

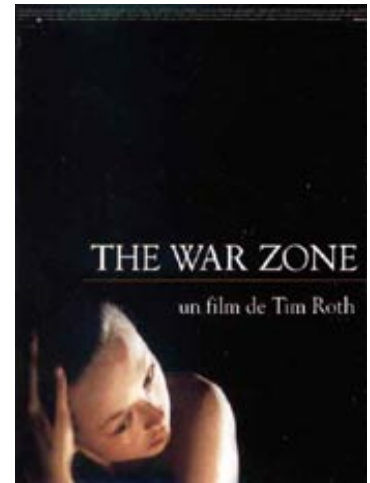
Fucking monsters: post-apocalyptic desire in Tim Roth's *The War Zone*

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Numbers of Beasts

At 32, *The War Zone*'s cinematographer Seamus McGarvey was the youngest ever member of the British Society of Cinematography. [1] As with Andrew Birkin's 1993 film *The Cement Garden*, and similarly based on a controversial novel, the point of view is primarily that of a young man, Tom, played by Freddie Cunliffe. What exactly British means in the context of an Irish cinematographer on a British production within European culture is beyond the realms of this article, but the film is both strikingly English and European. This article discusses *The War Zone* as a post-apocalyptic film in the sense of the period outlined in *The Book of Revelations* 13 where at Armageddon the devil rules. After a shot of blackness, connoting death, the essence of the film, the apocalyptic landscape is revealed followed by the view from a grey bunker. The opening sequence intimates this film is from the head of a teenage boy, this war zone, stuck in a family where abuse is rampant, yet the point of view is more ambiguous than this. There appears to be nowhere out, the desolate coast of Britain the end of the world. The immediate view is from the war shelter high on a coastline that peters out into nothingness. This, retrospectively, the audience is aware is Tom peeking out, after he has finally got what he wanted, sex with his sister and the death of his father. Tom is both the peeping Tom of Coventry, and doubting Thomas of Nazareth, who cannot believe that which he observes, and must touch the flesh to believe. Jessie, the highly sexual sister, is in many respects the saviour figure, her body offering the core route to salvation for the central male characters. Roth does not indulge in moralising. It appears entirely natural that a girl abused by her monstrous father, and possibly others, will finally fornicate with her own brother, to give and receive what she believes to be some semblance of love.

The basis for the screenplay, Alexander Stuart's novel *The War Zone* (1989), explicitly portrays Jessie as the 'Seductive Daughter' of popular secular literature, a contemporary theme that has come to dominate. [2] The novel's Jessie wants to have a baby with her father and is annoyed that he will only have anal sex with her. The film has Jessie appear younger than her literary counterpart, and far less in control and the ending is open. Cinematically, the film is peculiarly calm, the still nature of the cinematography contrasting with the interior turmoil of the characters and the landscape that is brutal and harsh, yet slowly being eaten away. There is the immobility of Carl Dreyer, the propinquity of Pier Paolo Pasolini plus the importance of Krystof Kie•lowski, as in *A Short Film About Killing*, is of note, matched by influences such as the low-key cinematography of Néstor Almendros ASC and Chris Menges BSC, with the plot evocative of Nan Goldin and Larry Clarke. [3] With the use of anamorphic lenses, low light and shallower depth of field, the landscape takes on a character of its own being, relentlessly harsh and uncaring, epic in proportion, while the interiors are cage-like. This does feel like the end or edge of the earth. Despite this evoking aspects of eternity and the apocalypse, that is hell, there is the idea that there is nowhere else to go, even the outer world being a prison.



The War Zone (1999).



Ray Winstone, infamous due to his role as Carter in the groundbreaking and similarly anal rape including banned film *Scum* (Alan Clarke, 1979) plays a furniture dealer in the film, while the father in the novel is an architect, Tom taking vengeance on him by fire bombing his docklands development. Roth has chosen to lower the class of the father, with Tilda Swinton's mother appearing a higher class than her husband. Given their isolation from others, the character Lucy being the only outsider who enters the family home, the abuse can remain hidden, while the family set up is a portrait of apparent harmony. Tom remains a voyeur throughout the majority of the film and by not acting sooner his newly born baby sister is sexually abused. This framing of the family has the composition of portraiture, the family consisting of distinct separate characters unified in the drabness of their inner worlds and matching outer environments. Michael Cartin, working on the interior design, made a point of using no primary colours, and the outside is monochrome, wiping away any signs of life in the film. The original plan by Roth was to use lots of movement with hand held cameras but the final film is far from this. There are moments of intense action, but the profundity of the film comes from its stillness, resisting the temptation of melodrama, culling much of Winstone's action or multiple verbal and physical explosions as the father.

Steadicam operator Alistair Rae and focus puller Baz Irvine had difficulty here because of the shallow depth of field and the limited space in the cottage; they wanted to 'create a sepulchral world in the interior, a bold chiaroscuro in which the light falls off rapidly into darkness'. [4] The use of the word sepulchral is significant given the film is set in an interment type atmosphere, the action framed by two nightmare funeral procession-journeys. The first car trip leads to an accident where Alice is born, the second results in the discovery that she has been abused. There is a parallel here with Dorothy Allison's 1992 controversial novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, turned into a TV movie by Angelica Huston (1996) and banned from US television, where the abused child is the one who is in a car crash. The bunker in *The War Zone* is tomb-like, and it is here that Jessie has sex with her father, her boyfriend Nick and, so it is implied in the final sequence, her brother. Sex has long been paralleled with death, and is represented here as something that staves off a living death.

Monstrous Evil

The house is depicted from Tom's point of view as he enters the grounds of the family home on his bicycle, framed as a child's painting, a box structure with blackened windows, isolated and stark. Slavoj Žižek's work *The Fright of Real Tears* is of use here. With reference to Jacques Lacan's *Seminar XI*, Žižek points to the antinomy between the eye and the Gaze, where a subject sees the house-the object-which seems to return the Gaze. The effect of this missing gaze is purely fantasmatic. [5] While Žižek here specifically refers to research on Hitchcock, his main thesis is on Krystof Kiełowski, a filmmaker whose style, as has been mentioned, *The War Zone* clearly resembles. There are also moments, particularly in the anal rape scene, where the following holds true: 'we are not dealing with the simple reversal of a subjective into an objective shot, but in constructing a place of *impossible* subjectivity, a subjectivity which taints the very objectivity with a flavour of unspeakable, monstrous evil'. [6] Whether we can go as far as Žižek in maintaining an entire heretical theology, identifying the Creator himself as the Devil, is debatable. The sea does take on this sexual and goading identity, the constant rain working as a diabolical inversed baptism.



The hellish-void silences in the film are particularly of note, reflecting Tom's repression/suppression. Prior to discovering his father abusing his sister he is deeply depressed. They have moved from London to Devon, and he claims he misses his old home and friends, but his depression comes from another source. After visiting his mother and the implication that the father has abused or will abuse the baby, Tom states simply to his father, 'I saw you fucking my sister'. The father is in complete denial, and in the following confrontation scene tells his son 'see what happens when you put things in people's heads', sarcastically stating, 'I suppose I'll be doing it with you next'. Tom's depression and ongoing detachment from his father indicates that his father may have actually been doing it with him. Thus, when he sees his sister in the bath with his father, it triggers awareness of his abuse. In reality, accurate scientific evidence concerning the effect of trauma on memory is still problematic being personal and depending on such things as pre-morbid temperament, interpersonal resiliency factors, and the presence or absence of pre-existing or concurrent psychopathology, as the American Psychiatric Association puts it. [7] This scene, where the accusation is mocked, effectively exploits the current furor over both false memory syndrome and denial by paedophiles, a core element of recent Australian, American and European film in general, just a few examples being: *The Color Purple*, *Happiness*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Bad Boy Bubby*, *American Beauty*, *Festen*, *Magnolia*, *The Gift*, *One Hour Photo*.

Tom continues the abuse established by his father by sleeping with his sister. The question over whether this is abuse is complex. Sociologists have argued that the incest taboo functions in creating the proper climate for the socialization of children. [8] Jessie consents with Tom, yet she is vulnerable, raised with the idea that this is the only way love can be shown. Jessie's masochism can be explained by reference to the 'feminine masochism' explored by Helene Deutsch, which equates with an eroticised relationship with the father. [9] Tom, however, has a non-sexual relationship with his mother that is expressive of love. After the car crash she offers to give him a hug and in a café he can actually joke with his mother, the only point in the film, other than the play fighting between Jessie and Tom that usually leads to a hug and suggests sexual tensions, where there is lightness. There is here the same ambiguity as with the character of Dianne in *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), who the core character copulates with only to discover he may yet go to jail, Jessie likewise being of an age where she is soon to go to college. Tom is perhaps fourteen, but the parents typically still see him as the baby of the family jealous of his new sibling receiving so much attention.

In the depressing Devonshire café Tom's mother tries to cheer him up, saying he might like his new school, but he jokes back about the locals. To Tom they all have giant foreheads and fingers sprouting from their shoulders. This scene is followed directly by Tom back at the house discovering the abuse, thus any hope is dispersed, his father being the monster previously spoken of. Interior scenes away from the house are significant, given they contain nobody, other than a dismissive waiter in the pub in London, and a barman and Nick in the tavern in Devon. Child sexual abuse is contained within a vacuum of silence and isolation. However, the myths around abuse being due to 'in-breeding' by 'country bumpkins' is exploded here, in that the abuse must have been occurring for some time in the Capital. The myth is inversed, in that it is in the country that child sexual abuse is actually discovered, when Tom discovers incriminating photographs of his father with Jessie in the nude with her 'friend' Carol.

A major aspect of the film is Tom's 'documentary evidence' of the abuse. Tom is a child who is forced to believe the unbelievable, face the unthinkable. After Jessie leaves Tom on the beach and goes off with Nick she apologises outside the house. Tom tolerates her behaviour up to this point and then accuses her: 'you're doing it together aren't you/not just what I saw in the bathroom/what do you want me to say/what happened/nothing happened'. They fight and then hug, with the implication that the problem here is Jessie's betrayal of Tom, rather than the abuse. The reliability of Tom as narrator in the



novel, and his point of view in the film, must be questioned. Despite the film being primarily from Tom's point of view, there is still the ambiguity that Jessie might actually be right when she comments, 'it must be better than love, better than anything/you're acting like a child, this isn't about me and dad is it, you just want to know about fucking...do you think Lucy wanks in the toilet when she's feeling neglected, because I do.' Jessie at this point attacks her brother, but then reveals her vulnerability, having previously discovered Tom on the toilet masturbating with a magazine; she wants him to know that she uses sex for comfort. Every time she lashes out at Tom, she is visually shot crying on her bed, as if this relationship with him is that which she values the most. In this relationship she supposedly has the power, being the older sibling but there is the potential for equality. Being narrated from the first person, the novel cannot achieve this balance, and does not reveal Jessie's vulnerability. The film ends on the notion that just as her father has initiated her into sex, Jessie will initiate Tom in the temple like tomb of a bunker.

Alexander Stuart's novel on occasion is purely pornographic adolescent male fantasy, if we take sections of the text out of context, and it seems Roth could not risk the censor's wrath by including a golden shower sequence combined with lesbian sex. [10] But Tom in the novel does not see these rites of passage as fulfilling, only humiliating, Jesse's lesbian lover Sonny urinating on him filling him with further rage. Sex for Tom initially is not liberating, but the narrative of the novel and film is driven by Tom's fantasy, consensual sex between siblings. Jessie is the sole object of everyone's desires, be they Nick, Dad, and Tom, in the film, and also Sonny, Wolfgang and Magda in the novel. The description of the sexually promiscuous Jessie in the novel suggests that she should be the reader's fantasy as well, but Roth again makes this more ambiguous. Jessie's breasts become the fetish in the film, while in the novel Tom is haunted by his father's monstrous member. The film's Tom is the ultimate voyeur, but this is hardly a form of sadistic voyeurism, more masochistic. The outsider with the status of the observer, it is because Tom is detached that he eventually cannot allow events to continue as they are. Once he discovers that Jessie and local boy Nick are having sex he brings a video camera to the bunker, buries it and goes back when he knows his father and Jessie will be having sex.

Tom then is the potential controller of the gaze, and thus will become the law in the film. We the audience are presented with the core abuse, both from Tom's point of view via his camera, and from a separate angle where we see Jessie on her back with her father removing her trousers. Tom can manipulate what takes place via his camera. Both father and daughter do not know they are being watched, yet, as with Tom, we as spectators are given to believe the events are real because of the presence of Tom's camera offering a form of cinema vérité. For, of course, the screen image guarantees that the spectator is witnessing a 'real' event. [11] The bunker is a peculiarly gothic structure, and with the incessant rain, darkness and the car accidents with Tom's glass shattered face there is an intense gothic overtone to the film. A comparison between *The War Zone* and the work of Kiełowski with regards to Žižek's term 'interface' is enlightening. Much of the film is similarly about drab reality through which another 'fantasmatic' dimension becomes perceptible. This does not come about purely, as in Kiełowski, via ordinary every day reality. [12] It comes through the central nexus of the film, death and the complex ambiguities concerning adolescent feelings on sex and sibling relationships.



'Do you get off on all this?'

Jessie is compliant with the abuse to a degree. 'Why don't you do it like you do it with mum?' she asks, when her father tells her to turn over. Tom turns away then spins back again, to voyeuristically watch the anal sex scene. He knows what is happening, wants to remove it from his vision out of disgust yet simultaneously is compelled to turn back, the camera set up recording the events. Jessie whimpers 'no', thus this is presented as rape, and Tom, as well as the filmic spectator act as her witness but are complicit. Both the spectator and Tom are frozen by the spectacle, the latter choosing not to intervene, as if filming the event is too much of an intrusion as it is. There is crosscutting between Tom's eyes and Jessie's, with close-ups on her tear drenched face, revealing Jessie's pain, but also creating identification between the brother and sister. Whether for Tom this is a re-trauma or total empathy is unclear. Tom hurls the video camera from the cliff in disgust. The novel has Tom mention it is his suicide or the death of the camera. The sequence in the film suggests that Tom is destroying representations of child sexual abuse on his videotape to nullify the reality of the abuse and negate his own memory. With the opening sound of the sea, the establishing point of view shot from the bunker and the closing sequence of the bunker blending in with the coastline, there is also the interpretation that the sea calls for the evidence, that the sea is the diabolic energy that controls the protagonists. Again, it is unclear whether Tom originally intended to record his father and sister or Nick and Jessie having sex, the ambiguity revealing the dual motive of voyeuristic desire and the need for further evidence of abuse to back up the photographs he has found documenting sexual liaisons in London. 'You're still fucking him,' he later confronts her with, to which she replies, 'do you get off on all this?' Can this question be put to the audience or do the style of cinematography and the horrific nature of the film negate such interrogation? Her question furthers the portrayal of Jessie as 'sick', damaged beyond repair.

There is the obligatory teenager's comment 'I fucking hate you' from the younger brother, which can be construed to mean 'I hate you for having sex with him, not me'. Jessie then asks Tom if he wants to hurt her and he proceeds to burn her breast, believing that she can give pleasure to others by letting them inflict pain on her, as if she deserves to be punished. Given the father's rage, there seems to be little choice for Jessie but to comply with his wishes, yet she does want to have his babies in the novel. With no boundaries being given by the father, the young boy must take control and become the law, part of the reason why he uses the camera, as if now, given he is no longer the youngest sibling after Alice's birth, he must take on the role of the defender of the women. Jessie's answer is to offer Tom sex, a form of blackmail so Tom will not tell their mother. She is going on a trip to London with her father and tempts Tom with, 'maybe I can get you laid'. After Tom leaves her alone at this point we are offered a long medium shot followed by close ups of Jessie on her bed, suffering in deep agony, her usual nonchalance and precocity absent. With her large breasts and apparent dispassion, Jessie appears publicly to be in control, a grown up woman. This sequence, unlike the novel, offers the spectator another picture of a lonely lost abused child who behaves with sexual abandon out of despair.

In London the landscape appears post-apocalyptic, the two towers blocks raised up like decaying phallic alien edifices. Wherever the location in this European island there are ironically no boundaries hence no humanity, the humanity of humans having ceased. Jessie's relationship with Tom is revealed in all its complexity within this alternative environment. Despite Jessie setting up an encounter for Tom to have sex with Carol, a woman who has had sexual relations with Jessie, Jessie prevents Tom and Carol having sex. Sex appears to be a way both in and out of the war zone, the area of conflict. In the final two powerful scenes the Steadicam pulls away from Tom and Jessie, then Tom closes the door in the audience's face. Now they will make love in private, away from the audience's gaze and the controlling gaze of the camera. A cut to a Wescam-stabilized helicopter shot slowly pulling back shrinks the bunker into part of the landscape. The bunker becomes one with the grey rock, as if it never existed. In this instance, Žižek's comment about heretical theology is appropriate given that the



world appears post-apocalyptic, the moment before judgement, where the Devil has victory. One argument might be that we are in a world where the beast has emerged from the sea seductively, prior to an eschatological battle, and Satan is enthroned. [13] This whole final sequence connotes transmogrification and disappearance, suggesting the secrets between brother and sister will never be shared with the outside world. They will endure in the lifeless landscape, at one with the dead, those fallen in battle in the war zone.

Notes

[1] Duncan Petrie, 'A Fractured Family' in *American Cinematographer* November 1999, Vol. 80 No. 11, pp. 22-28. The technical references here are taken from this article.

[2] This is an ongoing theme, most notoriously in *Lolita*. See Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1981, 2000) pp. 36-49 and C. Jason Lee, *Screening Abuse-representations of child sexual abuse in film* (Wallflower: London, forthcoming)

[3] Duncan Petrie, op. cit.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears. Krystof Kiełowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, (BFI: London, 2001) pp. 34-35.

[6] Ibid., p. 36.

[7] Kenneth S. Pope and Laura S. Brown, *Recovered Memories of Abuse. Assessment, therapy, forensics*, (American Psychological Association: Washing, DC, 1998) p. 54.

[8] Herman, op. cit., p. 53.

[9] Ibid., p. 58.

[10] Alexander Stuart, *The War Zone*, (Vintage: London, 1990) pp. 147-155.

[11] Slavoj Žižek, op. cit., p. 39.

[12] Ibid.

[13] See *The Book of Revelations* 13:11 and 19:11, in *The New Jerusalem Bible Reader's Edition*, (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1990) pp. 1425/1430.



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