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America's Culture of Greed: Patrick Bateman Versus the Brady Bunch



Christian Bale as Patrick Bateman

I had the odd and possibly disturbing pleasure of watching *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995) and *American Psycho* (2000) back to back the other night. While the former is a PG-13 spoof on the classic, innocuous 1970s sitcom of the same name, and the latter based on a wholly transgressive and gut-wrenchingly horrifying novel by satirist Bret Easton Ellis, the two films share a common thematic goal.

A short introduction: *The Brady Bunch Movie* takes the titular family from the television show and places them anachronistically in 1990s California. The humor stems from how oblivious they are to the world around them, which has changed dramatically since the show originally aired (to clarify,

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selfish real estate developer, who needs the Brady's to sell their iconic home in order to turn the area into a shopping mall.

The Bradys must then raise \$20,000 to pay back taxes or the house will be auctioned to Dittmeyer. In good old Brady fashion, the kids group together and eventually win a musical “Search for the Stars” contest, performing for an auditorium of bored looking grunge teens and, who would’ve guessed, the Monkees.



The Brady Bunch Movie

American Psycho is a different beast, a story about young, attractive, investment banker Patrick Bateman, extreme materialist and narcissist, unreliable narrator, and possibly serial killer and his misadventures in a late '80s wealthy Manhattan social circle. The film, like the novel, revolves around Bateman's shallow obsession with appearances, extreme adoration for popular music, dinner reservations, and a series of increasingly gruesome murders, his own distorted American Dream.

On its surface, the film is a satire of a society obsessed with capitalism. The film is “about” Bateman's commodification of people, especially women, reducing them to meat reserved for sex and violence, and his lifestyle of

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American Psycho, suave, transgressive, and completely sexual (without being erotic), is a highly “postmodern” work, one that covers itself in layers of truths, signs, and realities. It’s sort of obviously postmodern, and the novel is an essential postmodern text. The Brady Bunch Movie is harder to pin down.



American Psycho

It’s mostly an homage to the simplicity of ’70s America and its media, poking a good amount of fun at it while still being lovingly nostalgic about it. The film is an over-the-top “spoof” of ’70s American pop culture, but it is also very much a critique of contemporary American culture, that is, America in the late 1980s and 1990s.

California has been overrun by punks and thugs, and although the film never truly gets at the grittiness of reality (which would have made it a better, funnier film), cars are jacked by thieves, sex is rampant, and several establishing shots of downtown Los Angeles reveal heavy traffic, homelessness, and an obsession with the then newish cellphones.

While not as graphic, this California is very much the same one that

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up for a PG-13 comedy of manners. While free of its stylized transgressive qualities and explicit imagery, these two depictions of Los Angeles are not very different.

The tagline for *The Brady Bunch Movie* is “They’re Back To Save American From The ’90s,” and this notion of “saving” America is an important piece to the film’s overall thesis.

The Bradys are weird and everyone in the film knows it. From neighbors claiming they’ve “never seen a toilet” in the Brady house to the absurdity of the children’s relationships with schoolmates, the Bradys represent an extremely naive worldview, closed off from the horrors of the newsworthy world, but through this naivety comes something honest and possibly wholesome.

At the end of the film, when the Bradys buy their home back, it is their tenacious love for each other and for their community, however goofy and blind, that succeeds and is the moral backbone of the film.

The Bradys are outdated, yes, and their cultural blindness may seem immoral and certainly humorous, but they do in fact “save America” from the truly evil capitalist, real estate developer Larry Dittmeyer. The culture clash that the film revolves around is aware that both stereotypical 1970s and 1990s media depictions of reality are absurd, but it goes to great lengths to say that both can be morally sound and that goodness can actually come from the wholesome and blind if there is a sense of truth and goodness.

Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* is also “saving America,” but in a

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American and his media. Instead of showing that love prevails over material gain, Bateman exemplifies what happens when love and essence cannot overcome material greed and superficiality.

Unconsciously, *The Brady Movie* is the optimistic (and possibly naive) answer to the question than *American Psycho* poses: has all of American culture's soul been drained by greed and superficiality, been worn out by the pressures of a vicious capitalism? *American Psycho*, which is a thesis-heavy piece, seems to argue that yes, America is drained and worn. *The Brady Bunch Movie*, which is a mere collection of sitcom and comedy film tropes more than it is an essay, does not explicitly say much of anything, but it does hint at the notion of American goodness still lingering in the streets of (post)modern America.



Marcia Brady Meets Patrick Bateman

It would be decidedly humorous and poignant to see the two narratives cross paths, with Patrick Bateman maybe trying to murder and eat Marcia Brady, only to be caught and given a stern look by Mr. and Mrs. Brady, or maybe Alice stumbles into the room and makes an obvious joke while holding a basket of laundry. The Bradys exude a charm that repels the vulgar and narcissistic actions of Patrick Bateman, and in the spoof film, are his

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In the Brady world, the world of the film, the rules of the narrative are that nothing bad can truly happen, which is the opposite of Bateman's world, with his unreliable narration a display of everything bad can and will happen.

Interestingly, both the Bradys and Patrick Bateman are very extreme stylized versions of an American identity, the naive do-gooders and the hostile capitalist, only the naivety and hostility are turned up to eleven. These American caricatures are both critiques at their most severe.

Two equal and opposite sides of the same argument are found in these wildly different films. There's a certain charm in comparing and contrasting the two films, an absurd uncertainty, but the parallel fits. Both *American Psycho* and *The Brady Bunch Movie* revolve around the same concept.

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