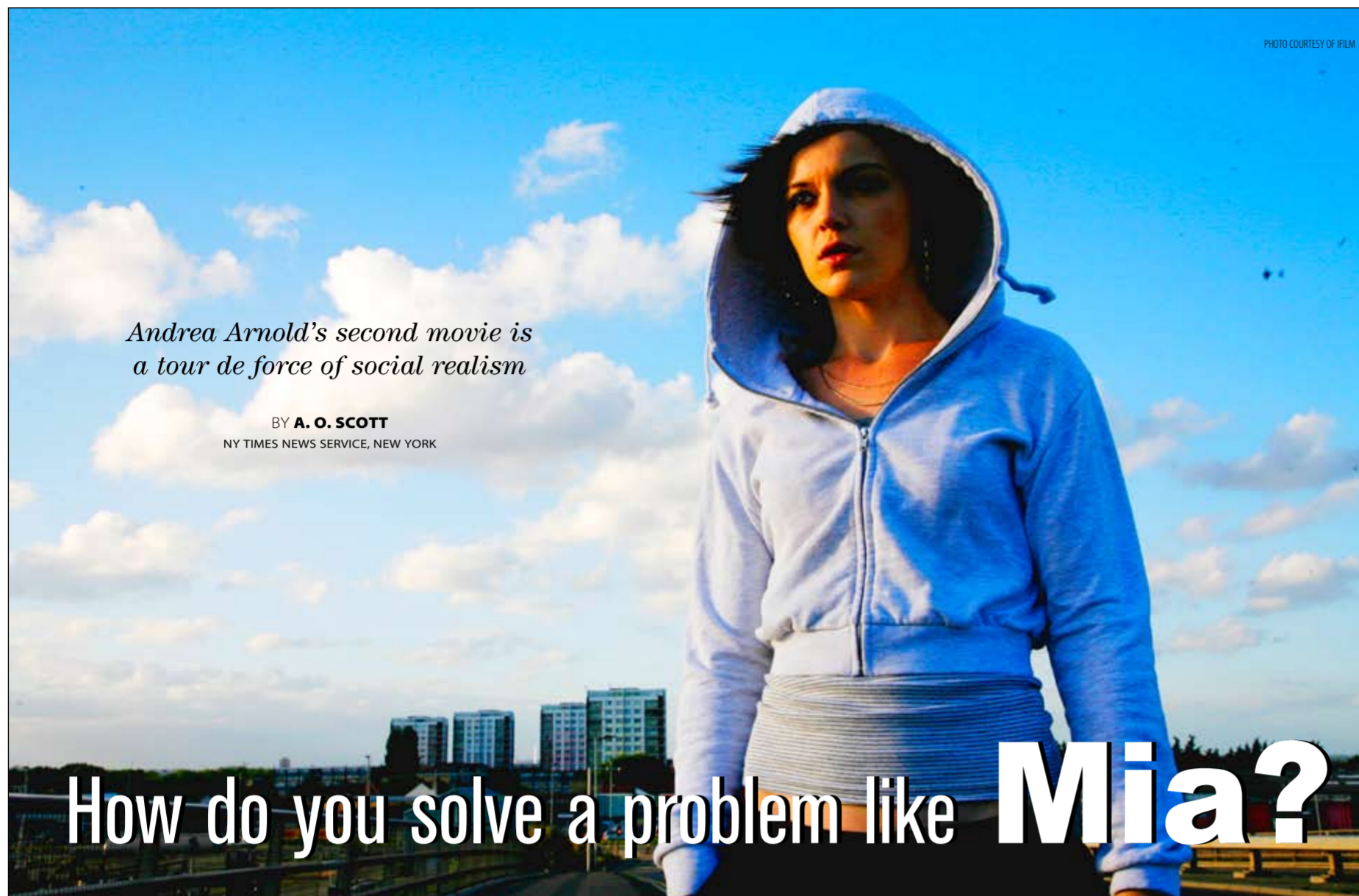


FILM REVIEW



Andrea Arnold's second movie is a tour de force of social realism

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Mia, the 15-year-old protagonist of *Fish Tank*, Andrea Arnold's tough and brilliant second feature, moves with such speed and fury that she seems to be trying to flee not only from her bleak surroundings but also from the movie itself. The narrow, nearly square frame boxes Mia in, and Arnold's on-the-run hand-held tracking shots increase the sense of panicky claustrophobia. Living in a cramped apartment in a British housing project that stands like a cluster of megaliths in the middle of nowhere, Mia is at once trapped and adrift, unable to contain or to express the feelings seething beneath the blank, sullen mien she usually presents to the world.

In the first scenes she comes across a group of girls practicing hip-hop dance moves on a patch of asphalt. She taunts and provokes these apparent rivals, pushing the confrontation toward violence and delivering a nose-breaking head butt to one of them. A few minutes later Mia is in a fenced-in vacant lot trying to free a horse tethered to a concrete block. She swerves from rage to tenderness, and may not even know which is which.

What does Mia want? To be free, to be safe, to be left alone, to be loved. The contradictions of adolescence have rarely been conveyed with such authenticity

and force. Though Mia is poor, unruly and obviously, in social-work parlance, "at risk" — her mother (Kierston Wareing) and younger sister, with whom she lives, are equally volatile, or even more so — *Fish Tank* is not drawn from the case files, and does not solicit pity. Rather, thanks to Arnold's fine-grained realism and the astonishing performance of Katie Jarvis, the nonprofessional actress who plays Mia, it is a diamond-hard reflection on the peril and progress of a fragile soul in a bad situation.

A trained actor might have taken care to sort out and communicate Mia's emotions, giving the audience a clear perspective on the girl's inner life. Instead, Jarvis' tentative, sometimes opaque self-presentation registers the crucial fact about Mia, which is her confusion. She is a puzzle to herself, unable to understand, much less control, her fury, her desire or her fear. When she dances alone in an empty apartment, she is not exactly at peace, but at least in a state of cease-fire in her ongoing war with herself and everything else.

Although she prefers to be alone, Mia craves connection. She develops a tentative friendship with one of the young men who keep that poor half-metaphorical horse, and a far more complicated relationship with Connor (Michael Fassbender), her mother's new

boyfriend. Mom, slightly less miserable and abusive when drunk — and therefore, perhaps luckily for Mia, rarely sober — has brought home a bit of decency as well as fun. Or so it appears. Connor is friendly, generous and easy in the company of Mia and Sophie, her prickly, foulmouthed little sister.

He takes the family fishing — his car is among his many attractive assets — and lends Mia his video camera so she can record a dance routine for an audition. More unsettling implications gather slowly, and arise partly out of the welter of Mia's feelings about Connor. She sees him as a big brother, a father figure and an easy-going pal, but she also has a crush on him. As it intensifies, so does our unease about Connor's response. Like Mia, the audience trusts him at first because we have no other choice, but we come to suspect a predatory, deceiving side to his character long before she does. How could she? She's 15.

Fish Tank, insofar as it concerns the relationship between a restless teenage girl and an unreliable older man, bears some resemblance to *An Education*, Lone Scherfig's much-praised recent movie. That film wraps its sexual queasiness in period glamour, fetishizing early-1960s clothes, cigarettes and cultural references as ardently as its young heroine. Arnold is no less absorbed in the details of

her film's setting — the graffiti in the corridors, the litter on the sidewalks, the trash on television — and her harsh brand of realism is no less a style than Scherfig's wry worldliness. We find ourselves, in *Fish Tank*, in a world made familiar by the films of Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and other socially conscious anatomists of British misery.

It's a place I'm usually (perhaps perversely) happy to visit, and to locate Arnold's work in a recognizable tradition is not to slight her particular and considerable strengths as a filmmaker. Her first feature, *Red Road*, was a tour de force of psychological insight slightly undermined by a script that relied a bit too much on late reversals and surprises. *Fish Tank* goes a little astray toward the end, in a scene of breathless pursuit across a marshy seaside wasteland. (To say more would give too much away.) The sequence is powerful and skillfully filmed, but the dread and horror it injects into the story seem superfluously melodramatic.

Otherwise, *Fish Tank* is nearly flawless. Fassbender, who was the Irish militant Bobby Sands in Steve McQueen's *Hunger* and the suave British film critic in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, is quickly establishing himself as an actor of impressive range and skill. The slightest imprecision in his portrayal of Connor — too much overt menace, or too little — would

have thrown the film off balance. (It may have helped that Arnold gave the script to her cast one scene at a time, so that they did not know what was coming next.) And Wareing, who appeared in Loach's *It's a Free World*, keeps her woebegone character just this side of caricature.

But the movie is Mia's, whose life is too much for her to handle but who must learn to manage it anyway. Whether she will succeed is a big question, of course, but Jarvis' triumph, and Arnold's, are hardly in doubt.

Film Notes

FISH TANK

DIRECTED BY:
ANDREA ARNOLD

STARRING:
KATIE JARVIS (MIA), MICHAEL FASSBENDER (CONNOR), KIERSTON WAREING (JOANNE), REBECCA GRIFFITHS (TYLER) AND HARRY TREADAWAY (BILLY)

RUNNING TIME:
122 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

Unlocking Pandora's box

A teenager prodigy and hacker do battle in 'Summer Wars,' a cautionary tale about overreliance on the Net

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

With Japanese manga film adaptations, it is not always easy to separate the gems from the dross, and a great deal of dross is screened on Taiwanese screens simply to feed an appetite for all things Japanese. With *Summer Wars* (*Sama Wazu*), we have most definitely got a gem. This is the sort of movie that rivals, and for the technologically oriented perhaps even surpasses, the work of Hayao Miyazaki, who created such classic animations as *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004).

The story is about Kenji, an 11th grade computer whiz kid who is invited to stay at the family home of Natsuki, a girl he has a crush on. He is asked to pose as her boyfriend in the hope that this will mollify Natsuki's grandmother, who is not long for this world.

Uncomfortable with this role, he spends a sleepless night working on a puzzle that is sent to his cellphone. He solves the puzzle. What he doesn't realize, until it is too late, is that he has just cracked the security code for Oz, a virtual world that has become indispensable to the real world. Oz is where people do their banking, meet their friends, monitor their health and calibrate their GPS. His solution to the puzzle has provided root access to a malign force operating within Oz. Millions of user accounts are compromised and then used to create chaos in the real world. Total social meltdown is imminent.



Mamoru Hosoda's manga adaptation gives the work of Hayao Miyazaki a run for its money. PHOTO COURTESY OF MIGHTY MEDIA

This sort of scenario is not new, but Hosoda's film brings it to life as a piece of fun family entertainment that proposes an all too possible result of our dependence on and casual acceptance of the Internet. There are a bunch of appealing characters, from Natsuki's grandmother, the aging matriarch of an ancient samurai family, an uncle who recounts in tedious detail the not altogether glorious history of the family and its retainers in various historical conflicts, and the sullen teenager whose real life is lived as King Kazuma (a rabbit with martial arts skills) and who spends his time fighting his way through the highest level of Oz's combat championships.

The family supports Kenji as he tries to put things right. Much action takes place within the virtual world of Oz, where King Kazuma and Kenji try to contain the chaos as the malignant force goes viral. The conflict, in all its graphic art glory, is utterly unreal, and also curiously exciting. And the spillover into the daily lives of the characters is very believable, largely as it is so closely linked with things most of us do every day — namely communicate and act through various online systems.

Summer Wars does a splendid job in representing one of the hottest topics of the modern world — computer security — and presenting it in a way that is both

Film Notes

SUMMER WARS (SAMA WAZU)

DIRECTED BY:
MAMORU HOSODA

VOICED BY:
RYUNOSUKE KAMIKI (KENJI KOISO), NANAMI SAKURABA (NATSUKI SHINOHARA), SUMIKO FUJI (SAKAE JINNOUCHI), MITSUKI TANIMURA (KAZUMA IKEZAWA), AYUMU SAITO (WABISUKE JINNOUCHI)

RUNNING TIME:
114 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
JAPANESE WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

thoughtful and fun. This may be simple flat animation that harks back to technologies many decades old, but in terms of quality, it leaves many recent 3D animations trailing in its dust.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

One Day (有一天)

A new Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) production, *One Day*, written and directed by Hou Chi-ran (侯季然), is described as "a visual love poem of magical realism" on the International Movie Database, and the trailer suggests that it is replete with all the excesses of Taiwanese art house aspirations. A great deal of labored emoting takes place between Nikki Hsieh (謝欣穎) and Bryan Chang (張書豪), both emerging but still minor talents in Chinese-language cinema. Although the film is being endorsed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, to get a real taste of Taiwanese cinema, it might be best to prime yourself for the 12-day Hou Hsiao-hsien Retrospective titled The Best of Times (最好的時光 — 侯孝賢電影經典重現), which is scheduled to open on Monday (see below).



Hou Hsiao-hsien Retrospective The Best of Times (最好的時光—侯孝賢電影經典重現)

The mini-festival presents 11 works by Taiwan's preeminent cinematic auteur, to be screened at the Wonderful Theater (真善美戲院, formerly the Majestic) and the auditorium of the National Taiwan University of the Arts (國立台灣藝術大學). The lineup ranges from 1983's *Green, Green Grass of Home* (在那河畔青草青) through to Hou's most recent major release, *Flight of the Red Balloon* (紅氣球, 2007) and includes all his major works. The festival runs from Monday until June 18. All screenings are free. For more details visit the festival's Web site at www.ntua.edu.tw/~film/houhsiao-hsien.html.



Director's A-List Film Festival (2010 國民戲院 — 大導演的獨家片單)

Part of the POP Cinema series hosted by SPOT — Taipei Film House (光點台北電影院), the festival opens today and takes place at SPOT, Universal Cinema City (全球影城) in Taichung and the Kaohsiung Film Archive (高雄市電影圖書館). The festival focuses on the early works of a number of directors, and is a must for anyone interested in visiting renowned directors in their first flush of success. Films include Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* and Truffaut's *The Four Hundred Blows*, Kevin Smith's *Clerks* and Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. Detailed schedule times for Taipei can be found at www.twfilm.org/a_list. The festival runs from today until June 18 in Taipei, June 18 to June 24 in Taichung and June 29 to July 4 in Kaohsiung. Tickets are NT\$200 in Taipei and can be obtained online at www.artsticket.com.tw or at the venue.



Good Man Film Festival (好人影展)

Film distributor Serenity Entertainment International delved into its catalog of international art house films to put on this mini film festival. The title is self-explanatory in a vague sort of way. The program includes *Away We Go*, directed by Sam Mendes from a screenplay by David Eggers, the Coen Brothers' *A Serious Man* and Jessica Yu's *Ping Pong Playa*. Screenings are at the Wonderful Theater and the Ambassador Changchun Cinema (國賓長春影城).



Earth

A feature-length compilation from the television series *Planet Earth* made by the BBC and Discovery Channel, the transition to big screen makes the most of high-definition images, producing a power and intimacy not possible in the living room. Startlingly beautiful shots show animals in the fullness of their strength, hunting, swimming and migrating. While *Earth* focuses mostly on the awesomeness of nature, the tragedy of animals trying to cope with changes resulting from global warming is also present. Identities and narratives have been given to many of *Earth's* stars, making this ideal material for younger audiences.



Sex and the City 2

The sequel to the film of the long-running television series has by general consensus driven the franchise definitively into the ground. Critics have been scathing about most aspects of the film, from its cynical product placement, its squirm-inducing attempts to be sexy, the characters' emptiness and script's tedium. It has been described by one female critic as "essentially a home video of gay men playing with giant Barbie dolls," and verges on the pornographic in its objectification of women — its stars, no less — as little more than, in the words of the Lily Allen song, "weapons of massive consumption." Be warned.



I Just Didn't Do It (Soredemo Boku Wa Yattenai)

Veteran director Masayuki Sudo's film about the tragic absurdities of the Japanese justice system was first released in 2006 and won numerous awards in Japan for its biting social commentary and attention to detail. The story of a young man charged with molesting a 15-year-old girl on a crowded train plunges the protagonist into a system that is all about upholding the moral authority of the police. At 143 minutes, *I Just Didn't Do It*, which follows the characters through the tortuous legal proceedings, drags at times, but as an introduction to how the courts operate, the film is superlative.



My Ex (Fan Kao)

Yet another film from the Thai horror factory, *My Ex* milks the *Fatal Attraction* theme for all it is worth. Not content with retribution in this life, *My Ex* takes vengeance into the next. In this film, we have playboy Ken swanning around with a bevy of lovesies, but who soon discovers that discarded lovers can come back to haunt him. A moralistic tone, repetitious use of scare tactics and a contempt for internal logic make *My Ex* second rate fare.



Higanjima

Japanese vampire flick by South Korean director Kim Tae-gyun that puts a bunch of young people on an island inhabited by fearsome vampires who relish torture, murder and general mayhem, all of which is inflicted at a breakneck pace to a thrash metal score. There are some clever ideas in the film, but this manga remake (based on the best-seller by Koji Matsumoto) has the story-telling subtlety of an arcade game. For action fans, there's plenty to like, but *Twilight* fans will be disappointed.

