

FIVE MINUTES OF HEAVEN

UK, 2009, *Oliver Hirschbiegel*



A film well worth seeing and reflecting on.

We are taken into Northern Ireland and the Troubles of the 1970s. What begins like an ordinary day for a teenager turns into a symbolic day of bigotry and violence as he takes a gun, meets up with friends, takes orders from the paramilitary officers, is eager to shoot anyone associated with Catholics or the IRA – and does so in cold blood in front of the victim's young brother. We have glimpsed the victim's family and the little boy innocently in the street kicking his football. The murder has long-term disastrous consequences for the boy, his mother blaming him for not stopping his brother's death and his continued feelings of anxiety and guilt.

This is important because most of this brief film takes place in the present. A television channel has persuaded both of them to meet on air.

The killer has served time and is now a respectable documentary maker. He is played with quiet intensity by Liam Neeson. The grown-up boy is a bundle of nerves, fidgety, distracted, changing and re-changing his mind. He is played by James Nesbitt at his best.

While a lot of the time is spent at the house where the two are to meet and the discussions between producers, minders, make-up artists, camera operators (who bungle walks down stairs which have to be re-shot), the focus is on the two men. The killer knows reconciliation might be too difficult. The victim has murder on his mind.

The screenplay offers the two actors an occasion each where they can speak to camera and explain what they have gone through and why. Neeson's plain and honest speech about his fanatical teenage viciousness and his coming to see how he had been brainwashed as well as his plea for understanding and non-violence is a high point. Nesbitt's desperate memories of his angry mother, his witnessing the murder and the corrosive effect this has had on his whole life reminds us powerfully of the lasting impact of trauma.

The aim is, perhaps, reconciliation but when that is too difficult, some kind of resolution, some kind of closure is the next best step. This can be very awkward as the film shows – but closure is possible.

The unusual title for this kind of film refers to the brief satisfaction someone might get in revenge... but, what afterwards?

The film won awards at the Sundance Festival 2009, for the screenplay by Guy Tibbert and for direction by German Oliver Hirschbiegel (who directed the strong Hitler film, *Downfall*, and who had a bad Hollywood interference experience on *The Invasion* with Nicole Kidman).

[As this film went to air on BBC 2, there was a cinema release of *Fifty Dead Men Walking*, the story of a mole in the IRA who reported to British Intelligence and who is still on the run since the early 1990s, a film critiquing the violence and ruthlessness of the Troubles.]