

Xavier Dzielski situates his analysis between director Neil Jordan's treatment of Irish Nationalism and trans identity. He examines many challenges facing the characters in the film *The Crying Game*. Written in Megan Shea's "Writing Art in the World," Dzielski navigates between vivid description and careful analysis to show his readers a way of grappling with multiple perspectives.*

LAYERS

Xavier Patrick Dzielski

Fergus and Dil are about to have sex for the first time. It's just over an hour into Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*, and the burgeoning relationship between the two has finally come to a head in Dil's bedroom. The romantic tension is at its peak, and the anticipation is rife; it's been a long journey to reach this point. After a sensual haircut, a few flirty excursions at the Metro Bar, and some steamy late-night encounters, Dil and Fergus are finally reaching the pinnacle of their intimacy. Fergus, though, drowning in guilt over the role he played in the death of Dil's previous boyfriend, Jody, can't help asking Dil about him. "I'm thinkin' of your man," he tells her; "I'm wondering why you keep his things," he says, looking at Jody's old cricket uniform hanging in her apartment. Jody's ghost has haunted Fergus since his death, in eerie visions and dreams, but Dil is blissfully unaware of all this. She doesn't know Fergus's past, as the IRA man who was involved in the events that lead to Jody's death. She only knows him as Jimmy, his alias.

As the sexual tension in the scene builds, the camera pans and dollies to follow Dil and Fergus around the room, moving gracefully, fluidly. Reds, pinks, and magentas bathe the set, creating a warm and romantic mood. The *mise-en-scène*—Dil's pink bed sheets, her red and feminine decor—expresses her romantic appeal, satisfying all the clichés of a beautiful young woman's apartment. Dil herself is wearing a fiery red dress, and even after she changes, she is scantily draped in

a scarlet robe. She glows in the light of the room, the glare reflecting off of her skin, heightening her allure; Fergus is captivated by Dil and her ethereal glow. The anticipation is palpable; the music swells as Fergus moves in to kiss and caress her. He tenderly slips off her robe, and the romantic leitmotif of the film comes to a crescendo, but it's abruptly cut short as the camera tilts down to capture her genitalia: a penis and testicles.

Fergus is dumbfounded.

"You did know, didn't you?" Dil asks.

No, he didn't, and neither did we, the equally dumbfounded viewers.

Let's rewind just over an hour to the beginning of *The Crying Game*. Written and directed by Neil Jordan in 1992, the film stars Stephen Rea and Miranda Richardson as IRA members Fergus and Jude, along with Forest Whitaker as Jody, a British soldier. It begins in Northern Ireland, where Fergus, Jude, and their IRA cell kidnap Jody. Fergus, who's been ordered to watch over and eventually execute the captive, makes the mistake of befriending him. At the last minute Jody makes a run for it, and in a cruel dramatic twist he makes it out onto the road only to be hit and killed by a truck driven by a troop of British soldiers who've come to rescue him.

Initially, *The Crying Game* situates itself within the dangerous and violent world of the Irish Republican Army, but what follows this first act is a polar opposite second act that turns the film into a romantic and heartfelt love story between Fergus and Dil, albeit one with a twist. The last third of the film witnesses these two movements—of political activism and its consequences, and emotional entanglement—collide in a dramatic and suspenseful final act. All of these tonal shifts and plot twists may confuse the viewer. Is it an action movie? A love story? In addition, these shifts and twists also throw the film's protagonist, Fergus, through the emotional wringer, thrusting him into psychological turmoil and moral crises left and right. Through Fergus, *The Crying Game* explores the mechanics of political and personal identity in an attempt to strip away the external layers of a character and reveal the true nature of the person lying beneath.

When we first meet Fergus, he's operating in an Irish Republican Army cell, carrying out attacks against the British troops occupying

Northern Ireland. This conflict stems from the age of English Imperialism, during which the British Crown forcibly held Ireland as a colony for several centuries. By the early 1900s, guerrilla groups and freedom fighters won independence for the southern two thirds of the island, resulting in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which eventually established the modern-day Republic of Ireland. Unfortunately, parts of the northern province of Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom, to the dismay of many Irish nationalists living there. Groups of these nationalists, banded together under the name of the IRA, have continued to fight for autonomy against the British occupation forces in the region.

Drawn to the group by his love of country and sense of national duty, Fergus fights in the IRA for all the same reasons that his comrades do: patriotism and the defiance of British rule. And yet, Fergus also feels inherently conflicted about his participation. He struggles with the act of killing Jody, who can clearly tell that killing is not in his nature. To demonstrate this, Jody tells Fergus an allegory about a kind frog who shepherds a scorpion across a river. The scorpion, because it is in his nature, is unable to resist stinging the frog, a senseless act that drowns them both. Correspondingly, Fergus, the “kind man,” as Jody calls him, is powerless to turn away from his sympathetic and compassionate nature: bound by it, he is ultimately unable to shoot Jody when the time comes, despite his orders.

The Crying Game reached critical acclaim in the United States, garnering six Academy Award nominations and winning Jordan the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. Conversely, it flopped in Ireland and the United Kingdom, receiving much disapproval, particularly for its treatment of the IRA and the situation in Northern Ireland. The film’s co-producer Stephen Woolley speculates that this is because audiences and the mainstream media had trouble accepting “the notion of an IRA terrorist who has a conscience” (Cormack 166). This is not surprising, given the tired stalemate that had been reached by the early 1990s. After relentless attacks—kidnappings, public bombings—the IRA was quickly losing support from people in all areas of the UK and Ireland, particularly after their operations began claiming the lives of innocents (Darnton).

However, some Irish film critics take issue with Irish directors—like Jordan—who seem to boil down the complexity of the Irish Troubles in order to appease the film industry and its consumerist audiences (Cormack 167). To them, *The Crying Game* doesn't go far enough in exploring the Irish-English conflict: it simplifies the issues at hand in order to focus the film's narrative on Fergus's journey. In light of this, one notices that the film, even though it concerns itself with the Irish-English conflict, hardly ever shows any concrete example of it. *The Crying Game* does not contextualize the nuanced political details, but rather ruminates on the captor-captive dynamics of Fergus and Jody, and the IRA's violent actions. Jody is presented to the audience as a wholly innocent character, completely unrepresentative of the British Army in which he serves. A later, separate target of the IRA is referred to as "some judge," without any context of the judge's role in the conflict. This narrative simplicity provides a stronger moral contrast between the compassionate Fergus and the violent IRA. Stephen Rea also disagreed with the film's portrayal of IRA soldiers. In interviews, he stated that some of the actors playing IRA members, Miranda Richardson in particular, heightened the callousness and brutality of the group. In doing so, he noted that they provided one-dimensional and stereotypical interpretations that, in effect, stigmatized Irish Republicans and presented them only as hostile extremists (Cormack 173).

Fleeing the IRA after Jody's death, Fergus, under the alias "Jimmy," embarks on a self-imposed exile in London. There, he's haunted by visions of Jody, who appears in a subjective dream world, running towards the camera in his cricket uniform, glowing in a ghostly light. Fergus soon finds Jody's former lover, Dil, played by Jaye Davidson, and begins a romantic relationship with her. She cuts his hair, they meet for drinks at the Metro Bar, he listens to her sing renditions of Dave Berry's "The Crying Game," and the two steadily grow closer through the movie's smartly crafted dialogue.

The film's story is propelled forward by the nuances of its intertwining character relationships. Richard Haslam, in his essay "Neil Jordan and the ABC of Narratology," asserts that Jordan uses "ABC character triangulations"—narrative structures built around three primary characters—in his films to create drama and narrative momen-

tum (Haslam 37). Following Haslam's argument, one can easily locate the primary triad in *The Crying Game*: Jody, Dil, and Fergus. Jody, person A, and Dil, person B, comprise one side of the triangle. However, the introduction of Fergus, person C, draws Dil's affections after Jody's death. Dil still loves Jody, even in mourning, but begins to fall for Fergus as he falls in love with her. Meanwhile, Fergus's relationship with Jody becomes incredibly complex: Fergus is dogged by Jody's memory, and he feels a keen desire for redemption or atonement for his involvement in Jody's death. Jody's specter hangs over Fergus and Dil's relationship in Fergus's recurring visions and urge to constantly question Dil about him (recall that spicy love scene first mentioned). He even retains a pseudo-physical presence: Jody's clothes hang in Dil's apartment while she and Fergus become intimate, and photos of Jody are strewn about the room, almost as if he's watching Fergus and Dil from afar. Of course, the triangle is redefined when Fergus realizes that Dil is a transgender woman, shocking and confusing him, while also completely upending his understanding of Jody.

Sensibly, the producers of *The Crying Game* "pleaded with reviewers not to reveal important plot twists" upon its release at the New York Film Festival (Canby). The belated revelation that Dil is a transgender woman creates the same shock and confusion for the audience as it does for Fergus. We, like him, reevaluate our understandings of Dil and Jody, and Fergus's relationship with the both of them. As viewers, we reevaluate the whole film. *The Crying Game*, which began as a love story between a former terrorist and a London hairdresser, has suddenly become not only an exploration of Irish-English politics and national identity, but also a foray into gender identity and queer relationships.

In an interview with film critic Marina Burke, Jordan has drawn parallels between moral choices and gender identity, explaining that Fergus "only survives . . . by taking on what you would think of as feminine virtues . . . [being] more understanding, compassionate" (Cormack 171). He is unable to stay in the violently masculine world of the IRA and thus flees to London, becoming wrapped up in Dil's quiet and feminine domesticity. Dil is a character who—perhaps unrealistically—is so politically naïve that she does not fully under-

stand the circumstances that lead to Jody's death, or even recognize Fergus's accent as Irish (she thinks he's Scottish). Contrarily, Fergus's former IRA comrade and ex-lover Jude returns at the beginning of the third act seeming to have fully embraced an oppositely virile morality. Brutally taunting Fergus with his guilt over the events of Jody's death in the first act, she threatens Dil's safety in an attempt to coerce him into joining another IRA operation in London: the assassination of a judge. She throws his past sense of political responsibility in his face, saying, "You're never out, Fergus."

Fergus takes drastic measures to hide Dil from Jude. He leads her back to the hair salon where they first met, asking her whether or not she would do anything for him. She says yes. He sits her down in one of the chairs. The camera dollies backward to frame them against the windows. Bright moonlight floods in from behind the blinds, reducing the pair of them to silhouettes. Fergus reaches for the scissors and grabs a lock of Dil's hair but she violently spins around as a match on action sharply cuts to her face.

"No way," she growls, as the moonlight glows off of her profile.

"I want to change you to a man," Fergus says; "It's a secret," he tells her when she asks him why.

"Would you like me better that way, Jimmy?" she wonders, the hurt evident in her voice.

"Yes," he replies.

She spins back around as Fergus continues to cut her hair and the leitmotif of the film returns. The halo around her skin recreates the ethereal quality that she's had in previous scenes, the same as Jody in Fergus's visions of him. "You want to make me like him," she cries out, referencing Jody. Despite Fergus's denial of this, saying that he wants to make her into "something new nobody recognizes," it becomes all too true when they return to Dil's apartment. As the two of them walk through the light beams flooding into the flat, they each glow and shimmer. Slipping into drunken maelstrom, she kisses and caresses Fergus, but his mind is elsewhere. He lays Dil down on the bed and then begins to dress her in Jody's cricket uniform.

Apart from reminding the viewer of his suspicious preoccupation with Jody, this seems an uncharacteristically cruel act for a "kind man" like Fergus. He forces Dil to appear male, much to her dismay, going

so far as to tell her that he will love her all the more for it. Jack Halberstam, in his book *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, claims that Fergus's transformation of Dil into a man "unmasks her and serves to protect Fergus from his own desires," attempting to reconcile Dil's gender status with his own feelings towards her (82). Because Fergus is not at all prepared to accept her as a woman—repeatedly bringing up her alleged deceit—Halberstam argues that Fergus's attempt to transform Dil into a man, though under the guise of hiding her from Jude and the other IRA members who would do her harm, is really to satisfy his own limited understanding of gender and normativity.

Citing the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, written and directed by Kimberly Peirce, Halberstam moves to discuss a film that he believes successfully establishes a "transgender gaze," or a depiction of a transgender character that legitimizes the character's status as a member of the target gender (83). The film is an adaptation of the real-life story of Brandon Teena, a transgender man from Nebraska who, in 1993, was discovered and outed as transgender, then raped and murdered in a transphobic hate-crime. Unlike *The Crying Game*, which focuses on Fergus, a cisgender man, and his experiences with a transgender woman, *Boys Don't Cry* concerns itself primarily with a transgender man and his attempt to gain recognition and validation as such. Halberstam posits that the latter film's success in creating a transgender gaze lies in the workings of the relationship between Brandon and his lover, Lana. Lana does not associate Brandon's gender with his genitalia; moreover, she refuses to recognize his genitalia at all, even when violently confronted with it by her family and friends (if you can call them that), who denounce Brandon as "sick," a "faggot," and a "dyke." In doing so, the film rejects the "compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre" and allows Lana and Brandon's relationship to remain undefined by sexual organs, as Halberstam believes is so clearly the case in *The Crying Game* (86).

In fact, both films present scenes just over halfway through in which transgender issues are very bluntly and explicitly confronted: the revelation scene in Dil's apartment in *The Crying Game*, and the forceful scrutinizing and shaming of Brandon in Lana's bathroom in *Boys Don't Cry*. In both instances, the cisgender lovers are faced with

their partner's genitalia, which is contrary to the gender that their partners identify with. The difference in these scenes is while Lana refuses to see Brandon's female organs (thus preserving his masculinity), Fergus can only see Dil's male organs (rejecting her femininity). Upon this discovery, Dil tries to console Fergus. He pushes her away, hitting her in the face and running to her bathroom, puking into the sink from the overpowering shock.

Halberstam concludes that Fergus's failure to accept Dil as a woman imprints upon *The Crying Game* a generic perspective that transgender people are inherently tragic characters. But he's forgetting the third angle of that narrative triad: Jody. With Fergus's clear substitution of Dil for Jody, Neil Jordan has very self-consciously called attention to their connection in Fergus's mind. Dil serves as the conduit for Fergus's redemption; he is figuratively and literally given another chance to save someone he cares about from the violence of his past. Through this, he can achieve salvation and rescue a vessel of Jody's memory, fully realizing the A-C length of the Jody-Dil-Fergus triangle. Fergus's substitution of Jody—in a redemptive context—is again highlighted in a later scene when he finds Dil, drunkenly walking back to her apartment. As she comes out of the shadows, walking towards the camera, wearing Jody's cricket uniform and ethereally glowing—just as Jody did in Fergus's visions—Fergus runs to protect her, knowing that if Jude or the other IRA members see her and realize who she is, her life will be in danger again.

As he ushers her back into her bedroom, he comes clean, telling Dil that he's the one responsible for Jody's death. To Fergus's dismay (as he's crying out to be punished for his actions), this news doesn't seem to phase her much. Instead, what breaks Dil's heart the most is that Fergus can't love her the way she wants him to. He is unable to move past her being trans. This bubbles to the surface the next morning when Dil ties Fergus to the bed and orders him to say that he loves her, all while pointing a gun at his head. When Jude comes into the scene, Dil's biological insecurities as a woman are only reinforced when she realizes that Jude helped lure Jody into the IRA trap by sexually seducing him with "her tits and her cute little ass." Knowing that she can't be perfect enough for Fergus or Jody, Dil's rage boils over, and she shoots Jude to death. Still furious, Dil turns the gun on

Fergus, but stops. Jody won't let her kill him, she says; the bonds the three of them share are too strong.

But while Fergus may not be able to rekindle the love he once held for Dil, he is certainly more than willing to sacrifice himself for her by taking the fall for Jude's murder. In doing so, he commits himself to nearly seven years in prison. But no matter, he's content to protect someone that he still cares about, regardless of the incredibly complex past they share. At the end of the day, when the layers of political pressure and emotional tension are peeled back, that's what a kind person will do: sacrifice themselves to spare another person suffering. He explains this to Dil when she comes to visit him in prison. "As a man said, it's in my nature," he tells her, repeating and affirming Jody's assessment of him from so long ago.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dil asks him, sporting a new feminine haircut and pink-bejeweled earrings. As Fergus leans in closer to the glass that separates them, he begins to tell Dil a story about a scorpion and a frog.

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