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The Wolfpack

(USA 2014. Cert 15)

dir: Crystal Moselle

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Documentaries are a curious animal - they are naturally as subject as any other cinema to filmmaking personality and perspective, but at the same time their frisson and power are nearly always contingent upon their raw ingredients. The genre is, after all, a matter of witness, and sometimes just showing up with a camera in the right place, and rubbernecking with a little panache, is most of what's required. Nearly anyone with a camera, you could argue, might make a remarkable film out of Resistance veterans, or Werner Herzog in the jungle, or Holocaust survivors, or what have you. If there is an auctorial force at work, it's frequently in the form of the friendship, dedication and self-sacrifice demonstrated by the filmmaker off-screen: often, a doc can, and must, be weighed as a craft of relationships, like espionage, with most of the real work done in private.

Certainly, the heart of Crystal Moselle's *The Wolfpack* is a freakishly remarkable thing - a family of six young brothers, products of a Peruvian father and a Midwestern mother, who grew up almost entirely sequestered in their cluttered Lower East Side apartment, hidden from the world. There's no reaching the bottom of our fascination with the archetype 'feral child' whenever it appears - from Kaspar Hauser in the early 19th century to Samira Makmalbaf's *The Apple* - in regards to both the end result of such abuse/neglect (particularly in popular myth, when a child is 'raised' by wild animals) and the unfathomable abuse itself. But Moselle's film is a modern - even postmodern - take on the paradigm: the six Angulo brothers are not feral, just home-schooled, sheltered from reality, heavily bonded as siblings and absurdly saturated in Hollywood movies, videos of which flowed into their home in a ceaseless stream.

They're also fabulously charming, with big relaxed smiles, serene dispositions and a zest for performance that puts them perfectly at ease in front of this stranger's camera. (The eldest, and seventh sibling, a daughter with learning disabilities, is barely glimpsed). Their plight is purely the father's engineering. Nominally a Hare Krishna follower and apparently some kind of monomaniac, Oscar Angulo wooed the pliant mother, Suzanne, at Machu Picchu, and insisted that their subsequent children grow their hair waist length and be given ancient Sanskrit names (Bhagavan, Govinda, Narayana, Mukunda, Krsna, Jagadisa and Visnu.) Defensive, autocratic and bitter about modernity, Oscar decided that his children would have no intercourse with the world, and was the sole guardian of the apartment's key. The man's epic antipathy towards civilisation extends to his own habits - he considers work to be beneath him, and so the family and their rent-controlled home are sustained solely by the municipal grants the city of New York send Suzanne to support her home-schooling. Oscar eventually grants Moselle a few uncommunicative sit-downs, but the very fact of her presence is a thorn in his side with which he struggles to make peace.

The Angulo brood, with their six sets of matching black warrior



hair, first caught Moselle's eye during one of their rare visits to the sidewalk: filming thereafter took nearly five years. (Unfortunately, Moselle doesn't attempt to clarify for us the passing of time, or even to distinguish one brother from another.) However surprising her intimate access to the family is, given the shades of hermetic isolation that preceded it, her interloping makes perfect sense - the years of filming correspond with five of the six brothers entering into, struggling with or emerging from adolescence, and the bell-jar existence the family was leading was destined to shatter. The filmmaker's presence had to help, but the boys themselves began breaking the mould - the pivotal moment, off-screen, was when one of them exited the house without permission wearing a Michael Myers Halloween mask (the anonymity seemed like a good idea) and promptly got arrested, exposing the Angulos to municipal daylight and all manner of (sketchily outlined) bureaucratic interference.

Another peaking crisis, unfilmed but described by the brothers in hushed tones, was when a Swat team raided the house with a search warrant, looking for illegal weapons. But the police, after handcuffing everyone, found only the elaborate mock movie guns the brothers had lovingly crafted out of cardboard and duct tape - a perhaps fitting caper to the brothers' compulsive and passionate relationship with films, which they would transcribe into scripts and then, in full handmade regalia, re-enact. Moselle

Synopsis: A documentary in which filmmaker Crystal Moselle infiltrates the lives of the six Angulo brothers, aged from pre-teen to early twenties, who have grown up almost completely hidden from the outside world in a small apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Home-schooled, the brothers have largely spent their lives watching and re-enacting movies, only being allowed outside occasionally. As the years of filming progress, the growing boys find small ways to rebel against their Peruvian father, and eventually begin to venture outside their home to interact with society.

Director	Crystal Moselle
Camera	Crystal Moselle
Editor	Enat Sidi
Music	Danny Bensi, Saundra Juuriaans
	Aska Matsumiya

USA 2014. 89 mins

captures a handful of these movie remakes, and it's a shame there aren't more. At times *The Wolfpack* plunges into the movies-as-play dynamic of Zachary Oberzan's sublime *Flooding with Love for the Kid* (2007), in which the novel *First Blood* is recreated in a small Manhattan apartment with the director in every role, resembling nothing so much as a little kid scrambling across the floor acting out a tear-ass action-melodrama that's really only in his head. (Godard pioneered this childlike stripped down self-consciousness in his 1960s films.) Running up and down their hallway brandishing fake pistols, the Angulos are whole-hog cinephiles and cineastes and merry children all at once, living and breathing the let's-pretend essence of the medium.

Moselle very occasionally edges as well towards the genre-morphing films-within-the-film of Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012), capturing the Angulo sextet hitting the streets together in suits and sunglasses à la *Reservoir Dogs*, or filming one brother in his elaborate Batman suit brooding by the window in a moment right out of *The Dark Knight* (2008). (The Angulo patriarch wanted to shield his children from the horrors of the outside world, but obviously never thought twice about the films he brought them.) But it's underexplored terrain. The film remains a testament to movie love, and how acculturated, against all odds, you could become on a steady diet of Hollywood product. But in contrast to, say, Makmalbaf's semi-fictional sleight of hand, Moselle largely misses the opportunity to see the Angulo's strange life through the looking-glass of movies - to view their chilling society deprivation experiment, and her exploration of it, as another form of cinema, as tainted by rampant movie watching and recreating as Tarantino and Burton (and Godard), but lost in the funhouse without the solvent of irony.

Instead, Moselle seeks to normalise the boys, and *The Wolfpack* climaxes with a kind of earnest Hollywood ending, as the various brothers begin to break out of the cocoon, get jobs, meet people and tentatively enter the social whorl. (She takes them to their first movie theatre to see *The Fighter* - as well as their first public beach.) We may well guiltily resist her efforts - the Angulos' developmental Otherness, terribly odd to us and yet immersed in the pop culture we all know just as well, is the film's primary allure. At the same time, the poignancy of what's undeniably on hand here - the bros' unspoken tribal cohesion, and the way their captivity pressurised and metastasised their creativity - is also fading as they disperse and grow up. Things change, alas.

Another view

People talk about life imitating art. But what if the only life you knew about - outside of your family home - was art? In the case of the children in the Angulo family - six boys and a girl, aged 16 to 24 - that's more or less what happened, with the artform in question being film. They were born to Peruvian wannabe music star Oscar and hippie Susanne, who met him in 1989 when she was looking for a guide to Machu Pichu.

Fast-forward to 1995 and the growing family had moved to New York where, ostensibly with a view to protecting them from the big bad world, they were kept isolated, home-schooled and only allowed to venture out, under strict supervision, a handful of times a year or less. If the children's 'real' outward-looking lives

*were restricted, however, their creative ones were nurtured. They were encouraged to embrace their artistic side by their mum and permitted to watch as many films as they wanted - how these films came into the house remains, like so many aspects of the boys' lives - a mystery. But as a result, the brothers threw themselves into the world of the films, studiously transcribing the scripts - *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Dark Knight* were particular favourites - before creating 'Sweded' versions of them, re-enactments with homespun props.*

Flying in the face of the frequently peddled idea about watching on-screen violence, the boys are gentle and, for kids who have barely ventured out, surprisingly well-rounded souls, who, eventually decide to stage a rebellion. That the first son to break out of the family home does so as a 'character', gives an insight into the psychological impact their isolation has had on them.

First-time director Crystal Moselle - who the press notes inform us met the boys by chance just as they first started to defy their dad en masse, a fact which the film itself is crying out for - has certainly stumbled on one hell of a story and these young people are so personable that we are quickly warm to them and long to know more about their lives.

*But inexperience shows in the way Moselle presents them. There's a scattered feeling to the action, as though once she had plunged herself into the situation, she didn't quite know what to do with it and she lacks the steely curiosity of more experienced documentarians. In the hands of someone like Kim Longinotto - whose excellent *Dreamcatcher* premiered at Sundance alongside *The Wolfpack* - there would mostly likely have been an incisiveness to the questioning. But even though Oscar seems happy to speak to her, we feel Moselle's reluctance to dig around in his motivations. There are hints and insinuations about what his drivers may have been but the director seems determined to keep everyone on-side. This means there is also a frustrating lack of external context - she speaks to nobody outside of the house.*

The boys' reactions to their new-found experiences out in the real world are also presented in a limited fashion - there is a sense of the freshness of freedom but this a film that mainly deals in big emotions as though worried about getting down to specifics. There's a large story here, certainly, but this is the abridged version. There are hints that, at some point, Mukunda - always the leader of the pack when it comes to his brothers - might well have the talent to show us the bigger picture in the future.

Amber Wilkinson (Eye for Film)

We'd like to thank all those of you have come to this season's films, those of you who have sponsored them and all those of you who have joined (or rejoined) as members for next season

We really appreciate the support and words of appreciation you have offered us. We hope to see you again on June 10th for the first film in On The Record (details below) and other films in that season; and certainly during next season, which begins on September 16th with The Brand New Testament.

Have a great summer!

**Our next screening - On The Record
Friday June 10th, 7.30pm at The Venue
Muscle Shoals (USA 2013. Cert PG):**

Tickets for all films - £5/£4 (concs) available on the door

This is a striking documentary explaining how two studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama became hit factories, supplying us with number one singles from Percy Sledge, Aretha Franklin, the Rolling Stones, and others. This goes deeper into the music business and its history than the more celebrated 20 FEET FROM STARDOM (see below), and Anthony Arendt's unexpectedly great cinematography makes this tiny hamlet and its environs into a character every bit as intriguing as the rural music moguls. Featuring contributions from Gregg Allman, Bono, Bob Dylan and others.

Also showing: **The Possibilities are Endless** (2pm June 12th at The Collection):
Mistaken for Strangers (7pm June 17th at EMMTEC)

Marley (7pm June 15th, EMMTEC)
20 Feet from Stardom: (June 19th, 2pm at The Collection)

Orion: the Man who would be King (7pm June 22nd at EMMTEC)