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'Night Moves' Review + An interview with the writer
Jonathan Raymond
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been individuals and groups who've reached more violent conclusions (such as the Unabomber in the US and Individuals Tending Toward the Wild in Mexico), these people have existed outside of and are usually contemptuous of the culture represented in the film.

As for farming versus sabotage, I suppose I'm just frustrated at this false dichotomy between taking direct action against industrialization and developing alternatives. One without the other is an exercise in futility. This seems remarkably obvious to me, as obvious as why you pay attention to offense and defense alike in games and sports and war.

It's interesting to think about the film in the context of Jon's "assumption that everyone shares this latent desire to blow up the industrial infrastructure. I take that urge as a kind of presumption of human awareness in contemporary society." One reading of the film is a cautionary tale against doing what you, in your heart, desire to do. We anarchists represent, to many liberals, the baser political urge.

I can't in good conscience end this review with a call to arms against dams. The risk of killing someone downstream seems real enough to me, and most of the criticisms levied at the action in the film resonate with me personally. It's interesting then that Jonathan brings up Derrick Jensen, a lead-from-the-back anti-dam type who broke from anarchism several years ago to start an authoritarian, anti-anarchist, anti-trans eco-defense cult called Deep Green Resistance. The world doesn't need people writing about the destruction of dams, and it doesn't need young impressionable people to fall in line behind a leader to go out and commit sabotage. I actually think the filmmaker-within-the-film really nailed it when she said, and I paraphrase, that we need people to, without authoritarian leaders, do a lot of different things. Directly confront the horrors of industrialism, and directly build alternatives.

largely anti-state, anti-capitalists who are directly influenced by the anarchist books of Murray Bookchin.

I'm not trying to claim that anarchism, as an identity, is more or less marginalized than other positions (most of which one is born into, unlike political philosophies). But the demonization of anarchists is real, ongoing, and has destroyed countless lives. None of this is Jonathan Raymond's fault. Addressing it is not his responsibility. And yet, it is the context that surrounds how we look at his film.

The murder at the end of the film muddies the film's own message. The accidental death of the camper is reason enough for crisis and self-reflection and paranoia and suspense.

Jonathan is right that eco-saboteurs are far from perfect people. Let me recommend a more realistic, believable, and historically defensible action for a monster of an eco-saboteur to do: inform. Jake the Snake, a self-obsessed arsonist who ratted out his Earth Liberation Front cell in exchange for money and immunity, is a perfect example of a paranoid and immoral person put into a comparable situation. If the first 90% of the movie is a realistic depiction of the types of tension that are faced by direct actionists, then why not make the last 10% be as well?

The question Jonathan raises—why would someone at war with industrial society care about taking a few lives in the process—is a valid one but also one that has been discussed and often answered time and time again in eco-defense circles. The characters in the film are represented as coming from a sort of direct action lineage, so they are not rogue agents—they are likely to be informed of and by the history of environmental direct action in the US, like Earth First! and the more tactically-radical Earth Liberation Front (ELF). The ELF has, as one of its core tenants, respect for all life, human and non-human alike. The idea that these characters would suddenly stop respecting life, and not worry overmuch about collateral damage, is hardly believable. While there have

Night Moves
2013
Directed by: Kelly Reichardt
Written by: Jonathan Raymond

Recommended? That's complicated.

I've been thinking about it for weeks, and I still don't know how I feel about *Night Moves*. My informal poll of eco-anarchists (okay, I asked two people) is split right down the middle: it's an excellent movie except for the end, or it's garbage the whole way through.

But the thing is, it was still stuck in my head. The very least I can say is that it's not an inconsequential film. So I tracked down the screenwriter, Oregon novelist Jonathan Raymond, and interviewed him.

I include that interview in full in this review, but the interview is very spoiler-heavy. So there's a short movie review, the interview, and analysis.

A Review

Night Moves is a low-key eco-thriller that follows three saboteurs as they blow up a dam. It's one of the most beautifully-shot films I've ever seen, and the cinematography carries as much of the story's meaning as the sparse and largely well-written dialogue.

In the first half of the film, the characters plot to blow up a dam. The second half of the film deals with the aftermath. This non-traditional plot structure is handled rather well, and despite being a slow-paced movie, it never lost my interest.

But it disturbed me.

From an anarchist (or eco-radical) point of view, there's not too much to discuss that doesn't delve into the realm of spoilers. Honestly, you'll probably get more out of both the movie and

the review if you go watch the film before coming back to the discussion below.

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Seriously. Go watch *Night Moves*. It might piss you off. But it captures the intensity of direct action planning and aftermath better than any film I've seen, maybe better than any book I've read. Even if it takes all of that tension and runs somewhere completely offbase at the end.

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In *Night Moves*, when they blow up the dam, they accidentally kill a camper. Each of the three saboteurs handles this differently. One guy just kind of doesn't give a shit. The other guy, our POV character Josh, gets really, really paranoid. The woman, Dena, starts freaking out, and it becomes increasingly clear that she's going to talk. Josh stalks her and, surprising even himself, kills her. Then he leaves and goes and gets a job under a fake name in another city and the credits roll.

What the film gets right

The film gets the tension of direct action right, in my limited experience (having never blown up a dam). At the beginning of the movie and the beginning of the plotting, the characters talk a fair amount. As they get closer to the event, they get a lot quieter as nervousness takes hold. And afterwards, the fear in Josh's eyes every time he hears a car door, the overwhelming intensity of every stranger's glance his way… that part is handled masterfully.

A lot of the details feel right. The farm feels real. The hippies arguing about whether or not the dam action was awesome or inconsequential or bad, the way that people acted once they started to guess who had done it—all of those things felt real.

Afterword

It's refreshing to learn that my disappointment at the ending of *Night Moves* is one that is shared by plenty of people, presumably across the political spectrum. And, interestingly, the awkward ending demonstrates the limits and/or dangers of mediation itself. (When I say mediation, I mean in this case taking real struggles—like anti-industrialism—and representing them via media—like film.) "The imperative of the storyline drove the characters toward murder." If that's true, and it likely is, then the way we tell stories is wrong and has been wrong for so long that we can't see our way out.

Jonathan is right that he, as an artist, can do what he wants. He can represent whom he wants, how he wants. But of course, this doesn't mean that we won't respond, or that it won't upset us. It doesn't mean that how we're represented doesn't have real life effects for us. I'm not angry at *Night Moves*, I'm disappointed… it was almost an amazing film. Instead, it's a good one.

It's possible that representations of anarchists are less important than representations of race, gender, and other identities. I'm not an expert on the matter. But in the US, anarchists have been killed by the state for their political beliefs. We've been deported and denied entry into the country by the hundreds or thousands. International policing was invented to keep track of and repress us. An immense propaganda machine has been levied against us for as long as we've existed. We're also entrapped by federal agents in phony terrorism cases by the state at a greater rate than anyone except Muslims. In the 1930s, countries all around the world agreed not to help Spain resist fascist takeover, and I'd guess a major reason for that is because the people trying to stop fascists there were largely anarchists and Marxists. Right now, while I type this, the great "democracies" are largely ignoring Kurdish resistance to ISIS in Syria. And they're ignoring the Kurds because the Kurds are

these forms of killing are related or not, I don't know. I guess I'm curious why you find it so conceptually impossible to imagine that someone who works on a farm and attends radical film screenings would kill someone? Would the story have been more palatable to you if you'd known Josh was born in Sacramento and had a dentist for a dad? Stuff like that to give him some more non-political facets?

Margaret: *You said you've received a lot of criticisms about the end of the film, some of which you see as valid, others not so much. Like what? What kind of responses have you gotten?*

Jonathan: Mostly people just don't find it believable. Or they find it overly conventional. Or they find the second half of the film less suspenseful than the first. Things like that. Enough people seem to have problems that I guess they must have a point, but I still don't know how it could have been different in a way that would've satisfied people.

Margaret: *Out of curiosity, are you familiar (or were you at the time you were writing the movie) with Eric McDavid's case and his being set up by the FBI on a fairly comparable plot as is depicted in the film? The primary source of tension for me, and I'd guess for a lot of your more radical viewers, was whether or not Dena was a cop all along.*

Jonathan: I wasn't aware of the case, no. And I never imagined Dena was a cop, no. That's kind of an interesting idea, but I think it also kind of neutralizes the moral weight of the cell's decisions. That would be a different movie. I was definitely aware of the case against that Somalian kid, Mohamed Mohamud, who tried to blow up Pioneer Square during the Christmas tree lighting ceremony, and who turned out to have been entrapped by the FBI, and I find that case fascinating. But this movie was about something else. It was about the moral math of extreme political activists whose actions can't be pawned off on the machinations of a diabolical State.

Jonathan Raymond's other films include Wendy & Lucy, Meek's Cutoff, *and* Old Joy. *His latest novel is* Rain Dragon.

There's a scene with a movie screening of an eco-radical film at the beginning of *Night Moves*, and a question and answer with the filmmaker. Someone asks what is to be done, and she answers that it's lots of things and without central leadership or a single set strategy. That answer was convincing.

What the film gets wrong

The movie screening scene at the beginning features what might be called a caricature of an eco-radical film, and for at least one of my friends, *Night Moves* felt like a ham-fisted mockery of us from there on out.

The direct action team has vetted itself to each other in very strange ways. The literature around such action (like the book *Eco-Defense*, and a simple analysis of the faults of historic groups) suggests that sabotage affinity groups are far better off forming out of, you know, affinity. In *Night Moves*, two of the three people involved don't even know one another before they go out and commit a rather major felony. Honestly, the tension for me during a lot of the film was whether or not one of the three of them was a fed.

But most importantly, the killing at the end of the film felt out of character, like it was forced into the narrative. It's sloppy writing, and it's writing that changes the entire film from an interesting analysis of eco-sabotage (and its attendant risks, like the accidental killing of the camper) to just another Hollywood story about how once you've stepped off the beaten path you're just going to wind up a murderer.

Also, I suppose it's a crime of passion or whatever, but it's also just *stupid*. Killing Dena is basically the worst possible security culture ever.

So why did Josh kill Dena? I put that question, and others, to Jonathan Raymond, the screenwriter.

I've not done a lot of confrontational interviews. It's not something I enjoy. I like interviews because they're a good way to get people to explain themselves and their ideas, and I like helping people promote their ideas and their points of view more than I like challenging them. Yet I couldn't talk to Jonathan without bringing up some of my problems with *Night Moves*. He took it well, and with an acknowledged Pacific Northwest indirectness between us, we went back and forth about some of his writing decisions.

So then, a look into the head of a talented, liberal author who turned his attention to the direct action environmental movement.

Interview with screenwriter Jonathan Raymond

Margaret Killjoy: Night Moves. *A character-driven piece that focuses on three people who have it in their heads to blow up a dam. What prompted the idea of the film itself?*

Jonathan Raymond: The idea came from a few sources. Firstly, the physical place of the Applegate Valley in Southern Oregon itself. My girlfriend and I have been visiting that valley for years now, spending time with some organic farmer friends of ours who grow seeds and run a CSA. Over the years, I became increasingly amazed by their life out there, a truly rugged, self-determined, political life, and also by the incredibly fertile political culture of the whole "neighborhood." Historically, the Applegate has always attracted free thinkers and drop-outs and exiles and such, not only of the leftist variety, but also the far right. Organic farmers and Ron Paul libertarians live side by side, and although they have very similar day to day routines they obviously view the world through radically different lenses. I found the political culture of the Applegate much more vigorous, serious, and interesting than that of Port-

thwart that drive (the film *Meek's Cutoff* is especially an example) and this time around I was more interested in embracing it. What happens when you let the noir be noir? Turns out you can't please people either way.

Margaret: *One of the more interesting themes of the film, from my point of view, is the discussion of futility of activism. There're conversations peppered throughout the film about, well, "what is to be done?" Was the non-answering of this question intentional, as a way to mention that it remains an open and depressing question?*

Jonathan: I thought the film did show an answer: farming, broadly defined. The criticism leveled by the farmer against the saboteur always seemed extremely sane and righteous to me. Growing things, making things, that's the answer, not blowing shit up. If this movie carries some kind of political message, it would be for the politics of pacifism. At the deepest root, this isn't Edward Abbey here, or even Dostoyevsky. It's Yoko Ono.

Margaret: *I think understanding your promotion of pacifism (or a pacifistic approach to change?) is really important for my understanding of the movie. A sort of "if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you" kind of idea, where since he's killed one person by accident, killing another intentionally becomes something that's more on the table?*

Jonathan: Yes and no, I guess. I think the two killings are quite different. The first one he's able to explain to himself as a necessary sacrifice for the larger good using the same kind of moral reasoning that grants people the right to kill other people in any number of war environments. This killing is serving a larger protection of life. This killing is actually the saving of life. Occasionally, these reasonings are even accurate. Killing Nazis, for instance, might have saved lives. Killing Kim Jong-un might save lives. The second murder is much more personal and passionate and thoughtless. It's a reflex action by Josh to save his own ass. It's a much more animalistic killing. The killing of a cornered creature. Whether

Jonathan: Yeah, a lot of people have an adverse response to that scene, for a variety of reasons. Some reasons I might buy, but others not. I definitely don't buy the idea that the ELF or its ilk are somehow immune from homicidal passions. True enough, there haven't been murderous direct action people (yet, that we know of). But so what? The ELF people moronically torched a library in Seattle. That's pretty close to murder in my book. And some of the people at the edges of the "movement," of any movement, are surely capable of terrible things. Why wouldn't they be? I mean, I sort of understand the flinching reaction to seeing a radical environmentalist depicted as a murderer, as I definitely see the idea of seeing, say, a lesbian depicted as such, but also not really. I was trying to think about the moral calculus of extreme politics here. Why should a single, measly life make any difference in the larger struggle to save the entire planet? Why shouldn't people be blowing up dams all the time, collateral damage be damned (pardon the pun)? If we are truly in a suicidal spiral towards extinction, Josh's actions seem almost sane.

Furthermore, the murder of Dena isn't really political at all. It's much more an act of self-preservation. That dodges the question of representation, I know, but I do get annoyed when people assume their own political party, that their own selves for that matter, are so predictable and pure. Josh has declared war on society. He then has to confront his own nature in the theater of war. As we know, people behave in all kinds of ways under the extreme stress and trauma of war. Turns out, Josh didn't behave well. No judgment on his political beliefs.

All that said, I'll also admit that at a certain point in writing *Night Moves* the meditation on extreme political ideology kind of segued into a meditation on the ideology of cinema and genre itself. The imperative of the storyline drove the characters toward murder. The imperative of any story, possibly, drives toward murder and death. Or marriage. That's just baked into narrative itself. I've gone out of my way in the past to

land, for instance, where I live, and always wanted to do something grounded there. Also, it's physically really beautiful, and I wanted to get Kelly out there with a camera. The farm scenes were written for and shot at our friend's farm.

Also, around the time of the writing of *Night Moves*, the Tea Party was metastasizing in America, and I was pretty convinced we were on the verge of some dire domestic terrorist events à la Oklahoma City. I wanted to do something on the topic of extremist political activity, to depict characters who were driven by ideology, but I also wanted the ideology to be one that I found sympathetic and real. I can't really understand why a person would fly a plane into an IRS building, but I can very much feel why a person would blow up a dam. So in a way, the eco-radicals of *Night Moves* are really Tea Party people in disguise. The direct action world simply offered a good disguise for what I always imagined was a meditation on angry zealotry in general.

Margaret: *The characters, and what we see of their backgrounds, are pretty convincing throughout most of the film, particularly the scenes that take place on the organic farm. My friends in the eco-radical movement seem pretty divided about the movie. Obviously, no one likes their culture or politics misrepresented in film, but I understand that an outside viewpoint is also useful. How did you go about trying to balance a fair representation with the needs of the story?*

Jonathan: I've lived in the Northwest almost my whole life, canvassed for the environment, participated in collective actions, donated to liberal candidates, generally participated in political life. I've been to a lot of grungy bonfire parties and sat in plenty of grotty cafes. I know these people well enough to write about them. And even if I didn't, I wouldn't really care. There was a time in my twenties when I was extremely concerned about issues of positionality and representation vis a vis artistic expression (though more in the realms of race and gender than political affiliation, certainly) but there came a

point for me that I had to say fuck it. The imagination can't and shouldn't be beholden to those concerns. Political groups and major institutions, yes. But artists no. Wringing one's hands about whether one can speak in someone's else voice is a useless and debasing activity for artists. Art isn't fair.

Margaret: *Our community (anarchists, eco-radicals, etc.) is so rarely depicted in mainstream culture, and when it is, it's even more rarely sympathetic. I think why* Night Moves *strikes such a strange chord for a lot of us is that it feels so close, and yet somehow miles away from our understandings. The "art can do what it wants" argument, while certainly true (you can, indeed, do what you want), doesn't remove the hurt (for lack of better word just now) it does us. The lesbian murderer analogy is apt. But a lesbian murderer would sit next to a modest number of more "human" (or less murderous) representations on screen, while* Night Moves *comes much closer to standing alone.*

Jonathan: I know I kind of introduced the idea, but let me just say I really think the equation of queerness with political affiliation is off-base. Anarchism is just not an identity in the way race/gender/sexuality are, but rather an elective system of thought. And while the depiction of anarchists throughout history is indeed negative, I wouldn't put it on the same level of racist, sexist, and homophobic representations of people.

And as a liberal, middle-class art guy, let me just say I do have immense sympathy for and interest in certain currents of what you'd call anarchist and eco-radical thought. I hope that comes through in the film. If anything, one of my main miscalculations in retrospect was my assumption that everyone shares this latent desire to blow up the industrial infrastructure. I take that urge as a kind of presumption of human awareness in contemporary society.

But on the other hand, I'll also admit I have less sympathy, or maybe just less interest, in the style of the subculture you mention, the identity of anarchism, if you will. I look at the art and music and fashion of the anarchist community—the culture

of anarchism—and I'm often just kind of bored. I find it for the most part monochromatic and predictable and strangely conformist. I don't like Burning Man stuff or hippie art, as long as we're at it. It's just a taste thing. Furthermore, as a person who really likes movie theaters and libraries and record stores, none of which would exactly flourish in a primitivist revival, I have a definite divergence with the ultimate vision of eco-anarchism in, say, the Derrick Jensen mode.

So, all of which is to say, I feel like my qualms with Josh were not with him as a human being but as an intellectual. I think he's a less-than-perfect thinker, not a bad person. And someone with definite anger management issues. I don't really view this as a form of prejudice against anarchists as human beings. What I wanted to see on screen was a character who held strong political beliefs but also registered as a real person. I didn't feel the need to have him register as a good person.

Margaret: *Did you know that* Night Moves *is almost certainly the first major film to feature a coogle? (Cat oogle. The cat on a leash on one of the people at the farmer's market.)*

The first coogle to appear in a major motion picture!

Jonathan: I never heard that term before! That's awesome. The coogle was a bit of serendipity on set. I wasn't there but apparently one of our Ashland crew members hooked that guy into the scene at the last second. He was just loitering around downtown Ashland and agreed to walk through the scene.

Margaret: *I just… I just have to ask. The end of the film. Josh kills Dena because he's afraid she'll rat them out. For me, this soured my experience of the entire film, because the tension you built had been so utterly believable until that point. I understand that radicals are not perfect people, but it just doesn't seem plausible. The Earth Liberation movement has seen dozens of prisoners and, sadly, nearly as many people choosing to inform, but not a single case of violence, let alone murder against informants [especially would-be informants]. What were your decisions around including that section in the film?*