

"SIGHTSEERS" (Sundance Movie Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
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With Ben Wheatley—one of the most electric and prolific new filmmakers working—and stars/writers Alice Lowe and Steve Oram crafting a chronicle of new lovers on holiday, the last thing to expect is anything resembling a traditional relationship drama. And that's the last thing you get. But within Chris and Tina's mad love, their pencil museum visits, their vicious murders and hysteric jaunt through the countryside is real poignancy about the peaks and valleys of intimate connection and letting go of long-held restraint.

Tina's repressed. She lives at home with severe guilt over the accidental death of her beloved dog, Poppy and with a cruel mother who perpetuates said guilt. Now, she's finally met someone who likes her for who she is. That's Chris. A "ginger-faced man," as described by onlookers, Chris is unassuming and friendly and a lover of the Crich Tramway Village, the Cumberland Pencil Museum, the Ribbleshead Viaduct and other odes to the Dark Satanic Mills of the beautiful English landscape. He's also mean-spirited and short in his temper, justifying murder of the likes of litterers and other hostiles that threaten the comfort and good nature of his and Tina's trip.

It's slow going for Tina—just leaving her mother behind feels like a huge step—but as Chris' world reveals itself, her propriety and meekness and boundaries crumble. Her first bold choice: Tina resists every impulse to return home to her mother, deciding to see where this new love and road takes her. It's a decision many make much earlier in life. SIGHTSEERS never makes clear whether Tina is finding something again, or if this is her real deal first love, but all that comes with a partner experiencing things anew next to someone well-worn is on display. Their interactions alternate between fiery and freezing, and once Tina gets the bug, begin to delve into gender politics and double standards via homicide. Tina kills on impulse. Her violence is largely reactionary, and unexpectedly tests Chris' boundaries, as he claims he has a code or system. Their argument that follows sounds oddly similar to the empty reasoning of why men can do things women cannot.



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Tina's second bold choice is stealing a dog. The lost dog of one of Chris' victims, Banjo looks identical to Tina's poor Poppy. She changes the pet's name and as her walls fall, so does her balance, with the dog's ever-shifting identity and close connection to such baggage a catalyst for extreme behavior.

As the film and their relationship develop, Wheatley imbues a sense of history and country throughout. The stunning, brooding landscapes (Laurie Rose's photography is stellar) feel intensely connected to the characters, as do their immediate company. Chris and Tina camp near a group of shaman, whose practices grow increasingly pagan and hallucinatory. Chris strikes up a friendship with a cyclist whose invention of a single-man camper seems to mirror the ginger killer's solitary desires as he grows frustrated with Tina.

Midst one fantastic sequence, Wheatley overlays classic English poet William Blake's "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time." The piece, fairly eerie, contemplates the possibility of Christ's landing in England during his lost years. It lays out the contrast of the divine traveling through a place so seemingly and naturally steeped in a dark mysticism; its "clouded hills" and aforementioned "Dark Satanic Mills" also referring to the more maligned byproduct of Industrial Revolution (artifacts of which Chris is enthusiastically visiting and including in his essential tour of the countryside). Are the likes of Chris and Tina, in tune to a violent, free spirited heritage keeping their fellow travelers from a sort of vacation New Jerusalem? Or is this in everyone's nature?

All this would make SIGHTSEERS sound heavy, but the film is evilly, evilly funny, very much thanks to its stars and writers, but also its director who even found kernels of gallows humor in his harsh, towering KILL LIST. Lowe and Oram live Tina and Chris, and while some may disengage as their antics escalate, they're undeniably worthy of applause. Lowe, in particular. While physically, SIGHTSEERS is a journey of two, by the film's final moments, you'll see just how far Tina has come.

SIGHTSEERS is currently playing the Sundance Film Festival. It is, as yet, undated by IFC.

