
The Conflicted Self-Construction of the Actor-Director: Tim Roth's *The War Zone*

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In 1999, Tim Roth released *The War Zone*, adapted by Alexander Stuart from his 1989 novel of the same name.¹ Set in a remote house in the county of Devon in southern England, this grim and yet delicate film deals centres on a family recently arrived from London. In the course of the film the alienated teenager Tom (played by Freddie Cunliffe) finds a way of coming to terms with the sexual abuse perpetrated by his father (Ray Winstone, credited simply as 'Dad') on his teenage sister Jessie (Lara Belmont), while their mother (Tilda Swinton, credited as 'Mum') cares for a new-born baby girl, Alice — who, it is eventually suggested, may also have been abused. *The War Zone* thus tackles a topic which has only occasionally been dealt with in child-centered films. Visconti's *The Damned* (It/W. Germ, 1969), Polanski's *Chinatown* (USA, 1974), and Almodovar's *Bad Education* (Spain, 2004) are set in the adult world and examine the consequences of sexual abuse and incest, while contemporary independent films like Solondz's *Happiness* (USA, 1998), Hadzihalilovic's *Innocence* (Belg/Fr/UK/Jap, 2004), and Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (USA/Neth, 2004) have, as Vicky Lebeau has shown, explored the complicity with child abuse of the images circulated by consumer society.²

¹ Alexander Stuart, *The War Zone* [1989], Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 20th Anniversary edition, 2009. This edition contains an 'Introduction' by the author, both British and American versions of the book's opening chapter, some updating of the main text, together with an 'Afterword' by Tim Roth and Alexander Stuart's 'The *War Zone* Diary'.

² Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, London: Reaktion Books, 2008, pp. 119-34.

Like his friend and colleague Gary Oldman, whose first venture into screenwriting and directing, *Nil by Mouth*, had appeared in 1997, Roth decided to make a film more in line with the films for British television that had launched his career, Clarke's *Made in Britain* (UK, 1982) and Leigh's *Meantime* (UK, 1983), rather than the US indie movies in which he had performed in the 1990s; he even received funding from the same UK TV channel (Channel Four) that had produced Leigh's first TV film, *Meantime*. Although Roth's movie would be based, unlike Oldman's, on the adaptation of a novel and not a semi-autobiographical script, Stuart's novel echoed Roth's own story of sexual abuse. Like *Nil by Mouth*, *The War Zone* was well received critically after premiering at Sundance in January 1999. Like Oldman, however, Roth has yet to direct a second film, though he regularly mentions in interviews his intention to do so.

It can of course be argued that all creative figures — actors, composers, directors, musicians, painters, singers — construct themselves as artists, that is to say they invent a *persona* that embodies their views on their art and art in general. The specificity of the actor-director lies in the fact that the star has already established him/herself in the industry and in the audience's mind (and more importantly even, in her/his own), and must thus adjust to the pre-existing construct. In other words, the actor-director has 'baggage', and the fact that the new role features in the same industry and medium actually makes the venture more daring: in a sense, the actor should know more about movies than, say, poetry, painting or sculpture. This article offers an analysis of *The War Zone* and its paratexts in an attempt to determine how a highly successful actor like Roth managed, with just one film, to construct himself as a specific type of director with a particular view of cinema in mind. Attention will be paid to the adaptation process, to the film's narration, and finally to what the actor perceived as his main challenge: directing other actors.

The Adapter as *Auteur*

It was sheer coincidence that Tim Roth's agent drew his attention to Stuart's *The War Zone*, a novel that had been considered for adaptation by several notable British directors including Danny Boyle and Nicolas Roeg.³ But chance had very little to do with Roth's decision to commit to the project. The reasons Roth gave at the time were bound to his status both as a first-time film-maker and as an actor-turned-director: "*The commitment you have to make as a director is far greater than the commitment you have to make as an actor so the material you choose must be something that really matters, otherwise it's a waste of time. And that applies whether it matters in a dramatic piece or a comedy.*"⁴ Roth was also very much aware that directing *The War Zone* could prove to be a risky career move in terms of acting, not so much because the industry would hold a bad movie against him - nobody had done so in the case of Johnny Depp's *The Brave* (USA, 1997) - but simply because the time he spent

³ Andrew L. Urban, 'Roth, Tim: *The War Zone* – Be Careful What You Wish for', <http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=3698&Section=Interviews>, 15 June 2000. Stuart, 'The *War Zone* Diary', in Stuart, *The War Zone*, pp. 223-24.

⁴ Urban, 'Roth, Tim Roth: *The War Zone*'.

making the film would be time not spent acting, and thus time during which the industry could forget about him.⁵

In the initial stages, Roth insisted primarily on how intent he was, in professional terms, on being a bold and serious director. He did not reveal that he himself had been a victim of child abuse until he started on an eighteen-month promotional tour for *The War Zone*, and it was another seventeen years before he disclosed his abuser’s identity — his paternal grandfather.⁶ Roth was invited to screen and debate the movie by numerous child abuse victims’ associations.⁷ The first-time director was very invested in how audiences would react to the film, whether victims who could identify with the children or potential abusers: “*My hope in making the film is that I made a good piece of cinema. First of all, I’m not a counselor, I’m not a therapist. [...] All I can do is offer up what hopefully is an accurate portrayal . . . on [sic] what it feels like to be a victim . . . and also to be an abuser, probably.*”⁸ It appears clear, in retrospect, that Roth’s motivations were highly personal. If he did not claim to be a therapist, he seems to have believed in the therapeutic potential of the material and even says of the “*difficult*” conversations he had with audiences: “[...] *in the end it was cathartic. And I think a very good thing for me to do — as painful as it was.*”⁹

The adaptation process reflects how deeply personal Roth’s endeavour to appropriate the material was. Three of the most significant changes made to the novel’s diegesis reinforced the biographical connection between Roth and the source text. They were made from the outset when Roth first met author Alexander Stuart to talk about adapting the script and which are noted in Stuart’s ‘*War Zone Diary*’ between April and September 1996. The first concerns the setting. The film was shot in Bideford, North Devon — whereas the novel is set in the south of the county — a place where the Roth family had vacationed. Roth could have changed the setting merely for convenience’s sake because he knew the area well, but Stuart immediately was immediately alerted to the fact that that Roth’s memories of the place “*are not fond, and I can sense in Bideford some of the bleakness he remembers from his childhood.*”¹⁰ Roth’s later admissions indeed suggest that the family summer vacation spot was possibly also one of the prime locations for the abuse that he suffered. The change in time-setting — from summer to winter — reinforces the change in mood that Stuart’s first glimpse

⁵ Roth, ‘Afterword’, in Stuart, *The War Zone*, p. 220.

⁶ My earliest source is Philippe Azoury, ‘Dans *The War Zone*, Tim Roth, victime d’inceste, mue l’horreur en plaisir, puis culpabilise le spectateur. Dégoût et des douleurs. *The War Zone* de Tim Roth, avec Lara Belmont, Ray Winstone, Freddie Cunliffe, 1h39’, https://next.liberation.fr/culture/2000/01/26/dans-the-war-zone-tim-roth-victime-d-inceste-mue-l-horreur-en-plaisir-puis-culpabilise-le-spectateur_313386, 26 January 2000. Catherine Shoard, ‘Tim Roth: my father and I were abused by my grandfather’, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/dec/05/tim-roth-father-and-i-abused-by-grandfather-rillington-place>, 5 December 2016.

⁷ ‘Tim Roth Interview: Tim Roth dares to make his directorial debut with the disturbing sexual abuse drama *The War Zone*’, <http://www.contactmusic.com/tim-roth/timroth>, 7 January 2009.

⁸ ‘*The War Zone*: Tim Roth Interview’, <http://www.hollywood.com/general/the-war-zone-tim-roth-interview-57162873/>, 29 November 1999.

⁹ Urban, ‘Roth, Tim: *The War Zone*’.

¹⁰ Stuart, ‘*The War Zone Diary*’, p. 233.

of the dailies was only to confirm: “*I have never doubted what [Roth] wants to achieve with this film, but for the first time I start to worry that it is too dark, both literally and figuratively.*”¹¹

The second and most important modification affected the family’s social status: upper middle class in the novel, lower middle/working class in the film. Again, Stuart notes the biographical connection, but he also emphasises how problematic it is: “*I have always wanted the family to be middle-class because the cliché of abuse is of a working-class family, whereas it happens in every class [...] But it’s important to Tim, and I feel that he, more than anyone, has to be comfortable with the milieu of the film.*”¹² From Stuart’s perspective, Roth’s determination to reinforce the biographical comes at the expense of the politics of the representation of child abuse. But the modification also serves to position Roth within a certain tradition of British film-making, namely working-class realism.¹³ Roth repeatedly refers to Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and especially Alan Clarke as major influences, and Stuart admits he was thrilled that the rushes reminded him of the ‘kitchen sink realism’ of the late 1950s/early 1960s.¹⁴

A third notable change concerns the gender of the new baby: the boy in the novel becomes a girl in the film. In this case, it is Stuart who admits that the main justification for the choice of gender in the novel was biographical and that the change furthers the dramatic potential: “*in this case, the risk of Dad continuing the abuse with a new daughter raises all kinds of new horrors, both for Jessie and the audience.*”¹⁵ The glimpses of baby Alice’s bloody nappy — moments before the protagonist, Tom, who has discovered that his father is sexually abusing his sister Jessie, warns his mother not to trust Dad and to “*keep him away from the baby*” — have horrific implications which the film leaves unclarified [74:39-75:44].¹⁶ Yet this modification also ties in with Roth’s own experience, since he and his father were both abused by a grandfather.¹⁷

Along with the changing depiction of Tom’s encounter with Jessie’s London friend Carol, a fourth structural alteration to the novel radically affects its ending where the brother and sister duo is concerned. In the novel, Tom attacks his father but the latter survives, and Tom reconciles himself to their likely future negotiations; reinforcing her talent for carefree survival, and her dominance over Tom, Jessie takes herself off to the Caribbean, where she summons Tom. They end the novel together there, on the verge of sexual union and with Jessie’s aspiration to have a child. In the film, Tom takes refuge in the wartime lookout bunker on the cliffs where he witnessed his father’s abuse of his sister,

¹¹ Stuart, ‘The *War Zone* Diary’, p. 248.

¹² Stuart, ‘The *War Zone* Diary’, p. 229.

¹³ For more on this tradition see, Jim Leach, *British Film*, ch. 3, ‘The Common Touch: The Art of Being Realistic’, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 48-65, or John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema, 1956-1963*, London, BFI, 1986.

¹⁴ Stuart, ‘The *War Zone* Diary’, pp. 219, 226, 247. The novel harks back to the ‘angry young man’ tradition in British literature, theatre and film in the late Fifties and early Sixties; Jessie’s outburst — “*they like angry little bastards who want to nail everything down. I’ll tell you something, brother — despite all your anger*” (p. 144)— recalls the opening of the voice-over in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (Reisz, UK, 1960).

¹⁵ Stuart, ‘The *War Zone* Diary’, pp. 236.

¹⁶ Azoury, ‘Dans *The War Zone*, Tim Roth, victime d’inceste, mue l’horreur en plaisir’.

¹⁷ Shoard, ‘Tim Roth: my father and I were abused by my grandfather’.

and where she also resorted with her boyfriend Nick. He is joined there by Jessie, who cannot confirm if their father is still alive.

In *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, Thomas Leitch has shown that directors have tackled the practice of adaptation in a variety of ways in order to establish themselves as artists in their own right, by adapting writers of pulp fiction, as Alfred Hitchcock did, or “by taking on authors directly in open warfare”, as did Stanley Kubrick.¹⁸ If Roth and Stuart worked closely together and eventually became friends, adaptation was nonetheless a process where authorship was negotiated, as evidenced by Stuart’s immediate reactions to Roth’s proposed modification of Dad’s profession from architect to architectural salvager: “To some extent, this feels like another loss of authorship for me”.¹⁹ In his ‘Afterword’ to the novel, Roth defends a view of adaptation as fidelity not to the diegesis, not even to the novel’s spirit, but to the emotions he had felt as a reader: “I wanted to end up with a film that honored the book and honored the subject. The worst adaptation is a literal adaptation — somehow you must follow your instincts and be true to the sadness of it. I wanted the audience to receive the impact of the book in the same way I had.”²⁰

What is being adapted, Roth suggests, is his experience and interpretation. The adaptation process reveals the web of insecurities, both professional and personal, faced by the actor turned director, but it also reveals how the actor constructs himself as the director of a serious and personal film, and thus as a serious and personal director, an endeavour Stuart suspected to be conscious enough: “I wonder if for Tim there’s an element of acting the director — and when the actuality takes hold.”²¹ For in a way Roth the director is proceeding very much like an actor: the adaptation serves as a mask for the artist to tell a very personal story (after all, the abused is a daughter and not a son). This explains Roth’s contradictory injunction to Stuart to “Go back to the novel”²² even as Roth reinforces the biographical connection and, as we shall now see, alters the overall tone.

Directing a European Art Film

Roth was also very deliberate in his intention to establish himself as a director of European art cinema in the British realist tradition. In addition to the work of Clarke, Leigh and Loach, he cites director David Lean and painter J.M.W. Turner as influences for the pictorial treatment of landscapes, as well as Rembrandt’s treatment of bodies.²³ On seeing the first day’s rushes, Stuart compared the cinematography by Seamus McGarvey, who had previously worked on Michael Winterbottom’s breakthrough feature *Butterfly Kiss* (UK, 1995), to the films of Tarkovsky.²⁴ The soundtrack mainly comprises diegetic sounds, with very little ambient tones and a recurrent piano melody that recalls

¹⁸ Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From ‘Gone with the Wind’ to ‘The Passion of Christ’* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, p. 240.

¹⁹ Stuart, ‘The War Zone Diary’, p. 229.

²⁰ Roth, ‘Afterword’, p. 220. Here I nod to Colin MacCabe (ed.), *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

²¹ Stuart, ‘The War Zone Diary’, p. 246.

²² Roth, quoted in Stuart, ‘The War Zone Diary’, p. 229.

²³ Stuart, ‘The War Zone Diary’, pp. 229, 244.

²⁴ Stuart, ‘The War Zone Diary’, p. 246, and ‘Tim Roth Interview’.

the soundtracks of some of the films by Loach and Leigh — the more jovial scores of *Meantime* and *Riff-Raff* (Loach, UK, 1991) come to mind. The narration abides by the main tenets of art cinema narration as outlined by Bordwell, including a slow pace and lengthy shots, and aims at a combination of 'objective' and, as we shall see, 'subjective' realism.²⁵

No doubt the boldest resolution, coming from an actor known at the time for his eloquent roles in Leigh's *Made in Britain*, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (UK/USA, 1990), as well as in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* (USA, 1991 and 1994), was the decision to make the film primarily non-verbal; in this respect at least, it is closer to Roth's experiences with Leigh on *Meantime* and with James Gray on *Little Odessa* (USA, 1994). The director and screenwriter shared an early commitment to "play on looks and gestures as much as dialogue", Roth advising Stuart to consult scripts from the era of silent cinema to help him write the screenplay.²⁶ This decision constitutes the most radical departure from the first-person narration of the novel, in which Tom is a anguished, bleakly comic, and garrulous narrator, and it impacts the overall tone of the film (the change was immediately noted, upon watching the first dailies, by Stuart, who regretted the lack of humour.)²⁷ The novel leaves very little room for suggestion; Tom regularly tells us and other characters how he feels and even admits that he is easy to read.²⁸ The strength of the novel's narrative strategy, largely indebted to Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), lies in the way Tom's eloquence imposes a view of his sister Jessie as being just as criminal as Dad, and not as primary victim. Tom's making himself so legible makes Jessie all the more *difficult* to read, just as Humbert Humbert's seductive prose works to make the reader forget the horror of his acts.²⁹ Like Humbert, though no doubt less deliberately, Tom 'solipsises' his sister and thereby functions as a screen through which the reader can only struggle for a glimpse of the real Jessie.

The film's non-verbal approach, where the acoustic dimension is often supplied by Simon Boswell's gentle and sensitive score, is based on a very sophisticated play on gazes and bodies in space. From the start, the film takes on the spatial metaphor in the title in a more subtle fashion than the novel.³⁰ The tension is made pregnant in the staging. As early as the second scene [3:05-4:38, all timings taken from the DVD edition by Diaphana], Mum, Jessie, and Tom are in the living room in a long shot running for some thirty-eight seconds, Mom and Jessie lying down on a sofa to the left, Tom sitting in an armchair in the right mid-ground, separated from the two women by an empty floor. The silence is broken by Dad's arrival in a dark doorway in the left background, and the stillness of the camera is also disrupted, with a slight right-to-left pan. The subsequent shot of Mom and Jessie on the sofa emphasises the symmetry of their positions and, symbolically, in their relationship to Dad, who is taking off his shirt in the background; the interchangeability between Mum and Jessie is

²⁵ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 205-13.

²⁶ Stuart, 'The War Zone Diary', pp. 230-31.

²⁷ Stuart, 'The War Zone Diary', pp. 248-49.

²⁸ Stuart, *The War Zone*, p. 88.

²⁹ For more on perceiving the real Lolita beneath Humbert Humbert's solipsised fantasy, see Leland De la Durantaye, 'Lolita in *Lolita*, or the Garden, the Gate and the Critics', *Nabokov Studies* vol. 10, 2006, pp. 175-97.

³⁰ The semantic fields of 'war', 'fight' and 'game' are conspicuous in the novel (Stuart, *The War Zone*, pp. 30, 59, 81, 89); the family is a site of multiple conflicts between siblings on the one hand, and parents and children on the other.

immediately furthered when Jessie takes her mother's place as soon as she gets up to join Dad. The staging of the family insists on the spaces between them and materialises the idea that something has come between them; they are alienated from each other, but the silence and their attitudes remain inscrutable.

The sense of alienation, uncertainty, and expectation is reinforced by the play on gazes. In the establishing shot of the living room, Mom stares into emptiness, suggesting she is oblivious to the tension (she is asleep in the next scene); a frontal medium close-up of Tom confirms that he is the main character, as established during the opening credits when we follow him riding his bike; only Jessie glances at her mother, father, and brother, hinting at her position as the character who is 'in the know'. That gazes are problematic is reinforced by an uncertainty concerning the origin of the point-of-view. The rear shot of Mum and Dad at the kitchen sink is introduced by Jessie's looking over her shoulder at them; the slow zoom-in reinforces the impression that the camera is aligned with her gaze. And yet this view of Mum washing Dad's neck is followed by a reverse shot of Tom looking, coughing, and then looking up, thereby constructing him too as the source of the gaze. Tom's position is reinforced in the next scene [4:39-5:28], thanks to a reverse frontal medium shot of him sitting at the kitchen table looking at the family, the long shot of the living room now aligned with his gaze.

The repetition of the establishing shot of the living room, this time with Jessie sitting in the armchair, Dad negotiating on the phone in the left background, and Tom off-screen, reproduces the sense that there is something going on here. The repetition of the frontal wide-angle establishing shot of the house with its symmetrical (and thus normal) façade [2:16, 20:38, 39:53, 44:41, 76:08] functions in the same manner: the house, as a metonymy of the family, becomes a mask that conceals the horror. It becomes, as the film progresses, the double of the cliff-top bunker, a realist location gone Gothic (significantly, the last two shots of the house are set at night). The boxes on the floor suggest that they have just moved in, and we later learn that Tom is upset because he preferred life in London [19:40, 40:45]. (Again, this is much more explicit in the novel where the narrator complains about the move in the opening pages.) Mum and Dad seem close, the latter saying softly: "*Leave it, darling, I'll do that.*" Mum's waters breaking at the end of the scene may lead us to believe that the portentous atmosphere was merely a means to build up the suspense leading to this event and, more dramatically even, to the car accident as they hurry to hospital in the next scene [6:30].

Yet even after the birth, the narration continues to play on the distance and proximity between the characters' bodies, and the direction and objects of their gazes. When Dad lets Jessie and Tom in to meet their baby sister [8:44-9:51], the scene opens with a series of shot/reverse shots, with Dad singled out; the family is then briefly united in the same medium shot, but only briefly because Dad steps out of the hospital room with Jessie, who is again depicted as the one gazing at the other characters: her brother and mother, whose backs are turned and who thus ignore her as she exits with her father. In the beach scene that follows [9:52-10:45], Jessie, Dad and Tom are framed together in a very long shot, but Jessie steps away from the two men when they hug, leading the camera to pan to the right and upsetting the balance of the composition, an empty space now occupying its centre; the effect is reinforced by the use of a telephoto lens, which diminishes the sense of space afforded by the wide-angle establishing shot that opened the scene.

The establishing shot of the living room returns with a vengeance immediately after Tom witnesses something through the window; Dad is on the phone, while Mum and baby Alice occupy the centre of the room and the shot [20:51-22:43]. As in the second living room scene, Tom is clearly positioned as the source of the gaze. This time, however, it is not the identity of the gaze that is problematic, as was the case in the first scene; here, we follow Tom as he walks up to a lit window and peers in, and the return of the long shot is preceded by a frontal medium shot of Tom in the kitchen. It is the object of the gaze that remains uncertain. Unlike the novel where Tom the narrator immediately informs the reader of what he witnessed,³¹ the film withholds the anatomical details provided by the novel — *"In the instant I witness, as the first scrape of the front door takes effect, Jessie's hands are scooping water to pour over the part of him that bobs above the surface of the bath — a string-operated thing, his tackle, a horse's prick uglier and more fascinating and more threatening than I've ever seen it."* — thus building up the suspense, until the next scene in Jessie's bedroom where Tom tells his sister that he saw her in the bath with Dad [22:44-24:42].

There follows a conflict of gazes, the shot/reverse shots depicting Tom looking down at the floor, while Jessie looks boldly at him in spite of her nudity. (The scene where Tom confronts Jessie with the nude pictures of her he found represents an intensification of this scene, Tom now looming over his sister and raising his voice [37:35-39:06].) The fourth scene with the establishing shot of the living room inverts the positions of the third instance, with Dad rocking baby Alice in the middle of the room and Mum on the phone [46:22-48:30]. Tom is once again seated at the kitchen table watching, and the scene is edited in eyeline match. With our suspicions stronger than ever (at this stage neither Tom nor the audience have witnessed what goes on in the bunker), the apparent normalcy of the situation has become a mere smokescreen for the horrific secret hovering in the room, a curtain waiting to fall shortly after Dad exits. The same can be said of the fighting between the two siblings. It evolves from something gratuitous and playful in the early scenes [13:45-14:10] to more serious struggles caused by the revelation of the incest [30:45, 37:35].

The play on bodies and gazes culminates in the scene of sexual abuse [51:18-56:02]. The 'war zone' is now made literal, as the family secret is enacted in a wartime building. The shelter, which was explicitly designed for the film, has two perfectly symmetrical slit-like windows; it is personified like Edgar Poe's House of Usher, so that Tom's peering in through a crack is akin to peering into someone's mind. The bleak realism has made way for a quasi-Gothic space. The centrality of the gaze is reinforced by a *mise-en-abyme*, as Tom is determined to record the act on his camera. Significantly, the crime occurs in the dead centre of the room in a pool of white light, with two family members in close contact and surrounded by emptiness. The silence is broken only by Dad's whispers and Jessie's whimpers. The play on bodies and gazes is equally central to the staging of the act, directed by the abuser. Dad gazes down at his daughter as he undresses her, while she looks away twice. Sodomy is performed with Jessie on all fours, signifying both her submission and her father's refusal to position her like Mum and see her face, and thus to acknowledge her pain, agony and subjectivity during the act. It befalls Tom to be the one who gazes at his sister's plight, the shot/reverse shots depicting his face framed by the aperture and Jessie's crying face — even when Dad's face appears in the shot, it is turned away from Tom and is mostly in shadow.

³¹ Stuart, *The War Zone*, p. 23.

After the act, however, Dad leans against the window in the right background and turns his back on Jessie, while she remains sitting on the floor, looking down. The space between them signifies a complex of emotions, including pain, shame, and denial. The expression of unavowed emotions is, as the metaphor in the title suggests, transferred on to the environment in an instance of pathetic fallacy. The penultimate scene, where Tom stabs Dad, represents an attempt to abolish the secret and to bring it out into the open [84:12-86:39]. When Tom enters his parents’ bedroom, Dad is sitting alone on the bed in the darkness, looking down. The shot/reverse shots which follow dramatise the confrontation between the siblings and the father as a conflict in which each gaze signifies knowledge but where one character (Dad) clings to denial (unlike in the novel, where he confesses). Consequently, the chain of close-ups is broken only when Tom stabs his father, where the camera has pulled back for a wider shot involving all three characters, in which Tom occupies the space between Jessie and Dad, in other words when he bridges the space of denial, significantly at the very moment when Dad protests: “*You can’t keep saying these things, dar[ling]—*”.

Roth’s determination to make a serious art film in the British realist tradition is more than just a bias; it is an adaptation strategy. Through the play on bodies and looks, the film’s viewer is invited to pick up the signs and interpret them. In this sense, the narration not only evokes the haunting presence of a secret; it mimics the cognitive processes at work in Tom’s mind as he endeavours to make sense of what he witnesses. But if in the interviews included as DVD extras the cast and screenwriter claim that the film is told from Tom’s point of view, the film also makes room for glimpses of the other characters (Dad and especially Jessie) alone, and thus of what Tom does not see or fails to pick up (Jessie’s looks in the early scenes, but also her moments alone when her brother leaves her bedroom). Unlike the novel, the narration of the film thus grants direct access to Jessie, so that there can be no mistaking the fact that she is the victim. The film’s play on bodies and gazes thus fulfills a heuristic function: it is meant to teach audiences to look beyond the normalcy and identify the signs that something is wrong, and thus to possibly be alert to such signs in real life and to the fact that they are so easy to miss for anyone but the victims and the abusers. Of course, the film’s bleak tone — Roth and McGarvey deliberately aimed for “*a black and white film in colour*”³² — alerts us to the tension, which is confirmed by the increasingly Gothic undertones.

Directing Non-professional Actors

Roth’s biggest fear in directing *The War Zone* may come as a surprise. While he felt relatively confident in the technical knowledge he had picked up on studio sets over the years, and in his talent for composition, he repeatedly expressed anxiety over his ability to direct actors.³³ In this regard as well, he called on his mentor, Alan Clarke, for whom “*Directing has to be about communication*”.³⁴ Roth’s concern about directing actors was at least threefold. It implies a commitment to acting-based cinema that is resolutely aesthetic (again, the debt to Clarke, Leigh and Loach looms in the background). It suggests that the actor-director was particularly insecure about what he should have known the most

³² ‘Tim Roth Interview’.

³³ Stuart, ‘*The War Zone Diary*’, p. 221. See also ‘Tim Roth Interview’.

³⁴ Stuart, ‘*The War Zone Diary*’, p. 220.

about, and possibly that the professionals whose judgment he was most worried about were his peers, namely his stars, Tilda Swinton and Ray Winstone. All this was further complicated by the material and the casting of amateur teenage actors (Belmont was eighteen, Cunliffe seventeen, at the time of the shooting). Belmont, Cunliffe and their parents had read the script early on, and a psychologist and counselor were on the set as chaperones. Cast and crew were determined not to "scar" the teenagers; Stuart noted, "*With Lara and Freddie in mind, Tim and Dixie [Dixie Linder, co-producer with Sarah Radclyffe] have deliberately assembled a crew who are as friendly and positive as possible — in Tim's words, people the kids would want to hug, if necessary.*"³⁵

Casting non-professional actors is a clear aesthetic choice in keeping with the realist tradition. Roth wanted teenagers whose physiques and behaviour would be a natural fit for the characters. Stuart immediately approved Roth's casting choices when he received the early screen tests: "*Lara Belmont, as Jessie, has the perfect mix of really interesting beauty (as opposed to simply glamour), vulnerability and strength that her character needs, and Freddie Cunliffe has the nervous smile, the awkwardness, and what looks like a totally believable potential for trouble, that immediately brings Tom alive for me.*"³⁶ Above all, Roth wanted Jessie and Tom to be portrayed by actors without 'baggage', in other words, by actors deprived of a "star image" — comprising "media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films and criticism and commentaries"³⁷ — something that the young Roth had brought to his role in *Made in Britain*: "*If we were thinking 'oh, they were terrific in this film, or in that episode of this', then we would not be looking at the kids. It would take out the element that they could possibly be our children, and it would be a barrier between the audience and the film.*"³⁸

Roth had no such qualms, however, when it came to casting the parents, as the choice of two famous British actors goes against this principle. It could even be argued that Winstone was typecast— he joked to Roth that "*he wanted to play the part because he's always playing abusers, and 'it would be nice to play a good guy for a change!'*"³⁹ Yet Roth's contradictory injunction can be explained in much the same way as his instructions to Stuart when adapting the novel: Swinton and Winstone provide the "barrier", the distance, to remind viewers that what we are witnessing remains, in the end, fiction, albeit of the realist kind. Most pressingly, the presence of an actor famous for his roles in two versions of Alan Clarke's *Scum* (UK, 1979 and 1991), Loach's *Ladybird, Ladybird* (UK, 1994) and *Nil by Mouth*, draws attention to the fact that the sexual abuse scene is of course simulated; it may thus temper our distress at witnessing the agony endured by Jessie and Belmont, who may be confused in our minds.⁴⁰ Casting Winstone does more than just inscribe *The War Zone* in the British realist

³⁵ Stuart, 'The *War Zone* Diary', p. 241.

³⁶ Stuart, 'The *War Zone* Diary', p. 240.

³⁷ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London: BFI, 1998, p. 60.

³⁸ Larry Getlen, 'Tim Roth's *War Zone* [sic]', <https://www.moviemaker.com/tim-roth-war-zone-20080201/>, 1 February 2008.

³⁹ Stuart, 'The *War Zone* Diary', p. 243.

⁴⁰ Reviewer Gilbert Adair was profoundly shocked by the scene because of the actress's ordeal: "*What is shocking – to me – is the fact that an adolescent actress was obliged to strip, hunker down on all fours and let a middle-aged actor (who, of course, remains clothed throughout) rub his groin suggestively against her buttocks.*"

tradition; it serves as a reminder that realism is also a mode or a genre and acts as a safeguard for the audience, as it probably did for the amateur actors as well.

The interviews all insist on the sensitivity of the subject-matter and not on the difficulty of directing non-professional actors *per se*. In the course of two weeks of rehearsal, Belmont and Cunliffe comment, in the interviews included in the DVD release, on how Roth talked them through the emotions of the scenes — something corroborated by Roth, notably when the latter describes shooting the sexual abuse scene⁴¹ — while, in a DVD extra, Winstone recalls a discussion in which he and Roth were envious of Belmont and Cunliffe’s “*naturalness*”: “*That’s just a natural thing. I think the problem is once you start learning something, you know, then you start to lose that naturalness and then you need to learn how to get it back again, you know. But — they’re tremendous.*” As an actor, Roth has always been fairly reluctant to talk about acting techniques and has expressed disregard for the Method and even training in general; he generally refuses to audition for roles and was famously tricked by Tarantino into a drunken one for his part in *Reservoir Dogs*.⁴² Roth does, however, research his roles, although he doesn’t believe it to be as essential as some think.⁴³

Roth’s portrayal of Colin in *Meantime*, for instance, is largely naturalistic. His constant looking down suggests his insecurity, broken only by sidelong glances. His low voice, heavy breathing, open mouth, slouching posture — all indicate that he is the ‘slow’ brother compared to Phil Daniels’s energetic Mark (and even more so compared to Gary Oldman’s acrobatic Coxy). The film even associates the three characters with specific animals: the frog (Colin), the jumpy bird (Coxy), and the mad dog (Mark). Roth’s performance occasionally taps into the histrionics associated with silent cinema. He pants out of excitement because Colin is near Mavis, the girl he desires. Like Brando or Dean, Roth busies himself with his hands (sticking a cap in his mouth, toying with a stick, playing with his sweater, fondling an arm-rest), chews food while the family is watching TV, and invents facial tics for his character (a twitching mouth), yet in *Meantime*, such gestures are, above all, symptomatic of Colin’s psychological condition. Roth’s performance is peppered by seemingly random, almost inconsistent gestures — such as when he kicks the washing machine — yet they are ultimately integrated into the character arc. Indeed, Roth orchestrates a *crescendo* according to which Colin, by the end of the film, builds up enough confidence to speak up and order his parents out of the brothers’

Adair, ‘Film: It Should Never Have Been Made’, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/film-it-should-never-have-been-made-1116498.html> independent.co.uk, 5 September 1999.

⁴¹ ‘Tim Roth Interview’.

⁴² See Edward Guthmann, ‘Tim Roth -- An Oddly Happy Bloke / British actor starring in independent *Little Odessa*’, <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Tim-Roth-An-Oddly-Happy-Bloke-British-actor-3031938.php>, 28 May 1995; Dina Gachman, ‘Tim Roth to Share Life Lessons in Acting Today’, <https://dailybruin.com/1996/02/01/tim-roth-to-share-life-lessons/>, 6 January 1996, and Conner Schewerdtfeger, ‘How Quentin Tarantino Convinced Tim Roth to Audition for *Reservoir Dogs*’, <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/1708880/how-quentin-tarantino-convinced-tim-roth-to-audition-for-reservoir-dogs>, 29 September 2017.

⁴³ Nick Roddick, ‘Why Tim Roth thinks we all should have the right to die’, <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/film/why-tim-roth-thinks-we-all-should-have-the-right-to-die-a2947741.html>, 15 September 2015. See also Roy Carroll, ‘Tim Roth: “If you neglect the working class for so long, they will rebel against you”’, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/dec/04/tim-roth-if-you-neglect-working-class-for-so-long-they-will-rebel-against-you>, 4 December 2016.

bedroom. Like many contemporary actors, as Christian Viviani has shown⁴⁴, Roth tends to mix techniques and favour spontaneity. This, I now want to demonstrate, is what he seems to have passed on to Cunliffe and Belmont.

Cunliffe’s performance, like Roth’s in *Meantime* and *Little Odessa*, is predominantly monotonous. He walks slowly with a slight slouch, his unease with his body suggesting a lack of self-confidence; he is often looking down, and his gait and posture are highlighted by his clothing, most of the time an open hoodie with a loose T-shirt underneath. His face is by and large inexpressive regardless of the situation: when he steps out of the car after the accident [7:54], meets his baby sister Alice [9:28], talks to Lucy, to whom he is attracted [17:40], finds the nude polaroids of Jessie with Dad [38:38], confronts his sister after the bunker scene [59:50], tells Mom not to trust Dad at the hospital [74:04], and tells the latter he hates him [77:35].

Aesthetically speaking, Cunliffe’s low-key acting has two effects. First, his inexpressive face invites the viewer to speculate about his thoughts and emotions. In tandem with the play on gazes studied above, his blank look goes from expressing something like an average teenager’s annoyance (with his family, with the house-move), to bewilderment and disgust, and finally to accusatory anger; his look, like the situation as a whole, becomes increasingly readable as the narrative progresses, and is thus part and parcel of the film’s heuristic strategy. Second, his restrained acting endows the slightest variation with a heightened dramatic impact, rendering more salient the two instances where his expressionless demeanour breaks down and he cries [37:46, 87:08].

Cunliffe taps into a variety of techniques in order to create these slight disruptions. On three occasions, he busies himself with his hands — fiddling with a wine glass [5:08], holding a cigarette [37:12], and clasping them [59:04] — in typical ‘Method’ fashion. Cunliffe also resorts to muted histrionics in order to express the brutal emotions that overtake Tom. Two gestures in particular are utilised: Cunliffe turns away from the incestuous acts he witnesses in the bathroom (his mouth is even slightly parted) [20:55] and in the bunker [52:47] to express shock, and crosses his arms to evoke contained anger while observing his normal family [45:08], studying Jessie after she has been abused [58:09], and confronting his father with his crimes at the end [76:47, 84:15].

Finally, spontaneity is emphasised when Cunliffe coughs in the first medium close-up of Tom, then shakes his head once [4:22], shifts in his seat when criticising Devon [19:47], does an Indian war whoop [37:28], and when his mouth twitches when Jessie asks him if he likes Lucy [29 22] and when he burns his sister’s breast [60:34]. These gestures are not eminently readable (unlike histrionics) and do not become so through iteration (unlike Method acting techniques); they do contribute, however, to the construction of Tom as a specific individual (and in the case of the war whoop reinforce the metaphor in the title) and have a jarring effect that breaks the monotonous performance — which is sometimes reinforced by the editing, cuts occurring immediately after (the cough) or before (the war whoop). Cunliffe’s performance, like Roth’s in *Meantime*, builds up to a climax — in the form of a parent-sibling confrontation—that leaves Cunliffe slouching, head bowed, and crying in the bunker, expressing both Tom’s introverted personality and his torment [87:08].

⁴⁴ Christian Viviani, *Le Magique et le vrai: L’Acteur de cinéma, sujet et objet*, Aix-en-Provence: Rouge Profond, 2015, p. 157.

As in *Meantime* and *Little Odessa*, the rift between two siblings is dramatised by contrasting a minimalist actor (Roth in *Meantime* and *Little Odessa*, Cunliffe in *The War Zone*) and a more energetic and/or effusive actor (Phil Daniels in *Meantime*, Edward Furlong in *Little Odessa*, Belmont in *The War Zone*). In the first confrontation scene between Tom and Jessie, the play on gazes (Cunliffe looking down, Belmont looking right at him) is reinforced by their postures (Cunliffe is hunched on himself, looking down) and costumes (though indoors, Cunliffe is still wearing his hoodie with the hood up, like Roth’s Colin in the final scenes of *Meantime*), opposing Jessie’s apparent confidence to Tom’s lack of it [22:44-24:42]. The second, as we have seen, is the one where Tom fights with Jessie on her bed, with both actors’ teary-eyed [37:35-39:16].

The power dynamic between the siblings evolves, however, as Tom’s knowledge increases. Subsequent scenes of confrontation depict Jessie in tears faced with her brother’s cold attitude. Such contrasts are dramatised through the shot/reverse shot technique [58:50-61:54] or analytical editing in the final confrontation with Dad [76:26-78:00; 84:12-86:39]; the frontal two-shot of Jessie and Tom in the car on the way back from the hospital in particular allows us to see the effect Tom’s harsh words have on his sister, which he can’t see since he’s sitting in the back seat [71:22-72:13]. With Jessie’s anguish increasingly visible, the contrast between Belmont’s and Cunliffe’s performances participates in both the adaptation and the heuristic strategy, the film leaving no doubt as to the identity of the abuser.

Roth’s endeavours to establish himself as a director with *The War Zone* is further proof, if need be, of the cultural capital attached to film at the turn of the century and to the people credited with making them. Clearly, the value attributed to the director testifies to the impact film awards, fandom, film criticism and film scholarship has had on the perception of film. A director is potentially an artist, an *auteur*, the conductor of a wonderful object called film, and thus a thing to be. But with enhanced value comes a host of responsibilities and fears, evidenced in some of the contradictory injunctions Roth made to Stuart. With *The War Zone*, the actor-director turned to his models and sought to inscribe himself in a tradition of European art cinema and British realism.

Like Johnny Depp with *The Brave*, Gary Oldman with *Nil by Mouth*, Steve Buscemi with *Trees Lounge* (USA, 1996), and Sarah Polley with *Away from Her* and *Stories We Tell* (Canada/UK/USA, 2006 and Canada, 2012), he sought to assert himself as a serious director of independent acting-based art films revolving around important topics that he knew something about. Roth’s adaptation of Stuart’s novel is thus an exercise in fidelity not so much to the source text as to the source of the film, that is to the director’s experience as an actor, a reader, and an abused child. With his mentors in mind, Roth attempted to pass on a personal view of acting that taps into a mix of techniques and traditions, and to orchestrate the energies of his actors into emotional contrasts.

The film’s main achievement, I would argue, has to do with its heuristic strategy and the way it adapts Stuart’s Nabokovian narration: the naturalistic acting and play on gazes (as constructed through camerawork and editing), by instilling a sense of suspense, aim to incite the viewer to be alert to the dark secrets lurking underneath the veneer of normalcy. The film is thus an exercise in analysis and interpretation, one that calls on an active spectator, but its strategy has real-world implications: its realism is meant to encourage us to pay heed to the signs surrounding us, where gestures and events are not as coded and dramatised. For all its realism, the film nonetheless maintains distance

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for both audiences (through the casting of Swinton and Winstone, and more generally its allegiance to the realist genre or mode) and even for Roth (by depicting female victims). Roth may not be a therapist or a counsellor, as he said in the interview cited above, but his fiction film does have a pedagogical and a moral intent: it warns us — nay, it implores us — to keep our eyes peeled, and to prick up our ears.