The Snowtown Murders

If you’re looking for a “regular” horror movie, stop right here. I love horror films, but this isn’t a new *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or *The Thing*. But if you understand that just having to live on this earth as a human being can often be horror enough, then venture forward if you dare. One could almost say that the title of this film is misleading. Yes, there are murders in the film, based on real-life occurrences. And yes, there is a psychotic ringleader doing terrible, awful things. But *The Snowtown Murders* has more in common with *Trash* and *Nil by Mouth* than it does with Tobe Hooper and John Carpenter. Much of the visual terribleness and macabre milieu of this film isn’t found in a remote exotic location or some seemingly abandoned and isolated hovel, but in a neighborhood not too far from your own, where much of what happens on screen is happening every day, all around us, unanswered cruelty and silent suffering that birth madness and violence.

The setting is a lower-class neighborhood, where junk is piled up on lawns, kids run wild in the street and the dirt and cramped spaces are so powerfully realized, you can almost smell the mixture of stale cigarette smoke, cheap beer and decaying trash. The focus is on a family and its extended community, characters from the block who come and go so often, it’s hard to keep track of who’s a relative and who’s just a friend. The teenaged Jamie is the main protagonist (played by Lucas Pittaway in a brilliant performance). Fatherless and weak, he is subject to brutal abuse from trusted friends and acquaintances. The first scene is of him posing nude for a pedophile who lives across the street. It’s a gut-wrenching moment of humiliation and manipulation, perhaps the last naïve moment in this young boy’s life. Far worse things happen to him as the film drags on, things you can imagine and expect and some you can’t.

In the midst of all this, his mother turns to her new boyfriend John (brought to life in creepy perfection by actor Daniel Henshall) and his band of neighborhood watchmen to deal with the crimes that the police won’t respond to. Taking young Jamie under his wing, John gradually indoctrinates the impressionable kid into his homophobic crusade against anyone he sees as a child molester, proven or otherwise, ultimately teaching him how to be a killer. It all happens very slowly. And what we watch is the slow, gradual corruption of a desperate and malleable young mind. It starts with chopping up freshly killed kangaroos (to be used as a terrorizing tactic against an accused pederast), moves on to the senseless killing of a pet and finally, to participate in a murder spree.

Styling himself as a righteous vigilante, the audience is subjected to the subtly-hidden, hyper-masculine psychosis which has warped John and seeks to infect Jamie. Most of the film isn’t about homicide at all. Instead, it’s really about the degradation of the soul, fed by hopelessness, poverty and the resulting violence. The narrative progresses through loose vignettes, linear to be sure, yet each scene could stand on its own as a short film, capturing the raw emotions and environmental influences upon characters. It’s gritty, even grainy at times, with a meandering camera, people often talking over each other and far too much action to follow at times, despite a fairly static camera. What’s transmitted is a dizzying montage crafted to disorient the viewer as much as the people in the film are themselves lost and confused. The linear connections tighten up as events march towards the climax, but at that point, the audience is now trapped in a nightmare, just like Jesse is. The order made out of the chaos is more repulsive than what came before, as constructed by a murderous ringleader pretending to be benign.

The journey the film takes us on is harrowing. It at once feels familiar and distantly perverse. The acting is so naturalistic, a channel-flipper could be forgiven for mistaking it at first as a reality show. The reek of degradation is so impactful, it’s hard to wash away from the mind. And therein lies the true horror the film offers as well as its cinematic triumph. The murders take a back seat to the explorations of the utter raping of the psyche of a teenager we are subjected to. No amount of gore could make an audience more uneasy, seeking the exits than what *The Snowtown Murders* has conjured. The truth and banality of human ugliness is that awful look in the mirror which is the hallmark of a truly successful horror movie.