene, which is further articulated in the mocking way in which he splashes water onto her back. His attention to every detail in the prostitutes' appearance and manners exposes his vulnerability. Patrick needs to control the whole interaction in order to be prepared for any circumstance in which the prostitutes may not behave as he expects, and he will continue to give out orders throughout the scene for that reason. The whole situation seems designed to showcase his vulnerability against the fake omnipotence of his persona since he also becomes visibly offended when they fail to show any interest in what he does for a living (0:40:55-00:41:00). Patrick's vulnerability emerges from behind his mask of self-confidence because he believes that what makes him stand out in society is the economic power that derives from his extremely well-paid job. Consequently, he feels threatened when he realises that there are people that do not share his principles and that do not perceive any superiority in him. At that particular moment, he becomes aware of the fact that his carefully constructed persona is worthless if someone does not give it the meaning that he attributes to it. Later in the scene, we can observe the way in which he rebuilds his façade of self-confidence. While he is having sex with the prostitutes, he is constantly looking at himself in the mirror and flexing his muscles as he smiles. His unfaltering focus on himself rather than on the prostitutes conveys the idea that he is only interested in himself. To some extent, he is having sex with himself, or rather, with the ideal image that he has of himself as a means to cope with his underlying sense of vulnerability. He is so concerned with the image that he wants to project that even looking at what lies outside his reflection in the mirror might be dangerous. If he were to focus on the prostitutes, he might realise that reality is different from what he wishes it to be

and that he does not have total control over it (00:44:28-00:45:35). To regain his sense of control, after their sexual intercourse, he tortures the prostitutes with a coat hanger and then hands them the payment for their services with calculated indifference, so as to underscore his emotional detachment and, consequently, his recovered control over his sense of vulnerability (00:45:50-00:46:20). Moreover, his inflicting pain works as a means to “cleanse” the impurities with which the prostitutes might have polluted him. The fact that he is in control of others’ pain works as a coping mechanism for him to alleviate his inability to control his own suffering. In that way, the agony and suffering that he inflicts on others are the same ones that he feels, as he, too, is not really in control of his own life.

Patrick’s vulnerability is also overtly illustrated in the scene in which Patrick and Jane, his secretary, are in the former’s apartment. Patrick had given Jane specific instructions regarding her behaviour and dress code for work, and he had never engaged with her in any conversation beyond the professional sphere. Here, however, they are having what is seemingly a date, although Patrick is planning to murder her. While Jane is talking about her feelings, plans for the future and pursuit of happiness, Patrick is walking around her while fantasising about how to kill her. So far, the camera had focused on Jane from a high angle, thus portraying her in a vulnerable position, whereas Patrick had been shot from below, thus emphasising his dominance. Suddenly, Patrick receives a phone call and it automatically goes to voicemail. It is his fiancée Evelyn; she makes fun of him by calling him “honey”, and jokes about his obsession with his work. That short message completely deflates Patrick’s powerful persona to the point that he is physically deprived of all his energy and sits motionless on his couch. Jane is Patrick’s secretary and is thus supposed to treat him as her superior; however, the fact that she has now seen the treatment that he receives from his girlfriend makes him feel humiliated. His façade in front of Jane has slipped. His transition to a vulnerable position in this scene is now amplified by the camera angles switching and focusing on Patrick from the top, and on Jane from below.

In *Shame*, there are two scenes in which we can see Brandon’s vulnerability at its highest, and they appear sequentially. The first example takes place when Sissy finds Brandon masturbating in the bathroom. Brandon’s disproportionate reaction shows a man out of control, as he violently throws Sissy onto the sofa, using the weight of his body to

pin her down while he is barely covered by a towel. The intimate position in which Brandon forces Sissy mirrors the intimacy of the act that he has been caught carrying out. The feeling of disgust that is attached to the incestuous overtones of Brandon's aggressive behaviour towards Sissy—which I will discuss in the following section—also mirrors the disgust that Brandon feels for his compulsion to seek sexual release. His sexual addiction has now been discovered and his deviant behaviour posits him outside of the social sphere of normal/normative masculinity, thus making him vulnerable to social rejection and self-loathing. His instinctive reaction reflects his need to re-establish his dominance and restore his rule in his household, which would then prevent him from falling into a vulnerable position. In the next scene, with an expression of fierce determination, Brandon approaches Marianne, a co-worker of his with whom he is starting a formal relationship. They go to a hotel together. It seems as if Brandon might need to engage in a relationship with someone who is at the same social level as he is so as to avoid falling into his socially unacceptable practices again. He needs someone that could take pressure off his chest and protect his inflated ego and his social stance. Marianne is, just like Brandon, a self-made woman who has complete control over her body and her sexual relationships. When Brandon and Marianne are about to have sex, Brandon cannot get an erection, which makes him feel physically impotent and throws him into a paroxysm of frustration, as we can see him violently grabbing his head, clenching his fist and looking out of the window (1:05:22-1:08:03). His failure at embodying masculine success shatters his painfully constructed social image and makes him vulnerable to scorn and rejection. Marianne's social position, which is the same as his, further challenges him, as equality of status prevents him from taking the position of the leader in that interaction. This is perceived as a defeat, a battle that he has lost. Thus, he has once again become vulnerable, as his protective façade of dominion has been torn. His urge for a relationship in which he might present himself as dominant is also at the heart of the very next scene. Right after having sex with a prostitute, he tries to have more contact with her and even becomes emotionally involved with her. They are shown having sex completely naked and leaning on a wide window, a place from which anyone could see them. Having sex in that way may indicate Brandon's will to show off his regained sexual potency. However, despite Brandon's numerous attempts to engage in a conversation with her, the prostitute rejects him and does not show the slightest interest in Brandon. That sudden urge to connect with the prostitute comes from the fact that he has been able to restore his façade as a 'manly man', that he has triumphed. He can now

ignore his unsuccessful affair with Marianne and have someone who would submit to his desires (1:08:05-1:09:30). The fact that the prostitute was, of course, only willing to submit as long as her professional engagement would last destabilises Brandon's sense of superiority once again.

Towards the end of the film, right after the aforementioned row with Sissy, we can see Brandon's paradoxically uncontrollable desire to be in control of a girl's pleasure. A girl—referred to in the screenplay as Carly—is sitting at a bar when Brandon approaches her. Even though her boyfriend is playing snooker just a few feet away, Brandon introduces his fingers into her vagina in an attempt to establish his control over her. Carly, although visibly surprised, does not reject Brandon, as he goes on to say: “Are you with someone? Does he go down on you? I do... I like the way it feels. I like the way it's just me and it... I wanna taste you.” (1:16:59-1:18:53). We can observe how Brandon excludes Carly from his fantasy, reducing her to “it”, to her vagina. By reducing her whole identity to just “it”, he is seeking complete control of her as a person by taking control of her pleasure and satisfaction, depriving her of any power over her own body and placing himself in a dominant position. Nevertheless, the specific moment in which this scene is located on the narrative timeline of the film establishes a clear cause-effect connection with his violent reaction to being caught masturbating by Sissy, and his attempt to control Carly can be thus interpreted as a means to escape from his own feeling of impotence. Seeing his sexual conduct reflected in Sissy's eyes has made him aware of the fact that it is out of the ordinary and that he is at risk of receding on the social scale, hence his aggressive, even predatory behaviour with Carly, and his having sex with two prostitutes in a subsequent scene. However, the fact that he got beaten by Carly's boyfriend, and that Brandon was expecting this to happen as he actively provoked him by boasting about having sex with her conveys the idea that his actual goal is to be brought down to the position to which he feels that he belongs. As he had learned that he has some vital flaws that would lower him on the social scale, he feels like a failure. He has also realised that his behaviour towards his sister, whom he judges and belittles, is hypocritical. Therefore, it seems as if he might be unconsciously trying to put himself in the same position of powerlessness in which he had thus far put others and letting for once his true self emerge by allowing another man to dominate him. His feeling of weakness in that scene is also amplified by images of him crying after his defeat, which are shown while the voiceover of his conversation with Carly goes on. The fact that he

is longing to be dominated means that he is ashamed of how he behaves and is seeking punishment. He is, then, willing to hand in his dominance over to another man and stand in a position of inferiority, which can also be seen when he accepts oral sex from a man, thus challenging the hegemonic ideals of masculinity and subordinating himself to a stranger in the same way that he had desired Carly to submit herself to his control (1:22:21-1:22:51).

In both films, vulnerability and powerlessness arise from the characters' fear of falling down on the social scale, of failing to embody the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, and of not having control over the situation. Both Brandon and Patrick yearn to being perceived as powerful and respectful individuals in society. Thus, when they feel in danger of losing their position or showing any emotional weaknesses, they instantly behave erratically. In Brandon's case, it is his fear of his unconventional sexual practices being discovered that makes him vulnerable. In Patrick's case, his power resides in him having control over the way in which others perceive him. Thus, when he is not considered superior or his status is not recognized, he grows a deep sense of powerlessness.

3.2. Disgust

In both *American Psycho* and *Shame*, disgust arises when the characters are confronted with versions of masculinity and with behaviours that somehow remind the two lead characters of their own abnormality. Like vulnerability and powerlessness, repulsion leads both Patrick and Brandon to inflict pain on others in order to soothe their anxiety. Their need to prove that the non-hegemonic identities they hide do not exist elicits a strong feeling of disgust, an instant gut reaction, whenever they come too close to deviant or subordinate versions of masculinity.

As we have seen, Patrick seems unable to escape the lifestyle that he has carefully constructed. He needs to be surrounded by specimens of the hegemonic masculinity to which he so desperately wishes to belong. His urge to control and dominate, alongside the various rituals and behaviours that come with it, enshroud him in what is both a protective armour and a suffocating cage, for they condition him to project an image and to achieve a status that is not real, but rather, a fantasy. Building a persona that does not correspond to any real personality, but rather mimics one, drives him to insanity, an

insanity that needs to be hidden behind an impenetrable mask if he aspires to ascend the steep ladder of hegemonic masculinity. It is thus the constant struggle to keep the mask up that ultimately leads him to a state of estrangement. He himself makes it perfectly clear early into the film:

There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping you and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there. (American Psycho 00:06:41-00:07:10)

Patrick is clearly aware of his situation. He is conscious of the façade that he has built for himself, up to the point where he no longer knows who he is. He metaphorically compares his image to an abstraction, an illusory entity. Therefore, he is stating that the idea that people have of him is something unreal, something that lacks a fixed form and is removed from his actual self. Since he cannot have control over something that does not exist, he can only try and control the opinions and perceptions that others have of him. He clearly explains that he is not hardwired to fit into society, although he is striving to do so by playing his character, a puppet in the shape of a muscular, attractive male that he owns and controls. Trying to keep this fictional self up around the emptiness that reigns where his self should be forces him into a state of self-alienation: as he himself states, “[he] simply [is] not there”. The effect of this line is greatly augmented by the fact that, while the voiceover makes the statement, Patrick is peeling a beauty mask off his face and staring at himself in the mirror with an utterly emotionless expression. That peeling off of the mask works both as a symbol of his ontological superficiality and of the necessity of getting rid of that illusion. In the aforementioned scene, one can perceive a lack of appreciation for himself, despite his success and the fact that he is accepted as a well-functioning individual in society. The whole fantasy that he has built about himself in order to belong in hegemonic social spheres forces him to seek acceptance from the rest, while also creating an injunction for him not to accept himself. The barrier that he must erect in order to keep the façade from caving in into the central void is thus vital to the success of his mission, to him being perceived as a success in terms of hegemonic masculinity. Should anything other than what is representative of idealised hegemonic masculinity penetrate said barrier, it would jeopardise the continued existence of his whole fictional persona.

Twenty minutes into the film, he and his co-workers brag about their new business cards, and his colleagues show fancier cards than he does. He interprets that situation as a tournament in which he has been defeated, and he is next seen walking straight into an alleyway at night. There, he notices a homeless man. He introduces himself, offers him money and food, and asks for his name: Al. However, as soon as Al starts to thank him for his help, Patrick, rather unexpectedly, insults him by mentioning his body odour while grimacing in disgust. The metonymical relationship between Al's smell and his lack of hygiene is, in turn, a sign of Al's indigence and of the type of 'inferior' masculinity Patrick cannot tolerate. The presence of such a deviancy from the masculine ideal generates repulsion in him and the urge to wash the 'stain' that Al is perceived to be. Furthermore, contact with this marginalised form of masculinity endangers the structural integrity of the symbolic barrier that sustains Patrick's identity by supporting his public persona. Patrick cannot allow himself to become contaminated by Al's impurity, hence the way in which he retracts his hand when Al touches him. Patrick immediately stands up, and the camera focuses on him from a low angle, thus emphasising his dominant position, and says "I don't have anything in common with you". He then stabs him to death while shouting "[y]ou know what a fucking loser you are?", and violently kicking his corpse (00:20:09-00:22:28). Feeling defeated and humiliated because his co-workers had better business cards than he did pushed him into a mental breakdown. He had felt like an underdog, exactly what he perceives the homeless man to be. Paradoxically, his desire to re-establish his superiority puts him in close contact with the abhorred Otherness that he is trying to avoid at all cost. Due to the absence of a true self, the boundaries that would otherwise clearly distinguish the world within his psyche from the world external to it are as fragile as they are porous, letting external realities be seen as internal and allowing internal realities to be projected onto external ones. As he does not have a personality of his own, all of his failures are reflected directly onto his skin. Al's brushing his hand against Patrick's skin is then perceived as a source of contamination. Al must now die for Patrick's persona to be cleansed.

In another scene from *American Psycho*, Patrick is determined to murder Luis Carruthers, who had bragged about his new business card, which has angered him again, as he felt his position as 'alpha male' challenged (00:47:20-00:47:55). He sneaks into a public restroom after Luis. When Patrick is about to strangle him from behind, his shaking hands alert Luis and he turns around. Completely misreading Patrick's gentle,

almost probing touch on his neck, Luis expresses his delight as he now believes that Patrick reciprocates his sexual passion. Nothing could have been further from Patrick's mind, and he freezes on the spot, unable to speak or react otherwise for a few long seconds. Once again misinterpreting Patrick's horrified astonishment for acquiescence, Luis kisses Brandon's hands softly. After such a response, Patrick suffers a mental breakdown and runs to wash his hands in the sink, trying to erase from his skin, the 'stain' that Luis's homosexual kiss has left on his hands. In that process, Patrick's reflection can be seen in a mirror, where we can see his look of abhorrence (00:48:10-00:49:40). In this case, it is Luis's undetected homosexuality that defines him as deviant and, consequently, as threatening. As in the previous example with Al's murder, Patrick feels the need to purge himself of such deviance from the hegemonic norm that he so painfully manages to mimic. Patrick has quickly turned to look at himself in the mirror, afraid of having been marked or polluted by Luis. The roles have been switched and Patrick is no longer the one in a position of superiority. Furthermore, the framing of the scene supports this idea of Patrick standing in an inferior position, as Luis is framed from a low angle, and Patrick from an eye-level angle, thus remarking Luis' position of dominance. Luis now believes that Patrick is homosexual too, which is unacceptable if he wants to maintain his status as hegemonic male. The scene ends with Patrick fleeing the place as fast as he can while Luis waves at him suggestively, which ridicules Patrick's attempt to re-establish his dominance.

Mirrors and reflections also constitute relevant symbols in *Shame*. In the scene in which Brandon is masturbating, he is naked in front of the mirror and is looking straight into his own eyes. Like Patrick before, Brandon, too, is essentially aroused by *his own reflection*. In the previous section, I have discussed Sissy's sudden entrance and Brandon's subsequent violent outburst, which ends with him sitting on the bathroom floor. The camera lingers on a close-up of his frustration and rage (00:57:25-00:58:37). Although he had reacted furiously against Sissy, his anger was clearly not directed at Sissy herself, but, rather, caused by her discovery of Brandon's sexual deviance, of which he was aware, but would not accept. He then proceeds to get rid of his huge stash of pornographic material, an obsessive, disturbingly large collection. He stands in front of a covered window, with his head and his arms down, and an expression of extreme disgust (00:59:40-1:00:28). The way in which Brandon threw himself over Sissy represents Brandon's means to eliminate his disgust. The only way to reestablish the

order and for Brandon to be disinfected from his personal immoralities is to break another taboo and impose himself over Sissy. Yet, the fact that his behaviour verged on sexual violence and incest triggers another wave of self-directed disgust in Brandon.

In a very tight frame, Sissy sits next to Brandon and rests her head over his shoulder as he grabs her gently. We know that she is struggling to engage in emotional relationships, as we have previously heard her attempting to contact Brandon's boss, with whom she slept. Wrapped in her brother's arms, she basks in the warmth of the emotional intimacy for which she had longed for so long. After only a few seconds, Brandon breaks the silence abruptly: "He's not gonna screw you again. You left a message didn't you? You can't help yourself. It's disgusting."(1:19:52-1:16:01). Brandon and Sissy are the two sides of the same coin: they are both attempting to find an emotional connection, but both do so by engaging in non-normative behaviour. In his sister, Brandon has found the same imperfections that he has. His earlier attempt to emotionally engage with a prostitute mirrors Sissy's desperate attempt to connect with his boss. Unlike Patrick, Brandon is not hiding an empty core, but an identity that is Other than the hegemonically masculine one that he displays on the surface. It follows that Brandon's disgust is actually caused by his own true self, which he perceives to be just as disgusting as Patrick had found Al. Interestingly, the fact that Brandon does have an identity of his own, albeit a secret one, also means that he can choose to face it and to even eventually accept it. In Brandon's case, that feeling of disgust, even if, at first, articulated through a violent outburst, it then becomes a motor for improvement, as we shall see later on. Patrick, on the contrary, has no such choice.

3.3. Shame

The eponymous emotion in *Shame* is defined by Silvano Arieti as "the feeling that one *deserves* to be punished" (20). The need to be punished is actually articulated in both films, as Brandon punishes himself by creating circumstances in which he is to receive the same type of treatment that he used to give others, and Patrick is compelled to fight a never-ending war for supremacy, thus never putting down his false identity nor an end to his torment. As noted, Patrick does not have a choice, for his very existence is entirely dependent on his public persona. Brandon, on the contrary, has the choice of facing his demons and changing his behaviour in order to embrace a healthy lifestyle and liberate his true self. Like Ariadne's thread, Brandon's feeling of shame will eventually

lead Brandon's journey through his sexual addiction to a positive conclusion. Shame is both what has prevented him, so far, from dealing with his addiction and from speaking openly about it, not even with his sister. Shame does not allow him to express affection, as he is deeply ashamed of his situation, especially when it is addressed or discovered by others. Yet, shame is also what will spur him to heal his fragmented self.

The exploration of shame is carried out through Brandon's reactions to those situations in which he is confronted with the reality and consequences of his masculine anxieties. Even if his sexual relationships do not equate to the norm, he is critical of other people's non-conventional sexual relationships. A clear example of this is Brandon's shaming of Sissy for her sexual affair with Brandon's boss, who is married and has children (1:11:05-1:15:50). Precisely since he is able to acknowledge his sexual affairs as unconventional, Brandon spirals through an intense emotional breakdown when he has to be faced with someone else's sexual transgressiveness. After that heated argument with Sissy, Brandon leaves the apartment. He revisits his memories from the night in which he was beaten up by Carly's hypermuscular and hypermasculine boyfriend, whom he had deliberately provoked, almost relishing the emotional pangs that reliving those moments cause him. As if seeking to increase his self-inflicted humiliation, he enters a gay club where a man performs oral sex on him. Brandon is now fully aware of his addiction and of its self-destructive nature, and so, it would seem as if he were actively trying to hit rock bottom. In the next scene, the voiceover of a message that Sissy has left in Brandon's answer machine floats in the air as he ignores it and enters a room where two prostitutes are waiting for him. Sissy's voice, anxious and fatigued is still playing. Brandon is now having sex with the two prostitutes, while his sister's now desperate voice hovers in the background. Brandon is clearly not enjoying himself, the muscles of his face show intense effort and a sense of doom. Sissy finally utters a hopeless "Brandon, I need you" (1:16:05-1:26:36). The contrasting effect between the images and the audio track communicates Brandon's inability to create emotional connections, as he cannot merge his physical and emotional dimensions. The dangers of hegemonic masculinity are represented in this scene as it compels individuals to seek sexual intercourse and physical dominance regardless of the aftermath and even in spite of the individual's lack of desire. Far from bringing him pleasure, his sexual addiction is keeping him from enjoying those whom he loves, and it makes it impossible to even take care of their well-being. Brandon is now riding the subway. The PA system informs him that the train has been stopped

due to a suicide attempt. This triggers a sudden and unexpected reaction in Brandon and he runs frantically to his apartment, where he finds out that Sissy has attempted suicide by slashing the veins in her wrists. After he rapidly assists her and brings her to the hospital, we see him sitting by her hospital bed until she wakes up. He finally reveals his deep affection for her in the tenderness of his caresses. It is immediately after Brandon's long-awaited acceptance of his vulnerability that we are shown the greatest expression of shame in the film. Brandon walks out of the hospital and we see him walking along a dock while it rains. We can see his expression of regret, guilt, and grief. He then starts crying and is unable to stand up anymore. On his trembling face, we can see the overwhelming shame that he feels as he stands in his loneliness (1:26:38-1:34:32). That uncontrollable wave of emotion comes from the fact that he feels guilty for his sister's suicide attempt. If he had not been so ashamed of himself, busying himself with new forms of self-punishment, and if he had been more understanding of Sissy's affair, instead of projecting his own shame onto her, then none of this would have happened. His sense of responsibility and guilt has grown into a strong sense of shame, as his actions could have ended his sister's life. His shame was originally derived from his understanding of his identity as a man as a single, monolithic ideal, which spurred him towards a model of perfection that required him to be flawless. In that sense, the things that granted Brandon's position in society—his job, his success with women, his economic status—have now been proved to be worthless since his addiction and his flaws could destroy him and destroy his loved ones.

The ending of *American Psycho* also climaxes with an overwhelming sense of shame that pervades and shakes the main character. At night, after breaking up with his girlfriend, we see Patrick going through an intense delusion in which he murders everyone with whom he comes across. He even gets involved in a shootout with the police and blows up police cars. He locks himself up in his office and calls his lawyer (1:18:39-1:22:16). He tells him about all the people that he has murdered and the despicable things he has done with the corpses. He explains how he has videotaped many of the killings, the places where he hid the corpses and that he even tried to eat some of them. Just as the camera is fully centred on his face and the close-up zooms in, we can see him start to sob. His voice cracks and he is fighting his tears back; he squeezes his eyes as he struggles to breathe. We watch him speak erratically and make violent gestures with his hands while he describes his murders. He seems also furious at himself given

the way in which he violently grabs his head and the emphasis with which he utters the names of his victims. His face shows his contempt for himself, as he is aware of the shameful nature of his acts, and in the fact that he calls his lawyer, we can perceive his desire to be punished for what he has done. Patrick even states “I’m not sure I’m going to get away with it this time”, which confirms his awareness of the significance of his acts. However, he seems relieved after his confession, apparently hoping that he will be stopped this time. That seems to be the point when his mask of sanity finally slips: “I guess I’m a pretty sick guy” (1:22:23-1:24:53).

Shame for one’s own actions is one of the main driving forces in both films. It is noticeably the main discursive current in *Shame*, as the title indicates. Brandon’s reactions to that feeling of shame, however, seem to be more mature or less paroxysmic than Patrick’s. While Brandon actually seems to use his frustration as a way to find solutions to his present and future problems, Patrick does not believe in change at all. In fact, even after his confession, and precisely because of an overwhelming sense of shame, Patrick continues committing his crimes and sinking further down his spiral of insanity. Not even at the end of the movie does he attempt to change; he even states the following:

I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact, I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no escape. But even after admitting this, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. (American Psycho 1:36:29-1:36:54)

As Patrick’s voiceover utters these words, the sign that is behind him reads “[t]his is not an exit”. This final quotation reinforces the idea that Patrick will not attempt to change his ways because of his own flaws, but also because of the flawed social context in which he participates. He explicitly states “I do not hope for a better world for anyone”, implying that it is not possible for society to change. Therefore, the film concludes that no one is capable of escaping the social anxieties that torment them, and that the individual is not the only one responsible for their own behaviour. The opposite is true in *Shame*, for Brandon does actually eventually embark on a transformative journey.

4. Conclusion

The two male characters that I have analysed in this essay embody the aggressiveness and sexually predatory behaviours of traditional hegemonic

masculinities. As a consequence, their personalities are moulded by such restrictive boundaries that it becomes impossible for them to maintain a healthy balance between social and individual expectations. That is why they follow alternative routes to relieve some of the pressure; alternative in that they are neither socially conventional nor socially accepted. They illustrate a masculinity in crisis that struggles to cope with a deep-seated desire for control and dominance, as well as with the inability to align the internal self with the external persona. In line with traditional models of patriarchal masculinity, Patrick's and Brandon's assumed personalities pivot around three main characteristics: economic success, sex and dominance. Although they are similar characters, Patrick tends to externalise his sense of inadequacy and shame, while Brandon tends towards interiorisation and self-destructiveness. Although at the end of *American Psycho* we learn that all the killings that Patrick had committed were only psychotic illusions, in Brandon's case, the spectator realises that all his experiences are real and that his violent outbursts and self-destructive behaviours are coping mechanisms to deal with a vast feeling of shame that surges when others get a glimpse of his failure to encompass all the aspects of idealised hegemonic masculinity—which materialises in his sexual addiction.

In their constant quest to achieve economic, sexual and social success, not only do Patrick and Brandon aim to exert control over everybody else and thus assert their dominance, but they also try to protect their vulnerable/real selves from public scrutiny. Their authentic selves, which cannot correlate to the canonical masculine ideal, are the seat of their insecurities which they cover with a fabricated façade. The latter's shallowness and its attachment to the idealised roles of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity will ultimately cause the façade to crumble. The main symptoms of this identity crisis are four emotions, disgust, shame, vulnerability and powerlessness, which are directed towards or triggered by their own identity, and the one that they perceive in others. However, there seems to be a paradigm shift in the final representation of the characters, as Patrick will continue to behave in the same way that he used to, unable to escape from the hyperbolic character that he plays in public and unable to explore his own identity. On the contrary, Brandon will actually deploy his feelings of shame so as to free himself from those oppressive, impossibly restrictive and ultimately destructive socially imposed traits. He leaves his self-destructive and obsessive behaviours to one side in order to engage in a healthy relationship with his sister and with his own self, regardless of the "flaws" condemned by the patriarchal discourse. Thus, the results of my

analysis suggest that there has been a shift in the way in which masculinities and, more specifically, hegemonic masculinities are represented in the media in the decade that divides these two films. *American Psycho* (2000) represents a hyperbolic representation of a vilified masculinity that presents no escape for anyone that embraces it. A decade later, the masculine character that Brandon shows in *Shame* (2011), while still openly critiquing the dangers of patriarchal masculinity, presents a man who is capable of recognising the destructiveness of the paradigm upon which his identity had been forced to build itself, to set aside his obsession with dominance and control, and to learn new, constructive behaviours. As the media represent the ideals of the hegemonic classes, that changing representation of masculinity might actually point towards an underlying change in masculinities as a whole, leaning towards the acceptance of new masculinities that do not support violence, but do support self-acceptance.

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