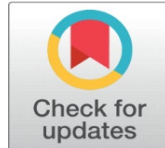


AN ANALYSIS OF NIHILISM IN MODERN SOCIETY: A STUDY OF AMERICAN PSYCHO AND EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

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ABSTRACT

Through thoroughly examining two culturally significant films, *American Psycho* (2000) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), this research paper explores the ubiquitous theme of nihilism in contemporary society. This analysis will look at how each movie both reflects and challenges nihilistic ideologies, providing opposing viewpoints on the pursuit of meaning in a world that is becoming more and more disjointed and disillusioned. By contrasting these two movies, the study seeks to reveal how nihilism is portrayed in various genres and eras and how it reflects societal concerns about morality, identity, and purpose.

Although philosophy and classic literature have written a great deal about nihilism, little attention has been paid to how nihilistic themes are portrayed in modern films like *American Psycho* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* about contemporary societal issues, especially identity crises. Few studies have looked at the relationship between nihilism and the pursuit of self-identity and personal meaning, particularly in a consumer-driven society like that portrayed in *American Psycho*, or the more general existential issues discussed in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. This disparity emphasises the need for a more thorough examination of how contemporary film reflects and critiques nihilistic ideologies via the prism of psychological and cultural issues.

Keywords: Nihilism, Existentialism, Identity, Cultural Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Nihilism is a philosophical concept asserting that life lacks inherent meaning, purpose, or value. Rooted in the Latin word nihil, meaning "nothing," it questions traditional values, objective truths, and the existence of inherent meaning in the universe. Most closely associated with philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, who explored the consequences of a world without divine or moral structure, nihilism manifests in forms such as existential and moral nihilism. The concept of nihilism continues to grow more and more significant in modern society, especially when taking existential crises, moral ambiguity, and evolving personas into consideration. Existential nihilism, marked by a pervasive sense of meaninglessness, alienation, and uncertainty fueled by the breakdown of traditional values and social order, has

been experienced by many people today. Existentialist intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who studied absurdity, personal autonomy, and the seeking of meaning in an indifferent universe, brought up these concerns. Although Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God" warned of the existential emptiness left in the absence of ultimate values, Camus probed how one may confront a life devoid of purpose without giving up.

Nowadays, the search for meaning is made much more difficult by materialism and hyper-individualism. Money, wealth, and conventional achievement could regulate an environment that refuses to fulfil deeper human needs. Identity fragmentation, social pressures, and an ongoing flood of information all create a growing feeling of existential emptiness. The film, an effective cultural mirror that throws light on how nihilism dominates contemporary society, reflects these psychological and social challenges. While movies like *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, and *The Big Lebowski* have been extensively examined from this angle, complex assessments like *American Psycho* (2000) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) are still emerging.

These two movies convey various perspectives on contemporary nihilism. *American Psycho* is a harsh critique of consumerism and identity through the character of Patrick Bateman, whose aggressive desire for power and compulsive quest for status underscore the absurdity of a world devoid of actual meaning, whereas *Everything Everywhere All at Once* portrays Evelyn as she moves through an infinite number of conceivable possibilities to examine existential nihilism in an environment of chaos. Her battle with meaninglessness eventually gives rise to a shaky hope—the idea that connection, love, and purpose could still provide meaning.

These films portray the evolution of contemporary identity in a world of commerce, ambiguity, and shifting plots. In these narratives, nihilism is not just a philosophical stance but a social reality. As traditional religious, political, and social forms of meaning continue to diminish, people sense themselves growing more morally puzzled and alienated from themselves. In such scenarios, the self can be moulded by external elements, resulting in personal crises and an increase in moral nihilism. By highlighting the challenges of fitting one's actions with shifting societal norms, these cinematic representations underline the escalating battle for moral lucidity, authenticity, and an integrated understanding of self in an uncertain society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mary Harron's movie *American Psycho*, which centres upon Bret Easton Ellis's novel, has been severely criticised for its exploration of nihilism, especially in light of its criticism of morality, materialism and identity in 1980s New York. This criticism is aimed at Patrick Bateman, whose life is defined by pointless conventions and an acute absence of moral and emotional complexity. One of the major issues of the film is the commercialisation of identity, which reflects the adverse behaviours of a consumer-driven society. David Foster Wallace (2000) asserts that Bateman's obsession with materialism and social status uncovers the hollowness rooted in capitalism. His identity is entirely shaped by external factors, such as expensive attire, wealth, and fame, and lacks any true internal content.

Donald N. Ferguson (2002) emphasises the "blankness" of Bateman's identity and conveys this superficial existence: He reveals profound alienation and a disconnection from any stable or significant self, as seen by his violent behaviours

and emotional detachment. A world where morality is mostly symbolic and relationships are superficial is the source of Bateman's nihilism, making his violence a desperate attempt to gain control over an unimportant world. The urge to fulfil Bateman's existential emptiness—a symbolic denial of both societal norms and the potential for authentic self-creation—is what drove his killings, according to Ruth Perry (2005), rather than sadism.

due to its ambiguity, especially the question of whether Bateman's assaults are real or imagined, *American Psycho* becomes a powerful Criticism of the spiritual emptiness below commercial society and the existential depths at the core of postmodern life. According to Douglas Kellner (2000), a wider public collapse of meaning is seen in this blurring of fantasy and reality. John M. Pahl (2007) characterises Bateman as an insane hero who continues in meaningless routines without any visible moral compass, thus further connecting the novel with Albert Camus's theory of the absurd.

In contrast, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* delivers a different perspective on nihilism that eventually leans toward a self-transformation and meaning-making. While *American Psycho* focuses on the grief that occurs in a world devoid of meaning, *Everything* addresses the existential overload that arises from a reality full of excess possible meaning. The film portrays Evelyn Wang as she is shown an infinite number of different versions of herself, resulting in sensations of paralysis, disarray, and meaninglessness. Alexandra J. Murphy (2022) sees the multiverse as a metaphor for existential fragmentation, whereas Jason G. Dufresne (2022) argues that this excess of choice results in a sense of purposelessness rather than freedom.

By embracing love, connection, and acceptance of oneself, the film fights nihilism.

. Jobu Tupaki, the multiverse version of Evelyn's daughter Joy, embraces extreme nihilism, claiming "nothing matters." Evelyn's journey to understand her reflects a rejection of this despair. Marilyn E. Knight (2022) argues that the film blends nihilism with existentialism, proposing that while the universe is indifferent, meaning can still be forged through relationships and acceptance. The emotional reconnection between Evelyn and Joy offers a hopeful alternative to nihilism.

The film's surreal, comedic tone also reflects Camus's absurdism. Thomas B. Ford (2023) suggests that its humour and chaos embody Camus's view that recognising absurdity leads not to despair but to freedom. Unlike *American Psycho*'s grim portrayal of existential void, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* affirms the possibility of choosing meaning even amidst absurdity and chaos.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Although nihilism is traditionally approached in classical literature and film with considerable success, relatively few studies have been undertaken that look specifically at how contemporary movies relate to the problem of nihilism and identity crises, particularly in a consumeristic society. In works by Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre, nihilism was characterised as being characterised by (insert name of philosopher here) "the empty existence in the absence of meaning." This gap in research literature was especially so for films centred on the effects of consumerism and societal pressures on human meaning-making.

The issue of nihilism in *American Psycho* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is important to discuss because, in their individualist contexts, the two movies provide divergent yet complementary narrative interpretations of how nihilism plays out in modern society and broader contexts. As in *American Psycho*, the film

presents a chillingly dreadful view of a consumer-driven, material world that degenerates into a broken system of meaningful human connection and personal morality. Its portrayal of a crisis of identity at the heart of this problem is a nihilistic gap that lies at the core of consumer capitalism.

Everything Everywhere All at Once is a much more expansive and existential view of Nihilism in which “nihilism” is the inability to understand the unstoppable force of possibilities. The nature of the multiverse structure of the film is metaphorically reflected by the choices and insecurity that characterise the world we live in today, as it explores how one might deal with an identity crisis as they confront an infinite array of selves. At the end of the film, it leaves us feeling somewhat more redeemed. If the world has meaning, it can be found through connections, emotional growth, but that will be enough.

Together, these films represent the complexity of identity crises in the modern world, where nihilism is not only a rejection of meaning but a response to the fragmentation and chaos of contemporary existence. Through comparing how these films depict nihilism’s effect on personal development and the building of identity, I hope to gain a new understanding of how nihilism continues to shape cultural narratives in a time of moral ambiguity, consumerism, and existential uncertainty. In addition, through comparative analysis of these two films (which are representative of different genres, periods, and narrative styles), I hope to gain a new appreciation of the changing representation of nihilism in contemporary cinema.

4. SIGNIFICANCE

This presents a richly detailed study of how nihilism is portrayed in modern movies, and particularly about contemporary social issues like identity crises and moral disillusionment. This topic has long been studied (by philosophers, literary critics, and earlier filmmakers), but the portrayal of nihilism in recent film can be difficult to locate. Through a comparison of American Psycho and Everything Everywhere All at Once, this study addresses this problem by showing how the notion of nihilism intertwines with the fragmentation of identity in a consumer-driven society. Both films take different approaches—one centred on the alienating effects of capitalism, while the other focuses on existential paralysis provoked by infinite choice—but both reflect the shapers of modern consciousness and nihilism.

New research on how everyday lives are being moved by the acceleration of technology, the proliferation of social media, and the destruction of traditional structures provides necessary evidence for the significance of nihilism in today’s society, as well as the potential to aid future scholarship in this regard by drawing these themes into wider cultural debates such as the rise of the self-help industry, the development of social media as an area of identity construction, and the impact of life under late capitalism on nihilism.

First, we analyse how the two protagonists Patrick Bateman and Evelyn Wang grapple with their identities on a plateau of meaninglessness in a world that gives them little point of reference or direction. We look at their psychological, emotional, and philosophical journeys as they attempt to balance their identity with the other. And we also consider how these dramas play against the background of more general identity questions, such as identity politics, ideals, and personal history. E2: We contrast the way American Psycho presents existential crisis and the search for meaning with Everything Everywhere All at Once, and find some evidence for the existential weight of infinite possibilities. Third, we evaluate how both films

condemn and attack the structures of the modern world—capitalism, consumerism, and hyper-individualism—that produce and undercut the narratives of the protagonists' disillusionment and existential crisis.

5. METHODOLOGY

This paper will study the thematic implications of nihilism in *American Psycho* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* through the method of qualitative analysis. By exploring how nihilism is expressed through dialogue, cinematography, character arcs, and repetitive visual patterns, we can develop an expanded awareness of how each movie tackles existential issues and challenges more significant social systems. This research is especially well-suited for a qualitative analytical approach as it allows a deeper investigation of the narrative, personality growth, and symbolic elements. In addition, this approach allows the identification of persistent themes and patterns in the two movies, offering significant insights into the many ways that each story defines and portrays nihilism.

6. ANALYSIS

Nihilistic concepts, which mirror the existential issues of modern society, have long been explored in film. Nihilism as a philosophical thought, especially existential nihilism, maintains that there is no innate worth, significance, or purpose to existence. This analysis will use the philosophy of existence, namely the writings of Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre, to examine how nihilism is demonstrated in *American Psycho* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

Everything Everywhere All at Once uses the multiverse concept to examine existential crises, identity fragmentation, and the pursuit of meaning in a chaotic world, while *American Psycho* uses the character of Patrick Bateman to critique consumerism, identity, and morality.

Patrick Bateman's quest for wealth, prestige, and outward appearances defines his life in *American Psycho*. Because his world lacks intrinsic meaning, his fixation with consumer goods, designer labels, and social status is a reflection of existential nihilism. The movie criticises a materialistic, capitalist society in which people try to use consumption to define their identities and sense of purpose. The idea that traditional ideas of meaning and purpose become outdated in a world consumed by consumerism is further supported by Bateman's increasing violence and moral ambiguity, which represent his desperate attempt to fill an existential void.

Because of his severe identity crisis, his character is a chameleon who constantly changes who he is to conform to the standards of society.

Despite his outward appearance as a successful, successful, and charming man, his lack of ability to build real connections or show true emotion shows his fragmented sense of self. Bateman's circumstances commodify identity, and his lack of interest indicates a depressing perspective in which selfhood is only a fantasy shaped by outside factors. His actions, which vary from horrific murder to careless cruelty, are performed without regard for morality or implications.

. Moral nihilism, a philosophy that rejects the existence of intrinsic moral values, is exemplified by his lack of regret. A moral void is reinforced by the shallow people who value appearances over substance in the society he lives in. *American Psycho* criticises a capitalist society that dehumanises people, arguing that when self-interest is the only motivation, morality loses all significance.

Everything Everywhere All at Once explores existential nihilism through the use of the multiverse as a philosophical framework and narrative. Every option and possibility cancels itself out due to the overwhelming sense of meaninglessness created by the vastness of infinite realities. When Evelyn, the main character, realises how insignificant every single life is in the multiverse, she has an existential crisis. This reflects the paralysis that contemporary people feel when faced with an array of options, leaving them unsure of their mission. Evelyn sets out on a path of self-discovery and metamorphosis, in contrast to Bateman. She is initially overcome by the countless incarnations of herself, but she eventually comes to terms with her shattered sense of self.

. Her development results from embracing her flaws and discovering meaning in her connections, especially with her daughter Joy. In contrast to American Psycho, the movie provides an emotional bond and personal acceptance as a means of escaping nihilism. The conclusion of Everything Everywhere All at Once implies that relationships and love can be used to create meaning. By recognizing that the ordinary, everyday act of taking care of her family might provide goal instead of unattainable desires, Evelyn finally rejects the meaninglessness of nihilism. Bateman's extreme isolation and collapse into moral nihilism contrast strongly with this acceptance of relationships as a source of meaning.

Although they take distinct viewpoints, both films look at modern society's institutions. American Psycho addresses nihilism through the lens of consumerism and portrays a society where individuals are seen as like commodities and their worth is based on their material possessions. Everything Everywhere All at Once, on the other hand, challenges nihilism by looking at the existential challenges of hyper-individualism and exposing how an excessive number of choices might lead to a serious lack of meaning.

Evelyn Wang and Patrick Bateman are two opposing viewpoints on nihilism. Bateman's moral decline is exacerbated by separation and disengagement, which are symptoms of an unsolvable identity crisis. In contrast, Evelyn experiences a metamorphosis in which she learns to accept life's absurdity rather than let it consume her.

Evelyn symbolises the potential to overcome nihilism via emotional development and connection, whereas Bateman represents its destructive effects. There is no conclusion in American Psycho; Bateman is stuck in a never-ending cycle of violence and emptiness, which only serves to highlight how hopeless a world dominated by superficiality can be. But Everything Everywhere All at Once offers a different viewpoint, demonstrating that relationships can give meaning even in a chaotic, meaningless universe. This contrast demonstrates how nihilism can either result in hopelessness or be met with a humanistic outlook on life.

This essay contrasts and compares these two films to show how nihilism appears across various contexts of history and culture. While Everything Everywhere All at Once explores the existential challenges of a collapsed, multiversal 21st-century reality, American Psycho examines the psychological and moral emptiness at the heart of late 20th-century materialism. Examining these films shows that nihilism can serve as a philosophical problem and a cinematic device for investigating morality, identity, and the search for purpose in life. Both stories ultimately reveal the ongoing conflict between nihilism and the core human drive to find meaning in an indifferent world, whether it is Evelyn's redemptive embrace of connection and purpose or Bateman's moral downfall.

7. CONCLUSION

By exploring how existential struggle and identity crises are handled in each plot, this study explores how nihilism appears in two culturally significant films, *American Psycho* (2000) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Nihilism is shown in *American Psycho* via Patrick Bateman's detachment from morals, the hollowness of materialism, and the shattered nature of identity in a materialistic society. His incessant pursuit of power and wealth results in a profound sensation of moral disengagement and confusion rather than contentment.

On the reverse, the overwhelming sensation of meaninglessness generated by the multiverse's infinite possibilities means that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* portrays nihilism. However, the film provides a therapeutic standpoint, asserting that love, individual growth, and human connection can offer meaning, in contrast to Bateman's decline into solitude and existential emptiness.

Everything Everywhere All at Once embraces unpredictability and disorder as possible ways for personal transformation as well as stronger interpersonal ties, while *American Psycho* criticises the way consumer culture harms authentic selfhood and reminds us of the psychological toll exacted by a society that emphasises image over substance. Despite this, the two films take very different approaches to focusing on identity crises in modern society.

Together, such depictions of nihilism reveal fundamental societal problems of today. *American Psycho* emphasises the feeling of isolation brought about by a culture obsessed in appearance and status, while *Everything Everywhere All at Once* tackles the existential disorientation of a shattered, choice-saturated world, while also suggesting that hope and meaning can still be found using self-acceptance and relationship.

By probing belonging, morality, and the quest for meaning from a nihilistic view, these films enable an in-depth examination of the psychological difficulties that define today's society.

These films provide insight into navigating the difficulties of consumerism, individualism, and identity in a complex world by addressing existential themes in an approachable and culturally relevant way.

In conclusion, *American Psycho* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* offer opposing but complementary depictions of nihilism, highlighting the perils as well as the potential for redemption in a fractured, contemporary society. These movies ask audiences to consider their own identities and values and look for purpose in a world that frequently seems to lack both.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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