THE BUTCHER BOY (1998)

by

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Directed by Neil Jordan. Written by Neil Jordan and Patrick McCabe from a novel by Patrick McCabe. Cinematography by Adrian Biddle. Distributed by Warner Bros., 1998.

SUMMARY

In the small Irish town of Cavan in the 1960s, we follow several years in the life of 12-year-old Francie Brady (Eamonn Owens). His musician father (Stephen Rea) is an alcoholic and his mother (Aisling O'Sullivan), depressive, compulsive, and suicidal, is always on the verge of collapse. Francie must look outside the family for both support and a way to organize his young life. His solace lies in his boyhood friendship with Joey (Alan Boyle) and, as his circumstances become more desperate, this relationship begins to preoccupy his life. He also believes that the source of all his and his family's woes is the snobbish Anglophile Mrs. Nugent (Fiona Shaw). When Joe succumbs to parental pressure, becoming an obedient mamma's boy and denying Francie, he becomes violent and winds up in a religious boarding school where he is sexually abused and has visions of the Blessed Virgin (Sinead O'Connor). Both his mother and father die. Released, he gets a job as a butcher's boy helping slaughter pigs. He once again makes an attempt to renew his friendship with Joey but is brutally rebuffed. He murders Mrs. Nugent and is committed to a mental hospital where he receives shock treatments. Years later, as an adult, he is released.

Recent films have offered an almost irresistible temptation to muse on the relation between filmic art and life – which imitates which? *Wag the Dog* [1997] and *Primary Colors* [1998] seem to be prescient to many contemporary political headlines. And, hard on the heels of the slaughter of the innocents at Jonesboro, Arkansas, here is *The Butcher Boy*. While this film offers no resolution, it does provide insight, and, after all, is not understanding the first step in devising solutions?

Writer/director Neil Jordan (*Interview with the Vampire* [1994], *The Crying Game* [1992]) non-judgmentally inspects three interacting layers of young Francie's life: the social environment of world events as they filter down to his Irish town; the social environment his town provides, that is, the network of friends and acquaintances Francie responds to both those in the adult world who might provide role models and friends his own age; and, finally, his immediate family. Cleverly (and realistically), these are not treated separately but as a complex web; any change in one will have immediate resonances in the others.

The film contains comparisons to make its points. These are often small to large or large to small. Here are a few:

World to Town: In the 1960s, Ireland was poised on the verge of entering the world of television. However, the source of their TV would be America, a country that for a decade-and-a-half grew up with TV images and, perhaps unconsciously, knew how to put them into some sort of meaningful perspective. Not so in Ireland. The images arrive fully developed to impinge

on a national psyche not yet prepared for them. Television is not yet ordinary, as it is in America It is something special – boys peep through a neighbor's curtains to watch episodes of *The Lone Ranger*.

While not without effect in America, the countless TV clips of nuclear explosions, duck-and-cover drills, and the doomsday-like coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis strike deeper into the hearts of these people. This is exemplified in the film by Francie's distorted take on the value of life when faced with what he perceives to be death and imminent destruction – denial.

In turning his back on the real world, Francie turns to the fantasy world of comic books and TV programs for his role models for both action and survival. In turn, the film becomes progressively surrealistic with wild shifts in mood, from Sinatra to sightings of the Virgin. Francie's growing and potentially explosive pathology is clearly reflected in shots of the atomic mushroom clouds. The duck-and-cover instruction videos reflect Francie's desire to escape from an inescapable situation. The fantasy compensations to these horrors, like visions of the Blessed Virgin, are only that – fantasies – and provide no real solution. The disintegration of Francie's personal world is reflected and paralleled by the coming apart of the larger society around him.

Town to Person: Unable to form meaningful emotional relations within his family, Francie turns to the larger circle of his town. To cope with a collapsing home life, his school chum, Joey, becomes his agapic love object. As the personal ties to his family disintegrate, he invests their relationship with the totality of his psychic energy. At first Joey, perhaps also chafing

under parental pressures, encourages the bond (literally and figuratively). However, as Francie's antics become tinged with ugliness, Joey is repelled. In reaction to what Francie is, Joey becomes what Francie is not: a momma's boy who makes friends with the son of Francie's greatest enemy, Mrs. Nugent.

Another aspect of Francie's denial is his refusal to take responsibility for his own actions. He postulates that Mrs. Nugent is the cause of all his and his family's troubles. Of course, he is projecting his own denied negativity and violence onto an external object. What Francie sees in Mrs. Nugent is actually the worst parts of himself. At this point, there would be hope for him if he could recognize and integrate the fractionated parts of his psyche. Unfortunately, there is no one there to catalyze this process – no family, no peers, no authority figures. Thus, all is lost.

Person to Psyche: It seems the happy-go-lucky, friend-to-all aspects of Francie's personality are compensation for having to live with a brutal, alcoholic father and mentally unstable mother. (Even father Brady's choice of musical instruments has an apocalyptic subtext – a trumpet.) His home life combined with an inner world shaped by a childhood take on both popular culture and the TV environment of nuclear destruction, become an irresistible combination. It is no surprise that the boy has little empathy, compassion or remorse and a very distorted value base that blinds him to the cruelty of his boyhood escapades. He has no sense of proportion, no sense of right and wrong. Francie is denied all archetypal connection needed for a young man to

successfully enter maturity: father, mother, male connections, and community connections.

Part of Francie's breakdown is a bifurcation: a Francie who wants to be good and a Francie who can't resist caving in to evil. The psychology of multiple personalities is not only an adult problem. A brief survey of teen cult will show a great concern for this issue. For instance, super-heroes both early and late, like Batman, Superman, Spiderman, the Hulk, and dozens of others, have two incarnations, good (and often ordinary) and powerfully transformed. The difference between the comic book super-hero and Francie is only one of degree, not type. The super-heroes alternate between ordinary and powerful, Francie between good and evil. (The film itself humorously participates in this type of division by casting Sinead O'Connor as, of all things, the Virgin Mary!)

The Butcher Boy is a brutal, uncompromising, and brilliant film that looks at the tragic downward spiral of a young boy under both social and psychological pressures too great for any young person to bear. A good definition of an adult, as distinguished from a child, is that he or she is aware of the consequences of their action. Francie is not. While indeed the film is a cautionary tale, a study of contemporary sociology, and an investigation into the psychology of adolescence, it never devolves into sounding academic or didactic. The title comes from Francie's job as a clean-up boy in a slaughterhouse, but it has deeper resonances. Mrs. Nugent, for instance, calls young Francie a pig. He then acts out the animal nature within himself that she summons forth: after wrecking her house, he even defecates on her rug.

However, the metaphor goes even further with the constant emotional slaughter and bloodletting throughout the film.

The Butcher Boy is a drama of the all-important and pivotal transition from adolescence to young adulthood, when one's future as an adult is determined (and changed later only with the greatest of efforts). It is, simultaneously, an examination of children as monsters. There have been many filmic approaches to the passage over this psychological cusp. Fellini's nostalgically funny *Amarcord* [1973] shows childhood, while not without problems, as basically idyllic. This contrasts sharply with Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* [1959], in which the young anti-hero is so psychologically damaged by the society around him he has seemingly no choice but to enter a life of crime. Other films, like *The Lord of the Flies* [1990] and *Hope and Glory* [1987] (with its youthful warmongers) show the dark side of youth. But rarely has a film combined both these warring sides of childhood.

Perhaps most disturbing about *The Butcher Boy* is that, to most eyes, Francie appears chipper, gay, friendly, and helpful (those last two make him the perfect Boy Scout). Yet beneath his surface of normality, brews a monster stewed from the untenable pressures of his unfortunate life. Francie is the youngest Job ever put on film. Equally frightening is the casting of Stephen Rae in two roles. He first appears as Francie's brutal father and then, at the end of the film, as the adult Francie. This gives the film a pall of depressing inevitability – the cliché here is seen as truth, "life-father, like-son."

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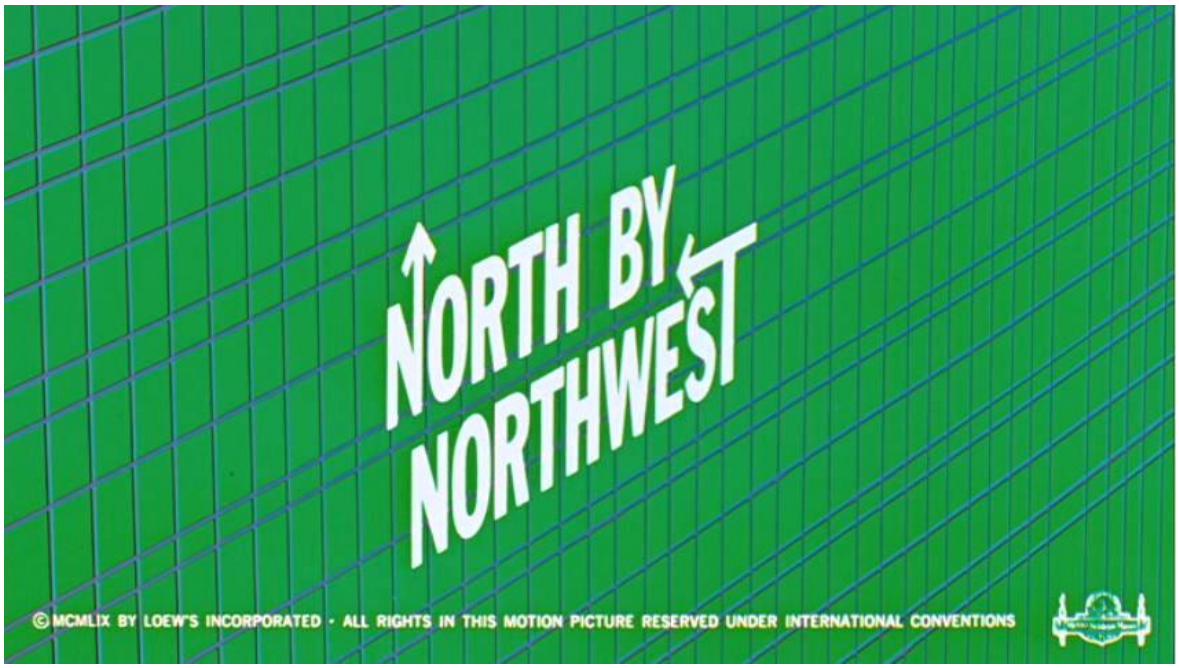

Caption Text

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