

How to Blow Up a Pipeline' Review: A Different Kind of Oil Boom

A book that proposed violent action in response to the climate crisis becomes a propulsive heist thriller.

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How to Blow Up a Pipeline Directed by Daniel Goldhaber · Crime, Drama, Thriller, Western · R · 1h 43m

Discussions of the 2021 book “How to Blow Up a Pipeline” inevitably note that it does not really contain instructions for blowing up a pipeline, although its author, Andreas Malm, a Swedish academic who has pressed for radical action on the climate crisis, hardly opposes the idea. He argues that the status quo has grown so dire that activists would be foolish not to turn to sabotage, and that peaceful protest alone is unlikely to achieve results quickly enough.

Movies, though, are more of a show-don't-tell medium, so the screen version of “How to Blow Up a Pipeline,” directed by Daniel Goldhaber (“Cam”), turns Malm’s ideas into the basis for a propulsive heist thriller. Instead of busting into a vault or a museum, the characters conspire to commit an incendiary act that will wreak havoc on oil prices.

Is the film itself, by having heroes some might call eco-terrorists, playing with fire? It certainly has the veneer of being daring. Then again, given the imagination that movies routinely apply to crimes of all sorts, it scarcely seems fair to object to the depiction just because the target is novel or has real-world implications.

After dispensing with some preliminaries — in an attention-grabbing opening, the film watches as a young woman slashes tires and leaves a preprinted note: “why I sabotaged your property” — “How to Blow Up a Pipeline” shows its ensemble assembling in West Texas to prepare for their operation. Goldhaber’s roving camera and vaguely retro zooms, and a trendy (if derivative) electronic score by Gavin Brivik, contribute to an anxious atmosphere as the group’s self-taught chemists fool around with combustible substances. There are hints that their plan isn’t airtight. For one thing, the no-drinking rule falls away.



A jagged, Tarantinian flashback structure slowly familiarizes us with the plotters. From Long Beach, Calif., Xochitl (Ariela Barer, also one of the film’s writers and producers), the tire slasher of the prologue, mourns the sudden death of her mother from a heat wave and frets over the sluggishness of fossil fuel divestment efforts. We learn that she grew up with Theo (Sasha Lane), who early on is shown at a support group talking about a “diagnosis” whose specifics will eventually be revealed.

In North Dakota, Michael (Forrest Goodluck) picks fights with men who have come to work in the oil fields. He has little concern for his physical safety; at one point, he says he doesn't care about the odds that they might blow themselves up. Dwayne (Jake Weary) is a Texas family man whose baby daughter and diabetic wife just want him home for Christmas. He is angry that the pipeline has intruded on his property, and he resents the well-meaning documentary crew members, including Shawn (Marcus Scribner), who film his sob story but can't actually help.

Alisha (Jayme Lawson), Theo's girlfriend, is on hand to play devil's advocate: She worries that the pipeline scheme is pure ego and bristles when one of the others likens their work to that of the civil rights movement. (The response she gets echoes Malm's ideas about selective historical memory.) Most mysterious is Rowan (Kristine Froseth), who furtively photographs some of the preparations. Her boyfriend, Logan (Lukas Gage), looks punkish but comes from wealth.

"How to Blow Up a Pipeline" is at its best when it functions as a kind of roughed-up caper movie; it has a degree of suspense and efficiency that are becoming all too rare in the mainstream. Goldhaber makes the most of potential complications at the pipeline site: a fraying belt, unexpected visitors, a bloody injury that might leave DNA. These are the sort of tactile details on which heist films thrive.

But "How to Blow Up a Pipeline" has been packaged as a movie with something to say, and for all its excitement, as a statement it is less than satisfying. In the spirit of collectivity, it is billed as a group effort; while Goldhaber is listed as the director, the "film by" credit lists him alongside his fellow writers (including Barer) and his editor. But the contrivances that have enabled them to construct such a tight nuts-and-bolts thriller also allow them to dodge grappling with the characters' ideology as ideology. Militant environmentalism is more of a hook than a subject about which the film has a point of view.

The flashbacks' placement seems designed solely to facilitate twists. All the members of the group have been written with convenient excuses for taking action, with Theo's illness making her an especially obvious vehicle for self-sacrifice. Just in case viewers might fear for the good dad, the movie devotes significant time to showing Dwayne constructing an alibi — admittedly a tense stretch, but such slick reassurance, as machine-tooled as anything from Hollywood, feels at odds with the project's ostensibly confrontational goals.

A truly radical film wouldn't go out of its way to concoct sympathetic motives, or to keep its plotting so clean.

How to Blow Up a Pipeline

Rated R. Dangerous explosives, put to use. Running time: 1 hour 43 minutes. In theaters.

How to Blow Up a Pipeline

Director Daniel Goldhaber

Writers Ariela Barer, Jordan Sjol, Daniel Goldhaber

Stars Ariela Barer, Kristine Froseth, Lukas Gage, Forrest Goodluck, Sasha Lane

Rating R

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