

**21L.435 Violence and Contemporary Representation**  
**Questions for Paper # 1**

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**NOTES:**

A. The period of texts for this paper is the material from the weeks on *America the Violent* and the three weeks on the Serial Killer.

B. Read the packet I've given you on Scholarly Writing. Everything you need to know about how to write a great paper and do well in this class is in there! Be sure you have a thesis in your paper; be sure you have a strong conclusion that presses on the stakes of that thesis. Proofread your papers; reread and polish your work before turning it in.

C. Papers should be 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font, Times or Times New Roman.

D. I am not only willing to talk to you about your papers as you work on them, I really enjoy doing it and I think it's very helpful to not write your papers in solitude. So: feel free to come to my office hours or make an appointment to talk. You can also always email me your thesis for some feedback—I can help focus it, or pose some questions to it (which you may want to consider in your conclusion), or let you know it sounds good as is.

\* *NB: I write long questions because I want to suggest all the different ways one might think about a given topic. You do not need to answer every sub-question (nor could you possibly in a 5-page paper). These are broad topics to give you a lot of flexibility in how to approach your paper. The numerous sub-questions are there to get you thinking about the material from several angles; you will use them to develop a narrow, specific thesis.*

**1. America the Violent, America the Psychotic.** Choose two of the following: *American History X*; *Fargo*; *American Psycho* (the novel). (You can also write about just Ellis' novel, if you like.) Articulate your understanding of what Slotkin's argument is about the role of violence in American mythology. Then make an argument about how your chosen text(s) suggest their own theory about the relationship between "Americanness" and "violence." Do they agree with Slotkin, or offer their own versions of similar claims as his, or do they suggest something that seems really different from Slotkin's formulation?

What is the signifier "American" to these texts: how do they define it, and what textual evidence suggests that definition? Is it a simple or complex term? Does national identity mix in with class, race, gender, sexuality, or other forms of identity? What about the role of history, temporality, family in relation to violence (consider both senses of that key word "generation" in Slotkin's argument)? Does "Americanness" change at all over the

**21L.435 Violence and Contemporary Representation**  
**Questions for Paper # 1**

course of the text? Is it something that can change or adapt or become otherwise? Invert the phrase and consider each formulation: is there something uniquely violent about America / is there something uniquely American about violence? These texts can be read as argumentative, even didactic: do they offer only a diagnosis of the problematic or also an account of how change or another sense of national identity might be possible?

**2. Blankness / Nothingness.** Choose two of the following: *American Psycho* (the novel); *American Psycho* (the film); *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*; *Se7en*. Or, you can just write about Ellis' novel if you like. Make an argument about the way(s) in which the texts use the concept of blankness, nothingness, or absence. Be sure to be as specific as possible in defining your terms: blankness might be linked to gaps, omissions, ellipses, opacity, ambiguity, avowals of nothingness, white space, missing things, illegible things, darkness, unrealized canvases, etc. So articulate what kind of blank or nothing you're making a claim about.

Describe how your chosen texts deploy the figuration of blankness or nothingness that you're focusing on, and make an argument about how this figure relates to the text's theory of violence. Does that figure change over the course of the text? Do different media forms deal with blankness and nothingness in different ways? And what does this figure mean for reading, spectatorship, and/or critique? Does it foreclose judgment, evaluation, understanding of violence, or does it enable those modes of thought?

**3. The Staging of the Corpse.** Choose two of the following: *American Psycho* (the novel); *American Psycho* (the film); *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*; *Se7en*. Make an argument about the way(s) in which the texts/films stage, display, visualize, structure, present and represent the corpse. The corpse is a specific form of the (dead, hurt, material) corpus—so it is like a body, but also not quite like a body.

Describe how your chosen works treat the corpse (as a visual or plastic or material object) and make an argument about how this staging of the corpse relates to the films' theory or use of violence. How does a film's visual treatment of the corpse parallel or depart from the diegetic serial killer's treatment of the corpse? (In other words, is it the killer or the aesthetic work that stages the corpse, and does it matter which is the directorial agent?) You should stay focused on your chosen texts, but in your conclusion you might make a larger claim about the relationship between staging (art, artifice, artificiality, presentation) and violence, using the corpse as a means to make a broader argument about your chosen films. The corpse is the human as a form of meat and flesh, as a form of plastic, as an object and artifact: does the staging of the corpse in your texts mitigate violence (aestheticize or sanitize it) or is staging yet another way violence takes place?

**4. Abnormal Normality.** Unpack Seltzer's argument about the role of the normal or typicality in relation to the serial killer. (You might also consider Freeland's arguments here

**21L.435 Violence and Contemporary Representation**  
**Questions for Paper # 1**

as well.) Then choose two of the following: *American History X*; *American Psycho* (the novel); *American Psycho* (the film); *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*; *Se7en*. What is the role of the average, the normal, the typical in your chosen texts?

How do formal techniques figure the typical as typical; in turn, do formal techniques (saturation, repetition, exaggeration, literalization) make the typical atypical or the familiar unfamiliar? You should interrogate the key terms of this question: what do you understand normality to mean in your chosen texts, and how does that term get figured, defined, negotiated, renegotiated and upset over the course of the texts? You might want to pluralize the terms and suggest how the average, normal, ordinary, typical, etc., works differently in different texts. How does Seltzer's theorization of identity relate to violence? What is violent about the normal, or what is normal about violence? Does the conjoining of typicality and violence open up a space for a critique of violence in your texts?

**5. Reader Complicity and *American Psycho*.** We've talked at length about different ways in which the reader of Ellis' *American Psycho* is made a part of the text, or addressed by it, sutured to it, bound up in it without an exit, etc. Formulate an argument about the complicity of the reader, using specific textual evidence to support your claim about how the reader is in relation to Ellis' novel. Or does the reader have different poles / modes of engagement over the course of the novel?

What is the reader's "work" in relation to the novel: as co-doer of violence; as assaulted victim; as narrative agency; as detached viewer; as consumer? What is at stake in thinking about the reader as Bateman, as aggressor, as victim? Is complicity the same as recognition or identification? Does the novel give us clues as to how it views the figure of the reader (which is not necessarily the same as its own reader)? Bateman, after all, is a consumer of popular culture; is he also a "reader" or critic of it? Is reading different from consuming, or a form of it? Or do you want to redefine the question and suggest that the reader of this novel is not a "reader" in a traditional sense (making meaning, identifying, understanding, interpreting, taking a text apart, seeing underneath/behind it)? Is this novel doing something affective with the figure of the reader? Boring it? Baiting it? Making it endure or witness something?

**6. Red and White and Black.** Choose two of the following films: *American History X*; *Fargo*; *American Psycho*; *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and make an argument about the use of color in relation to your chosen texts. You'll want to carefully trace how color is used, deployed, structured, destructured, nuanced, multiplied, staged, etc. in your films and make an argument for how the relation(s) of color gives us an understanding of some larger dimension of each film: its relation to critique; its relation to violence; to history; to language; to bodies; to power; to racial connotations of white / black / red; etc. This is another way of saying you'll explore how formal issues relate to ones of content.

As you analyze how color(s) appear, how they work across the text as a whole, how they change or modify over the course of the work, and the specific lines, shapes and blocks

**21L.435 Violence and Contemporary Representation**  
**Questions for Paper # 1**

they take, you'll want to consider both color as an aesthetic or formal element and as representations (so, for example, red as both red and as blood; or as culinary ornament and spilled interior of the meat of the body)... Does color undergo distortion or change over the course of each text, or do your different films use color differently? Is there a logic or narrative related to color or is it linked to spectacle, excess, what resists language, logic, narrative? Why would a critic interested in violence attend to color at all? You might end by examining whether form colludes with violence or mitigates it. Is color *relevant* to how spectators engage with violence, trauma, disturbing forces, or is color linked to a dominance of style that aestheticizes, sanitizes and makes it easier to consume violent images?

**7. Violence, Looking, and Videotape(s).** Consider and describe reflexive moments of videotaping or watching scenes of violence in any two of our texts to date, and make an argument about how these works use embedded screens or reflexive references to mediation as either an agent of violence or for a critique of violence. You might think about the videotape scenes in *American Psycho* (the film) or the famous video-rewatching scene in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*; you might also want to consider the role of videotapes in the narrative of Ellis' novel, the video interviews in *American History X*, and even the function of watching television in *Fargo*. Recording is of something "live" to be played back at a later time: some of our films show the "live" recording; others rewatch/repeat it after the fact; these notions of liveness might be contrasted to a deathliness in rewatching... perhaps.

Is there a logic to embedded scenes of videography; how is filming a victim linked diegetically to violence and/or how is showing us violence through embedded filming linked to a critique of violence? Does putting a diegetic frame around violence make the violence more violent, or more distant; does it increase the affective experience or mitigate it? Is watching violence (diegetically) pleasurable or unpleasurable? Are there ways of connecting our spectatorial work to these scenes of people watching terrible things? (Or forced to watch terrible things? Unable to look away...) Are there ways of watching filmed violence that are more or less complicit with violence? How do different looks function in the texts you've chosen; are there looks that undo or work against violence?

**8. Consumerism, Commodities, Banking.** Choose one or two of the following: *American Psycho* (the novel); *American Psycho* (the film); *Fargo*; *Se7en*. Consider and make an argument about the role of capitalism, consumerism, big corporations, commodity culture, conspicuous consumption, or banking in relation to your texts. What is your texts' reading or figuration of your chosen figure of late capitalist economics? (This ranges from the literal appearance of banks in *American Psycho* and loans in *Fargo* to more abstract figurations such as "consumption." You can take this question any direction that interests you.)

What is the relationship between violence and economics, according to your chosen texts? Is there a necessary or inevitable link between the economic sphere and violence, or is your text suggesting a more complex model? Is there any way of breaking or undoing or challenging that relationship according to your texts? What does it mean to make a system,

**21L.435 Violence and Contemporary Representation**  
**Questions for Paper # 1**

abstraction or collective (such as “capitalism” or “corporations”) the agent of violence? What critical problems arise in relation to that claim? Likewise, your chosen text(s) may well still focus on a singular protagonist or representative of an entire system: what is the relationship between individuals and the economic critique your texts are positing?

**9. The Real, Realism and Expressionism.** Consider and make an argument about the “real” in relation to two of the following texts: *Fargo*; *American Psycho* (the novel or the film); *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*; *Se7en*. What is function of discourses of “the real” in your texts (real places, real histories, real objects, real people)?

Or, in turn, you could consider realism. The real is different from realism, which is an aesthetic meant to evoke or replicate our ordinary world: how do your texts (especially if you’ve chosen to write on *Henry*, *Se7en* or the film of *American Psycho*) deploy a realist aesthetic? Relatedly, how do they deploy the opposite: an expressionist aesthetic (marked by self-conscious stylization, notable aesthetics, and a distorted view of bodies/the world)? Consider Freeland’s argument in your analysis. How is violence differently negotiated by a realist vs. expressionist aesthetic?

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