Unreliable narration in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho: Interaction between narrative form and thematic content

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Abstract

In this paper I analyse the narrative technique of unreliable narration in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho (1991). Critics have been split about the reliability of Patrick Bateman, the novel's gruesome narrator-protagonist. Using a new model for the detection of unreliable narration, I show that textual signs indicate that Patrick Bateman can be interpreted as an unreliable narrator. This paper reconciles two critical debates: (1) the aforementioned debate surrounding American Psycho, and (2) the debate surrounding the concept of unreliable narration itself. I show that my new model provides a solution to the weaknesses which have been identified in the rhetorical and cognitive models previously used to detect unreliable narration. Specifically, this new model reconciles the problematic reliance on the implied author in the rhetorical model, and the inconsistency of textual signs which is a weakness of the cognitive approach. In conclusion, I demonstrate how the technique of unreliable narration has undergone a paradigm shift towards a greater historical and cultural interaction with historical and cultural contexts. The example of American Psycho will be used to demonstrate the interaction between the narrative form of unreliable narration and thematic content.

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Abstract: In this paper I analyse the narrative technique of unreliable narration in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho (1991). Critics have been split about the reliability of Patrick Bateman, the novel's gruesome narrator-protagonist. Using a new model for the detection of unreliable narration, I show that textual signs indicate that Patrick Bateman can be interpreted as an unreliable narrator. This paper reconciles two critical debates: (1) the aforementioned debate surrounding American Psycho, and (2) the debate surrounding the concept of unreliable narration itself. I show that my new model provides a solution to the weaknesses which have been identified in the rhetorical and cognitive models previously used to detect unreliable narration. Specifically, this new model reconciles the problematic reliance on the implied author in the rhetorical model, and the inconsistency of textual signs which is a weakness of the cognitive approach. In conclusion, I demonstrate how the technique of unreliable narration has undergone a paradigm shift towards a greater historical and cultural interaction with historical and cultural contexts. The example of American Psycho will be used to demonstrate the interaction between the narrative form of unreliable narration and thematic content.

In this paper I compare different interpretations of the novel (Bret Easton Ellis 1991) and film versions (dir. Mary Harron 2000) of *American Psycho.* I argue that the movie represents only one way of interpreting the source text and that it is also possible to interpret Patrick Bateman as an unreliable narrator. I demonstrate that the technique of unreliable narration foregrounds different thematic elements from those presented in the movie where the question of reliability is less prominent. I hope to demonstrate that textual unreliability needs to be analysed not only as a narrative form, but also as a culturally relevant expression of thematic content.

The narrative technique of unreliable narration is situated in the field of *literary narratology*, a field which, as Ansgar Nünning notes, has "not only survived the challenges of poststructuralism, but has recently risen like a phoenix from its ashes" (2004: 354). This rebirth has taken the form of a greater cultural, historical and ideological interaction with narratological analysis. This is documented in David Herman's collection *Narratologies* (1999) which includes feminist narratology, postcolonial narratology and cyber narratology. In his 2001 study, Bruno Zerweck noted this shift, arguing that unreliable narration is a textual strategy which 'does not simply *mirror* certain historical [and cultural] attitudes. It *mediates* between the real […] and

the imaginary' (2001: 168). While Zerweck's paper is an important contribution to the study of unreliable narration, it contains no detailed analysis of texts in which this mediation can be identified. My paper will attempt to demonstrate one way in which unreliable narration mediates between the 'real and the imaginary' – specifically in the text *American Psycho*. Although Zerweck himself believes that Patrick Bateman is not an unreliable narrator, an analysis of the text as unreliable narration demonstrates Zerweck's ideas in practice.

Before going any further, it is helpful to briefly outline the debates surrounding both the technique of unreliable narration and *American Psycho* itself. One working definition of unreliable narration is: a narrative technique which occurs when a reader suspects, or has revealed to them – either overtly or through the detection of textual signs – that the first-person character narrator has (to borrow Phelan and Martin's terms) misreported, misread, misevaluated, underreported, underread or underregarded events within the narration of the text (2005: 51). Much of the debate which surrounds unreliable narration has occurred through reference to texts like *American Psycho* where the unreliability in the narrative is difficult to detect. I call these kinds of unreliable narrators 'covert' unreliable narrators. This is opposed to 'overt' unreliable narrators such as the narrator of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996)*,* who overtly reveals his unreliability through a late revelation in the text[i].

A model for the detection of unreliable narration was first established by Wayne C. Booth in the following, oft quoted, sentence:

> I have called the narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance
> with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms)
> and unreliable when he does not (1961 [1983]: 158).

Booth's definition – while initially accepted as the standard for unreliable narration - has met with much criticism and debate, specifically in the last twenty years. These debates have caused two schools in the analysis of unreliable narration to develop: (1) The rhetorical model, which relies on Booth's concept of an implied author, and (2) the cognitive model which has removed the implied author and instead relies on textual signs for the detection of a narrator's unreliability. I believe both of these models have their weaknesses. The rhetorical model has most frequently been criticised for its reliance on the implied author[ii]. Ansgar Nünning is a vocal critic of the concept of the implied author, describing it as 'notoriously ill-defined' (2005: 91) and arguing that this 'incoherent concept' (2005: 92) 'hardly provides a reliable basis for determining a narrator's unreliability' (1997: 85-86). However, Nünning has also criticised the purely subjective elements of the cognitive model as well, noting that

> A pederast would not find anything wrong with *Lolita*; [and] a male
> chauvinist fetishist who gets his kicks out of making love to dummies is
> unlikely to detect any distance between his norms and those of the mad
> monologist in McEwan's 'Dead As They Come' (2005: 101).

Although Nünning intends this as a criticism of Booth's rhetorical "norms" based method for detecting unreliability, it also reveals that without the position of the implied author in a text, unreliability becomes almost impossible to determine. Tamar Yacobi (2000) has also noted one problem with the cognitive reliance on textual signals: certain

Current Narratives   **62**

signs can be interpreted as signs of unreliability when they may not be designed to elicit that response. One example cited by Yacobi is the tendency to interpret a narrator's lie as a sign of unreliability. However, 'white lies, heroic lies, ironic lies' are 'all possibly trust inspiring beyond the domain of fact itself' (2000: 715). Because of these limitations of the cognitive method, there is need for an interpretive framework beyond the explicit level of the text itself.

In light of the weaknesses of these two current models, I propose a new model: the textually evident model. This model is based on what Greta Olson (2003) saw as the similarities between the rhetorical and cognitive methods. Olson notes that both models consist of

> (1) a reader who recognizes a dichotomy between (2) the personalised narrator's perceptions and expressions and (3) those of the implied author (or textual signals) (2003: 93).

I propose a three-stage model which is a synthesis of both approaches: (1) a reader recognizes textual signals which indicate a discrepancy between (2) the personalised narrator's perceptions and expressions (the explicit narrative discourse) and (3) those of the implied author (the implicit narrative discourse). (adapted from Olson 2003: 93). In this model, it will be seen that unreliable narration can be detected in the ironic distance between two of the levels of Seymour Chatman's communication model: in his study *Story and Discourse* (1978: 151), he defines a 'communication model' which analyses the three pairs of communicating entities in a text: the narrator and the narratee (the explicit narrative discourse), the implied author and the implied reader (the implicit narrative discourse), and the real author and the real reader (the extra-textual narrative discourse). If there is no discrepancy between the explicit and implicit narrative levels, the narration will be reliable. When there is a discrepancy between these two levels of communication, textual signs need to be analysed to discover if the narration is unreliable.

This model addresses some of the weakness of the rhetorical model, where textual signals are substituted for the 'ill-defined' implied author. However, it also allows a position of objectivity against which unreliability can be measured, while still allowing the focus to shift away from the authorial hand which creates unreliability to the reader who interprets the signs of unreliability in the text. This model allows for the perception of the narrator to change over time. Vera Nünning 1998 [2004]) has shown this to be the case in texts such as *The Vicar of Wakefield* (Oliver Goldsmith 1766). This model also encompasses texts like Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* where the unreliability is unquestionable and therefore a deliberate strategy on the part of the author. By synthesising the rhetorical and cognitive models, all of these positions can be accounted for.

 The following analysis of *American Psycho* will demonstrate how unreliable narration is a technique used by the 'flesh and blood' author to mediate 'between the real and the imaginary' (Zerweck: 168). Before doing so, it is important to negotiate the detection of unreliability by contrasting the explicit and implicit narrative discourses. Interpreting Patrick Bateman as an unreliable narrator allows the reader to see the interaction between narrative form and thematic content at work in this text. Unreliable narration is

Phillips   **Unreliable narration**

a narrative technique which mediates between the world of cultural discourses and the imaginary world of the text.

American Psycho is structured to be read on the explicit narrative level as the personal confession of the narrator Patrick Bateman, a young, attractive psychopath. The novel traces numerous acts of violence which are narrated in the same cool and detached tone in which Bateman catalogues the objects he owns and the designer labels his companions are wearing. What ties these random acts of violence together is the fact that all of Bateman's victims are "othered" by him either because of their financial status (126), their ethnic background (333), sexual preference (159), age (285, 370) or gender (289).   This literal interpretation of the novel as the story of an unrepentant, unpunished and unexplained serial killer created a furore upon the novel's original publication. Many believed that the narrative simply catalogued Bateman's crimes without any commentary or critique from the author. In a later interview Ellis notes how absurd this interpretation was:

> Because I never step in anywhere and say, 'Hey, this is all wrong,' people get upset. That's outrageous to me! Who's going to say that serial killing is wrong?! Isn't that a given? There's no need to say that (Ellis 1999).

 What is often missed by critics is the ironic distance between the author and the narrator which determines the reliability in the text. It is this question of reliability that I, and several other critics, have been drawn to analyse. Those who consider Patrick Bateman to be a *reliable* narrator are often critics who accept the reliability of the narrative without question (Weldon 1991; Helyer 2000). The most obvious example of this interpretation is Mary Harron's film adaptation which offers very little indication that would lead an audience to question whether or not these actions are taking place. Harron herself has noted that it was never her intention to make reliability an issue in the film (Charlie Rose Show: 2000). Among literary critics analysing the novel, there are differing interpretations of the reliability of Patrick Bateman. One critic who does not consider Patrick Bateman to be unreliable is Bruno Zerweck, who argues that in *American Psycho,*

> There are no inconsistencies or contradictions in the narrative, whether textual or in relation to real-world or literary frames of reference. The narrator knows and openly tells of his deeds and motivations and makes no attempt to "hide" his nature. There is no "detective framework" involved and no unintentional self-incrimination takes place (157).

While I am informed by Bruno Zerweck's work and indebted to him for his contribution to the study of unreliable narration, I disagree with his interpretation of *American Psycho.* There are inconsistencies in the narrative (such as the scene where a park bench follows Patrick Bateman home), the "detective framework", is signified by the character of Detective Donald Kimball (255), and there are several instances of unintentional self-incrimination which will be analysed in greater detail. Using the textually apparent model to detect unreliable narration, I argue that *American Psycho* does include signs that Patrick Bateman can be interpreted as an unreliable narrator.

It is important, firstly, to establish the distance between the implicit and explicit narrative discourses operating in the text. The discrepancy between Bateman's perception of himself and the way others see him is one example of such a distance in the text. It is also an example of "unintentional self-incrimination". One of the earliest textual indications of both Bateman's psychopathic nature and the possible unreliability in the narration is his whispered confession that he is an 'evil psychopath' (19). This is his response when Evelyn, his girlfriend, has patronisingly referred to him as the 'boy next-door' (19). The exchange is an indication that there is a discrepancy in the narration. This discrepancy is also becomes evident Bateman later leaves a "confession" on his lawyer's answering machine, admitting that he is a 'pretty sick guy' (338) who has committed 'thirty, forty, a hundred murders' (ibid). The message is interpreted by the lawyer as a joke, because the Bateman he knows is 'a brown-nosing goody-goody' (372), not a murderous psychopath. Alone, these examples are not enough to reveal unreliability in the narrative; this discrepancy could be interpreted as the "mask of sanity" Bateman wears to cover his growing dementia. However, these two examples demonstrate a distance between what Patrick Bateman says he is and how others see him. The explicit narrative discourse is what Bateman describes as happening, while the implicit narrative discourse is what the reader can glean from the reactions of other characters present. There are several other occasions when Bateman says something that reveals his "psychopathic" nature, but his words are unheard or unacknowledged by those present. In a few instances this lack of reaction could be explained by loud music (57), or the fact that Bateman whispers the words (19). However, when Bateman later admits to Evelyn that he needs to engage in homicidal behaviour (325), we are told that each word is carefully measured. Earlier, when Evelyn does not react to Bateman's confession that he has put her neighbour's head in his freezer (114), her lack of response actually prompts Bateman to ask 'can you hear me?' (ibid) Even Bateman considers it odd that his words are unacknowledged.

Seymour Chatman has described this process in action: 'the implied reader senses a discrepancy between a reasonable reconstruction of the story and the account given by the narrator' (1978: 233), noting that the two levels of narrative come into conflict. The 'reasonable reconstruction' of the account presented by the narrator in this instance is that the words are not said at all: two levels of the narrative - the explicit and the implicit – have come into conflict. Chatman believes that when this happens, 'the covert [or implicit] set, once recognised, must win' (1978: 233).

These examples signal a certain level of narrative unreliability, namely that Bateman is fallible in his reporting of events, and unaware of the perceptions and reactions of those around him. However, these examples do not in themselves reveal that Bateman's narration of his violent crimes is unreliable. These scenes have their own textual signs which indicate a level of unreliability. Many of the violent attacks described by Bateman are inflicted upon the nameless, vagrants and prostitutes, whose identities cannot be verified and whose existence cannot be proven. Because of the "namelessness" of his victims, there is very little proof that these attacks occur outside of Bateman's mind. In several instances, Bateman narrates how he leaves the scene of the attack, still wearing blood-stained clothes which are unnoticed when he goes to McDonalds (127) and a supermarket (159). Another improbable scene occurs when Bateman walks out of a Zoo, 'hands soaked with blood' (285) after killing a small child. These signs indicate that there is a possible "covert" interpretation of the events, namely, that these attacks never take place.

Phillips **Unreliable narration**

On the occasions where Bateman attacks "real" people (i.e. people identified in the story), the narration includes signs which indicate a discrepancy between Bateman's explicit narrative and the "silent" implicit narrative. One example of this is the attack on Luis Carruthers in the Yacht Club men's room (152 – 154). Bateman describes approaching Luis from behind as he stands in the men's room stall with the door ajar. Although he intends to choke Luis, his grip is "loose enough to let Luis turn around" (152). In this description, the reader has to reconcile the apparent discrepancy between Bateman's attempt to squeeze Luis' neck to choke him while still enabling Luis to turn around and face his attacker. The unreliability of the narration of this attack can also be gleaned from the narrative shift between what *is* happening to what Bateman *wants* to see happen.

> [Luis's] eyelids flitter for an instant, then widen, which is exactly what I want. I want to see Luis's face contort and turn purple and I want to be the last face, the last *thing* Luis sees before he dies (152).

However, these events do not occur. They are only Bateman's fantasy of what he *wants* to happen. Luis' interpretation of this attack is another sign pointing to the unreliability in Bateman's narration of the event. What is narrated by Bateman as a violent attack leads Luis, not to run away in fear, but to kiss Bateman's wrist. Luis' only shock at the "attack" is to ask, 'why here?' (152). The difference between Bateman's perception of the attack and the response it provokes in Luis is a reflection of the distance between the explicit and implicit narrative discourses. This distance reveals that what Bateman is narrating may not be what has actually occurred. It is possible to assume that Bateman did not approach Luis to attack him, but to solicit him. Bateman's homophobia is something he has to deny, even to himself, but it is evident throughout his narrative where homosexuality is frequently associated with violence and anger.

Using the textually apparent model for the detection of unreliable narration, we have seen that there are textual signs within *American Psycho* which indicate that the implicit and explicit narrative discourses are in conflict. Chatman notes that when this happens, 'the covert [or implicit] set, once recognized must win' (233). This model leaves room for multiple interpretations of the text: that Patrick Bateman could be unreliable, reliable or somewhere in-between. We may thus diagnose an ongoing problem with the analysis of *American Psycho*: that it is ultimately impossible to determine where reliability ends and unreliability begins.

In addition to this unanswerable question, another question remains: is an analysis of unreliable narration relevant to a reading of *American Psycho*? Mark Storey has considered this, noting that:

> The question is not whether the 'action' really takes place – a careful reading reveals that was never the point- but what the 'action' tells us about the person who recounts it (2005: 58).

Through an analysis of Patrick Bateman, the person who recounts the narrative, the thematic elements of the text become apparent. I agree that there is more to *American Psycho* than the question of the reliability of the narrative. This becomes clear from the success of the film version, in which Bateman is presented as reliable (although not a

narrator) and his crimes are depicted as if they actually occurred. The difference in the way themes are communicated through either reliable or unreliable narration is brought out in the different meanings of the phrase 'this confession has meant nothing' (363) in the novel and film versions of the text. In Mary Harron's film interpretation, Bateman says 'this confession has mean nothing' in a voice-over conclusion to the events which have just been witnessed. Bateman's words accompany a scene depicting him with his friends eating an expensive meal in a high class restaurant. Just prior to this, Bateman has discovered that his lawyer thinks his confession was a joke. The lawyer rejects the reality of the events the audience has seen on screen. The audience is transformed into the only witnesses to Bateman's crimes, his uncomfortable co-conspirators. The 'confession has meant nothing' because Bateman's crimes will not be punished, there will be no justice for his victims and he will continue to live his affluent life with no consequences.

In contrast to this interpretation, when Ellis' novel is interpreted with Patrick Bateman as an unreliable narrator, 'this confession has meant nothing' (363) because the events to which Bateman is confessing did not occur. If we remove these events from the novel, what is left is a bored man who lives a life of monotonous repetition, with a Wall Street job he has no interest in, a fiancé he has no desire to marry, a secretary he's unable to have an affair with, a mother and brother who mean nothing to him. Bateman is unhappy despite and all of the trappings of his affluent life, expressed through emotion-less lists of material possessions and designer labels. Interpreting Bateman as an unreliable narrator leads to the conclusion that this is not a novel about the failure of justice, as indicated by the movie, but instead a novel about the failure of Bateman himself and the society he represents. Bateman is not only a personal failure, but he is representative of a greater cultural failure. Bateman's crimes thus exemplify the key theme of the novel, namely, a critique of the masculinity which Bateman and his friends have been performing. As I have previously noted, what ties Bateman's random acts of violence together is that all of his victims are "othered" by him either through their financial status (126), ethnic background (333), sexual preference (159), age (285, 370) or gender (289). Bateman's (real or imagined) violence is an expression of his fear that these groups threaten his dominant position as a young, successful, white, heterosexual man. This is what "Bret", the mock-autobiographical narrator of Ellis' later text *Lunar Park* (Ellis 2005), is talking about when he argues that '[Bateman's] murders and tortures were in fact fantasies fuelled by his rage and fury at how life in America was structured' (122). If Bateman did not inflict the literal violence that he is described as perpetrating, the reader is led to consider what other crimes Bateman is guilty of. It is here that the novel's critique of 1980s Reganomics and Wall Street culture becomes apparent. Bateman may thus be compared to another fictional villain, Gordon Gekko from Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* (1987). Bateman's violence against a few is an allegory for the true force and impact of corporate crime on the lives of untold thousands of victims.

By contrasting the film and novel versions of *American Psycho,* I have argued that the question of a narrator's unreliability is a formal embodiment of thematic content in a text. Unreliable narration can be considered as more than a narrative strategy but rather – as Zerweck found – 'Unreliable narration [is] a strategy within the fictionalizing act [which] does not simply mirror certain historical attitudes [it] mediates between the real […] and the imaginary' (168). Zerweck's study is a pivotal paradigm shift in the analysis of unreliable narration. This paper has been a continuation of Zerweck's work,

Phillips **Unreliable narration**

providing an example of a text where this "mediation" is evident. Although I am aware of the irony of using *American Psycho* as a text which demonstrates Zerweck's ideas, seeing Zerweck himself considers Bateman's narration to be reliable, *American Psycho* is a text which not only highlights this mediation, but demonstrates the thematic shift which occurs when Patrick Bateman is interpreted as reliable (as is the case with the film adaptation).

Interpreting Patrick Bateman as an unreliable narrator allows the thematic content of the text to be clearly communicated. By deconstructing a norm of the text – namely reliability – this reading points to a further deconstruction of the world of discourses and cultural norms the text represents. Mary Harron's film presents a nihilistic rejection of justice by the elite and rich. Ellis' novel simultaneously describes and undermines the reliability of the description of Bateman's gruesome and violent acts. This directs the reader to consider what real crimes are represented through the allegory of the textual violence'. By interpreting *American Psycho* with Patrick Bateman as an unreliable narrator, the reader realises that Bateman's confession, even if it refers to crimes he did not commit, certainly did not mean nothing.

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[i] The terms "overt" and "covert" have been borrowed and adapted from Seymour Chatman's "overt" and "covert" narrators" (1978:).

[ii] The implied author is a concept which has been thoroughly documented by Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Muller (Author) in their book *Implied Author: Concept and Controversy* (New York: de Gruyter 2007). Briefly, in Booth's definition, the implied author, the 'author's second self' (1961 [1983], 74) is 'the core of norms and choices' in a text. In Booth's model, the implied author is the one who 'chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read' (74). The difference between the implied author and the "real author" is negotiated by Booth who sees the implied author as the 'ideal, literary, created version of the real man' (ibid). In Booth's definition, the implied author is the projection of the 'real author' as seen through the filter of the text.