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Film Review: If a Tree Falls



Maybe it's like hearing a tree fall in a distant forest: we can't really see it, but we know that somehow the world has changed, and not for the better. That, at least, is one of the feelings I encountered when I watched Marshall Curry's documentary *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* last spring at the Seattle International Film Festival. The film, which is a nominee for a 2012 Academy Award in the Documentary Feature category, tells the true story that unfolded in front of Curry, beginning in December 2005, when a worker in his wife's New York office turned out to have a history with the Environmental Liberation Front (ELF). Daniel McGowan's arrest by federal agents was part of a nationwide sweep of radical environmentalists—a sweep that targeted the ELF in particular, an organization the FBI has called America's "number one domestic terrorism threat."

The film made me squirm in my seat. It describes a post-9/11 world where the FBI has turned environmentalists into a terrorist threat (a campaign that's earned the moniker "Green Scare"), and where special prisons, referred to as "communication management units," contain young activists like McGowan. As I watched, I couldn't help but feel that our government is silencing the lambs

that grew out of the unrest seeded in the Sixties. But mostly, I think: How did this happen on my watch? Wasn't I of an age to be making positive change politically? I feel a deep sadness, made more penetrating by the fact that Daniel McGowan looks a bit like my own son.

Watching the film again, I see a tragic mash-up of heavy-handed law enforcement, individuals seeking nonviolent change, and ill-informed plans made in the face of broken promises. In *If a Tree Falls*, Curry has crafted something complex and worthy of attention, a film that asks hard questions about environmentalism, activism, and the way we define terrorism. Let's see if it's honored with a nod by the Academy.

The Academy Awards will be televised on Sunday, February 26, 2012.

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