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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 contagion.

—Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*

Ronald Reagan’s greatest strengths as President are perhaps most interestingly examined through his greatest failures. The 1986 Iran Contra scandal, for instance, involved members of Reagan’s administration selling Iran arms, allegedly to aid the release of US hostages in Lebanon and to fund anti-communist Nicaraguan guerillas with the profits. This act, if it was indeed done for the above-mentioned reasons, contradicted Reagan’s vehement promise never to negotiate with terrorists and was in defiance of the Boland Amendment, which restricted support to Nicaragua. Reagan initially denied the allegations completely. A week later, however, he admitted that weapons were transferred to Iran, but persisted in his denial that the transfer was made to negotiate for the release of American hostages. He opens his speech by stating, “I know you’ve been reading, seeing, and hearing a lot of stories the past several days.[...]Well, now you’re

going to hear the facts from a White House source.”¹ Despite his assertion of truthfulness, polls indicated that only fourteen per cent of Americans believed his statement.²

In addition to Reagan’s perceived dishonesty, his presidency marked a period of economic hardship for lower- and working-class Americans. Reagan’s social policies, however, remained seemingly indifferent to this privation. His administration operated according to the logic that stimulating the private sector rather than supporting public programmes would optimize economic opportunity for all classes, or, “lift all boats” to prosperity. Thus, a classist sentiment informed Reaganomics—as the administration’s economic philosophy is called—that cast welfare programmes as factors contributing to social ills, and taxes as unfairly supporting the unemployed at the expense of “productive”—or working—taxpayers. Despite Reagan’s ostensible intention to “lift all boats” through free-market capitalism’s supposedly trickle-down benefits, unemployment actually rose during his administration. By the end of 1982, over 10 per cent of the American population was unemployed—the largest percentage since the Great Depression.³

Regardless of his dishonesty and his policies’ disastrous economic effects, Reagan left office in 1988 with a 64 per cent approval rating—the highest of any President since Franklin Roosevelt (who is incidentally remembered for ameliorating the Depression’s economic effects through the development of social programmes). But how could Reagan have a 64 per cent approval rating when 86 per cent of Americans apparently did not trust his word? There was thus a disjunction between his public image’s signification and his actual performance as president that enabled him simultaneously to be the most and least successful president since Roosevelt. Though most Americans did not trust his word or even agree with his policies, they did trust his public image. “In February 1982, for example, only 47% of the national population

approved of ‘the way Ronald Reagan is handling his job as President,’ yet 70% approved of him ‘as a person.’ Another poll found that nearly a third of those interviewed disapproved of Reagan’s policies, yet personally ‘liked him.’”⁴ As evidenced by his re-election in 1984 and popularity when he left office, Reagan’s likable image overshadowed his often unpopular actions. According to David Harvey, “The triumph of aesthetics over ethics could not be plainer.”⁵ As Reagan’s statement quoted in the epigraph implies, the facts simply could not compete with his carefully constructed image. Robert Dallek incisively calls him “the first true Prop President, one whose real self is the image on the TV screen and whose shadow self is the man in the White House.”⁶ This separation between Reagan’s image and substance enabled him to signify reliability despite his rather unreliable political actions and their consequences.

Mary Harron’s 2000 film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis’s 1991 novel, *American Psycho*, comments on the disruption between the signifier and signified that marked the Reagan era.⁷ The film chronicles the life of Patrick Bateman, a young Wall Street businessman. Bateman is Harvard-educated, rich, and handsome. He wears the most expensive designer suits, lives in Manhattan’s most luxurious section, rubs elbows with New York’s elite, and dines daily at the most exclusive restaurants. Indeed, he epitomizes the yuppie stereotype of vacuity combined with greed, overconsumption and materialism that pervaded America during the 1980s. Elizabeth Young calls Bateman the “Everyyuppie, indifferent to art, originality or even pleasure except insofar as his possessions are the newest, brightest, best, most expensive and most fashionable.”⁸ In addition to his social stature and the commodities he uses to construct it, Bateman believes himself to be a serial killer. Throughout the film he imagines himself torturing and killing a number of people in extremely gruesome, and often highly sexualized, ways.

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 unclear reality 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 81st street, on the eleventh floor. My name is Patrick Bateman. I am twenty-seven 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 the 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 anti-aging 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

commodities, and the brand names attached to them, are as important to Bateman's identity as the face they help transform into an image. Indeed, his identity gains meaning through these objects' signification. In reference to Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle, these commodities—and the symbolic value they have in his time and place—have colonised Bateman's identity, marking a condition in which “commodities are now *all* that there is to see.”⁹ As such, Bateman's identity is refracted through the coded objects he uses to manufacture his image. The brand names signify and give value to the products to which they are attached, which in turn give value to Bateman's identity. Bateman emblematically displays this hyperreality at the end of the scene. He applies and removes a translucent facial mask while looking in his bathroom mirror, suggesting that even after his mask is removed all that is left is a carefully constructed reflection of a handsome face shaped by expensive commodities rather than a genuine object.

Bateman thus establishes his identity through a process of simulation; he is a symbol that refers to an additional set of symbols rather than a clear referent. As Jean Baudrillard states, “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreality.”¹⁰ At the end of the scene, after peeling off his facial mask to reveal a reflection that is similarly veiled by the invisible mask his expensive moisturizers provide, Bateman coldly asserts his hyperreality:

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 yours, any maybe you can sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there.

He *is* Patrick Bateman; however, his identity is dependent upon the image he manufactures through the objects with which he surrounds himself. According to Stephen W. Busonik, Bateman is “a gap, a vortex into which the structural environment would collapse were it not

upheld by the consensus of the value relations that maintain it.”¹¹ The chain of signifiers in which he is caught therefore makes it “impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real” because it is determined by the codes on which it relies for its signification—so determined by these codes that the codes themselves take precedence over that which they signify.¹²

In an interview, Mary Harron describes Bateman as a “symbol” who “represents the craziness of an era, all its psychoses wrapped up in one person—obsession with clothes, obsession with food, obsession with his skin.”¹³ Bateman’s relationship to his historical and political moment is made explicit at the film’s end. After going on a supposed killing spree and deciding his homicidal habits are out of control, he manically confesses to his lawyer’s answering machine. When he approaches his lawyer the following day in a fancy Wall Street bar, Bateman is immediately confused with another member of his firm, suggesting the degree to which his individuality is sublimated by the code that signifies his public persona—a code that governs his colleagues’ public appearance and demeanor as well. Second, his lawyer treats Bateman’s confession as a bad joke and leaves. The lawyer thus confirms Bateman’s earlier assertion that there is no “real” him. Bateman’s carefully manufactured image overshadows his actions and prevents the ability to create a link between his image and those actions insofar as they may be inconsistent with his image’s signification. His schizophrenia is therefore complemented by his community’s similarly schizoid inability to connect form to substance. As Baudrillard states, “*today reality itself is hyperrealist.*[...]Today everyday, political, social, historical, economic, etc., reality has already incorporated the hyperrealist dimension of simulation so that we are now living entirely within the ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality.”¹⁴

When Bateman approaches his friends' table after his fruitless confession, they are watching a newscast of Ronald Reagan commenting on the Iran Contra affair. In response to Reagan's speech, which contradicts his earlier denial that the United States transferred weapons to Iran, Bateman's friend Timothy Bryce cynically asks, "How can he lie like that? How can he be so, I don't know, cool about it?... He presents himself as this harmless old codger, but inside..." In a monotone voiceover, Bateman replies, "But inside doesn't matter." Bryce then explicitly asks Bateman what he thinks about Reagan's disingenuousness, to which Bateman replies, "Whatever," as the group's conversation shifts to their dissatisfaction with the drinks they ordered and where they will dine later that night: in other words, back to the codes through which they assert their simulated identities and back to a discourse that is indifferent to the link between form and substance. Bateman closes the film with a final voiceover, exhaustedly concluding that his "confession meant nothing"—its potential substance and consequence is incorporated by the codes that maintain a disjunction between image and reality.

This final scene links Bateman's apparent schizophrenia to Ronald Reagan's image-politics and seeming irreverence for the difference between image and reality. This irreverence is epitomized by Reagan's statement that facts are stupid things, which, according to Lawrence Grossberg, "is often taken as proof of the importance of fantasy, images and desire in contemporary political struggles."¹⁵ Thus, *American Psycho* can be read as a hyperbolic comment on the implications of image politics during the Reagan era. Bateman's seeming ability to get away with murder through the manufacturing and deployment of his image parallels the manner in which Reagan's image—so meticulously constructed and affective that the former actor earned the nickname the "Teflon President"—enabled him to maintain public favour while being involved in scandals and helping create the highest unemployment rate since the

Depression. As 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*'s commenting on Reagan's image politics illustrates how the Reagan era marked a hyperreal cultural condition in which the codes 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.”¹⁷ In addition to locating Reagan's image politics as hyperreal, my reading seeks to examine the manner in which Reagan's use of and reliance on 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. He therefore can be viewed as shaping material conditions through his image politics' affect.

Bateman, as evidenced by his morning routine, operates within a community in 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 just 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 upon performing his role as a member of the upper class—a performance in which the symbolic value of one's job (and the office, personal assistant, designer suits, and lunch dates that signify it) is a key component. In fact, though Bateman goes to the office every day, he doesn't really work. He is not once shown speaking to a client or even taking a business-related phone call.

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 and restaurants and vice versa”—all of which function symbolically to assert their status.¹⁸ As Jean Baudrillard notes, “[labour] is everywhere, because there is no 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 without doing any work.

Bateman’s hyperreal signification of “successful businessman” simultaneously masks his substance and maintains his social positioning in the material world. Thus, his hyperreality has the potential to influence the material inasmuch as it functions to maintain the relations of production, legitimizing his role as a successful businessman through the simulated image’s import in the material. However, Baudrillardian simulation, a condition in which reality is

reduced to a hallucinogenic game, does not allow for an interaction or differentiation between the simulated and real. This engagement between the hyperreal and the material can be negotiated through the manner in which simulated images have effect in the material. Affective images can at once reproduce the reality principle of the code while producing material consequences through that code's import. This notion of affect is therefore useful for examining the manner in which Reagan's image remained disconnected from his actions while influencing material circumstances.

As noted, Reagan, a former actor whom Americans identified as an entertainer long before his political career began, largely maintained public favour by deploying his image as a "harmless old codger" who epitomized traditional American values. According to Frank Van Der Linden, Reagan

clings to the traditions of courtesy, civility, and gentle manners. To the total disgust of sophisticates, he embodies all twelve traits of the Boy Scout Law: he is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.²¹

In Baudrillard's words, Reagan's performance as President maintains the reality principle of the code through his image, even when his actions, as evidenced by his dishonesty and his policies' effects, do not conform to that code. As Diane Rubenstein states,

Reagan was elected as a signifier—that is, elected for his "representation of leadership and not for his possession of qualities of leadership." He is thus not just a signifier, but an autonomous one. He represents the nonobligation of the signifier to the signified.²²

Reagan's aestheticized politics therefore operated much like Bateman's hyperreal identity. As Bateman associates himself with and deploys images that signify a wealthy businessman, Reagan deployed images that suggest trustworthiness and patriotism, making his actions and their effects secondary to this powerful signification. Thus, he was not obligated to match his actions to his rhetoric as long as he unfailingly reinforced the image he was elected to signify.

According to Grossberg,

Reagan governed *affectively*. His power rested on his popularity, as his politics was defined by his commitment: even reality could not interfere with his commitments. The world was simply coded: right and wrong, black and white, rich and poor, masculine and feminine, us and them.²³

This affect, as it is deployed through the symbolic code to which Reagan ascribes, maintains the arbitrariness of the relationship between sign and substance and actualizes what Rubenstein calls the non-obligation between the signifier and signified in the material world. Consequently, one could unproblematically disagree with Reagan's politics but vote for him based on his likeable image—Reagan's form acted as substance through its affect.

Brian Massumi contends that “Reagan is not concerned with the difference between reality and appearance.”²⁴ Massumi therefore implies that there is a difference between the simulated code and reality, though “reality” may be secondary to, interspersed with, and even shaped by appearance. Massumi's reading builds on Reagan's 1965 autobiography, *Where's the Rest of Me?* which takes its title from his formative acting experience playing a man who had been dismembered during war.²⁵ “One of its [the autobiography's] primary functions,” according to Massumi, “is to explain how half a lifetime as a bad actor actually qualified him for high office, contrary to the then-public perception that the roles of entertainer and governor were fundamentally incompatible.”²⁶ Reagan's advertising of the manner in which acting informed his political abilities is therefore emblematic of his fusion of the image with reality. This process, according to Massumi, creates “technologies for making seeming being, for making a life of acting, for making something unified of supplementarity, something central of liminality, for filling the fractal rim to make a (w)hole.”²⁷ Reagan enacted the image's signification in reality, creating a reality formed through the image, or, in Massumi's words, transforming seeming into being. Consequently, Reagan constructed a (w)hole through his image's affect, shaping reality

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, while 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 seeming being. His image produced material consequences but was deployed through simulation, maintaining a valuation of the code rather than substance, and indeed substantiating the simulated code through affect. This is demonstrated by his famous line, "stay the course," which he 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 behaviour 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 referred 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 was sublimated by that image. Staying the course amounts to supporting Reagan's image and

trusting that his symbolic value will somehow guide one to better circumstances; in other words, maintaining the symbolic import of the code he endorses and interpreting the consequences of his policies as disconnected from that code.

Reagan's image-politics and aestheticization therefore manufactured consent through affectivity:

It was on the receiving end that Reagan's incipience was qualified, given content. [...] That is why Reagan could be so many things to so many people; that is why the majority of the electorate could disagree with him on major issues but still vote for him. Because he was actualized, in their neighborhood, as a movement and a meaning of their selection.²⁸

Reagan's symbolic value outgrew his political actions or even abilities, creating a character, script, and interpretation that he, as much as the public that supported him despite themselves, was compelled to follow. As Bateman's lunch dates, suits, and beauty products outweigh his supposed actions, Reagan's performance as president overshadowed the material consequences of that performance. This resulted in "a dehumanizing contagion," according to Massumi, that was precipitated by the conflation of aesthetics and politics in this historical moment.²⁹ Thus Reagan's image-politics fostered a virtualized reality based on the (w)hole created through the disjunctive though affective relationship between image and reality, a relationship Reagan utilized to remain disconnected from his politics' consequences while linked to the pristine image that produced them. Reality, in Baudrillard's words, remained a game governed by images—but it was a game in which images produced material consequences.

Reagan's image still has tremendous import in the popular American imagination. Since his death in 2004, proposals have consistently surfaced to put him on U.S. currency or even etch him into Mount Rushmore, finally transforming him into a pure sign and confirming Bateman's Reagan-induced conclusion that "inside doesn't matter." The facts, though perhaps not

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

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- 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/peoplevents/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), 103.
- ⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 329.
- ⁶ Robert Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 12.
- ⁷ For the purposes of this essay, I will refer only to Harron's film.
- ⁸ Elizabeth Young, "American Psycho: A Double Portrait of Serial Yuppie Patrick Bateman" (*Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 22.3, 2003), 49.
- ⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 29.
- ¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.
- ¹¹ Stephen W. Busonik, "Epistemic Structuralism in the Postmodern Novel: The Examples of William Gaddis, J.G. Ballard, and Bret Easton Ellis." Dissertation (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 1993), 248.
- ¹² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 21.
- ¹³ Jeff Sipe, "Blood Symbol" (*Sight and Sound* 7.9, 1999), 8.
- ¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993), 74.
- ¹⁵ Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 165.
- ¹⁶ Harvey, 330.
- ¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 74.
- ¹⁸ Martin Weinreich, "'Into the Void': The Hyperrealism of Simulation in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*" (*Amerikastudien* 49, 2004), 65.
- ¹⁹ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 18.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, 11.
- ²¹ Frank Van Der Linden, *The Real Reagan* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 25.
- ²² Diane Rubenstein, "The Mirror of Reproduction: Baudrillard and Reagan's America" (*Political Theory* 17.4, 1989), 588.
- ²³ Grossberg, 315, italics added.
- ²⁴ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 47.
- ²⁵ The film is *King's Row* (1942), directed by Sam Wood. Reagan plays Drake McHugh.
- ²⁶ Massumi, 46.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 64. Massumi notes that he takes this phrase from Meghan Morris's examination of Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating in *Too Soon, Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 41.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 55.