



THE EVOLUTION OF BEAUTY

DIRECTED BY BRETT MORGEN

*Based on the best-selling book
by Richard Prum*



OVERVIEW

With films such as JANE and KURT COBAIN: MONTAGE OF HECK, visionary documentary filmmaker Brett Morgen has pushed the aesthetic boundaries of nonfiction. With THE EVOLUTION OF BEAUTY, he tells the story of how the behavior of the world's most stunning and unusual birds led ornithologist Richard Prum to a groundbreaking feminist reinterpretation of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

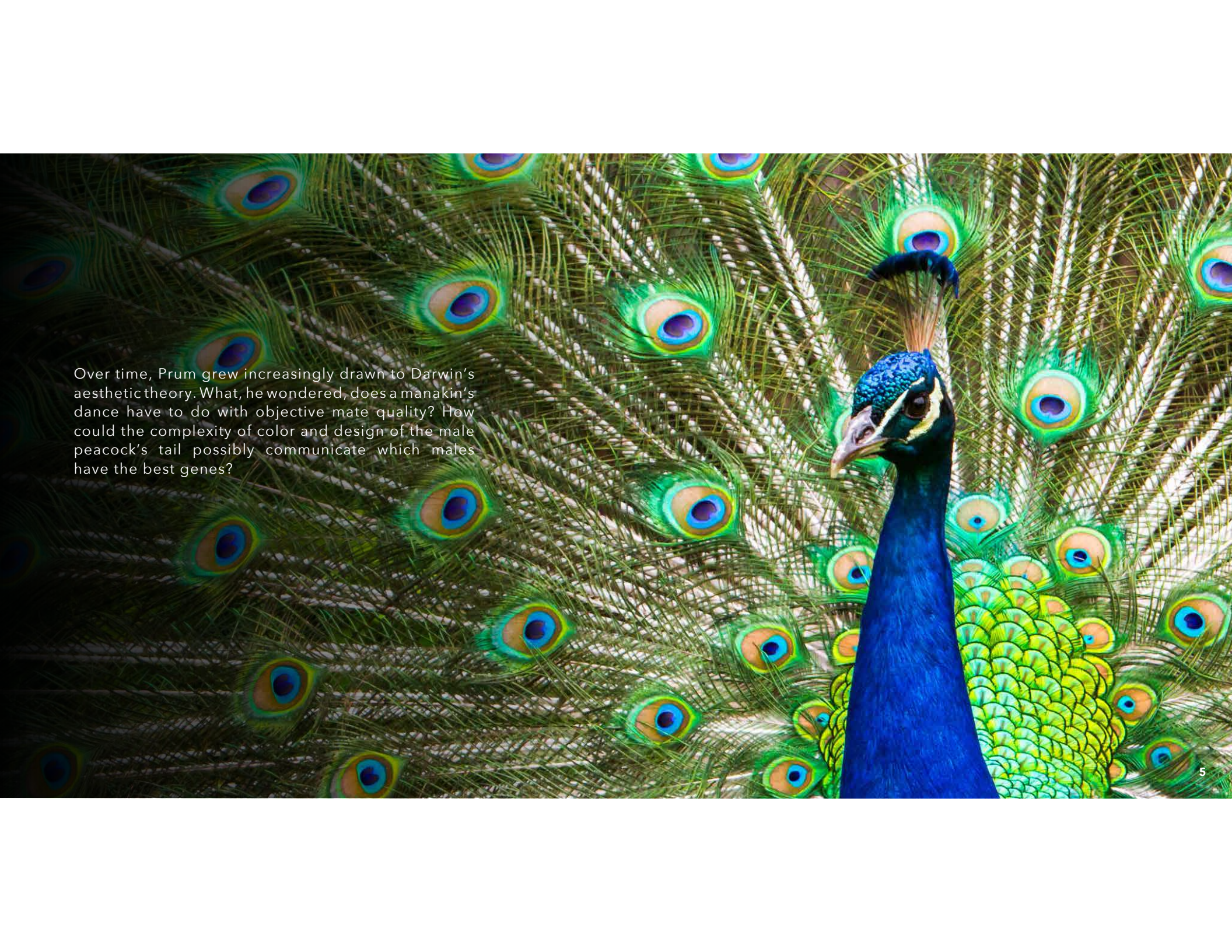


The Australian great bowerbird has a unique form of courtship. The male bowerbird spends most of the year engaged in the fastidious design and ornamentation of his bower, a nest structure that will only allow the male to attract a mate if sufficiently ornate and colorful. When mating season comes, the female bowerbird, like an architecture critic, surveys the bowers of the males and chooses only the one she finds the most appealing - leaving the other males to wonder how they can improve their own structures the following year.



The bowerbird's bower-building is just one of the unusual mating rituals that Yale ornithologist Richard Prum has observed over a lifetime of obsessive birdwatching. According to the predominant theory, such courtship displays have evolved because they demonstrate objective quality as a mate - ie, they demonstrate good genes or control of good territory.

In this view, mate choice is a kind of adaptive natural selection. However, Darwin himself proposed an alternative theory in which mate choice involves aesthetic judgment based on sensory pleasure and cognitive delight.

A male peacock is shown from the chest up, facing left. Its head is turned slightly towards the viewer. The neck and upper chest are a vibrant, iridescent blue. The tail feathers are fanned out, creating a dense, textured background of green and blue. Each feather has a distinct 'eye' pattern, consisting of a central blue spot surrounded by a ring of orange and green. The overall appearance is highly detailed and colorful.

Over time, Prum grew increasingly drawn to Darwin's aesthetic theory. What, he wondered, does a manakin's dance have to do with objective mate quality? How could the complexity of color and design of the male peacock's tail possibly communicate which males have the best genes?

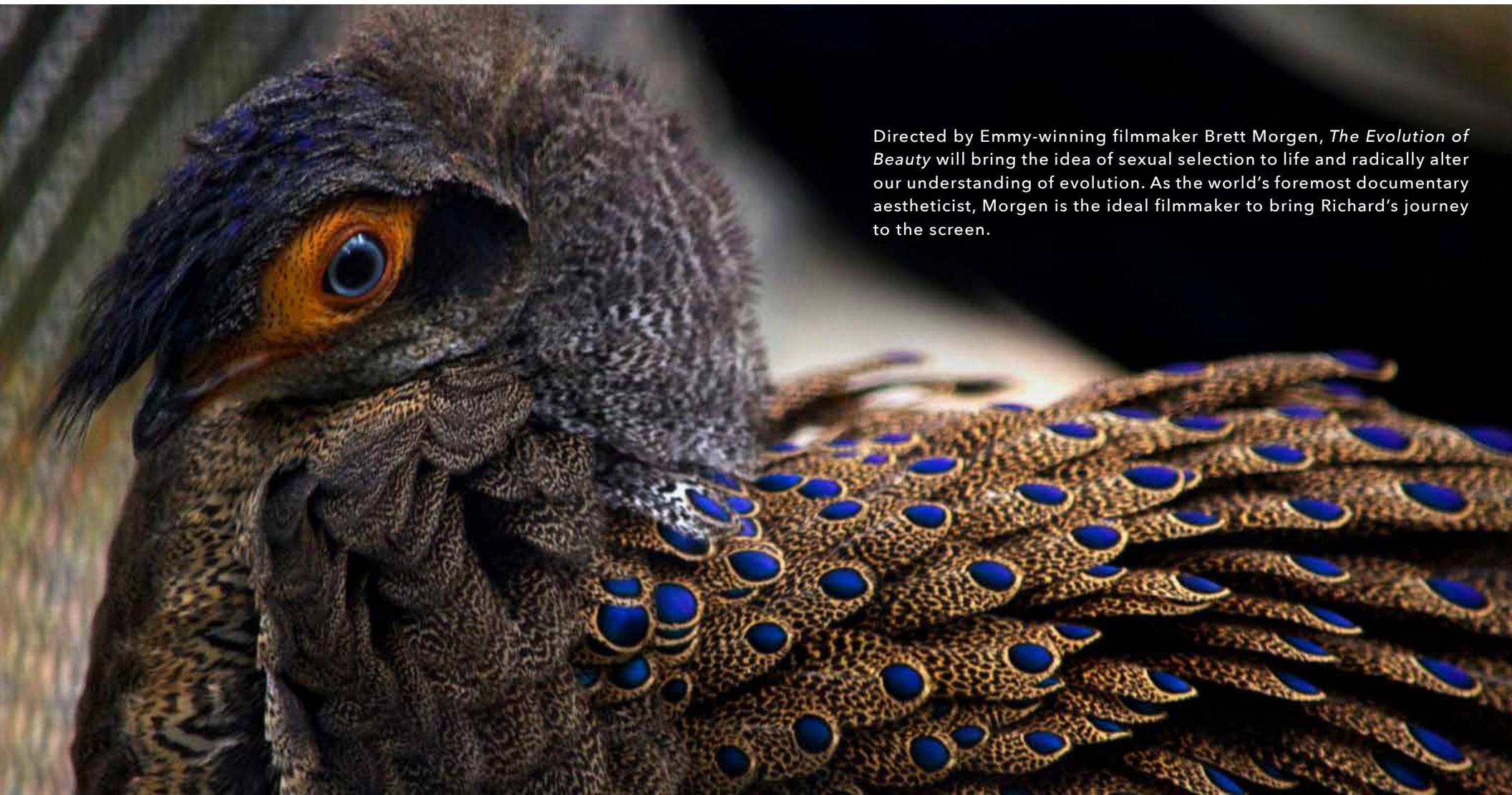
Prum explored these questions in his book *The Evolution of Beauty*, which was named one of the 2017 Top Ten Books of the Year by the New York Times and was a 2018 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The book offered a groundbreaking, feminist revision of our understanding of evolution. According to Prum, the scientific consensus of the last 150 years has rejected a vital piece of Darwin's aesthetic theory of sexual evolution.

Our film will tell the story of how Prum came to his revolutionary conclusions, reconstructing as a propulsive and visually sumptuous narrative the journey that ultimately brought him to this summation of his life's work. We will take the audience deep into the forests of Suriname to observe the mating displays of lekking manakins, to a survey of the colorful and stunningly engineered bowers of mating bowerbirds in Australia and New Guinea, and on bird-seeking trips with Richard and his wife Ann to illuminate both their research and their own relationship.



For nature lovers, this will be a visual feast, featuring ultra-high-resolution footage of some of the most beautiful, exotic birds in the world. For science enthusiasts, it will be an engaging, hands-on demonstration of an exciting breakthrough. And for all viewers, it will be a funny, entertaining tale that will challenge their understanding of how our world came to be and introduce them to a radical, profoundly feminist vision of evolution that, as a society, we are only now beginning to be ready for: that female mate choice, based on female aesthetic preferences, has been one of the driving forces of evolution, not just for birds but for all species, and that freedom of choice matters to animals.





Directed by Emmy-winning filmmaker Brett Morgen, *The Evolution of Beauty* will bring the idea of sexual selection to life and radically alter our understanding of evolution. As the world's foremost documentary aestheticist, Morgen is the ideal filmmaker to bring Richard's journey to the screen.



ELEMENTS OF THE FILM

RICHARD AND ANN

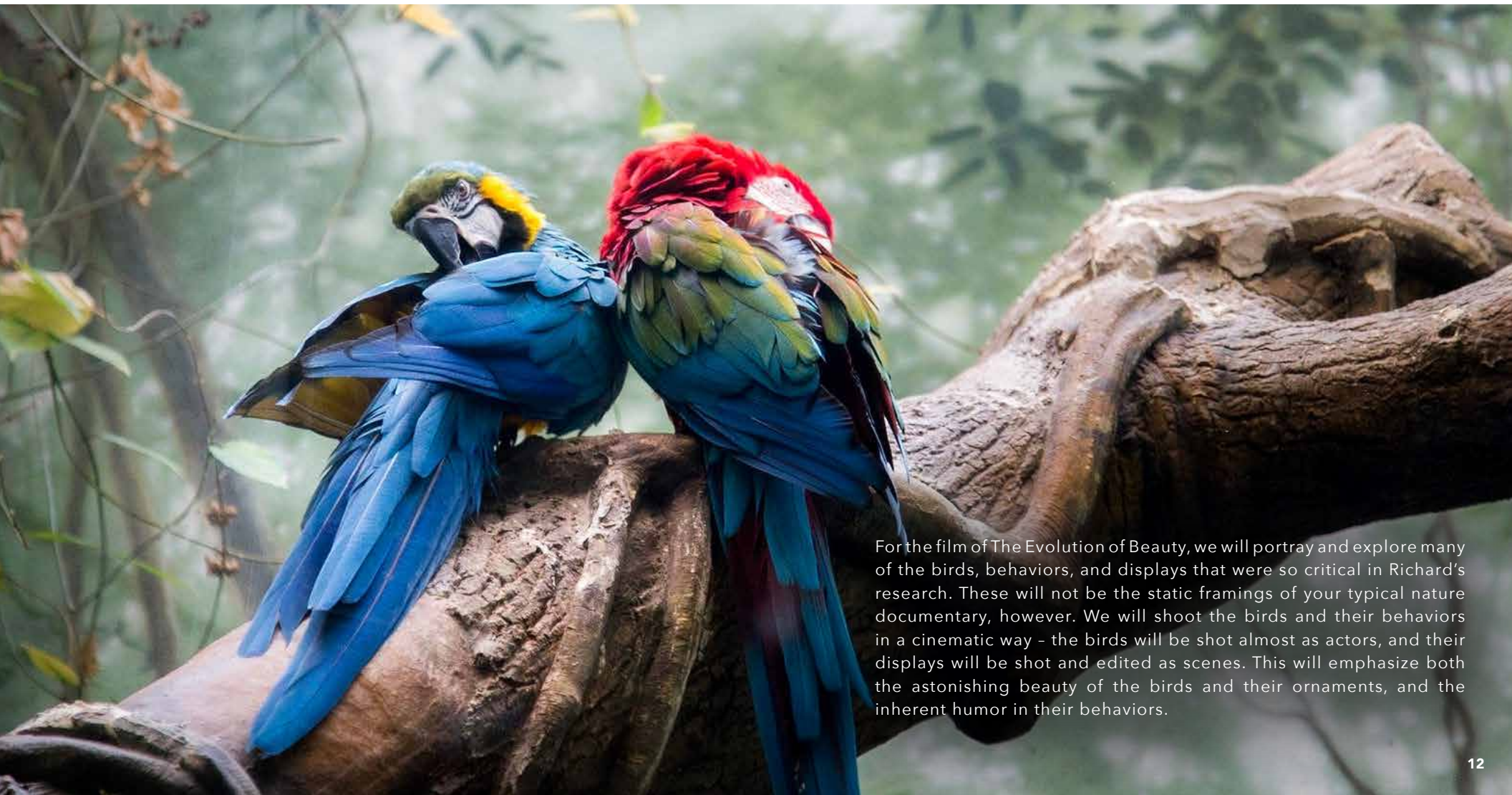
Two-time Emmy winner Ann Johnson Prum is one of the world's leading nature cinematographers, as well as Richard's frequent companion on his ornithological adventures. Telling the story of how Richard came to his scientific conclusions is impossible without telling the story of the Prums' relationship. Just as Ann will be filming birds in the field with Richard, we will have a crew with them to document their own relationship and behavior, and the audience will see that the story of the birds that they study is indistinguishable from the "studiers" themselves.





THE BIRDS

Prum came to believe Darwin's theory of sexual selection through his long career observing exotic birds. Over time, Prum realized that the display traits of many of these birds could not be adequately explained by the prevailing theory of mate choice as an adaptive process in which sexual preference evolve for traits that indicate a mate's objective quality.



For the film of The Evolution of Beauty, we will portray and explore many of the birds, behaviors, and displays that were so critical in Richard's research. These will not be the static framings of your typical nature documentary, however. We will shoot the birds and their behaviors in a cinematic way - the birds will be shot almost as actors, and their displays will be shot and edited as scenes. This will emphasize both the astonishing beauty of the birds and their ornaments, and the inherent humor in their behaviors.









PHOTO ANIMATION

Director Brett Morgen has pioneered the use of photo animation as a dynamic, cinematic tool for telling nonfiction stories. In his films *The Kid Stays in the Picture* and *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*, Morgen developed new ways of bringing photos and written materials to life. With *The Evolution of Beauty*, Morgen and motion graphics artist Stefan Nadelman will use those techniques where appropriate, but more importantly, will expand the language of the film through the animation of lifelike dioramas of the birds, their environments, and their displays. For most people in the world, the only forum in which they can see these birds in their natural habitats is through museum dioramas. The film will animate these dioramas to supplement the footage of the living birds and to provide another medium through which to tell the story.

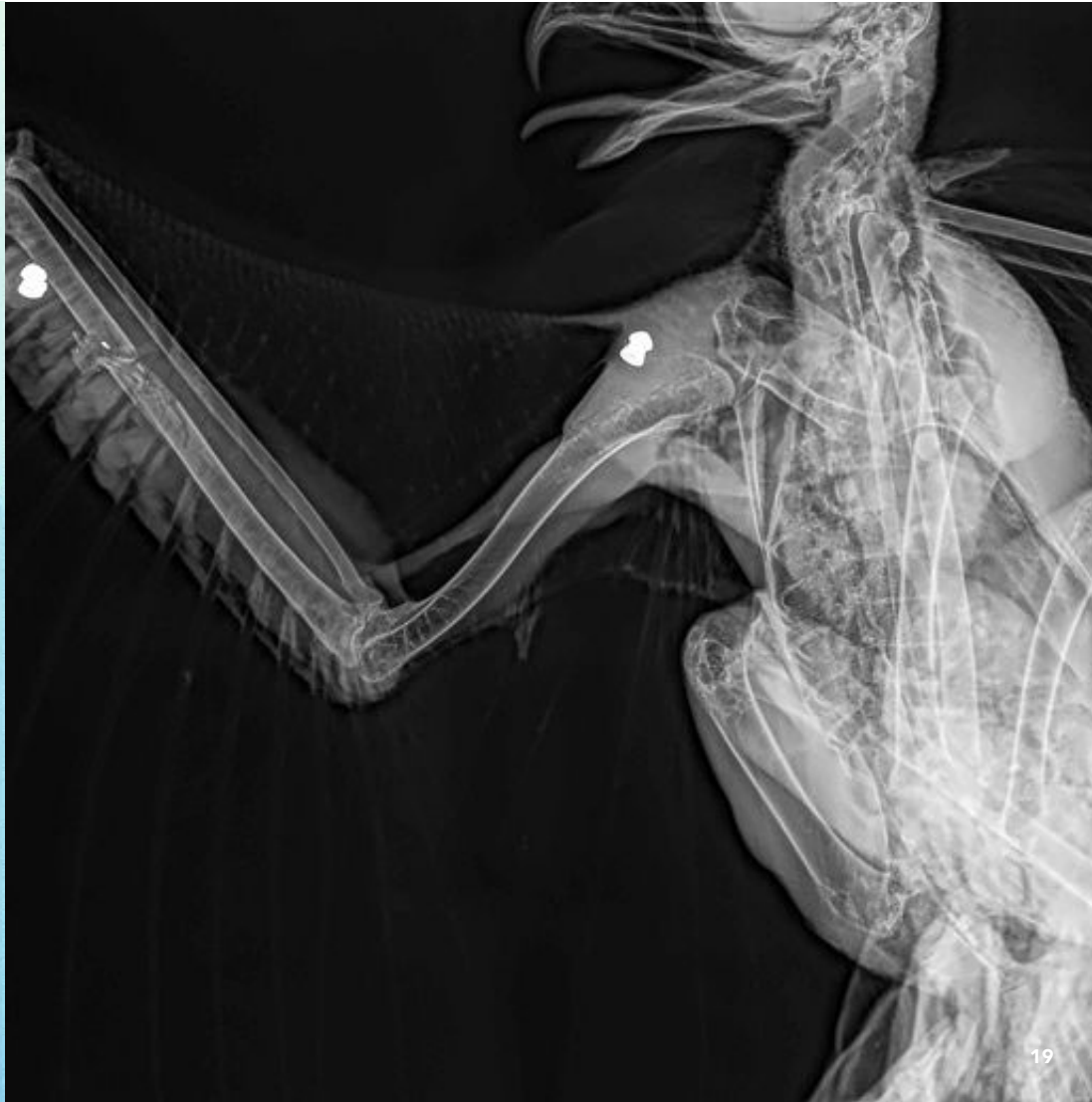
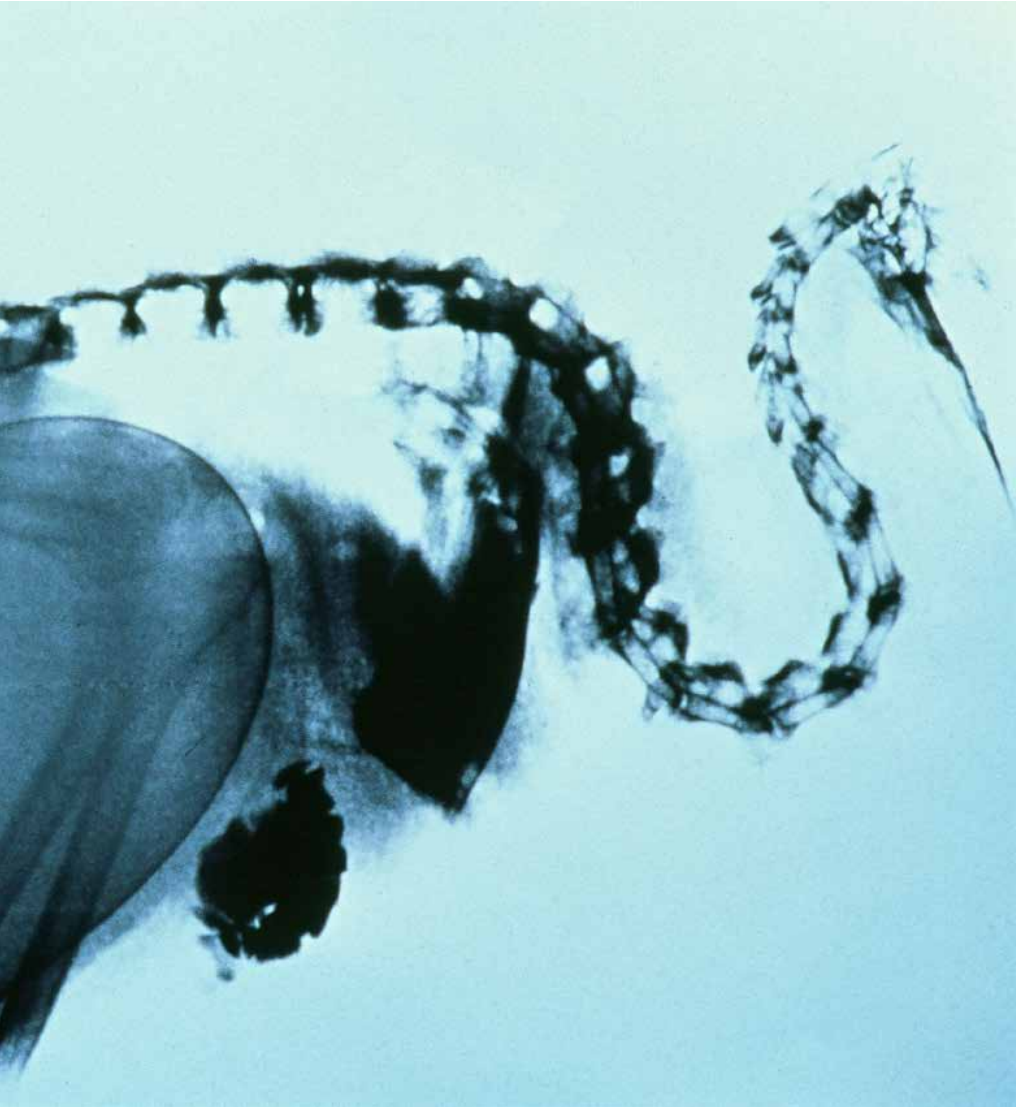


Rupicola rupicola
(Guianan cock-of-the-rock)



Bowerbird Nest: Male bowerbirds use their nests to impress and seduce females. They collect brightly colored objects in a single color range to catch their lady's eye. And, as the colors fade, they swap out the pale objects for new, brighter ones.









THE CAST.

It only takes a cursory reading of *The Evolution of Beauty* to be taken with Richard's clear passion for the birds that he studies, and as a character himself, he's close to the mental image one has of an ornithologist. As such, he will play a major role in the film, and the audience will get to know him as the film traces the development of his understanding of Darwin's theory of sexual selection.



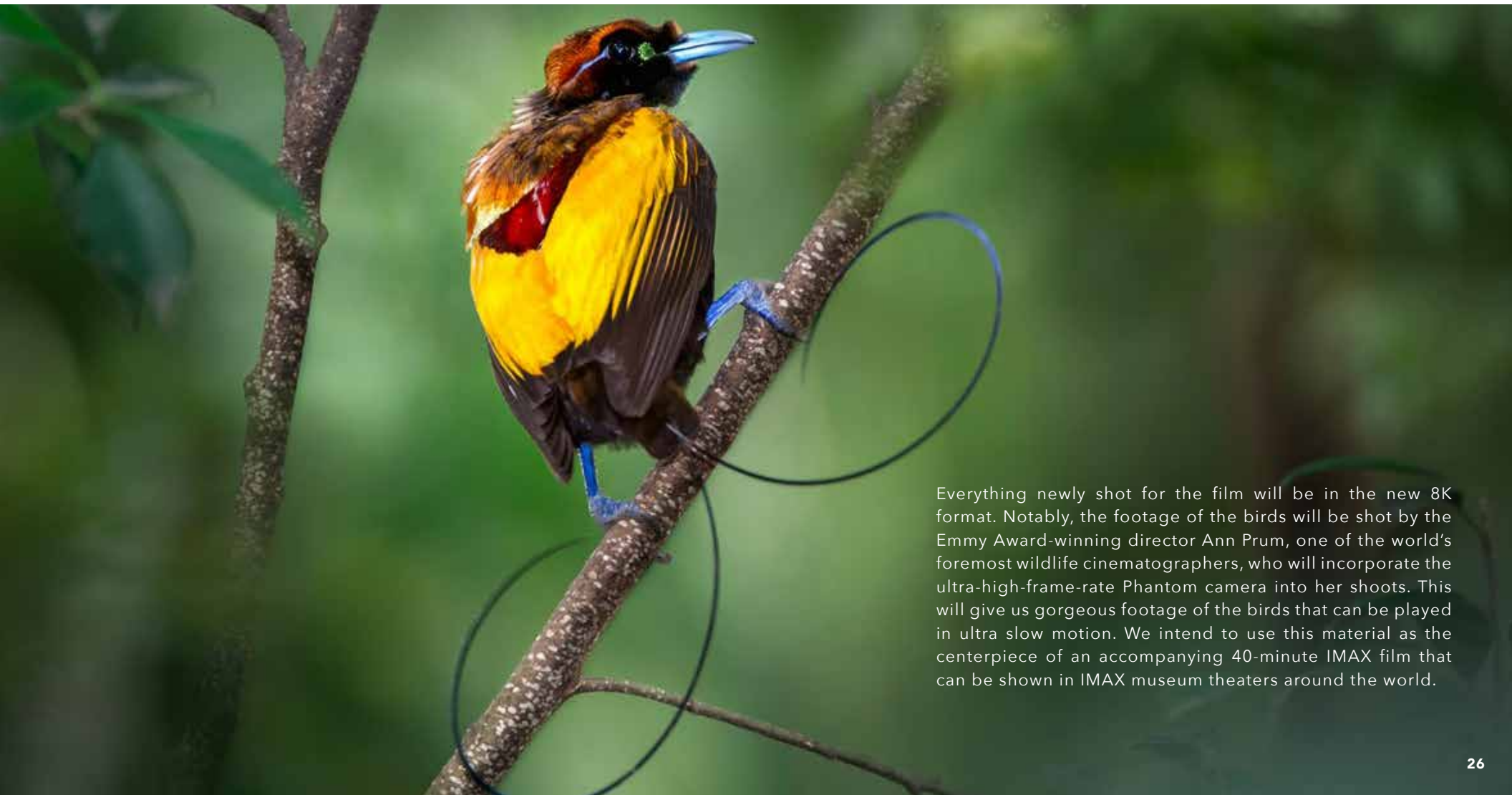


However, we want Richard's voice to speak for Richard only, not to be the "voice of God" throughout the film as a whole. Accordingly, we will also cast a major comic actor to serve as the narrator of the film. Ideally, since Richard's book is so important as a feminist recasting of the theory of evolution, this will be a female voice - think of Amy Schumer, Amy Poehler, or Sarah Silverman.

Additionally, the film will feature interviews with academics who are both critical and supportive of Richard's theory.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a lush forest floor filled with various types of ferns. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a rich, green atmosphere. The ferns in the foreground are sharp and detailed, while those in the background are slightly blurred, creating a sense of depth. The word "IMAX" is centered in the middle of the image in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

IMAX



Everything newly shot for the film will be in the new 8K format. Notably, the footage of the birds will be shot by the Emmy Award-winning director Ann Prum, one of the world's foremost wildlife cinematographers, who will incorporate the ultra-high-frame-rate Phantom camera into her shoots. This will give us gorgeous footage of the birds that can be played in ultra slow motion. We intend to use this material as the centerpiece of an accompanying 40-minute IMAX film that can be shown in IMAX museum theaters around the world.

SUMMARY

Darwin's aesthetic theory of sexual selection was ignored and ultimately forgotten because it gave too much agency to the sensibilities and choices of female animals. Now, in 2018, in the midst of the #MeToo era, is the perfect time to reintroduce this radical idea to the world through Prum's groundbreaking ornithological research, and thereby to give us a unique new understanding of female autonomy. The Evolution of Beauty will challenge viewers to rethink their conceptions of how evolution functioned, presented as a stunning visual adventure featuring some of the world's most amazing animals.

