



Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent



Friday, October 3rd 2014

Blue Ruin (15)

dir: Jeremy Saulnier

starring: Macon Blair, Devin Rattray, Amy Hargreaves

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The opening shots of *Blue Ruin* convey the intrigue and potency of other people's family photographs. Smiley, semi-focused faces peer out from cheap supermarket frames on the wall. Other faces, other lives, a personal history much like our own perhaps? As we muse on the human commonality between these strangers and ourselves, the camera moves to a steamed-up bathroom and the bearded, ginger guy taking a soak, who swiftly jumps out of the window when the property owners and their kids return.

This, we later learn, is Dwight, and his connections to the world of home and family and holiday snaps have been severed, seemingly irrevocably. By day, he's sheltering under the boardwalk at a Delaware beach eating from dumpsters, while nights are spent in the rust-bucket Pontiac saloon that gives US indie writer-director-cameraman Jeremy Saulnier's second feature its title. Tellingly, we see him reading a book by torchlight – evidence that he is not completely lost to the civilised world. It's this tension between the realm of warm domesticity and the cold outer limits of modern existence where Dwight finds himself that the film will explore in the next 90 minutes, as Saulnier works intelligent and engrossing variations on the revenge thriller.

Thanks to the intervention of a local police office, we learn that Dwight has come to this pass as a result of the murder of his parents, whose convicted killer has gained early release. Presenting us with Dwight's situation first and explaining it later allows Saulnier to draw the viewer into the story; it's a technique he uses adeptly throughout the proceedings, aided at every juncture by the soulful presence of leading man Macon Blair, whose pleading brown eyes and look of bloodhound



melancholy make his an immensely sympathetic presence even when his decisions and actions are not just questionable but deeply troubling. Action reveals character, as they say in all the screenwriting manuals, and it's certainly true in this instance, since Dwight, perhaps as a consequence of having lived unmoored from the rest of society, is a man of few words. He doesn't announce that he's going to take his revenge on killer Wade Cleland – he steals a gun from a parked pick-up truck, fails miserably to break its security lock, follows Cleland's vehicle when the latter's family collects him outside the prison gates, then knifes him in the toilets of a roadside diner.

Two contrasting images tell the story here. One is the look on Dwight's face when he knows his victim is now within his grasp, his expression suddenly engulfed by rage, desperation and fear all at once. The other is the brutal sight of Cleland staring starkly up from the floor as blood pumps out of his head wound. Action reveals character all right, but actions also have consequences. Such is the reality of ending another man's life. It's the moment when Saulnier sets the tone for his approach to material that might, in other hands, have played as an endorsement of vigilantism. It's possible to have sympathy for Dwight who's clearly no shit-together action hero, but he has to know, and the viewer has to know, what's further on down that dark road now that he's chosen to follow it. By tracing the path of an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances, Saulnier's film plays the same game of putting us in the protagonist's shoes that French director Fred Cavayé

Synopsis: Delaware, present day. Dwight is homeless, sleeping in his rusty blue Pontiac saloon. He's summoned to the police station to learn that Wade Cleland, convicted of killing both Dwight's parents, is being given an early release. When Wade leaves prison, Dwight follows the Cleland family car to a roadside bar, where he stabs Wade to death in the toilets, escaping in the Cleland car after releasing the latter's son William from the back seat. Dwight drives to his sister Sam's home in Virginia and tells her what he's done: concerned because the Clelands haven't contacted the police, he sends Sam and her children away and waits for the Clelands to show up. Dwight runs over Wade's brother Teddy and himself receives a crossbow bolt in the leg. Anxious to know if the attackers were targeting Sam, he drives off with Teddy in the boot. He subsequently meets up with old high-school friend Ben, who offers him a gun. Ben later shoots Teddy dead after Dwight is overpowered by his captive. Teddy, however, has already revealed that it was Wade Snr who killed Dwight's parents, because Dwight's father had an affair with his wife, fathering William in the process. Dwight travels to the Cleland residence and ambushes Wade's sisters when they return. He's wounded by William, whom he encourages to flee. A further exchange of fire leaves everyone else dead or dying.

Cast

Dwight: Macon Blair

Ben: Devin Rattray

Sam: Amy Hargreaves

Teddy Cleland: Kevin Kolack

Kris Cleland: Eve Plumb

William: David W. Thompson

Carl Cleland: Brent Wertzner

Hope Cleland: Stacy Rock

Wade Cleland Jnr: Sandy Barnett

Officer Eddy: Sidné Anderson

Credits (selected)

Writer-director-cameraman: Jeremy Saulnier

Editor: Julia Bloch

Original Score: Brooke Blair, Will Blair

Costume: Brooke Bennett

USA/France 2013. 90 mins

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recently managed with such aplomb in *Anything For Her* and *Point Blank* (shown at LFS 2 years ago.) There are, however, crucial differences here: as well as the intensified sense of ordinariness we get from watching a relatively unknown cast rather than Gallic leading men of the calibre of Vincent Lindon and Gilles Lellouche, there is the added complexity of the audience investing in a protagonist who has gone beyond the law to protect a loved one, taking murderous revenge in the opening reel and then having to deal with the ensuing, altered circumstances.

What Saulnier is trying to achieve here is quite a challenge, encouraging empathy yet also maintaining a certain distance, especially when he resists the temptation to have the dialogue editorialise what we're seeing. At one point Dwight admits to an old high-school buddy that "I ain't got no speeches," resisting the *cri de coeur* scene the screenwriting manuals insist is required in this kind of story. Only when the friend, having faithfully provided the gun and advice Dwight seeks, tells him "I'm not helping you because this is right – this is ugly" does Saulnier weaken on his seemingly non-judgemental rigour – though the credible decency conveyed in Devin Rattray's supporting performance stops the line sounding in any way out of place.

Indeed, there's nothing to jar our confidence in Saulnier's storytelling, since just as Dwight's instincts to protect his sister's family when the Cleland clan comes looking for payback gets us on board with him, so witnessing the awful damage inflicted on the human body by gunshot wounds ("The rest of his head is over there," quakes the squeamish lead) prompts us to ponder. Most impressively, for a relatively inexperienced filmmaker, Saulnier's direction works in the same key, resisting the lure of hand held *vérité* to return to a classical reserve that's most reminiscent of John Carpenter's work on *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) – never displaying camera technique for its own sake, showing us exactly what's required and no more, using the widescreen frame to put plenty of space (and hence potential threat) around our lone central figure. Formally, it's unobtrusive, again encouraging that bond of empathy with the alternately bumbling and resourceful lead, but it's so confident, so masterly in essence, that we sense an overriding intelligence behind the construction.

And yet for all the expert build-and-release of tension and Blair's heartbreaking performance, suggesting a good man inexorably drawn into a vortex of hate, as the film goes on there is also a feeling that it can't have it both ways, that we can't be both inside and outside Dwight's fateful mission.

Saulnier, impressively, has evidently thought this out, for the final confrontation brings in another set of family photographs, jolting us (and Dwight) into recognition of just how far he's strayed from the hearth and home that shaped him. After that, when Dwight does eventually point his rifle in anger, without any dialogue telling us what to think, Saulnier still manages to have us questioning not only the validity of this act, but the justification in this society for making guns available off the shelf and part of the household furniture. A perfectly achieved cinematic moment, it's the culmination of a movie that is surely worthy of the Carpenter or even Jean-Pierre Melville comparisons you might care to throw at it. Yes, it's modest in scale, but its craftsmanship is so genuine, its narrative so considered, its dramatic payoff so visceral, you can't help thinking that if Saulnier can sustain this, we could be looking at the emergence of a major new filmmaker.

The story behind *Blue Ruin* (Den of Geek: extract)

From a limited set of resources, director Jeremy Saulnier, actor Macon Blair and their collaborators made *Blue Ruin* - one of the best indie thrillers we've seen in years. About a lonely drifter who one day embarks on a revenge mission, it's pared-back, unpredictable and elegantly shot.

The story behind the film is as intriguing as the film itself. Saulnier and Blair had been making films together since their childhood, and *Blue Ruin* was intended as their final collaboration - "Macon and I had really given up on our quest to break into the industry and become legitimate filmmakers," the director says.

As a result, they put everything they had, creatively and financially, into their revenge saga, and steeped the film in their youthful memories: at least one character's based on a childhood friend, while the filming locations are ones the filmmakers regularly frequented as teenagers.

The air of nostalgia and lonely realism seeps into the finished film, and perhaps explains why it's not only a refreshingly different kind of revenge flick, but also an acclaimed one. Selected to screen at the prestigious Director's Fortnight at Cannes last year, it was picked up at its premiere by Radius TWC - one of The Weinstein Company's distributors. Far from signing off Saulnier and Blair's careers, *Blue Ruin* sent it off in an entirely new direction.

Our next film: Sunday, October 12th, 3.00pm.

The Epic of Everest (UK, 1924)

Made in 1924 by Captain John Noel, an innovative film-maker who had been to the mountain in 1922 to record an unsuccessful British attempt to climb it, this film is an extraordinary account of an historic story charged with human drama and tragedy. It's the story of the expedition, which included star climbers George Mallory and 'Sandy' Irvine, that launched decades of speculation as to whether Hillary and Tensing were in fact the first to get to the mountain's summit, and contains some memorable images not just of the mountain but also of life in Tibet.

Restored by the BFI to mark the 90th anniversary of the expedition this year, the film overcame many severe technical and logistical handicaps in its making. It is therefore noteworthy in the history of the cinema besides being a remarkable tale of a remarkable event and has been described by Sight and Sound as 'the peak of silent cinema'.