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American Animals (15)

Dir: Bart Layton

**Starring: Evan Peters, Barry Keoghan, Blake Jenner,
Jared Abrahamson**

Sponsor: The Venue cinema

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Synopsis: Lexington, Kentucky, 2003. Spencer Reinhard, studying art at Transylvania University, is given a tour of the rare books department. The librarian, Betty Jean ('BJ') Gooch, proudly shows off first editions of Audubon's 'Birds of America' and Darwin's 'On the Origin of Species'. Impressed, Spencer tells his wayward friend Warren Lipka (who studies at the nearby University of Kentucky) about them, adding that the Audubon is said to be worth \$12 million. Warren immediately proposes that they should steal it. They devise a plan that involves taser-ing BJ, and bring in two accomplices: the cerebral Eric Borsuk to help plan the heist, and fitness fanatic Charles Allen to drive the getaway car. In search of a fence, Warren travels to Amsterdam, where he meets the sinister Mr Van Der Hoek.

Back in Lexington on the 16th of December 2004, the four adopt 'old men' disguises and approach the library, only to find that BJ has visitors. The next day they try again, finding her alone; Warren and Eric (both undisguised) attack the librarian, taser her and tie her up, while Spencer keeps watch and Charles sits in the car. Unable to find the designated getaway lift, Warren and Eric stagger through the library and drop the heavy Audubon on the stairs.

In New York, Spencer offers the Darwin to a rare book dealer, who tells him to come back the next day when an expert will be available. A few days later, back in Lexington, all four are arrested. They're each sentenced to 7 years in jail.

The action is interspersed with talking head interviews with the four real life perpetrators, some of their parents and professors, and finally with BJ.

In 2012, British director Bart Layton's feature debut *The Imposter* scooped acclaim at Sundance and multiple awards, including a BAFTA. A semi-dramatised documentary, it told a true story that was hard to credit. In 1994, a 13-year-old boy, Nicholas Patrick Barclay, inexplicably vanished from his home in San Antonio, Texas. Three years later, his family received a call from police in Spain - an individual claiming to be Nicholas had turned up. His older sister Carey went to bring him home, where he was welcomed by his overjoyed family, this despite 'Nicholas' being at least 7 years too old, with no physical resemblance to the missing boy, the wrong hair colour, wrong eye colour and a strong French accent. These discrepancies, 'Nicholas' claimed, resulted from torture and brainwashing - and the Barclay family unhesitatingly believed him.

Layton told his extraordinary tale with a mix of documentary footage and dramatic reenactments, with the participants' voices often dubbed over the actors portraying them. Now, with *American Animals*, his second feature, he relates another real-life US-based drama, but this time with the balance skewed considerably more towards the dramatised approach. Once again, it was the sheer improbability of the story that drew him in. "I wanted to find out," he says, "why a group of seemingly educated young men from comfortable backgrounds would go through with a crime like this in the first place" - a crime, furthermore, for which these students possessed minimal skills, and for which the chances of success were close to zero.

The venue for this farcically botched heist was the University of Transylvania in Lexington, Kentucky. (Nothing to do with Dracula's homeland: the establishment was named for the colony of Transylvania - literally 'beyond the woods' - founded in 1775 and now part of the state of Kentucky.) The small, high-grade University prides itself on its library holdings; the jewels of this collection are first editions of John James Audubon's exquisitely illustrated *Birds of America* and Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. It's Darwin who lends the film its title, with an on-screen quote from his *magnum opus*: "it is well known that several animals, belonging to the most different classes, which inhabit the caves of...Kentucky, are blind." (To compound the irony, Kentucky is also home to the Genesis-revering Creation Museum, where Darwin's theory is routinely denounced as blasphemy.)

Layton prefaces his film with another on-screen line: "This is not based on a true story" which morphs into "This is a true story." The 'true story' is that, in December 2004, four Lexington students - Spencer Reinhard, Warren Lipka, Eric Borsuk and Charles Allen - planned to steal two priceless volumes and sell them. Two of the students, Warren and Eric, invaded the special collections unit, where they tasted and tied up the librarian, Betty Jean Gooch, and tried to carry off the books, but dropped the huge, unwieldy Audubon while making their getaway. After an abortive attempt to sell the Darwin to a New York book dealer, all four were arrested, convicted and sentenced to 7 years jail a piece.

Adopting a nonfiction/fictionalised, real-life person/actor mix similar to that of Craig Gillespie's *I, Tonya* (2017), but pushing and subverting it a stage further, Layton counterpoints his dramatization of the heist - its planning, execution and aftermath - with to-camera interviews with the actual perpetrators 14 years on, post jail. It's notable that they're filmed separately, with no group reunions - their preference, one wonders, or Layton's? Also, contrary to expected practice, all of them are a touch better looking than their movie actor counterparts.

What this approach effectively points up is a key theme in the story as Layton presents it: the clash between reality and movie-derived fantasy. All four, but Spencer (Barry Keoghan) and Warren (Evan Peters) in particular, are seen as obsessed with the belief that their lives are lacking in some crucial element. "Ever feel like you're waiting for something to happen - that thing that could make your life special?" Spencer asks, and when he seems to be losing his nerve, Warren exhorts him; "I don't want you waking up years from now and wondering what could have happened and what you could have been." Layton has said that he sees this as a "story of a lost and increasingly individualistic generation fed on a mantra that its lives would end up being interesting and remarkable in some way. In the absence of what they saw as meaningful life experience, they set out to manufacture one."

Unsurprisingly what they manufactured was derived from the movies; we see them assembling the stack of heist DVDs - *Oceans 11*, *Snatch*, *Reservoir Dogs* and the like and even aping Tarantino's film too, giving each other colour-coded pseudonyms. Following Steve Buscemi, the macho Charles, played by Blake Jenner, objects to being labelled 'Mr Pink'. Like the gang in *Point Break* (1991), they get themselves up in outlandish disguises (there US presidents, here stagey, fluffy-haired old fogeys). and as in *Gambit* (both versions, 1966 and 2012), we see the heist first being carried out as the heisters conceive it, with swift efficiency, only for the subsequent actuality to collapse into inept clumsiness and chaos.

It's at this point that the real life heist that the tone of the film abruptly switches - from farce into something much more distasteful. The assault on Betty Jean Gooch (Ann Dowd, Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*), imagined as being executed so smoothly, turns into a bungled brutal assault on an elderly woman, with her being agonisingly hurt and dragged across the floor, wetting herself in her fear and distress. After this it's impossible to continue taking the story as anything funny.

As if mirroring this emotional ambiguity, Layton repeatedly plays with narrative ambiguities. "I tried to make a virtue of that notion," he has said, "how we all create our own version of the truth that we want to remember or believe." So on several occasions we are given one person's version of events, only to backtrack and see it overlaid with another character's take. When Spencer and Warren visit New York to contact a potential fence, we first see him in Warren's description (a stocky middle-aged guy with a purple scarf), only to witness this individual transform, as Spencer recalls him in voice-over, into a slim, white-bearded elderly man. And the whole episode of Warren's trip to Amsterdam to visit local super fence Mr Van Der Hoek (a regrettably briefly glimpsed Udo Kier, relishably creepy) is called into question by Spencer, who doubts that he ever went there at all.

In the final analysis, the inept quartet, even after having served lengthy prison spells, come across as off-puttingly self-satisfied. We're told that they're all adopting creative careers - 2 writers, 1 movie director, 1 artist - and it seems they still see the Transylvania heist, however incompetent and ill-conceived, as the 'meaningful life experience' they set out to achieve, one that would make their humdrum privileged existences rewardingly different. To counter this perception, Layton finally introduces the real life Betty Jean Gooch. Her comments, dignified but still angry at having been so maltreated and humiliated for the crassest of motives, throw cold water on everything that's gone before and leave us feeling that, diverting though the whole tale undoubtedly is, it casts a critical light on the tawdry manifestations of the American Dream - and on those blind animals living in the caves of Kentucky.

Credits

Warren Lipka	Evan Peters
Spencer Reinhard	Barry Keoghan
Charles Allen	Blake Jenner
Eric Borsuk	Jared Abrahamson
Mr Lipka	Gary Basaraba
Bill Welton	Wayne Duvall
Mr Van Der Hoek	Udo Kier
Betty Jean Gooch	AnnDowd
Director	Bart Layton
Screenplay	Bart Layton
Director of Photography	Ole Bratt Birkeland
Editors	Nick Fenton, Chris Gill, John Hart, Luke Dunkley
Production design	Scott Dougan
Music	Ann Nicklin
Sound	Joe Foglia

USA/UK 2018. 116 mins

Another View

In order to understand why four young, middle-class, white men from Kentucky would risk serious prison time by stealing some of the world's most valuable books from their university library, director Bart Layton shrewdly chooses to blend fact and fiction.

The real men appear in interviews to each give their version of events, their diverging testimonies functioning as the ever-shifting building blocks of the fictionalisation that Layton presents with a cast of brilliant actors. The two masterminds are Barry Keoghan as Spencer Reinhard, a young painter worried that his life is too safe and boring to make him a good artist, and the excellent Evan Peters playing bad boy Warren Lipka, always up for sending a 'fuck you' to the system. Making their delusions of grandeur clearly visible, this narrative device is more than a gimmick: they are literally the stars of their own movie.

Looking back to the classics of crime cinema, depiction is not always endorsement, but denying the appeal of, say, Sterling Hayden's hardboiled thief in Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* would be disingenuous. Glamorously defying society has always been an

enticing feature of cinema, and the (anti-)heroes of *American Animals* have also succumbed to the appeal of gangster movies.

What separates them from you and I is that they maintained their suspension of disbelief after the end credits - or rather never suspended it in the first place, instead taking Kubrick's high-flying act at face value. Inspired by the heroes of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, Reinhard and Lipka, with additional muscle in the form of Eric Borsuk (Jared Abrahamson) and Chas Allen (Blake Jenner), planned and executed, in 2004, one of the most audacious and ludicrous heists in modern history.

The juxtaposition of documentary and fiction filmmaking in *American Animals* reveals the dangerous power of imagination. Once Reinhard got it in his head that he could steal valuable items which Danny Ocean would not hesitate to stealthily make his, it only took Lipka's bravado to get the snowball rolling. Soon enough, their lives became consumed by planning the perfect robbery. Layton goes much further in his attack on self-fictionalisation. Erasing the line between fact and fantasy, he makes the real-life protagonists face the plausibility of their subjective recollections by having them physically enter his reenactments and talk to their impersonators.

This brutal confrontation is at once exhilarating and eerie. Opening up new possibilities for 'based on a true story' narrative cinema, it reminds us of our unavoidable accountability to the truth: the men soon realise that none of them know exactly what happened because each was too preoccupied with his own 'truth'.

When a bystander is hurt by the group's foolish and deeply selfish actions, Layton returns to the talking heads as the young men awaken to reality. Shaken out of their daydreams, they are finally out of words, sobbing and trying to avoid the camera's inescapable gaze. From the absurd story of four self-centred and bored friends, Layton has created a powerful hybrid film which decries, with entertaining panache and urgency, the utter nonsense of 'alternative facts'.

Manuela Lasic: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday September 20th, 7.30pm *Dogman (Italy, 2018). Cert 15*

Matteo Garrone's pulsating film *Gomorrah* (2014) delved into the Neapolitan underbelly and the corroding influence exerted on the city and its people by the Mafia. In *Dogman*, he serves up another slice of life for Italy's 'left behind', this time on the outskirts of Rome., through the story of Marcello (Marcello Fonte), who - though meek and acquiescent (especially to local bully-boy Simone) - finds the inner steel needed to assert himself, just when it's most needed. Marcello Fonte's performance won him Best Actor at Cannes 2018.

Reminder:

Film Society is joining with The Venue and Lincoln Book Festival to present a special showing of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), starring a very young Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons. The film is on Wednesday September 18th at 7.30. This is not a Film Society film and members will need to buy tickets from The Venue.