

Portrait of a Snitch

Documentary examines the mind of FBI informant, Brandon Darby

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2014

a review of

Informant: A documentary directed and written by Jamie Meltzer. Information at informantdoc.com; also **Netflix**.

In Jamie Meltzer's 2012 documentary, "Informant," we're taken into the home and mind of the FBI informant of the title, Brandon Darby, infamous within U.S. anarchist circles for responsibility for the arrests and conviction of activists during the 2008 Republican National Convention.

The film opens in Darby's living room as he paces and shouts at the camera. Is he looking in the right place? He wants to start over; he's not doing it right.

It's clear that he's nervous and wants his side of the story to prevail.

Although I knew that Darby was a police "Informant" recruited voluntarily from the ranks of the radical movement—which is to say, the worst of turncoats—I was concerned that he would be portrayed sympathetically.

Viewers do, indeed, get to hear Darby's side—as well as those critical of him—but the impression left with the audience is largely that of a self-obsessed, sociopathic man who has driven himself into a corner.

We see Darby's rise to prominence by falsely taking credit for co-founding the Common Ground Clinic in New Orleans in the wake of 2005's Hurricane Katrina. We hear him brag about getting out into the floodwaters on his way to rescue his then-friend Robert Hillary King, a former Black Panther, and give impassioned speeches about the need to rebuild.

We hear him talk about the guns he purchased to fight off white racist militias in the flooded city. But, we also hear from people speaking about his consistent disregard for process and collective action, about his machismo and ego. All the same, he starts off looking pretty good.

The authority he claims to wield over the clinic is that of experience, the authority those committed to a project for the long haul might want to assert over those who are just in for a bit of anarcho-tourism. Of course, the valid counterpoint raised is that he and his macho attitude were the reason that so many were transitory in the space.

But his obsession—indeed, fetishization—of the militant and statist Left is made clear in his own words as well as those of Scott Crow, a Common Ground co-founder, who had been his close friend at the time. (See Crow's book, *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, anarchy and the Common Ground Collective*, PM Press.)

We hear about Darby's obsession with breaking friends out of prison, about blindly idealizing his Black Panther friends, about his passion to fight the government by force of arms. He describes his excitement about traveling to Venezuela to ask President Hugo Chavez for assistance for Common Ground, and his statism begins to show through. At least as he paints things, it was his trip to Venezuela where he was rebuffed in his request for funding that began his disillusionment with the movement.

After coming back to the U.S. empty-handed, he left New Orleans and returned to Austin, Texas where he approached the FBI about, as he claims, a plan by schoolteacher and peace activist, Riad Hamad, to funnel money to the Palestinian resistance. He tells us he did this to prevent young, impressionable radicals from getting caught up in a scheme that would land them in prison for terrorist charges. When Riad kills himself as a result of the FBI's

investigation, Darby turns to the only people he can talk to—his handlers at the FBI—for emotional support. And, he is completely converted.

It's almost pathetic (that is, invoking of pathos) the way that he describes his letters to the FBI. More than simple reports, he sent them his diaries, as though any of the agents gave a shit about him, as though they weren't simply using him to entrap the same impressionable young radicals he claimed to want to protect.

We learn how he criticized a group of young men who looked up to him for not being macho and militant enough, and then led them up to the Twin Cities to protest the Republican National Convention.

He tipped off his FBI handlers about shields that activists had constructed to ward off tear gas canisters, adding the lie that they were designed with protruding pointed screws to injure police. The FBI raided a mobile home and seized the shields. In response, Darby's affinity group, including Texas activists Bradley Crowder and David McKay, constructed Molotov cocktails with the intention of attacking parked police cruisers. Darby goes on and on about the remorse he felt for not stopping them, but in the end just keeps up the macho demeanor. The FBI finally arrested the group, including Crowder and McKay, before any property destruction took place, with the two receiving two and four years in prison respectively.

In the final moments of the film, Darby's lies and self-aggrandizing become most obvious. Although the Molotovs were intended to target unmanned police cruisers, Darby later gave speeches at Tea Party events about how he stopped anarchists from firebombing RNC delegates.

After telling the camera directly that he felt bad for the two men he set up, he admits that the FBI offered to drop the charges against them in order to prevent Darby from being outed as an "Informant," but he decided it was important that they be punished for their crimes.

Thus, we see a man tormented not by his emotions—he has reconciled himself to the death of Hamad and the imprisonment of McKay and Crowder at his hands—but by the ramifications of his actions.

He is holed up in his house with guns, jumping at every alarm. According to the film credits, he continues his role as an undercover investigator, though in the drug war instead of against the radical movement.

The film itself is immensely watchable and has won numerous film festival awards for best documentary. The filming and editing are pristine and the story telling is riveting.

The fact that it is primarily from Darby's point of view helps undermine any feeling that the film itself is propaganda for a particular position, though obviously the inclusion of voices directly critical of Darby—primarily Scott Crow and Lisa Fithian, another Common Ground activist—is crucial to the success of the film.

"Informant" is important as a piece of radical history as well as a useful insight into the minds of those who seek to destroy those fighting for another world.

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