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“Inside Doesn’t Matter:” Ronald Reagan and American Psycho

Facts are stupid things.

—Ronald Reagan, 1988 Republican Convention

All the world will be a stage, with Reagan in the leading role
as carrier of a dehumanizing con

—Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual

Ronald Reagan’s greatest strengths as President are perhaps most interestingly examined through
his greatest failures. The 1986

However, neither his supposed homicidal habits nor his apparent schizophrenia are noticed within the social arena in which he operates as long as Bateman continues to wear Valentino suits and is seen at the right restaurants—signifying a successful businessman and shielding his substance (or lack thereof) with these status symbols. His acts, intentions, and overall mental state don't seem to matter; however, I disagree with Young's contention that Bateman is indifferent to originality; rather, he seems hopelessly caught in a similarly schizophrenic sociopolitical and discursive context in which the relationship between image and reality has dissolved, providing an uncertainty from which he can base his actions. There is no originality to which he can be indifferent, and his actions—no matter how violent, perverse, or insane—are sublimated by his public image's signification.

Bateman's obsession with form establishes itself immediately. He introduces himself by carefully describing his morning routine and the beauty products he uses daily to manufacture his image.

I live in the American Gardens Building on West 84th Street, on the eleventh floor. My name is Patrick Bateman, I am twentyseven years old. I believe in taking care of myself, in a balanced diet, and a rigorous exercise routine. In the morning, if my face is a little bit puffy, I'll put on an icepack while doing my stomach crunches. I can do a thousand now. After I remove the icepack, I use a deep pore cleaner lotion. In the shower, I use a water-activated gel cleanser; then a honey almond body scrub; and on my face, an exfoliating gel scrub. Then I apply an herb mint facial mask, which I leave on for ten minutes while I prepare the rest of my routine. I always use an aftershave lotion with little or no alcohol because alcohol dries your face and makes you look older. Then moisturizer, then an antiaging eye balm, followed by a final moisturizing protective lotion.

Throughout his monologue, the audience is only presented with either Bateman's masked face or the reflected image of it in picture frames and his bathroom vanity. At one point in the scene he opens his medicine cabinet. Bottles with the brand names "Yves Saint Laurent" and "Oscar de la Renta" replace his reflection while he continues to describe himself, suggesting that these

When Bateman approaches

DepressionAs Harvey states, Reagan “could make mistake after mistake but never be called to account.His image could be deployed, unfailingly and instantaneously, to demolish any narrative of criticism that anyone cared to construct.”¹⁶

An examination of American Psycho commenting on Reagan’s image politics illustrates how the Reagan era marked a hyperreal condition in which the code of signification took precedence over that which they signified (Indeed, on account of Reagan’s background as an actor-turned politician it is only fitting to examine his public persona and presidency through a film.) In Baudrillard’s words, this reading demonstrates the manner in which “reality has passed completely into the game of reality.”¹⁷In addition to locating Reagan’s image politics as hyperreal my reading seeks to examine the manner in which Reagan’s use of America the image, though deployed through simulation, could precipitate material effects. While Reagan’s “inside,” like Bateman’s, may not have mattered his carefully constructed form somehow produced material consequences therefore can be viewed as shaping material conditions through his image politics’ affect.

Bateman, as evidenced by his morning routine, operates within a community which one’s status is determined by images. Indeed he does not even have to work to be wealthy. His father, as Bateman’s fiancée Evelyn points out, practically owns the company for which he works. When Evelyn asks him why he doesn’t quit his job and live off of his family fortune Bateman replies “Because I want to fit in!” The assertion of status within his field is dependent

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When he is pictured in his office, he is most often listening to his headphones, reading magazines, or drawing crude sketches of the murders he imagines. His actual function as a businessman is therefore secondary to his acquisition of the symbols and performance of the activities associated with one who has that occupation in his time and place. The true workplaces of Bateman and his peers, as Martin Weinreich indicates, are “the restaurants and clubs and even the New York cabs that transport them from clubs to restaurants and vice versa—all of which function symbolically to assert their status.”¹⁸ As Jean Baudrillard notes “[labour] is everywhere, because there is more labour.”¹⁹ In other words, the performance of labour is incorporated by the codes that signify one’s capital within a field “work” is reconstituted as time spent performing a socially inscribed role.

As Bateman’s acquisition of these work-related symbols shows, there remains a desire to simulate actual labour through its performance as “a social ritual [affectation], as a reflex, as morality, as consensus, as regulation, as the reality principle. The reality principle of the code, that is: an immense ritual of the signs of labour extends over society in general since it reproduces itself, it matters little whether or not it produces.”²⁰ Bateman and his peers are therefore compelled to partake in this affective social ritual en route to asserting their status publicly. This legitimizes their lack of actual work by placing their actions within a form that signifies work. As he is masked even when unmasked, Bateman works with-1(out).49 0 Td(w)2(he)(l)-21

through the image's symbolic value while maintaining a disjunction between the simulated and real. His signification is contained by the code; however, the code deployed through simulation can be actualized in the material. On account of his trustworthy image, Reagan's public dishonesty signified truthfulness as well as dishonesty. His image's affectivity actualized a notion of trustworthiness and reliability that included falsehoods and unreliability. Thus, Reagan's dubious statement during the Iran Contra scandal that the American public was "hear[ing] the truth from a White House source" was accurate regardless of his speech's content—as a consequence of his signification he could not speak without speaking the "truth."

Reagan, through his image politics, made it seem as if his image produced material consequences but was deployed through simulation, maintaining a valuation of the code rather than substance and indeed substantiating the simulated through affect. This is demonstrated by his famous line, "stay the course," which was used to reassure frustrated Americans that their hard work and perseverance, despite continually worsening economic circumstances, would eventually yield material benefits. This line established guidelines for behavior without attaching those guidelines to any particular scenario or set of circumstances to which they could be usefully applied. Indeed, staying the course meant something vastly different depending on one's economic circumstances. The line therefore reinforced American values but was ultimately empty and deferred back to its own inspirational potentialities, which were endorsed by Reagan's similarly dubious trustworthiness, rather than an actual course Americans could productively follow in order to change their circumstances. The course is code, however, as a consequence of the line's derivation from Reagan's trustworthy image, its empty signification and utter lack of practicality for most Americans within the circumstances in which it was used.

completely stupid, apparently still can not compete with the power of Reagan's carefully constructed image to transform seeming into being

¹ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy," 13 November 1986, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/111386c.htm>

² Julie Wolf, "The Iran-Contra Affair," *The American Experience: Reagan* 2000. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reagan/peopleevents/pande08.html>

³ Bruce W. Kimzey, *Reaganomics* (New York: West, 1983) 103.

⁴ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985),