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LITERATURE

Aleksandra Noińska

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland
noinskaaleksandra@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7208-021X

The Symbiotic Relationship Between the Murderer and the City, a Silent Accomplice in Crime, in *The Love Witch* and *American Psycho*

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to examine the interdependence between the killer and the urban space in *The Love Witch* and *American Psycho*, as well as to explore the subversion of gender roles in horror productions through satirization of toxic masculinity and fragile femininity. Furthermore, the paper examines the murderer's persona, along with motifs and psychological factors motivate criminal behaviour, and also investigates the importance of the urban space as it conditions the perpetrators' behaviour and reflects their personalities. An in-depth study of such a phenomenon is conducted by employing the comparative analysis of two similar yet different serial killers from the aforementioned films, as well as implementing spatial theories and delving into the connection between fictional characters and their surroundings. Ultimately, the partnership in crime linking the killer and the horror settings is proven to exist and benefit both parties.

Keywords: horror, murderer, crime, gender, urban space, *American Psycho*, *The Love Witch*

1. The Identity of the Murderer and the Impact of Gender

The division of gender roles in horror movies, abundant in female victims and male villains, corresponds to the enduring hierarchy present in society. The masculine gender naturally radiates power and authority; therefore, men were primarily chosen for

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the role of the protagonist. According to Carol J. Clover, the creator of the "final girl" theory,[1] male characters were assigned a dominant status and turned into either "heroic being[s] who [cross] boundaries" (Clover 1989, 13) or monsters. Conversely, women were typically cast as victims or heroines taking revenge after suffering terrible injustices in their lives. Alfred Hitchcock, an iconic director of suspenseful films, even claimed that "the trouble today is that we don't torture women enough" (Spoto 1983, 483). The advantaged position worked in men's favour, allowing them to adopt any role they wanted. Entitled to the privilege of performing the most essential functions in their surroundings, they established themselves as creators of order while reserving the right to disturb it. With all these assets acquired on account of their gender, it was much easier for men to transgress moral and ethical boundaries, which was in many cases justified or even unpunished, as they had "greater access to, and control over, valued resources, and they [had] greater formal power, embedded in positions of authority and codified in law" (Ridgeway 1992, 1).

As Kimberley Tyrrell points out, an increased interest in portraying the violent character of the killer has been observed since the 1960s, as the most cruel monsters proved to be not supernatural creatures but humans themselves. At the peak of his popularity, a typical murderer was depicted as "a white, single, middle-class, heterosexual man, aged 20–40" (Tyrrell 2001, 274), suffering from childhood trauma and aggressive tendencies – a seemingly ordinary and unremarkable individual. Various movies have explored this ambiguity and indicate that the identity of the one who dared to commit murder is difficult to determine, as it could be "somebody in this town. Somebody we all know. Someone we see in this town every day. Might be me. Might be you" (*The Spiral Staircase* 1946). As the dominant figures in horror, men tend to seize the roles of tormentors and target their violence at female characters, often due to their general resentment towards women or the "bizarre relationship[s] with [their] mother[s] [shown] as the source of [their] aberrant behaviour" (Hutchings 2013, 50) as influenced by psychoanalytic tropes. Consequently, this dynamic places the opposing gender in the position of a scapegoat, rendering "the proper feminine role designed to keep women impotent and marginalised" (Creed 2022, 17), and resulting in the fair sex being the most frequent victims of on-screen violence.

For a long time, there was no room for any diversity in this male-dominated sphere. While predominantly masculine traits were praised, femininity was equated with weakness and with something unknown yet threatening. As Barbara Creed mentions in *The Monstrous Feminine*, "the man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, infected with her femininity and of then showing himself incapable" (Creed 1993, 119). It was

[1] In the article, *Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film*, Clover coins the term "final girl" to describe "the one who did not die: the survivor" (1989, 201). She describes this type of character as markedly different from those around her, capable of finding the strength either to hide from the killer or confront him and survive.

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not until the title character of *Carmilla* (1872)[2], a female vampire who even preceded Dracula, proved to the readers that women were equally capable of taking on the role of a villain, "a powerful and queer form of the monstrous-feminine who takes no prisoners" (Creed 2022, 181). Compensating for their frail physique, women's methods, though slightly less violent, were far more refined and deliberate. Thus, female killers and their techniques are described as "'gentle' in comparison to stabbing, beating, or shooting" (Newton and French 2008, 44). Furthermore, the public is more accustomed to "a male killer than a female one" (Patla and Teleśnicki 2009, 206, *translation mine*), since the killings committed by women are "less widely understood and more often attributed to mental disorders" (Patla and Teleśnicki 2009, 206, *translation mine*).

However, as stated by Clover, horrors are full of "gender transgressions" (Clover 2015, 231), and traditional rules do not always apply. With increasing frequency, masculine figures abandon their macho masks and are relegated to the roles of emotional victims; women, on the other hand, are promoted from supporting characters to villains, cruel, ruthless oppressors. Yet, aside from this attempt to ridicule stereotypical social roles, particularly prominent in horror films, many directors employ the opposite strategy, exaggerating the feminine and masculine traits. Through such an approach, a similar effect is achieved; the characters appear ridiculously caricatural, which suggests that traditional gender roles are outdated and no longer functional, and therefore, new approaches should be embraced.

Alongside these shifts in presenting gender identities and roles in horror conventions and the growing importance of urban areas, cities become frequently selected locations as settings for scary movies and the stage for diverse crimes. The previously chosen gothic castles and gloomy dungeons no longer suit the rapidly developing world, while crowded cities breed crime and provide culprits with anonymity under a veil of darkness, as well as a wide range of prey and opportunities. Through a detailed analysis of *American Psycho* (2000) and *The Love Witch* (2016), two contrasting depictions of narcissistic serial killers, this article shall examine the partnership in crime between urban spaces and fictional murderers in horror narratives, as well as the role of gender exaggeration and subversion in depicting fictional murderers and ridiculing the outdated conventions.

2. The Double Identities of the Killers in the Aforementioned Films

Alzena MacDonald highlights some features that may distinguish the murderers within society, namely "a nervous sensitivity or gentlemanly connoisseurship combined with sexual frenzy" (MacDonald 2013, 148). This indicates that such individuals are char-

[2] A Gothic novella by Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla* tells the story of a young woman who is seduced and preyed on by the titular character, a female vampire. As one of the earliest examples of vampire fiction, the literary work explores the theme of lesbian romance amid Victorian Era oppression, as well as provides the readers with a strong female villain, a serious threat to the established social structures.

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acterised by having complex inner lives compared to others, namely odd personality traits or uncommon interests inaccessible to the eyes of the community surrounding them. In order to remain unnoticed, murderers often disguise themselves as typical members of society and "appear on the surface quite normal, and perhaps bland and non-threatening" (Mason 2012, 162) or even tend "to be inconspicuous, average, and thus distinctly unspectacular" (Hantke 2003, 35). Hence, most killers bury their homicidal fantasies beneath the façade of citizens respected among their peers, yet, simultaneously, search for their next victims.

Directed by Mary Harron, *American Psycho* is a psychological horror set in the city of New York. The first-person, unreliable narrator is the protagonist himself, Patrick Bateman, an ambitious businessman who feels underestimated by his contemporaries and does everything to impress them. His carefully created persona of a caring fiancé and a wealthy materialist conceals the fact that he is a ruthless killer. From a homeless man and his dog, a deeply hated co-worker, the occasionally met prostitutes, to the woman Patrick was in love with, the murderer's "portfolio" gradually and shockingly expands. Not knowing what is real and what is not, Patrick falls into a spiral of slaughter as he sneaks around at night, looking for his next victims.

The protagonist of *American Psycho* is a 26-year-old individual working at an investment company, Pierce & Pierce, "practically own[ed by his] father" (*American Psycho* 2000). His main goal in life is to fit in with society; therefore, he puts great effort into maintaining a perfect, spotless appearance as he "believe[s] in taking care of" himself (*American Psycho* 2000). Contrary to people in his surroundings, the man has a daily skincare and workout routine, as well as a balanced diet. In order to blend in within his workplace, he tries not to stand out in terms of clothing or hairstyle, and he succeeds to the point that people have difficulty recognising him among the others. Nevertheless, Patrick Bateman secretly strives to be the best, from his overall work performance to such details as the appearance of his business card. Every part of his life is carefully crafted to satisfy the curiosity of people around him. Even his career, an extravagant apartment, and a rich fiancée, Evelyn, seem to be only accessories to his persona. Moreover, the music he often mentions does not seem to truly resonate with him personally; rather, it consists of songs that are currently popular. Also, in the case of the restaurants he visits, Bateman is focused solely on securing prestigious reservations and tasting expensive dishes, to the point that when he accomplishes it, "the relief washes over [him] in an awesome wave" (*American Psycho* 2000).

Conversely, directed by Anna Biller, *The Love Witch* is a comedy horror with a setting divided into a real and mental space – a small town, its suburbs, and a few dream scenarios that the main character's inner world consists of. After her husband leaves her, Elaine Parks moves to Arcata to live peacefully, and as an independent woman, unknown in the neighbourhood, she attracts a lot of attention. With the help of witchcraft, she seduces nearly everyone, which has tragic consequences. The romantic excursion to the woods ends up in her spell turning out to be fatal for her potential lover. Elaine omits to cover up her tracks; instead, she buries the body and performs

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a ritual involving her personal belongings, later enabling the detectives to perceive her as a potential culprit.

The mysterious main character of *The Love Witch*, Elaine Parks, is a newcomer in Arcata; she is quite a mystery to the locals when she appears out of nowhere and moves in to live there as a young and single woman in her 20s, without any friends or family. The way she looks is extraordinary, a "feminine perfection, presenting herself as a purposefully fabricated woman" (Stümer 2021, 1215), as she pays particular attention to how she presents herself and treats her appearance as a way to stand out from the crowd. Elaine wears wigs, applies eye-catching make-up and wears feminine clothing to make "herself into an object, inspiring adulation and love" (Stümer 2021, 1214) and shine in the local community. Her decision to move to another city is motivated by a desire to heal from heartbreak. Appointments with a therapist turn out to be unsuccessful, since he belittles her problems, claiming that she is "not unusual at all. People are abused all over the world. Every day. Much worse than [her]…" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Later on, she is introduced to witchcraft and becomes interested in dancing at a burlesque club, as it enables her to explore the power of her femininity, all of which significantly improves her mental health, makes her realise her inner power and "[be] reborn as a witch" (*The Love Witch* 2016). As Elaine "seeks perfect love in a world where men and women seem incapable of such feelings" (Candel 2021, 79), her primary objective is to form a deep connection with someone special. The desire to be someone's "ultimate fantasy" (*The Love Witch* 2016) is the force that drives all her actions, as she is desperate for affection and believes in true love. However, Elaine fails to understand that her longings are impossible to fulfil since she craves to be adored by an independent, strong man and to receive complete devotion while also being in power in that relationship.

Due to their carefully crafted disguises, both Patrick and Elaine, two "loathsome, well-styled narcissist[s] who [have respectively] a postmodern penchant for consumption [and an almost primal need for being desired]" (MacDonald 2013, 2), adeptly blend into the crowd and are immediately accepted by the local communities of the cities they inhabit. The deceptions they consistently uphold enable them to evade the consequences of the bloodshed they cause and even find allies amid the risk of being discovered. Nevertheless, over time, their bloodlust begins to interfere with maintaining impeccable reputations and inconspicuous appearances, as their perfection starts to appear a little too good to be true, which threatens their merited positions in their respective coteries.

3. The Identities of the (Serial) Murderers

While analysing the subject of murderers and their characteristics, a few factors need to be taken into account, namely their modus operandi, the choice of victims and the frequency with which the individual kills. Focusing specifically on the last component, their crimes are divided into one-time and recurring events, defined as serial murders. Around the 1970s, former FBI agent Robert Ressler described it as "the unlawful kill-

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ing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events" (Morton 2008, 9). Unsurprisingly, many literary critics and theoreticians have attempted to delve further into characterising the figure of the serial killer in horror productions. For instance, Kimberley Tyrrell observes that such a character's portrayal varies "from hero to monster, from inevitable by-product of culture to an inexplicable force of nature, from irredeemable to pitiable" (Tyrrell 2001, 274). Furthermore, films attribute serial murderers to "an abnormal personality—one whose imaginative fixation combines obsessive care with flamboyant whimsy" (MacDonald 2013, 147) and present them as "either a deviant or an over-enthusiastic conformist" (MacDonald 2013, 147). Therefore, the murderous identity and repetitive killings are often associated with distinctive psychological patterns, compulsions, and obsessive behaviours.

At the very beginning of *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman claims he is "some kind of abstraction" (*American Psycho* 2000), admitting that "there is no real [him], only an entity, something illusory" (*American Psycho* 2000). The carefully created vision of him is just a front that enables him to blend in with his surroundings. Yet, his murderous identity does not overlap entirely with the "dark, mass-produced fabrication of identity" (Rischard 2020, 444) he feigns every day and no matter how hard he tries to hide his real nature under a façade of superficiality and perfection, his disturbing habits expose his morbid tendencies, such as an aggressive approach towards the female staff in shops and bars. In day-to-day interactions, he patronises women and even becomes violent towards them if his requirements are not fulfilled. For instance, when a bartender rejects his method of payment for drinks, he responds by offending her with some obscenities, saying that he wants to "stab [her] to death and then play around with [her] blood" (*American Psycho* 2000). Such outbursts are ignored or misheard by his interlocutors. Moreover, he owns a set of murder weapons and mentions things which indicate his unhealthy fascination with hurting people. This is evident through wordplays or straightforward confessions, for example, when he admits that he "like[s] to dissect girls" (*American Psycho* 2000) or that he is "into […] murders and executions" (*American Psycho* 2000), exploiting the similarity in sound to "mergers and acquisitions".

Another attitude he displays towards the feminine gender is treating them solely as objects of his desire. From his female colleagues to prostitutes, as well as his fiancée and mistress, all these women are only perceived by him based on their physical attributes. By way of illustration, during the Christmas party, Evelyn asks Patrick what kind of present he wants to receive from her and urges him not to say "breast implants again" (*American Psycho* 2000), which suggests that he has already tried to interfere with her appearance. Furthermore, he advises his secretary to wear more feminine clothing because she is "prettier than that" (*American Psycho* 2000). Therefore, the victims targeted by Patrick are, unsurprisingly, mostly women, sex workers and strangers he meets at social gatherings or in other situations, as well as men of lower status. Killing them gives the murderer satisfaction from being in power and getting rid of the weaker members of society he despises.

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Yet, one of his victims is also Paul Allen, the successful colleague he is jealous of, as well as a mirror for Bateman's insecurities and class envy. Patrick eliminates his competitor and loses himself in a "real or imagined killing spree" (Rischard 2020, 455). While confessing all his wrongdoings to his lawyer, Bateman admits to killing "twenty people… Maybe forty!" (*American Psycho* 2000), as well as recording several of them on video tapes. Interestingly, the murders seem as artificial as his whole persona and resemble theatrical performances, involving him humiliating his victims before killing them. As his murderer's "portfolio" grows, the perspective shifts to "the way in which Bateman sees himself as a star in his own movie" (Kooijman and Laine 2003, 50), and Patrick gradually transforms into a fictional character with his killing methods becoming increasingly absurd.

Bateman's only fear is not moral decay but others destroying his illusion of perfection. Therefore, he meticulously cleans the crime scenes and hides the bodies. Yet, after the most spectacular of his murders, he cannot handle the growing pressure and calls his lawyer. However, his confession is treated as a joke, which reassures him that there will be no repercussions for his crimes and his image is unchanged as people around him still perceive him as a harmless "dork. Such a boring, spineless lightweight" (*American Psycho* 2000). As a result, Patrick Bateman's final monologue proves that he feels no remorse for his crimes:

There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it I have now surpassed. My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact, I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape, but even after admitting this, there is no catharsis. My punishment continues to elude me and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself. No new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant nothing. (*American Psycho* 2000)

Thus, due to society's ignorance and his certainty that he will not be punished, Patrick continues his killing spree even though it shall never fully satisfy his bloodlust.

Conversely, the very first scene of *The Love Witch* reveals that the protagonist is not entirely stable. Elaine admits that she "had a nervous breakdown after [her ex-husband, Jerry] left [her]" (*The Love Witch* 2016), and even though she sought professional help, she still struggles with "intrusive thoughts" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Her last statement seems especially suggestive when intertwined with scenes depicting Jerry lying on the floor in a pool of blood, as it implies that she was the one who took his life. Another factor that may arouse viewers' doubts about Elaine's mental health is her rather reckless practice of advanced witchcraft without proper experience. It "provokes the breakdown of normative gender polarity, emotionally overwhelming her love interests, leaving them confused, needy, and finally dead" (Stümer 2021, 1212–1213).

The source of her trauma in relationships with men can be traced back to the abuse Elaine suffered at the hands of her father, as he would call her unstable and suggest that she could "lose a few pounds" (*The Love Witch* 2016) because she is "looking

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a little fatty" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Her ex-husband was no better and continued both the vilification and body shaming, reminding her that she needs "to take better care of [herself] and the house" (*The Love Witch* 2016), and adding that she "need[s] to step up her game" (*The Love Witch* 2016), before eventually leaving her for another woman. Both men made Elaine feel like affection was conditional and to be loved by someone she had to change. As such, her turn to witchcraft becomes not just a means of seduction but a reaction to years of emotional suppression.

While Bateman's efforts are focused on eliminating people he loathes, Elaine Parks is obsessed with the idea of finding a perfect lover and seducing her potential partners, yet as her efforts are mostly futile, she eventually disposes of the disappointing boyfriends. All she desires is expressed in one of her rituals with words: "Goddess, please, send me a beautiful, sweet man to love me as I love him" (*The Love Witch* 2016). To achieve that, she thoroughly studies parapsychology and comes to believe that all men need "just a pretty woman to love and to take care of them and to make them feel like a man and to give them total freedom in whatever they wanna do or be" (*The Love Witch* 2016). As a result of her idealistic expectations, Elaine experiences one disappointment after another. The men she seduces with spells, handmade potions, or rather poisons, "a common lady's weapon" (Newton and French 2008, 43), and hypnosis completely change under the influence of her magic; they reciprocate her feelings and cannot handle separation from her. Yet, Elaine claims that "[she] didn't kill anyone. Wayne died of heart failure after a beautiful night of lovemaking. And Richard died because he loved [her] too much. These men weren't used to the deep feelings of love that they were experiencing with [her]" (*The Love Witch* 2016). As every attempt to find her dream man backfires, Elaine is forced to abandon and destroy her ex-lovers because none of them are the "real man" she desires, but instead they act "like a little girl" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Yet, her last lover tricks her, and feeling the "destructive urges arise from her failure to lead a 'normal' life" (Creed 1993, 122), she stabs him to death.

Parks' attitude towards the victims that are infatuated with her is rather harsh, rooted in a deep resentment shaped by past abandonment. She feels no sympathy while witnessing their suffering for "no one was ever there for [her] when [she] was crying [her] heart out. No one ever comforted [her]. No one" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Furthermore, Elaine does not feel guilty for killing her ex-lovers, and not seeing it as her fault, she does not bother to clean up the crime scenes thoroughly. Like many serial killers, she "experience[s] a crisis of subjectivity in which [she] no longer seem[s] to be the author of [her] own actions, and in which [her] actions seem to be the effect of forces over which [she has] no control" (Jancovich 2015, 173). Instead, she buries the bodies and performs religious rituals involving her personal belongings so that a part of her can be with them, not caring if the police will tie her to the murders. In her conversation with the detective, she argues that "it's almost scary how strong the love gets" (*The Love Witch* 2016), adding that "[m]aybe [he is] a narcissist who can't love. [He] think[s] that [she is] sick because [he has] never loved like [she has]" (*The Love Witch*

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2016). Finally, disgruntled by another failure, she loses her sanity and escapes to an imaginary world, where she is loved the way she has always dreamt of.

Both *American Psycho* and *The Love Witch* depict the cases of two narcissistic murderers who transgress moral boundaries, show neither remorse nor sympathy for their victims, and will never be punished for their crimes because society protects them. The fear of being caught slowly leads them to "kill literally instead of being killed in the symbolic sense" (Stümer 2021, 1213), ultimately ruining their disguises as exemplary members of society. As both movies are representative examples of "the psychological horror film[s] in which the monster is a serial killer that is motivated by uncontrollable compulsions" (Jancovich 2015, 173), it is worth highlighting that, despite the parallelism between protagonists, each character's behaviour is shaped by distinct psychological and emotional mechanisms. First and foremost, their motives differ, as Patrick's murders are a means of satisfying his horrendous urges, while Elaine's are the by-product of the failure to achieve her idealistic desires. Furthermore, to some extent, their manners of executing their crimes contrast: Bateman is brutal and violent, whilst Parks' methods are more deliberate yet still cruel.

4. Reinforcing Conventional Gender Norms in Aforementioned Horror Films

The crucial difference between the fates of male and female characters in horrors is that the latter are destined to play the role of victims "because their sexuality renders them desirable but also threatening to men" (Neale 1996, 61). Therefore, their power needs to be stifled, and the suffering inflicted on them is displayed "at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length" (Clover 2015, 35), while men's death is shown "from a distance" (Clover 2015, 35), "only dimly" (Clover 2015, 35), or simply "happen[s] offscreen" (Clover 2015, 35). Similarly, Peter Hutchings draws attention to the fact that the typical serial killer's representation can "be seen as blurring distinctions between living and dead and between male and female" (Hutchings 2013, 53). Thus, the blending of characteristics typical of each gender is often applied in horrors, especially when the portrayal of murderers is concerned. Manipulating genre conventions through reframing conventional depictions of sexes and transgressing the boundaries between them enables the filmmakers not only to create a new, complex figure of a killer but also to redefine ubiquitous patriarchal patterns in art.

The hedonistic attitude of Patrick Bateman is perfectly suited for the world he lives in. Maintaining his flawless image, he immerses himself in a life full of luxurious products, expensive restaurants, and meaningless conversations because that is exactly what he and his colleagues do every single day. His persona can be better understood through the label 'yuppie,' defined as "Young, Upwardly-mobile, Professional" (Robertson 2004, 513). These were relatively young individuals who benefited from the economic progress in the 1980s, held a well-paid position, and therefore enjoyed life

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with an air of arrogance towards the rest of society. Patrick's workplace is the perfect breeding ground for yuppies, a predominantly male environment and a space "full of Bateman-clones" (Kooijman and Laine 2003, 49). None of them actually perform their work, spending their days "mulling over business problems, examining opportunities, exchanging rumors, spreading gossip" (*American Psycho* 2000), as well as doing drugs, exchanging views and briefly touching upon such topics as women, clothing choices, restaurant recommendations or politics. Furthermore, the relationships formed in this environment are shallow and limited to few social interactions. The colleagues are "so physically similar that they seem to share the same 'statistical body'" (Hantke 2003, 35), which combined with their unremarkable personalities, makes it difficult for them to recognise one another, leading to frequent cases of mistaken identity.

Patrick himself is a personification of toxic masculinity, a narcissist who thinks highly of himself while constantly criticising his surroundings. His ambition and competitiveness make him highly sensitive to any disapproval. To fulfil some of his disturbing needs and cope with the changes that happen inside him, he inflicts pain on prostituted women. His violent tendencies take the form of sexual aggression, yet he lacks sympathy towards the victims. Furthermore, like the rest of the yuppies, Bateman loves designer goods. His outfits consist of fashionable clothing and accessories, such as a Valentino suit. Even as a murderer, he is glamorous, "hiding the dead body [of Paul Allen] in an overnight bag designed by Jean Paul Gaultier" (Kooijman and Laine 2003, 49). Additionally, evidence of him treating his possessions with care can be seen when he wakes up in the middle of the night just to warn one of the hired sex workers not to touch his watch, as it is valuable. These interactions with women are in reality a kind of performance where he pretends to be of higher status than he actually is and "showcase[s] his own physique and prowess on video" (Rosa 2021, 6). He demands to be called Paul Allen and boasts about working on Wall Street, offering his guests expensive wine, Chardonnay, and Varda truffles. When one of the women tries to engage in small talk, asking how much he paid for his apartment, he replies, "That's none of your business, Christie, but I can assure you, it certainly wasn't cheap" (*American Psycho* 2000). Her question flatters him, but rather than showing her appreciation, he patronises her.

The male characters in *American Psycho* are placed in a dominating position regarding women and hence, female colleagues and staff, fiancées, and even strangers are "all presented through Patrick's misogynist point of view" (Ross 2016, 107) and treated solely like men's commodities and sexual objects. They are not allowed to make any decisions on their own, from choosing meals in restaurants to being in charge of their own physical appearance. Through that, *American Psycho* highlights "how the misogyny and objectification of women [are] part and parcel of a destructive part of consumerism that markets women's bodies like pieces of meat" (Ross 2016, 108), which was especially visible in the intimate scenes with sex workers as their bodies were framed almost like consumer goods ready to be used by Patrick.

In contrast, Elaine Parks is an embodiment of "femininity as charming, yet deadly, trickery" (Stümer 2021, 1214), and a "beautiful but deadly killer" (Creed 1993, 1), and

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can be described as a femme fatale, tempting the men of Arcata. A beautiful, single woman appears out of nowhere and charms the local community with her lovely looks and mysterious aura. Men, regardless of their relationship status, feel drawn to her, while other women are helpless and doomed to failure as soon as they try to compete with her love magic. Parks' character is a parody of women who assess their worth based on the fact of whether men want them or not. Furthermore, unlike other fictional femmes fatales, Elaine is not fully in control of her charm since her seductive power is undercut by her own emotional vulnerability and romantic naivety. Her new friend Trish states that she "[sound[s] as if [she]'d been brainwashed by the patriarchy. [Her] whole self-worth is wrapped up in pleasing a man" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Elaine, in fact, has rather idealistic ideas about relationships and genuinely believes that all women are "just little girls dreaming about being carried off by a prince on a white horse" (*The Love Witch* 2016); and when confronted about how delusional her thinking is, she suggests that such an outcome is possible as long as a woman conforms to male expectations.

It is the witchcraft practice Elaine decides to trust and follow its guide after she suffers a breakup that leads to the worst time in her life. In order to fight the loneliness, she joins a witch coven, which is more of a cult, putting a major focus on unlocking one's potential to pursue romantic relationships through the "sex magic to destroy [partners'] fear of [the witches] and open [their] heart[s] to the floodgates of love" (*The Love Witch* 2016). They do so through various rituals that are, in fact, sexual assaults. However, even though their methods, namely rapes and brainwashing, are questionable, cult members make her feel understood as "a lot of women who feel the way that [she] do[es]" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Furthermore, Parks often seeks advice from her tarot cards, but they continue confronting her with the Three of Swords as a foreshadowing of a heartbreak and emotional pain. All of her potions, spells, and rituals also fail to provide her with the man of her dreams, and hence, she completely changes herself in order to fit men's desires. In interactions with males, she behaves overly submissively and adapts to their expectations regarding her, "operat[es] in the private domain" (MacDonald 2013, 42). However, such a tactic is only a ploy to lure them, as she believes that "men are like children. They [are] very easy to please as long as we give them what they want" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Consequently, she manipulates them through affection and sex, becoming a dream come true, only to abandon them as soon as they surrender to her and become entrapped in her arms.

Through conforming to societal expectations, Patrick and Elaine are not limited but rather protected by their carefully shaped and slightly clichéd identities. Such fictional examples of exhibiting overt masculinity and femininity serve as a cautionary tale about surrendering to societal norms and unwittingly encouraging toxic behaviours. In the above-named films, behaving in a highly masculine or feminine manner renders the protagonists perfect citizens, grants them anonymity, and enables them to blend into local communities with rather strict rules and criteria of belonging. Nonetheless, away from public view, there are moments when their beautiful masks drop and reveal the imperfections of their disguises.

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5. Subverted Gender Roles

Transgressing gender norms in horror films serves as a tool in resisting and even rejecting oppressive patriarchal patterns often employed in horror productions. Therefore, allowing such subversions while creating fictional perpetrators encourages commentary on social issues. Accordingly, some of Patrick's traits do not seem to align with the masculine persona he tries to maintain in the eyes of others. His obsession with looking good and keeping his surroundings spotlessly clean is not that typical of yuppies, who do not put effort into anything, instead staying "indifferent to art, originality or even pleasure" **(**Kooijman and Laine 2003, 49). Hence, Bateman paying special attention to his appearance in order to fit in, paradoxically, makes him unique compared to his social class. Furthermore, he wears luxurious clothes and keeps his body in good shape, which results in him being presented as an attractive "object-to-be-looked-at" (Kooijman and Laine 2003, 54), that is the way in which directors tend to depict female characters, as mere trinkets for the audience to admire.

What is more, Bateman is solely concerned about the consequences his actions have on his image in society and "the illusion of significant wealth out of empty assets connected to new brands, logos, and celebrities" (Rischard 2020, 443) he creates for himself. As a result, he tends to be rather awkward and anxious in social situations and worries about nuances such as the appearance of his business card, as any dismissive comments towards him increase his "anxiety about the insignificance of his personal brand and thus his identity" (Rischard 2020, 451). The worse his state of mind gets, the more paranoid he becomes, and to cope with such a feeling, he ridicules and humiliates those of lower status. For Patrick, "all unemployment precedes from a lack of personal incentive" (Heise 2011, 142); therefore, before murdering a homeless man, he gives him hope and advises him to "get a goddamn job [and] get [his] act together" (*American Psycho* 2000), only to stab him to death a second later.

Surprising as it may seem, Bateman's emotionless mask slips when he contacts his lawyer "all confused and shaken, and 'confesses' the murders" (Kooijman and Laine 2003, 51). It is the only moment when he genuinely feels something, no matter if that emotion is just panic. Further, he appears to be shocked and even disgusted when he mentions how he "tried to cook a little" (*American Psycho* 2000) and allegedly consumed some of his victims' flesh. Thus, Patrick is capable of experiencing emotions, even if they are hidden deeply inside him.

Conversely, Elaine Parks is a cruel manipulator under the guise of a sweet girl "fulfilling a man's every dream" (Stümer 2021, 1213). To find the love of her life, she is capable of casting spells, preparing potions and even drugging her potential partners. Furthermore, Elaine does not perceive sex as an intimate moment meaningful for lovers, but as a means to get what she wants from men, namely their devotion. Contrary to her partners who almost faint due to the pleasure she gives them, she is completely detached from reality during intercourse and escapes to her inner world of romantic fantasy. Even in conversations with the men Parks seduces "with deadly results" (Can-

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del 2021, 77), her "internal responses […] are often detached and condescending" (Stümer 2021, 1218), namely bored and disdainful facial expressions, as she sees them only as mere tools to achieve satisfaction.

The aftermath of her love rituals is always disappointing for Elaine. Her partners become sensitive and open themselves to her feelings, but it only irritates her. Nothing they do would ever satisfy her needs. As her last lover says, "even when a man loves [her] so much it kills him, it's not enough for [her]. [She's] like a bottomless hole" (*The Love Witch* 2016), Parks suffers from everlasting insatiableness, and no matter how much of her lovers' affection she absorbs, there is no man that will be able to fill it. Such insensitive behaviour may be rooted in the trauma she experienced because of how her ex-husband treated her. Elaine explains that he "used to punish [her] by withholding his love from [her]" (*The Love Witch* 2016) and she more or less consciously repeats this masculine approach in her next relationships as to "strive, women must adopt characteristics that are more masculine and deny their traits" (Candel 2021, 78). As such, Elaine's violent acts challenge traditional expectations of female killers. Death is not a taboo topic for her given that she does not "really mind death [and she has] buried people before" (*The Love Witch* 2016).

Patrick and Elaine are presented as model citizens, exceptional yet undistinguished individuals. However, both of them differ from the typical portrayal of a serial killer in a horror film. They challenge some of the gender stereotypes and ridicule others to express doubts about the traditional roles assigned to the sexes. Patrick displays a rather emotional approach towards his surroundings, while Elaine seems confident and even insensitive at times. Therefore, this suggests that their overly exaggerated masculinity and femininity serve as a disguise that allows them to blend into the surroundings and remain unnoticed by their potential victims, as well as to avoid punishment for their crimes.

6. The Relationships Between the Protagonists and their Surroundings

Since there is nothing less complex than the "relationships between human beings and the spatial image of the world" (Lotman 1990, 204), fictional surroundings are "created by [characters], and on the other, [they] actively [form] the [people] immersed in [them]" (Lotman 1990, 204). Interactions occurring between the protagonists and the settings of horror movies depend on the roles assigned to the characters, as "horror films would ultimately journey [to] pitch-black places where they had never dared go before" (Hallenbeck 2009, 53). In the case of murderers infesting the cities, the settings either discourage potential crimes or form a symbiosis between perpetrators and the local society, thus covering villains' tracks and supporting the elimination of the weakest members of the community.

Since the 1980s, American cinema has been particularly interested in the "nightmarish vision of the […] urban landscape" (Macek 1999, 81), and a variety of films have portrayed the cities "as breeding grounds for rampant criminality, bloodshed and moral

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chaos" (Macek 1999, 81). Moreover, metropolises were widely associated with "vice, deviancy, alienation, social disorder, and the absence of authentic community" (Macek 1999, 81); they embodied the mixture of humanity's worst sins and increased distance from moral principles. Hollywood's portrayal of the cities further reinforces the image of "dangerous mystifications of urban woes" (Macek 1999, 83), resulting in these spaces serving as perfect settings for crime scenes, especially in horror. Furthermore, as stated by Urszula Szczęch, some murderers think of themselves as "missionary[ies], who [do] the right thing by eliminating those [they consider] to be the worst group in society" (Szczęch 2018, 10, *translation mine*). In the city, social hierarchy is ruthless for the weak members of the community, as it enables the strongest individuals to rule, which renders the urban space a perfect setting for criminals' activities in horror films. At the same time, it "serves as a powerful frame of reference for the reality of crime […] at that time" (Baranauskas 2024, 4), as well as an accurate reflection of murderers' fractured psyches, blurring the differences between reality and imagination.

The New York City presented in *American Psycho* is depicted as a "reflection of late capitalist consumer society" (Weinreich 2004, 69), described as situated in "an age […] where commodities produce bodies: bodies for aerobics, bodies for sports cars, bodies for vacations, bodies for Pepsi, bodies for Coke, and of course bodies for fashion, – total bodies, a total look" (Faurschou 1987, 72). The city is populated by diverse social groups, yet in Bateman's circles, status and style function as unifying codes. Since "in the New York yuppie cosmos of the 1980s, the commodity seems to have become the only referential authority to the world" (Weinreich 2004, 66), Patrick Bateman and his contemporaries view the city primarily through the lens of their workplaces and leisure facilities, such as "The Newport. Harry's. Fluties. Indochine. Nell's. The Cornell Club. The New York Yacht Club" (*American Psycho* 2000), or through some less prestigious locations allowing them to reveal their true selves, abuse drugs, and meet women.

Such an urban environment, which epitomises "a total visualization of everyday life under the sign of the commodity" (Weinreich 2004, 66), is a perfect place for materialists and ruthless businessmen, people who do not care about anyone but themselves, symbolising "a world dominated by hedonism, greed, and egocentrism" (Kooijman and Laine 2003, 46). As the inhabitants of such a ruthless metropolis, Patrick Bateman and his fellow yuppies are conditioned to focus only on mundane satisfaction as their primary concerns are maintaining social status and deriving pleasure from life. Yet, Bateman mentions a variety of emotions he experiences while interacting with the city he lives in; for instance, he is "on the verge of tears" (*American Psycho* 2000) while waiting for a table in a restaurant, and "relief washes over [him] in an awesome wave" (*American Psycho* 2000) when he finally gets it, or "a moment of sheer panic" (*American Psycho* 2000) Patrick feels while comparing his and Allen's apartments. Moreover, his colleague booking a dinner in Dorsia, the most fashionable place in New York, on Friday night, is doubted by the other co-workers and perceived as impossible as they all wonder "how'd he swing that" (*American Psycho* 2000),

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since it was treated as a social victory and a proof of his high status. Nevertheless, together with access to such prestigious facilities, yuppies feel superior to the rest of society. Further highlighting the outstanding reputation of these spaces, Bateman often fakes meeting famous people and asks questions such as "Is that Donald Trump's car?" (*American Psycho* 2000) or "Is that Ivana Trump? [...] Why would Ivana be at Texarkana?" (*American Psycho* 2000), even though he knows that the chances for it to truly happen are close to zero.

Despite caring about famous personas, yuppies do not pay much attention to the identities or even well-being of the people surrounding them, often adopting a passive approach to what is happening around them. For instance, when Paul Allen disappears, a private investigator informs Bateman that "his family want[ed] this kept quiet" (*American Psycho* 2000) and points out that he "had a hard time getting an actual verification" (*American Psycho* 2000), as some of Allen's colleagues claim to have seen him at the same time but, in fact, they mistook him for someone else. Patrick states that the fact that "no one's seen or heard anything" (*American Psycho* 2000) is typical, and then, together with Detective Kimball, they agree that in New York, "people just disappear. The earth just opens up and swallows them" (*American Psycho* 2000).

Additionally, a more straightforward example of the settings having a direct impact on characters' actions is the scene where Bateman returns to Allen's apartment to clean up the crime scene, but, to his surprise, the flat is already restored to its original state. Moreover, there are some visitors inside, accompanied by a real estate agent who looks at Bateman suspiciously and warns him not to "make any trouble [and] go" (*American Psycho* 2000). Interestingly, Patrick's surroundings "persuade" him to continue his killing spree through signs such as displaying the message, "FEED ME A STRAY CAT" (*American Psycho* 2000) on an ATM's screen, a clear incitement to violence. Yet, later, the city deprives him of hope by placing "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (*American Psycho* 2000) above his head as he delivers his final monologue, where he admits that "there's no catharsis [and his] punishment continues" (*American Psycho* 2000). In broader terms, Patrick sees himself as playing a significant role in the ecosystem of New York City, believing he "cleanses" the society of individuals who contribute nothing to the local community, at least according to his own criteria. While confessing to the murders he committed, Bateman admits that he "just had to kill a lot of people!" (*American Psycho* 2000), which indicates that he perceives it as his duty. His victims are mostly the ones who would not be missed, social outcasts, or stray animals; therefore, despite hurting them, Patrick is protected by the city.

Even though Arcata, the city where Elaine Parks seeks refuge from her traumatic past, is a relatively small, close-knit community that does not "like to mess with [the witches]" (*The Love Witch* 2016), life for occultists there is challenging. With mysterious murders occurring, the locals' attitude turns increasingly "hostile to witches" (*The Love Witch* 2016), as it is "certainly not San Francisco [but] not bad for a small town[, yet not] all of them embrace [such] methods of practicing witchcraft" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Therefore, a clear division emerges between two groups in the small lo-

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cal society – between witches and non-witches. The latter residents, feeling superior, claim their rights to Arcata, even though occultists have always been part of the local community, as "every city […] today has pockets of both black and white witches who practice the ancient rites" (*The Love Witch* 2016). This portrayal of the witches' presence evokes a popular horror trope of depicting outsiders as a group which is simultaneously feared and fetishized by their conservative neighbours.

Arcata, as depicted in *The Love Witch*, seems frozen in time, with its architecture reminiscent of 1960s fashion and relatively conservative beliefs. The city centre, while not as prominent and crowded as in the previous movie, still consists of cultural facilities, maintaining its role as the community hub. Moreover, there are broad educational prospects offered, as the local schools provide traditional courses, along with "Sidral magic, […] organite alchemy, […] energy grounding, earth-based spirituality, pagan arts and crafts, candle work, the spellcraft master class, ancient mysticism, herbs and spices, and […] sex magic" (*The Love Witch* 2016). There are also many green areas in the vicinity, including parks and secluded areas where the witches conduct their rituals.

Further, after "San Francisco got to be a really bad trip" (*The Love Witch* 2016) for Elaine, moving to Arcata offers a chance to start over in a city where "almost no one knows [her]" (*The Love Witch* 2016). She receives a warm welcome from the local community as "Trish has been lovely" (*The Love Witch* 2016) and has introduced her to Arcata. Furthermore, moving to this quiet city provides her with peace and inspiration to pursue her creative hobbies, and she "[has] been getting a lot of artwork done" (*The Love Witch* 2016) since she moved there. Arcata seems like a great destination for witches to live in, as the police have "a policy of leaving [them] alone [as] they've lived in this town a long time" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Moreover, Elaine manages to seduce one of the officers, who orders his colleagues to dismiss the murder case she is the prime suspect in.

Nevertheless, Parks' arrival in the town coincides with a series of unsettling murders, which both alarms and frightens the local society. In the bar, some of the inhabitants of Arcata discuss the recent events and how near one of the corpses "they found all kinds of witchcraft things on the grave" (*The Love Witch* 2016). Thus, the suspicion obviously falls on the newcomer, who happens to be a witch. Further complicating matters, the DNA tests show a link between Elaine and one of the recently dead men, while "Patricia Manning [said that Elaine] drove her husband to suicide" (*The Love Witch* 2016). As more and more accusations are directed at her, Parks confesses to killing men who failed to meet her expectations, thereby eliminating from society the "specimens" who are not able to love women as much as they deserve. Nevertheless, as Elaine is skilled in seducing and her hopes for finding the man of her dreams remain unchanged, the city will always provide her with a "knight in shining armour" to protect her from the consequences of her crimes.

Both *American Psycho* and *The Love Witch* explore the symbiotic relationship between the urban space and the murderer. The city provides broad opportunities to kill, offers a wide range of potential victims, and effectively conceals the criminals' tracks;

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in return, the perpetrator gets rid of those he deems useless elements of society. Such a partnership is vital and beneficial to both partners, as otherwise they appear incapable of properly functioning and seem sensitive to each other's needs. Elaine's surroundings feel more human, providing a backdrop where individuals can openly manifest their identities and beliefs, and therefore are more attentive to what happens around them. Conversely, New York offers anonymity and diverse entertainment options, catering to the desires of characters like Bateman, who thrive in its impersonal vastness; yet it is also completely indifferent to what occurs to its inhabitants as long as the luxurious reputation of the city remains spotless. Despite the differences in how the cities "react" to their inhabitants, both settings provide a protective backdrop for their respective killers.

7. Conclusion

As presented in the analyses, Elaine Parks and Patrick Bateman differ from the typical depictions of serial killers as emotionally detached, overtly masculine, or overtly monstrous. Even though they share a personality of "either a deviant or an over-enthusiastic conformist" (MacDonald 2013, 147) common among the perpetrators, both protagonists seem to exaggerate some gender norms while transgressing others. While characters in horror films are divided into "those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (Creed 1993, 11), Bateman and Parks serve as representations of both approaches. Elaine displays highly feminine qualities to conceal her ruthless nature, while Patrick hides his anxiety behind the mask of a hyper-masculine individual. Yet, maintaining such intricate disguises is possible only in close partnership with their surroundings and requires their proper contributions.

The relationship between the fictional murderers and urban settings in horror films can be perceived as a symbiotic relationship through which both "partners" benefit. The city favours the villains and provides them with anonymity, a wide range of potential victims, and various opportunities for their crimes. In *American Psycho*, the setting of New York City is a vast space that enables Patrick to blend in with the crowd, while in *The Love Witch*, the small town of Arcata relatively tolerates the practice of magic, allowing Elaine to easily find new victims. As a result, the structures of urban space breed cruelty and are ruthless for weaker individuals. Even though murder remains socially unacceptable, the city, with its structures, permits it, thus becoming a silent accomplice in crime.

The exploration of the connection between perpetrators and settings in horror films proves that such narratives often deal "with the unknown in the shape of humanity itself" (Blake and Bailey 2013, 24) and access one's "psyche, the bits of [oneself] in dreams, in nightmares, madness, visions or fits" (Blake and Bailey 2013, 24). Hence, horror productions tend to utilise the space of the city as a setting to reflect the true nature of its inhabitants, either by provoking their hidden cruelty to come to light or by ridiculing the

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societal norms and those who obey them, thus, providing the audience with "a glimpse into worlds that most of […] law-abiding citizens would never witness" (Baranauskas 2024, 4). In the case of the analysed films, while the villains assume the role of guards controlling the local community and getting rid of the flawed, in their opinion, elements of society, urban space reacts with tacit consent to the violence.

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