Margaritas at The Metro. Violence in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game.*

The following essay will focus on depictions of violence in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game (*Neil Jordan, 1992). It will discuss how the character of Fergus (Stephen Rea) uses violence as a performance of masculinity and how the violence shown towards the character of Dil (Jaye Davidson) is partly due to societal pressures Fergus feels. Violence as a concept is difficult to define. James Kendrick writes in *Film Violence. History, Ideology, Genre*, 'common sense tells us we know exactly what violence is, but once we start unpicking all of the associations, assumptions and elisions of our own personal definition of the word and comparing it to others, we quickly realise there is no one thing.' (Kendrick,2009:7). Taking Kendrick's point, there are different forms of violence contained within *The Crying Game*. The backdrop of the film centres on the conflict in Northern Ireland between the IRA and British Army but this is only one definition of what violence can be. Explosions, gun fights and bomb threats mix with mental and physical violence against the character of Dil. The violence both aimed at Dil and carried out by her is more complex in that, it offers a psychological take on violence and associated effects.

The film seems neutral in the portrayal of the IRA and the British Army. The explicit violence is presented in such a way that the viewer can make up their own mind, Jordan does not aim for the film to take political stance.

The opening scenes of *The Crying Game* are not typical of a crime thriller. There are establishing shots of a fairground, with shouts and calls of excited fairgoers. The romantic ballad *When a Man Loves a Woman* by Percy Sledge (Lewis, Wright, 1966) plays over these scenes. The camera pans to a couple, they seem to be enjoying each other's company, which doesn't seem out of the ordinary, until there is a medium close up of Fergus, skulking by one of the stalls, watching them. It's the first

indication that all is not as it seems. The editing, with the panning shots and the close-ups of the couple being observed is the first sense the audience get of the sense of threat. As the film begins, the audience hear Jude (Miranda Richardson) refer to the man as ‘soldier’ and she has a Northern Irish accent. The soldier, Jody (Forrest Whitaker), talks to her in an English accent. This alerts the audience to the fact that the film is set in Northern Ireland and that the soldier is clearly a member of the British Army. To say this was a precarious situation to be in, would be an understatement. The film was released in 1992 and this was at the height of The Troubles. The IRA had been upping their campaign for independence, using increasing violence to convey their message, since the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984. Being a member of the British Army in Northern Ireland, kidnap and death was a very real possibility. Historian Kenneth O. Morgan writes in the book, *An Oxford History of Britain,* ‘an alarming wave of bombing attacks in English cities signified that the IRA and Sinn Fein were taking the age-old struggle of Irish nationalism into a new sinister phase.’ (Morgan, 2001:647). With this in mind, the viewer is now primed for something to go horribly wrong in the union between this couple. Indeed, it does, when Jude is revealed as a member of the IRA and the soldier is kidnapped by her colleagues, bundled into the back of a car, with a hood over his head and driven to a safe house. What is interesting about the depiction of violence in this first sequence is, is it is not graphic. There are guns, there is threat, but it is not overt. The camera pans and tracks the kidnappers and their victim with an uncertainty and ominous threat that the kidnapped solder would have been feeling. The violence is not stylised, there is a naturalism to the depiction that feels as though it showcases what the audience were used to reading about and seeing in the media. In the book, *Film Violence. History, Ideology, Genre*, James

Kendrick says, ‘realism is a cinematic construct, a merging of stylistic devices with audience preconceptions to produce a sense in the individual viewer that what is being viewed is, closely, if not exactly, analogous to their knowledge and experience of external reality.’(Kendrick,2009:6). It is useful to think of this quote when studying the first few scenes of the film. When the IRA kidnap Jody, it is the gritty realism of the editing and the camerawork that suggests to the viewer this could be close to reality. Jody is depicted with a beaten face and a bag over his head, he is guarded in a disused greenhouse. For some of the time, he is not given sustenance. In the first scenes of the film, when Jody has been kidnapped the characters of Jude, Fergus and the leader of the IRA cell, Maguire (Adrian Dunbar) discuss what to do with him. It is Jude who is forceful in her reasoning to shoot Jody as the British Army have not given into the demands of the IRA. There are close up shots in these scenes of her cocking a shot gun and arguing with the men about what should be done. Fergus, however, takes a more sympathetic approach in the midst of the violence, arguing that Jody is a human being. However, Fergus knows that he must be loyal to the cause he believes in. This is the first time that the viewer sees the conflict that continues throughout the film’s narrative. Although Fergus wishes to treat Jody as a human being and he bonds with him over friendship, it is a friendship of limits. For example, in one scene he allows the hood to be removed from Jody’s face, so that he can eat and they begin to converse but all the while Fergus has a gun firmly pointed at Jody, loaded and the camera focuses on that fact, making sure that as a viewer, it is not forgotten that Fergus has a job to do and his beliefs outweigh bonds which may be forming. In the documentary film, *I, Dolours* (Maurice Sweeney, 2018) former IRA member, Dolours Price, talks about being sworn into the organisation. She states, ‘I took the oath and that was it. I was a member of the IRA and would do

whatever my superior officer wanted' (*I, Dolours*, 2018). As an IRA volunteer, Fergus would have taken that oath and knows what it means to betray it, however the violence in several scenes appears to be more of a performance. The viewer can see how Neil Jordan has written Fergus to begin to question his sense of self and his beliefs from the very moment he forms a bond with Jody, because this goes against what he has sworn to do. He carries out the violence, pointing the gun, keeping guard and informing Jody that he will have to shoot him but as the scenes continue, Jordan is painting a picture of a man increasingly conflicted. The violence in several scenes appears to be subdued from Fergus' end at least. He holds the gun but is shown laughing, joking and bonding with Jody. It is during one of these scenes that Jody tells Fergus the fable of the scorpion and the frog:

> 'As they both sink beneath the waves, the frog cries out, why did you sting me Mr Scorpion? Now we will both drown. I can't help it, it's in my nature' (*The Crying Game*, 1992).

The quote is used again at the end of the film when Jody recites it to Dil but it calls to question the violence that Fergus involves himself with and Neil Jordan's comment on that as a director. For example, viewers are supposed to be warming to Fergus, he does not seem like the other members of his IRA group, in that, it's in his nature to be kind. He cannot help but think of Jody as a human being and therefore the violence with him is more of something he feels he has to go through because he believes in the cause of the IRA and will defend that at whatever cost. When Fergus is tasked with killing him, Jody attempts escape. This is where Jordan builds the suspense and the tension. There are tracking shots as Jody runs through the woods with Fergus following, brandishing a shot gun, the non-diegetic sound builds the tension. Suddenly Jody runs into the road and is killed by the convoy of British Army

soldiers who have come to rescue him. At the same time, the safe house is being bombed by army helicopters, with Jude crouched in the corner, cradling her gun as destruction reins around her. This scene, unlike the earlier hostage scenes, takes its influence from the action films of the 1980s. It is one example of the film using violence to move the narrative along. In regard to the action genre, Kendrick states that such films rely on 'violence as a structuring device' (ibid,2009:69). The violence here does exactly that, when the narrative had slowed to a more thoughtful pace, the bombing of the safehouse jolts the viewer back into the reality of the situation. In addition, this scene is a turning point for the character of Fergus. He sees Jody killed directly in front of him, and it is at this point he chooses to flee. This scene carries the film's narrative further and allows the viewer to witness the state of Fergus' mind. Racked with guilt over the death of Jody, he flees to London to find Jody's girlfriend Dil. After Fergus decides to flee, the threat of violence hangs over him for the rest of the film like a prophecy. The fact that Fergus spends much of the rest of the film attempting to either avoid the violence of the IRA himself, or protect others from it, is at odds with the traditional masculine sense of violence that may be expected from belonging to the IRA. In the essay, *Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade*, academic Chris Holmlund writes, 'both sexes masquerade in order to break down rigid gender bound dichotomies' (Holmlund,1992:2013). As the film continues, Fergus is as conflicted by his relationship with Dil as he is with his standing as a member of the IRA. He is concealing the fact he is a member of the IRA from Dil but he is also aware that the IRA are going to find him and kill him. He attempts undercover life for some time but the threat is always there. This culminates in the character of Jude, stalking him around London before breaking into his flat and pointing a gun in his face. 'Fuck me Fergus' (*The Crying Game*, 1992), she orders as though Fergus is

still under her command. The roles have reversed to some extent here, with Fergus having taken a submissive role and Jude, a dominant one. Although Fergus knows that violence is what he will be expected to carry out, he is conflicted because he knows that it will endanger the life of Dil. In the book, *Irish Film. The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema,* Martin McLoone writes of Jude, 'her character hardens (or is masculinised) as the narrative proceeds, in contrast to Fergus, who softens as he is feminised' (McLoone,2000:182). Taking the points of both Holmlund and McLoone, it can be argued that both Fergus and Jude are masquerading in the roles which fit into the stereotype that the IRA would expect. It is important to note that the violence is depicted as the moment that Fergus must choose. It is the catalyst that forces him to decide where his loyalties are. McLoone may be suggesting that Fergus has become feminised during the narrative, however looking back at the very start of the film, when he bonds with Jody, the viewer can see that Fergus is a considerate person and does not fit in with the stereotype of the violent, gun wielding terrorist. This essay argues that Fergus is masquerading. He is performing the role of the of the violent terrorist, even though at this point in the narrative, he is becoming increasingly disillusioned. One area that showcases his masculinity, pride and also the conflict he feels, is his relationship with the character of Dil.

The representation of transgender women in *The Crying Game* is controversial to say the least. Given the film was released in 1992, some herald it as a progressive film and ahead of its time, in that, it deals with complex issues of gender and sexuality in a way other films had not done previously, however the violence within the narrative directed at trans people cannot and should not be ignored. When the film was originally released in the UK the film was not a commercial success at the box office. It wasn't until the film was released in the USA that Miramax decided to

use the fact the film featured a twist as a marketing ploy and the audience numbers increased. In their essay, *The Crying Game*, Journalist Juliet Jacques, says, 'Dil's secret was crucial to the film's success in north America' (Jacques,2017:8). This twist was the fact that half-way through the narrative Dil is revealed to be a transgender woman, a fact upon discovering, Fergus reacts violently to, hitting her in the face and vomiting in the bathroom toilet. The scene is a culmination of the violence towards transgender women that the film depicts within the narrative and the stylisation.

When the character of Dil is first introduced to the viewer she is followed to the pub, *The Metro* by Fergus and it is not long before the first piece of violence is shown towards them at the hand of an ex-boyfriend called Dave (Ralph Brown). What the viewer sees is a domestically abusive relationship, the camera pans in on a heated argument and Dave being physically abusive towards Dil grabbing her arm and dragging her from the pub. In his essay, *The Representation of Domestic Violence in Popular English-Language Cinema* by Duncan Wheeler, he discusses the depiction of women in domestic violence situations as, 'roles of passive victimhood or active regeneration' (Wheeler, 2009:170). This is an interesting observation to make because, by the end of the film Dil has managed to be both the victim and gain some form of regeneration, when she shoots the character of Jude dead.

Throughout most of the film Dil is painted as a meek victim, to whom violence happens and she accepts this. When Dil suffers violence at the hands of Dave, she is rescued by Fergus and assumes that her luck will change. However, little changes. Throughout the script, there are lines that refer to Dil's status as a transgender woman, not least the following exchange between Fergus and his boss:

'Pat's got a tart' (Boss)

‘She’s not a tart’ (Fergus)

‘A woman then’ (Boss)

‘She’s not that either’ (Fergus). (*The Crying Game*, 1992).

This exchange is glossed over and Dil says nothing but wryly smiles. In the script Jordan has used lines of misplaced comedy to show that Fergus is uncomfortable with his feelings towards Dil. He cannot view her as the woman that she is and therefore resorts to violence in his language towards her because he cannot comprehend the emotions that he has. He continues this, ‘I kind of liked you as a girl’ (*The Crying Game,* 1992). The worst violence occurs when Fergus is about to sleep with Dil and discovers that she has a penis. In the famous scene Fergus violently slaps Dil and throws up in the bathroom – repulsed. He cannot comprehend his attraction. Of the scene, trans activist and author, Kate Bornstein, in their book, *Gender Outlaw. On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, describes the scene as, ‘an admission of attraction’ (Bornstein,1994:192). While that may be the case, it is an incredibly violent and transphobic scene. The fact that Fergus reacts so aggressively towards Dil when he discovers the truth shows that he is not at ease with his own sexuality and does not (at this point in the narrative) accept Dil as a woman. In addition, the conversation between Fergus and his boss takes place later, when Dil visits Fergus at work to apologise, ‘it’s the fault of yours truly’ (*The Crying Game*, 1992) she says. This promotes the narrative that Dil is somehow to blame for the violence used against her, suggesting she has deceived Fergus. Portraying Dil as someone who would accept this level of violence is psychologically disturbing. She exclaims after Fergus hits her, ‘It’s okay Jimmy, I can take it, just not on the face’ (*The Crying Game*, 1992), In the article, *On The Crying Game and that Scene,* Peter Piatkowski argues:

> ‘Because Dil wasn’t upfront about her biological sex, her act is framed as a lie, and so Fergus’ reaction—becoming violently ill, and just plain violent—is somehow justified. It’s the same form of trans panic used to excuse violence against hundreds of trans women’ (Piatkowski, 2017).

With that scene Jordan has created an undercurrent of violence, that perhaps he never intended. When speaking to the journalist, Tara Brady of *The Irish Times*, Stephen Rea commented on the relationship:

> ‘That scene when he’s protesting: ‘You’re a man, I can’t handle this’, and Dil says: ‘Kiss me before you go.’ And he does and it’s the most beautiful kiss in the world and he’s in love. That’s so absolutely beautiful’ (Brady, 2017).

It is perhaps strange that Rea would draw this conclusion as there are many scenes where Fergus, is violent towards Dil, verbally and physically.

When Fergus cuts Dil’s hair in order to protect her from being targeted by the IRA, it may seem like an act of love can also be read as an act of violence against Dil’s sense of self. As Fergus cuts her hair, she says, ‘I don’t recognise myself’ (*The Crying Game,* 1992). She has given up her very sense of identity for a man who has violently attacked her and dismissed her gender identity on numerous occasions. Dil’s only form of retribution is when she shoots and kills the character of Jude. Finally, she is not seen as a passive participant in the violence and casual transphobic threats from others around her. Although even the shooting is because she is obsessively in love with Fergus. This is shown when directly before the shooting scene, in fear that Fergus will leave her, she ties him to her bed. The violence that occurs is one of the most graphic scenes in the whole film. Dil aims the gun squarely at Jude, who she sees as a love rival and fellow captor of Jody. She shoots her with a precision and coldness that she has not possessed before. As she

lies on the floor, blood seeping from her wounds, Jude shouts, ‘you sick bitch’ (*The Crying Game*, 1992). It is at this moment that Jordan presents the two women as psychotic – pitted against each other. Violence here serves as Dil getting the revenge and the retribution for the violence that has coloured her life.

In conclusion the violence contained within *The Crying Game* is one element of a complex narrative, however it is central to the characters of Fergus and Dil. Violence coupled with love and obsession mix in an alarming way. For Fergus, violence offers a way to deal with his inner turmoil and for Dil it is a way of finally getting the happy ending she deserves.

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