Paper Cuts:

HOLLYWOOD'S TREATMENT OF SCANDALOUS LITERATURE

BY BRANDON GRIGGS

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Three-fourths of the way through "American Psycho," Bret Easton Ellis' notorious 1991 novel, Wall Street yuppie-turned-serial killer Patrick Bateman brings two young women to his Upper East Side apartment. Bateman plies both with wine and Ecstasy, choreographs sex between them and a strap-on dildo, then produces a butcher knife. Elizabeth, the first victim, stumbles into the kitchen, blood spurting from her jugular onto the fancy oak paneling, and collapses on the floor, where Bateman rubs his erect penis in her blood. He then ties Christie, the second victim, to the bed and drops lit matches onto her stomach before electrocuting her with jumper cables clamped to her breasts.

In the film adaptation of "American Psycho" that hit theaters in April 2000, this scene unfolds quite differently. After some fleeting (and dildo-less) sex, Bateman grapples with Elizabeth under the bedsheets until her moans turn to screams. Bateman emerges from the sheets, his mouth dripping blood, and chases a terrified Christie through the apartment. She opens a door to reveal a closet full of dismembered bodies and severed heads, then flees into a corridor, followed by a naked Bateman wielding a roaring chainsaw. Christie dashes down a circular stairwell and seems on the verge of escape when Bateman drops the chainsaw on her from three floors above.

In this way, director Mary Harron (who also co-wrote the script) shifts the scene's emphasis on torture and sexual perversion to a single act of cinematic violence that is startling, outrageous and, yes, comic—reinforcing her treatment of the novel as satire.

Harron's "American Psycho" is the most recent example of a postmodern cultural truth: Movie adaptations of controversial novels are rarely as disturbing—or as debated—as the books from which they came.

First, as our society matures and artists keep testing the boundaries of acceptable subject matter, audiences have grown increasingly unfazed by graphic sex or violence. In recent decades, high-profile books and films have explored such previously taboo topics as incest, child sexual abuse and male-on-male rape. Material that seemed shocking in print appears dated and tame a decade or two later when it appears onscreen. There is usually at least several years' lag time between a novel's publication and the debut of its film adaption—with controversial books, this period is often much longer—giving audiences time to grow inured to once-startling subject matter. Hubert Selby Jr.'s sexually explicit "Last Exit to Brooklyn" was banned in England upon its publication in 1964; when a film based upon the novel appeared 25 years later, it caused not a whimper of protest.

Second, despite the common notion advanced by religious conservatives that recent films have plumbed the depths of every depravity, the fact is that Hollywood's bottom-line mentality and the MPAA rating system limits most mainstream films' sexual content (although apparently not their violence). Although ostensibly set up to aid parents in choosing films, the MPAA was also established overtly as a self-policing system in order to placate the public and avoid government intervention. Sexually explicit films get slapped with an NC-17 rating, which, while often good for publicity (see 1995's infamous "Showgirls"), is considered box-office poison. Most major movie theater chains refuse to screen NC-17 films, relegating them to a handful of art-house

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theaters where they struggle to break even. This, for better or worse, has a policing effect on filmmakers: Even the most provocative director, under studio orders not to exceed the milder R rating, can push the envelope only so far. It's not difficult to find material on bestiality, incest or pedophilia in America, but it won't be found in a Hollywood movie released to 2,000 theaters. Even independent films, which typically take more artistic risks than studio movies, have financial backers who are reluctant to see deviant subject matter limit the potential return on their investment.

Finally, and most interestingly, are the differences in the ways audiences absorb the printed word versus the moving image. Books are consumed in a solitary pact between author and reader. Moviegoing, on the other hand, is a collective experience. Watching a film in a crowded theater tends to distance the viewer from the material. A reader coming across a disturbing passage in a book can linger on the words or turn away from the page to let their impact sink in. But cinematic images flash past in a stream, each one canceling its predecessor. We have little time to consider what we've witnessed before we're on to the next scene.

These fleeting images pack the power to disturb—if they depict something we've never seen before. "Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel," Susan Sontag writes in her book, "On Photography." The same argument applies to movies. Filmgoers nearly fainted when Anthony Perkins stabbed Janet Leigh in the shower in Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho." Twenty years later, a razor-wielding Michael Caine interrupted Nancy Allen's shower in Brian DePalma's "Dressed to Kill," and audiences merely squirmed (or smiled knowingly at the reference).

"Unfortunately, the ante keeps getting raised—partly through the very proliferation of such images of horror," Sontag writes. "Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings. The sense of taboo which makes us indignant and sorrowful is not much sturdier than the sense of taboo that regulates the definition of what is obscene."

In this way, Sontag stands on its head the common assumption that words by their very nature cannot carry the same force of a photograph or film. To most people, photography still represents raw, unfiltered truth, while literature is a system of signs and symbols distanced from actuality. It's no accident that the biggest NEA controversies of the '90s surrounded live performers and the photos of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. No written works came under attack.

Photography's ability to shock is fleeting, however. By showing us what goes on inside characters' heads, literature can probe dark subject matter in much greater depth than the movies and with infinitely more disturbing results. A novel like "Crime and Punishment" explores murder and its moral consequences through the tormented psyche of Raskolnikov; in this way, Dostoevsky forces the reader to participate in the crime.

Film, on the other hand, cannot convey thought directly. When a filmmaker wants to climb inside a character's head, he must construct a flashback or a dream sequence, or employ the more cumbersome device of voice-over narration. Film, being a medium of surfaces, can for the most part only record behavior.

In absorbing a film, a moviegoer is limited to the finite images chosen by the director. Nobody walks out of a movie theater replaying images that were not shown onscreen. Readers, on the other hand, are bound only by the limits of their imaginations. Whatever horrors audiences witness onscreen are no match for the unspeakable acts cooked up by the mind of a helpless reader. Moviegoers witness disturbing images concocted by others; readers supply such disturbing images themselves.

"I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who

seduced me," confides obsessive narrator Humbert Humbert in a key passage of Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel, "Lolita." Depending on the reader's perspective, this sentence conjures images that anger, sadden, repel or arouse—perhaps even all of these things simultaneously.

"Lolita" posed a delicate challenge to anyone seeking to adapt it for the screen. Child molestation in the early 1960s was an unspeakable subject, and Nabokov's novel was filtered through the refined, witty and unreliable narrative voice of a middle-aged pedophile. After American publishers refused to touch the novel, "Lolita" was first issued in 1955 by a small press in Paris. As Nabokov wrote in 1956, New York publishers' rejection of the novel "was based not on my treatment of the theme but on the theme itself."

When "Lolita" finally appeared in the United States in 1958, many critics did not see what the fuss was about. "The novel's scandal-tinted history and its subject . . . inevitably conjure up expectations of pornography," wrote Charles Rolo in a review that year in *The Atlantic Monthly*. "But there is not a single obscene term in 'Lolita,' and aficionados of erotica are likely to find it a dud."

Nevertheless, the novel's subject matter forced Stanley Kubrick to tread lightly when making his "Lolita" in 1962. Working loosely from a screenplay by Nabokov, Kubrick admitted that his fear of Hollywood censorship kept him from depicting details of Humbert's sexual obsession with his 12-year-old stepdaughter. James Mason played Humbert as a weak, befuddled professor while Sue Lyon looked too old and self-aware to be convincing as the object of his desire.

The seduction scene, a masterpiece of subtlety in the novel, is further watered down on film. The Kubrick version cuts Lolita's coquettish reference to incest, places Humbert on a separate cot instead of in bed with Lolita, and erases all but the faintest suggestion of sex.

"Why don't we play a game? I played it [at camp] with Charlie. You sure you can't guess what game I'm talking about?" asks Lyon, kneeling by Mason's cot in a chaste, ankle-length nightgown and stroking his hair with her finger. As she shifts her body closer to Mason, Kubrick fades to black. The couple never even kiss in the film; their subsequent couplings are suggested only by Humbert painting her toenails. "I regret that the film could not be more erotic," Kubrick later said.

Thirty-five years later, one might expect America to be ready for a more explicit "Lolita" from Adrian Lyne, director of such sexually charged films as "Fatal Attraction" and "9 1/2 Weeks." Yet despite little nudity, the use of a 19-year-old body double for 15-year-old actress Dominique Swain and a respectable "R" rating, no major Hollywood studio would release Lyne's 1997 film. (It was eventually aired the next year on the cable network Showtime and in a few dozen art-house theaters.) In other words, Nabokov's point, made 40 years earlier, would still seem valid: Issues of pedophilia and incest remain taboo, regardless of how they are treated.

The Lyne remake, scripted by Stephen Schiff, was indeed sexually franker than the Kubrick version. The seduction scene ends with Swain straddling Jeremy Irons' Humbert and unbuttoning his pajama bottoms. "I guess I'm going to have to show you everything," she says, removing her retainer. In the car later that day, Swain asks Irons to stop at a gas station. "I hurt inside," she says—a brazen line not found in the book.

Neither film, however, comes close to capturing the ironic, confessional and ultimately pitiful tone of Humbert's narration in the novel. As critic Michael Wood noted in *The New York Review of Books*, "The difficulty with [adapting] 'Lolita' is not that it is an immoral book, but that it is soaked in Humbert's morality, that it leaves us scarcely anywhere else to go."

Thanks to Nabokov's sleight of hand as a prose stylist, we feel sympathy for Humbert even as we abhor his possession of Lolita, and this makes us uncomfortable. As with "Crime and Punishment," this subjectivity of the reader's experience makes "Lolita" disturbing, makes the reader, in effect, collusive with Humbert. Filmmakers could approach this effect by casting a sympathetic star as Humbert, one viewers might identify with. But Hollywood's skittishness over "Lolita" stemmed from questions of "objective" cinematic

treatment—how much was shown—and not by the popular appeal of actors Mason or Irons in softening the stereotype of the monstrous sex offender.

Like “Lolita,” “A Clockwork Orange” is a disturbing book that unfolds through the distinctive viewpoint of a morally complex narrator. And like Nabokov’s novel, the narrator presented problems for Stanley Kubrick when he adapted “A Clockwork Orange” to the screen nine years after “Lolita.”

A savage fable about good and evil and the meaning of human freedom, “A Clockwork Orange” was first published in 1962. Alex, the novel’s protagonist, is a 15-year-old psychotic thug roaming the streets with his droogs (buddies) in a futuristic England. The novel’s most distinctive feature is Nadsat, a private English slang spoken by Alex and his hoodlums. “Those two were unplattied and smecking fit to crack in no time at all, and they thought it the bolshiest fun to viddy old Uncle Alex standing there all nagoy and pan-handled, squirting the hypodermic like some bare doctor,” says Alex, describing his sexual encounter with a pair of young women. For readers of the novel, the language has a distancing effect that makes the sex and violence more palatable. “Nadsat. . .was meant to muffle the raw response we expect from pornography,” wrote Burgess in 1986. “It turns the book into a linguistic adventure. People preferred the film because they are scared, rightly, of language.”

After he clubs an old woman to death, Alex is captured by the government, which “reforms” him by forcing him to watch movies filled with graphic sex and violence. The newly docile Alex is eventually returned to the streets, now helpless against his revenge-minded former victims. “It seems priggish to deny my intentions in writing the book were to titillate the nastier propensities of my readers,” said Burgess. “But the book does have a moral lesson, and it is. . .the fundamental importance of moral choice. It is as inhuman to be totally good as it is to be totally evil. Evil has to exist along with good, in order that moral choice may operate.”

While he kept its structure and themes, Kubrick departed from the novel repeatedly in making his 1971 film. By casting Malcolm McDowell as

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Alex, he changed the character from a teen-ager to a young adult, thereby making Alex's behavior less shocking. Imagine the public response if a 15-year-old-looking actor raped and robbed the way Alex does on film. Kubrick also toned down the Nadsat language, except for snippets of Alex's voice-over ("Oh, my brothers. . ."), and stylized the book's violence with humor, musical references and tricky camerawork. Early in the novel, for example, Alex and his droogs break into a writer's home, beat the man to a bloody pulp and gang-rape his wife. Kubrick's version of the scene, which ends before the rape begins, shows Alex skipping about the house, repeatedly kicking the prone writer while chirping "Singin' in the Rain." The pairing of the cheerful song with the sadistic imagery somehow makes the violence less brutal but more unsettling.

In its depictions of the Ludovico brainwashing treatment, "A Clockwork Orange" also makes a statement about the power of filmed images to repel. Instead of reading accounts of atrocities to Alex to turn him from violence, the state's scientists show him movies: snuff films, Nazi propaganda films, films of Japanese soldiers torturing prisoners during World War II. Yet these celluloid images alone are not enough to disgust, Burgess and Kubrick suggest: They must be combined with nausea-inducing drugs to produce a Pavlovian negative response.

The film is more disturbing than the original novel in one way: the ending. The British version of the novel contains 21 chapters; in the last chapter, Alex matures and renounces his sadistic past. But Burgess's New York publisher considered the chapter a sellout and refused to issue the novel in America unless Burgess cut it. Reluctantly, the author agreed. "The 21st chapter gives the novel the quality of genuine fiction, an art founded on the principle that human beings change," Burgess wrote in 1986. Kubrick found the extra chapter "unconvincing and inconsistent with the style and intent of the book" and chose to film the American version of the novel, which ends with Chapter 20 and a sardonic Alex vowing to resume his violent ways. In this way, Kubrick's film closes on a more threatening note.

Unlike the debates about "Lolita," protests over the film version of "A Clockwork Orange" were fueled precisely by the fear of audiences' subjective identification with the protagonist—the possibility that young viewers would idolize a violent and glamorous Alex unreformed or dulled by comfy middle age. In America, the film initially received an "X" rating but was eventually given an "R." In England, "A Clockwork Orange" was blamed for inspiring several "copycat" crimes, forcing Burgess, despite his objections to the film, to defend it. In response to the clamor, Kubrick pulled the film from British release. The subjective nature of "A Clockwork Orange" and its narrative viewpoint fanned the fears of film boards.

In contrast, the one theme of scandalous novels that has been consistently muted during their journey to the screen—regardless of narrative style—has been overt homosexual activity. Witness three different novels from three different decades: "Last Exit to Brooklyn," "Naked Lunch" and "Crash." All explore homosexuality in explicit, sometimes violent passages of gay sex. Their resulting film adaptions preserve heterosexual sex scenes but play down or cut entirely images of sex between men, bleeding the stories' gay characters of their sexuality. In Hollywood, there is scandalous literary material (potentially lucrative and therefore treated with a peculiar mixture of caution and titillation), and there is explicitly gay scandalous material (which is always marginalized or completely removed).

The subject of an obscenity trial in England, "Last Exit to Brooklyn" was first published stateside in 1964, when poet Allen Ginsberg said the book "should explode like a rusty hellish bombshell over America." In its review, *The New York Times* called it "a vision of hell so stern it cannot be chuckled or raged aside."

Selby's novel is a bleak portrait of 1950s Brooklyn, a squalid, unforgiving world of shuttered warehouses, abandoned cars and cruel street punks. Against the backdrop of a factory workers' strike, the novel's three main characters all meet tragic ends. Georgette, a homosexual junkie, overdoses. Tralala, a streetwalker, is brutally gang-raped one night by a drunken mob. And Harry, a married but closeted strike leader, is caught propositioning a boy

and is beaten to a bloody pulp. Selby describes these events in unflinching, vernacular-filled prose that contributes to the overall sense of despair.

The novel's frank depiction of gay sex was bold for its time. Selby devotes almost 40 pages to an all-night drag queen party at which Harry and another man force two transvestites into a bedroom and have rough anal sex with them. Around his hard-drinking factory buddies, Harry blusters about how he hates "queers," but later he succumbs to tender, new sexual pleasures with a drag queen named Alberta.

Little of this appears in Uli Edel's 1989 film adaptation, which preserves the novel's violent, hopeless tone but not its raw homosexual content. When Harry falls hard for a transvestite named Regina, Edel portrays Harry's yearning but not his sexual reawakening. The postwar Berlin production design and Mark Knopfler's haunting score create a mood of epic tragedy, but while Edel's camera lingers on the novel's atrocities, he fails to provide the sexual context that gives them their power on the page.

In the film, when Harry, abandoned by Regina, tries to fellate a 10-year-old boy, he is beaten mercilessly by his fellow workers. Edel follows this scene with the rape of Tralala, played by Jennifer Jason Leigh (yet another in her long line of victimized women roles). The tough-talking Tralala appears in only 21 pages of the novel's midsection, but Edel expands her story and weaves it throughout the film. In Selby's novel, the gang rape is vicious and harrowing: hooligans drag the drunken Tralala to the back seat of an abandoned car. Three pages later, she is bloodied, battered, violated with a broomstick and left to die while her drinking pals pass by in a cab, watching and laughing. Edel moves the rape to the end of the film, tones down its brutality and adds a rare note of tenderness by inventing a teen-age boy who chases away the last of the rapists and cradles the dying Tralala in his arms. But the scene, coming immediately on the heels of Harry's demise, leaves us numb instead of shattered.

Edel may play down the sexuality of Selby's gay characters, but at least they are present in his film. The same cannot be said for David

Cronenberg's version of "Naked Lunch," William S. Burroughs' surrealistic, stream-of-consciousness rant on drug addiction, deviant sexuality and death. Published in Paris in 1959, Burroughs' work was the last major novel subjected to a trial in the United States on charges of obscenity. Burroughs makes references throughout to castration, disembowelment, necrophilia, gang rape, sex between children, a man feeding his wife down a garbage disposal and endless variations on bodily fluids, functions and orifices. He invents such hallucinatory flights of fancy as Mugwumps, purplish creatures with beaks and near-constant erections, a man with a talking asshole and Steely Dan, a strap-on dildo from which the rock band took its name. Burroughs claims not to recall writing most of the novel, which was drawn from diaries detailing his drug-induced visions. "Junkies have no shame," he writes. "They are impervious to the repugnance of others."

The novel's most repugnant passages involve bizarre sex fantasies with boys hung from nooses until they get involuntary erections. In one such scene, a Mugwump rapes a boy to death. In another, clearly derived from the dark fantasies of the Marquis de Sade's novels, a hundred naked boys hang quivering from ropes to be used by party guests as sex toys. A few pages later, a woman impales herself on a hanging victim's erect penis, then chews away his genitals. Burroughs claims he wrote these passages "to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric and disgusting anachronism that it is."

None of these images appeared in Cronenberg's 1991 film. Faced with adapting a plotless, fragmentary book, Cronenberg chose to blend scenes from "Naked Lunch" with details from Burroughs' life and other Burroughs works to create a film that became a response to the novel. "The very fact that it's unfilmable means I'm free to invent something new," Cronenberg said in a 1992 interview. Cronenberg created pale, alien-like Mugwumps and honored Burroughs' talking asshole by inventing large insect-typewriter hybrids that speak from puckered orifices on their backs. As a result, actor Peter Weller, who plays a Burroughs-like writer named William Lee, spends much of the film arguing with his typewriter. "I wanted the typewriter to become, without get-

ting too Freudian, your unconscious," Cronenberg said. The director eliminates the novel's violence, most of its sex and almost all of its homosexual imagery while capturing something of the spirit of the surreal Burroughs universe. Stripped of Burroughs' most nightmarish visions, the film is more creepy than disturbing.

Cronenberg, no stranger to dark material, took on another controversial project five years later when he filmed an adaptation of "Crash," J.G. Ballard's futuristic novel of people sexually aroused by car accidents. Published in 1973, the novel was a hit in England but a curious flop in the United States, home to the world's most pervasive automobile culture.

The book opens with narrator James Ballard accidentally smashing his sedan into another car, killing its driver. Recuperating in a hospital, Ballard forms a strange erotic bond with Helen, the dead man's widow. Through her, Ballard meets the mysterious Vaughan, a scarred accident survivor who gets a sexual charge from photographing car crashes and plotting collisions. Ballard grows intoxicated with this dark lifestyle and shares his desires with his nymphomaniac wife, Catherine, who encourages him in his new fetish. Soon Ballard is cruising city streets in Vaughan's convertible Lincoln, stopping at accident scenes and watching in the rear-view mirror as Vaughan copulates with prostitutes in the back seat.

"I like to think of 'Crash' as the first pornographic novel based on technology," said Ballard in a 1997 interview. "The idea of the car crash is sexually intriguing. By sex, I mean all those aggressive sexual energies that compel some young men to chase women drivers who dare to overtake them." Using deliberately clinical language ("pubis," "vulva," "rectum"), Ballard chronicles an escalating series of explicit sexual encounters—almost all of them in cars—between Ballard and Helen, Ballard and Catherine, Catherine and Vaughan and even Ballard and Vaughan. Through loveless couplings between people whose bruised and broken bodies have yet to fully heal, these scenes explore the disturbing notion of finding sexual pleasure amid pain and destruction.

A bravely faithful treatment of the novel, Cronenberg's NC-17-rated film was banned from many theaters in England for almost a year; in America, Ted Turner tried unsuccessfully to block its 1996 release through his distributor New Line Entertainment. "It's not a violent movie," Cronenberg said at the time. "It's conceptually violent, but not physically on the screen." Except for the car crashes, which are intentionally abrupt and jarring, Cronenberg's film unfolds in a languid, dreamily detached style. His camera glides seductively over mangled metal, hissing radiators and gyrating bodies while keeping a chilly, voyeuristic distance.

Like Ballard, Cronenberg resists the temptation to justify his characters' behavior or place it within any conventional moral framework. He refused to add voice-over narration, which he felt would have had a comforting effect on the audience.

"For me, this movie is a kind of existentialist romance," Cronenberg said. "The characters have found that the old forms of love and sex no longer work. [They] have to reinvent sexuality, eroticism, love. And they arrive at a very strange place. But in a way, it's a bizarrely happy ending."

There is no such happy ending in "American Psycho," a novel that even before its publication was widely reviled—mostly by people who never read it. The controversy over Ellis' book is well-documented: Simon & Schuster grew squeamish at the last minute in 1990 and refused to publish the manuscript, Gloria Steinem and others protested its treatment of women, and reviewers savaged it ("the most loathsome offering of the season," sniffed *The New York Times*). Snapped up by Knopf and published the following year, the book is now in its 34th printing.

There is no denying the book's shock value. Over the course of the novel's increasingly gruesome 399 pages, Bateman cuts out a woman's tongue, saws a woman's head off and sexually penetrates it, rips a woman's throat out with his bare hands, inserts a starving rat in a woman's vagina and eats a woman's remains while cooking her head in a microwave. Between—and occasionally during—these depraved acts, Bateman reveals his soulless yuppie core

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by obsessing at length about his designer wardrobe and the music of Phil Collins. "The murder sequences are so over-the-top, so baroque in their violence, it seems hard to take them in a literal context," said Ellis in a 1991 interview. "For all the book's surface reality, it is still satirical, semi-comic and—dare I say it?—playful."

Harron, the director, agreed. Her "American Psycho" opens cleverly with a close-up of red liquid drops landing on a white background. Blood? No—raspberry sauce drizzled on a plate of nouvelle cuisine. "The story. . .was not a slasher novel," she wrote in *The New York Times*. "It was a surreal satire, and although many scenes were excruciatingly violent, it was clearly intended as a critique of male misogyny, not an endorsement of it."

Most filmmakers who tackle disturbing novels, reluctant to appear sleazy, will bend over backwards to emphasize a book's Big Ideas instead of its depravity, thus softening their movie's shock value. Harron, who saw "American Psycho" as a commentary on the status-crazed '80s, was no exception. If she had faithfully recreated the atrocities of the novel, her movie would have been unwatchable. Instead, by lowering its body count and excising the worst of its violence, Harron allowed the novel's true meaning to appear. In the book, Bateman slaughters 14 people; in the movie he kills four, not counting a hallucinatory shooting spree that appears to occur only in his mind.

Like the novel, Harron's film flirts with the suggestion that all Bateman's murders were imagined. And the climax of Harron's film, like that of Ellis' book, suggests Bateman's homicidal spree will continue. "I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape," Bateman says in voice-over lines lifted directly from the novel. But Harron departs from the book in one key respect that softens its ending. In the novel, Bateman's devoted secretary Jean remains ignorant of Bateman's true nature and his crimes go unpunished. Harron concocts a scene in which a horrified Jean discovers an appointment calendar filled with his psychotic doodlings—suggesting that Bateman's actions will have consequences.

Rick Marin, in *The New York Times* on the eve of the movie's release, posed the question: If "American Psycho" were published today, would anyone care? Was the novel a victim of a timid, politically correct culture that now seems a quaint memory? In the decade since, we have witnessed Anthony Hopkins licking his lips over a meal of human liver, rival girlfriends calling each other "bitch" on "The Jerry Springer Show" and the president receiving blowjobs in the Oval Office from a White House intern.

Perhaps it's no surprise that, despite a blizzard of publicity, Harron's "American Psycho" came and went without protest. It's not just that the movie is tamer than the book. It takes more to shock us now. With the exception of "A Clockwork Orange," which was an obscure cult novel when first released, none of the film adaptations discussed here incited anywhere near the controversy that greeted their literary progenitors, in part because few moviegoers saw them. Each year, urban arthouses show a handful of small films that would offend much of mainstream America; these films cause little fuss because mainstream America remains oblivious to them. While all the novels cited here were best-sellers, none of the resulting films could be considered box-office hits. In an era when mediocre studio movies routinely earn upwards of $50 million, "Crash" collected only $3.2 million in North American theaters while "Naked Lunch," "Last Exit to Brooklyn" and the "Lolita" remake earned even less.

Except for "American Psycho," which appeared in some 1,200 theaters, few of these films even got a widespread release. In this way, they were marginalized—shunted to the fringes of American popular culture. Of the filmgoers who did see "Crash" or "Naked Lunch," few were outraged. Chances are

anyone offended by one of these novels did not bother to see its film version. So the audience for these movies was limited to fans of the novels, fans of the actors or directors, people drawn by rave reviews or people intrigued by the books' scandalous reputations. Such moviegoers were unlikely to find the film more disturbing than they bargained for.

High-profile Oscar-winning films such as "The Silence of the Lambs"—adapted from Thomas Harris's thriller—are much more likely to incite debate. In fact, Jonathan Demme's 1991 film is a rare example of a movie that proved more controversial than its source novel, largely because the movie reached a mass audience unfamiliar with Hannibal Lecter's cannibalism or Anthony Hopkins' ability to deliver a chilling performance.

Taboos arise when our moral boundaries are violated, when we're forced to consider something we forbid ourselves to speak of, let alone think about. As a society we rarely agree on what these taboos are. But it's clear that traditional sex or violence alone is not enough to shock many readers or filmgoers today. In fact, controversy over recent Hollywood films has more often erupted over religion—"The Last Temptation of Christ," "Priest," "Dogma"—suggesting the American public's threshold for sex and violence is higher than its tolerance for blasphemy. Organized religion is more tightly woven into the societal fabric of mainstream America than, say, homosexuality—or the religious lobby is simply able to arrange more systematic, persistent protests than the gay lobby. So for the moviegoer at the suburban multiplex, a film viewed as sacrilegious hits closer to home than a film about New York transvestites.

Hollywood's treatment of violence and sex is often highly stylized, even romanticized. Bullets pierce bodies in slow-motion red bursts; couples make love under flattering lighting to seductive music. This aesthetic approach, witnessed in Lyne's gauzy "Lolita," Edel's elegiac "Last Exit to Brooklyn" and Cronenberg's sleek "Crash," lends an artsy sheen of respectability that bleeds the material of its raw power. Burgess's "A Clockwork Orange" created a grubby, poverty-stricken vision of the future, while Kubrick's version is all Pop Art fashion and production design. It's no accident that one of the most controversial films of the 1990s, Larry Clark's "Kids," presented its teenage characters' atrocities in an unvarnished, documentary-like style.

Besides a general watering-down of their source novels' most disturbing passages, most of these film adaptations downplay or ignore homosexual sex. The novel "Crash," for example, establishes an erotic charge between Ballard and Vaughan from the beginning; near the end of the novel, the two men have anal sex in Vaughan's parked car under a highway overpass. On film, Ballard's attraction to Vaughan is kept under wraps until the sex scene, which stops at open-mouth kissing. Even "A Clockwork Orange," a novel with little homosexual subtext, contains a scene near its end in which Alex's droogs gang-rape him. There is no such scene in Kubrick's film.

These examples suggest that while gay sex is increasingly common in mainstream literature, it remains almost unheard of in studio movies, whose financiers fear alienating the wider, straight audience. Openly gay characters can appear in films as long as they keep their clothes on. Hollywood wants to titillate filmgoers, not offend them. This reluctance has little to do with morality—few filmmakers are personally bothered by homosexuality—and everything to do with economics.

In Hollywood, the greatest taboo remains box-office failure.