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**GRAMMATIZED
PSYCHOPATH: AMERICAN
PSYCHO ONLINE AND
OFFLINE**

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Dress like a secret agent, Fitted dress shirts and jackets for the modern man by Saboteur, www.saboteurman.com (Cabell and Huff 320)

Published in 1991, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis presented a terrifying first person portrait of Patrick Bateman — a Wall Street banker and an industrious serial killer. Bateman, through his own voice, is revealed to be a narcissistic, status-obsessed perfectionist who not only thoroughly describes his own actions of torturing and executing, but also details his extreme regime of self-maintenance, his fixation on others' and own appearance through corporate brands and his obsession with popular music.

The artists Jason Huff and Mimi Cabell rewrote Ellis's text in their piece *American Psycho 2010*. In order to make a present time version of the novel, *American Psycho 2010* was made by sending the text of Ellis's *American Psycho*, page by page, between two Gmail accounts. The resulting Google-generated advertisements were kept as footnotes while the original text was deleted. *American Psycho 2010* consists henceforth of 800 ads as footnotes corresponding to the voice of Patrick Bateman.

I will here argue that this rewriting, moving from offline to online (and back to offline) literature through Gmail as a filter, not only manifests a here-and-now alternative, consumeristic portrait of Bateman co-authored by Google's algorithms' interpretation of the text, but also elucidates a reading and writing otherness. This otherness, the underlying workings of the algorithms, is performing within its own discourse, which we emulate in our daily email correspondence. Thus Google is reading and producing us as datafied consumerist subjects through these parallel reading and writings of our own reading and writing online.

In order to clarify this argument, I will use the notion *grammatization*, where I for the greater part of my argument will draw on Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler's use of it. Stiegler relates to Jacques Derrida's reading of Plato (in *De La Grammatologie*), where Plato describes the act of writing as mnemotechnic (Stiegler, *How I Became a Philosopher* 41) — a technique of memorizing. Grammatization then implicates an exteriorization of consciousness and, consequently, an exteriorization of memory. Alphabetization as the exteriorization of consciousness through the phonetic alphabet, also called grammatization, hence means making the interior into concrete, discrete units — making something into grammar, patterns and code. And since the thoughts, when grammatized, are units 'out there' instead of abstractions 'in here', they can be infinitely duplicated and distributed independently of us. Following this, when we describe and inscribe ourselves in grammatizations in different contexts, we exist somewhere 'out there' as grammatized. I will argue that *American Psycho 2010* represents a process of grammatization in our everyday communication online: by Google's algorithms, as online users of communicative media, and through our own written and read words we are being grammatized. Consequently, communicating online equals a double grammatological process: the self-grammatization from our own 'pen' and a simultaneous datafied grammatization from, in this case, the search engine algorithms of Google. So how can we re-introduce and discuss grammatization, when the grammatization is datafied?

Forgetting, memory and history

In *De La Grammatologie* from 1967, Derrida introduces what he suggests as a science of writing, *grammatology*, which becomes — as throughout the book he deconstructs science and philosophy of language within itself — a science of philosophy, history, a science about science or a science about everything constructed through writing. This is in order to reject any kind of metaphysics, any kind of origin. Discussing speech and text, both encompassing an exteriorization of consciousness, writing is to be understood as language graphically externalized, for instance constructed within the technical system of the phonetic alphabet.

Derrida proclaims that language is not neutral, on the contrary it is a system with an independent reality, a system with its own structures, affecting how we apprehend, understand and construct ourselves and our surroundings. He adds to this an understanding of an ‘arche-writing’ meaning a nonorigin, which he also calls ‘the trace’ or a spoor of an inscription or engraving. He writes:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin — within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. (61)

In other words, Derrida’s insertion of a nonorigin opens up for an understanding of a constitutive absence that clears the way of anything present, which refers to the logic of binary oppositions. In the preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

in clarification explains Derrida’s arche-writing or trace as “the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience.” (9) The mark of an absence is constitutive to the presence of writing as such.

In addition to installing a constitutive nonorigin, Derrida also aims to annul — in the period of the publishing of *De La Grammatologie* — the dominant philosophical tendency to place speech over writing. This favour of the spoken word means for instance to give prominence to speech as being closer to thinking — closer to sense and the natural — and simultaneously to accuse writing of “clothing” speech as a “garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised” (35). In response to this accusation, Derrida points to the omission that speech is an exteriorization of the interior just like writing. Speech is not a direct, pure channel to consciousness; it is a signifier of whatever is signified as well.[1]

Confronting this tendency, Derrida refers to *Phaedrus* in which Plato is deeply concerned with grammatization as a graphical exteriorization in relation to memory. In *Phaedrus* Plato compares writing with speech as *hypomnesis* with *mneme*; the supplementing help versus the vivid, natural memory. Thus, according to Plato, writing equals forgetting, since it is:

denouncing the being-outside-of-itself of the logos in the sensible or the intellectual abstraction. Writing is that forgetting of the self, that exteriorization, the contrary of the interiorizing memory, of the Erinnerung that opens the history of the spirit. It is this that the Phaedrus said: writing is at once mnemotechnique and the power of forgetting. (37)

However, as Derrida and later Stiegler shows, the process of grammatology is how we make and have been making history, collective and individual memory as well as construct members of a society. We exteriorize and engrave our actions and ourselves in descriptive grammatizations (most basic: date of birth, death and social security number) so that others can know us and re-know us, even after we are gone. And more importantly, Stiegler stresses, while we describe and inscribe ourselves outwardly, we simultaneously inscribe and interiorize these descriptive grammatizations within ourselves in a process of getting to know ourselves. It is a process of *becoming* ourselves. According to Stiegler, grammatization is therefore also a constitutive foundation for a feeling of belonging; a constitutive function from where a possible individuation of subjects can be derived, since it enhances the individuation of a we, a society. In a generic process this collective understanding of a we co-constitutes the psychically understanding of the subject as an I, which again confirms the we and so forth. Stiegler writes: "I am not human except insofar as I belong to a social group", which is an understanding he collects from Aristotle (Stiegler, *How I Became A Philosopher* 3). A possible co-individuation of a we and the *Is* involved in the we is thus-forwarded by a descriptive grammatization of social relationships.

Stiegler provides another relevant and important layer to Derrida's grammatology. He expands grammatization to be more than alphabetization, to include any formal system, which encompasses cultural representations, products and communication technology (*What Makes Life* 49). These grammatized representations, I would argue, equal the arche-writing of Derrida and works as a cognitive and corporal archive or trace of intergenerational memory, a present absence, which provides the constitutive

possibility for a 'presence', for a *presentation*, a re-writing of oneself, a process of individuation.[2]

Fictional grammatization: I simply am not there

When viewing Patrick Bateman as the narrator in Ellis's *American Psycho* through the lenses of the above described theory, the figure Patrick Bateman, his actions and his thoughts are born from text and he exists only as grammatized. Bateman is nothing but written. However, being fiction as such and thus a product of the pen of Ellis, Bateman is a *re-presentation*, a metaphor of reality. Thus, Bateman could be viewed as a representation of how grammatization produces the subject, who undergoes the grammatological process.

If we add to this Émile Benveniste's theory of enunciation and the focus of the subject-constituting personal pronoun, Bateman is a represented subject of enunciation; his enunciation(s) is an enunciated enunciation. (Ellis is the actual subject of enunciation.) Following Benveniste in *Subjectivity in Language*, the personal pronoun I is to be understood as an empty signifier, which only refers to the speaker, who utters it in a present time discourse (244). Thus, the I in an enunciation is not referring to a pre-existing substance of subjectivity, but exclusively to its own 'taken-place' in a here-and-now discourse. And since this empty signifier, when appropriated by a human subject, refers only to the event of the enunciating activity and not to an exterior reality, the subject of enunciation is inevitably also de-subjectivated and expropriated in its appropriation of language (Lund 71). This explicates the point of the grammatological

process understood as the appropriation or the exteriorization of consciousness through language: Grammatization is at once both representing *and* producing the human subject involved. Within the enunciation and therefore also within the grammatization, the *I* is empty and as a result also always already absent within its own discourse.

Bateman represents this process. As he enters the position of the speaker and becomes the subject of the enunciation he is consequently also represented as absent, which turns obvious as the narration develops. Here, his psychopathic features, his inhumanness, complete lack of empathy and compassion seems to apply perfectly to the appropriation of language, which, as we have seen, automatically means a simultaneous desubjectification and expropriation. Throughout the narration, one could argue that even though, and because of, Bateman's repetitive re-inscription of himself, which stems with his appropriation of a first person-I, he is "sous rature" (Derrida 48), he is "under erasure". Approaching this, Jacob Lund cites Judith Butler, when he writes: "The more one seeks oneself in language, the more one loses oneself precisely where one is sought" (70). Compulsively keeping up his appearance, while simultaneously losing the 'human' within himself together with affects and feelings, Bateman as a psychopath is an exemplary illustration of this losing oneself "precisely where one is sought". Notably, Butler refers to language in general or language as such. In *American Psycho* the 'language' in which Bateman loses himself is a commercially expropriating language or spectacle (which is why he is so beautifully painted by Google's algorithms in the 2010 version). He represents the function of a constitutive absence in a grammatological process. Even Bateman himself articulates his process of being under erasure, of losing himself in different contexts:

[T]here is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there. (Ellis, 352)

[M]y normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. (265)

The character Bateman represents the constitutive absence of one's own presence in the grammatization and further illustrates how we are at once represented and produced in these grammatizations. The uttering "I simply am not there" is in its contradiction directly applicable in relation to the appropriation and expropriation in the enunciating activity.

consumersearch.com

So what happens when the grammatized Bateman is re-written into a double grammatological system of both alphabetization and the algorithmic system of Google's Gmail and search engine? What happens when the Google-generated advertisements are also within the construction of enunciation? Cabell and Huff show us a snapshot of the result from a specific day in 2010. In the 'narration' of *American Psycho 2010*, Bateman is not only represented and produced through language and hence writing, his represented I has also undergone a parallel reading and writing process performed by Google's algorithms in a discourse of consumerism. He is represented as the consumer the algorithms

predict him to be. Within the narration in Ellis' novel, Bateman as an empty shell is produced by corporate brands representing him in the narrative, which the 2010 version illustrates perfectly. This version even leaves the alphabetized Bateman behind, deletes him, leaving him literally expropriated, desubjectified and eradicated. The literal erasure explicates the fact that within this construction of enunciation he is also reduced to a subject of consumerism, when authored by Google; consumerism since it is the only language and thus the only system describing him.

As an example, the utterance of Bateman, which is underscoring the constitutive absence and the desubjectification within the apprehension of language "I simply am not there", corresponds to footnote 781 in *American Psycho 2010*, relating to an absurd invitation to click on the link *consumersearch.com* (Cabell, Huff 385). Consequently, even when under erasure in alphabetization, Google's algorithms find a way to reproduce and invite one to re-write (or re-click) further into its system. In a palimpsestic self-production and deletion, one could then re-inscribe oneself in a hyperlinking-activity — constantly 'sous rature' in Derrida's vocabulary. This activity begins with an offer; in this case an offer to literally seek oneself as a consumer — *consumersearch* — thus losing oneself, erasing oneself again "precisely where one is sought".

Google is the psychopath

Moreover, it is interesting to notice that Google's algorithms and corporate sponsors are completely indifferent towards the description of the person to whom they make the offer, even if the narrative is Bateman describing himself killing a child at the zoo and

leaving him in a trash can. The corresponding footnote says: "Recycling Containers, Buy your plastic recycling containers here. We can customize. www.nwpackagingonline.com" (308).

The ads will customize their offers to the individual — and it makes no difference whether the individual is a disturbed, shallow, psychopathic killer. Somehow this indifference towards the *I* exterior to the discourse resembles the condition of the possibility of becoming an *I* through language. Situated in a corporate context, the indifference towards the personal being of the human, which in this case is Bateman, illustrates the algorithms as non-emotional and inhuman, but however also smart and intelligent actors in the writing and producing process. One could argue that in *American Psycho 2010*, it is not Bateman but Google that is representing a true psychopath.

Turning to Stiegler and his productive theory about co-individuation and its negative antipole dis-individuation, in this particular case of Gmail, Google's algorithms use keyword identification within Patrick Bateman's utterances to write him as a consumer entity, mapped to Google's corporate sponsors. An alternative portrait of Bateman as a mere consumer is manifested in the resultant ads. In Stiegler's vocabulary, instead of the *I* as the grammatized subject individuating within a grammatized *we* in a conversation through Gmail, the *Is* and the *we* are considered a *they* by the algorithms of Google, a collection of consumers, not individuals. This parallel reading and producing thus implies a loss of individuation. This becomes remarkably literal and explicit in *American Psycho 2010*, where Patrick Bateman's utterances, self-description, history and memory are literally deleted — even Bateman as an extreme psychopath is read and written by a corporate algorithm, which means he is reduced to a mere consumer like everybody else.

Here, he is painted by the prediction of algorithms anticipating his desires.

Grammatized datafication

Grammatization as the exteriorization of memory, and hence a mnemotechnic, is also pregnant in *American Psycho 2010*. By writing and apprehending language, the interior is engraved and exteriorized 'out there' as Derrida and Plato have taught us, and which has been illustrated in Ellis' *American Psycho*. Stiegler makes the point that it is through and within these grammatizations that an individuation and a re-installing of the personal being of the human can take place. While taking one more step in thoroughly explaining the notion of grammatization, he calls them 'pharmacological phenomena'.^[3] This means that cultural products such as cinema, television, social networks, technology equal medicine or drugs in general are both poison and cure — potential facilitators for both individuation as well as dis-individuation (Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living* 50). He argues that in the exteriorization of the interior a diverse process is taking place, where the grammatizations change us inwards as we use them outwards; they re-open a space for a process of *becoming* through the exteriorizations. The *what* (being the grammatizations) is creating the *who* as it is created by it, so to speak. In this light the grammatizations are not only memory 'out there', they also constitute a memory and a knowledge about ourselves 'in here'. However, according to Stiegler, in this interiorization of grammatizations, we are also in danger of being 'deleted' or dis-individuated, when the grammatized products are strategically programmed to do so (Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery* 110).

Moving into the digital, the self-grammatization, the self-engraving changes. Within the network of Google, we are not only constituted as subjects within language, but notably every click and every bit of text (being our online-activity referring to ourselves as speakers or 'clickers' in a here-and-now discourse) are tracked, indexed and algorithmized by a network that is constantly and invisibly reading our writing and writing our reading. In other words, what problematizes the circumstances is the fact that the difference between a self-description, a self-desubjectification offline and online is that a self-description online is also an instant self-indexication — it is traceable. One could say that by apprehending the personal pronoun *I* online, one does not only exteriorize and inscribe oneself in a history and memory of letters; you are also remembered within an algorithm that performs on its own, independent of the *I* involved. The dis-individuation is complete; the algorithms apprehend the first person-I for you. Thus, the *I* is not even present in its own de-subjectification. As a result, Google's memory is 'too good' compared to the phonetic alphabet.

American Psycho 2010 in a comparative analysis with Ellis's *American Psycho* is thus an exemplary illustration of how this offline to online changes the grammatization. *American Psycho 2010* is a *representation* of the *production* of subjectivity. A production constructed by the algorithms of Google. This also implies that if Cabell and Huff ran Bateman through two new Gmail accounts today (2015), the portrait of Bateman would be painted by other ads, which only emphasizes how the self-activated performativity of the algorithms works. I would argue that the aesthetic practice of *American Psycho 2010* recognizes the Google-algorithmic system and makes a re-negotiating possible. The 2010 version reflects the current state of online writing, and could potentially install a

conscious reflection and awareness in us of how Google works, how it generates the ads it does and, in the words of Lori Emerson in *Reading Writing Interfaces*, how “it sells ourselves and our language back to us” (location 2666 of 4314). One could hope that a reading of a work like this push forward a re-installing or a re-claiming of the first person-I, which means at least an awareness of what happens, when language is appropriated online.

In conclusion, I would argue that the inscription of oneself online demands for an even broader or different formulation of the notion of grammatization. While the analogue construction of enunciation in Ellis’s *American Psycho* begins and ends with the phonetic alphabet, *American Psycho 2010* illustrates a whole different digital problem; the algorithms perform, act and remember, even after the *I* has left the keyboard and the inscription is done. As psychopaths they act without compassion, they produce the subject in corporate systems, they re-write the subject — the desubjectification ‘stays’ so to speak. I would suggest a descriptive notion of ‘grammatized datafication’ for this purpose, which encompasses the double process of being grammatized and datafied in a self-description online.

Notes

[1] In fact, according to Derrida, speech is always in itself a writing, which means that it is always an expression of or a trace of writing.

[2] Stiegler’s notion ‘tertiary Retention’, which he has developed from Husserl’s ‘primary retention’ (experience) and ‘secondary retention’ (memory), is notable, since it is to be understood as the artificial ‘container’ of memory. Stiegler present this philosophy in *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. In fact, tertiary retention is grammatization understood as technologies and media of memory. In further readings of datafied grammatizations, this notions needs to be included and unfolded. For this article, the understanding of grammatization is first and foremost the main focus.

[3] Before Stiegler, Derrida deconstructs the term in an analysis of Plato’s *Phaedrus* in his piece: “Plato’s Pharmacy”.

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