

***Hanna* (Joe Wright 2011)**

Michael Oppermann

British director Joe Wright, best known for his literary adaptations *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and *Atonement* (2007), has opted for a real change of genre. *Hanna*, an American-European co-production, is an unconventional thriller that invites the viewer to a cinematic ride which begins in the snowy wilderness of Finland, continues in New Mexico, Morocco and Hamburg and ends in Berlin.

Hanna, the film's central character (played by Irish actress Saoirse Ronan), is raised in a log cabin in Finland. Her father Erik (Eric Bana) has taught her several languages. He has also shown her how to hunt and wrestle in order to turn her into a perfect killing machine. Hanna's only knowledge of the outside world is contained in an encyclopaedia which she knows by heart. She also has to memorize a whole series of fake back stories that provide her with a future identity. *Wer ist Hanna?* (Who is Hanna?), the German title of the film, points to the problem of identity that is central to the movie. The viewer does not have any clue to Hanna's past. We do not know why she is raised in total loneliness and why she is trained as a multi-lingual assassin with an expertise in martial arts. Hanna is a living mystery, a puzzle waiting to be solved.

One day Hanna tells her father that she is ready to fulfil her task. She sends out a signal through a transmitter in her shack so that she can be traced down. Her father says goodbye and disappears in the snow while Hanna awaits the arrival of a group of soldiers (probably Naval Seals) who come to eliminate Erik. Instead they find a 17-year-old-girl who appears to be both harmless and distressed. Hanna is arrested and taken to a high security post that resembles a concrete labyrinth. Here she encounters the woman she is supposed to kill, Marissa Wiegler (played by Cate Blanchett), a CIA-agent of the most corrupt nature. The woman who interrogates Hanna, however, is not Wiegler herself but a double. Hanna breaks the double's neck and manages to escape the compound. While on the run

through the desert she meets a British family and befriends their daughter. The family decide to help Hanna to go to Berlin where she intends to meet her father. Meanwhile Marissa hires a (rather eccentric) mercenary (Tom Hollander) to capture Hanna. What follows is a classical chase thriller that takes Hanna on a breathtaking ride through three continents. The catch for the viewer is that Hanna and Wiegler are hunters and hunted alike. They try to kill each other, and they are both haunted by a past secret that is gradually revealed through the film. In the end Erik is eliminated by Hollander's hunting squad while Hanna manages to kill Marissa. Hanna has learned that she is the only survivor of a failed CIA-experiment that involved a program to alter a child's DNA in order to create a perfect killing device.

Admittedly the film's basic plot is not going to win a prize for originality. Some critics have pointed to Jason Bourne's quest for identity as a direct point of reference while others have underlined similarities with the movie version of the comic-book series *Kick-Ass* (USA 2010) in which a father (Nicholas Cage) tries to turn his daughter into a super fighter. It is also true that the film's "mystery" points to a whole universe of (rather uninspiring) CIA conspiracy movies. Nevertheless *Hanna* is one of those rare films that please audience and critics alike. The movie shows that it is possible to turn a conventional story line into a fulfilling aesthetic experience.

The film's first strong point is Saoirse Ronan who plays Hanna's part with rare vigour and dedication. Ronan (who has already won an Oscar nomination for her role in *Atonement*) is obviously able to change into totally different characters. She is not an actress who *plays* a part but she totally *transforms* into what she represents. Secondly the action sequences are simply superb. Instead of presenting a thunderstorm of rapid cuts (in the tradition of Paul Greenblatt and many others) Joe Wright reverts to long and uncut sequences and the occasional use of slow motion. The action itself is the result of the same kind of careful choreography that has turned films such as *The Matrix* (USA 1999) or *Hero* (China 2002) into outstanding aesthetic achievements. Both elements converge in Erik's fight in a metro station in Berlin that is presented as an action ballet filmed in a long and uninterrupted steadicam take.

A third strong point is the intellectual subtext of the film. Hanna's flight resembles a classical quest for authenticity, a ride into her past that

leads her to a moment of recognition. In other words, the film combines classical thriller territory with a fairly profound psychological interest. Several critics have also noted the fairytale structure of the film. Hanna is raised in a kind of paradise that she has to leave eventually. Her (occasionally funny) encounters with a world of electricity, TV and (male) sexual desires can be likened to the classical fairytale situation of a child trying to find his way in a dark forest. The final scenes of the film (shot at an abandoned amusement park near Berlin) make the fairytale analogy explicit by taking us into a museum house that used to be dedicated to the Brothers Grimm.

*Hanna* is a film that works on many different levels. It is a breathtaking thriller, a coming-of-age story, a romantic tale and a work of art that cleverly juggles genres and narrative traditions. It is also a movie with a powerful soundtrack. The electronic patterns (created by *The Chemical Brothers*) enhance the impact of the images while, simultaneously, they are strong enough to work outside the context of the film. All of these qualities easily make up for some minor flaws (such as Tom Hollander's futile attempts to turn his role into a playground for method acting).