

Review #59 : *The Illusionist* (2006)

Edward Norton and Jessica Biel

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0xO64icGSY>



Magic usually doesn't translate well onto the screen, since the movies themselves are illusions, in an age of computer-generated special effects, when **every image is susceptible to endless manipulation**. Yet the surreal feats that Eisenheim executes, undiluted by obvious cinematographic embellishment, still produce a tremendous effect on screen because they have an **aesthetic elegance that transcends trickery**. Even if they're fake, they look like works of art. And somehow, as Pablo Picasso once said, art is a lie that tells the truth.

Tricks of the eye, mechanical illusions, artistic skills, philosophical principles, metaphysical questions – all those subjects are at the mysterious, romantic heart of *The Illusionist*, directed by **Neil Burger** and based on *Eisenheim the Illusionist* by **Steven Millhauser**.

Like the film *F for Fake*, the delightful **meditation on art and deception** by **Orson Welles**, *The Illusionist* places the film you're watching at the center of the illusion. There's an irony inherent in making a movie about magic, since the photographic medium is discontinuous and subject to **post-production manipulations** beyond those that could be created before a live audience. But it also **focuses your attention elsewhere**, on the illusory properties of movies and storytelling, and how much we love to be dazzled by illusions in the realm of art.

SYNOPSIS

Set at the turn of the century in Vienna, this fable, told mostly in flashback by Inspector Uhl (**Paul Giamatti**), concerns the political and personal duel between Eisenheim the Illusionist (**Edward Norton**) and Crown Prince Leopold (**Rufus Sewell**). Poised between them is the beautiful Sophie von Teschen (**Jessica Biel**), childhood soul mate of young Eisenheim (**Aaron Johnson Taylor**) and possible future princess of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Leopold sees himself as a man of reason, certain that Eisenheim is a fraud. But the enigmatic Eisenheim may be an even better politician than the volatile Machiavellian prince. He lets his illusions speak for themselves, making no overt assertions but letting his audience interpret for themselves – a tactic that only enhances his mystical renown, and his **sway over the enraptured Viennese** populace. Humiliated more than once and in more than one way, Leopold sees **Eisenheim's popularity as a political threat** to his plans to become king. Furthermore, Eisenheim repeatedly challenges the prince's authority in his act.

Uhl, a narrator whose perspective is limited by what he thinks he has pieced together about Eisenheim and his **shrouded past**, is, like Sophie, caught up in the **tension between the magician and the monarch**. He's not an omniscient story teller – like any detective, he just fills in any gaps in the case with his **instincts and imagination** – allowing us to identify very easily although manipulating us at the same time and focusing our attention elsewhere.

REVIEW

The movie sets up a **fascinating parable about art, illusion and politics**, and the **misty boundaries between them**. When the magician's manager introduces him by invoking '*the forces of the universe*' – life and death, space and time, fate and chance – those are, indeed, mere hyperbole, or simply the stuff that dreams – art, and illusions – are made of.

THE GOOD

If *The Illusionist* approaches the realm of art, its spell is heightened by a subtly **mesmerizing score by Philip Glass** and cinematographer Dick Pope's **flickering, sepia-tinted visuals**, evoking early motion pictures and **19th century daguerreotypes**. For instance, in the scenes from young Eisenheim's childhood, the **edges of the frame blur into shadows**, surrounding the picture with mystery. And as the movie peels back layers of its core *conundrum*, the images and their colours become clearer and brighter.

In the early days of movies, the **novelty of photographic illusions wore off** as audiences became accustomed to the conventions of the new medium. Film-makers then discovered perhaps the greatest cinematic special effect ever invented : the **movie star**. The **human face**, when well-cast, can be the **most spell-binding of subjects**. And thus faces are at the heart of the dazzling illusions in *The Illusionist* like mirrors in which the real magic is reflected. The screenplay and direction aren't particularly strong, so it guess it wouldn't have been half as entertaining without the right actors.

As Sophie, **Jessica Biel** is beguiling yet not ephemeral and 'Victorianly' feminine enough. **Rufus Sewell** as the moustachioed Leopold is at once formidable and ridiculous, fearsome and pathetic. **Edward Norton** is an actor of fierce intelligence, and this role perfectly fits his disturbing inscrutability. His face, with obsidian eyes that take in everything but reflect nothing, and a tight little mouth framed by a sleek black mane, is an impenetrable Van Dyke mask of either innocence or cunning – you're never sure which. His dark, penetrating irises conjure some of the film's best effects. Few musical notes are buried in his flat, dry speaking voice, an ideal instrument for conveying an **ominous inner deadness**. Throughout the movie Eisenheim remains a **man of mystery** whose few, carefully chosen words project a wary – possibly phony – omniscience.

But the film depends on **Paul Giamatti** as the audience surrogate. He is in fact introduced as the would-be villain, striding down a hellish corridor lined with severed animal heads and antlers, but he soon becomes the **most human and likable presence** in the film. His expressions and line readings alone are worth watching, as they convey Uhl's uncomfortable position on the horns of a devilish dilemma between Eisenheim and the Prince, or his Holmesian delight in assembling another section of the puzzle. The whole magic show might break down under scrutiny, but it certainly **holds you in its spell** for a time...

THE LESS GOOD

Pity, though, that the film raises so many philosophically rich ideas about **faith versus sight** and the **mind's ability to see what it wants to see**, only to use those elements in the service of a tepid love story. *The Illusionist* never really explains how Eisenheim carries out his most impressive illusions, nor is it much interested in the 'false hope' Eisenheim acknowledges stoking within his most ardent admirers. During the balcony scene, when people ask him if he can really raise the dead from their graves, Eisenheim doesn't make any overt assertions but keeps things in a blur.

Rather than contemplate deeper issues, the story elects to **focus on a villainous cretin and his mad quest to control another person**. We've seen this before, and despite the nice performances, a warmed-over feeling about the plot persists.

Thirdly, the **twist** – or rather, the **reassessment** of all that's come before – is too much. Have we been fooled? Yes, that is part of the illusion. But it **verges on manipulation**, and every viewer will decide for themselves if *The Illusionist* is, or not, a rewarding experience after all.

THE BAD

For the Christian, the movie does pose some problems as well :

1 – Fornication

First, the hero and heroine are shown having sex on... their first date. They did know each other as children, but haven't seen each other for years. Naturally, the first thing they do when they get back together is roll in the hay. The scene is done without any nudity – just bare backs and close-ups of skin – or explicit sexual movements, but it is nonetheless a typical and disturbing trend that Hollywood knows of no other way to depict love. For Hollywood, romance equals sex ! When is it going to change ?

2 – Violence

There is also some violence, although nothing that one doesn't see on television daily. There is, however, a shot of the woman's dead body that might disturb some.

3 – Subversive Message

Beyond the eternal fight between the poor (shown as human, clever and with an iron fist) and the rich prince (shown as dement, weak, and a hopeless cretin), the lesson is clear : the representative of **Catholic Habsbourg Monarchy as well as authority, law and morality**, after being humiliated on numerous occasions, commits suicides in the end, while the master of deceit, the **vengeful rebel with his shadowy past and morally questionable character**, wins the lot : glory, renown, respect from an enraptured population... and he gets the girl of course. Gosh, what had the Prince done to Eisenheim... part from being engaged to Sophie ? Isn't it –from a literary point of view – a little too easy to make the poor guy so hateful that Sophie doesn't even have to make a choice ? And morally-speaking, it's quite subversive as well. Why should the prince be the baddy here ? Part from being ill-tempered he isn't a mass killer or a fanatic like the Emperor in *Star Wars* or whatever villains usually are...

4 – Scientific Illusion, Artistic Illusion and Spiritualism

The greater problem is the fact that the Illusionist is **conjuring up the dead** and making no direct answer to the asking crowd whether this is real conjuring or scientific illusion – as for his other tricks. Necromancy is of course explicitly condemned in the Bible (*Deuteronomy* 18:11, *Isaiah* 8:19 and 19:3, 1 *Samuel* 28:7). One might say of course that it's ambiguous, and that it's never said that he is *actually* conjuring the dead. Well, the question is raised anyway, and the fact that Eisenheim has also been travelling all over the world might also serve as a possible hint to his being instructed in occult arts and Spiritualism.

From my point of view, the movie does not really speak of Spiritualism. Nor does it actively promotes it. It rather **exploits the ambiguity** of the situation, based on the unawareness of the reality of such things by most movie-goers. It's just like this quite contemporary film trend that exploits exorcism as fantasy and meddle with its reality to create an **atmosphere of terror and a veil of mystery**. Anyway the ending is a blast, and most of you will probably enjoy it in particular since it relates to the matters discussed above. Do not expect a shock ending like the *Sixth Sense*, but remember that with an illusionist, nothing is what it seems...

- **Violence** : Mild
- **Sex & Nudity** : Mild
- **Profanity** : None