

The Eagle Huntress is about real people—*Rules Don't Apply* and *Nocturnal Animals* are about something else

Joanne Laurier
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The *Eagle Huntress*, directed by Otto Bell; *Rules Don't Apply*, directed, written and co-produced by Warren Beatty; *Nocturnal Animals*, directed by Tom Ford, based on the 1993 novel by Austin Wright

The Eagle Huntress

Eagle hunting (falconry), a centuries-old tradition, is currently practiced by Kazakhs in Bayan-Ölgii, Mongolia, as well as in Kazakhstan, and the Saur and Altai ranges in Xinjiang, China. This ancient form of hunting is also employed in Kyrgyzstan and Akqi, Xinjiang in western China, and in Turkmenistan.

Golden eagles, capable of speeds of up to 190 miles per hour, weigh up to 15 pounds and average about three feet tall with wings that span over six feet. They kill with their talons, sharp and powerful enough to pulverize the bones of their prey, which is then used by their owners for meat and fur.

The documentary, *The Eagle Huntress*, directed by Otto Bell, follows apple-cheeked, 13-year-old Aisholpan, a member of a tribe of Kazakh semi-nomads, as she learns the art of eagle hunting from her father Nurgaiv. She is destined to become a member of her family's 12th generation of hunters. While Nurgaiv and his wife believe in the equality of sexes, many of the tribal elders are vehemently opposed to the training of female hunters. (In 1924, when Mongolia became part of the Soviet Union, the constitution mandated gender equality.)

Aisholpan divides her time between boarding school and her family's encampment. The latter is elemental but adorned with exquisite, hand-embroidered tapestries, the same stunning handicrafts that ornament the family's clothing.

Under the tutelage of her patient and loving father, Aisholpan will capture her own three-month-old eaglet, which must be female, due to a larger body and more ferocious nature. Drone cameras swoop over sparse steppes and snow-capped mountains as the young steady-footed *bürkitshi* (eagle hunter), is lowered down a steep cliff by her nervous father to the nest. It is a visually arresting and tension-filled sequence, which skillfully mixes live footage with re-enactments.

Despite her age and relative inexperience, Aisholpan enters the Golden Eagle Festival in Ölgii to compete against 70 of the greatest eagle hunters—as old as 80—in Mongolia. This and other arduous challenges in the frigid mountains must be endured before Aisholpan

can take her place as the youngest and one of the first eagle huntresses.

The Eagle Huntress is a lively and unusual encounter with a remote population and their customs. Aisholpan and her family are endearing and profoundly humane. When the courageous huntress extends her small, leather-covered arm to serve as the landing pad for an imposing raptor approaching at race car speeds, it takes one's breath away. In an interesting scene at Aisholpan's school, classmates—who are gathered around listening to her recount her exploits—exclaim: "We too want to be eagle hunters, but we're afraid of eagles." They are rightfully in awe of a girl who is taking the eagle hunting world by storm. (At one point, Aisholpan also reveals she wants to be a doctor.)

Girls will be girls, and Aisholpan prepares for the festival by applying nail polish with less skill than she handles her beast of prey. She also helps her younger sibling brighten up her digits.

The Eagle Festival is another of the movie's highpoints. Eagle-hunting regalia for hunters and their horses are judged, as well as the skill of the eagles at hunting and locating their owners from a distance.

In an interview with *National Geographic*, director Bell explains some of the factors responsible for the young girl's extraordinary talents and the equally extraordinary acceptance of these by her parents: "I think her parents' support is born from a combination of factors. Firstly, they saw this coming. Aisholpan's mother, Alma, told me that her daughter was always transfixed by her father's eagles—since she was a baby she'd exhibited an almost preternatural fascination with the birds.

"Secondly, there's circumstance. When her older brother left to join the Mongolian Army, Aisholpan took on the bulk of his chores. These were often physical farm tasks, typically undertaken by the men of the tribe. From what I understand, Aisholpan parlayed these new responsibilities into time on the mountain with her dad's eagle. He's a fair man and a champion eagle hunter."

After describing the "quiet steel that underpins her determination," Bell goes on to say that he and his "little crew of three would be freezing in minus-50 conditions and she would just plow through knee-high drifts, carrying her 15-pound eagle like it was a walk in the park."

The Eagle Huntress dazzles as much for its images as for the love and respect it holds for its subjects.

Rules Don't Apply

Warren Beatty's *Rules Don't Apply* begins with a quote from tycoon Howard Hughes, "Never check an interesting fact," an adage that the filmmaker staunchly adheres to in his fictionalized homage to the aviator-mogul. The movie begins and ends at a 1964 press conference where members of the media anxiously await a statement from the recluse. The unlikely story is sandwiched in between.

In 1958, Marla Mabrey (Lily Collins), a small town Virginia beauty queen and Baptist, arrives in Los Angeles with her prudish mother (Annette Bening). She has been hired as one of Hughes' contract starlets. Given a house, Marla is chauffeured by the handsome Frank Forbes (Alden Ehrenreich), a Methodist engaged to his childhood sweetheart. Sparks fly between the two despite the fact that Hughes employees are forbidden to "fraternize."

While the pair's attraction for one another slowly builds, *Rules Don't Apply* suddenly becomes a faux Hughes biopic and from there the chaotic goings-on revolve around Beatty's portrayal of the neurotic billionaire. Minor roles are assigned to Candice Bergen, Martin Sheen, Alec Baldwin, Matthew Broderick, Ed Harris, Amy Madigan and Steve Coogan, among others.

The film is poorly made, choppy and rambling. More to the point, it presents the deplorable Hughes as an essentially sympathetic, eccentric figure with a father complex. And lines such as "No one has done more to fight Communism" are delivered with a straight face.

Why do we need another film about Howard Hughes?

In 2005, in a review of Martin Scorsese's film, *The Aviator*, the WSWS noted that Scorsese's work had falsified Hughes's life, since it avoided "his role as a fanatical anti-communist, who purged his own studio, RKO, of left-wingers, and his campaigns against screenwriter Paul Jarrico and Chaplin's *Limelight*; his well-known links to the Mafia; his business and personal dealings with bloody dictators such as Cuba's Batista, the Dominican Republic's Trujillo and Nicaragua's Somoza; his sale of TWA for half a billion dollars and his subsequent bizarre retreat to Las Vegas; his alleged participation in an assassination plot against Fidel Castro; his multifarious and lucrative association with the CIA ...; his profiteering during the Vietnam War...; his buying up of Republican and Democratic politicians alike ('I can buy any man in the world,' he boasted); his especially intimate ties to Richard Nixon and his apparent role in the Watergate conspiracy; his drug addiction; and, of course, his descent into hypochondria, paranoia and, ultimately, total lunacy. One might legitimately describe Hughes as something of an American fascist type."

Unhappily, one suspects that "Rules Don't Apply" is meant by Beatty to apply to himself, a subject that seems to take up most of his time and interest at the moment.

In an interview with the *Daily Beast*, Beatty—an affluent liberal and Democratic Party supporter—waxed complacent about the election of Donald Trump: "I think we don't know yet what the possibilities are," he said. "And I think we have to respect our system and not respond precipitously. I think we'll have to see what happens."

Beatty long ago surrendered to the Hollywood establishment. It has been more than a third of a century since he directed *Reds*, about the American socialist and chronicler of the October Revolution, John Reed. However, as recently as 1998, the WSWS headlined its review of his entertaining and anti-establishment *Bulworth*, "A Little of John Reed, After All." The film centered on a corrupt California senator

(Beatty) who has a nervous breakdown, in part, from his guilt over a political turn to the right. Eighteen years later, that little bit of Reed has apparently been worn away.

Nocturnal Animals

A revenge thriller, with the emphasis on 'revenge,' Tom Ford's *Nocturnal Animals* opens during an art gallery exhibition that features obese naked woman energetically dancing, waving sparklers and American flags, while others recline motionlessly on platforms. Through this scene, Ford, a successful fashion designer whose career as a filmmaker was launched in 2009 with *A Single Man*, seems to express a non-committal, but certainly uncritical attitude toward the current vacuous and distasteful art scene. It further sets the tone for a movie that is violent, pretentious and misanthropic.

Amy Adams plays Susan Morrow, a wealthy art gallery owner who has lost her zest for life. A work spelling out "REVENGE" is prominently on display in her institution and a sculpture from the repugnant Jeff Koons adorns her home. Her husband (Armie Hammer) uses his failing business as an excuse for absences to indulge in infidelity.

Susan receives a book manuscript from Edward (Jake Gyllenhaal), her ex-husband whom she dumped for the more upscale Hammer character. The book's narrative is the film-within-the-film. It concerns Tom (also Gyllenhaal) and his wife (Isla Fisher, looking like an Adams replica) and daughter who are terrorized and worse as they drive at night on a back road in West Texas. Michael Shannon is a cop dying of lung cancer who has no qualms about dispensing vigilante justice when all else fails.

While the film contains vague references to the superficiality of the moneyed, it also wallows in what it considers the savagery of "nocturnal animals," i.e., the backward horde of have-nots who live to harm those who have. Ford's trivial impressions and vengeful fantasies leave him squarely in the swamp he is supposed to be critiquing.



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