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The Killer Inside Me

By [Douglas Keeseey](#)

Douglas Keeseey, author of the Neo-Noir Kamera Book, writes about Michael Winterbottom's The Killer Inside Me (Beware spoilers)

As both a deputy sheriff and a killer, Lou Ford is an enigma, and Casey Affleck plays him that way. Sometimes Lou sports a devious grin and seems to get a kick out of killing. At other times, heaving a weary sigh, he seems fatigued by his own violence, acting only because he feels compelled to kill. And there are also those times when, narrating in a mournful, high-pitched voice, he seems sorry and even remorseful for his crimes, as if the sheriff in him would like to bring the killer to justice. As Lou says, 'I've got a foot on both sides of the fence. ...I can't move. I can't jump. All I can do is wait until I split – right down the middle.' Even the film's soundtrack is split – between upbeat pop tunes and tragic opera.

At an early age Lou was traumatised by a family housekeeper who seduced him into violent sex. From that point on, he has compulsively acted out sadistic patterns of behaviour with women, who have been traumatised by him (or by other men before him) into masochistic enjoyment of his beatings. This is not a playful sado-masochism with pre-set limits and a 'safe word'. It is an ever-escalating violation ultimately moving towards murder, a love contaminated by death.

The film has been heavily criticised for its scenes of blunt and prolonged violence against women, especially a scene in which Lou takes the face of his lover (Jessica Alba) and punches it into a bloody pulp. Anthony Quinn in *The Independent* (4 June 2010) accuses the film of a 'perverse concentration on the act of murder', so much so that 'you can't help suspect the motivation of the film-maker'. But director Michael Winterbottom has countered that 'the idea was for the violence to be shocking. ...If you're going to take a moral point of view', he argues, 'surely what would be immoral would be for the violence to be entertaining and acceptable?' (1)

What some critics seem to find most disturbing is not just the violence, but the fact that it is sexualised. All three of Lou's lovers derive pleasure from pain, with one woman even coming back for more 'love' after he has beaten her almost to death. I would agree that the film's depiction of female masochism is deeply unsettling, and I would add that its exposé of male sadism – in Lou's persona – should also shock us. For one dark side revealed by this film noir is the extent to which 'normal' sexual relations have been invaded and corrupted by violence. If only Lou could tell someone about what happened to him as a boy or the things he has done as a man, he might be able to comprehend and contain his behaviour, but instead he feels the need to keep it all a secret, thinking that the truth would be too shocking for such a 'normal' town and too shameful for himself. There is only this film – and his narration to us – to serve as his confession and perhaps to help us recognise a piece of ourselves in him and bring this violence to an end.

1: Michael Winterbottom in Hannah McGill, 'Inside Out', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 20, no. 6 (June 2010), p. 41.

Douglas Keeseey's Neo-Noir: Contemporary Film Noir from Chinatown to The Dark Knight has recently been published by Kamera Books.

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