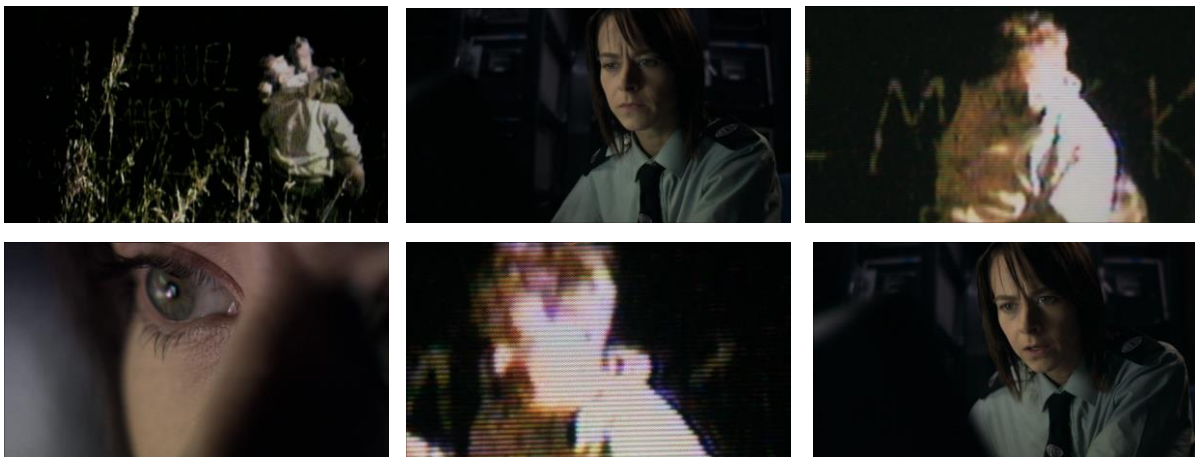


First Impressions: Discussing the ways in which *Red Road* (Andrea Arnold, 2006) guides the spectator to a particular understanding of events by revealing and withholding information about its characters.

A spectator's first viewing of *Red Road* (Dir. Andrea Arnold, 2006), as with any film, carries with it the weight of being at a stark disadvantage: The viewer lacks information about the film's narrative or, more specifically, its characters. It is only upon our second viewing that we experience a narrative in a privileged position, rendering our experiences of and relationships with a film's characters to be very different indeed. The purpose of this essay is twofold: **First**, to discuss how the absence of this privilege affects a spectator's moral evaluations of the two lead characters. **Second**, to explore how this film gradually blurs, or rather challenges, our allegiances. To achieve these objectives I shall consider three sequences that reveal important narrative information and thus significantly alter these evaluations upon first viewing *Red Road*. To frame my discussion, I shall make extensive reference to Murray Smith's model of the "*Structure of Sympathy*" (1995, pp.81-86) and its vital distinctions between our alignment and allegiances with characters, with a brief note regarding Smith's comments on "Text and Co-text" (p.194). The reader should note, however, that my intention here is not to suggest that Smith's model should be regarded as the only valuable approach to understanding character engagement, but rather that it can certainly be a useful focal point when discussing (what I suggest to be) the rather ambiguous relationships between viewer and character in *Red Road*.

Let us first look at Smith's model. The "*Structure of Sympathy*" outlines three distinct levels of character engagement. The first level, *Recognition*, refers to the rather "phenomenologically 'automatic'" process of a spectator's "construction of a character." (pp.82-83) The second level, *Alignment*, denotes the "systematic regulation of narrative knowledge," controlled by the narrative's "spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access." (p.83) It is upon this regulation of knowledge that spectators morally evaluate characters, a level of engagement Smith calls *Allegiance* (p.84). It is worth noting that my discussion will focus entirely on the two latter levels of engagement. This is because I consider *Red Road* to be a film that gradually complicates our moral allegiances with both of its main characters (note here that I refrain from referring to either character as a protagonist or antagonist - the reasoning for which shall become clear later) as it reveals information, a claim that I shall defend by considering the "process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they *know* and *feel*." (p.83, emphasis added) Speaking of the "...*structure of alignment*," (p.83) Smith introduces spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access, two interlocking functions "cognate with the concepts of narrational range and depth," that refer to a narrative's restrictiveness and subjectivity. (p.84) I take this to be a useful starting point for analysing a viewer's experience of *Red Road*. For my first example of alignment in this film, consider the first time we see Clyde. We certainly *recognise* him to be a human agent, but it is Jackie's reaction

(**Figures 1.1-1.6**) to seeing Clyde that prompts the viewer to question the significance of this character. This pertains to the *knowledgeability* and *communicativeness* (Bordwell, 1985, pp.57-59) of the narration: The prospective POV shot between Jackie and her monitor limits the communicativeness of the narrative, restricting us to seeing only what she sees, and learning *at the same moment as her* of this character's whereabouts. I argue that these POV shots, with the accompanying unsettling non-diegetic music, are also exemplary of spatio-temporal attachment that aligns us with Jackie. The objective narration (or lack of subjective access) restricts us, however, from knowing anything about this character, only that Jackie is shaken by his presence. This flaunted gap, where the spectator is aware of such a lack of knowledge, demonstrates the withholding of information to retain both curiosity and suspense around Clyde's character.



Figures 1.1-1.6

Most importantly, this restriction of seeing only as Jackie sees is one that is maintained through the majority of the film and one that, I suggest, aligns the spectator such that one would morally evaluate Clyde to be an immoral (or more simply put, problematic) character; the sexual activity that we first see him partake in; later scenes of him dragging along some wood; flirting with a waitress; and the redundancies and repetitions of learning that he was as an ex-convict. I also argue that the positioning of the spectator this way works to capitalise on his or her pre-set expectations of Clyde in two ways; the first relies on the phenomena known as the 'primacy effect', whereby our priming – or first impressions - of Jackie and Clyde correlate with our sympathy and apathy for them respectively; the second, I suggest, employs schemata salient to ex-convicts. That is, Clyde's behaviour quite adequately suits the prejudices that we may have towards ex-convicts. stylistic features of *Red Road* may too affect our emotional engagement with these characters; later scenes in which Jackie stalks Clyde (**Figures 2.1-2.3**) features haunting non-diegetic music and handheld camera, both stylistic devices used to represent Jackie to be in a dangerous situation. Furthermore, her action of picking up a shard of broken glass also adds to the spectator evaluating Jackie to be vulnerable, and in a dangerous proximity to Clyde. I take, however, the consideration of subjective access to be of paramount importance in this analysis. This is because it is the objectivity of the

narration that prevents the audience from knowing the intentions and mental states of both Jackie and Clyde, reiterating my argument regarding the blurring the allegiances: By the close of the narrative, we may evaluate Clyde to be less of a threat than previously estimated (more on this later), and access to either character's thoughts or feelings throughout the narration would perhaps lead us to evaluate his character in such a way much sooner. In other words, our suspense around Clyde in this first sequence is the result of a deliberate omission of information regarding his history - information that we eventually receive much later into the syuzhet – referring back to how we are “placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know.” (Smith, 1995, p.83)



Figures 2.1-2.3

Smith clarifies this important relationship between given information and moral evaluation: “Allegiance depends upon the spectator having what she takes to be reliable access to the character’s state of mind, on understanding the context of the character’s actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge.” (p.84) This elucidates the schism between our allegiance with Jackie and our rejection to Clyde. The syuzhet manipulation that restricts our construction of the fabula (particularly with events from outside of the syuzhet duration, namely the reason for Clyde’s incarceration) is what aligns us with Jackie, which we take to be ‘reliable’, before becoming allied with her and evaluating Clyde to be dangerous. Things are not necessarily this simple, however, to recall the sentiment I alluded to in my introduction: *Red Road*, I suggest, is a film that complicates and challenges our moral allegiances to its characters. As a brief tangent I wish to refer to Smith’s discussion on ‘Text and Co-text’ to demonstrate one example of moral ambiguity within this film. Smith speaks of “responses of sympathy towards action and characters with which we would have... no active aversion to in reality” (p.194). I would take the example of Jackie stealing CCTV tapes as an example of an action that the audience ‘excuses’ as our sympathy is “determined... by the internal ‘system of values’ of the text”. That is, her arguably immoral actions are seen to be permissible in relativity to what is at stake in the ‘larger picture’ – one such component of this ‘picture’ being the audience’s desire to fill the gaps regarding Clyde’s character due to the withholding of information about him.

I now wish to focus the discussion, however, on my second sequence, one that may exceed the leeway of this and mark a turning point in our allegiance with Jackie; when she claims a false rape allegation against Clyde (**Figures 3.1-3.4**). This scene leads the audience to question (and morally *re-*

evaluate) Jackie's motives: Why is she doing this? For how long did she plan this? Does Clyde deserve this? Hypothesis-testing that, again, is the result of restricting audiences' knowledge to that of much less than Jackie's. These questions also lead the audience to question the 'reliability' of the 'access' that they have had to Jackie's mental state – a process which, by Smith's logic, works to defer or stagnate our allegiance with her character. To provide a clearer example of what it is that I mean when referring to the stagnation of allegiance, consider Jackie's act of picking up the rock (Figure 3.1). It may be a fair judgement to initially assume that this is an act of preparation for self-defence; we (are likely to) fear Clyde and would also wish to possess some form of defensive weapon and as such are rather unlikely upon first viewing to assume that Jackie has brainstormed a cunning plan. Her act of self-harm (Figure 3.3) in the name of wrongly imprisoning Clyde, however, may well lead spectators to feel misled, perhaps even betrayed. The emotions one may feel in this situation becomes a difficult and ambiguous grey area when Jackie's intentions are withheld from the audience, thus stagnating our moral evaluations. This is further exemplified by her hesitation before retrieving the rock from her pocket (Figure 3.2): "Was this plan the very reason that she chose to bring a weapon? Is this an improvised decision based on her guilt for sleeping with Clyde?" Clearly, a troublesome evaluation. It is not only Jackie with whom the audience feels conflicted with, however; my final chosen sequence considers the resolution between *both* of the two main characters, where the audience is finally granted answers regarding Clyde's criminal history.



The delaying and eventual revealing of Jackie's loss, and Clyde's responsibility as a driver-under-influence, takes place over several scenes. It is only in the final conversation between the two main characters that all details are clearly and coherently stated. The narrative's retardation is responsible for the emotional responses that the audience has towards Jackie and Clyde, as previously discussed. This climactic scene, however, not only reveals the events pertaining to Jackie's grief, but also each character's mental states regarding the accident. To simplify my discussion here I shall suggest that the two most significant pieces of information to be (a) the details of John and Sorcha's passing and (b) Clyde's regret and torment as a result of his actions. To be brief, Clyde is haunted by these events, and filled with a bitter combination of sorrow and anger: "What do you want? I'm sorry. What can I say? "This shit happens every day. That's life. "You shouted at your little girl the day she died. But at least she was loved. "Fuck this." Clyde's honesty and clarity shifts the structure of alignment slightly. Prior to this, the audience's narrative comprehension was, so to speak, refracted through the lens of Jackie. As of now, we are spatially attached to both characters and learning, by

means of speech, their thoughts and feelings. A spectator's *allegiance* with these characters, however, remains difficult. The audience has more access to narrative information than any previous point, yet one may feel *less* inclined to 'take sides' and become allied with a particular character. How can our allegiances become blurred despite receiving clarity of narrative information? This is a prime example of the discontinuity Smith later addresses, by distinguishing between *alignment* and *allegiance*, whilst also noting that this distinction is often not made, as previous notions of 'identification' tend to conflate the two terms: Smith states that there is "error" in the argument "that alignment with character necessarily creates a basic sympathy for that character." (p.187) I deem this to be a critical component in understanding both the *Structure of Sympathy* and *Red Road*. Even to recall Jackie's activities from earlier points in the film (her casual relationship with a married man, the aforementioned tape theft) exemplifies the disunion between our alignment and our allegiance with her character. Likewise, with Clyde, we now know the gravity of his crimes but the audience perhaps evaluates him to be of much less *danger* to Jackie than previously thought.

To conclude then, it should be evident that the access to information that we receive in the syuzhet not only affects our construction of the fabula events within *Red Road*, but also the emotional and moral evaluations we make of the two main characters. It should also be clear that, when using Murray Smith's *Structure of Sympathy*, one can distinguish alignment from allegiance, at the very least in an effort to appreciate the ambiguous relationships that a viewer may have with these two characters as a resulting factor of the deliberate withholding and revealing of information.

Word Count: 2185

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