

Slamming The Doors



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Jim Morrison is dead, dead as a doornail. He has been since 1971, when he expired, bloated and burnt out, in a bathtub in Paris at 27, not a moment too soon. His life was a bad influence. His death was a cautionary reminder of the costs of the Sixties stupidity that went by the puffed-up title of "counterculture." Morrison himself is not particularly interesting, except that he is an obsession to the sort of people who root around reverently in the shards of the Sixties. Now Morrison is back. He is the black hole at the cold heart of the movie "The Doors," which tells the short, sick story of that rock group and Morrison's role as singer.

Oliver Stone, a Sixties-aholic, is the director of the movie, which is fresh evidence that necrophilia—Yo! Elvis!—is a growth industry. Stone, a confused man, says, "There is a major time warp going on here . . . We all feel the '60s are coming back." No, the Sixties are now just nostalgia, kitsch junk among the clutter in the nation's mental attic. That good news suggests that America has matured, even become middle-aged. Not a moment too soon.

Age 27 was something of a ceiling for drugged rockers. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin died at 27. But for many pop-culture figures, an early death was a good career move. James Dean, a three-movie cult figure, died in his Porsche at age 24. Keats, Shelley and Byron, dead at 25, 29 and 36 respectively, left serious legacies. Morrison left some embarrassing poetry and a few mediocre rock albums. He resembled Byron only in being "mad, bad and dangerous to know." He was infantile, unsanitary (how odd that he died in a bathtub), dissolute, sadistic (he sometimes was sexually aroused only by inflicting mental cruelty and physical brutality), occasionally homicidal (as when he locked his girlfriend in a closet and set it afire) and eventually semi-suicidal.

Universities, self-contained communities congenial to the questioning of all authority, were natural incubators of Sixties radicalism and today are its last redoubt. Morrison had a smattering of university experience, enough to acquire a patter of ersatz profundity from French poets. The Doors took their name from William Blake's yearning for more immediate, more intense, more real understanding, or at least sensations: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." In the Sixties, many people intoxicated by such talk thought the cleansing needed chemical assistance. Morrison, an icon of the drug culture, ingested his share of drugs but was basically a drunk.

Morrison's short, shabby life, and its peculiar echo today, express a longing that waxes and wanes like a low-grade infection but never quite disappears from temperate, rational bourgeois societies. It reflects a vague—very vague—desire to (in the words of The Doors' anthem) "break on through to the other side." Through what? To what? Don't ask. The Doors didn't. People who talk like The Doors are not, as such people say, "into" details.

Their point, if a notion so muzzy can be said to have anything as sharp as a point, is that the existential hero is in permanent revolt against society's repressiveness. By being in touch with nature and his vital urges he breaks on through the walls of the mundane world to "authenticity." Evanescent figures like Morrison, manufactured by the music industry, were given inflated importance by the romantic idea that artists are heroes and rockers are artists. How democratic: anyone can qualify. (In the movie, a friend encourages Morrison: "You gotta be able to sing better than Dylan." How true.)

The juvenocracy of rock sniffed the air and decided that the times they were a-changing. Elders were saying so. In 1960, Walter Lippmann said, "We're at the end of something that is petering out and aging and about finished." In 1962 Arthur Schlesinger Jr. announced "a new epoch" of "vitality" and "new values . . . straining for expression and release." Break on through to the other side.

Morrison was not Schlesinger set to music, but both were symptoms of a Sixties disorder. Schlesinger's words "expression" and "release" were part of the mantra of the decade that made Morrison a shooting star, and soon a cinder. The cult of self-validating expression contributed to the debasement of education, which came to be considered a process of letting something out of students rather than of putting something into them. The craving for "release," from reason and other intolerable restraints, led to the confusion of narcissism with freedom.

Urban jungle: Warming up for the Sixties, Norman Mailer wrote "The White Negro," praising "the primitive" in the urban jungle, the "nihilism" that wants "every social restraint" removed. That was in 1957, the year of "West Side Story," a sentimentalizing of juvenile delinquents as Romeos and Juliets. In 1960, Mailer decided "there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream of the nation." Seeing John Kennedy, Mailer swooned: "The hipster as presidential candidate . . . a cool grace which seemed indifferent to applause . . . the poise of a fine boxer . . . a good lithe wit . . . a keen sense of proportion . . . an elusive detachment . . . manners which were excellent, even artful . . . a subtle, not quite describable intensity, a suggestion of dry pent-up heat . . . the eyes of a mountaineer . . . like Brando . . . Mickey Mantle-cum-Lindbergh . . ."

Teenagers say such stuff when they have a crush on somebody. Clearly some people were turning to politics for almost erotic excitement. Mailer's other heartthrob was the man Kennedy tried to kill, Castro. Mailer loved Castro for "giving us psychic ammunition" for the "desperate silent struggle we have been fighting with sick dead hearts against the cold insidious cancer of the power that governs us." Whew. Castro sure lit Mailer's fire.

The passage of time has broken the big progressive hearts of the people who looked to politics and rock music for salvation and Truth, and who regarded tyrants and rock stars as existential heroes. Those dabbings with serious subjects now seem inexpressibly childish. Has there ever been such politically barren radicalism as that of the Sixties? Morrison said he liked anything having to do with "re-

volt." So what did this little Lenin do to overthrow "the system"? He unzipped his trousers on stage.

Devotees of the Sixties sensibility have broken on through to the other side, all right. Here they stand, blinking in the light, wondering why Americans, including young Americans, are more excited by Norman Schwarzkopf than Jim Morrison. This complicates the task of arguing that "there is a major time warp going on here."

And yet there are faint echoes of those dead days. Now, as then, any moneymaking and publicity-generating bit of popular culture, however trivial or tawdry, can, like *The Doors*, be tarted up to look like a highly moral exercise of "concern" and social criticism. And there are always members of the chattering classes eager to join in the puffery. Consider the case of Bret Easton Ellis.

He is a three-book writer. Formerly a prodigy-by-publicity, he now is a pornographer. He is 27. His first novel, "Less than Zero," was short (208 pages) but too long. It was a mildly interesting sketch of self-absorbed rich and drugged youths in southern California. His second novel really was less than zero. His third novel proves that he was at most a one-book semi-wonder. Simon & Schuster gave him a big advance for "American Psycho," then, to its credit, flinched from publishing it. This refusal generated a gusher of publicity for it. Knopf, dressing up its greed as anti-greed, rushed to publish "American Psycho," which supposedly is a terribly serious "indictment" of the—you guessed it—Reagan Years of Greed.

'Satiric' look: Although Ellis is conventionally dressed and barbered, he is a Morrison for the Nineties. He is, at most, a mildly talented young man. But he is marketed by older people. Some are cynical, others are just incorrigible. (Stormin' Norman Mailer is back.) Presto! Ellis, a triumph of packaging, is a serious critic of America generally but especially of the last decade. "American Psycho" is short on plot and shorter still on characterization. It is long on sexual atrocities interlarded with minute descriptions of designer clothes and pretentious menus and other objects of status-conferring consumption. It is about a Wall Street Yuppie, a serial killer who especially enjoys torturing women, as when he inserts a starving rat into a victim's vagina.

It is (so we are invited to believe) a "satiric" look at callow youth rendered degenerate by the Greed Decade, deprived by effortless wealth and pursuing instant gratification of evermore extreme fantasies. Needless to say, the torturer himself is, well, sort of a victim. Of what? Consumption-crazed American society. You say Ellis's prose is pedestrian? Ah, the banality is a device for brilliantly conveying the barrenness of contemporary America. The book is absurdly padded with brand names? But of course: such a clever way to lampoon America as all surface.

Actually, Ellis is the 2 Live Crew of the literary set, making money from today's depraved appetite for imaginary violence against women. The desensitizing of Americans is a tragedy for an increasingly violent nation but a

market opportunity for the likes of Ellis. It may seem paradoxical to call his pornography boring, but it is. Making sadism boring may seem to be a literary achievement of sorts, but pornography always is boring, for the same reason Morrison's frenetic attempts to be "outrageous" were boring. Adult infantilism is not interesting, other than clinically.

However, Norman Mailer offers an equivocal defense of Ellis served up (in *Vanity Fair*) with wheezy bromides ("Without serious art the universe is doomed") and the faintest possible praise: The novel "is not written so badly that one can reject it with clear conscience." Mailer says it is a "serious" book, a "black comedy." Useful, too. "Art serves us best precisely at that point where it can shift our sense of what is possible." Ah. Perhaps that is the purpose of the rat in the vagina. Mailer's idea seems to be that the book is provoked by, and needed by, our rotten society. Ours is "a world which, by spiritual measure, if we could

measure it, might be worse than any of the worlds preceding it."

Mailer limps to a lame, utilitarian conclusion: perhaps "American Psycho" will prevent sadistic crimes. (Harmless catharsis for potential homicidal maniacs?) Ellis's shockingness may be, Mailer thinks, therapeutic for us all, blasting society out of its death-of-the-spirit that has been caused by greed, Reagan, etc. "Ellis," says Mailer, "wants to break through steel walls." Go for it, Bret: Break on through to the other side.

Myth of the Sixties: Ellis is, as Morrison was, his own fault. If society has made some small contribution to such shambles, it is this. Ellis in his way, and Morrison in his, illustrate a particular fate for certain youths. In Randall Jarrell's novel "Pictures from an Institution" a foreign visitor says, "You Americans do not rear children, you *incite* them; you give them food and shelter

and applause." The problem is juvenophilia. It is the foolishness of listening for wisdom from the mouths of babes and hoping that youthful vigor (the favorite word along the New Frontier when the Sixties were aborning) will liberate by smashing suffocating old structures. Remember the Founding Father, Chuck Berry: "Hail, hail, rock and roll, deliver me from the days of old."

"The planet is screaming for change, Morrison," says one of *The Doors* in Stone's movie. "We have to make the myths." The central myth of the Sixties was that the wretched excess was really a serious quest for new values. And there always will be a few who seek salvation from cathartic rock music, orgasmic politics and pornography masquerading as social profundity. Today there are many people who are willing to plunk down good money to see Morrison brought back to life, and death, for two hours. But for today's audiences, Stone's loving re-creation of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district is just a low-rent Williamsburg, an interesting artifact but no place for a pilgrimage. As the years pass, more and more Americans will say, "The Sixties? I never was there—but I saw the movie." The Sixties are dead. Not a moment too soon. ■

KEN REGAN—CAMERA 5



Jim Morrison