

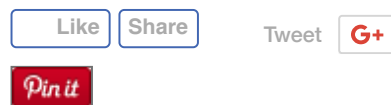


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RED ROAD

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Feb 12, 2007



Reviews

Since capturing, among other awards, the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes 2006, *Red Road* has collected plenty of hoopla. Justifiably, it turns out. This debut feature by Brit Andrea Arnold is haunting, brainy, spare--and it's also topical, tapping into the paranoia induced by increasing surveillance, whether by phone/wire-tapping or, as in *Red Road*, CCTV. At the same time, Arnold stirs into the mix a provocative view of female sexuality that's likely to rile the p.c police.

Intriguingly, Arnold has pulled this off in a film that sounds the opening salvo from the Advance Party Concept, the Dogme-inflected brainchild of Lone Scherfig and Anders Thomas Jensen, employees of Danish co-producer Zentropa. Three directors were reportedly invited to develop scripts around the same group of characters, all of whom must be based in Scotland. Sidestepping what could have become a gimmicky exercise, Arnold has set the bar high. As stated in the production notes, she was able to "tap into the things that had resonance for me and write a story that felt like my own."

Jackie (the superb Kate Dickie) works as a CCTV operator scanning the mean streets around a desolate Glaswegian tower block (Red Road), the equivalent of our projects. Solitary and gnawed-on by a mysterious past, Jackie spends her days manning a bank of screens that resemble a jigsaw puzzle of other people's lives. Her main recreation is the occasional shag in a car with a married colleague. That the camera is trained on his backlit hairy butt, while cows low in a nearby field, foreshadows the mischief in store.

One day Jackie is jolted when Clyde (Tony Curran), a figure from her past, shows up on her screen,

apparently on parole from a ten-year prison sentence. Feverishly tracking Clyde's moves on her monitor, Jackie finally emerges from behind her screens to stalk him in the flesh, then seduces him in a scheme to exact revenge for a crime explained only in the third act. A final coda adds revelations that impel her, not altogether convincingly, to reverse course.

In the film's first half the action is minimal, taking the form of a doubled surveillance: The viewer studies Jackie's beaky, handsome profile, while she herself studies Clyde's moves across multiple screens. Arnold ups the suspense by slyly withholding the picture in the jigsaw puzzle--a tease that's subtly erotic--and recording the ominous ambient sound of Glasgow's backwaters. Her unflinching camera surveys a dystopian universe of sterile tower blocks, their elevators daubed in graffiti, their upper stories buffeted by Arctic updrafts. Sharing this wasteland with Clyde are a grungy, drug-addled pair (Martin Compston and Natalie Press) who consider him, all things being relative, a role model. Since Clyde is being stalked by Jackie, he's often shot from behind, wolfing down a meal, his quasi-animal aspect of a piece with the scabby diner.

Not least among Arnold's skills is to zap the viewer using minimal means. So when we at last get Clyde full-face--his mating manners are a tad rough, but the magnetism sizzles--it feels like a leap to a new dimension. Same for when Jackie emerges from behind her mosaic of screens, with their blur of scan lines, to confront Clyde in the flesh and engage him in a deadly dance of seduction. To call the sex scene graphic is the least of it; Arnold captures arousal cut with menace in a manner rarely examined. That Jackie is, in a sense, violating, Black Widow-style, the unsuspecting Clyde; that she's both turned on and simmering with hate, evokes a netherworld of eros that Dickie nails in a feat of acting.

Finally, *Red Road* expands what could have been just another revenge story by shifting the Big Brother motif to the center of the action. Snooping surfaces in many contemporary films, from Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* to Michael Haneke's more recent *Caché*, to the forthcoming *The Lives of Others* from Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, about a Stasi spy. Arnold, though, ups the ante, taking as a given that electronic surveillance has entered the cultural repertoire. Instead of going one-on-one with the "real" world, her heroine interacts with it from behind a bank of images, co-opting a tool for crime prevention to mount a personal vendetta. The film's subtext suggests that, like Jackie, we live at a double remove in a clammy climate of alienation: If the Other is unknowable, he becomes even more opaque when viewed through a blur of scan lines. In a triumph of filmmaking, Arnold has endowed a tale of female rage with disquieting social resonance.

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