



Closed Circuit Tunnel Vision

Tom Jennings

Red Road, 2006, United Kingdom / Denmark, 113 mins
Director, Andrea Arnold; Producer, Carrie Comerford

Concern over the use of information gathered by governments about their citizens has a long history, and the increasing sophistication of surveillance that matches the complexity of state and private institutions has been fertile ground for a variety of artistic, philosophical and political projects. The most prominent theme is the state's proclivity for interfering in everyday life, purportedly in the public interest of social cohesion and stability but in practice for the benefit of those with power seeking more of the same. The cinema of paranoia grossly oversimplifies such scenarios, including Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse* films of the 1920s, Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), *1984* (dir. Michael Anderson, 1956), *Winter Kills* (William Richert, 1979), a 1984 remake (Michael Radford, 1984), *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998), and now the tired bourgeois triumphalism of *The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006). Recent experimental films such as *Unrequited Love* (Chris Petit, 2005) and *Hidden* (Michael Haneke, 2005) develop the phenomenology of persecution to some extent, but a naïve belief that in the virtual omnipotence achieved by cumulative observation is still the rule – so that individual resistance to oppression means seeking out loopholes, weak points and blind spots in the blanket coverage of objective data.

Given that independent and arthouse cinema-makers claim to be deconstructing the voyeuristic fantasies masquerading as reality in mainstream cinema, it may seem surprising that the effectiveness of surveillance technology itself in delivering truth is rarely interrogated. An exception here is Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) that notably achieved this, despite restricting itself to the conspiratorial recording of voices and professional, expert and elite agendas. However, fictional treatments have failed to imagine the wider social and cultural significance of developments that may well lead to the current proliferation of high-resolution cameras that loom over urban areas across the UK becoming progressively integrated with ID card systems and comprehensive national databases (which will be hawked around for corporate scrutiny and input). Worse, despite the saturation coverage already offered by one-fifth of the world's CCTV units trained on us in the UK, some local councils already fit ex-military employees with headset versions to roam dodgy areas – yet the local

opposition to this creeping authoritarianism goes little further than queasily rehearsing outdated Orwellian pieties or lofty liberal abstractions concerning privacy.¹

In this context, perhaps Andrea Arnold's *Red Road*, a Glasgow-set suspense thriller, was awarded the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival last year partly in recognition of its nerve in attempting to transcend cliché and liberal platitudes. It can't have hurt that it is also an immensely impressive, ambitious, intelligent and idiosyncratic film, with a complex structure, taut pace, powerful script, convincing characterisations, evocative design, vivid photography, astute direction, and compelling performances. *Red Road* originates in Lars von Trier's post-Dogme Advance Party project, which involved Lone Scherfig and Anders Thomas Jensen (undeterred by the failure of a similar concept in Lucas Belvaux's *Trilogy*) outlining a set of characters to be played by the same actors in three low-budget DV features in different genres by novice writer-directors. *Red Road* depicts Jackie (Kate Dickie), a widow in her thirties working as a low-paid CCTV operative alerting emergency services to incidents in the north of the city. Shunning family and friends since her bereavement, her drab, hermit's life seems to provide no pleasure beyond an occasional flickering smile when the quirks of ordinary folk on-screen interrupt her scanning for stabbings and muggings.

Her robotic routine is disrupted when she spots the man responsible for the deaths of her husband and young child. Clyde (Tony Curran) has been paroled early for good behaviour, and Jackie's subsequent grim, single-minded, remote pursuit soon turns to stalking. He shares a high-rise flat on the run-down Red Road with disturbed youngsters Stevie (Martin Compston) and April (Natalie Press), with whom Jackie cultivates relationships after blagging her way into a party there. After several meetings she has sex with Clyde, whereupon her plan is revealed as she leaves, rips her face and clothes and accuses him of rape. However, Stevie tracks her home and confronts her but then accepts her explanation. Also now aware of Clyde's efforts to connect with his own teenage daughter, Jackie's demonising hatred dissolves along with her own character armour, and she drops the charges. Together they visit the accident site where his regret, combined with a determined positivity – despite worse prospects than her – leads her to reconcile with the in-laws, scatter the loved-ones' ashes and at last contemplate a future.

In Full View

Arnold has consistently emphasised her intention to question the ramifications of surveillance in Britain (having wanted to make a documentary on the subject before being offered *Red Road*). She explains the apparent acceptance of the state's intrusiveness in terms of "our national psyche" – a reference point which, beyond hysterical hyperbole, has been absent from debate on the subject on current affairs programmes.² Similarly, the critical reception of the film tended to emphasise Jackie's personal psychological and social trajectory and her individual pathology – with the paranoid snooping seen only as convenient metaphor and instrument for its expression. But interpreting this film as a tale of the neurotic armed with the power of a million eyes is to miss the point of this story's deconstruction of the unglamorous, supposedly benign perspective of those trying to pre-empt street violence. Juggling conventions from several film genres, the theme here is the inherent unreliability of suspicious monitoring as a mode of understanding that can lead to action and power.

The Advance Party character sketch limited itself to describing Jackie as "cool and aloof because of a terrible loss she has suffered ... The world has been insanely unfair to her". However, while the camera shadows her claustrophobically when not taking her point of view, information about her subjectivity, motives and backstory is scrupulously withheld (reminiscent of the contemporary cinematic naturalism, for example, of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne). Forcing viewers to guess who she is and what she's up to mimics the process of interpreting CCTV images, using only sequences of trivial, isolated or arbitrary visual clues. Prior experience in similar contexts naturally inflects and colours any conclusions drawn, and expectations and predictions will further depend on resonances with our personal preconceptions, prejudices and predilections. Deep-seated anxiety or biographical trauma predispose us to associate victims with our own pain and suspects with fear or anger – but when feedback from direct interaction is not available, reality cannot be tested against the attributes unconsciously projected on to others, because they derive from one's own preoccupations.

So, this damaged protagonist is far from proactively powerful at the hub of the panopticon. She is functionally impotent – moved only by an occasional remote compassion (for example, for



a bloke with a sick bulldog or a dancing office-cleaner), prompting isolated expressions of human warmth which establish our sympathy for her numbly repetitive existence. A similarly mundane event triggers the unfolding drama. Noticing the possibly sinister pursuit of a girl on to waste ground, Jackie's anxieties turn to mild arousal once consensual sex ensues, quickly followed by shock at recognising Clyde. Then, galvanised by imagining that her privileged gaze promises mastery over him, exposing herself to danger in his real world eventually proves to be a hollow victory. Revenge is redundant once its quarry is humanised by the yearning for intimacy they share and now that her anguish need no longer be suppressed. By implication, the detached overview of everyday life actually prevents development, and offers protection only by sustaining a safe, habitual alienation.

However, while the surface content of the narrative surely echoes the process of dealing with loss – from grief, fixation, anger, and melancholy to re-engagement with the world – there is no straightforward submission to a simplistic counselling formulae: this mourner's pain is certainly not “managed”. Instead, she compulsively dismantles her own depressive defenses, casting off vulnerability for and overconfident recklessness and moving from self-hatred to the brink of self-destruction. In the process, hitherto dormant energies of aggression and libido are mobilised which couple capriciously to propel Jackie towards a variety of climaxes. The denouement, nevertheless, may seem a little anti-climactic, and too comfortably tidy (perhaps relating to the need to leave the characters intact for the next two Advance Party efforts). Even then, that Jackie's manic brazenness culminates in an uplifting, redemptive ending is as counter intuitive for her as it is for us. The narrative seams mined on the way seduced us into expecting the worst (as in the CCTV orientation), so that evidence of caring, empathy, or collective goodwill is easily discounted or uneasily misinterpreted in the inexorable gravity of violent or tragic destiny.

Precedents here for *Red Road* are furnished by cinema subgenres, such as rape revenge thrillers and recent, more sophisticated explorations of women's autonomy and sexual agency, like Carinne Adler's *Under The Skin* (1997), Jane Campion's *In The Cut* (2003) and Catherine Breillat's post-feminist brutalism from *Romance* (1999) to *The Anatomy of Hell* (2003). But while *Red Road's* tantalising plot flirts with exploitation, and stylistic flourishes both encourage and thwart cod-psychoanalysis, a thoroughgoing ambiguity built into imagery and character undermines the temptation towards universalising mythology in favour of social-realist specificity. So Jackie's reluctant contact with family establishes her traditional working-class background – her pursuit

of Clyde into a seedy world was not slumming it: she is neither excited nor disgusted, nor daunted by a bit of rough (linguistically or sexually). The affair conducted fortnightly in the vehicle of a married van driver reinforces her lack of prudishness, and counterpoints her repulsion from and attraction to Clyde. His feral, expressive, uninhibited sexuality embodies an honest, generous curiosity that belies the squalor of his situation, and which, on intimate knowledge, helps bring about a re-orientation toward her misery as those in his milieu also strive to kick-start stalled lives in a collaborative, open-hearted, and raw sociability.

Behind the Scenes

Jackie's journey, moreover, implicates far wider regimes of truth than local authority crime prevention schemes. It yields a convenient scapegoat in alignment with government policy and dominant popular media rhetoric that exaggerates under-class dysfunction as a cause rather than a symptom of society's ills. In this case his name is Clyde, living on Red Road, Glasgow – home to a proud libertarian-socialist heritage of a militant Red Clydeside that challenged historic political and social divisions whose descendent faultlines CCTV systems help paper over and mystify. When the politics of narcissism, envy and resentment poison the traditions of mutual aid already shattered by deindustrialisation, the human fallout breaks into discrete strata of hopelessness frozen in antagonism, ordered by hierarchies of precariousness, abjection, and, most of all, aspiration. Then, refracted by the cold gaze of neoliberal information management structures into a visibly classifiable lifestyle, those able to maintain a veneer of respectability institutionalise their marginal distinction by servicing and policing the rest.

But Jackie's solitary emotional confinement leaves no space for affection, as she observes Clyde trying to go straight as a 24-hour locksmith, his wounded, caring, rogue spirit provides the key to her prisoner's dilemma, softening the tough exterior of her obsession. Their fluid negotiation of the normally gendered ascriptions of initiative, desire and sensibility then facilitates a reciprocal altruism which supersedes hypocritical truisms of moral conformity. The site of this revelation gains additional poignancy from the knowledge that Red Road's actual eight tower-blocks now house asylum-seekers and refugees as well as ex-convicts and *Red Road* accordingly hints at renewed cycles of solidarity that are required for struggle in the global village taking shape outside of official structures, which are maintained by power-holders too busy dispassionately parading a matrix of superficial details across soulless monitor screens to take part. Their statistical correlations of



our everyday lives give an aura of authenticity to the pseudo-scientific justifications of our elected rulers, whose policies allow those lives to be shrouded in persistent acts of surveillance, simulating the self-aggrandising need of those in power to tame and regiment human entropy.

Notes

1. The shortcomings of which are spelled out in the excellent *Defending Anonymity*, published by the Anarchist Federation (available at www.afed.org.uk). Meanwhile two national groups are gearing up for a concerted campaign against ID cards: the 'No 2 ID' coalition focusses on the usual respectably pointless lobbying – but is gathering very useful information, including from countries where similar schemes have been roundly defeated (see www.no2id.net); whereas the more truculent and pragmatic 'Defy ID' network (www.defy-id.org.uk) anticipates the need for action on an anti-Poll Tax scale.
2. An exception being *Observer* columnist Henry Porter, whose *Suspect Nation* (Channel 4, November 2006) comprehensively rubbishes the supposed necessity, desirability, workability, trustability and affordability of the government's present plans as regularly peddled in transparent and fallacious spin. For valuable observations on the broader cultural context, see also James Horrox, 'When the Clocks Strike 13', and 'Surveillance as a Way of Life', in *Freedom* magazine, 16th December 2006 and 16th January 2007 respectively.