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Margaret Killjoy
The East (2013)
June 10, 2015

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The East (2013)

Margaret Killjoy

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Director: Zal Batmanglij

Writers: Brit Marling, Zal Batmanglij

Recommended? Maybe

Among anarchists, my informal poll shows three responses to *The East*. Most people hate it. They feel it grossly, and perhaps dangerously, misrepresents us. Other people would prefer to ignore it—it's a minor film, after all, and seems to have had no lasting effect on the broader culture, so lets just ignore it and hope it goes away. And then there's the minority who, well, kind of love it, for all its flaws.

I'm in the latter camp.

The East, for those of you who missed it, is an off-Hollywood thriller about an agent at a private intelligence firm who infiltrates an anarchist eco-terrorist cell named The East. She finds them by, you know, hopping trains and hanging with homeless crusties.

The East are more than just eco-terrorists, they're charmingly cultish hippies who live collectively and take themselves too seriously. And frankly, I feel like I know them. Or, at least, that they're rude caricatures of some of my favorite people.

When our undercover protagonist first falls in with *The East*, they really and truly come off as a cult. There's a cult leader, Benji, who is charming and tall and handsome. And there's a cult initiation rite, during which everyone goes to dinner in straight jackets and feeds one another with spoons in their mouths. The longer she stays with them, the more she realizes Benji isn't the leader (or at least has no authority) and that the cell's intimacy and affection for one another is genuine. This is, frankly, probably how certain sections and tendencies of anarchists come across. And if that representation is awkward, it's likely in part because of its truth.

As I understand it, the two filmmakers spent a summer ooglin' it up, hopping trains and hitchhiking and attending a CrimethInc convergence. This research paid off. The consent spin the bottle and the group washing at the river — these scenes capture everything that was beautiful and strange and intimate and magical about my early years in anarchism.

But despite it all, this is first and foremost an outsider's view of us. The anarchists in *The East* are not protagonists. We're well-meaning and charming but we're ultimately misguided. In the final moments of the film, our protagonist realizes that the company she works for is evil but that the anarchists are going too far, and that the way to victory is... get this: (Yes this is a spoiler)

Find all of her co-workers at the evil spy agency and tell them that the company they work for is evil and to instead use their spy powers to expose evil corporate misdeeds to the government, who will of course rectify the problems at hand.

If that isn't good for a laugh, I don't know what is.

In real life, the government works hand-in-hand with capitalism to administer these evils onto the world. It's not that the feds don't know what's happening, it's that they either don't care or are active co-conspirators in the first place.

Even mainstream reviewers recognize that this ending feels tacked-on and pulls most of the film's emotional and political punch.

The minor discrepancies are kind of jarring as well: you don't "dive" a dumpster, you "dumpster" a dumpster while "dumpster-diving." I've never met anyone who's read enough *AdBusters* to call a direct action a "jam." Actions are called actions. The whole surgery scene is pretty strange and doesn't feel particularly realistic. Also, it's not only the white rich kids among us who have developed, three-dimensional personalities. And our political practice is, by-and-large, not just an elaborate "fuck you dad."

Does *The East* do us a disservice? I don't know. Probably. When anarchists are an ignorable element in society, we're painted as cartoon villains. When we're actually accomplishing things and are in the public eye (as we have been of late), it's harder to paint us as villains so instead we're misguided youth who are taking things too far. *The East* puts us firmly in that second category. It's fucking annoying. I'm glad the film didn't take off, that it doesn't seem to color stranger's assumptions about my politics the way other films have.

But when the police raid the house and Doc stays behind to ensure everyone's getaway, dooming himself to a life in prison to save his friends, it brings tears to my eyes. Because I know him. I've worked with him. He, in that moment, is the best in everyone I've ever met. That's enough for me.