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An Interview with Andrea Arnold



See, Saw:

An Interview with Andrea Arnold, director of *Red Road*

By Michael Joshua Rowin

Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* is destined for an unusual amount of attention for multitudinous reasons. It's not only the debut feature from a promising Oscar winner (the British director's *Wasp* took home the gold for Best Live-Action Short in 2005) but also the first film to be conceived from the Dogme-inspired dare of the Advance Party, in which three filmmakers use the same characters and the actors who play them to make entirely separate and different movies. It also happens to be a damn good film. Starring Scottish actors Kate Dickie and Tony Curran, *Red Road* follows Jackie, a young female CCTV operator who stalks a man she spots on her surveillance monitor. Her seduction of him transcends the ephemeral limits of shock—*Red Road* stays true to its roots as an affective, realistic drama investigating retribution and recovery. I spoke with Ms. Arnold a couple of weeks ago about her film and the various ways it was atypically designed.

REVERSE SHOT: *First off, how did you and your crew choreograph the surveillance footage with concurrent events on screen?*

ANDREA ARNOLD: It was quite a challenge. We had to shoot all the footage before we started filming the main film, and I had to really shoot it quite carefully because all the footage you see in the film was from our camera. I created sketches for the little screens and tried to work out what images had to be on what screens at what times. We had a bunch of beta machines behind the screens, about nine beta machines, so we had to duplicate images as well because we couldn't play back 36 different tapes—that would've been crazy. I was editing during the first week of the shoot. We were filming the CCTV footage and then I was going into the editing room after the shoots to edit what we'd done so that then could be edited to a tape ready for the following week when we would have to be shooting everything else.

RS: *Did you use real surveillance cameras?*

AA: We had a CCTV camera that we hired, but we only had one, so we had to put that in lots of different places. Many of the places we put it in already had cameras there. But we couldn't use the real cameras, there was no way we could have done that.

RS: *Recently there have been several high-profile films like Caché and A Scanner Darkly involving surveillance recording. Is Red Road's primary concern with surveillance in regard to one person's voyeurism, or are Jackie's job and her inquiries suggestive of something more menacing in modern technology?*

AA: I'd been looking at doing something about CCTV because in Britain we have 20% of the world's cameras on our tiny island—that's a lot of cameras, and they've been increasing gradually over the years. I often looked at the cameras and wondered who's behind them, who's watching, what does it mean. Is it Big

Brother, are our daily lives going to be constantly watched? And I'd also been wondering why Britain has so many cameras. When I was given this project and the character description of Jackie—because it was an unusual way of starting—it was described that she was cool and aloof and that she had this terrible thing happen in her past, and I had this idea that she was separated from life, she was watching life but not taking part. And I thought she could be a CCTV operator.

I started from the character and the emotional place, so I'd say the story is about Jackie and her journey. I decided at one point to be ambivalent about what I said about CCTV. I feel it was enough to show it, and to show what it can do. I've met journalists from lots of countries and people from other countries at screenings and they think it's science fiction, they think it's not real. To me it was enough to show what is happening, what is possible, what the cameras can do, without making a heavy-handed statement, because that would interfere with the story. I wanted the audience to have to think about what it means now that these cameras exist and that we're watched on a daily basis. If you live in London or Glasgow or any big city in the UK, you're caught on camera 300 times a day. Those details aren't in the film, but I thought it would be interesting for people to have their own ideas about this. I made a very definite decision to leave it open.

RS: You alluded to the unconventional genesis of Red Road. Could you describe the Advance Party and how you got involved with it?

AA: One of the co-production companies [for Red Road] is Zentropa, who were very much involved in the Dogme films. Two producers from the Advance Party were looking to make some low-budget films using a similar idea in giving several filmmakers the same rules and restrictions. When they asked me to see them they gave me exactly what it was—the idea was to give a bunch of filmmakers the same characters to be played by the same actors. The characters were devised by Anders Thomas Jensen and Lone Scherfig. So I was given a document that described seven characters, though the directors added two. There were no more rules than that, really. There were practical rules like it had to be shot in Scotland, it had to be shot in six weeks for a million pounds or less, and on digital format.

RS: Did knowing what other filmmakers were doing with the Advance Party concept influence you at all?

AA: We were very collaborative with each other. We all went off and started working on our own ideas individually, but we came together and discussed what we were doing. We made some decisions at the beginning—there were a few things that were open. Like adding characters, that was our decision. It was very collaborative, but I don't think we really influenced each other. We're very different people and I think that we had things we wanted to make ourselves. So, sure, we were supportive of each other, and collaborative in the casting, but I don't know if we were influenced by each other in terms of our ideas. We each took it in our own directions.



RS: Could you explain a little about the casting, what the descriptions were for the characters, what the actors brought to their roles and what they added?

AA: We [Arnold, Morag Mackinnon, and Mikkel Norgaard, the filmmakers working from the Advance Party concept] thought we might cast early on. Because when we first met, before we started writing, we thought it might be a good idea to cast first so when we were writing we would have these people in our minds. As it happened we had a couple of casting sessions, but we didn't complete it. And then everybody got busy, we were in different cities and didn't see each other, so we didn't do any more casting until my film got greenlit and we had to. Each of us had by accident picked different lead characters for our films. What we decided amongst ourselves was that we would give each other the main choice on the actors for those characters because they were the most important in our films. So I had first choice of Jackie and Clyde. The other directors had to agree—it had to be that they were happy with who I picked, as we had to be happy with whoever Morag or Mikkel picked. So within the collaborative casting there was some room to push it in the direction you wanted as well.

Casting is such a big thing for a film, and I did think it was going to be interesting to see how it would work out, but we were incredibly helpful to each other, we weren't that competitive. If there had been a real difference in opinion maybe it would have been quite difficult, but there wasn't, really. Avery was a difficult one to cast because I found him the hardest to deal with. Jackie was described as having an affair with a married man and originally I had someone called Collin who was her affair. But I couldn't find anything to do with Avery, So I made Avery her affair. Now she has this relationship with Avery and it turns out to be something quite different. It was complicated, but to try to help each other we would rewrite characters or think of how else to use another actor. We were finding ways of making the concept work for us.

RS: What about Jackie and Clyde as compared to some of the others you had the option of focusing on? What about them did you gravitate toward?

AA: I just made a connection between those two. I needed to look for connections with the characters, I needed to get them to interact. Clyde was described as having gotten out of prison and feeling guilty, released early for good behavior, and liked women, or women liked him, he was hanging out with his ex-prison friends but was trying to go straight. Jackie was described as having had this terrible thing happen to her in her past, and being cool and aloof and shut out from life. And I thought, he's had something to do with this terrible thing that happened to her, and they must meet and sort this out. It was just the first connection I made, and it was the one I could put down. When I received the Advance Party document I put it away and just wrote down more about each character, about where they lived and so on, got to know them a little bit more for myself. Then I wrote treatments for story ideas, just playing around and interacting the characters and seeing what would come out. I wrote three complete ideas. In the spirit of collaboration, I gave them to the people I was working with and asked, what do you like, what should I do? Because I would have been happy to have done any of them. Everyone picked the one that became Red Road. But interestingly in all of those story ideas, even though I found different ways of bringing them together, there was always this connection between Jackie and Clyde. That was always there, that was probably the strongest connection I was making.

RS: *Red Road seems like it could take place anywhere with its universal themes, ideas, and relationships, and yet its look and atmosphere seems inseparable from Glasgow. How much did shooting in Glasgow influence the film and its sensibility?*

AA: I agree, it could be universal. I want it to be a universal story. But I was filming in Glasgow and I get very affected by places. I didn't know Glasgow, I come from London, so it was a discovery for me. I get very moved by places and how they are, and the more I thought about the story—I was driving around Glasgow, discovering it for myself and seeing it with new eyes—as I was writing I was incorporating what I was seeing and the Red Road flats came into the story. I was very struck by those flats when I saw them. Glasgow's a really big city with many elements to it. The film shows a certain side of Glasgow and not its whole self.

RS: *I'm sure you've already gotten many questions about the film's sex scene. What intentions did you have for it?*

AA: When I wrote the script I tried to follow Jackie around and let her go through what she needed to go through. When she got to that place with Clyde, she was really leading me when I was writing, so I let it be what it needed to be. I tried not to judge her. I was shocked by her, but I tried not to judge her. It really was a place where she needed to go through this. The details that came out of that were very much part of that experience of writing, and they went into the film. I always felt it had to be that way from the beginning. I have not questioned why that is. Sometimes I don't really like to think about it too much, because if you think too much you inhibit yourself and start judging yourself, and then nothing's possible. Filmmaking is such a deliberate process, but within that there's room to be instinctive. Sometimes I don't understand why I've written what I've written or why my characters are doing what they're doing, but it feels right.

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