

# Questions about Chris Smith's American Movie

**Emanuele Saccarelli**  
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Chris Smith's documentary *American Movie* is a puzzling work. The documentary follows the life of Mark Borchardt, a poor aspiring filmmaker in Wisconsin in the American Midwest, as he struggles to finance, write, produce, direct and act in his low-budget horror film *Coven*, with the help of a few friends and relatives.

The nature of the relation between Smith's film and Borchardt's is open to a number of interpretations. One could venture the hypothesis that *American Movie* is a critical effort of self-reflection on Smith's part as an independent filmmaker. Does Smith believe that it is only away from the glitter and comforts of Hollywood, and in the most wretched social conditions, that true art can flourish? Certainly one gets the sense that, at times, Smith's work conveys his admiration for Borchardt's genuine commitment to filmmaking.

Conversely, one could also legitimately suspect that a great deal of patronizing informs Smith's treatment of Borchardt's life. Too often Smith seems unable to resist eliciting from the audience a cheap laugh at Borchardt's expense, his hard-luck existence and artistic pretensions. Is Smith perhaps developing a mean-spirited and gratuitous critique of the common man's barrenness and vain aspirations behind the back of a naïve Borchardt? One comes away from Smith's film with unanswered questions such as these. Unfortunately, these are not necessarily artistically productive ambiguities. Instead, they could well be the mark of opportunism and inconsistency. Nevertheless, the film also presents the viewer with potentially intriguing themes and sporadic moments of considerable interest that caution us not to dismiss Smith's work out of hand.

What do we know about Borchardt? Born in a poor rural area of Wisconsin, struggling with debts and a

failed relationship with the mother of his three children, Mark Borchardt is a man of limited artistic talents. His account of the works that influenced him and the fragments of his movie we get to see make this abundantly clear. A number of inconsequential horror movies, as well as the charm of the local cemetery, have fueled his fascination with death since his childhood. Borchardt makes a living, so to speak, working there as a janitor and custodian. The material Borchardt likes to film includes scarecrows, haunted houses and various assortments of blood, gore, and violence. Seduced by the Satanic influences of popular culture, Borchardt would be the kind of youth Republican moralists like to complain about, if he were not 30 years of age.

One does not wish to patronize or ridicule Borchardt. His experience is, after all, more pressingly real and common than a great deal of commercially successful filmmakers. Smith, who found success with this project by winning the 1999 Sundance film festival Grand Jury Prize, seems at some level inspired by the way in which Borchardt endures all sorts of humiliations, mostly at the hands of his own family members. What makes Borchardt a compelling subject for a film is his single-minded and indomitable commitment to what he believes to be art.

"He has a lot of dreams" we hear Mark's mother say. In reality, Borchardt's life and aspirations appear wholly consumed by the idea of filmmaking. The other interesting aspect of *American Movie* is its investigation of the motivations driving Borchardt. Borchardt insists with no discernible sarcasm on the urgency and validity of the American dream, especially his own. His brother, who seems to have a familial ax to grind, tells the viewer that Mark has always wanted the good life.

In one of the film's remarkable moments, Borchardt ponders on the ethical dimension of his American dream while driving along in his beat-up car. It turns out that Borchardt, who by all accounts would be labeled a "loser," has devoted a great deal of thought to the finer ethical complexities of his potential success as a filmmaker. This remote possibility is what consumes him and sustains his efforts. The prospect of "making it" as others fail and remain in the conditions he grew up in, is a problem Borchardt feels compelled to consider and overcome.

We are faced at once with genuine human hope and with a degrading coping mechanism; with a pressing and continued consideration of matters of social justice, and with the renewed legitimization of the grotesque inequalities of capitalism. Borchardt provides a poignant reminder of the absurd and nevertheless real power of the American dream.

Borchardt admits that he realizes how the kind of inequality that keeps him down but could conceivably propel him to the height of fame and fortune is antithetical to Christian principles. But, of course, he is not a Christian. Or rather, he is "half Christian and half Satanist"(!): part devoted to a spiritual calling, and part devoted to the pursuit of millions of dollars. In these days of entrepreneurial Christianity it is up to the viewer to decide which part is which.

Mark's brother states in a resentful tone that Borchardt really ought to abandon his illusions and work in the local factory. This is the other side of Borchardt's American dream. The fuel of Borchardt's artistic drive is not simply ambition, but fear that he may never get out of his present condition. Borchardt's early remark that "The American Dream stays with me each and every day" assumes its more properly dark tones once we plunge more deeply into his existence. His condition is tolerable to him only to the extent that becoming a rich filmmaker remains even a remote possibility. Borchardt bitterly complains about having to clean filthy bathrooms at the cemetery. He repeatedly forces himself to confront his personal condition, "Is that what you want to do with your life—suck down peppermint schnapps?" But this merely serves to fan the flames of the unlikely dream that sustains him.

As the Green Bay Packers are shown winning the 1997 Superbowl on the TV screen of his parents' small

and messy living room, a mildly intoxicated Borchardt storms out of the house ranting against the "motherf\_\_\_\_ing factory workers." "Never" he exclaims with a raised fist (!) as he vows not to remain trapped in the conditions of working class life. These kinds of contradictions emerge with occasional vividness in Smith's documentary. Amidst the cheap laughs and trivial moments, Smith's work reveals flashes of the tragedy of a man trapped not just in the harsh reality of his social condition, but, more importantly, in its ideological negation.



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