

# Kelly Reichardt's *The Mastermind*: “Honestly, I don’t think you’ve thought things through enough”

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*The Mastermind* is the latest film by prominent American independent writer-director Kelly Reichardt, responsible for *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), *Meek’s Cutoff* (2010), *Night Moves* (2013), *Certain Women* (2016) and *First Cow* (2019), among others.

It concerns the theft of paintings from a local museum in a Massachusetts town in 1970 and the aftermath of the crime, its almost inevitable “unraveling.” James Blaine (“JB”) Mooney (Josh O’Connor) is an unemployed carpenter from an upper middle class family, an art school dropout at loose ends, bored with his disappointing life.

Mooney determines to steal four works by American modernist Arthur Dove (1880-1946) as a solution to his financial problems and perhaps to confirm his view of himself as somehow “special” and a little above the rest of humanity. To finance the theft, he is obliged to borrow money, on false pretenses, from his mother. He hires three accomplices, one of whom withdraws at the last moment.

The heist takes place, but things go badly wrong. One of the crew, subsequently arrested for a bank robbery, names Mooney as the “mastermind” of the art museum operation. A second, under pressure, lets local criminals know who was responsible and they appropriate the paintings from a defenseless Mooney. Wanted by the police for questioning, he sets off across the country, leaving his wife (Alana Haim) and two sons behind. His name and face are now all over the news.

Mooney’s friends Fred and Maude put him up for the night, but she bluntly tells him to leave the next morning:

I don’t want you staying here anymore after tonight. I’m serious. And don’t call either. I don’t want you talking to Fred at all. And I want you to leave us alone, okay? ... I don’t want you ruining our lives, too.

Mooney sets off again. Now in a Midwestern city, he steals an elderly woman’s purse for bus fare. In an ironic twist, he falls into the hands of the police by accident.

Reichardt has made some intriguing, engaging films, including in particular *Wendy and Lucy* and *First Cow*, along with portions

of *Certain Women*.

*Wendy and Lucy*, set in a rundown, former industrial town, movingly follows a young homeless woman (Michelle Williams), one of the millions in America hanging on by their fingernails.

Reichardt explained to an interviewer that the filmmakers’ starting point was to oppose

the conception, popular in the media and official political circles, that “if you’re poor in America, it’s because you’re lazy. As the gap [between rich and poor] has grown over eight years, so has the feeling that it’s okay.”

*First Cow*, set in the 1820s in the Pacific Northwest, deals memorably with the origins of North American business and the value of—and need—for solidarity. It is a realistic and intelligent account of a time when US capitalism was first spreading itself across the continent. On the other hand, *Night Moves*, about eco-terrorism, and the especially minimalist *Meek’s Cutoff*, set in the 1840s, are muddy or slight.

*The Mastermind* is one of Reichardt’s weaker efforts. It impresses the viewer primarily as a criticism of the self-involvement and self-delusion of a certain masculine type. As painted, Mooney is an individualist, with little thought about the consequences of his actions. He has no time for protests against the Vietnam War or life on a “commune” proposed by Fred (“Me in a commune? [He chuckles] Who’s he got there, a bunch of draft dodgers?”).

JB is in quest of “personal freedom,” which comes primarily at the expense of his wife, along with other women like his mother, to whom he owes a good deal of money, and his friend Maude.

Is the character or the situation even entirely plausible? Mooney is the son of a judge, so presumably he is familiar with the legal system and the operations of the police. How could he possibly have expected to get away with such an amateurish crime? Is he stealing the artworks to have them fenced? If so, there is no indication of it, except an allusion to a professor of his at college who was fond of Dove’s work.

Mooney appears to have his wits about him, but no cautious son of the petty bourgeoisie, as he is otherwise portrayed, would have

embarked on such a foolhardy, doomed business. Unless ... he is genuinely a convinced Nietzschean, a megalomaniac who believes himself above and immune from the law, a latter-day Rodion Raskolnikov (from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, 1866). But Reichardt does not provide more than a hint or two of that. Mooney is presented as simply lazy and narcissistic, and dishonest.

While on the lam, for example, he tells his wife over the telephone:

Terri, I know it doesn't make much sense. But everything I've done ... it's been for you and the kids. And me, yeah. Yeah. Me too. True enough. But mostly, Terri, my intentions, the things I've done ... three-quarters of what I've done, was for the good of our family.

We are meant to sneer and scoff at his pretensions. The heavy-handed irony of the title gives away too much. Reichardt is operating in some intellectually "passive-aggressive" mode here. She is obviously angry at the Mooneys of the world, all these terrible male egoists, although she keeps the goings-on quiet and calm for the most part. ("Honestly, I don't think you've thought things through enough," one of the real criminals informs Mooney, in a moment of self-conscious understatement, echoing an earlier comment by Mooney's father.)

Reichardt let a little out of the bag in a conversation with the BBC. Their reporter wrote:

*The Mastermind* works in many ways to upend entrenched ideas about art robbers. From Caine in *Gambit* to Alain Delon in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970), such a figure was often represented as a heartthrob in the films of that time. But, with JB, Reichardt hoped to subvert that. "These guys are [actually] such jerks. They're misogynist. They can afford to break away and do what they want. They're not pinned down with kids."

Or, as she says elsewhere, "one person's personal freedom usually falls on the shoulders of someone else, and oftentimes, that's the woman in the room."

A critic suggests the "film's critique is partly aimed at men's [Beat writer] Jack Kerouac-style mythologies of freedom, so often lived out at women's expense. The ideal of the liberated male, usually bonding in free-roving groups, was common in the period the film is set."

Is such a "subversion" of this type of misogyny truly important, or, frankly, even necessary? Don't we have bigger fish to fry? The end result of this misplaced concern with the secondary and even tertiary is a rather drab and even dull film. The real drama is missed.

Reichardt magnifies Mooney's selfishness and potential for criminality for her own narrative and ideological purposes. The

film imagines a robbery at a fictional art museum in Framingham, Massachusetts. As the writer-director has indicated, she was set into motion on this film project in part by reading about the 50th anniversary of a robbery at the Worcester [Massachusetts] Art Museum that occurred in May 1972.

In that episode, apparently the first time in US history that artworks were stolen at gunpoint, two men entered the Worcester museum right before closing and stole two paintings by Paul Gauguin, one by Pablo Picasso and a work then attributed to Rembrandt (now considered a work by one of his students). A security guard was slightly wounded when he attempted to detain the thieves fleeing the building.

Within days, three men and one woman were arrested in connection with the robbery (as well as the theft of seven artworks stolen in another operation). They had apparently bragged about their exploits in a local bar. The actual "mastermind" of the robbery, Florian "Al" Monday, was found in Montreal and extradited a year later. But Monday was a "career criminal," well known to the police and to other crooks, not a "slacker" Raskolnikov.

According to Anthony Amore, director of security and chief investigator at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston: "They [the Worcester museum paintings] were recovered by a couple of guys that were awaiting sentencing from a judge in Worcester, [they] decided if they could recover the paintings they would be able to carry some favor with that judge and the sentencing, so they put a gun in Al Monday's stomach and said, 'take us to them,' and he did. And the paintings were recovered."

In any event, self-deluded personalities like Mooney do exist, whether they plan museum heists or not. Well and good, and so? Again, is the largely ahistorical and asocial presentation of such a figure particularly meaningful?

*The Mastermind* spends a good deal of time creating the atmosphere and social trappings of 1970, with numerous references around its edges to the Vietnam War, anti-war protest and so forth. Mooney is not interested in any of that, but, unfortunately, neither does Reichardt turn out to be terribly either. She insists, according to one interviewer, "that politics are only the backdrop to the film, and [she] doesn't want them 'to be a forefront thing.'"

All in all, something of a muddle. Reichardt has a good observational eye and writes and films intelligent dialogue and action. She would benefit if she stopped being shamefaced about her social concerns, an accommodation to backward moods in film circles, and consistently pursued them instead.



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