

Under the Skin, written and directed by Carine Adler

Bad behavior

David Walsh
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In British director Carine Adler's first feature film, *Under the Skin*, a young woman, Iris (Samantha Morton), is thrown into a crisis when her mother (Rita Tushingham) dies from a brain tumor. She breaks off relations with her boyfriend, distances herself from her coworkers, quarrels with her pregnant sister, Rose (Claire Rushbrook), and enters into a series of sexual liaisons in an effort to assuage her grief and sense of abandonment. Her desperate activity brings no relief. In the end, after a kind of cathartic breakdown, she seems more able to come to terms with her emotional turmoil, as well as the people around her.

This is a serious and legitimate story. Why then is Adler's film, by and large, so unsatisfying?

In an interview with a journalist from the Sydney Morning Herald, Adler recounted that while making a previous film, a short, she had come across 'a book written by a psychiatrist, Estela Weldon [*Mother, Madonna, Whore*], which dealt with behaviour patterns--extreme sexual behaviour patterns. It dealt with promiscuity, sexual abuse by mothers, and prostitution, and how women will act out anger on themselves, whereas men act it out externally. And being promiscuous is a way women act it on themselves. So I drew a lot of the ideas for the film from that, but also from my own observations.... I think everyone has had moments where they have had brief encounters with the wrong person.'

Certain critics have praised the film extravagantly: 'emotionally raw' is a phrase that recurs, as does the word 'uncompromising.' You have to wonder what people are used to, or what they think life is all about.

Iris picks up a man in the cinema and sleep with him. He is obviously married or attached, but she continues to long for and pursue him. She dances seductively with strangers in clubs and presumably ends up with

some of them. She enters into a seriously masochistic relationship with one man, but seems capable of extricating herself from it. There is clearly something neurotic about her behavior, but, frankly, none of it is all that shocking or extraordinary by contemporary standards. What is Adler's point?

This is apparently a cautionary tale, but I doubt whether even in a better world men and women will entirely resist the attraction of 'brief encounters with the wrong person,' and be able to avoid emotional humiliations altogether. Life, with all its inevitable difficulty and pain, seems to me to go far beyond Adler's conception. On the whole I think the 'bad' Iris has more possibilities than her mother- and sister-loving, conformist, respectable self. In any event, one hopes that compulsive, self-destructive behavior and the highly questionable emotional security offered by middle-class family life are not the only two possibilities left open to women, as the film seems to imply.

There is a kind of puritanism at work here, and also something quite repressive. The director obviously thinks she is quite advanced to present goings-on about which she so strongly disapproves. I don't know Weldon's book, but I can't avoid suspecting that it makes a poor starting point for a film. If *Under the Skin* has certain valuable moments, it is because Adler and Morton (a fine actress, who has appeared in leading roles in British television's *Jane Eyre*, *Emma* and *Tom Jones*) occasionally break away from the preconceived and present a real living being.

But not nearly often enough. Adler speaks admiringly of Mike Leigh's *Naked*. Unhappily, there is a world of difference between her film and that one. In creating the character of Johnny, Leigh and actor David Thewlis were not handicapped by any self-imposed need to

offer instruction to audience members as to the proper way to conduct themselves. They attempted to reproduce something from life, mediated through their sensibilities and intellectual concerns. There is a balance, which establishes itself more or less organically, in *Naked* between the spontaneous-instinctive and the rationally worked out. Adler begins with a notion of 'female sexuality' out of which she attempts to extract a film. A futile task. Such a method has inevitable dramatic consequences. Whether or not the film is psychologically and socially accurate in a superficial sense, it is not especially affecting.

I question, in any event, whether one can speak of female sexuality, or male sexuality, in the abstract in any meaningful way. In the sense both that one is essentially considering socially-conditioned relations between people, often of opposite genders, and that interpersonal relationships, even of the most elementary kind (parent-child), have a history. It seems almost embarrassing to have to point out that responding to grief and anger through promiscuity, for example, presupposes a variety of historical and social conditions and that it still remains an option, if one wants to call it that, available to a relatively small percentage of the world's female population. To make the activities of middle class women in certain advanced countries the basis of eternal psychological laws seems a trifle impressionistic, not to mention self-centered.

All of this is not entirely the director's fault. She no doubt lives in an atmosphere where feminism and similar tendencies prevail absolutely. Very little is more destructive to art than the prescriptions these trends insist upon. I don't believe for one second that Adler, obviously a talented individual, is aware of how much damage she inflicts on her art by playing it safe and making this sort of schematic picture about 'women's issues.'

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