



American Movie Discussion Guide

Director: Chris Smith
Year: 1999
Time: 107 min

You might know this director from:

Collapse (2009)
The Pool (2007)
The Yes Men (2003)
Home Movie (2001)
American Job (1996)

FILM SUMMARY

Upon first meeting outside the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's film department, Mark Borchardt and director Chris Smith were both struggling artists, aspiring filmmakers tirelessly toiling to translate their creative vision onto screen. Smith sensed something spectacular about Borchardt, something utterly unadulterated and pure in his quest for his art. Feeling curious and inspired, Smith followed the aspiring filmmaker over the course of two years in his Midwestern hometown, capturing the ins-and-outs of his totally real, totally quirky life on the medium they both loved best.

And so AMERICAN MOVIE transpires. Working within the horror film genre, Borchardt - a 30-year living at home with his parents, who drinks regularly and is falling behind on child support payments for his three young children, who spends as much time coercing his withered old Uncle Bill to finance his film career as he does working to pay off his debts - is dead set on finishing his first short, "Coven," before embarking on his masterpiece, "Northwestern." A lover of films since childhood and deeply knowledgeable on the technicalities of filmmaking, Borchardt makes for an enthusiastic director. Enlisting the help of friends, family, and whatever extras his humble staff can scrape up, Borchardt and team complete 30-minute horror short "Coven" just as the 107-minute tragi-comedy AMERICAN MOVIE reaches its own conclusion.

With a cast so real they often appear unreal; including Borchardt's long-time party partner Mike Schank, whose former drug habits have him tripping over his own thoughts, Joan Petrie, Borchardt's girlfriend-turned-producer, and his reluctant Swedish mother; Borchardt simultaneously inspires enthusiasm and dismay from those whose lives he penetrates. A story of addiction, perseverance, and heartache, AMERICAN MOVIE is a tale of a true American, a one-of-a-kind spirit convinced that the world is his oyster as he stumbles through its shell.

FILM THEMES

Mark Borchardt knows why he was alive: to make horror films. As proof of the American Dream's pulling power, Borchardt hopes and perseveres... and drinks, and the world does its best to keep up.

A TRUE ARTIST

Not only does Mark have an intense passion for film and the capabilities it offers for self-expression, he knows the ins-and-outs of his craft, can speak the lingo, and is well-acquainted with the stages to take an idea to finished movie. He knows the role of the producer, director, cameraman, sound department, film editor, casting director, and even acts in the leading role. With his self-declared primeval insight into the craft of filmmaking, Mark is more than just a hot-air balloon of ideas and dreams. A man of action, he rides the roller-coaster an artistic life demands. Success? A matter of perspective.

ADDICTIONS

For Mark and nearly all his friends drinking and drugs are a way of life. "There was no such thing about college or religion or anything. There was drinking. Everything would revolve around that," he states. Most of the company he keeps is connected by their love of partying. Very few scenes in AMERICAN MOVIE do not feature a beer bottle, regardless of season, time, or location. Does Mark have a hold on his drinking? Or is his fuddled mind, an outcome of endless alcohol, incapable of seeing the big picture? Mark is fuelled by the dream of making it big, and yet lacking the clarity of sobriety, he seems to waste away a great deal of his time and energy on the bottle.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

We are made acutely aware of the double-edged nature of the American Dream while watching AMERICAN MOVIE. What fuels Mark onward is the dream that all is possible with effort and determination, and that even the most far-fetched notion can become a reality. He is going "to make it," as a big-time movie producer and set the world on fire through his filmic masterpieces. Failing to succumb to the humdrum others live by, Mark is a major proponent of the American Dream, traversing hell and high water to reach it. Yet it consistently evades him, slipping from his grip, calling into question the promise that all you need to succeed is a bit of hard work and elbow grease.

"I AM HERE BECAUSE..."

Living life is no passive activity for Mark. He knows why he was put on this earth: to make horror films, which he actively sets out to do. An inspiration, Mark serves as an example of dedication to oneself and remaining ever true to one's internal passion. As he discovers, though, he is more of an exception than the rule. Rather than doggedly pursuing their passions, the community surrounding him - his family, friends, and daily run-ins - were mainly just getting by, or at best following in the footsteps of someone (primarily Mark) who knew the answer to "I am here because.." What a different world we would live in if we all knew how to complete that line.

"If he's able to even do 25% of what he says, it is more than what most people accomplish."

Joan Petrie

"Mark would drink vodka with me all the time... That really made me happy."

Mike Schank

"The American Dream stays with me each and every day."

Mark Borchardt

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What made AMERICAN MOVIE such a captivating film? What were its most poignant characteristics?
2. Have you seen "Coven," the film Mark completes during AMERICAN MOVIE? If so, discuss its merits as a film. If not, would you like to see it after watching the documentary?
3. In what ways, if any, do you respect Mark Borchardt? In what ways, if any, do you pity him?
4. Should Mark have given up his pursuit of filmmaking and faced his responsibilities: paying child support, moving out of his parents' house, etc.? Or is it more important to pursue one's dreams, regardless of obstacles and practicalities?
5. Uncle Bill comes across as a pessimistic man, never believing in anything Mark does. Yet, he financially supports Mark's filmmaking? Do you think there is part of him that believes in Mark's dream?
6. Do drugs and alcohol fuel Mark's creativity or hinder it? Do they play more of a negative or positive role in his filmmaking career?
7. Have you ever pursued something against all odds? Or given up on something because of discouragement? What was the outcome?
8. What is your definition of the American Dream? Is the American Dream, in your experience, still alive?
9. Besides scaring people, what are some of the functions of horror films?
10. In order to justify their existence, Mark asked people to complete the sentence: "I am here because..." How would you finish it?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- AMERICAN MOVIE was met with critical acclaim upon its release in 1999. It snapped up a number of prestigious awards, including the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and the People's Choice Award at the Denver International Film Festival, and received numerous nominations, including Best Documentary from both the Online Film & Television Association and the Online Film Critics Society Awards.
- Director Chris Smith first met Mark Borchardt in 1995 on the steps outside the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee film department, as Smith was spending the summer in Milwaukee and Borchardt was working on "Northwestern." Mark told Chris that he was heading to the Toronto Film Festival with his parents with three objectives: to have lunch with Roger Ebert, to make connections, and to find funding for his film. Chris followed him to Toronto, the first time he filmed him. None of that footage made it into AMERICAN MOVIE, but the idea for the documentary came about that weekend.
- Mark Borchardt and Mike Schank play themselves in a 2004 episode of "Family Guy."
- Michael Stipe, the lead singer of rock band R.E.M., ran a film company called Single Cell Productions, which released two movies in 1999: AMERICAN MOVIE and "Being John Malkovich."
- Director Smith and producer Price were living together in Milwaukee during the filming.
- Mark Borchardt apparently says "man" a total of 151 times throughout AMERICAN MOVIE.
- Director Chris Smith has recently focused on directing commercials, including for brands AT&T, Snapple, ESPN, Playstation, T-Mobile, and BMW.
- The term "the American Dream" was coined by writer James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book "The American Epic," in which he stated, "The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement."
- Since AMERICAN MOVIE, Mark Borchardt has been working on "Northwestern" and a film about an alcoholic writer entitled "Scare Me," in addition to picking up some minor acting roles and directing a couple of gory music videos. He continues to live in the Milwaukee area. His father, Cliff, passed away in 2012 at the age of 90. Mark's daughter Dawn is also a filmmaker. Mike Schank continues to play music and lives with his wife Kate in Milwaukee.
- The first horror film ever is considered Georges Méliès' "The Haunted Castle" from 1896, a story about encounters between the devil and other phantoms. Other early horror films include Thomas Edison's "Frankenstein" (1910), "Nosferatu" (1922), and "Dracula" (1931). "The Exorcist," "The Shining," and "Psycho" have been voted as some of the scariest movies of all time.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Visit** the AMERICAN MOVIE [webshop](#), where you can purchase Mike Schank's songs or a signed DVD, in addition to finding a number of director Chris Smith's other productions.
2. **Help** those around you affected by alcohol or drug addiction. [The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence](#) offers useful resources for anyone either directly or indirectly affected by addiction.
3. **Pursue** something in your life, be it an interest, hobby, or career that you feel held back from. Write a list of 5 things you can do to get started and begin checking them off.
4. **Support** independent film projects. Not every independent filmmaker has an Uncle Bill. Both [Indiegogo](#) and [Kickstarter](#) are excellent platforms for supporting - and finding support for - independent film projects.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.