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Atrocity Exhibitions

by J. Hoberman
April 12 - 18, 2000

"His normality is more terrifying than all atrocities together." So hyperbolized Hannah Arendt of Adolf Eichmann, the unprepossessing Nazi bureaucrat who organized the transport of several million European Jews to death camps, on the occasion of Eichmann's 1961 trial in Israel.

Arendt's key formulation—"the banality of evil"—became a mid-20th-century catchphrase, reaching its ultimate banalization with Bret Easton Ellis's quasi-pornographic 1991 novel, *American Psycho*. After a decade of Clinton, Springer, and gangsta rap, this deadpan, extremely detailed, and programmatically un-p.c. portrait of a young Wall Street broker as misogynist serial killer is about to embark upon a second career.

Director Mary Harron, who sympathetically depicted a would-be assassin (and polemical pornographer) in her estimable *I Shot Andy Warhol*, has a healthier sense of humor than Ellis. Adapting his novel with sometime actress Guinevere Turner, she treats the whole notion of a status-obsessed, fashion-enslaved yuppie engaged in Ed Gein-type ritual sex-killings as a joke—on the author.

Harron opens wittily by equating bodily fluids with nouvelle cuisine, although nothing that follows is nearly so Swiftian. She effectively burlesques Ellis's affectless carnage amid a mannequin-parade of product endorsements—itsself a provocatively tedious riff on the high Reagan world of *Wall Street* and *Bonfire of the Vanities*—but the edge has already been blunted by the funnier, more disturbing *Fight Club*. (Indeed, *Fight Club* may soften up some critics for *American Psycho* as *Happiness* did for the far less daring *American Beauty*.)

"I have all the characteristics of a human being," Patrick Bateman explains, by which he means greed and disgust. With his newsreader voice and immaculate coif, the sleek, well-toned, Armani-ized Christian Bale is more than serviceable in the title role, a part once briefly coveted by Leonardo DiCaprio. Bale is the better actor, but the baby-faced icon would have been far more discomfiting. (Given the movie's pervasive '80s nostalgia, the template is the young Tom Cruise.) If anything, Bale is too knowing. He eagerly works within the constraints of the quotation marks Harron puts around his performance—taking an ax to a colleague while Huey Lewis sings "Hip to Be Square."

American Psycho is basically a succession of escalating atrocities. There's a feeble attempt at suspense. As Bateman realizes his fantasies, he's investigated by Willem Dafoe's suspiciously amiable detective. The private eye is another textual effect; like everyone else, he constantly



Crank call: Bale in *American Psycho*
photo: Kerry Hayes

American Psycho
Directed by Mary Harron
Written by Harron and Guinevere Turner from the novel by Bret Easton Ellis
A Lions Gate release
Opens April 14

The Specialist
Directed by Eyal Sivan
Written by Sivan and Rony Brauman
A Kino International release
Film Forum
Through April 25

Eve
Directed by Joseph Losey
Written by Hugo Butler and Evan Jones from the novel by James Hadley Chase
A Kino International release
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April 14 through 20

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Bodies The Exhibition

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confuses the psycho with various peers. (Our hero is the one who works out to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, watches himself on TV as he cavorts with two hookers—stunned beyond submission by his passionate explication of Phil Collins—and keeps a human head in the fridge.)

While *American Psycho* is filled with visual references to the painting and photography of the '80s, it lacks the visual élan and period pathos of *I Shot Andy Warhol*. Acting as a kind of responsible parent, Harron strictly minimizes the on-screen violence against women—this despite the presence of the prime potential victims played by Reese Witherspoon and Chloe Sevigny. Any one of Ellis's countless descriptions of torture and mutilation is more disgusting than the movie in toto. Harron has deftly transformed the naughty-boy original into the anti-masculinist satire Ellis claims it always was. (The writer resembles his creation in that no one believes his admissions.)

The novel was Ellis's risky, not unambitious attempt at Dostoyevsky lite. The movie is certainly less offensive—for which many might well be grateful—but, lacking any equivalent to the Sadean excess of Ellis's prose, it is also further evacuated of purpose. As the antihero himself sneers at the bloody finale, "This confession has meant nothing." It's a form of poetic justice that *American Psycho* would be impaled on its own point.

The real Adolf Eichmann—or at least his televisual form—is currently on view in *The Specialist*, an austere and fascinating documentary fashioned by Israeli director Eyal Sivan from the 500 hours of video footage shot by Leo Hurwitz during the trial.

More than the miniseries *Holocaust* or the Oscar-winning *Schindler's List*, the spectacle of Eichmann in Jerusalem introduced America—and the world—to the facts of what was, for the first time, referred to as the Holocaust. Even then, many intellectuals understood the trial's fundamental purposes to be the legitimization of Israeli authority and the creation of a Holocaust narrative. Harold Rosenberg ascribed to it "the function of tragic poetry, that of making the pathetic and terrifying past live again in the mind."

Here, the Eichmann trial itself is that pathetic and terrifying past. A performance-documentary set in a hall of mirrors, *The Specialist*—like the movie fashioned from the army-McCarthy hearings, *Point of Order*—is about history as it is structured in court and mediated by the camera. The credits suggest a cast of actors; the first few shots are of the empty seats and stage. Excavating the event as theater, Sivan is less interested in giving voice to the many witnesses against Eichmann or showing the atrocity footage entered as evidence than in demonstrating how this evidence functioned in the trial. The material has been digitally enhanced so that the image of the audience is reflected on Eichmann's protective glass booth, and the frequent, sometimes violent, crowd reactions are now audible.

The greatest emphasis is on Eichmann's performance. His peculiar half-smile as he listens through a headset to the testimony against him is unnerving and disarming. (You should have seen the balding, bespectacled clerk—a self-identified "specialist" in forced emigration—when he was costumed in his SS uniform of absolute power.) Eichmann is clever enough to suggest that he is really a Zionist and stupid enough to insist that he improved conditions on the transports to Treblinka. He is fastidious in his language, precise in his evasions, anxious to seem reasonable, deferential to authority. This born flunky always stands to speak—one assumes he also clicks his heels—an appropriate tactic for a man who, arguing for his life, claims only to have followed his superiors' orders.

Sivan further accentuates the differing agendas of the judges, some interrogating Eichmann directly, and the show's real director, prosecutor Gideon Hausner. Aggressively trying to break down a criminal bureaucrat who had no official function apart from his mandated task of facilitating the extermination of Jews, Hausner grows increasingly sarcastic. When cornered, however, Eichmann holds his ground: "I refuse to reveal my inner feelings," he sulks, taking refuge in his own enigma as the empty suit of institutionalized evil.

There's a minor devil on display next door to *The Specialist* in the person of Jeanne Moreau, the eponymous vixen of Joseph Losey's 1962 film *maudit*, *Eve*. After nearly a decade of blacklist-induced exile from Hollywood, Losey was trying to change his (artistic) life. *Eve*'s Italian settings and evocation of jet-set decadence suggest reigning maestros Fellini and Antonioni even as its jazzy camerawork, frantic cutting, and Michel Legrand score scream nouvelle vague. Indeed, Losey actually replaced Jean-Luc Godard as director.

Moreau is a wanton femme fatale who first fascinates Stanley Baker's boorish, blocked writer by turning up uninvited in his Venice pad (complete with a drunken trick) and wandering around half undressed while her trademark record of Billie Holiday singing "Willow Weep for Me" plays in the background. Although engaged to gorgeous Virna Lisi, Baker is captivated, even after Moreau coldcocks him with a glass ashtray. He pursues her to Rome—and for the rest of the movie—as she plays him for a fool. Losey's first cut was incredibly long; his revision ran 155 minutes. The film was shortened several times by its producers. (The excellent new print at Film Forum is the local theatrical premiere of the longest of these releases, hence

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the Finnish subtitles, but not the director's cut.)

Losey liked to speak of the original *Eve* as the equivalent of a martyred Stroheim film; the extant version is more a scenario for Theda Bara, the vamp of 1915. Still, the wreckage exerts its own fascination—as does Moreau's quicksilver performance. In many respects, this butchered film is more engagingly nutty than its follow-up, *The Servant*, the more refined version of *Eve*'s baroque visuals and s/m thematics that would be Losey's biggest international hit.

#### More by J. Hoberman

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