

# Bale's twisted performance makes 'Psycho' a satirical journey

By Samuel McKewon

Senior editor

"American Psycho" was nearly an Oliver Stone film starring Leonardo DiCaprio. I shiver at the thought.

Not because either are without talent. Stone's had his days (but if he keeps up his dizzying editing tactics, they're numbered). DiCaprio has undeniable acting prowess.

But it's hard to see the adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' bloody novel any other way than director Mary Harron's vision. Harron made an eccentric little picture called "I Shot Andy Warhol" in 1996. "American Psycho" surpasses that movie in ambition by leaps and bounds. And, in the main event, as serial killer Patrick Bateman, Christian Bale is up for the challenge. This role will rocket-launch his career.

The most controversial movie of the year is a big success, a not-so-twisted gem mixing pathos and satire, nearly perfect, too juicy to see just once. And Bale's performance is a beauty all its own, a total surprise, considering his resume of English period dramas and softball roles in movies such as "Little Women."

There's enough word of mouth out there to know Ellis' novel chronicled the mental freefall of Bateman, a 27-year-old Wall Street shark

straight out of the 1980s, who dabbles in investing, fine dining, pop music analysis, wire hanger torture and the occasional chainsaw murder of prostitutes.

It's a clunky, overly graphic novel — pages and pages of gruesome murder detail overwhelm what's meant to be an attempt at Dostoyevsky — with several tracks and sidetracks. Harron pares all the clutter out, squeezing out a lean 104-minute version of the essential facts, along with a female point of view.

It's actually preferable to the novel, as Bateman, obsessing over his hair care, skin care, clothes and furniture ensemble to the point of madness, is the butt of his own joke. Harron doesn't much like "PB," and it shows. Which doesn't mean Bateman's character is without virtue. He's just very, very confused about many things.

Narrated from his point of view, Bateman introduces us to his life of finer things, which includes his women (Reese Witherspoon and Samantha Mathis, among many others), his money and more important than either, his bone-colored business card. Alas, his mates' cards are just as fine, even better. Bateman, no matter what, cannot separate himself from the pack.

And so he indulges his anger in a series of murders. Women, prefer-

ably. But one man, Paul Allen (Jared Leto), has Bateman particularly peeved. Paul won't hear the end of "Hip to be Square," by Huey Lewis and the News, without a taste of Bateman's rage.

Though he's established the character well to that point, Bale shoots Bateman into overdrive in the scene. It looks effortless, but the logistics of the scene, which involves three rooms, a raincoat, a long soliloquy from Bateman on Huey Lewis and finally, the murder itself, is a triumph of film.

And Bale, who must do an impromptu shimmy in the middle of it all, sinks into the moment. And there are more moments to come.

The murders pile up. A police detective (Willem Dafoe) has questions about Paul Allen's death. But the movie, all done through Bateman, has better things in mind, like the three-scene chopped down to avoid the NC-17 rating. It's still effective for what it's worth, a fine example of the narcissism that only Bateman pays attention to.

But Harron, along with co-screenwriter Guinevere Turner, is smart enough not to send the Bateman character off on an island, as Stone probably would have done. Rather, she makes him just like the rest of his chums, and he's constantly misidentified as a Davis, a Marcus, a

Tom. Here, then, is the interesting premise of the filmmakers pitting themselves against their own main character, the result surprisingly clear. At no time is Bateman a clear protagonist. But we're not rooting against him, either.

As the movie develops, reality becomes more and more stunted. Dafoe's character seems too amiable. Plus, he already knows everything. And his story isn't matching up with Bateman's. Nor is anyone else's. "American Psycho" begins to reveal its real colors in the last 20 minutes.

The shift could have been done slightly better. The end is meant to be chilling; it's hard to say if it ever gets there for everyone, though there's one haunting moment where Bateman walks into an empty, freshly painted apartment that he remembers differently.

It's part of what makes "American Psycho" work so well, this altered reality, which was there all along, even in the opening credits. As the oddball events unfold onscreen, it's hilarity, a commentary on late-'80s high society and its detachment from the world. But there's more to it. Or less, depending on how you see it.

In my view, Harron's vision is a fairly straight shot. Its overlying structure hangs in the air of every shot, in Bale's dramatic gyrations, in

## REVIEW American Psycho

**STARS:** Christian Bale, Willem Dafoe, Reese Witherspoon, Samantha Mathis  
**DIRECTOR:** Mary Harron  
**RATING:** R (graphic violence, strong sexual content)  
**GRADE:** A  
**FIVE WORDS:** A two-leveled, entertaining gem.

the dead-on imitation of 1980s fashions and media stars.

"American Psycho" takes place in its own self-contained universe with fragments of truth tossed in. It comes together in another mistaken identity conversation at the very end, followed by a moment of quiet, where Bateman seems to conjure up the words for his summation. The moment is paced perfectly, and it leaves plenty of begging questions.

See "American Psycho" once for its surface joys and Bale's star-making performance. Then see it again for all its tiny revelations. To be honest, the movie's complexity I expected. It's the sheer entertainment, the first-time viewing, that was such a surprise.

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