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## The Fragility of White Masculinity: An Exploration of the White, Heterosexual Male Fantasy of Gender in Horror

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University of Tennessee

The Fragility of White Masculinity:

An Exploration of the White, Heterosexual Male Fantasy of Gender in Horror

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UNHO 498: Honors Thesis Seminar

Dr. Robin Nicks

## Introduction

Horror operates as a looking glass for society, absorbing its anxious and fearful projections, and manipulating their reflection as if a fun house mirror that delights in discomfort. Horror reflects the “other,” the abjection of society, into the face of its creators and its consumers as if an indictment against them. Yet, so often among critics, horror, particularly the horror film, is regarded with disdain as elementary and simplistic, an invention of human imagination to delight the masses. In their neglect they fail to see the driving essence of horror, choosing instead to view horror in a vacuum void of the very context it responds to. However, as much as horror is a response to the historical moment, it is also the product of one person’s subjective experience. For much of the history of the genre, white heterosexual men dominated horror and thus the white heterosexual male perspective was perceived as the standard if not universal perspective. Assuming this limited perspective as “normal” and ignoring the unique aspects that exclude it from universality contribute to its implicit biases and prohibit a thorough analysis of the fears and anxieties present in horror.

Movies coming out of or directly inspired by the 1980s hold a particular fascination for American society perhaps out of nostalgia for a bygone time where creators did not feel so limited by political correctness or perhaps for that unique feeling of excess and freedom. However, film from the 80s holds resonance with today’s audience for more reasons than mere nostalgia and a tendency toward camp. The issues and anxieties plaguing Americans in the 80s survive in the present, though they have morphed and evolved with recent technological and societal developments, attracting a modern audience that seeks an outlet for their worries. Through an analysis of *Sleepaway Camp* and *Videodrome*, both produced in 1983, as well a more retrospective look at the 80s in *American Psycho* produced in 2000, I will explore how they

weaponize the white male perspective in their fantasy of gender; the insecurity of white heterosexual masculinity as the supreme identity prompts explorations of the body, the transitory feminine, and male violence as an expression of repressed sexuality before culminating in a narrative of white male oppression.

### **Historical Context**

*Sleepaway Camp*, *Videodrome*, and *American Psycho* raise concerns about transgender identity, technology, and consumerism as threats to societal stability and thus the stability of the white male identity. Though, the portrayals of these issues reflect the anxieties of white men who fear the destabilization of their identity as the context for their identity faces rapid social changes. Today, these issues remain at the forefront of American minds as evidenced by recent headlines. According to the ACLU as recently as April 22, 2021, 35 states have introduced in 2020 “anti-trans bills” that are still active and defined as:

Target transgender and nonbinary people for discrimination, such as by barring or criminalizing healthcare for transgender youth, barring access to the use of appropriate facilities like restrooms, restricting transgender students’ ability to fully participate in school and sports, allowing religiously-motivated discrimination against trans people, or making it more difficult for trans people to get identification documents with their name and gender. (“Legislation Affecting LGBT Rights Across the Country”)

However, anti-transgender sentiment extends beyond political action and often translates into violence. The Human Rights Campaign Foundation collected data for the year 2019 and found that from January to November of that year “at least 22 transgender and gender non-conforming people have been killed in the U.S.” (“A National Epidemic: Fatal Anti-Transgender Violence in

the United States In 2019” 2). The reasoning behind anti-transgender prejudice seems to be based on their disruption of gender roles. Kristin Broussard and Ruth Warner, social psychologists, investigate in their study “Gender Nonconformity Is Perceived Differently for Cisgender and Transgender Targets” the link between gender conformity and anti-transgender prejudice. They found that “transgender individuals may be perceived as gender nonconforming in multiple ways” both for “not conforming to the traditional roles of either their *assigned sex*...or of their *gender identity*” (Broussard 409). Broussard and Warner touch on a previously undocumented phenomenon in scholarship that “because transgender individuals are perceived as transgressing binary gender roles, transgender individuals who cannot be easily detected as gender ‘violators’ (i.e., are ‘passing’) may be especially threatening to binary gender distinctiveness” (424). Anti-transgender bias roots itself in established gender norms and the fear of the instability of these norms that are foundational for the way many people identity and order the world around them.

The questions *Videodrome* raises about technology, its ability to augment reality and its potential threat to the construction of gender and sexuality are particularly relevant today with the advent and widespread use of social media. Social media’s capacity to attract and hold users’ attention as well as the economics of social media which relies heavily on ad revenue create a perfect breeding ground for influencers and fake news to propagate false narratives of reality. Hunt Allcot and Matthew Gentzkow, behavioral economist and political economist, analyzed the 2016 presidential election in their work “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” They state explicitly that “fake news,” which they define as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers,” often “imposes private and social costs by making it more difficult for consumers to infer the true state of the world” (Allcot 213, 213,

212). The echo chambers where social media users can insulate themselves with opinions and “fake news” that further confirm their own opinions can alter one’s perceived reality (Allcot 213).

However, the confirmation bias in social media extends beyond politics and has fostered an environment where men form communities that pontificate gendered-violence against women and gender-nonconforming persons as a means of affirming masculinity. Maria Scaptura and Kaitlyn Boyle, a doctoral student in sociology with a focus on gender and crime and a professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of South Carolina, investigate incel traits amongst men and their predisposition to gendered-violence in their study “Masculinity Threat, ‘Incel’ Traits, and Violent Fantasies Among Heterosexual Men in the United States.” Incel, an abbreviation for “involuntary celibate,” communities find their home on the internet and espouse “feminism [as the cause] for their celibacy, claim women are genetically inferior, and complain that women prefer more ‘genetically superior’ men” (Scaptura 279). Men within the incel community are predominantly those “who feel threatened by the social progress of women” and are “more likely to hyper-conform to masculine identity traits and exhibit anger and aggression toward women” (Scaptura 279, 279).

The #MeToo movement also started on social media as a means to “deliver the message of [sexual assault] survivors” in the face of “people and conventional systems [that] have failed them in their quest for validation -and further provided a metaphorical sense of justice” (Alaggia 8). Though not directly a response to the incel community, the #MeToo movement contributes to the feeling of white male victimhood as thousands of sexual assault survivors came forward against men who violated them. Sarah Banet-Weiser addresses white male feelings that they are being targeted and attacked in her study “‘Ruined’ Lives: Mediated White Male Victimhood.”

Banet-Weiser finds that with the rise of the #MeToo movement, “powerful and (almost always) white men in positions of privilege took up the mantle of victimhood” to protect their “positions of privilege” against false claims that would ruin their reputation (61). She cites the simultaneous rise of the “#himtoo movement” that “mobilized powerful men who became fearful about the potential loss of entitlement” to adopt the language of victimhood to preserve the “dominant dynamics of power” (Banet-Weiser 64). The preservation of the traditional social order marks the push for male victimhood as distinctively white. Thus, the tales of white male victimhood in *Sleepaway Camp*, *American Psycho*, and *Videodrome* find an audience in the present.

The 1980s in America was marked by decisive efforts both from white society to reaffirm the hierarchal status of the white heterosexual men and from marginalized communities to disrupt racial supremacy with each building and amplifying the efforts of the other. Elin Diamond, feminist literary critic, explores the history of identity politics in her article “Identity Politics Then and Now” with regard to its place in theatre. She finds that though identity politics “existed before the late twentieth century...the term was coined in the 1970s” and became “widely circulated in the 1980s as a response to social injustice, widespread prejudice and even assault borne by members of specific minority groups” (64). Diamond connects the increased publicity of the identity politics phenomenon with direct political action revolving around “defiance and solidarity” (65). In conjunction with what Liam Kennedy, an American studies historian, describes as a feeling of white “visibility in the United States,” white male society “must confront their diminishing ability to assume normative roles of power and authority and transcend the politics of identity formation,” (89, 89). Though Kennedy addresses the gendered

and racialized tension of the early 1990s, his analysis aligns with the anxieties expressed by white men in horror from the 1980s.

The 1980s also saw the rise of the Men's Rights movement that according to Bethany Coston and Michael Kimmel, sociologists, departed from the Men's Liberation movement's emphasis on the "oppressive male sex role, and the desire to free men from it" and opted instead for a "celebration of all things masculine, and a near infatuation with the traditional masculine role itself" ("White Men as the New Victims" 372). Some men believed the consumerism that characterized the 1980s "diluted and polluted" authentic masculinity and encouraged men to seek out a "'deep' or 'essential' masculinity" (Coston 371). In their case studies of lawsuits filed under the belief of discrimination against men, Coston and Kimmel found that men positioned themselves as victims of feminists who sought to destroy "traditional masculinity" (371).

*Sleepaway Camp* and *Videodrome* are direct products of the new age of identity politics and a reinvigorated Men's Rights movement reflecting the fears and anxieties of white men who feared their societal position was at stake. They villainize what they cannot understand, or what they refuse to, and use horror to inspire the same fear in its audiences while making pseudo commentaries on society based on the real and imagined elements of their fear. *American Psycho* operates in a different capacity. It is a retrospective look at the 1980s masquerading as a slasher movie and black comedy in the attempt to criticize the blatant consumerism that rendered whiteness invisible though ultimately unsuccessful. Where it did succeed, along with *Sleepaway Camp* and *Videodrome*, was in exposing the fragility of white masculinity that required the absolute stability of the known social order. However, *American Psycho* departs from its predecessors in that it was directed by a white woman, Mary Harron, and the source material was written by a white gay man. While the deviation from white, heterosexual male creators inclines



viewers to be more receptive to the possibility of genuine social critique, the end result remains complicit with rhetoric of white male victimhood at the expense of its female characters.

### **The Body**

Hiltzik, Harron, and Cronenberg explore in their films the fate of white, heterosexual masculinity, particularly as it manifests in the body, and each create or replicate an ideal body that haunts the film. Their depictions of the body confront the idea first presented by Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato who “posit a soul that governs the body...assign[ing] it the task of disciplining the body’s form and constructing a corporeal model on the logocentric projections of the male sex” (Cavarero 100). They call into question the extent to which the soul controls and defines the body as well as the implications of a monstrous body on the soul.

Conceptualizing the anxieties about the dissonance between the body and the soul as an extension of Jacques Lacan’s theory of the signifier and the signified provides further insight into the unconscious thought that relies on the connection of the body and soul. Lacan describes in his “The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious” the arbitrary nature in which language ascribes meaning to words and the ability to “use [language] to say something quite other than what it says” (123). Lacan then briefly entertains the implications of his theory on gender and the meaning each signifier, either male or female, holds for people. He concludes that “Ladies and Gentlemen will henceforth be...two countries toward which each of their souls will strive on divergent wings” preventing the realization that they “are in truth in the same country” (Lacan 119). Literary and film critic Cyndy Hendershot echoes Lacan and Greek philosophy in her work *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic*, stating that “in the modern and post-modern Euro-American world the body has traditionally been used as a means of representing masculine superiority and feminine inferiority” (9). The meaning that humans assign to the body

as either feminine or masculine, while predicated on sexual difference, often mimics Lacan's assertion of the arbitrary connection between the signifier and the signified.

The fluidity of gender and the body pose difficulty for easy categorization that constitutes the stability of identity (Hendershot 9). Horror then further corrupts the integrity of the body and therefore identity reflecting fears of instability, particularly for the white heterosexual man whose status in society relies on clear distinctions. Sociologist Abby Ferber expounds upon the reliance of categorization for the preservation of white supremacy in *White Man Falling*. Her studies indicate that for the continuance of white supremacy "the maintenance of the boundaries sustaining the white/black and male/female dichotomies is required" and there is no room for fluidity as it threatens "the construction of racial and gender identities themselves" (Ferber 81, 81). The body as a vessel of representation becomes a stage for projection.

However, before I can begin the discussion of the body in *Sleepaway Camp*, I must address Angela. Aunt Martha assumes custody of Peter, who the audience later learns is the Angela they have come to know, after his sister and father die in an unfortunate boating accident at the hands of campers from Camp Arawak and Martha forces Peter to take on his sister's identity because she "already [has] a boy" (*Sleepaway Camp* 1:19:59). While some feel comfortable viewing *Sleepaway Camp* as trans representation, I think to do so would be reductive of transgender identity and of the circumstances surrounding Angela's gender dysphoria as well horribly misconstruing the essence of being transgender. Though I would like to avoid perpetuating the trauma associated with Angela's gender identity, solely for the sake of clarity I will refer to them by she/her pronouns and the name "Angela" as the film does. As I will elaborate later on, the depiction of Angela and her gender crisis is from the perspective of white cis-gendered man and the derogatory portrayal of transgender identity is a reflection of

white male fear. Angela outwardly presents a demur and modest feminine identity through her behavior, dress, and her long hair; however, the film indicts her performance as a lie reducing gender identity to the body as the final and sole indicator of gender. The final scene features full frontal nudity of Angela revealing her penis and forces Ronnie to exclaim, “My God, she’s a boy” (1:20:35). Director Hiltzik embodies Lacan’s theory that one can “use [language] to say something quite other than what it says” through Angela who uses her body to perform something that he believes is “quite other than what it says” thus giving the body primacy over presented identity (Lacan 123, 123). *Sleepaway Camp* affirms the gender binary in its vilification of Angela for her disruption of the female/male dichotomy.

*Sleepaway Camp* takes place in the microcosm of the summer camp, rife with hormones and sexual tension from its (mostly) pubescent inhabitants. The pubescent body is one in flux; a body progressing from child to adult. There the teenage body with its budding capacity for gender expression operates as the fulcrum for the movie as well as for the campers who experience gender not solely as an individual experience but also a communal one. Angela and her cousin Ricky are greeted at Camp Arawak by camp counselor Ronnie who is several years older and displays a comically large bulge in comically short shorts that outline a disturbing amount of detail of his genitalia (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:09:48). While short shorts were the style in the 1980s, Ronnie’s character takes the fashion to the extreme and functions as a fixture of hypermasculinity that continually confronts Angela at Camp Arawak. Angela has male genitalia yet her aunt forces repression of her gender identity thus preventing her from achieving the masculinity that Ronnie represents. Particularly, Ronnie shows off his body with ease and confidence, without the self-consciousness that plagues Angela as she often places her hands in front of her groin as a physical barrier to perception.

Yet, neither can she take comfort in her femininity. Immediately upon entering the camp space, Ricky and Paul discuss the new developments in the female campers narrowing in on Judy's new boobs marking as closer to woman than girl while also highlighting Angela's lack (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:11:15). Judy and camp counselor Meg proudly display their feminine bodies and their new sexual capacity; they antagonize Angela's attempt at feminine performance because of her body's inability to fully be a woman. In the same way that Ronnie represents Angela's forbidden masculinity, Judy and Meg are the unattainable embodiment of femininity. Angela's body makes her a target in the girls' cabin because the other girls assume she hasn't started puberty. Judy mercilessly taunts Angela about her chest, yelling in front of the other girls that she is as "flat as a board and needs a screw" (0:45:41). While Angela's identity excludes her from participation in masculinity, the nature of her body also excludes her from complete participation and performance of femininity.

Angela's unwillingness to partake in the communal spaces and activities at camp literalize her inability to participate in gender. In the cafeteria, Angela refuses to eat, or to speak, with her cabin though she remains at the table frustrating Meg who confronts her about her silence and her appetite. Ronnie intervenes on Angela's behalf, though in his attempts to comfort her, he inadvertently places his crotch, once again clad in ridiculously short and tight shorts, at eye-level with Angela and forces juxtaposition of his muscular masculine body with her own skinny and effeminate one (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:14:32). Unable to be fully man or woman, Angela relies on invisibility to escape the scrutiny that accompanies the gender performance at camp that depends on the perceivability of the body.

However, her invisibility brings her only more attention. Continually, Angela opts out of communal spaces and increasingly marks herself as other. She sits out of the girls' volleyball

game prompting Meg to say, “If you’re not going to participate in our activities, then you just sit there and do nothing” (0:38:56). Meg intentionally uses “our” to emphasize Angela’s exclusion through her refusal to participate in mandatory camp activities as well as her refusal to participate in the all-female spaces that construct gender expression at camp (0:38:56). Their antagonism culminates after all girls return from a shower and Judy verbally attacks Angela. She says that Angela “takes showers when no can see” because “she has no hair down below” transforming showering into a gender affirming activity (0:45:35). For the pubescent campers, gender relies on the body more than mere performance. Angela’s outward presenting female identity does not provide sufficient proof of her womanhood and her rejection of shared experiences with her female campers prohibits her from correct gender performance in the context of camp. The focus on the pubescent body exacerbates Angela’s otherness as her body prohibits correct gender performance because, unlike her female counterparts, Angela will not get a period or grow breasts which are bodily experiences that in many ways are foundational to female gender identity. The perception of the body is essential to the communal experience of gender and to fully participate in gender one must willingly offer up their body to these experiences. Therefore, to hide the body, as Angela does, is to other oneself.

*American Psycho* fixates on the body differently than in *Sleepaway Camp*. Instead of juxtaposing lack, *American Psycho* explores and obsesses over Patrick Bateman, CEO of a nondescript financial firm, and his achievement of the ideal white male body. Within minutes of the film beginning, Patrick Bateman details his extensive morning beauty regiment. He exercises in his underwear displaying a sculpted and muscular body as he works through crunches of which he “can do a thousand now” and stretches that exhibit the physical capabilities of his body (*American Psycho* 0:05:32). He monologues through his routine, affirming to

himself that his “name is Patrick Bateman” and that he is “27 years old” subconsciously tying his fixation on his body with his identity (0:05:14). The adaption of Ellis’s novel *American Psycho* to screen complicates Patrick’s narration. Film limits the possibility of retroactive narration and promotes the theory that *American Psycho* is an unselfconscious documentation of the life of Patrick Bateman. His monologuing serves as his internal thought that reveals how Patrick places himself in relation to the rest of the world; he does not monologue or perform for us as an audience but rather every aspect of his life is performance. Monologue turns soliloquy for an ever-present, internal, and imagined audience which he cannot escape even in the solitude of his own mind. He literalizes the idea of the body as a stage and becomes an actor in his own life.

His body is the only proof that he is real and his efforts to perfect his appearance serve both to confirm his existence for himself as well his perceivability in the world. However, Patrick presents a self that rejects his bodily identity. He tells himself that “there is no real me...only abstraction” and that his body is “illusory” contradicting all his later efforts throughout the movie to prove to himself and others that he exists (0:06:58). He would prefer to mask his fear of unreality as an acceptance of invisibility rather than as desperate attempts to confirm his bodily identity. Patrick Bateman seemingly resists the idea that to exist he must be seen, telling himself that though he occupies flesh that can be seen and touched, he “simply [is] not there” (0:06:58). In a meta description of himself, Patrick accepts his body but rejects its being a vessel for his consciousness, for his internal being. For Patrick, his body retains no connection to the soul that inhabits it perhaps out of a stubborn belief that he does not have a soul or that Patrick Bateman is an identity arbitrarily assigned to a body that is indistinguishable from his corporate peers and thus interchangeable. He fluctuates between identifying with his physical body and with his “identity” as Patrick Bateman. Patrick cannot commit to his mantra

of invisibility or nonexistence and his devotion to the performance of white heterosexual masculinity exposes this inability. He ensures that his body is physically fit, that he dresses his body appropriately, gets the better haircut. During his sexual exploits, he elevates his fixation on his body. He hires prostitutes to have a threesome and watches himself in the mirror as he has sex with them (0:44:32). Patrick makes eye contact with his reflection then raises his arm to flex his muscles as a testament to his body and its masculine dominance over the women he has sex with (0:44:50). Patrick derives more pleasure from his own presence in the threesome than that of the two women. His show in bed resembles how a juvenile boy would imagine having sex as a man because of Patrick's performance of exaggerated masculinity throughout the encounter.

In spite of his internal efforts to convince himself both that he does not exist and that his identity does not rely on its relationship with his body, Patrick betrays himself. He uses his body to exert his existence over others; he takes real physical action against people in the hopes that someone will realize he is the culprit and capable of masculine dominance all because "he wants to fit in" (*American Psycho* 0:09:59). Yet, he chooses victims that are in many respects also invisible to society. He murders a homeless black man and violates, before eventually murdering, prostitutes all who live on the margins of white society. These are regular victims of violence and their bodies blend in with the others. He ventures beyond marginalized people to eventually murder Paul Allen, a prominent businessman in the financial world. However, Mary Harron, director of *American Psycho*, and Bret Ellis, author of the source material by the same name, use Patrick Bateman and his business partners to address the invisibility they believe affects the affluent white man. Literary critic Daniel Cunningham analyzes the phenomenon of white invisibility in "Patrick Bateman as 'Average White Male' in *American Psycho*" and while he examines the novel *American Psycho* (1991), the film relies heavily on the source material

deviating in slight ways for adaption to the screen allowing for much of his discussion to apply to the movie as well. He argues that Patrick Bateman's feeling of white invisibility is a symptom of "the break-neck speed of consumerism" and the "immersion in surfaces that produces an identity trapped as average" as his white identity is commodified (41).

However, Cunningham's analysis is incomplete. He briefly touches on the reality that the white man has long been perceived as standard and normal which greatly contributes to white invisibility, but attributes the phenomenon to consumerism, a compulsion toward "accumulation and fetishization of things and bodies" (47, 48). Cunningham fails to fully contextualize *American Psycho* opting instead to disparage the feminist movement that places the "straight white man under fire" instead of recognizing the rise of identity politics in the 1980s and their threat to white supremacy (46). Though Bret Ellis and Mary Harron fixate on Patrick Bateman's affluence as the cause of his disconnection from his identity and society in their satire of the 1980s, they are unable to source a key contributor of their imagined threat to white identity. Misattributing the threat to "greed" detracts from much of the historical significance of the 1980s and minimizes the racial implications of the white fear depicted in *American Psycho*.

*Videodrome* follows the life of Max Renn, president of CIVIC-TV, who uses his channel to broadcast pornography and becomes fascinated with a broadcast signal that plays endless hours of torture in the hopes that he could replicate the show on his own channel. However, the signal, initially produced by Brian O'Blivion in the hopes of elevating the human race, causes a brain tumor that induces hallucinations and eventually death. Then Barry Convex appropriates the videodrome signal to rid the world of sexual deviants and perverts that are attracted to the violence, torture, and murder featured on videodrome. *Videodrome* focuses on the invasion and corruption of the body by the television signal both by Brian O'Blivion and Barry Convex.



O'Blivion believes that "television is reality" and the "retina" of the mind's eye thus converting television to flesh (*Videodrome* 0:35:34). Television will be the "new flesh" (1:24:31). Through Brian O'Blivion, Cronenberg takes the new obsession with television and its ability to alter reality for its viewers to an illogical end where humanity supersedes its flesh and occupies television signals instead. Simultaneously, Cronenberg uses Barry Convex to confront the reality presented by television and whether perhaps it normalizes violence and makes it too accessible. Cronenberg's rationalizes the relationship between humanity and technology through the body as humanity's miniature. He literalizes television's ability to alter reality as a tumor that invades the brain, uses human flesh to construct itself and thrust itself upon the human condition.

Visions of living technology plague Max Renn. Bianca O'Blivion, Brian O'Blivion's daughter, gives Max a VHS tape that is supposed to explain videodrome; however, once alone he imagines that it breathes and expands as if a pair of lungs (*Videodrome* 0:34:39). Mr. O'Blivion's pre-recorded video talks directly to Max at once echoing his hallucinations and merging with them. O'Blivion believes that "the visions turned into flesh, uncontrollable flesh" and almost immediately the television set begins breathing and moaning after morphing into an image of Nicki Brand, Max's lover (0:37:40). The television's hard plastic takes on the elasticity of human skin complete with veins bulging underneath the surface. The screen becomes Nicki's lips that entice Max inside, that open and allow his head in between them (0:38:34). Later, in an induced hallucination at the hands of Barry Convex's hallucination machine, Nicki Brand reappears once more handing Max a whip and asking, "What are you waiting for lover, let's perform" (0:53:43). However, she again takes the form of a television set that Max repeatedly whips to her moans and cries (0:53:50). In the mind of Max Renn, television, his hallucinations, have become indistinguishable from human flesh. He can only imagine Nicki briefly as woman

before being replaced by a television that promises to produce an image catered to his every desire.

Max's own body undergoes massive transformations throughout the course of the film. Just as the television set acquires human characteristics, Max's body develops a vaginal slit in his abdomen that accommodates VHS tapes as he morphs from fully human to fleshy vessel for technology. Max pushes a gun inside his slit with sexual moaning and breathing that borders on pain as he loses the gun inside himself arming and weaponizing the vagina-like organ on his chest (044:47). However, Cronenberg obscures whether Max's bodily transformation is reality or hallucination and, though the reliability of what the audience sees is called into question, Max believes in his transformation and conceptualizes his interactions with technology through the slit in his abdomen. Barry Convex and Bianca O'Blivion then take advantage of his hallucinations and the penetrability of his body, and mind, to impose their agendas on Max. When Barry Convex reveals his plot to weaponize videodrome to rid America of its "rot" and tries to bring Max into his fold, he pushes a VHS tape into the Max's gash. Cronenberg deliberately sexualizes the slit on Max's chest, giving it structures like labias and folds as an intentional organ or extension of Max's body rather than an open wound or cut. He wants to literalize the brainwashing, the coercion, as rape with the forced insertion of a VHS into his body and the subsequent hijacking of Max's body and mind. The integration of technology and the human body poses a threat to the individual and free will as symbolized by bodily autonomy.

### **The Transitory Feminine**

*Sleepaway Camp* explores femininity in the various stages of puberty as girls transition to womanhood. The importance of this exploration is the fixation on sexuality. The film presents a Madonna-Whore complex where Angela represents innocence and purity associated with her

youth while Judy and Meg are hyper-feminine and hypersexualized. However, the dichotomy is presented as less stagnant and more fluid as it is expected of young girls to forgo their innocence in favor of a sexuality that marks their movement into womanhood. Hiltzik conceptualizes womanhood and femininity only for its sexual capacity; he portrays the girls who have not embraced their sexual nature as pre-pubescent and immature or even unnatural. Angela has the biological body of a boy and therefore will never become a “true” biological woman and will only further progress through male puberty. He juxtaposes Angela’s pubescent stagnation with Judy’s enthusiastic embrace of puberty and sexuality. Angela and Judy share many of the same physical characteristics; they both have dark brown hair, brown eyes, long angular faces. However, Judy proudly displays her body in crop tops, shorts, and bathing suits where Angela wears t-shirts and longer shorts that do not cling to her body.

Hiltzik presents Angela’s femininity as a temporary façade that will inevitably give way to her true nature. She impermanently inhabits a feminine body and feminine spaces and Hiltzik portrays her “impersonation” of child-like femininity as a crime and as a lie that far outshines her murderous activities at camp. In the end, the camp counselors that discover her are much less surprised by the severed head of another camper in her lap than the fact that she is “a boy” and has a penis (*Sleepaway Camp* 1:20:35). Tempting as it is to declare that Hiltzik believes the true indicator of gender is anatomy, Hiltzik intentionally shows how Angela fails to perform gender correctly and to participate in the foundational and communal gender confirming experiences. While he does not reduce gender to mere anatomy and nuances the concept of gender with the necessity of performance, Hiltzik suggests that Angela’s male anatomy precludes true feminine performance especially as puberty complicates femininity with sexuality. Aunt Martha, the mastermind behind Angela’s new identity, never intended for Angela to grow up or to undergo

puberty and consistently infantilizes her. She refers to her almost exclusively as “my little girl” to reassure herself and Angela of her innocent femininity as well as a reminder to Angela of the role she must play (0:7:09). Aunt Martha rejects reality and attempts to alter it to fit her desires ignoring the impending doom that threatens to ruin her illusion.

Angela, on the other hand, seems more acutely aware of her predicament. She cannot remain a pre-pubescent girl as her child-like body would become conspicuous among girls like Judy and Meg. Neither can she allow puberty to take its course because instead of further confirming her feminine identity with progression into womanhood it would jeopardize her ability to self-identify as female. In this sense, Angela’s feminine identity is very much transitory and temporary as she comes closer and closer to confronting the reality of her condition. The nature of the sleepaway camp expedites Angela’s doom as it encourages increased interaction between boys and girls with decreased adult supervision in conjunction with its mandatory gender-based communal activities meant to foster bonding among campers. Where the illusion of pre-pubescence protected Angela from sexual perception, the camp’s environment immediately sexualizes her. The cook, Artie, comments as the children disembark the buses and enter the camp space that the “young, fresh chicken,” the “baldies” as he calls them, “makes [his] mouth water” (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:10:13). Artie then targets Angela when Ronnie commissions him to find something for Angela to eat; he corners her and says almost to himself, “You sure are a sweet-looking little cupcake, ain’t you?” (0:16:17). Artie finds Angela’s youth and pre-pubescence attractive and prematurely forces Angela to confront perceivability of her body as well its sexualization thereby emphasizing the impermanence of her female identity.

Where Angela embodies the transitory feminine in *Sleepaway Camp*, *American Psycho* addresses the serial male consumption of feminine bodies. The film confronts Patrick Bateman's use of the female body in the attempt of a critique, though the director, Mary Harron, falls short of problematizing the disposability of women and instead engages in their marginalization so as not to obscure audience sympathy for Patrick Bateman. Patrick exploits women to confirm his performance of masculinity particularly the element of "access[ibility] to all women [that] characterizes white masculinity" (Ferber 107). The "access" extends beyond mutual sexual attraction between women and white men suggesting the total availability of women to white men as well as the understood right they have over female bodies to use at their discretion (Ferber 107). Patrick believes that not only are all women attracted to him but that it is a woman's duty to please him. He directs his secretary, Jean, to dress more appropriately and to "wear a dress, a skirt or something" instead of her pantsuit (*American Psycho* 0:08:47). Jean's pants place her beyond the safe realm of femininity as Patrick perceives it and his remark that she is "prettier than that" satisfies the need to soften his earlier comment as well as to express his insecurity about his own gender performance (0:08:48). Clothing denotes gender and in deciding to wear pants Jean assumes a degree of masculinity that mars her femininity thereby threatening Patrick's masculine authority over his overtly feminine secretary.

The stereotype or caricature of a rich, white businessman in the 1980s, for better or worse, sets Patrick's standard for behavior and performance. Every aspect of his identity, his wealth, his whiteness, his masculinity, and his career, confer authority onto Patrick and in his mind to perform "Patrick Bateman" correctly he must assert his dominance. In conjunction with the belief that white men have "access to all women," Patrick affirms his sexual identity as a white man by directing Jean how to dress to best satisfy his aesthetic and sexual desires (Ferber

107). As Jean walks out of his office, Patrick calls after her, “And high heels, I like high heels,” reminding her of her societal duty to be pretty and feminine but more importantly her duty to him to be pretty (*American Psycho* 0:08:50). Patrick and his friends from the office echo the sentiment that women are sex objects to compliment and accessorize white masculinity following Patrick’s violent rendezvous with a prostitute and an escort. In unison, all the men state as if reciting a code or a tired joke, “There are no girls with good personalities” (0:46:32). David Van Patten elaborates the point further in saying that the only personality girls should have is one that “consists of a chick with a little hard body who’ll satisfy all sexual demands without being too slutty about things and will essentially keep her dumb fucking mouth shut” (0:46:34). In his description, Van Patten manages to avoid any characteristics of a personality opting instead for a female body vacant of any desire beyond fulfilling “all [his] sexual demands” (0:46:34).

Patrick Bateman structures his interactions and relationships, including the exploitation and murder, with women around their feminine bodies and appearances as they complement his masculinity. However, as much as he depends on the physicality of their femininity the film questions the reality of Patrick’s world, his actions, and his sanity. The murders and killing spree complete with cops, helicopters, and explosions go unreported, unnoticed, as if they never happened at all. Following Patrick’s realization that no one knows or believes his sins, the audience watches as Jean unearths Patrick’s daybook only to discover sketches all over of the dismemberment and disfigurement of women suggesting that Patrick may have daydreamed the murders. The uncertain existence of the murdered women further asks the societal question of whether these women are real or not, if they are valuable or not. They are so dispensable that in

the end it doesn't matter if they exist in the world or only in Patrick's head as his final soliloquy dramatizes Patrick's agony and insanity and he exposes the truth of Patrick Bateman: he is lost.

The tragedy is that these women, real or not, exist only in Patrick's head as he is the only one to remember and to care about their fate and he is lost. He names them as it pleases him, one Sabrina and another Christie, simultaneously creating an identity for them and naming them in a humanizing manner while also completing the erasure of their previous identity that their societal invisibility eroded. He has sex with them and then brutalizes them; he murders Christie with a chainsaw that he drops on her from above. He bites down on Elizabeth's vagina while performing cunnilingus and presumably kills her. In his confession, he quantifies the other women he has killed. If the audience is to believe that Patrick has truly imagined all these women, then Patrick gives them life and kills them as part of his "need to engage in homicidal behavior on a massive scale" as well as to allow him complete control over the feminine and to destroy it repeatedly (*American Psycho* 1:16:44).

Patrick Bateman uses women to affirm his masculine identity thus rendering them helpless victims. In *Videodrome*, on the other hand, men weaponize women as tools manipulating them to suit their purposes yet Cronenberg also portrays women as Eves that corrupt man giving them a degree of agency. Nicki Brand encourages and enables Max Renn's fascination with Videodrome because of her own sexual empowerment and liberation. After their interview on national television, Max and Nicki return to his apartment where she promptly asks if he has "any porno" before discovering Videodrome in his VCR (*Videodrome* 0:14:23). She watches as masked men torture a naked woman and turns seductively to Max declaring that she "like[s] it; turns [her]on" (0:15:12). Nicki Brand readily indulges in her kinks and refuses to be shamed by her desires. Her insistence on painful pleasure sparks Max's interest in

Videodrome and transforms it into sexual fantasy as Nicki allows him to explore his sexual fixation on pain. The unreality of Videodrome's hypersexualized torture becomes increasingly tangible. Yet, in spite of Cronenberg's portrayal of Nicki as a corrupting Eve, she exists as a person in the movie only for a short time. After tracing Videodrome's signal back to Pittsburgh, she goes to audition for the show where she is tortured and killed. Max Renn hallucinates her remaining iterations. His mind creates an image of Nicki Brand, but it uses a television as her bodily vessel; he cannot imagine her as a person but rather as an incorporated being with technology. If he conceptualizes her as a TV, sees her body through the screen, and follows Brian O'Blivion's statement that "television is reality," then he can alter reality and make her real (*Videodrome* 0:35:54).

However, given the nature of Nicki's image as a hallucination, Max only has the illusion of control as the Videodrome tumor prompts and creates Nicki. The Videodrome broadcast has already absorbed Nicki and exploits her connection to Max in order to consume him as well. The broadcast masquerades under Nicki's identity and reduces her to her sexuality as Max Renn cares less for her life than for her ability to be a sex object. In the hallucinations, she wears a red dress which Max comments earlier in the movie as an indication of her hypersexuality and sexual desire (0:10:53). Under Barry Convex's guidance and manipulation, Max hallucinates Nicki though her image is marred by the flickering screen of the recording device in front of his eyes emphasizing her existence within technology rather than without. As she hands Max a whip she asks, "What are you waiting for lover, let's perform," and the room shifts (0:53:43). Suddenly Max finds himself in a fleshy, red room with a whip in his hand standing in front of the sole furnishing: a television. Nicki appears on the screen and her breathy moans spill out of the speakers as Max repeatedly whips the television hesitant at first but with more enthusiasm as he



continues, giving himself over to the hallucination. The television's plastic covering is Nicki's skin then Martha's, the older woman who warned him about the reality of Videodrome's broadcast, almost as if trying to mimic the human body. Cronenberg shows the integration of technology with the human body as a literalization of technology's consumption of humanity.

Though technology itself has no gender, Cronenberg intentionally feminizes. He uses the female body to personify Videodrome and to portray his fear of the dangerous, consuming, and seductive nature of technology. Thus, as Videodrome consumes Max Renn, it also feminizes him. Max begins to hallucinate a vagina on his chest to symbolize the absolute bodily corruption and his permeability. The vagina operates as a channel, an opening, for technology to enter Max. He receives data and instructions from the VHS tapes inserted into him that then render him into a vessel and a screen to be controlled. Barry Convex exploits Max's vagina to assert his dominance and will over him; he aggressively pushes a breathing VHS tape into Max's abdomen. Max cries out but is powerless to stop him. Cronenberg simulates rape to emphasize technology's nonconsensual intrusion and exploitation of humanity. However, Cronenberg uses the rape imagery to further underscore the perversion of nature by equating the unnatural integration of technology and the human body with the bodily corruption of manhood. He embodies Max's weakness as vaginal and feminine and Max's emasculation is not through castration but rather through the addition of a vagina, a feminine organ.

### **Male Violence and Repressed Sexuality**

Though sexuality is a separate concept from gender, in many ways one informs the other as gender performance often relies on sexuality and sexual identification depends on one's gender identity. Anatomy, however, complicates the relationship between gender and sexuality as they are both to a degree bodily actions that for some are solely dictated by genitalia while

others place little importance on genitalia. *Sleepaway Camp*, *American Psycho*, and *Videodrome* each address the relationship between gender and sexuality fixating particularly on the fear that repressed male sexuality manifests as violence in an effort to affirm masculinity. The misconception that male sexual frustration and confusion requires a violent outlet equates sex to violence and encourages the dangerous systematic sexual violence against women. The portrayal of uncontrollable male sexuality also removes the onus from men as individuals and implicitly suggests a feminine responsibility to satisfy masculine desire before it transforms into violence. The presented dichotomy between masculine sexual violence and feminine victimhood adheres strictly to heteronormative sexuality and the gender binary. Though characters like Angela and Patrick Bateman respond to insecure gender identity and perceived threats of homosexuality, they want to rely on unstable heteronormativity even as it decays around them.

In the case of *Sleepaway Camp* and Angela, it is important to clarify how she manifests male violence and repressed sexuality given her assumed feminine identity. Director Hiltzik presents Angela as essentially male despite her feminine performance. Angela represses her sexuality as well as her masculinity. While she opts out of communal feminine experiences and activities at camp, her outward femininity excludes her from communal male spaces as well. The boys' gender-affirming activities revolve around displays of violence and aggression simultaneously allowing them to perform the characteristics associated with masculinity but also allowing an essential outlet for sexuality. The boys gather together to play baseball and taunt their peers while wearing crop tops and short shorts. Ricky insults the other team when he remarks that "maybe the girls want a game" insinuating the opposing team's femininity as well as their inferiority to actual girls who would make for better competition (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:26:37). The opposing team, in losing, failed to perform the acceptable level of masculinity and

aggression and are thus demoted to femininity. Masculinity is defined by opposition; it is not just defined by what a man is, but also what a man is not. Therefore, the maintenance of white male supremacy relies on “binary oppositions [that] serve to preserve white privilege and racial hierarchy” as they inform the “construction of racial and gender identities” (Ferber 81). The boys practice the preservation of the gender binary in the microcosm of Camp Arawak and the white racial identity is preserved within the structure of camp as the only people of color are kitchen workers for all the white campers.

Camp Arawak serves as a space to inform children how to perform gender correctly while also giving them an avenue for expression that caters predominantly to masculinity with the emphasis on sports and outdoor activities. Though not explicitly approved by camp counselors, fighting serves as yet another communal male activity. Ricky often perpetuates the fights with the older boys for the sake of protecting Angela, but the others cannot resist joining in. At the dance, some boys approach different girls in the hopes of a co-ed skinny dipping expedition with dismal results. They ask themselves, “Who wants to go skinny dipping with fifteen guys and only five girls?” (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:27:06). The impending threat to both their heterosexuality and their masculinity, prompts a dare for the boys to ask Angela to go skinny dipping to reaffirm their masculinity. Angela meets their cajoling questions with silence, even after one repositions himself to put his crotch at eye level with her, thus destroying the illusion that their white masculinity entitles them to “access to all women” (Ferber 107). In an effort to salvage their bruised egos and to reassert their dominance, they make fun of Angela. However, they did not account for Ricky, Angela’s cousin, who feels a masculine and familial obligation to protect Angela. His mother charges him with the task to “take good care of [her] little girl” reinforcing Angela’s infantilization and juxtaposes her innocent femininity with the implication

of Ricky's masculine protection (0:09:05). He incites a fight with the older boys and all the others join in, unable to resist the opportunity to display their masculinity through violence and aggression.

Angela, on the other hand, cannot engage openly in violent behavior or express her repressed masculinity. Her attempts to repress her biological gender are compounded with the repression of sexuality with uncertainty clouding both facets of her identity. She allows herself to explore her sexuality and femininity with Paul who presents himself as an unimposing masculine presence. Paul convinces her to join him at the beach where they kiss but as he advances and tries to take Angela's shirt off, she hesitates and asks him to stop. Then Angela flashes back to watching from just outside the door her father and his male lover kissing in bed; Angela and her sibling look at each other and giggle seeming unable to understand the implications of what her father was engaging in. The image changes abruptly to one of her and her brother as small children sitting atop a bed except Peter, her brother, points directly at her and the laughing and smiling stop as she realizes that not only is she really Peter but that she may be mimicking her father's homosexual behavior. Angela's body traps her in an impossible situation. If she adheres to her feminine identity and participates in a heterosexual relationship with Paul, then she would also be engaging in homosexual relations as she is biologically a boy. The uncertainty of her gender prevents sexual identification but not sexual desire which she must suppress or else jeopardize both her gender and sexual identity.

Hiltzik portrays Angela's internal disjunction between her anatomy, gender, and sexuality as the motivation for her murders. He intends for the audience to see Angela as a boy with pent up aggression and sexuality that are compounded by the ambiguity of their gender and the violent outbursts as an inevitability of their condition. Hiltzik believes that Angela's violence is

inherently male. She cannot express her sexuality, heterosexual or homosexual, nor truly participate in gender performance and thus she attacks those who make fun of her otherness or who threaten her identity, like Meg, Judy, and Billy. She attacks them in moments of vulnerability: Meg in the shower, Judy while she is alone in the cabin, Billy while he uses the bathroom. She murders the four younger campers who threw sand at her after she refused to swim in their sleep when their camp counselor leaves them in the woods to help another camper. Her violence is retaliatory and, like violence for the other male campers, serves to reaffirm her identity by eliminating threats to her exposure. Angela's behavior aligns with Hiltzik's portrayal of the other boys at camp and their communal gender experiences. Kenny flips a canoe against Leslie's pleading to force a sexual situation. Billy and other boys throw water balloons at Angela, knocking her to the ground. After Angela freaks out at being thrown in the lake against her will, little boys throw sand at her while she coughs and cries. They perform masculinity by bullying, harassing, and becoming physically violent toward women.

While *Sleepaway Camp* addresses the repressed budding sexuality of pubescent teenagers, *American Psycho* exhibits the manifestations of repressed adult male sexuality which is complicated by Patrick Bateman's sexual immaturity. Throughout the film, Patrick never has sex with his fiancé, Evelyn, and lives separately from her only seeing her at dinners where he suspects she is having an affair with his coworker Timothy Bryce. Her seeming indifference to Patrick aside from a desire to be married for social status bothers Patrick though he pretends it does not. Once again devolving to monologue, Patrick remarks his own feigned indifference stating, "I'm almost completely indifferent as to whether Evelyn knows I'm having an affair" while Evelyn openly flirts with Timothy (*American Psycho* 0:10:49). However, his statement falls flat as pursues their friend Courtney, who is "almost perfect looking," a rich, blonde, white

social elite like his own fiancé (0:10:59). The prostitute he picks up later in the movie is also a conventionally attractive blonde white woman and when searching for an escort to round out their threesome he demands a blonde to which he is disappointed by her darker, strawberry blonde color. His assistant, too, is blonde. They epitomize the American ideal of beauty but his desire for blondes extends beyond mere aesthetic. Patrick wants to recreate his fiancé in these women, women who he deems lesser and feels more comfortable unleashing his repressed sexual violence on.

However, in the case of Courtney and his assistant, Jean, they are still of too high a social class to dehumanize. Leslie Fiedler, literary critic, details the quintessential American literary tradition of sexual immaturity and notes that certain women are “refined to the point where copulation with them seems blasphemous” (*Love and Death in the American Novel* 293). Patrick Bateman displaces his sexual desire for Evelyn onto lesser women with varying degrees of violence depending on their class. Fiedler also highlights the convention in American literature toward the dichotomy of the “Fair Maiden,” a blonde, and the “Dark Lady,” a brunette, where the dark lady is the “sinister embodiment of the sexuality denied the snow maiden” and yet their origins are “purely decorative...before they adapted to symbolic ones” (296). *American Psycho* presents a similar dichotomy without the bodily distinction between the fair maiden and the dark lady choosing instead to use class as the marker for allowed sexual deviance. Though physically similar, Christie and Sabrina occupy invisible spaces in society while their counterparts are highly visible, and therefore more valuable.

Yet, Patrick’s desire to replicate Evelyn seems more out of anger than out of sincere desire. Evelyn frustrates his illusion of “access to all women [that] characterizes white masculinity” because she does not want him in a tangible way. She only needs him for their

marriage and satisfies herself sexually outside their relationship; she wants to be married more than she wants to be married to Patrick. In their relationship, he could be any other man which contributes to his feeling of invisibility that causes him to take violent physical action against others to prove his existence. He chooses women that look like Evelyn because he cannot prove his masculinity, his unique existence as Patrick Bateman, to her and displaces his powerlessness onto other women. Evelyn emasculates Patrick and he retaliates against women to reestablish his masculinity and his dominance.

Much like in *American Psycho*, the violence in *Videodrome* is directly linked to sex though exacerbated by technology that makes sexuality more accessible. Cronenberg seems to promote a dichotomy of acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior and while he condemns Barry Convex's efforts to rid the world of sexual deviants that enjoy and are sexually aroused by Videodrome, he intentionally portrays Max's fascination with it as his downfall. Max deals in soft-core pornography to attract more viewers to his channel and the Videodrome broadcast with its sexualized torture holds the potential to elevate Max's channel to an unprecedented height. Max himself cannot escape Videodrome's seduction and is inexplicably aroused by the violence. Nicki Brand raises the stakes by making the fantasy of violence during sex reality. She openly admits her arousal by pain and asks Max to "take out [his] Swiss Army knife and cut [her] here, just a little" (*Videodrome* 0:15:26). She subverts the normal sexual dynamic by initiating pain and sex instead of waiting for a man to inflict both on her. Nicki assumes a masculine role in her sexual agency and though Max inflicts the pain and pierces her with a needle, he is inexperienced and submissively follows her lead.

Max allows himself to be seduced by Videodrome and by Nicki Brand and hallucinates sexual violence first against Nicki and then against Martha, an older woman, that leads to a

hallucination where Max moves beyond sexual violence to the murdering Martha. The Videodrome tumor further corrupts Max permitting Barry Convex and then Bianca O'Blivion to use his weakness, his vagina, to fulfill their agenda necessitating real, rather than imagined, murder. Barry Convex rapes Max and inserts a VHS tape into his vagina that programs Max to kill his TV executives then Bianca O'Blivion hijacks Max once more, also inserting a VHS tape into Max that ultimately leads him to kill Harlan and Barry Convex. The integration of technology and the human body releases people from their inhibitions and makes them susceptible to persuasion which Cronenberg literalizes through the manifestation of a vagina on Max's chest and his subsequent rapes.

### **Oppressed or the Oppressor?**

*Sleepaway Camp*, *American Psycho*, and *Videodrome* each present a version of an oppression narrative of the white, cis-gendered, heterosexual man often perverting (or altogether ignoring) history and reality to better reflect the narrative they perpetuate. In *Sleepaway Camp*, Hiltzik uses Angela to demonize queer and gender-nonconforming people as threats to stable gender and sexual identification. Instead of emphasizing Angela's victimhood, Hiltzik chooses to focus on her unhinged, murderous behavior against heteronormative characters. Her killing spree begins with Artie, the adult man who tries to molest Angela in the kitchen pantry; however, Angela does not succeed in killing Artie and manages only to cause horrific burns across his body. While Artie's predatory and pedophilic behavior does not explicitly fall into societally accepted heterosexuality, he introduces the threat of sex and sexual desire while also establishing the wild west attitude of Camp Arawak: unsupervised and rife with sexual urges.

Angela remains docile until she attends a dance in the gym where boys who had previously been searching for girls interested in skinny dipping with fifteen guys. To their



dismay they succeed in recruiting only five girls and as a dare Kenny and Mike ask Angela to join. Kenny and Mike do not force Angela to go, opting instead to make fun of her for ignoring their advances. After Ricky instigates a fight to protect Angela, Kenny, Mike, and the thirteen other boys head to the lake only to find that after they jumped naked into the water that the girls have no desire to skinny dip. Kenny, however, convinces Leslie go on a late-night canoe ride as a front to get her in the lake with him. Leslie begs him to stop rocking the canoe but Kenny tips it over anyway to force her to skinny dip; Leslie swims to shore leaving Kenny by himself.

Angela appears under the canoe with him and drowns him. Hiltzik presents Kenny's indiscretion as just "boys being boys" and as an innocent sexual experiment that comes with the territory of male heterosexual desire.

However, Kenny's nonconsensual behavior and harassment of Angela, Leslie, and the other girls who refused his skinny dip proposal exhibits the belief of his "access to all women [that] characterizes white masculinity" (Ferber 107). Hiltzik paints Angela as a villain for killing boys who exhibit heterosexual desire, but he portrays heterosexual desire in men as nonconsensual. Just as he characterizes the male heterosexual desire as nonconsensual, Hiltzik emphasizes the manifestation of male sexual desire and masculinity as violence through his male characters, including Angela. While the other boy's actions are perceived as innocent, Angela's violence and slaughtering are portrayed as cold, calculating rather than reactions to the violence perpetuated against her. Angela's "male" violence escalates to attacking women, killing Meg as she gets ready for her date with Mel, the man who owns Camp Arawak, and smothering Judy before raping her with a hot curling iron after a boy refuses to have sex with Judy. Where the other boys had exhibited societally accepted forms of violence against women, Angela deviates from innocent expressions of sexual desire as violence and murders. She concludes her

murdering spree with Paul, the initial object of her desire, presumably because he figures out her secret while also being unable to reconcile her desire for him with her anatomy and identity.

Hiltzik obscures Angela's victimhood and uses her uncertainty about her gender and sexuality to create a narrative that homosexuals and transgender people are dangerous and a threat to "normal" heterosexual society. The reality is that transgender people, specifically transgender women, are targeted because of their identity and killed for it rather than targeting heterosexual, cis-gendered people for performing societal norms.

Hiltzik also perverts transgender identity and removes the consensual and gender-affirming aspects of transitioning. His conception of transgender identity is one forced on a perfectly normal child by a white woman whose desire to play house outweighs the wellbeing of their child. In a flashback the audience learns the circumstances around Angela's identity. Aunt Martha approaches Peter, the sole survivor of a boating accident that killed his father and sister, and remarks, "You see, I've always wanted a little girl, but when my husband left..oh well" (*Sleepaway Camp* 1:19:37). She goes on to say that it "will certainly be a nice little surprise when Richard comes home to find a little girl in the house" and as if speaking to herself, "Yes, I've always dreamed of a little girl just like you" (1:19:47). She builds to her conclusion saying that "we already have a boy so another one simply would not do" and how "a little girl would be so much nicer...don't you think so Angela" (1:19:59). It is not until she addresses the child as Peter that the audience realizes, and perhaps Angela for the first time truly, that the whole time Angela has been her brother Peter (1:20:20). Hiltzik indicts Aunt Martha for denying Peter's opportunity to be a full-fledged white man in the way that mothers smother their boys and spoil them to the point of emasculation. Aunt Martha's desire to have the perfect home and the perfect children literalizes the emasculation as she forces Peter to become Angela.

While *Sleepaway Camp* portrays transgender identity and homosexuality as threats to white masculinity, and therefore societal stability, *American Psycho* explores the oppression of the rich, white, heterosexual man who loses his identity to commodification. Mary Harron and Bret Ellis attempt to portray consumerism as the cause for Patrick Bateman's loss of identity and masculinity aligning with male voices in the 1980s that expressed "dissatisfaction with the 'male sex role'" and claimed that authentic masculinity had been "diluted and polluted both by life in mass consumer society" (Coston 371). Patrick's manicured appearance and the obscene number of products he uses to preserve his masculine image are more stereotypically feminine undermining his very efforts to perfect masculinity. Daniel Cunningham argues in "Patrick Bateman as 'Average White Male' in *American Psycho*" that Patrick feels lost in a sea of white men that look exactly like him. He is indistinguishable from his male counterparts so much so that Paul Allen confuses him for Marcus Halberstram and Patrick's own lawyer did not recognize him. Patrick calls his lawyer to confess to his crimes, but his lawyer thinks it is an elaborate prank saying, "Bateman is such a dork...if you had said Bryce or McDermott..." (*American Psycho* 1:31:58). Patrick then asks, "Don't you know who I am? I'm Patrick Bateman" but he loses confidence in his own identity (1:32:43).

However, consumerism plays a much smaller role in Patrick Bateman's psychopathy and unstable identity than his lifestyle as a rich, white, heterosexual man. He operates from a place of privilege and takes the lives of others as if he has a right to them all to affirm his tangible existence as Patrick Bateman and to establish ultimate dominance over people where he cannot in his corporate world. Though the critique of white invisibility that largely prompts Patrick's psychosis and detachment from his identity, *American Psycho* fails to acknowledge that this feeling is in response to a historical moment with the rise of identity politics and the increased

visibility of marginalized communities. *American Psycho*'s whiteness and fixation on masculinity erases the context for the widespread feeling of white male victimhood in the 1980s. Interesting, too, that the narrative of white invisibility is at the expense of the women Patrick kills. The news, the police, his lawyer, do not care if Patrick murders because he is a wealthy white man who kills undesirable and equally invisible people like the homeless and prostitutes. Patrick continually benefits from his status and the attempts by Mary Harron to paint him as a victim of his identity because his "confession has meant nothing" and "even after admitting this, there is no catharsis" (*American Psycho* 1:36:47). The audience is meant to believe that Patrick's identity traps him in an inescapable hell as if much of it is not of his own creation or the reality that his identity allows him to continue his crimes as he has every intention for his "pain to be inflicted on others" (1:36:36). Mysteriously, consumerism's culpability falls away in place of Patrick's dedication to the performance of unhinged white masculinity.

Cronenberg takes a markedly different turn in his narrative of white male oppression. Where *Sleepaway Camp* and *American Psycho* are slasher films where the monster is human, Cronenberg's monster is technology. He portrays Max's channel, CIVIC-TV, as a sleazy attempt to get pornography onto cable television and Max intends to escalate to torture porn after accidentally intercepting a broadcast that features the torture and murder. He wants to replicate Videodrome on his own channel but unbeknownst to him the broadcast triggers the growth of a tumor that integrates the broadcast directly into the human brain. Videodrome was Brian O'Blivion's pet project to make television reality but was co-opted by Barry Convex as a means of extinguishing the sexual deviants who would willingly watch Videodrome. Convex, with the help of Max's assistant, Harlan, plots a eugenics movement with Max Renn as its target. Cronenberg fantasizes that a successful, wealthy, white, heterosexual man would be the target of

a eugenics movement to purify the world and uses his fantasy to instill fear of technology in his white viewers that they too could be victims.

To further drive home his trepidation of technology, Cronenberg presents the possible emasculation of white men. The sexual liberation Nicki Brand explores with the increased accessibility of violent sex through Videodrome corrupts Max Renn. He succumbs to his repressed desires and gives himself over to the fantasy; he is not strong enough, masculine enough to withstand Videodrome and Nicki Brand. Technology dominates Max and he hallucinates a vagina on his chest, a literal corruption of the body and his masculinity, that makes him subordinate to the wills of others. His body becomes a vessel to be programmed and Cronenberg intentionally feminizes technology and Max Renn to show the degradation of masculinity. His own fear and anxiety of the fate of masculinity in technologically advanced society manifests in a social critique of technology's threat to humanity. He assumes that a white man is the universal embodiment of humanity but cannot help but vilify the feminine in such a way as to exclude a female audience.

Horror has always held a fascination for the public, if not always for academia, for its ability to respond to its particular historical moment and to literalize its audiences' fears and anxieties. However, the fears manifested in horror are often that of white heterosexual men afraid that their individual, "unprecedented" historical moment threatens the stability of their identity. Horror allows them to turn their fears into monsters.

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