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'Veni Vidi Vici' Review: Ruthless Austrian Satire Takes Aim at the Superrich, Treating Capitalism as a Most Dangerous Game

Co-directors Daniel Hoesl and Julia Niemann tap a nerve with their unconventional murder mystery, which asks not who the killer is but why the system indulges (and even encourages) the 1%.

By Peter Debruge 



Courtesy of Sundance Institute

Hailing from the country that gave us such grim social critics as Michael Haneke and Ulrich Seidl (fittingly, the latter serves as a producer here), Vantablack Austrian satire [“Veni Vidi Vici”](#) opens with a senseless homicide. It’s a startling scene, no less upsetting than the Scorpio killing that kick-started [“Dirty Harry”](#) – except that in this case, the incident is calibrated as the darkest sort of comedy. Rather than picking off an unsuspecting rooftop swimmer, the serial killer does his



The movie makes no mystery of the sniper's identity, revealing it right from the jump, the way a "Columbo" episode might. And yet the authorities show zero interest in arresting the guilty party, even going so far as to toss an eyewitness out of the police station (that man winds up offing himself in exasperation). That's because the person responsible, Amon Maynard (Laurence Rupp), is a millionaire, perhaps even a billionaire, which makes him untouchable in co-directors [Daniel Hoesl](#) and [Julia Niemann](#)'s deeply cynical capitalist takedown.

From "WiNWiN" to "Davos," these two filmmakers have dedicated their careers to exposing and skewering the ultrarich, and their latest – which premieres in competition at Sundance, closely followed by an international bow in Rotterdam – is destined for a controversial festival run. Like a (less violent) version of "American Psycho" presented in the ironic, arm's-length style of double Palme d'Or winner Ruben Östlund ("The Square," "Triangle of Sadness"), "Veni Vidi Vici" is designed to be divisive.

Practically the only way not to be outraged by the movie, which piques audiences with an out-of-context Ayn Rand quote straight out of the gate ("The point is, who will stop me?"), is to view it as an allegory. That's precisely how Hoesl and Niemann intend a film where members of the 1% are free to hunt civilians for sport – an idea also floated in movies such as "Bacurau" and "Hostel." Recognizing the metaphor won't make this ruthless fable any easier to stomach as it calmly observes unrepentant Amos smugly getting away with murder.

For starters, Rupp, who plays Amos, is not an inherently repulsive screen presence, but a handsome and affable actor. Picture Austria's answer to Tom Hiddleston. His performance has been stripped of anything that might suggest a psychological motive to Amos' actions, which is one clue that the directors don't mean for the crimes to be read literally.

Look at it this way: Maybe the murders aren't really murders, but brusque, life-destroying actions – such as layoffs or equivalently callous, without-warning business decisions that do irreversible existential damage to employees, locals or anyone else that Amos (or the system) deems acceptable casualties in the pursuit of corporate profits. The movie takes us inside the Maynards' world, which mirrors the filthy rich excess photographer-cum-filmmaker Lauren Greenfield chronicled in her movies "Generation Wealth" and "The Queen of Versailles."

Shopping for a surrogate mother the way she might a new car, Amos' trophy wife (Ursina Lardi) bases her decision on photos of the various candidates, even though they'll play no part in the baby's genetic makeup. Meanwhile, the couple's adolescent daughter (Olivia Goschler) shows a chilling interest in her father's extensive collection of hunting rifles. Her fascination suggests not an implicit acceptance of Amos' serial-killer behavior, but a desire to follow in his footsteps. Capitalism, as depicted here, is inherently sociopathic. As the murders continue to claim ordinary



Just as troubling is the constant presence of a loyal butler, Alfred (Markus Schleinzer), who we learn was once a respected journalist — a detail that condemns how easily those who dedicate themselves to exposing corruption can be bought and coopted. A trusted member of the household, Alfred accompanies Amos practically everywhere, carrying his weapons and stepping in to tidy the crime scene after each killing.

The screenplay presents just two characters who could pose a threat to Amos' people-hunting spree, including idealistic journalist Volter (Dominik Warta), whose fate speaks volumes. Most of the movie is shot at a remove from the parties depicted, making it that much more difficult to identify with anyone. If "Veni Vidi Vici" sounds intense, that distance certainly dulls its edge. So too does Amos' unnervingly likable personality, which his daughter appears to have inherited — along with his near-total emotional detachment. The casting of these two characters introduces layers of complexity to such monsters.

Still, the police look the other way. Politicians scramble to accommodate Amos, embracing his plans to build Europe's largest battery factory, and even going so far as to engineer the hostile takeover he needs to accomplish said goal. The earlier Rand quotation is a clue that the filmmakers conceived "Veni Vidi Vici" as an answer to works like "The Fountainhead," illustrating the human costs of Rand's idealized form of laissez-faire capitalism.

If the film seems coldblooded, that's a misreading of Hoesl and Niemann's own politics, which hold that society should be doing more to intervene on behalf of the victims Amos so blithely claims. Their above-the-law antihero is meant to upset as he acts out a version of Donald Trump's claim that "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters, OK?" Sorry if you find a last-minute mention of Trump's name to be triggering. Indignation, not empathy, is how Hoesl and Niemann hope to stir folks to action.

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Daniel Hoesl, Julia Niemann, Sundance Film Festival, Veni Vidi Vici

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Production: (Austria) An Ulrich Seidl Filmproduktion GMBH production. (World sales: Magnify, New York.)
Producer: Ulrich Seidl.

Crew: Directors: Daniel Hoesl, Julia Niemann. Screenplay: Daniel Hoesl. Camera: Gerald Kerkletz. Editor: Gerhard Daurer. Music: Manuel Riegler, Gerhard Daurer.

With: Laurence Rupp, Ursina Lardi, Olivia Goschler, Kyra Kraus, Tamaki Uchida, Dominik Warta.

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