

Source Code and Hanna—two new Hollywood thrillers

By Hiram Lee
3 May 2011

Source Code, directed by Duncan Jones, written by Ben Ripley; *Hanna*, directed by Joe Wright, written by Seth Lochhead and David Farr

Source Code and *Hanna*, two new thrillers from Hollywood (both directed by British-born directors), are poor films which have little to say about real life and fail, frankly, to be “thrilling” for the most part.

One film tells the story of a US soldier used as a guinea pig in an experimental program designed to prevent a terrorist attack. The other is about a teenaged girl trained by her father to be an assassin and seek revenge against an old enemy. One relies on surprise twists and turns for its impact, and the other features a character whose violence is coldly delivered with unshakeable confidence and almost surgical precision. We’ve seen too much of all these phenomena in recent years.

In *Source Code*, directed by Duncan Jones (born 1971), Army Captain Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) must prevent a major terrorist attack in the United States. A bomb has already destroyed a train in Chicago, killing everyone aboard, and more attacks are imminent.

A secret program developed by a mysterious Dr. Rutledge (Jeffrey Wright) is able to construct a kind of virtual reality from the memories of those killed on the train. The program allows Colter’s consciousness to be uploaded into this memory-world and assume the identity of one of the passengers on the ill-fated train. Only able to relive the final eight minutes on the train before it explodes, Colter must be sent to experience these eight minutes again and again until he is able to determine the bomber’s identity. Told by his superiors that he cannot change past events, only prevent the next attack, Colter opposes them and attempts to stop the bombing of the train.

In the background of *Source Code* is the war in Afghanistan—where Colter has served as a pilot, in a secret government program with disturbing implications (he is an unwilling and exploited participant)—and domestic terrorism. The film is not terribly concerned with the implications of any of this. In fact, little of it even seems necessary to the film itself.

Instead, much of the work is dedicated to meditations on fate or destiny. At times it strikes a religious tone. There’s even a love story, as improbable as that might seem under the circumstances. None of it is convincing. “What would you do if you knew you only had one minute to live?” Colter asks his love interest. “I’d make those seconds count,” she replies. The skill and detail that went into producing the film’s special effects stand in stark contrast to the banality and contrived nature of those scenes in which human beings interact.

Jake Gyllenhaal is a talented actor who has done some good work in the past (*Brokeback Mountain*, *Rendition*), but his talents are wasted here. The other performers—Jeffrey Wright, Michelle Monaghan and Vera Farmiga—don’t have a great deal to do.

As is often the case with films constructed around extreme plot twists and surprise endings (or middles), there are events which don’t make sense according to the film’s own logic. Is the train a reconstruction of memories, as we are told, or is Colter traveling through time? The filmmakers want it both ways. There are perhaps more twists and turns than even the writer and director were able to sort out. Even with all the surprises, one never escapes the feeling that one has seen this all before.

Hanna

In a cabin in the Arctic, Erik (Eric Bana), a rogue CIA agent, trains his young daughter, Hanna (Saoirse Ronan), to be an assassin. The two have lived like recluses all of Hanna's life, in hiding from the CIA. The young girl appears never to have experienced the world.

Hanna is being trained to kill Marissa Wiegler (Cate Blanchett), another agent with whom Eric shares a dark history. Once Hanna's training is complete, she flips a switch on a transmitter which alerts the CIA to her presence. Erik flees before the authorities arrive, with plans to rendezvous with his daughter again in Germany. Hanna allows herself to be taken into custody. The bulk of the film follows her escape and subsequent journey to reunite with her father in Berlin, fighting off mercenaries hired by the CIA along the way.

Hanna, directed by Joe Wright (born 1972), is a very insubstantial and contrived film. It bears some similarity to the series of films built around Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne character, in that it involves a former, essentially super-powered asset of the CIA seeking both freedom and revenge against the agency.

Like those films, the hero, or anti-hero, in *Hanna* is an expert killer, capable of inflicting sudden and brutal violence. One is meant to be impressed by—to find “cool”—the detached, unfeeling way in which Hanna brutalizes and kills her enemies. That her foes are the CIA and also brutal and unsympathetic is, to say the least, beside the point.

As with *Source Code*, when the filmmakers are forced to deal with human beings, and make attempts at generating feeling and emotion, the movie simply becomes tedious. A large section of the film—during which Hanna is introduced to a number of new life experiences, from her first time listening to music to her first kiss—is awkward and completely drained of inspiration or spontaneity.

Presumably, the filmmakers are attempting with these sequences to bring out the damage done to Hanna by her father and present her with the opportunity of renouncing everything she knows--violence and coldness—in favor of life, and new experiences. None of it comes through. If real life is as it is depicted in this film, one wonders why the girl doesn't immediately run back to her cabin in the far north.

In any event, whether they are entirely conscious of it

or not, the filmmakers have rendered the more violent and sadistic elements of their character the most alive and appealing. Hanna is just the latest in a long line of glorified revenge killers to have appeared in Hollywood thrillers and action movies in recent years. It is a deeply unhealthy phenomenon.

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