

# Confused, struggling America

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*I Heart Huckabees*, directed by David O. Russell, written by Russell and Jeff Baena.

*I Heart Huckabees*, the new film by David O. Russell, director of *Flirting With Disaster* (1996) and *Three Kings* (1999), is something of a personal as well as a social statement. A confused and unresolved statement, but one that points in a more unsettling, provocative direction than the vast majority of American films. (It has received some quite hostile notices in part as a consequence. Two influential film critics managed to find the work, respectively, an “authentic” and an “unmitigated disaster.”) Russell’s work at least shows signs of intelligence and an active intuition. There are things here worth considering.

The film’s story and structure are deliberately chaotic, even at times nonsensical. Describing its general contours may not help that much. An environmental activist, Albert Markovski (Jason Schwartzman), beset by personal and professional problems and troubled in particular by a series of coincidences, seeks out the services of a pair of married “existential detectives,” Bernard and Vivian Jaffe (Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin), who promise to look into his situation. Bernard, using a blanket to illustrate his points, argues that everything in the universe is interconnected (he says, more or less, poking his fingers up through the blanket: ‘here’s the Eiffel Tower, here’s me, here’s you, here’s a hammer.’)

We first find Albert royally cursing the world, after one piece of land he attempted to save has been reduced to a single rock, and wondering to himself, “Is it hopeless? Can you change things?” He is being unceremoniously shoved aside as the leader of a local branch of the ‘Open Spaces’ coalition by a smooth-talking executive, Brad Stand (Jude Law), from Huckabees, a giant retail chain. Brad has joined the group to subvert the pro-environmental effort and ensure his company’s ability to build a new megastore on a stretch of marshland.

Meanwhile, Albert gets introduced by the detectives to his spiritual “other,” a firefighter, Tommy Corn (Mark Wahlberg), who has been traumatized by September 11. Tommy’s newfound intellectual and moral restlessness has cost him his wife and family. He has learned too much,

about oil and US support for “Arab dictatorships,” child labor in Indonesia, global warming and similar matters, ever to be satisfied with his former existence. Disturbed by Americans’ dependence on petroleum, he rides his bicycle to the scenes of fires! Tommy is one of the film’s most intriguing figures, and one of the clearest indications that Russell has an antenna extended in interesting directions.

As Albert sinks deeper into despair, he becomes tempted (along with Tommy) by the outlook of the Jaffes’ arch-enemy (or perhaps not), glamorous French philosopher Catherine Vauban (Isabelle Huppert). She sweepingly preaches that human beings are isolated and alone, that the world is dominated by “cruelty, misery and meaninglessness.” One strives for pure being, according to Vauban, but one is constantly drawn back into the human drama of desire, suffering, etc. She urges Albert to indulge himself, and helps him in that effort.

Brad hires the existential investigators too, primarily to unsettle his rival, Albert. Once that goal has been accomplished, he wants out of the deal. However, he finds himself contractually obliged to go through with the investigation of his life, and it ends up plunging him into uncertainty and self-doubt. Thrown into a crisis along with him is his girlfriend, Huckabees’ spokesmodel, Dawn Campbell (Naomi Watts). She goes from making commercials—for everything from “mops to tops”—dressed in skimpy (and patriotic) outfits—to looking like an “Amish bag-lady,” in another character’s words.

These are a few of the film’s goings-on. There are more. The film goes on too long. The last twenty minutes are largely tedious and confused. Russell did not, it would seem, know how to end his film satisfactorily. One draws the general inference that Albert’s struggle for the environment is futile, but the only thing that can be done. Perhaps he has found a soulmate in Tommy. The film’s conscious conclusions—among them that perhaps the universe is, in fact, interconnected and disconnected at the same time—are not terribly earthshaking. However, *I Heart Huckabees* should not be judged solely on the basis of its weaknesses, obvious as they may be.

Along the way Russell has demonstrated a keen and

critical eye for various aspects of contemporary American culture, or lack thereof. His depiction of the rather ineffectual activists—Albert writes poems as part of his protest, including one that contains the immortal line, “You rock, rock”; he plants, briefly, a tree in the middle of a crowded parking lot—is entirely on the mark. Outmaneuvered at every point, Albert is not the slightest match for Brad and Huckabees.

Law is comically memorable as the glad-handing Brad, professing his deepest respect for the environment, for the marshland and all the little forest creatures, as he sells his fellow coalition members down the river—all of them happy and eager to go—and earns his promotion to “corporate.” One of the nicest touches has Brad organizing country music star Shania Twain to sing at a benefit for the marshland or what’s left of it. He drops her name at every turn. The kitsch of American corporate life is nicely captured.

Hoffman and Tomlin, both of them always best at comedy, do a lovely, silly turn as the Jaffes, who spy on their clients in the bedroom and bathroom as part of their ‘existential’ investigations.

One of the most amusing moments, albeit brief, involves Dawn, the now disillusioned Huckabees’ spokesmodel. Having taken to wearing bonnets and overalls in protest against her previous superficial existence, she insists on making 30-second commercials for the company products, in which she forlornly waves new outfits and ends up flat on her face in despair.

There are these and other touches. Russell has a genuine feel (and not a malicious one) for the well-meaning self-delusions of the American middle class. One is not likely to forget the wonderful meal at which Tommy and Albert are present, presided over by an engineer and his wife. After grace, over utterly bland-looking “Middle American” spaghetti and meatballs, Tommy and the engineer get into a shouting match over petroleum, SUVs and whether it is possible to have decent jobs and a decent environment. Jesus comes up in the conversation as well.

In response to one of Tommy’s grander arguments about being and nothingness, the man reminds him, “We’re not in infinity, we’re in the suburbs.” He tells Tommy and Albert that their ideas are “socialism.” Criticized for their gas-guzzling and socially irresponsible ways, the wife protests, “We took in a Sudanese refugee!” The details of the scene, including the rather stupid children of the couple, rendered openmouthed by anything outside their immediate realm, are sharply and cleverly filled in.

The film’s attempt at finding psychological roots for the characters’ problems is less convincing. A scene, for example, in which Catherine takes Albert to his family’s apartment and teaches him how he was trained from an early

age “to betray himself” by his parents, and that he had been “orphaned by [his mother’s] indifference,” seems contrived and somewhat clichéd. Likewise with the Jaffes’ all too meaningful mantra, in response to Brad’s crisis, “How am I not myself.” Yes, people betray their own interests and, yes, they are not truly themselves, but this is not a purely individual, psychological dilemma. Why is so much of American life, including its public and political life, false, unreal, mythological, fantasized? The filmmaker would do better to address himself to that.

No, the strength of *I Heart Huckabees* lies almost entirely in its vivacious, critical, slightly manic—and not unsympathetic—pictures of confused and struggling Americans. (The filmmaker, one imagines, would not be unduly offended to include himself in that latter category.) Although it makes no explicit political argument, this is one film in the light of which the 2004 election, both campaign and outcome, would not be entirely incomprehensible.

Again, the fact that Russell places at the center of his untidy film (interestingly, the focus of the work shifts perceptibly at a certain point from Albert to Tommy) a worker, a firefighter, radicalized, though in a limited, “Green” manner, by the September 11 events, must have some significance. The filmmaker’s ideas are vague and diffuse, far from being fully worked out or developed, but he senses and communicates something about the troubled and potentially volatile state of the country.

Russell is obviously aghast at the way the world is and, simultaneously, disturbed by the violence of his own reactions (the opening sequence of the mild-mannered environmentalist pointlessly screaming obscenities sticks in the memory). He is sympathetic to people and, at the same time, does not understand why they put up with so much abuse, corruption and stupidity.

Why are Americans so susceptible to hucksterism and propaganda and nonsense, the film seems to ask, almost parenthetically? Well, for definite historical and social reasons ... and within definite historical and social limitations. Russell needs to understand both these sets of facts. His angry but understanding attitude will not remain as it is indefinitely. Russell, one suspects, must develop a deeper understanding of America’s social and ideological difficulties or eventually turn misanthropically against its population.



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