

ALONG FOR THE RIDE: DEVOTION AND POWER IN HARRY LIGHTON'S PILLION

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Pillion — the seat behind a motorcyclist — and also the title of writer/director Harry Lighton's directorial debut.

An apt name for the “Dom Com,” as star Alexander Skarsgård has dubbed the film. One could argue that the film literally revolves around pillions... but we'll get to that. One thing about this film is undeniable though: Lighton unabashedly submerges the viewer into the rich and niche world of Dominant/Submissive queer relationships in the specific subset of a UK biker community, tugging at your heartstrings the entire way.

While the textured environment of this BDSM biker gang creates a deeply authentic experience for the viewer that allows both the comedy and drama to sing, it's the heart and chemistry of our two main leads — Colin played by Harry Melling and Ray played by Alexander Skarsgård — that resonates so deeply, leaving you with no choice but to root for them with your whole chest. It's difficult to not be enamored by their, albeit non-traditional, but beautifully complicated relationship.

Skarsgård's Ray is a queer, masculine, hot as hell, emotionally distant biker whose entire world revolves around his bike and his BDSM biker gang. Melling's Colin is a meek, gangly, inexperienced gay man who still lives with his parents (played masterfully by Lesley Sharp & Douglas Hodge) and seems to lack any friends outside of his own family. These two unlikely characters end up being just what the other is looking for... and real love is formed.

The film starts in Ray's POV — one of the only times we are in Ray's perspective — but this deliberate choice by Lighton immediately informs the audience who exactly is in charge here. Ray is our dominant. It is he who holds the power in their relationship. Ray starts the film in control and remains in the driver's seat (pun intended) for the majority of the film. We stay in Ray's POV for a few beats, as he hurls down a highway on his bike with the non-diegetic song, “Chariot” by Betty Curtis, blasting. Lighton then cuts to Colin sitting in the backseat of his parents' car, looking longingly and almost passively out of the window. Although the majority of the film is told through Colin's POV, Lighton makes the intentional choice to introduce him second — signifying that Colin is our submissive and already assumes the role of “powerless” in his own life.

The song “Chariot” also blasts through the speakers of Colin's parents' car — another intentional choice by Lighton to cement the idea that although Colin is our submissive, he is our main character. It is Colin's journey we will be following and it is through his POV that we experience their relationship.

Lighton continues this carefully crafted opening sequence by crosscutting back and forth between Ray's POV and Colin in the backseat of the car. It's a strong editing choice that instantly establishes that these men live in two completely different worlds and play completely different roles in these worlds. And although their worlds collide and intersect throughout the film, they ultimately remain separate — two lines running parallel to each other.

At first Colin is just happy to be there. On their “first date” that takes place on Christmas in a random, abandoned, alleyway, Ray asks Colin: “What am I going to do with you?” To which Colin replies: “Whatever you want... really.” This line from Colin acts as the main thesis of the film.

Colin is just along for the ride.

Literally — on the back of Ray's bike, sitting on his pillion, getting drunk on the wind in his face as he tightly grabs on to Ray's waist, zippers, chest. And, metaphorically — agreeing to whatever Ray commands of him, whether that be sleeping on the floor, shaving his luscious curls, or making his own dinner on his birthday.

As the film and their relationship progresses, Colin tests the boundaries and has small bouts of acting out. Colin simply being happy to be there evolves into him wanting more — summed up eloquently and succinctly with the line, "I am happy. I just could maybe be happier."

Colin's positive growth as a character ultimately ends up being the downfall of their relationship. Ray tries to give Colin what he needs. He even goes as far as agreeing to give Colin's request of "one day off a week" from their regular BDSM roles a go — but he can't deliver and freaks out when they share their first kiss — an emotional boundary Ray never wanted to cross.

It's tragic to watch, and you can feel the hurt and confusion coursing through Colin after Ray walks off post kiss and disappears from sight — never to return again.

But in true form to how their relationship always functioned, it is Ray who holds the power right until the end. He is the one who walks away. At first, Colin refuses to accept that Ray is really gone and searches far and wide for months to find him — but he never does. In the end, it is Ray who initiated their relationship, and who ultimately kills it.

Ray once told Colin that he had an "aptitude for devotion" — and you could argue that this aptitude for devotion existed all the way until the end. Even with Ray gone, Colin was devoted to him and wouldn't abandon or move on until he finally accepted that Ray never wanted to be found.

Ray was Colin's first love, first boyfriend, first BDSM relationship and first heartbreak. He took Colin's virginity, in every sense of the word. He exposed Colin to a new world and to a new way of living. And although it didn't work out the way Colin hoped it would, he found himself along the ride on Ray's pillion.

And although Colin is still very much a Sub, the film ends with him having the confidence and wherewithal to set the boundaries he needs from his future Dom — cutting his glorious curls will forevermore be strictly off-limits.

The film has struck a deep chord with many because most of us aren't strangers to the notion that having love for another person isn't enough to sustain a relationship or to "save" someone. A person needs to be willing to be saved and for Ray, he just wasn't ready to fully let Colin in. An utter tragedy that is too often experienced. For the film to live in this over-the-top, niche world, yet still balance these complicated and vulnerable emotions, is a true feat of Lighton's.

Pillion is a special film that I hope continues to be seen far and wide. For the soundtrack at the very least ("I Think We're Alone Now" by Tiffany has been on repeat since I've seen the film — not once, but twice). But because we seldom get such a tender, authentic experience of how beautifully complicated falling in love and attempting a relationship is.

It's hard to believe *Pillion* is Harry Lighton's directorial debut — it's a true masterclass in original storytelling and world building. He came out of the gate strong and I can't wait to see what he does next. And please, oh please, may it have more shirtless Skarsgård in it.