

## Q&A: Zal Batmanglij and Brit Marling on Sci-fi Cult Tale, "SOUND OF MY VOICE"

Written by Samuel Zimmerman  
Friday, 27 April 2012 07:48

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In *SOUND OF MY VOICE*, director/co-writer Zal Batmanglij and co-writer/star Brit Marling have crafted something special. Haunting, provoking and ultimately the type of film that implores its audience to just give themselves over, the tense and eerie story of an L.A. cult is low-key Science fiction one is behooved to seek out. Continuing our interviews (see our talk with lead Christopher Denham [here](#)), Fango sat down with both Batmanglij and Marling (presented back-to-back below), and spoke the many layers of the film, seeking transcendence and much more.

### Zal Batmanglij



**FANGORIA:** While *SOUND OF MY VOICE* isn't down the line horror, it does give itself over to genre, and wears that on its sleeve.

**ZAL BATMANGLIJ:** People always walk out of *SOUND OF MY VOICE* and say, "I felt so much dread."

**FANG:** It's so eerie. A lot of indie filmmakers, as I said to Chris, aren't embarrassed of the idea anymore (as they shouldn't be). So, I wanted to talk about injecting that, or making something low key like this.

**BATMANGLIJ:** No, I'm obsessed with genre. I think a lot of great filmmakers are into genre.

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My editor on THE EAST loves POLTERGEIST, thinks it's one of the best movies ever made. I think genre is the only thing that really interests me. I think thrillers are fascinating, and sci-fi is fascinating. What I'm interested in, is the flipside of horror. What is the opposite of a horror movie? I'm very interested in that. That is what I want to find.

**FANG:** In the sense of spectacle?

**BATMANGLIJ:** If a horror movie is on one side of a spectrum, what's on the other side of that spectrum? I don't think anyone's really made that movie yet. I don't know, maybe I'm not being very clear. Maybe it has to do with a spiritual thriller. I don't know. I mean, I guess a spiritual thriller would be on the opposite side. If evil is discussed in horror then the other side would be the opposite of evil. Is it a love story that's the opposite of horror? No, because love stories are horror stories on their own.

**FANG:** There's all kinds of savage love. Do you mean, if horror finds the evil within us, or speaks to that, you're looking for the light? Your characters are looking for light in Maggie.

**BATMANGLIJ:** SOUND OF MY VOICE definitely has elements of it, but I want to take it on like...

**FANG:** You want to make something incredibly transcendent, it sounds; something that just transports people.

**BATMANGLIJ:** I would like to do that. I would like to spend my life trying to do that. I'm not saying that I would ever achieve that, but I started when I'm thirty, so by the time I get to be sixty, could I make that movie? I started with this, this is like a sketch for that.

**FANG:** I love that idea, not that every filmmaker doesn't want a long career, but some feel like they're on a mission. A passion in someone like Alain Resnais (LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD), or any of the French filmmakers that are so elderly, yet still searching and working.

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**BATMANGLIJ:** We have a lot of American ones that do that too. Look at Ridley.

**FANG:** Ridley's British.

**BATMANGLIJ:** I know, but in terms of, America will take anyone.

**FANG:** We've co-opted Alfred Hitchcock.

**BATMANGLIJ:** As Americans, I don't even think that Hitchcock is British.

**FANG:** Well, they're still there, but that sounds noble in a way.

**BATMANGLIJ:** Well, I'm a late bloomer too. I was like that growing up, so expect that in real life, too. But who knows, you never know.

**FANG:** Were you a late bloomer in making film, or film production? Do you feel like you didn't get into it until later on?

**BATMANGLIJ:** I wrangled a video camera when I was 12, so I was doing it on some level, but film is such a collective sport. It's not like being a novelist. It's more akin to playing soccer than it is to swimming. You can just start swimming, but you can't start filmmaking.

**FANG:** Do you think your search for something transcendent translates to the characters in SOUND OF MY VOICE searching for something in Maggie; that Maggie's going to take them someplace? What do you think about that being a larger statement in the sense of the cult stories being told right now?

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**BATMANGLIJ:** You mean like MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE?

**FANG:** Exactly, the films come from different places, but there's still an undoubted fascination at the moment with people being lost and trying to find something. Christopher Denham and I spoke about maybe that comes from a collected dread of the future, maybe it's politics related?

**BATMANGLIJ:** I think we're hungry to find family. We're so alienated these days. We're far away from our own families, but far away from our friends, and also work. I feel like, in the old days, people really did congregate around the water cooler. People are working in front of their computers, or on their Blackberrys, people aren't coming in to work as much as they used to. I think we're hungry. I thought MARTHA MARCY was a little bit more cynical about groups than we are. I don't think we give an opinion, one way or the other. I'm kind of fascinated by them. I think group think is appealing.



**FANG:** Is that a possible step on the path to finding light?

**BATMANGLIJ:** Oh, I don't know, but maybe to finding some sort of meaning. If I found someone I could give up sense of self to, gosh, I would do it. I just don't know if I can find that person.

**FANG:** Do you meditate?

**BATMANGLIJ:** I used to. My dad taught me how to meditate when I was a tween, and I did it

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for a while and I did it while we were writing SOUND OF MY VOICE, but lately I haven't. I just don't even want to think too much, let alone not think. I'm just working so hard on THE EAST these days, in the edit room. There's too much anxiety, I don't even want to clear the anxiety.

**FANG:** One of the scariest things about SOUND OF MY VOICE is it's really infused with the weirdness of L.A. Did you grow up there?

**BATMANGLIJ:** No, in D.C., but I've lived there now for seven years.

**FANG:** Did you put any of your own odd experiences. L.A. seems to be a lot of people working together to try and find something.

**BATMANGLIJ:** It's manifest destiny. A lot of prom kings and queens come out there on their way into the Ocean. It's the last stop, all these lemmings and cars headed for the ocean. It's also the desert and don't underestimate the desert. A friend of mine once told me the desert winds come at night and clear out the desert, and so energetically, it's constantly clearing itself, Los Angeles. So, there's no sense of memory there, like there is on the East Coast. And it's true, if you spend a lot of time in L.A., it all sort of blends together. There are no seasons, there are TV billboards. I remember when we first moved to L.A., there were brand new shows, like LOST and DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES. Those were the two new shows, and now DON'T TRUST THE B in APT 23.

**FANG:** You live close to ABC?

**BATMANGLIJ:** [Laughs] Oh yea, these are all ABC shows. I guess they buy some billboards. I think the first Tyler Perry movie was being marketed when we first moved to L.A. and now he's an empire.

**FANG:** He's his own cult leader? I was just reading a piece about how his whole aesthetic and views are actually truly weird and warped and flying under a lot of the entertainment of it.

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**BATMANGLIJ:** I think his movies are kind of amazing. I watched one movie in which a girl tells her mom, "You dressed me up and sent me into my stepfather's bedroom! You put perfume on me." And she's like, "That's how I kept this family together!" And then literally, Tyler Perry dressed as a woman comes with a frying pan into the next scene. I thought, "this is actually kind of an art film."

**FANG:** That's exactly the gist of what I was reading.

**BATMANGLIJ:** But I'm not kidding, it's not ironic. I really think he's on to something.

**FANG:** He's possibly incredibly Lynchian.

**BATMANGLIJ:** I think so. Lynch is going off and making *INLAND EMPIRE*, but Tyler Perry is picking up right from where Lynch left off with *MULHOLLAND DR.* But I think you're right that L.A. is a character a lot like L.A. is a character in *MULHOLLAND DR.* It's so palpable in *MULHOLLAND DR.* I'd love to know what Lynch thinks of this film. Or David Lynch on Tyler Perry, Tyler Perry on David Lynch.

**FANG:** A new *HITCHCOCK/TRUFFAUT*, if you will.

**BATMANGLIJ:** You need to publish that.

**FANG:** Yes, with me in the middle! Something that really compels me about the writing of the film, and not that I'm so much interested in what your version of the "truth" is, but that you have your own view and know the "truth" and then writing and justifying the other view, or skepticism within the film. Basically, making all views fit just as tidy.

**BATMANGLIJ:** It's so true, if we do know the truth, how do you—it's because I really believe that the movie is an essay and I actually believe in both in many regards, even though I know the answer. Life is like that. There is so much magic in just real life, in the mundane-ness of

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real life. It's also just so much fun. In the scene with Lam, she says, "Hello, Lam wasn't with us." It's so funny because his response to that is, "Are we with you?" and she says, "That's for you to decide." She talks in those weird, paradoxical things that I think people who have that weird magnetism and run cults, do talk like that. I was watching the movie two days ago thinking, "What is she saying?"

**FANG:** It brings it back to the politician parallel.

**BATMANGLIJ:** Someone asked me if this was a metaphor for the crumbling of our belief in government, and politicians and leaders. I think of it as post-leadership, it's got such this L.A. pioneer feel to it. They don't even believe in anything. The whole world exists in that basement for them.

### Brit Marling



**FANGORIA:** When I spoke to Chris, we brought up the idea of how some independent filmmakers are currently making this very quiet type of genre film, but one that doesn't seek to leave the genre behind. Do you feel like you might be in this crowd who no longer see genre as something to avoid?

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**BRIT MARLING:** You know what's so funny, I didn't even realize, but the way you're articulating it, I guess genre was a dirty word.

**FANG:** It seems like it used to be, but now people in the indie drama kind of wheelhouse are playing and injecting and admitting being weaned on it.

**MARLING:** I didn't even know that it was a pejorative thing. I always felt genre was cool.

**FANG:** Exactly, of course.

**MARLING:** Those were always the movies I loved, like TERMINATOR, or the Chris Marker film LA JETEE, that later inspired TWELVE MONKEYS. Those are the movies that I liked growing up.

**FANG:** Especially something like LA JETEE, it's total genre.

**MARLING:** Total genre. It's poetic and masterful and stunning. I'm worried about the films that aren't genre, or don't have genre elements. What are those movies [ *laughs*]? What's interesting about film, to me, is as an art form, it's one of the few art forms where commerce is braided into it, and that's awesome because you're making work for an audience, and the expectation is that, on some level, you're trying to appeal to as many people as you can. So that's an interesting braid, because you're not making work in a vacuum and it's not like the way a sculptor may talk about something, "Oh, well I'm just making this for me, and if some people happen to connect, or not connect, then it doesn't really matter."

At least with the way Zal, and Mike [Cahill, director of ANOTHER EARTH, also co-written by and starring Marling] and I have always been interested in films, we want to construct a film that's like a cruise ship that can dock anywhere because it's entertaining, and then you put all this subversive cargo on board and try to smuggle it in. I think SOUND OF MY VOICE does that.

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**FANG:** Absolutely, two things that immediately come to mind in a major way is the idea the film is about reacting to turbulent, or strained childhoods. Peter is very much reacting to his mother, and he throws himself into Maggie knowing full well, in some capacity, what can happen.

**MARLING:** Nobody ever talks about that part of it. Nobody ever talks about the abuse, and it's a fascinating part of it.

**FANG:** Well, the little bit of history we get of Lorna is the idea she abused herself, in a way. And now Maggie's like another high.

**MARLING:** There are all kinds of questions of molestation, and molestation of the mind, and also where we are in the world right now. I feel like, we didn't really know who Maggie was until that scene between her and Peter came and the idea that Maggie has this ability to get at the center of what makes someone tick in like, thirty seconds. Usually, it would take a psychotherapist three years of couch talk to get someone to open up enough, and to see what's in there to get it out. Maggie has this ability of doing it pretty instantly. Peter, like you're saying is so guarded and so protected and has functioned that way his entire life, and yet there's this like delicious appeal of someone being able to see your brokest, weakest, messiest point, and to actually love you because of it, not in spite of it.

**FANG:** Well, that extends to the idea of looking for a new family and the danger of being completely betrayed by them. Also, the film is totally L.A.-centric, and just how weird the place can be.

**MARLING:** Yes!

**FANG:** It's very much a part of this idea of being displaced there, and being far from everything you know or once were. I asked Zal, are you from L.A.?

**MARLING:** No, I journeyed there too, both Zal and I came out from the east coast and I think you do feel when you get there, it's strange. It's like the edge of the frontier. There's all this desire and disappointment, dreams and then nightmares. The valley is this weird landscape,

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that sometimes at twilight, there are coyotes running about, and hummingbirds. It's haunting and ethereal in a way that is otherworldly. And then, in the harsh light of noon, when traffic is going, and smog is thick in the air, and endless strip malls. You're like, "this is the most ordinary, mundane place." It's both, and *SOUND OF MY VOICE* is both.



**FANG:** Both, that's a word Zal mentioned when I asked about the idea of knowing the "truth" of the film and still writing and justifying another perspective. It's compelling; it seems so hard to do, to see both sides of everything.

**MARLING:** It's so interesting that you say that, because the reason we're able to do that in this movie is because we genuinely feel that we don't know, and that every day you can go back and forth. Sometimes, I wake up and I look out and there's like a breeze coming in the window, and some music, and you're like, "Oh wow, being alive is the most magical, strange—there were once pterodactyls—what is this experience?" and then other days, you're sitting in a taxi and traffic and you have 200 emails to return. So, I think that we go back and forth. I think we do that in *THE EAST* too, and *THE EAST* is dealing with anarchy and the possibility of a rebellion and I think that the film is incredibly neutral. It's neither for, nor against. As a filmmaker, or at least the kind of films I like, I don't want to be spoon fed. I want to be presented the world, and enter as I will, you know? I hope that we were able to do that.

**FANG:** I think so. There are so many ways you can find meaning within *SOUND OF MY VOICE*. There's abuse, and family, and politics, and even this idea of why are we fascinated with cults?

**MARLING:** I think that there's also, amongst the millennial generation, a desire for a collective experience.

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**FANG:** Being behind computers has alienated us?

**MARLING:** We're so alienated and Twitter is our solve for that. That's how we hang out with people. I'm alone in a hotel room during a press junket, so I get on Twitter and feel less alone? There's something to be said for it, but there's also something missing, which is the idea that how can people come together and have a meaningful, shared experience, and in some respects a cult seems very appealing.

And in some respects, independent filmmaking is its own kind of cult. Chris pointed this out the other day in a Q&A. Independent filmmaking is like a tribe of people that come together for a period of time, and there's a leader, a director, but the real higher power that everyone surrenders to is the story, and you're all servants to that. You're told what time to wake up and what time to go to bed, and when you're going to have lunch and what lines you're going to say. You know what I think is so intoxicating about that experience, why I'm attracted to it as an actor? You're finally removed from the alienation of being who you are; from the sadness of being locked in your own point of view of the world. You get to step outside of yourself for a while and live in group think. There's something freeing about it.

*SOUND OF MY VOICE is out now*