

**Viewing Notes for *Land of Mine/Under Sandet* (2015)
written and directed by Martin Zandvliet**

The original Danish title *Under Sandet* translates to “Under the Sand.” Many film critics despise the English-language-release title *Land of Mine* and find it annoyingly punny. The director actually prefers the English title because of its double meaning.

Background

Denmark has typically had a positive portrayal in the WWII era because of the famous “Rescue of the Danish Jews” boat lift, when members of the Danish resistance organized to transport more than 90% of the country’s nearly 8,000 Jews to safety in Sweden. Zandvliet exposes the flawed virtue of his nation in the 1940s, as he takes on a morally ambiguous policy exercised after V-E Day by the Danish government. In fact, intentionally using prisoners of war for dangerous work violated the Geneva Convention. About 2000 Germans prisoners were forced to dig up land mines, and about half of those were either killed or maimed in the process.

This is Zandvliet’s third feature film. The cinematographer is Camilla Hjelm Knudsen (Zandvliet’s wife). A little more trivia: the farmer’s little girl is played by their own daughter Zoe.

The film is a Danish and German co-production, and the filming location is on the site of one of the actual beaches that was cleared by German PoWs. The beach was turned into a national military site and preserve, so it has been mostly untouched since the postwar years.

Story and Aesthetics

Note how the character of Sergeant Rasmussen (a U.S. ally) is introduced to us in an opening scene of rage and violence, and how this contrasts the introduction of the German POWS (passive, weary faces lit in the dark transport truck). The director continues to turn the tables throughout the story by portraying the Danish Lieutenant Ebbe Jensen as more ruthless than the Nazis. Why do you think he does this? To what extent does it make you uncomfortable to be out in the position of empathizing with the Nazi youth?

Note how the characters of the German boys are generic and indistinguishable at first, then gradually individualized over the course of the narrative.

Camilla Hjelm Knudsen’s cinematography in this film is really impressive, and she creates a rich palette with a fairly minimal color scheme of tan, black, dark blue, and green. She seems to constantly find new ways to photograph the same sandy planes. Note how she uses contrasts to visual advantage, as well. Examples:

- faces highlighted within poorly lit spaces contrasting with the bright sunshine of the exterior scenes
- the wide, beautiful, fairly calm seascape shots contrasting tense close-ups of the boys’ faces and fingers as they work at defusing the mines

The soundtrack works with contrasts, too:

- how the sweeping sounds of surf and wind are contrasted by the squeaks and clinks of the metal parts they work with
- in the dialogue, how the word “home” becomes the boys’ refrain, counterposed with the repeated line “Ja, Herr Feldwebel” as they obey commands
- ambient noise/silence punctuated with occasional minimalist soundtrack score, but no diegetic music—nothing from the period in which the film is set

Overall, these visual and sonic contrasts work with the script's pacing to create a narrative that balances moments of extreme tension with poignancy and natural beauty. As critic Stuart Liebman notes, the scene's dramatic arc has a kind of rhythm, from quiet tension to violent outburst, structured around the tedium of the soldiers' daily work, and ultimately, "The visual and sonic rhythms develop a parallel systole and diastole, allowing the characters—forced to confront the tragic inexorability of their fate—to breathe."

Thematics

This film raises some obvious but important moral questions centered on Sergeant Rasmussen's character, such as the importance of duty vs. the pull of empathy, and identifying the fine line between one's selfish desire for vengeance and true patriotic outrage. For the young soldiers, we are left asking the question, "To what extent are somewhat powerless individuals responsible for the decisions made by their leaders?"

Both titles—the Danish and English versions—hold metaphorical truth. "Under the Sand" hints at the "repressed and potentially explosive" ethical questions that remain to plague a nation after its actions in wartime. Consider how this Danish episode complicates an otherwise "good war" in ways parallel to the U.S. firebombing of Dresden. "Land of Mine" speaks to both the ways in which we defend our territories as well as to the mines—real and metaphorical—that may be tripped in that defense.

The concept of place in this film functions in a variety of ways: the geopolitical lands and borders of nation-states are central to the post-war dilemma. The setting of the beach itself becomes a metaphor for working out the geopolitical conflicts. Ultimately, the beach setting is ironic: a place of beauty turned into a battle zone and site of potential destruction.