

Audacious Caper

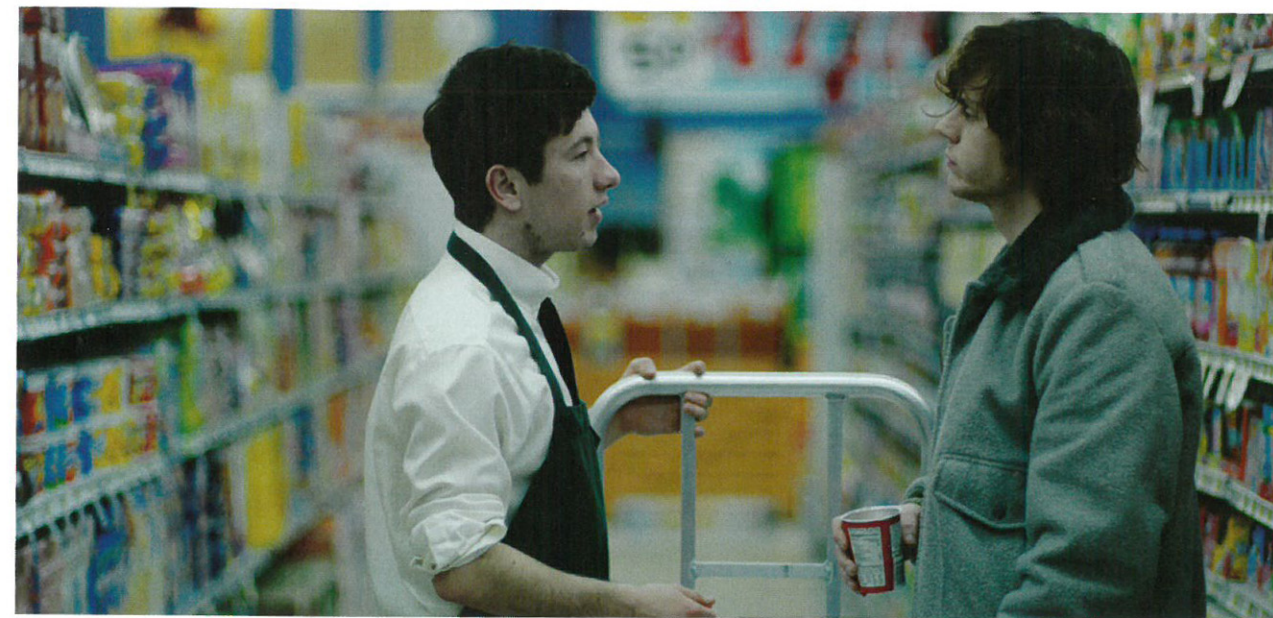
Referencing classic heist movies, Ole Bratt Birkeland, BSC helps director Bart Layton tell the true tale of four film-buff college students who pull off a notorious rare-book robbery.

By Patricia Thomson



Lifting its title from a line in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, *American Animals* is a rare breed indeed. In recounting the unlikeliest of rare-book thefts, the film has a wholly unique DNA, blending documentary and drama, indie-style naturalism and heist-movie tropes, anamorphic and spherical. "It presented an opportunity to find a new way of telling a true story," says British writer-director Bart Layton of the central event.

In 2004, four students from Transylvania University in Lexington, Ky., broke into the library's special collections room in broad daylight to steal its most priceless books: that Darwin tome, Audubon's *Birds of America*, and other rare



manuscripts. It wasn't for love or money; all four came from caring, financially comfortable families. The students were simply adrift in the malaise of youth, and this was their misguided search for identity.

When Layton read about the theft, first in the news and then in a *Vanity Fair* piece, his instincts as a long-time documentarian kicked in. He tracked down the foursome, then serving seven years in federal prison. They started a long correspondence in which the lads articulately talked about their motivations. They also revealed something intriguing: "They didn't have any practical understanding of how you go about planning a robbery, so they'd go to Blockbuster and hire out every heist movie," Layton says. "For me, that was the thing that unlocked this idea" — the hybrid approach that would become his new approach to true storytelling. While his prize-winning doc *The Imposter* incorporated some dramatic reenactments, *American Animals* would flip the balance, interweaving interviews with the dramatic action. And for the latter, he had big ideas.

As Layton saw it, the boys lost themselves in a movie-world fantasy as they planned their theft, and he wanted audiences to get swept up in that as well. The movie would start naturalistically,



Opposite: Four bored college students attempt one of the most audacious rare-book heists in U.S. history in the feature *American Animals*. This page, top: Spencer Reinhard (Barry Keoghan, left) and Warren Lipka (Evan Peters) organize the theft of such tomes as Audubon's *Birds of America*. Above, from left: Director-writer Bart Layton and cinematographer Ole Bratt Birkeland, BSC prep for a shot above Keoghan.

then "as they get deeper into the plot, we'd get deeper into the tropes of the heist movie," the director says. "We'd borrow from films they would have been watching" — movies like *The Sting*, *Heist*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Point Blank*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. "You get to a point, right before they actually commit the crime, where we've gone quite far into the tropes of those

kinds of movies." Scenes become slicker — with track and Steadicam, pulsing music, and split-screen editing à la *The Thomas Crown Affair*. "Then, when they actually cross the line, the bubble gets burst."

Layton's partner in crime for the scripted portion was Ole Bratt Birkeland, BSC, a Norwegian-born, London-based director of photography

Unit photography by Wilson Webb, courtesy of The Orchard.

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Right: First AC Troy Wagner lines up the dual-camera interview rig, which shoots close-ups and wides simultaneously. Below: The real Spencer is interviewed for the movie.



known for his work on Season 1 of Netflix's *The Crown*. "Ole was perfect for this," says Layton. "Not just because he's super talented, and has an amazing eye and the capacity to do beautifully composed work on track or sticks, [but] he's also a phenomenal handheld operator." All would be essential on this visually polymorphous project.

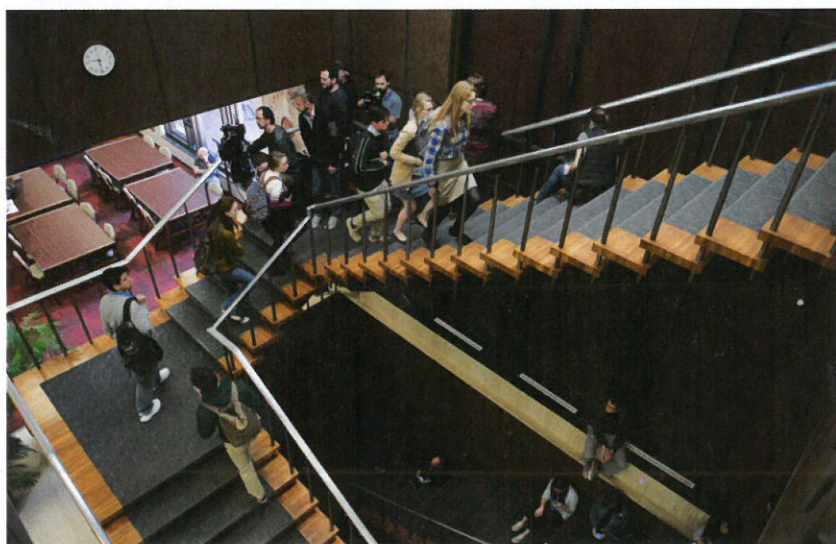
The interviews were shot before Birkeland came on board. Layton had written an initial script based on the boys' letters — he hadn't been allowed to see the young men in prison — but wanted a Rubik's Cube-like interlock between the scripted and documentary parts, which meant the interviews had to come first and the final script would

be built upon them.

Layton hired his cinematographer from *The Imposter*, Erik Wilson, another London-based Norwegian. Capturing with Arri Alexa XTs, they decided to shoot anamorphic and frame for the 2.39:1 aspect ratio. "There was obviously a concern from financiers," Layton says. "As soon as you mention the word 'documentary,' alarm bells ring." Widescreen anamorphic, they felt, held out the promise of a more cinematic look.

The pressure was great to get the interviews right. "We had no idea how they were going to perform [on] camera," says Wilson, "and we only had a day with each." For years, the cinematographer had been pondering the most efficient way to capture over-the-shoulders and wides simultaneously — and now was the time, he decided, to make that special rig he'd been imagining. Collaborating with technician Richard Mills and Onsite in London, they modified a 3D rig, resulting in two stacked Alexas that could shoot wide and close-up with identical direct-to-

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Top: Birkeland moves the camera into position above Keoghan. Middle: Birkeland shoots on the staircase landing. Above: The filmmakers plan a shot of Spencer eyeing the Audubon volume.

camera eyelines. The top camera captured the wide on a 75mm Cooke Anamorphic/i, while the bottom camera did mid-shots and close-ups with a 48-580mm Angenieux Optimo (T4) anamorphic zoom — converted from a 12:1 24-290mm (T2.8) Optimo spherical zoom via a Vantage rear-anamorphic adapter. “The whole rig could pan and tilt together,” says Wilson, and the bottom camera could also move independently. The cameras recorded ProRes 4:4:4 in 4:3 sensor mode to Codex XR Capture Drives.

This dual-camera system made it easy on the editor, but its bulk could be intimidating to interviewees. “They’re not actors, just regular people,” Wilson says. The filmmakers thus devised a way to hide the rig from view. A large glass plate was placed at a 45-degree angle between subject and interviewer. Layton, who conducted the interviews, sat behind a black curtain. That forced the subject to focus on Layton’s reflection in the glass — and positioned directly behind that was the camera rig. Layton was pleased with the results: “It’s like you’re having a one-to-one conversation, but it’s all reflected.”

Wilson adds, “Our first AC, Troy Wagner, made sure it all lined up and was in focus. I met him on *Masterminds* in North Carolina the year before, and he had experience with 3D rigs, so he was a great help.”

Layton spent some time rewriting the script once the interviews were in the can, and by the time he was ready to continue with the dramatic parts, Wilson was shooting *Paddington 2* and had to bow out. He recommended his good friend Ole Birkeland.

When picking up the baton, Birkeland switched to an Alexa Mini for its greater agility, and recorded in ArriRaw in Open Gate mode to CFast cards. Except for one car stunt, this part of the production was entirely single camera.

The decision regarding anamorphics was more complicated. “Because the documentary footage had been shot anamorphic, we decided it would be

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Top and above: Birkeland and crew shoot the disguised Warren and Spencer as they head off to their first heist attempt. Right: Birkeland captures the young conspirators from the back of a minivan.

nice to separate out the drama footage and make it feel more real,” says Birkeland. They opted for Zeiss Super Speed MKIII spherical primes for the bulk of the material. Eighty percent was shot on two lenses — the 25mm and 35mm — to suggest a subjective experience. Footage on those lenses was “all shot wide open, at T1.3, without exception,” Birkeland states. A 28-340mm Angenieux Optimo zoom (T3.2) was occasionally used to reference surveillance shots in movies like *The Conversation*, such as when the boys rendezvous with a criminal contact in New York’s Central Park.

At times, though, their film references cried out for anamorphic. Such was the case with the imagined heist that gives a nod to *Ocean’s 11*, as well as scenes that might have been invented by our unreliable narrators, such as a meeting with a prospective buyer in an Amsterdam bar. “You’re encouraged to go with the characters into their movie fantasy,” says the director.

Following Wilson’s lead, Birkeland used Cooke Anamorphic/i lenses for those scenes, always wide open at T2.3. “I tend to underexpose by about two stops and push it up with a LUT, then rate the camera at 160 ASA,” Birkeland says. “When you rate the Alexa at 160 or 200 ASA, it clips the very end of the black to a hard black. And you’re at a very low noise level. But at the same time, to protect the highlights, I underexposed. So I gain low noise, approximately the same latitude, and get a density in the blacks, which I enjoy.”

For the LUT, he continues, “I set one look in advance. It’s like a one-light print, which in this case is a curve I designed: a two-stop push curve with a slightly more [filmic] tone than Rec 709. It doesn’t matter what job I do — I always set one look, then change everything with the lighting.”

American Animals was shot mostly on practical locations in North Carolina, with Davidson College standing in for Transylvania University. Birkeland had just over one week for

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Right: Shooting a day exterior featuring the four friends as they enter the library. Below: Davidson College in North Carolina stands in for Transylvania University.



location scouting, and then returned for seven weeks of prep.

Production comprised 38 shooting days, including one day in Amsterdam and slightly more in New York City. The schedule was packed. The script, including the documentary sections, contained more than 300 scenes, by Birkeland's estimate. "I believe we shot in the region of 240 to 260 scenes."

A key location was, naturally, the

scene of the crime: a two-story campus library, with special collections on the upper floor behind a glass entryway. The college had obligingly cleared out a reading room to allow production designer Scott Dougan to create that space, with the giant Audubon folio at center stage.

Three heist scenes occur here, all major set pieces. First is the slick version that the boys imagine, in *Ocean's 11* style. Second is their initial attempt, done in

disguise, which is ultimately aborted. Third is the real deal, which goes nothing like their fantasy.

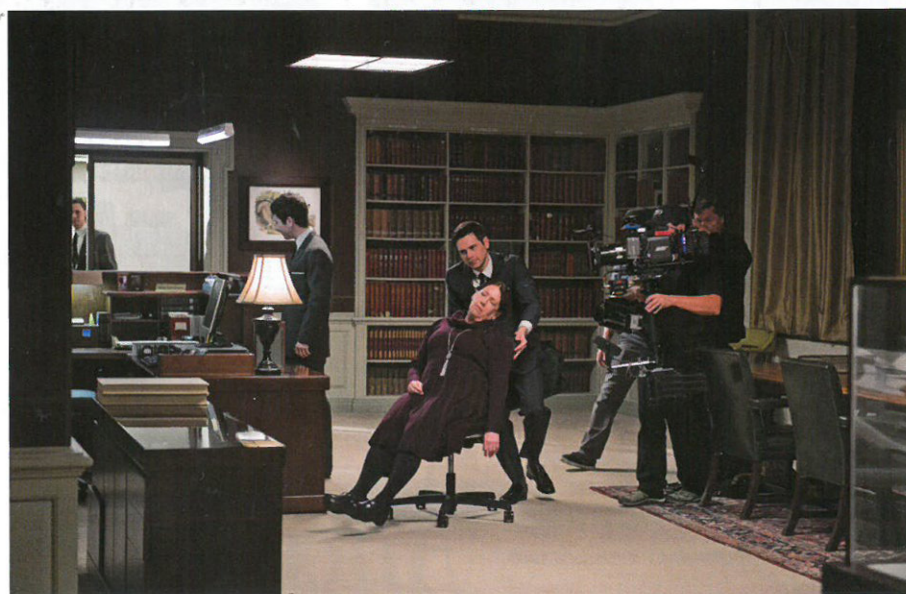
For the fantasy heist, "It was important to have something that doesn't exist in the real world," the director says. "My original thought was to shoot it incredibly intricately, with dozens of shots, so it had a machine-gun rhythm to it — meticulous and really percussive, like a great drum solo." The cinematographer adds, "There would be lots of tracking on birds, or tracking into people's faces, and hands passing things."

Ultimately, the tight schedule got in the way and they would have just several hours to shoot. Instead of 80 shots, the team started thinking about a one. In rehearsal, Layton and the actors worked out an intricate choreography involving a stun gun, keys tossed across the room, books slid across a table and dropping into a bag, and other clockwork actions. "We wanted it to feel very elegant and special," Birkeland says.

But looking at it straight on, Layton feared it wouldn't be as cool as he'd hoped. "So I got Ole to get the camera on his shoulder and basically

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Right: The crew captures Warren and his associate Eric Borsuk (Jared Abrahamson) arriving at the library for their second — and far more tumultuous — attempt. Below and bottom: The perpetrators must get past the librarian (Ann Dowd) to successfully execute their plan.



dance with them, so it all flowed together. The moment the camera started moving around, it was obvious it was going to work.”

The day of, they brought in Steadicam operator John C. Lehman, who would do that dance while hoisting an anamorphic package. “The poor guy,” the director says. “On every take, someone would screw some tiny thing up.” But they finally nailed it. As Birkeland recalls, “When that all came together on the 12th or 13th take, there was clapping all ’round.”

The second heist scene — the thieves’ first attempt — is all about building tension, staying in the boys’ heads, and making sure the library’s geography is clear. The foursome come disguised as old men, figuring nobody pays attention to old people. They arrive looking as if they’d pinched their grandfathers’ 1970s-era wardrobes (a nod to 1974’s *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*), and then disperse to their assigned positions in the library (citing *Heat*). The camera focused on small details: a hand turning a squeaky pencil sharpener, someone flipping the pages of a newspaper, feet going up the stairs, meaningful glances across the room. “It’s

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Right: Practical overheads designed by gaffer Stephen Thompson and the electricians for the special-collections room were employed to create 360-degree lighting. Below: Handheld cameras capture Eric and Warren attempting to escape with *Birds of America*.



good ol' Sergio Leone and the Spaghetti Western," Birkeland comments. "Just before dawn, and guns at the ready. In the first sequence of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, nothing is said; you have all these gunslingers standing around, just waiting for the cowboy to come into town."

When that effort is aborted, the tension immediately dissipates. "Spencer Reinhard [Barry Keoghan] comes outside, and it's like he's being released — he doesn't have to go through with it," says the cinematographer. "That's why you get that twirling, swirling Steadicam shot around him, which is representative of his mood of being free."

That feeling doesn't last — for they return once more, this time without costumes. This third heist scene, workshopped at the Sundance Directors Lab, has two visually distinct parts: "I wanted the first half to be intense and incredibly precise," says the director. That's when two of them, posing as scholars interested in rare books, arrive for their appointment and go through the formalities of signing in. "We broke the scene down into these meticulous camera moves and blocking. It moves very claustrophobically with the characters, up until the moment

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The crew mounts the camera to a JLG lift.

where they make physical contact with the librarian. You're sort of inhabiting a movie, then suddenly we smash back into handheld, documentary-like coverage of the actual crime," Layton says. "I

wanted it to have this feeling of complete, agonizing chaos, like the wheels had come off."

Birkeland adds, "The second they start attacking the librarian, the camera

goes into handheld, with a 45-degree shutter, and it's 'there' with them; being with their energy. We become quite subjective at that point."

The staging of these heists required 360-degree lighting. Their main source in the special collections room would be the practical overheads, which gaffer Stephen Thompson and the electricians designed. "We created 3-by-3 boxes with a grid underneath," says Birkeland. "They had two rings of 60-watt bulbs, an outer ring and an inner ring, that were separately controllable. The boxes had 16 bulbs in [each] — four in the center and 12 in the outer ring. If I wanted more punch, I'd turn on all of them." One was placed directly over the Audubon display case, and the other over the librarian's desk.

With each heist, the lighting gets progressively darker. By the third, the room is quite somber, with patches of light. "If you were under the practicals, you'd be toplit," says Birkeland. "Then

you'd go through the dark [areas] and out again — in order to [experience] the tension of how these people were feeling emotionally."

As there was a minimum of two locations per day, the best boy was always leapfrogging ahead to pre-rig. "On this schedule, you can't have too many lamps up, because it takes too much time," Birkeland says. Overall, he kept the lighting package small. "We carried a couple of 18Ks for a day here and there, but for the most part we had a lot of 1.8Ks and built [several] practicals, just for simplicity," he says. "Then we had some [Arri] SkyPanels, which were very useful for dialing in color. We used quite a lot of fluorescent lighting, partly because it had an energy of modernity that feels jarring sometimes, but can be incredibly seductive and pretty.

"A lot of the lighting is based on reality as an idea; then you try to enhance it," he notes. "There are

moments when you want to create little magical 'oddnesses' that happen in real life. Like the scene with Spencer [interviewing for art school] — we wanted to have dust floating in the air, so we backlit that heavily to make sure it had a slight oddness to it."

For the color grade, Birkeland and Layton spent two weeks at Goldcrest in London working with colorist Rob Pizzey on Blackmagic Design's DaVinci Resolve. "We built the look into the rushes as much as possible," the cinematographer says. "Even though there are differences between the rough cut and the grade, it stays very true. Color-wise, it's very similar. We built in a bit more contrast here and there, and sometimes just brought out some color separation."

The completed movie stayed true to the script as well. "That's because it was so tightly structured, and we had such a long prep period to discuss things," Birkeland notes. On the experi-

ence as a whole, he reflects, "I really enjoyed it. The team was amazing, and Bart is such a joy to be with. I'd also love to give a great shout to my focus puller, Matthew Mebane; my second, Monica Barrios-Smith; my key grip, Ben D. Griffith Jr.; and dolly grip Chris Koch — as well as gaffer Stephen Thompson. They were all excellent, and I'm really proud of the work we did together. It was very concentrated and busy, but it felt well planned. I'd do it again in a heartbeat." ●

TECHNICAL SPECS

2.39:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa XT, Mini

Cooke Anamorphic/i,
Zeiss Super Speed MKIII,
Angenieux Optimo