

A sympathetic depiction of eco-anarchists in The East

David Fellerath

06/19/2013

It's not often that Hollywood movies portray America's radical left in any light at all, let alone a sympathetic one.

Eighty years after the Depression, there's still a subculture of people riding the rails, living in modern hobo jungles and "living off the fat of our great land," as Merle Haggard sang in one of his anthemic celebrations of society's outsiders. We see the evidence of this culture hairy, heavily pierced kids sleeping at the bus station, or working shifts at the food co-ops, or plucking banjos in alleyways.

In *The East*, a new indie thriller, we see a world that rarely makes the screen in anything other than the occasional documentary: the American leftist fringe, eco-radicals, freegans, vegans, skaters, dumpster divers and freight-hoppers, along with elusive activists whose tactics veer into law-breaking.

In this film, "The East" is the name of a band of eco-anarchists who spring actions, or "jams," against corporate malefactors, including industrial polluters and pharmaceutical poison-pushers. Over an opening credit sequence featuring oil-soaked seabirds, dolphins and tortoises, a voiceover drones menacing threats against America's capitalist oligarchy.

An earnest young investigator, Sarah Moss (Brit Marling), is sent to infiltrate this group. She's a politically unsophisticated, Christian-radio-listening tyro, and she's anxious to impress her boss (Patricia Clarkson), who is the head of a secretive private security firm (the name of which, Hiller Brood, uncannily echoes Booz Allen Hamilton, the outfit that employed NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden).

When Sarah gets the assignment, she's presented with a new pair of Birkenstocks, which she begins scuffing; fortunately, the film soon dispenses with this hippie cliché, as Sarah, once undercover, adopts a more rugged shoe. The narrative that follows begins promisingly, with Sarah being rather adept at insinuating her way into freegan campgrounds and hopping trains.

If the film doesn't quite go off the rails at this point, it does divert onto a dead-end spur of genre predictability. The film ends up being about a concept the anarchist left which is then poured into a generic thriller mold, and the characters seem to have been sketched from an Identikit. Undercover, Sarah hides among The East, which turns out to be led by a self-pitying rich boy (Alexander Skarsgard), a militant sidekick (a very strong Ellen Page) and assorted "damaged" individuals, including a doctor with career-killing tremors, a flamboyant queer and a deaf woman. (As a hearing impaired person, it infuriates me whenever deaf people are presented as emotionally fragile and easily wounded, as is the case here.)

The conversion narrative and thriller mechanisms that follow are rather tired, but to the film's credit, it doesn't betray or condescend to the convictions of its radical characters. At the same time, it shortchanges their political sophistication and basic decency; as documentaries such as *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* have demonstrated, many eco-radicals take pains to avoid injuring living creatures through their protests, which is not the case with *The East*.

This film was co-written by Marling and the film's director, Zal Batmanglij. They're a fascinating arrival on the film scene; their last collaboration, *The Sound of My Voice*, was a similar story but creepier, funnier and more original of an infiltration into a separatist religious group. (Their instinct for depicting cult behavior survives in *The East*, which includes a very odd meal in which everyone wears a straitjacket.) Marling, who appeared earlier this year in *The Company You Keep*, Robert Redford's film about the 1960s radical underground, and Batmanglij actually spent a summer running with anarchists, and the best moments of *The East* are drawn from those experiences, as in a lovely sequence of "spin-the-bottle."

I just hope they're able to continue developing their writing and filmmaking skills before the powers that be stop giving them money.

This article appeared in print with the headline "Little criminals."

The Ted K Archive

David Fellerath

A sympathetic depiction of eco-anarchists in The East

06/19/2013

<indyweek.com/culture/screen/sympathetic-depiction-eco-anarchists-east>

www.thetedkarchive.com