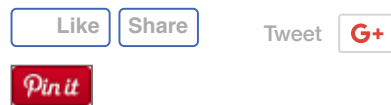




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## Takedown: Bennett Miller explores dark side of privilege with true story of du Pont Foxcatcher scandal

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Oct 30, 2014



### Features



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At this spring's Cannes Film Festival, the award for Best Director went to Bennett Miller for his new film, *Foxcatcher*. Meeting with Miller recently at his publicist's office, I asked whether the honor had made him anxious about topping his own achievement with his next movie.

"It's the opposite, actually," he replied. "Years ago when I started out, I might have scoffed at an artist's need for validation. But I realize now that it's not just ego gratification. Often artists don't have the most sophisticated interpersonal skills—I myself am somewhat challenged interpersonally. A film is a means of communication that has no other channel, a way of moving into the world and sending a ping out there. And when it comes back to you, it's very nice."

Miller has gotten a lot of pings coming back to him at post-Cannes screenings of *Foxcatcher*. A meld of true crime and sports drama, the Sony Pictures Classics release is remarkable for its control—its every moment feels calibrated—yet it also breathes, frightens, outrages, moves. Miller masterfully whips up a mood of steadily mounting dread, the action culminating in a shocking act that—as the viewer replays the action in his head—seems as though it were inevitable. Some view the film as a cautionary tale about the abuses visited by the very rich on the rest of us.

*Foxcatcher* unites three of the more unlikely people ever to come together in a common space. John du Pont (Steve Carell), heir to the great du Pont fortune, invites wrestling champ Mark Schultz

(Channing Tatum) to join a team that's training for the 1988 Seoul Olympics at Foxcatcher, the billionaire's immense estate near Valley Forge. Mark is inducted into his new surroundings with an oleaginous promo film celebrating the family's illustrious history—a detail that proves acidly ironic once we get to know the family scion.

Du Pont also tries to enlist Mark's older brother Dave (Mark Ruffalo), a wrestling coach, but Dave initially demurs, reluctant to uproot his family from their suburban home. Du Pont pushes Mark to his limits, the wrestler only too eager to oblige. Accustomed to dreary digs, Mark is wowed by the splendor of du Pont's spread and the sleek chalet-like quarters where he's housed. Having been raised by Dave in hardscrabble circumstances, Mark sees in du Pont a father figure, mentor and friend.

But all is not well at Foxcatcher. From the first glimpse of Carell's du Pont, it's clear that he's a head case. The dead eyes and bloodless smile, along with peculiar pauses in his speech, suggest derangement held in check. He's also a self-styled patriot who laments America's lack of values—"I want to see this country soar again," he says—yet his overweening sense of mission appears delusional.

While it's never made explicit, Miller's riveting portrayal of wrestling and its holds—which echo those of lovemaking—suggests a buried homoerotic component to du Pont's fixation on his protégé. In a moment of friction, he calls Mark "an ungrateful ape"—but in his arrogance and entitlement, he never seeks to apologize. Dave comes on board, convinced that reason and calm will smooth out the kinks—and the stage is set for disaster.

The real-life crime at the center of the film occurred in 1996. Miller became involved in 2005, the same year his first narrative feature, the Oscar-winning *Capote*, was released. (His second film was the equally acclaimed *Moneyball*.) Speaking in a careful, studied way, he shared his perspective on this compelling tale with *Film Journal International*.

*What drew you to the story?*

I was immediately intrigued by these characters. And drawn to the story because it was a rare opportunity to see these extremes living together—two wrestlers pulling up stakes and moving onto this enormous estate belonging to one of America's wealthiest men and heir to an enormous fortune. I wanted to see, incrementally, how this story happened and how something so crazy got to that point.

*Some viewers see Foxcatcher as an indictment of a psycho one-percenter. Especially as the film opens with scenes of John du Pont's opulent estate, so you get an immediate sense of outsized privilege.*

The film is not an indictment of a class of people. It seeks to look past the terrible behavior that does sometimes seem characteristic of those with immense power. But rather than stick a label on it and disdain it, the film looks further and deeper into what's behind it and what's at play in the

relationships.

*But isn't fair to say that these two blue-collar guys were victimized, partly out of economic need? Especially in the case of Mark, who, though a champion, never cashes in with endorsements and lives in a dump.*

I prefer to look at the story as simply tragic and to understand the confluence of personalities and circumstances that lead to such outcomes. Did a person in power with privilege abuse and violate it? Yes. But does it end there? No. The film should not leave you simply with the conclusion that power corrupts. We know that.

I personally prefer to resist making excited conclusions and getting frothed up over the abuses of one person or group over another. Because I want to know more than that it was unfair. Who are the humans behind it and how does it get to this place? As much as we like to just blame one side, ultimately every character had circumstances that propelled him toward this end. Every character stood at a crossroads and made a decision that contributed to the outcome. This is not to say that what one character did wasn't evil. Still, it was a collaboration, it was a co-authored tragedy.

*Sorry to belabor this, but Dave Schultz really does seem like an innocent here.*

Well, he stayed, he made a decision, he made a calculation. Everyone could see who du Pont was. There's not a lot that wasn't known about him. Dave had to weigh the reward against the risk of being there.

That's not to condemn Dave. It's simply to understand how a sick person would get this way. Someone like du Pont is at a disadvantage because no one around him is willing to risk the benefits of their association in order to intervene. A less privileged person would almost certainly have caught hell. The fact that du Pont was protected and empowered kept help at bay.

*Some reviewers have seen the film as a Greek tragedy.*

I don't like labels. That responsibility belongs more to you. But I would say, yes, the outcome was not random. It is a consequence of character. I do believe that character is destiny, which is a Greek concept.

*Usually a bad guy has some redeeming or likeable qualities. Anything redeeming about John du Pont?*

I think so. He wanted to be a hero. And the role he cast himself in was as a patron and someone who could help others. He desperately wanted to be of assistance to people and be appreciated for it. His self-image was of somebody who would be respected because of his contribution to society. He made offers anonymously; in one case he heard about somebody who needed an operation and under conditions of anonymity he paid for this person whom he didn't know.

But that's not in the film. You can see I'm having trouble finding redeeming traits in du Pont! No, it wasn't in the film, but if you listen to du Pont's words—and what's really happening in the

film tends to take place beneath the words—you'll see what matters to him.

*Could you give me an example of a scene where the meaning is occurring beneath the words?*

Name any scene in the movie. The scene with his mother, for example. He's presenting her with a trophy he's won, and they discuss where to put it, there's already a train set in the trophy room, etcetera. And du Pont says, "I don't care about my train set. Mother, I'm leading men, I'm teaching them, I'm coaching them. I'm giving America hope. It doesn't matter where you put the trophy." To me that's a tiny tip of an iceberg that reveals du Pont's tremendous need for validation from a mother who dismisses wrestling as a "low sport."

*Why did you cast Steve Carell as John du Pont?*

Because obvious wouldn't work here. And I think he's a great actor. He's intrigued me in the past. I think he owns this particular brand of awkwardness that has only ever been employed for comedic purposes. There's something benign about the perception of John du Pont and about Steve Carell as an actor. Steve said to me, I've only ever played characters with mushy centers. And du Pont is the opposite: He seems benign but underneath there's something that's very unforgiving and ruthless.

Steve has never exhibited the many dimensions that he possesses as a person and as an actor. And when we met to talk about it, he made it clear that he understood what this was and there was a willingness and commitment to show these qualities that till now he's never had an opportunity to show.

*I loved the film's quiet, deliberate pace. For instance, the scene with Mark Schultz checking out the luxurious, nothing-spared house where du Pont puts him up. You're in no hurry to move to the next scene. It's so different from many American movies where God forgive there should be a quiet moment. How did you hit on that style for this story?*

I'm thinking back to what Truman Capote once said in an interview about style. It's not something that you choose, it's something that you're born with. This is a film that endeavors not to *tell* a story, but to *observe* it.

Then there's the question about whose mind we're in when we observe this story. Because so little is explicit in what is actually said, it becomes a matter of communicating subtler frequencies that are best shown in these moments of pause and silence. For me it's a tendency to want to really sensitize the way something's presented. And the more frenetic the thing is, whether it's the sound or the frequency of the cuts, the more it drowns out the song of this film and what it's communicating.

*Channing Tatum, with his grand physicality, seems a no-brainer for the role of a wrestler. But how did you train Mark Ruffalo?*

Mark Ruffalo was a wrestler and a state champion and his father was also a big wrestler. So this was his world.

*Why did you choose to keep the homoerotic strain of du Pont's feelings toward Mark latent? You can't research this film without asking the question: Was there a sexual component to the story? The people I talked to said that it never became explicit. There might have been aspects of du Pont's character that he was struggling with, but I don't know what he told himself. Du Pont was not at ease with himself—in fact, was pretty twisted and tormented, and I was interested in a character who wasn't admitting the truth about himself.*

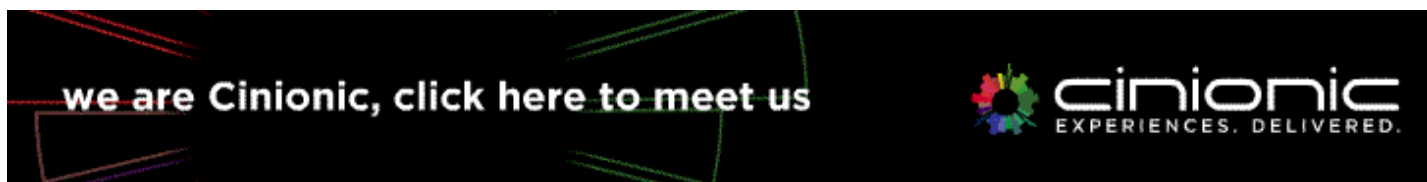
*I picked up horror film tropes in Foxcatcher. I'm thinking of the gloomy, menacing palette, especially in the exteriors. And a shot early on—which conveys foreboding—of a misty Valley Forge seen from behind a looming, dark statue of George Washington.*

Making this film really gave me an appetite to consider my next making an all-out horror film. *Foxcatcher* can't be characterized as primarily a horror film—though it definitely kept wanting to go in that direction and I found myself in that territory. I'm fascinated by how a great horror film like *The Shining* can sustain its mood as you witness a character grow more twisted and at odds with the world around him. And you feel the bow get pulled back a little more, and a little more—and you wonder if it's going to break. Or is that thing going to fly?

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