

# Jake Levy

“Close Encounter: the Politics of the Hypochondriac”

Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics

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For my senior thesis, I plan to investigate the political implication of the hypochondriac. Patrick Bateman, the leading character of Brett Easton Ellis’ 1991 novel *American Psycho*, provides a productive illustration of this “illness”. He follows an extensive skin and hair regimen, a healthy diet and life style as sterile and cold as the marble floor in his Manhattan apartment. He is afraid of disease, invasion, and anything that tempts to penetrate his “mask”. He is also a serial killer.

The narrative is lead forward by Bateman’s almost ritualistic murders, in which the elimination of one parasite always invites the prospect of another, and then another. In director Mary Harron’s 2001 film adaptation of the novel, Bateman admits, “But even after this, there is no catharsis; my punishment continues to elude me, and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself.” The temporal duration of the hypochondriac finds its source of movement in the subject’s continuous desire to cleanse the body of what it can neither remember nor forget, or know but not see. Yet, it can never fully purge itself of the residual, images of disease that are constantly unfolding within the inner workings of its corpse. Perhaps, this narrative does not move forward but backwards instead, caught within a memory or image of disease that the temporality of the hypochondriac insists upon. In other words, the past is framed as a “temporal other” that cannot be possessed; memory is the parasite that haunts the hypochondriac.

Rather than simply constructing a rigid definition of this medical character, my project considers the hypochondriac as a social and psychic subjectivity in urgent need of being parsed out, and dissolved into the more nuanced moments and encounters in our aesthetic and political experience. My project will also involve a discussion of the formation of authorship in biomedical literature, the language that shapes the experience of sickness and death for millions, and the residual effects of medical discourse on the human body. In addition, I will discuss the death drive in psychoanalytic and social discourse and its relationship to democratic theory (including its ability to both seduce and inspire visions of the political).



My greater argument is that the hypochondriac reveals an intimate relationship between the political imagination of the body and the cultural production of disease, despite the social localization of illness within the limited frame of the individual body. In other words, the hypochondriac is called forth to problematize the cultural distance between infection and affectation. It is a method for coping with the material invocation of disease, one that finds the remnants of patriarchal capitalism in its own technology, imagination and pathology.