

## Irish Cinema 2005 - Year in Review

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### Introduction

Tony Tracy, December 2005

On being invited to contribute to *Estudios Irlandeses* with a reflection on film and television output in the year gone past, I felt that, rather than authoring a single overview, it would be useful to invite colleagues in Ireland to contribute to such an enterprise, on topics chosen by them. Partly this had to do with a feeling that an e-journal for Irish Studies, with its wide and international accessibility, offers a very distinct kind of distribution mechanism which can function, at least in part, as a kind of barometer of current cultural activity for those living outside Ireland. But equally, the format of a 'year in review' offered the possibility of hearing from a range of emerging and established Irish film scholars in one place, reporting on films and subjects that caught their eye or chimed with their research. That said, it should be noted that contributors were invited to submit short pieces in an informal – or as informal as they wished – format.

The pieces that follow are not an exhaustive overview of audio-visual production in 2005 and I am especially regretful not to have been able to include

essays on short film, low-budget and Irish-language productions.<sup>1</sup> But they give a sense of current activity nonetheless, and in a number of instances go beyond textual analysis to offer views on contexts of production, reception and distribution. Such a balancing of content and context is particularly important in a discussion of the audio-visual sector since it is often considerations of development trends and demographics that are as influential in shaping a cinematic heritage as imaginative exertions.

If there is a theme running through the generally diverse essays it might be that Irish film (and increasingly, television), having developed so quickly and impressively in the aftermath of the reestablishment of the Film Board in 1993, seems temporarily uncertain of its purpose and direction. Many writers here note that Irish film is caught between the

1. We note particularly Ken Wardrop's short film *Undressing My Mother* which won the European Film Academy Short Film Prix 2005 Award; Dermot Doyle's accomplished 'no-budget' feature debut *Hill 16*, and Andrew Legge's charming and visually sophisticated silent short, *The Unusual Adventure of Henry Cavendish*, all of which received widespread exposure and praise on the film festival circuit

competing structures of a global and local market - attempting to please both - while also attempting to come to terms with the seismic political and social changes of Irish society over the past decade. In discussion of RTE drama series *Pure Mule*, I suggest that a successful resolution of these tensions might lie in the development of more television drama, with its quick 'turn around', lower production costs, a tolerance for more character-centred stories and a localized primary audience. The national broadcaster would appear to agree - after years of neglect - it commissioned a record 30 hours of drama in 2005. With the advent of digital projection (Ireland is set to become the first country to go entirely digital)<sup>2</sup> the theatrical cinema market will, arguably, offer greater distribution possibilities to low-budget and independent films, increasing the likelihood of a more diverse choice for audiences and reinvigorating an artisan cinema. That remains to be seen. But no matter how accommodating the televisual marketplace, feature film production for theatrical release is still the ambition for many because of its scale, ambitions and potential

audience. In the last months of 2005 several new feature productions were announced, in addition to a late year government gift of €1.5 million to the Film Board signalling a pick-up in momentum from what has been one of the least vigorous periods of production for a decade. The year in review has been therefore both one of disappointments and emerging possibilities. It is beyond the scope of this small enterprise to explore how such developments might be reflective of wider ripples in the global industry; faltering cinema audiences and a proliferation of TV outlets are not unique to Ireland. For now, though, there seems to be a discernable cooling of interest in prestigious adaptations and historical projects in favour of more contemporary subjects. For now the Irish film and television sector would seem to be negotiating the insecurities of adolescence.

2. In March, 2005, Avica Europe, announced that the first of its countrywide digital cinema networks is now underway in Ireland which will result in a groundbreaking nationwide conversion of Ireland's cinema screens to digital format.

## Irish Film 2005: An Industry in Crises?

Roddy Flynn

“Ireland has a lot to offer incoming film producers, quite apart from our tax incentives. Our locations are excellent. Our country is safe and welcoming to visitors. We speak English . . . We have quite low levels of bureaucracy, and those making films in Ireland can achieve access to very senior people, both in the Irish Film Board and in Government, far more easily than in many other locations. We have quite an informal 'can do' attitude, with a flexible approach to overcoming any obstacles that may arise. Perhaps most importantly, our film professionals, and those who support them, are accustomed to meeting and are very capable of meeting the highest international standards.”

John O'Donoghue,  
Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism,  
May 16, 2005 Cannes Film Festival.

Notwithstanding the optimism of John O'Donoghue's speech, 2005 has been a catastrophic year for film production in Ireland. The last large scale Hollywood production in Ireland - Jerry Bruckheimer's \$100m *King Arthur* – completed its 90 day Irish shoot in September 2003. There have been other medium scale productions since - *The Honeymooners* completed a seven week shoot in Ireland in September 2004 whilst the latest version of *Lassie* (Sturridge) shot in several locations around Ireland from May 2005 – but there has been nothing on the scale of previous productions like *Braveheart*, *Reign of Fire* or *Veronica Guerin*. This is reflected in the fact that, measured in terms of production activity, 2005 has been Ardmore Studios' worst since before the re-establishment of the Film Board in 1993. (Furthermore the studios saw no production at all in the first half of 2004.)

Alongside the fall-off in visiting international productions there has been a similarly depressed level of indigenous activity. In a March 2005 *Film Ireland* article director Liz Gill (*Goldfish Memory*) criticising the operation of the Irish Film Board's Low-Budget and Micro-Budget Feature Film Initiatives, noted that although 11 films were funded under the initiatives up to August 2003, only one - *Studs* (Paul Mercier)– had been 'greenlit' (given the go-ahead) under either initiative since that date. As of October 2005,

only five of the 16 films awarded Production Finance Loans by the Irish Film Board since Oct 2004 had gone into production. For Irish producers such loans often represent the first step in assembling a finance jigsaw: the apparent consistent absence of other funders suggests a lack of confidence in the sector.

Of course, all industries go through slumps but with the occasional blip, the story of the Irish film industry for the last decade has been an unfettered ascent. In 1993, for example, the industry created the equivalent of 480 fulltime Irish jobs. By 2000 this reached a peak of 1,742. And as a consequence many people working in the industry have never known it to do anything other than expand. Hence the current sense of crisis.

Why has this crisis come about? Analysis of the downturn in both sectors (international and domestic) of the industry reveals a different set of answers. With regard to overseas production, the stated reasons for the fall-off usually point to “uncertainty” over the future of the Section 481 film investment tax incentive in the run-up to Christmas 2003 when then Minister for Finance Charlie McCreevy kept the industry guessing as to whether he'd retain it or not. However, given that McCreevy subsequently guaranteed the section's retention until 2008 – thereby creating certainty – it's difficult to understand how this can still be having a substantial effect, two years on (notwithstanding lengthy lead-in times necessary to feature-film production).

Therefore it is more likely that overseas producers have been put off by changing terms of trade that have made Ireland Inc. less competitive internationally. In practical terms, Ireland is now perceived – with some reason – as an expensive place to shoot. Indeed it is an expensive place simply to live in – a recent survey by the Economist<sup>1</sup> described Dublin as one of more expensive places to live on the face of the planet. Added to these basic costs, producers have argued that union inflexibility imposes additional artificial costs, making Ireland even less competitive. For example, SIPTU, No. 7 Branch which represents the majority of film workers in Ireland, insists that

1. The Spring 2005 audit by the Economist had the capital falling one place from 22 to 23 since last year in the cost-of-living survey. Dublin is cheaper than Sydney or Hong Kong but remains more expensive than Rome, New York and Los Angeles.

crews working more than 40 miles outside Dublin City Centre or Bray must be paid ‘per diems’ (daily expenses over and above their standard wages) to offset the hardship experience by their members as a result of such long “commutes”.

However, the key factor is unquestionably changing exchange rates. As of 14 November 2005, one US dollar bought €0.85. In mid-June 2001, however, the Dollar’s peak versus the Euro in the last decade and a half, that same dollar bought €1.19. Such buying power made Ireland a very attractive location for the producers of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Reign of Fire* and *Veronica Guerin* all of which were shot in 2001 and 2002, with cumulative budgets of over \$150m. Subsequent exchange rate fluctuations up to 2005 have made Ireland 30% more expensive for Hollywood companies to shoot in than in 2001. (Even this is an improvement on December 2004 when the Dollar hit a 10 year low against the Euro, making one dollar worth just €0.77.)

Meanwhile, with regard to domestic films, Liz Gill claimed –in the article referred to above– that the decline in indigenous production was at least partially the result of adjustments to the operations of the Film Board’s two low-budget initiatives, made under the tenure of Chief Executive Mark Woods. Gill asserted that projects seeking low-budget funding now needed to have a sales agent, distributor or bond company on board before applying, conditions that many Irish producers were finding hard to fulfil. In effect, she argued, the Board’s editorial choices were based on commercial rather than cultural or aesthetic criteria. Interestingly, in response, Woods tacitly conceded that this was the case. However, he defended the need for market money arguing that Board decisions to fund production which lacked the tacit imprimatur of marketplace partners, were open to charges of “spending taxpayer money on personal choices.”

Given all this, how have stakeholders in the Irish film industry responded? Again the answer depends on whether one is referring to foreign or indigenous productions. With regard to the dearth of overseas productions, there has been an increased emphasis on the promotion of Ireland as a location (see John O’Donoghue’s speech above) and further changes to section 481 aimed at large-scale (i.e. overseas) productions have been mooted.

At the Cannes Film Festival in May 2005, John O’Donoghue announced that the Irish Film Board would shortly make arrangements to appoint a Deputy Film Commissioner, based in Los Angeles, to liaise with the major studios there and to effectively link these studios with the services and supports available in Ireland. (As of December 2005 the position has yet to be created due mainly to the lengthy absence of a Chief Executive at the Film Board – see below.)

Similarly, in July 2005 the Film Board announced the introduction of new management structure axing the positions of Head of Production and Development and Head of Marketing. (Production and Development functions would in future devolve to the Chief Executive.) But the Board took the opportunity to entirely refocus the efforts of the marketing department on *attracting inward production* with other marketing requirements (i.e. those related to selling indigenous productions) being out-sourced as and when needed.

Finally, on 10 November, at a launch for the Irish Film Archive’s “Reel Ireland” touring programme, John O’Donoghue again acknowledged that the competitive position for Ireland as a production location had become “less favourable... particularly with regard to the attraction of inward international productions.” He went to suggest that it was necessary to revise Section 481 “particularly with regard to big-budget productions” and hinted that he was attempting (unsuccessfully as it turned out) to steer Brian Cowen’s December 2005 budget announcement accordingly.

With regard to indigenous production, O’Donoghue had announced four weeks earlier on 5th October, the unprecedented provision of “up to a total of €1.5 million of *additional funding*” for the Irish Film Board to be spent by close 2005, as a response to the decline in production activity in 2005 and to prevent what he termed the potential erosion of infrastructure, under-employment and emigration of skills from the sector.

And with regard to both overseas and indigenous production, in October 2005, David McLoughlin, Chief Executive of Screen Producers Ireland (SPI), a representative group for Irish film and television producers, noted that having been in negotiation with SIPTU since November 2004, that he hoped “very

soon” to reach agreement on more flexible terms and conditions of film employment.

So, what is the net result of this? To begin one should acknowledge that, despite the unfavourable production climate discussed above, some films have been made in Ireland this year. *Studs* completed shooting at the start of the year. Ken Loach’s War of Independence drama *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, and Tom Collins’s *Dead Long Enough* were both started and finished this year. In addition there have been several micro-budget features, including Ronan Glennane’s *Pride and Joy* and the astonishingly low-budget - €25,000 - *Triple Bill*. And several overseas projects using Ireland as a location were shot here – in addition to Charles Sturridge’s *Lassie*, Ireland was the location for the Charles and Camilla telemovie, *Whatever Love Means*.

Furthermore, as this article goes to press (mid-December 2005), five further projects went into production – *The Front Line*, *Speed Dating*, *Middletown*, *In Like Flynn* and animated feature *Brendan and the Secret of Kells*.

However there is also a sense that there is now a need to take stock of what Irish film policy is/should be seeking to achieve. This debate was ignited by Liz Gill’s comments on the Film Board’s low-budget schemes but subsequent events have broadened the discussion. In April 2005, Mark Woods announced his resignation from the Film Board after just 19 months at the post, having been offered a position at Ausfilm, the Australian film production promotion agency. In the press release announcing his resignation, Woods described his period at the Board as “unforgettable”, a carefully chosen adjective, given the perception that Woods had been bruised by the negative response of local film-makers to his tenure.

However, though his comments on the importance of market-oriented finance were hardly welcomed by indigenous directors, they demand further consideration. There is a school of thought which argues that there is little point in spending money on funding films that no one will see and it is undeniably the case that many of the indigenous films supported by the Film Board over the past decade have failed to secure any kind of meaningful distribution. Even in 2003, a year when Irish films cumulatively enjoyed unprecedented success at the domestic box

office (e.g. *Intermission*, *Song for a Raggy Boy*, *Spin the Bottle*), many failed to secure a theatrical release outside Ireland: *Mystics*, *Headrush*, *Bloom* and *Cowboys and Angels* were screened in Irish cinemas but nowhere else. Woods’ (unstated but implied) point was that the involvement of sales agents or distributors hugely increase the chance that the film will receive a theatrical release which may be used as a platform for a release in ancillary (but also more lucrative) markets such as DVD and television. Although the assertion of a decade ago that most Irish producers concentrated on finishing their films before addressing questions of distribution was always overstated it did contain a grain of truth. Furthermore, Woods’ comments suggest a familiarity with the document that laid much of the philosophical groundwork for restarting the film industry in 1993: the 1992 Coopers and Lybrand Report. Although often thought of as giving equal weight to cinema as an artform and an industry, any close reading could hardly fail to notice the stress laid in the document on the need for Irish film-makers to become more market aware. Indeed although the document praised aspects of what the “First” Film Board had achieved during its six-year tenure, it also concluded that its decisions to concentrate on low-budget, locally cast pictures, had condemned the industry to the commercial sidelines.

In short, the great unspoken truth about state support for the Irish film industry since 1993 is that it has been predicated on the assumption that it generates a net economic return for the Irish economy. Any less tangible cultural benefits generated are a bonus but not a prerequisite for support. And hence the stress on attracting large-scale productions which generally have a greater economic impact than their indigenous counterparts. Indeed as PriceWaterhouse Coopers demonstrated in their December 2003 report on Section 481 for the Department of Arts and Tourism, the kind of smaller-scale budgets which characterise indigenous projects are actually unlikely to generate a net return for the economy.

Such films do win critical praise. Mark O’Halloran has been nominated for European Film Award for his *Adam and Paul* screenplay. Perry Ogden’s *Pavee Lackeen* was selected for screening by both the Toronto International Film Festival and the Venice International Film Festival. It was also selected by the

Directors Guild of America Finders Series. Critical praise is very hard to measure on a balance sheet, however.

In conclusion, Irish film finds itself once again at a crossroads. The successful balancing act between American and indigenous productions at the beginning of the new century ensured a diversity of activity, widespread employment and a cultural/economic balance which was finally achieved nine years after the report which brought about the re-establishment of the Film Board recommended such a configuration as justifying government involvement. The incoming Chief Executive of the Board, Simon

Perry brings with him a seemingly tailor-made CV for this balancing act, having previously worked as former Head of British Screen Finance and as the current President of Les Ateliers du Cinéma Européen (ACE). Having fallen foul of a regime change in British cultural politics (when he lost his BSF job), he is fully aware of the vicissitudes of state sponsorship. But for now, it seems that his experience in weighing the industrial-artisanal tension is exactly the film policy that the Irish wish to pursue.

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## ***Boy Eats Girl***

Ruth Barton

Spending just under an hour and a half watching Ireland's California-ised youth eat itself is a pleasure. In *Boy Eats Girl*, directed by Stephen Bradley for Element Films, a clatter of Dublin secondary school kids, their cultural touchstones firmly located in West Coast America, discovers that every blow job counts when their classmates start biting back. The film establishes its central characters with light brushstrokes – there is the hero, Nathan (David Leon), whose mother, Grace (played by Bradley's wife, Irish comedian Deirdre O'Kane), brings him back from the dead after she has accidentally caused him to commit suicide; school rugby bully, Samson (Mark Huberman), who causes the misunderstanding that leads to the half-baked suicide attempt after Nathan spots him apparently going down on Jessica (Samantha Mumba), and the two guileless best friends, Diggs (Tadhg Murphy) and Henry (Laurence Kinlan), who invariably catch up with what is going on two seconds after it has happened. The trouble, as you might expect from an Irish movie, starts in a Church when Grace stumbles across a book of curious imprecations lurking under the altar. Without realising that an all-important page is missing, she quickly puts together some hokum and reanimates her beloved Nathan, soon to cause havoc when he exacts his revenge on Samson's neck. Before you can say 'yum', half the class is tucking into the other half and only the inevitable small group of survivors is left to defend itself and wait for the arrival of an antidote.

With its cast of pampered youngsters, its anodyne school buildings and its hierarchy of privilege, *Boy Eats Girl* knowingly recreates the iconography of the American teen-pic. Moreover, the kids all have the kind of names you might just as easily hear in a Hollywood production. This effect was, the director has said, a deliberate commentary on contemporary Irish life: 'the only ambition we had for the film to be taken seriously as a theme was to have the idea that, with the Celtic Tiger and all of that nonsense which has come over the last ten years, we have all sucked up that huge amount of Americana, and this film shows how much we have.' Casting Samantha Mumba in one of the central roles further connects the film to the new Ireland, though as

the bearer of the film's most excessive display of wealth – her stinking rich and overbearing (white) father owns a large suburban home complete with riding stables – this is more the new Ireland of Louis Walsh and global pop stardom than of racial dispossession. The production's other most immediate influence is the low-budget British genre film, notably *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). In common with the latter, *Boy Eats Girl* is primarily a comedy, but with less of the self-referential knowingness of recent American horror films, such as the *Scream* series of 1996 onwards. This didn't prevent the film from running into trouble with the Irish film censor who refused certification unless the scene depicting the ostensible suicide attempt was cut. The issue went to the Appeal Board who unanimously reversed this decision and the film was released with a 15A certificate

*Boy Eats Girl* is not Ireland's first 'romzomcom'. Late in 2004, Conor McMahon's *Dead Meat* laid claim to that title when it opened in Ireland. A grungy, ad-hoc production, made under the Irish Film Board's microbudget initiative (which provides funding for projects budgeted at under €100, 000), *Dead Meat's* premise is that one day the bovine population of Ireland will turn on the humans who have so insensitively infected them with Mad Cow Disease (BSE). Their victims, mostly from the Co. Leitrim area, are instantly rendered zombies and cluster in roadside bands, alternatively consuming fresh kills and stalking the living. A less polished production than Bradley's better-financed release, *Dead Meat* more obviously straddles the otherwise conflicting traditions of an older generation of Irish filmmakers and the new brash commercialism of its younger digital successors. The attack, it is suggested, may not just reflect the revenge of the cows, but have its roots in a much darker history, as its male lead, Des (David Muylaert) relates to the young woman, Elena (Marián Arújo), who becomes his companion in the battle against the zombies. This is the area in which Cromwell hung fifty men and children; it is also a countryside dotted with ruined churches and round towers, symbols of an abandoned culture and religion. In such a landscape, the wandering bands of starving, homeless country people could easily be mistaken for famine victims come back to haunt the present. At the same time, McMahon's perspective is

resolutely metropolitan, viewing the countryside as the locus of an unspeakable horror.

By contrast Bradley's film, for all its parodic intent, is equally a celebration of a new globalism. We have suburbs, the film declares, just like everywhere else, and a rock scene (the soundtrack features a selection of rising Irish bands such as *Bell x1*) with international appeal, and a youth population that dresses and talks in the idiom of teen TV. Our kids are obsessed with sex and its substitutes, and how they look and what they wear, just like teens in all rich Western countries. We make genre films like everyone else's. Given that Bradley's previous film was the 1998 release, *Sweetie Barrett*, a quirky, somewhat fey re-shaping of the gangster drama to fit into a background of small town, coastal Ireland, the distance he, and the aspirations of Irish cinema, have travelled are immense. Invariably when local filmmakers make films that aspire to global status, they leave themselves open to comparisons and *Boy Eats Girl* found as many detractors as admirers in local press reviews.

Does it hold its own in *Zombieland*, or is it just a good Irish attempt at doing what other film cultures take for granted? Rather more the latter, I would say.

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***Boy Eats Girl*** (Irl, 2005)

Director: Stephen Bradley

Writer: Derek Landy

Cast (Principal): Samantha Mumba, David Leon, Laurence Kinlan, Tadhg Murphy, Sarah James

Cinematographer: Balazs Bolygo

Music: Hugh Drumm, Stephen Rennicks

Producers: Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe

## Masculinity in Contemporary Irish Cinema

Debbie Ging

In the mid- to late-1990s, Irish Cinema underwent a radical shift, which entailed, among other significant features, a thematic trajectory from the rural to the urban, from the historical to the contemporary and from the local to the universal (McLoone 2000, Ging 2002, Barton 2004). This shift also involved a radical reconfiguration of cinematic masculinities, not only in terms of the representation of male characters but also regarding how masculinity as discourse was being addressed: the earlier critiques of traditional patriarchal masculinity, which emerged from a more politically-engaged and less commercial period in Irish filmmaking (Rockett 1994: 127), began to give way to more ambiguous, male-centered narratives, whose protagonists resist unequivocal ideological categorization. What is most striking about this new cycle of male-themed and male-oriented films is its preoccupation with underclass, criminal and socially marginalized masculinities and the popularity of these underclass antiheroes at the height of the Celtic Tiger, a time of unprecedented economic prosperity in Ireland. Although recent years have also seen the emergence of a number of films set in middle-class milieu and featuring non-normative, sexually-fluid and reconstructed masculinities (*About Adam*, *Goldfish Memory* and *When Brendan Met Trudy*), the hapless criminal, the stoner, the 'loser' and the underclass rebel remain influential masculine types (Spicer 2001) in contemporary Irish cinema.

Arguably, this trend has as much to do with the popularity of underclass-rebel and neo-gangster iconography across the global mediascape than it does with the social and economic specificities of modern Ireland. Elements of the new British gangster cycle (Chibnall 2001), the British underclass film (Monk 2000), the American "smart film" (Sconce 2003), the "gross-out" comedy (Greven 2003), the "male rampage film" (Pfeil 1996) and the "new brutalism" of Quentin Tarantino (Shelley 1993) are variously identifiable in a wide range of Irish films made over the past decade. Most of these films revolve around themes of crime and social exclusion, and feature sympathetic male

antiheroes who are variously marginalised, criminally active and ostensibly opposed to the *status quo*. They include *I Went Down*, *Saltwater*, *Flick*, *Last Days in Dublin*, *The Actors*, *Head Rush*, *Intermission*, *The General*, *Ordinary Decent Criminal*, *Veronica Guerin*, *Accelerator*, *Crushproof*, *Adam and Paul* and *Man About Dog*. Many of these have been big commercial successes and even those that did not enjoy sustained theatrical release, such as *Accelerator* and *Crush Proof*, have achieved cult status through video viewing among certain male audiences (Ging, PhD findings: unpublished). In press reviews and in the films' own marketing strategies, comparisons with *Trainspotting*, *Lock Stock* and *Pulp Fiction* have been ubiquitous. Thus, in spite of Irish cinema's increasing generic and stylistic diversity and its growing ability to accommodate different scales and models of filmmaking, there remains a strongly identifiable trend within indigenous filmmaking over the past ten years, whereby traditionally male-oriented (sub)genres with universal appeal have been reappropriated within an Irish context.

These constructions of masculinity signify an important break with Irish cinema's preoccupation, up until the mid-1990s, with stringent critiques of oppressive, absent and ineffectual fathers (*Maeve*, *Exposure*, *The Field*, *Korea*, *The Butcher Boy*, *Guiltrip*, *Country*, *A Soldier's Song*, *Into the West*, *Our Boys*, *The Family* and *Amongst Women*). More recent portraits of modern Irish masculinity are, by comparison, not only less culturally-specific but also less critical of hegemonic masculinity. However, rather than signalling men's willingness to adapt to the changes wrought by second-wave feminism, these developments are suggestive of a somewhat more complex dynamic in the contemporary 'genderscape', whereby the more traditional elements of 'hard' masculinity, such as excessive displays of drinking, fighting, (hetero)sexual bravado and involvement in crime, have been resurrected and repackaged in the form of the underclass rebel. In spite of - or arguably in response to - the ubiquity of discourses in the public arena which celebrate the Metrosexual male and the perceived achievements of feminism, these antiheroes appear to be variously resistant, defiant, angry, conflicted, troubled or disenfranchised in the face of key social transformations. In this

sense, they largely eclipse the politics, aesthetics and target demographic of New Laddism, a phenomenon which started out as peculiarly British but which has cross-fertilised with other forms to produce a range of global representations of 'resistant' masculinity.

These male identities also encapsulate many of the features of the "protest masculinities" described by R.W. Connell (1995), whereby young unemployed men, in the absence of a gendered claim to power, exaggerate their claims to masculinity through excessive displays of sexuality, violence and rebellion. Rather than being treated as a social problem, however, such behaviours are arguably presented as a subcultural lifestyle which, according to British film theorist Claire Monk (2000), appeals both to those represented and to a post-political male audience which has little or no experience of drugs, poverty or unemployment. As Irish cinema has begun to look increasingly to successful formulae from elsewhere, the self-referential and allegedly ironic take on gender that is visible in films such as *Trainspotting*, *Lock Stock*, *Magnolia*, *Fight Club* and *Pulp Fiction* has become increasingly visible on our screens, albeit in "indigenized" form (Pettitt 2004). As Rod Stoneman readily acknowledges, "The cycle of created demand is locked into specific audience targeting, often focussed on a teenage male demographic" (2005: 259). Although the masculinities on display in Irish cinema are by no means static, homogenous or unambiguous, they can be said to constitute a cohesive discourse or set of discourses on masculinity that articulate with and only make sense within the context of the social, economic and gender-political specificities of the past decade.

The aestheticisation and commodification of socially-disadvantaged men, which according to the findings of the study cited above (Ging, PhD thesis: unpublished) were most enthusiastically and least critically received by working-class male viewers, may ultimately reinforce stereotypes and preconceptions about social exclusion in the popular imaginary. Even though the films offer recognition and valorisation of marginalised urban identities by presenting a counter-discourse to the news media's demonisation of socially-disadvantaged male youth (Devlin 2000), their celebration of these ways of life as subcultural styles runs the risk essentialising

and further marginalising these groups. As Will Higbee has commented in relation to French film *La Haine*, such imagery risks contributing to the "already exaggerated media representation of the disadvantaged urban periphery as the site of violence and delinquency which warrants the repressive police presence" (Higbee 2001: 202). Indeed the extreme polarity that has come to characterise media representations of young working-class men – as lawless and dangerous in the news media, yet reified as popular cultural heroes in advertising and the entertainment media – may ultimately be serving the same purpose, namely to stigmatise and essentialise underclass masculinity as social inevitability rather than social problem of the State.

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## *Adam and Paul*

Barry Monahan

Taking their cue from comments made by director Lenny Abrahamson, many reviewers of *Adam and Paul* (2004) compared elements of the film's style and content with the Laurel and Hardy series and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In terms of characterisation and mood, the similarities were so evident that few of the journalistic critics ventured to assess the extent of the resemblances. Certainly, the minor segments of physical comedy pratfalls and dialogue non-sequiturs, and the gradual emersion of the directionless protagonists into situations of epic and uncontrollable proportions echoed Henri Bergson's notion of the comic "snowball effect", and justify the first comparison.<sup>1</sup> Equally, the absurdity and existential lack of purpose of the central characters, their failure to act, their vaudevillian routines and circular conversations punctuated constantly by rhetorical questions, bear remarkable likeness to exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot*. Even the bothersome stone in Paul's shoe – the impediment that inaugurates his series of accidents – connects him with the continually suffering Estragon, the most corporeal and physically cursed of Beckett's tramps.

What becomes interesting once the parallels have been suggested however, is the way in which Mark O'Halloran's script – developed in collaboration with Abrahamson – contemporises these earlier aesthetic and structural moments for contemporary Irish audiences, half a century after the first staging of *En Attendant Godot* in Paris. The appropriation takes on a number of forms which become useful in understanding how themes that are relevant for present-day Ireland may be voiced through universal paradigms.

The trope of the dual protagonist has appeared frequently in recent Irish cinema and while it provides another similarity to the texts mentioned above, it also facilitates for the

screenwriter(s) a vocalisation of characters' otherwise undisclosed concerns, attitudes, reactions and feelings. In this way, a theatrical externalisation through dialogue connects spectators with characters intimately. Here, however, this does not happen. The erratic, illogical or indecisive nature of many of the exchanges between Adam and Paul actually ironises the externalisation by rendering it pointless as they remain largely inaccessible to us. As an alternative, we are provided with direct access to characters by another cinematic device. The audience is granted certain limited proximity to Adam and Paul at two moments of "internal focalization" (Branigan, 2004, 103); firstly during the scene in which the perfect family tableau occurs with Janine and the "baba", and later when they are tripping. Any alignment with their point of view at these times is however fatally undermined as we are not informed which of the characters is imagining or observing details in these scenes. It seems at first that the taller of the two is "seeing" the neon lights, the cigarette packet and the half-eaten apple core on the bridge, but eye lines are not matched in a way that can positively confirm this. Our separation from the "everyman" figures is also maintained because we never learn from the diegetic evidence which of them is Adam and which one Paul.<sup>2</sup> While this offers an interesting alternative to the operations of the star-system within mainstream genre cinema (the cast of the film were for the most part unknown Irish actors), it also counteracts the sense of continuity across the Laurel and Hardy series, and the immediate audience identification with those personalities whose characters *were* Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, both on and off screen.

Although Dublin city can be identified from a number of its iconographic and architectural elements, the urban space is not drawn upon to provide any sense of Irish locality or recognisable backdrop for precise geographical definition. Rather it is used as a narrative structuring device, containing the random addiction-motivated rambling of the protagonists as they move from one encounter to another in search of their next 'score'. Adam and Paul are the ultimate post-modern

1. See Bergson's "Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique", Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1940, alternatively a translated version is available on the web under the title: "Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" at <http://www.templeofearth.com/books/laughter.pdf>.

2. It is not until the closing credits that audiences can positively identify the characters, but even then only if familiar with the actors.

*flâneurs*; but their aimlessness does not provide for a positive connection with the urban space. Rather, they become socially alienated, detached and disoriented, and their failure to feel at home everywhere (as does the modern *flâneur*) marks the futility and absurdity of their existence. Although exterior spaces in the film are framed as an inversion of the “homely” – an expressionistic rendering of the *Unheimlich*<sup>3</sup> – interiors are even more unwelcoming and uninhabitable. In an ironic reversal, the city is depicted as “home-turned-inside-out” when items of domesticity are incongruously scattered on the landscape: televisions, a mattress, a microwave oven and fragments of furniture are among the objects that cross easily from private to public spaces. Nonetheless, the cold urban landscape still provides greater justification for the characters’ existence than any of the interior spaces depicted. The greasy café, the convenience shop, the “boring” materialistic domesticity of Janine’s “cleaned-up” flat, and the grimy pub that is appropriately named “The Coal Bunker”, are places in which Adam and Paul are shown to be utterly ill-at-ease.

It is through the inversion of expectations of inside and outside spaces, placing Adam and Paul as social outcasts, that the film dramatises our – and society’s – distance from them. The film thus comments on contemporary society by excluding it from the picture. By removing it, making it abject, it is associated with the condition of the characters, implicating those absent, passive and apathetic parties of Celtic Tiger Ireland in the on-screen situation by virtue of their absence, passivity and apathy.

The unconquerable potency of their addiction is ultimately dramatised when, on discovering that his friend is dead, Paul shrugs his shoulders, reflects for a moment and then leaves, only to return after a pause to collect the remaining bag of heroine from Adam’s pockets. The tragedy is sustained because they are never granted the moment of personal enlightenment or self-realisation that Vladimir is given in the second act of *Waiting for Godot*. The monologue that begins “Was I sleeping,

3. In his writing on the “Uncanny”, Freud emphasised the importance of the knowable qualities, characteristics and aspects necessarily embedded within the unfamiliarity of the *Unheimlich* in order for it to maintain its horror. See Nicholas Royle for a good explanation of this, (Royle, 2003)

while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?...” (Beckett, 1990, 84) expresses the absurdity of existence, but it implicitly guards Didi’s self-awareness as a positive quality. Adam and Paul’s utter inability to consider their existence in such terms, is played out through repeated references to Bulgaria. When Paul first discovers that Adam’s coat is “Made in Bulgaria”, he says that he feels “sorry for them”. As the music reflects the tonal qualities, sound and rhythms of Eastern European music, it aligns them with those they consider to be worse off than they. Ultimately, they are confronted directly with the question of self-awareness when they meet a Bulgarian refugee who has been criticising Dublin. When Adam asks him “Why are you here, then?” he returns the question: “ ‘Why am I here?’ Did you ever ask yourself the same question?” Incapable of considering an answer that would demand self-analysis, their next exchange is reminiscent of Beckett:

Adam:	Come on!
Paul:	Where?
Adam:	Just move!

The characters are never granted the void of cyclical purgatory of Didi and Gogo in a narrative sense, because the addictive cycle that suppresses them is rendered in a linear plot structure. At the beginning of the film, a rack focus positions them on either side of the two distant power station towers in Ringsend, geographically placing them somewhere (unidentified) on the South West suburbs of the city. Their journey ends when the final camera angle allows us sight of only one tower (the other is directly behind it) as Paul – now alone – awakens from his drugged sleep. Unlike Beckett’s characters, who suffer from an historical amnesia that undermines their ability to construct a future,<sup>4</sup> Adam and Paul’s future is bound to their briefly narrated past, and the death of their friend Matthew. Evidently inevitably, after Adam’s demise, for Paul it is only a matter of time.

4. Declan Kiberd has written in detail about Beckett’s characters’ relationship to their past, and he mentions specifically Estragon: “As a victim of a history which he does not understand, Gogo must deal with every situation as if it were a wholly new event.” (1996, 539)

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articles on Irish film history and contemporary Irish cinema, and is currently researching work by Abbey Theatre players and repertoire writers on screen.

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### ***Adam and Paul* (Irl, 2004)**

Director: Leonard (Lenny) Abrahamson  
 Writer: Mark O'Halloran  
 Cast (Principal): Tom Murphy, Mark O'Halloran, Louise Lewis, Paul Roe, Ion Caramitru  
 Cinematography: James Mather  
 Music: Stephen Rennicks  
 Producers: Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe

## *The Trouble With Sex*

Emma Grealy

Shot in twenty-eight days, Fintan Connolly's *The Trouble with Sex* (2005) is a brash attempt at dealing with the formerly taboo subject of sex as a central subject in contemporary Irish cinema. Paradoxically however, more results in less. As was the case with the director's feature debut, *Flick* (2000), which focused primarily on the similarly under-exposed subject of drug-dealing, the overt representation of sexuality in the film thwarts plot development, severs audience-character identification and limits the film's narrative potential. The film vacillates between modes of melodrama and avant-gardism, unsure what kind of film it is. It isn't the serious exploration of the boundaries of the screened sexual act seen in recent boundary-pushing engagements like Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* (2004) and Patrice Chereau's *Intimacy* (2001) because the sex scenes are perfunctory and banal. But neither is it a compelling romance; the characters fail to elicit any emotive response from the viewer.

While Connolly claims sex in the film serves as a pivotal theme from which a relationship emerges (Shields 2005: 12); promoting the film primarily as a love story, the film is better interpreted as an exploration of the dilemma that 'New Ireland' faces. The meeting of Michelle (Renée Weldon), the successful corporate lawyer and symbol of New Ireland and Conor (Aidan Gillen), the anachronistic male anchored by loyalty to his heritage, reveals a disparity between the two value systems. How can 'New Ireland' reconcile itself with its traditional counterpart, given this disparity? In this guise, the characters therefore must reconcile their sexual attraction to each other and their contrasting attitudes towards relationships. Perhaps a narrow foundation for a feature film, nonetheless, this brings about a tug of war of contrasting representations.

While the character of Michelle embodies Ireland's current engagement with capitalism and the edicts of consumerism, Conor is stifled by a sense of responsibility, the burden of tradition and attendant frustration. He remains working in his family's bar in order to care for his father (Eamon Morrissey), the caricatured drunken, Irish male, while Michelle's equally

dependent mother Rosie (Susan Fitzgerald) is kept within the confines of a nursing home. Here we encounter the first in the series of contrasting value systems. Traditional Ireland promotes family engagement and privileges local community while 'New Ireland' abuses society for its own profitable gains. Michelle ignores the street busker while Conor gives him change, Michelle dances with Conor's father to console herself rather than out of need for affection. Michelle seeks out Conor for sexual gratification while he expresses affection that is more genuine. Therein lies the proposed subtext of the film: the reversal of roles. The dominant male role has shifted as seen in the emasculation of Michelle. She is forced to reconfigure her femininity under the heavy costuming of a male business suit for capitalist success and consequently substitutes sex for emotional engagement, which Conor recognises during the break-up scene. While Conor unreservedly demands commitment, Michelle, seeming to be speaking as a medium for a modern mores, accuses him of naivety. Of course this is exactly the case as Conor guards a more traditional morality which he makes known to Michelle on their first date, 'Mid-thirties male seeks similar, no time-wasters please'.

The film's reliance on contrast is also exploited in its cinematography. Director Fintan Connolly has claimed that Caravaggio and Edward Hopper inspired the visual character of the film (Shields 2005: 14), however its visual style is also highly reminiscent of Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* (2002) and, in turn, Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Cinematographer Owen McPolin draws on a palate of red, blue, black and white that function as codas for desire, contentment, death and loneliness respectively. Harsh, clinical lighting floods bedroom scenes for the first half of the film awaiting Conor and Michelle's liaison to transfer from detached sexual encounter to emotional engagement, consequently warming bleached white lighting to that of autumnal yellow. Again the film depends on clear parallels to fuse the transition from isolation to solidarity. In heightened contrast to bedroom scenes, Flynn's bar, Conor's environment, is a crypt of red walls covered in pictures of figures of the 1916 Rising, thus chastising desire with images of sacrifice and solidifying Conor's position as frustrated anachronism. Both

characters are also used as dual signifiers to signpost narrative direction, a point most obviously seen towards the close of the film with the death of Conor's father. This sequence of shots first shows Michelle in full black dress then cuts to Conor attempting to wake his father in bed. This is followed by a shot of Conor carrying the coffin at the funeral which cuts to Conor and Michelle's chance meeting, both dressed in formal black clothing, and finally consolidating the sequence with the closing shot of the film where both characters are in bed together.

Such a denouement obviously gives symmetry to the piece as the closing shot returns to the opening of Michelle's face, the lighting having changed from a hostile blue to sensual red, the implied argument being that Michelle is now a content, emotional participant in her relationship whereas previously she was disenchanted as a result of her connection to her adulterous boyfriend Ivan. In terms of the clash of 'New Ireland' and its traditional counterpart the film proposes a meek compromise: Conor sells his pub and thus all vestiges of his past in an attempt to engage with 'New Ireland' in the form of his relationship with Michelle and one would assume a new career. Michelle has empathised with Conor over the death of his father thus reflecting 'New Ireland's' lament for the past. However, it is a fundamentally conservative conclusion, promoting monogamous heterosexual coupling above all, re-affirming the film's uninspiring exploration of the contemporary Irish relationship- drama.

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### ***The Trouble With Sex*** (Irl, 2005)

Director: Fintan Connelly.

Writer: Fintan Connelly, Catriona McGowan.

Cast (Principal): Renee Weldon, Aiden Gillan, Susan Fitzgerald, Declan Conlon, Darrah Kelly, Eamonn Morrissey.

Cinematographer: Owen McPolin.

Music: Niall Byrne.

Producer: Fiona Bergin.

## *Pure Mule*

Tony Tracy

In any year 'Pure Mule' would be a significant achievement. That it received 8 IFTA nominations in 2005 – winning 5 – speaks for itself about its place in the televisual landscape of the past 12 months. RTÉ, through its Independent Production Unit (IPU) – as well as a number of in-house productions – has now made several years of television drama worth talking about, breaking a long and arid period of inactivity. Produced by 'Accomplice TV' (producers David Collins and Ed Guiney, who also made 'Bachelor's Walk'), 'Pure Mule' is testimony to an impressively courageous strategy of development by the IPU which has been responsible for a number of similarly interesting, if not always as successful, projects over the past 5 years.

'Pure Mule's 6 hours of prime-time television (6 x 52 min episodes) can be located within two textual precedents. The first is a growing confidence in the production of television drama alluded to above which has resulted in mini-series as varied as 'Any Time Now', 'Bachelors Walk' (3 series), 'Love is the Drug', 'Paths of Glory', 'Fergus' Wedding' and 'Showbands'. The primary target audience for these programmes is the much sought-after 15-34 demographic, central to advertising spend. In reality, they have come from the pens of middle-class programme makers in their 30s and bear the concerns and perspectives of the pre M50 generation.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the 'retro' Showbands, these shows in various ways have attempted to depict a (post)modern Ireland, located in the narrative 'interstice' between the immediacy (and production values) of soap opera and universalising tendency of cinema. Taken as a whole, we can trace lineaments of concern in these series. These would include a preference for the comic mode (although this is often tainted by a bitter-sweet melancholia or satire); an attempt to locate the fault-lines of a culture in transition; discomfort with changing social values among small communities of characters; and an interest in representing the 'new spaces' of Irish life – apartments, landmarks and construction sites – as if they in

1. The M50 is the perimeter road on the west of Dublin which began construction in the early 1990s.

some way offer expressive possibilities for a changed condition of Irishness.

So successful have these series been in critical and audience terms, one is tempted to suggest that a majority of development energy and production finance should be directed to this sector. The recurring presence of a group of individuals (actors, directors, producers) and production companies suggests that some have made just that decision, with *Accomplice* and *Grand Pictures* in particular notable for their cultivation of talent.<sup>2</sup> At the very least a new and exciting space for audiovisual expression has been opened up, which can confidently and successfully compete with content from the US and the UK in way that feature films in theatrical release find much more difficult.

'Pure Mule', is arguably the most artistically ambitious production to date; a stylish and confident amplification of themes and setting found in a second textual precedent: writer Eugene O'Brien's play 'Eden'. I saw this on its original Abbey tour in 2001 and the clarity of its vision, characterisation and writing left an indelible impression. Don Wycherley, who would soon after come to widespread attention in 'Bachelor's Walk', played opposite Catherine Walsh in a two-sided monologue between a married couple on in their 30s. Set – or at least inspired by – O'Brien's native Edenderry, Co Offaly, the play's title brought a degree of anonymity and therefore generality to the story's setting, a painful and at times painfully funny, meditation on married life in a small, claustrophobic and unequivocally post-lapsarian Irish country town. Like his fellow emerging Irish playwrights, Conor McPherson (who directed the Abbey stage production of 'Eden') and Mark O'Rowe ('Howie the Rookie', 'Made in China'), O'Brien adopted the monologue form to give vent to character's secret lives, exposing an agonizing gulf between public and private identities that bordered on schizophrenic.<sup>3</sup> Like O'Rowe and McPherson O'Brien's world was resolutely male – even when it offered a female voice - focussed around alcohol, frustrated sexual

2. As this article was going to press this analysis took a particular twist with news that Mary Callery, the commissioning editor of drama series for RTE, had left the broadcaster to join independent production company Parallel Films.

ambition and self-loathing. It made for dark and exhilarating viewing.

'Pure Mule' revisits similar territory – some characters and situations bear similarities to 'Eden' – giving voice and dimension to a broader group of characters from an unnamed small town. Neither rural nor urban this in-between place is reminiscent of contemporary Ireland at large – part of an amorphous sub-urban sprawl, caught between paradigms of community, values and the social politics of space. The use of locations are expressive of this see-saw identity: with the fulcrum of the pub sitting between domestic interiors of traditional Ireland (one of which houses the painfully poignant figure of a middle-aged mother with Alzheimer's) and a new housing estate which remains under construction for the entire series. The characters of 'Pure Mule' move physically and imaginatively back and forth between these spaces; confused and often blind, they stagger (mostly literally) between past and future, between the confines of tradition and the new promise of consumerist plenty.

While many recent Irish films seem more properly suited to television than the big screen in ambition and technique, 'Pure Mule' opens a space for a hybrid format. Showing the influence of a structuring trend popular in US independent cinema (*Magnolia*, *Night on Earth*, *Crash*, *Traffic*) and a commitment to writing development found in some of the best American television (*The Sopranos*) it allows individual characters a separate episode ('Shamie', 'Kevin', 'Scobie' . . .) to shape the point of view (offering 'multiple focalisation') of six weekends from Friday evening to Monday morning, while maintaining a broader communal canvas. The plurality of perspectives links the series with similar cinematic narratives, allowing each episode to stand alone while being part of a whole, while the generous length of the overall 'story' facilitates a developing, complex and often unresolved set of relationships. Furthermore this allows for a welcome balancing of gender perspectives; three male, three female. Of course, this structure conforms to many definitions of post-modern narrative in its polyphony and weakening of a central

3. A crises of language is inherent in O'Brien's vision or, more properly, a crises of communication in which language is opaque or deceiving.

narrative voice. Visually, the cinematograph of Owen McPolin puts the look of the series on a par with many feature films. Among McPolin's credits are *Showbands*, *Headrush* and *Flick*, all of which featured photography of a rich and atmospheric quality, not quite painterly or formal but far from social realism. There is an expressive quality to his lighting and composition which, in this instance, adds flourishes of formal beauty to landscapes (the much maligned midlands) and settings (the building site in particular) normally unexplored and unacknowledged. The overall effect is one of heightened realism, reflecting the alcohol-addled adventures of the characters' weekends.

If the series represents a community in transition the grounding preoccupation of 'Pure Mule' lies in Ireland's Catholic past. Its creators and character are obsessed with sex and heterosexual union. The pub dominates as the locus of interaction but only as a pretext, through the anaesthesia of alcohol, to sexual seduction. One of the series' central characters, Scobie, is a builder during the week and rough-hewn Casanova on the weekends, one minute excited about the possibility of experiencing a 'real-life porn movie', and later seducing his now married babysitter. He is also depicted considering or engaged in masturbation on several occasions. Male fantasy, desperation and immaturity dominate the sexual agenda with the three lead female characters of 'Pure Mule' responding to that agenda to a greater or lesser extent. The sexual politics of the series are its most compelling aspect – indeed there is little else – but they remain stubbornly predictable after a number of episodes. There is an underlying fixation with sexual repression by the writer, with only a cursory interest in any larger dimension of modern Irish life. The decision by Jennifer - the one female character who is single and in no great hurry to get 'her man' - to re-emigrate at the end of the series (having returned from Australia at the beginning), might be read not only as an inability to function within the crushingly dull, if recently 'liberated', confines of small town sexuality but equally, on a meta-textual level, in the drama that it has given rise to.

If elements of drink-filled 'Pure Mule' sound stereotypical and limited it's because they are. What lifts them above familiarity and gives the series cultural resonance and relevance is the quality of the writing and

uniformly excellent performances. There are no actors named in the opening credits, no stars identified as central and few of the more familiar faces of the Irish acting world here. Ireland has an almost baffling abundance of acting talent, and all here breath life and soul into their characters lifting them well beyond the types that they are inspired by and could so easily be reduced to. Eileen Walsh, Dawn Bradfield and Tom Murphy deservedly took awards for acting at this years IFTAs but the whole cast deserve credit for the nuance, complexity and depth of their performances. It was this collective presentation of flawed, confused, unremarkable and often unattractive characters that formed a strong bond with Irish audiences, so far from GAP-styled vacuity of *Friends* and similar sit-coms. Of course, 'Pure Mule' lapsed into sentimentality and cliché on occasion, and although it ignored many issues and characters that have come to make up contemporary Ireland, it sought to offer viewers an infrequently realised, though widely familiar vista of a culture still mired in the twin preoccupations of sex and drink. In this concern it showed itself to be as much a product of its time as of imagination.

'Pure Mule' aired over 6 weeks in September/October 2005. As for the title, it is explained in the publicity for the series thus: 'Pure Mule' can be positive or negative – 'went out, long queue, shite beer, no craic, walked home in the rain on me own, it was 'Pure Mule'' or 'went out, straight in, no kissin', loadsa drink and scored big time, it was 'Pure Mule''. It all depends on the intonation.<sup>4</sup>

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4. <http://www.rte.ie/tv/puremule/>  
(Accessed: November 4, 2005)

### ***Pure Mule*** (Irl, 2005)

Directors: Charlie McCarthy, Declan Recks  
Screenplay: Lauren Mackenzie (story), Eugene O'Brien.

Cast (Principal): Garret Lombard, Tom Murphy, Luke Griffin, Eileen Walsh, Gary Lydon, Dawn Bradfield.

Cinematography: Owen McPolin

Music: Mundy, Stephen Rennicks

Producers: David Collins, Ed Guiney, Mary Callery (executive, RTE)

## *Fair City*

Helena Sheehan

There was a sense of a yawning gap in the picture of Irish society emerging from RTE drama ever since the demise of *Tolka Row* (1964-1968). For the next two decades, there was talk of the need for a new urban serial. When RTE announced *Fair City* in its autumn schedule for 1989, it was at the centre of anticipation. Much effort and major investment had gone into its development.

The opening sequence evoked Dublin with an aerial overview of the city. The pilot opened with a succession of breakfast scenes in a number of houses with a running thread of various characters commenting on the story on the front of the *Northside People* featuring the first anniversary of the local community enterprise centre. As the day went on, these characters all converged on this centre. In between there was much happening: people coming and going, phone messages being conveyed, characters gossiping about other characters, rows about relationships and money. There were a flurry of reviews and a vox-pop on the streets of Dublin. The consensus was that it had got off to a frenetic start, that it was not clear who was doing what and why, but that it should be given a chance.

The pace slowed somewhat, sometimes to the point of the pedestrian. All sorts of things were tried, but the audience fell and the critics became harsher. Inside RTE, there was consternation, but also commitment to do whatever it took to fix it. Sometimes it seemed that the desperation to make it better only made it worse. It was trying too hard to be something without being too sure what that something was. It was too bitty. There was too much happening for too little reason. It was too imitative. It was looking too much to *Eastenders* and not enough to contemporary Dublin.

By the end of first series, the centre was burnt down and characters had to find alternative employment. The emphasis was more on personal relationships and less on community activities. All through the series there has been much recycling of soap opera clichés: much pairing and triangulating, long lost parents and children, rape, abortion, kidnapping, sexual harassment, blackmail, murder. There were comings and goings, births

and deaths, windfalls and debts, rows and reconciliations, but there often seemed to be insufficient reason why. It has often seemed to be soap opera by the numbers.

Although most characters were supposed to be of working class origins, not many were wage labourers and they worked primarily in the local businesses. It often seemed that Carrigstown was more like a 1950s rural village than a 1990s city. Everybody lived in each other's pockets and knew each other's business. This was soap opera convention, but it was not urban life.

As the years moved on, *Fair City* evolved. By 2001 it was going out 4 nights a week. The new opening sequence in 2005 is a stylish evocation of the tiger city, showing the Luas, the boardwalks, the cafe bars, but also the old flats, terraced houses and fruit stalls. It is the look of a city that has come up in the world, as indeed it has. It shows too in the characters. They are less downtrodden, but not fabulously rich, reflecting the rising tide lifting many (if not all) boats.

It has come to have more of a feel of the city about it with characters moving through the larger city, although there are still too many of them who own and work in local businesses. Suzanne and Sarah went to university. Location shooting opens out into shopping centres, night clubs, city streets. There is also more of a sense of the wider world in the way the script refers outwards even when the cameras don't go there, although it is intermittent and it varies with scriptwriters. Sergei, a Russian immigrant, even gave the locals a lecture on *perestroika*. Suzanne arrived back home from Borneo to scrutinise Carrigstowners on their use of fair trade products. Kay and Charlie, like much of the rest of the world, read and discussed *The Da Vinci Code*.

The no politics or religion rule of earlier years is no longer in force, although there is still a certain caution in dealing with politics and the north is an area that is avoided. Now politicians are regular characters. They belong to "the party", which is never named, but is unmistakably Fianna Fail. There have been references, even if only in passing, to the tribunals and the political corruption exposed in them. Sometimes there have been storylines that situate the local community and its characters in relation to power and property, such as those about the closure of the local

library, a pirate radio station, a rent strike and a proposal to re-site the homeless shelter.

An important story reflecting the evolving relationship of Ireland to the politics of the wider world was the entry of a refugee into Carrigstown. Ashti was a Kurdish teacher who fled to Ireland, feeling caught between the Turkish authorities and those in armed struggle against them. At first, the only work he could find was selling *The Big Issues* on the streets of Dublin. It highlighted the difficult lives asylum seekers left behind, in this case including torture, the ruthlessness of those who profited on their transit and the suspicions surrounding them on arrival.

Characters represent interesting dimensions of contemporary Ireland. Although they rarely articulate any sort of ideological self-consciousness, they nevertheless embody a number of ideological positions. Nicola Prendergast is an excellent embodiment of the yuppie mentality, while other characters give occasional expression to a social critique to the left: Charlie Kelly, Tara McCann, Malachy Costello and Barry O'Hanlon. Older characters represent traditionalist Ireland in a society not very respectful of its traditions in a more and more confused way. Mary O'Hanlon, now dead, was closer to the Irish mothers who populated earlier serials. Eunice Phelan's mind is a dustbin of contradictory half-baked ideas, mixing old-fashioned Catholicism with tarot cards, horoscopes, reincarnation and celebrity gossip.

The women have been relatively liberated. They might not all have glamorous careers, but they do a day's work, even if it is working behind the counter of a pub, sandwich bar or corner shop. Going against gender stereotypes in their jobs were Robin, a car mechanic, Tess, a taxi driver and Karl, a male nanny.

The kinds of relationships explored have been more various. Inter-racial romance might raise a few eyebrows, but first Nicola and Ben and now Louise and Joshua go with it. Gay Pride too came to Carrigstown. Eoghan Healy first appeared as a DCU student, working his way through university. Carrigstown took it in its stride when he came out. He subsequently became a teacher in the local school. He took up with Andrew, a fellow teacher, who had a partner dying of AIDS, who wanted help to die. Andrew would not do so, but Eoghan did. Simon's relatives denounced Eoghan in a crowded school hall. Not only was his career

as a teacher in ruins, but he was questioned by the Gardaí and the case was forwarded for prosecution.

The norms of sexual morality have shifted dramatically in both soap opera and society. The dominant point of view in how Eoghan's character was constructed was that he was a person of high moral character, whereas those who messed with him were not. On abortion, there have been several stories. Niamh became pregnant by Leo and went to England to do what many Irish women have done, without much soul searching. A more maturely explored and morally nuanced story came when Kay and Malachy, who treated the news of pregnancy with joy, found themselves on the horns of an agonising ethical and emotional dilemma after the amniocentesis. The child would be severely disabled. With great regret, Kay went to England and had an abortion. Malachy could not accept it. The edgy painful relationship between them after it was dealt with in a protracted and sophisticated way.

For most of the time, the characters live their lives outside the norms of Catholic sexual morality with very little in the way of moral discourse about it. The adulterous affair between Dolores in an advanced stage of pregnancy with Frank in the house doing work on new baby's nursery pushed at the boundaries of transgression. So too was Billy's view that "sex is a commodity to be sold like anything else". The steamy liaison between Sorcha, a secondary school teacher, and her pupil Ross, the object of her daughter's desire, went far into the breach.

*Fair City* has tacitly tracked the secularisation of Irish society. It is assumed that most of the characters are Catholic, but it impacts little on their lives. The first time a priest entered Carrigstown as a core character was when Malachy Costello appeared on leave from the foreign missions. He was one of those priests who believed that they belonged with the poor and oppressed. He became involved in a relationship to Kay McCoy and eventually became laicised and married. It was not happily ever after. He could not settle into private domesticity or confine his role in the community to being a publican. He still felt a sense of vocation and a pull to those struggling from below. He has devoted much of his time to running a shelter for the homeless.

The issue of clerical sexual abuse came to the fore in special episodes. The serial in

recent years has broken from genre convention from time to time to deal with storylines which foreground a whole set of new characters and background the regular ones. These episodes dealt with a troubled victim, his family, his abuser and priests on both sides of the debate about how the church should deal with it. A Killarney priest made *Fair City* the subject of his homily, upset that the serial had portrayed a priest breaking the seal of the confessional. The health service was at the centre of drama in another special, but it needed to be a lot more extras to convey how bad conditions were in the Mater hospital Accident & Emergency.

This is not Dublin in the rare old times. It is not the fair city of fish mongers, of cockles and mussels, alive-alive-o. No, this is a Dublin of hotmail and health clubs, of sex in the city, of clubbing and cocaine, of refugees and racism, of crime and compassion, of poverty and property, of books and websites and universities. These Dubliners live in a new millennium, a multicultural milieu. They are open to its possibilities. These are the descendants of Molly Malone.

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## *Mickybo and Me and The Mighty Celt*

Pádraic Whyte

Although *Mickybo and Me* (2005) and *The Mighty Celt* (2005) initially appear to have much in common by representing both images of the conflict in Northern Ireland and concepts of childhood, the films differ enormously in their treatment of such issues. While *Mickybo and Me* offers the spectator a predominantly complex representation of childhood experience, *The Mighty Celt* succumbs to clichéd and stereotypical images of both childhood and Northern Ireland.

Set in Belfast in the summer of 1970, *Mickybo and Me* is an adaptation of Owen McCafferty's 1998 play *Mojo-Mickybo* and follows the story of two boys, Jonjo (9) and Mickybo (8), one Protestant and the other Catholic. Inspired by a viewing of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the boys adopt the personas of the two anti-heroes and imagine that Belfast is their own Dodge city. After believing they could be implicated in the death of Old Barney, the boys go on the run, hoping to reach Australia. The strength of the film lies in the foregrounding of comic childhood adventures in the narrative, leaving the violent sectarian conflict in the background but always within sight. The atrocities of the 'Troubles' are clearly represented and continually act as an impending threat to the boys' games, but (until the end of the film) do not distract from the friendship of the two, which is the central focus of the narrative. This is evident when Jonjo is woken by bomb blasts in the middle of the night, as his main concern is with the welfare of his friend rather than the wider political implications of the violence.

Ultimately, the violent conflict in Belfast provides them with an even greater opportunity to re-enact scenes from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, to brandish guns, rob banks, and escape from the police. Writer and director Terry Loane establishes a comic tone to these capers, particularly in the climactic escape sequence as the two boys decide to risk all and jump into the sea. The scene is then quickly juxtaposed with a shot of Jonjo and Mickybo dripping wet and seated in the back of a Garda car, comically establishing that despite all their bravado, their adventurous plan has failed.

However, Loane never over-sentimentalises the characters and this humour

is coupled with a very real threat of danger. As they find a real gun loaded with ammunition, the unpredictability of the boys' behaviour heightens the tension of the film as Mickybo asserts 'People don't slobber at you when you've got a gun'. As they ward off the older bullies, their naive understanding of the power of a gun, shaped by their surroundings and their cinema-going, causes them to make an easy transition from the world of childhood play into the realm of armed violence. Throughout the film, rather than portraying an adult nostalgia for childhood, Loane suggests that children can be just as dangerous and cruel as adults.

However, the complexities of the text are undermined by the over-sentimentalised final sequence which shows an adult Mickybo sitting in a pub while reading a letter from his now estranged friend Jonjo. The concluding lines contain the phrase 'let the children be children', conforming to stereotypes of childhood innocence, a trope which dominates *The Mighty Celt*.

Written and directed by Pearse Elliott, *The Mighty Celt* offers a representation of 'Post-Troubles' Northern Ireland. The narrative centres on a thirteen year old boy, Donal, who works with greyhounds. He makes a deal with Joe (Ken Stott), the owner of the kennels, that if his dog (the Might Celt) wins three races, Donal (Tyrone McKenna) will get to keep the dog for himself. However, Joe abuses the dog, reneges on his promise, and kills the Mighty Celt.

The film contains a great performance from Gillian Anderson as Donal's single mother Kate and most of the humorous moments derive from Kate and O's (Robert Carlyle) awkwardly comic interactions. However, Elliott's script lacks any depth or complexity and is laboriously episodic as the narrative repeats cliché after cliché. This is mixed with a failed attempt at humour as a series of "bum-bandit" jokes uncomfortably align paedophilia and homosexuality. This repetition is also evident in many of the themes and images as the audience are saturated with simplistic semiotics, with the result that the climactic confrontation scene lacks any dramatic tension.

It is quickly established that while Kate worships the memory of her brother, a member of the IRA who was killed during the 'Troubles', she does not support any form of

continued violence. However, Elliott feels the need to repeat this argument ad nauseam. This issue eventually culminates toward the end of the film when an offer to give Joe a punishment beating is emphatically declined. Joe is represented as an evil two-dimensional character that wishes to perpetuate violence and is established as a Northern Cruella De Vil, lacking any sense of complexity. As a result, Joe is aligned with butchering as he is repeatedly represented chopping meat for the dogs.

Similarly, while McKenna gives a good performance as Donal, the child character is portrayed in sentimentally innocent terms as Elliott foregrounds the boy's closeness to animals and nature (in contrast to the violent and aggressive Joe). Such a technique dominates many children's film from *Lassie Come Home* (1943) to *Fly Away Home* (1996). However, as the audience are presented with a plethora of shots of Donal bonding with the Mighty Celt, Elliot over-uses such a concept. As a result, by portraying simplistic binaries of good and evil, the film undermines the complexity of Peace Process culture in the North and adheres to stereotypical versions of both childhood and Northern Ireland.

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### *Mickeybo and Me* (Irl, 2005)

Director: Terry Loane  
 Writer: Terry Loane, Owen McCafferty  
 Cast (Principal): John Joe O'Neill, Niall Wright, Julie Walters, Ciaran Hinds, Adrian Dunbar, Gina McKee, Susan Lynch.  
 Cinematography: Roman Osin  
 Music: Stephen Warbeck  
 Producers: Mark Huffam, Mike McGeagh

### *The Mighty Celt* (Irl, 2005)

Director: Pearse Elliott  
 Writer: Pearse Elliot  
 Cast (Principle): Gillian Anderson, Robert Carlyle, Ken Stott, Tyrone McKenna, Alison Finnegan  
 Cinematography:  
 Music: Adrian Johnston  
 Producer: Paddy Breathnach, Robert Walpole, Paddy McDonald.

## *Man About Dog*

Díóg O'Connell

*Man About Dog* (2004) is an Irish comedy-caper-road-movie about three Northern wide-boys who manage to get their hands on a prize-winning greyhound. They travel from North to South in pursuit of their fortune chased by a big-shot greyhound breeder and a group of Irish travelers, who are intent on claiming their winnings.

In the film many aspects of narrative structure, theme and visual style that have come to be identified with New Irish Cinema,<sup>1</sup> intersect, tracing key developments in Irish cinema at large and in particular, the ongoing relationship between southern and Northern Ireland since the re-activation of Bord Scannan na hEireann/Irish Film Board in 1993. This film reveals how identity politics and film narratives have shifted significantly during this period, with the emphasis on the 'national' being, in more recent times, eschewed. While the discourse of national identity has served Irish film well over a long period, providing a cogent methodology for examining Irish cinema's First Wave (1975-1989), off-shore<sup>2</sup> and foreign productions over the past 30 years, its value to the analysis of contemporary indigenous film-making is less pronounced. Film-makers in Ireland today appear less concerned with the exploration of national identity; contemporary Irish cinema reveals an identity formation that is more aligned to mainstream popular culture relying on cultural universals rather than specificities. Where identity is specific, it is at the level of consumer products that cross easily between national borders, mainstream cinema being one of the dominant cultural underpinnings. Many of the transformations in style and content within Irish film over the last decade or so can be surveyed microscopically in the film *Man About Dog* – illustrating developments in the macroscopic practices of New Irish Cinema at large.

1. New Irish Cinema is a term Ruth Barton uses in her book *Irish National Cinema* (2004) to describe Irish cinema since the 1990s.

2. Off-shore productions refer to films made in Ireland by foreign producers, principally US film-makers.

*Man About Dog* can be categorised as a "post cease-fire" film, whereby the North of Ireland is used as a location backdrop with little exploration of politics in the story line and almost no reference to the "Troubles". In a similar way to *Accelerator* (2000), *Sunset Heights* (1998) and *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (2001) the backdrop of Northern Ireland is used to launch the narrative and locate the story. While the premise of the plot may be linked to the "Troubles" or remnants of the conflict since the cease-fire, the central dramatic theme is usually more universal and often humanistic, less locally specific and rarely political, a characteristic of contemporary Irish writing that, on a surface level, could take place 'anywhere'.<sup>3</sup>

As Martin McLoone (2001) has argued, although many films set in Ireland since 1993 are not necessarily political films, one can engage with them in a political way, suggesting that far from being ideologically neutral, these films reveal a political nuance in its broadest sense. Whether as a reaction to the perceived notion of what an Irish film is or to thirty years of political violence in Northern Ireland, recent Irish writers and directors are increasingly appropriating the political situation in the North for comic purposes. The collective response among film-makers in Ireland, possibly reflecting a wider reaction to the cessation of political violence, is not to analyse and reflect through the medium of film, but to laugh, creating a catharsis of relief having finally discarded the fighting Irish stigma and stereotype that has sustained many Irish film narratives. Comedy is the chosen method by southern film-makers to explore the Northern situation which often eclipses an overtly political resonance. The record-setting box office receipts for *Man About Dog*, (€2.5 million in Ireland, making it the highest grossing Irish Film Board film since its re-activation in 1993) suggests that the domestic

3. While Irish producers / directors / screenwriters have not completely abandoned the "Troubles" as inspiration and story matter (*Bogwoman* (1997), *Bloody Sunday* (2002), *A Further Gesture* (1996), *Some Mother's Son* (1996), *H3* (2001), *Silent Grace* (2001), *High Boot Benny* (1993) *Nothing Personal* (1995) and *The Boxer* (1998)), these productions are being replaced by stories less concerned with the political situation than using Northern Ireland as a location back-drop, since the dawn of the new millennium.

audience is responding favourably to this type of exploration.

Despite challenging the notion that a national cinema exists, in an article entitled “The Myth of an Irish Cinema”, Michael Gillespie (forthcoming 2006) states that ‘a film industry [in Ireland] does exist, but, from the beginning of the last century to the present, the efforts of foreign and national filmmakers have been indistinguishable from one another at every level of the production process’. His argument heralds a new way of examining Irish films like *Man About Dog* and those mentioned above that eschew and reject the parameters of national identity as a framing device. What he suggests is that now is the time to shift focus, to look for the ‘Irishness’ in these films rather than claiming them as ‘Irish’. Certainly, looking for the ‘Irishness’ in *Man About Dog* poses a challenge. Firstly, the viewer must sieve through the ‘Americanness’ of the film which is much more overt. Referencing popular culture is not a new phenomenon in film but appears to be a trademark of recent Irish film (*When Brendan met Trudy*, Kieron J. Walsh 2001). In *Man About Dog*, the references span a whole range of mainstream films from *Mad Max* (1979) to *Pulp Fiction* (1994), either through deliberate appropriation or straightforward self-reflexivity.

While the iconography of the “Troubles” has not been left behind – murals, west Belfast, isolated farms – the American road movie dominates with its symbols of isolated diners and gas stations against a ‘sublime’ landscape which evoke notions of rootlessness and aimlessness. Just as the road movie is often associated with male existential angst, *Man About Dog* complies by satisfying the expectation of a restive and recuperative function. The purpose of the road movie is to allow the character travel, and as Baudrillard suggests, the thrill of travelling to different places is the realisation of immortality rather than revelation through experience. Travelling, by freeing the character from the social, puts him/her on a different plane and thus evokes a spiritual dimension, a central tenet of the American road movie. However, this reconfiguration of the journey as a mythical voyage is notably absent from the recent spate of Irish road movies (*I Went Down* (1997), *Accelerator*). Clearly, identity in these recent Irish films is constructed by reference to

popular culture, principally the movies, yet the enduring spiritual and mythical resonance of film has not been appropriated alongside the iconography and visual style.

Thus the aesthetics, narratives and stories emerging since the re-activation of the Irish Film Board in 1993 and since the cease-fire of 1994 reveal that Irish cinema is functioning within a medium that combines an international shape with national elements – principally by integrating universal (humanistic), global approaches to narrative and theme while firmly rooting their elemental expression to a local and often idiosyncratic milieu. Seeking the ‘Irishness’ in *Man About Dog* and other films of this era as Gillespie suggests, reveals a characteristic Irish humour, identifiable local actors and recognisable locations. Far from making films that might travel to an international market through their universal themes (such as the pursuit of a dream, of love, of ambition for example), it appears that this combination is addressed to a domestic audience. These films tell stories that are structured within a mainstream American narrative combined with strong local resonance and inflection, thus suggesting that identity in Irish film is still a live issue and pertinent to cinema analysis. However, identity occurs at the level of affiliation to products of popular culture – American generic film, and not Irish history and politics – yet the comic and dramatic references in *Man About Dog* are culturally specific and far from universal. While shaking off some of the domineering devices of the past, Irish cinema has still many contradictions to work out. *Man About Dog* reveals New Irish Cinema’s capacity for the task and suggests that identity politics is a much more complex framework for analysis than the national dimension would suggest.

**Dr. Díóg O’Connell** lectures at the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire in film and media. She was recently awarded a doctorate from DCU for her study of narrative strategies in contemporary Irish cinema.

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***Man About Dog*** (Irl, 2005)

Director: Paddy Breathnach

Screenplay: Pearse Elliot

Cinematography: Cian de Buitléar

Cast (Principal): Allen Leach, Ciaran Nolan,  
Tom Murphy, Sean McGinley, Pat Shortt,  
Fionnula Flanagan

Music: Stephen Rennicks

Producers: Simon Channing-Williams, Robert Walpole.

## Documentary Film and Television

Harvey O'Brien

The year 2005 was a significant one for Irish documentary, marking the release of one of the most important non-fiction films ever seen on the island. Unfortunately, it was actually made in 1968. The re-release of Peter Lennon's *Rocky Road to Dublin* marked the climax of years of struggle for this disgracefully neglected film. Made in a whirlwind of *camera stylo* with the help of American financier Victor Herbert and acclaimed *nouvelle vague* cameraman Raoul Coutard, Lennon's avowedly personal, angry assault on the stagnation of the Irish nation under the twin yokes of Church and State was both condemned and repressed on its original release.

Shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1968 but only reluctantly screened at the Cork Film Festival the same year, the film received only limited distribution in Ireland until 2005. Its strident posing of the disturbing question "What do you do with your revolution once you have it?" found favour with the French in May 1968, and had the film hailed "one of the three or four most beautiful documents the cinema has given us" in *Cahiers du Cinema*. It was also held a revolutionary masterpiece by the striking students behind the barricades of Paris. This only further fuelled suspicion at home and the film was branded communist propaganda.

The theatrical and later DVD release of *Rocky Road to Dublin* in 2005 met with considerably more favourable press in an Ireland now freed of the psychic grip of the Church in the wake of scandals including that involving Fr. Michael Cleary, a Catholic Priest who appeared in Lennon's film extolling the virtues of celibacy when, in fact, he was in a sexual relationship with his housekeeper, who later bore him a son. The film received strong notices both in Ireland and the UK and brought its maker belated, but great satisfaction that his work was finally being seen by the wide audience it had always deserved.

However, no documentary film made in Ireland in 2005 could come close to matching the sense of excitement of *Rocky Road to Dublin*. Of the feature documentaries produced in the year, probably the most high profile were *Haughey* and *The Asylum*, both shown over four weeks. *Haughey*, made by the

independent Mint Productions, was a chronicle of the life and career of one of the country's most controversial political figures, former Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey. Though a major political force throughout much of his career, including the early days of Irish television when his desire to control his representation led to a clash between the national broadcaster, RTÉ, and the government led by his father-in-law Séan Lemass, Haughey went down in flames in the 1990s with a series of scandalous revelations surrounding the misuse of State resources. Though the immediate storm had long passed by 2005, the series promised an important insight into a figure whose life exemplified many of the darkest aspects of twentieth century Irish politics. In the event, though it drew the highest ever viewing figures for a documentary on Irish television, the series did little more than present a basic historical overview, never quite probing the dark heart of the subject or of the nation itself.

*The Asylum*, meanwhile, was a sensitive portrait of St. Ita's Hospital in Portane, Co. Dublin, a mental health care institution whose imposing Victorian setting traditionally evokes cultural memories of bedlam asylums. Director Alan Gilsean, one of the most prolific of Irish documentarists, successfully debunked this mythic image, while also drawing attention to the real issues in mental health in contemporary Ireland raised by the fact that the institution is slated for closure. Each episode tackled a different dimension of the operations of St. Ita's, including the subject of off-site residential treatment for recovering patients, literally moving outside the walls of the institution to ask bigger questions. Though no *Titicut Follies* (Wiseman, 1967), *The Asylum* at least demonstrated a documentarist's eye for subject.

Ironically, the most provocative non-fiction to emerge from Ireland in the past few years have been personality-based television series, including *The Des Bishop Work Experience* (2004) which followed an American stand-up comedian taking employment in various low-end jobs in Ireland including fast food and supermarket services. In 2005, journalist and financial advisor Eddie Hobbs' four-part *Rip Off Republic* caused a major political panic. The programme, in which Hobbs presented his personal and professional opinions on examples of inequities in the Irish economy, proved

enormously popular with television audiences and sparked debate throughout the country. Political figures were quick to respond, which amused the public even more, as the frenzy of accusation and refutation amounted to a trial by media of the government's economic strategies. The less remarkable personality-based series *Karl Spain Wants a Woman* provided some surprise in that its risible premise, a stand-up comic goes dating, turned out to provide an observational forum for a display of real emotional need.

The Irish language series *Scannal* also provided some surprise by nakedly focusing exclusively on scandalous material, including an interview with the infamous son of former Bishop Dr. Eamon Casey, whose downfall on this matter was the beginning of the end of the moral authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland. In other arenas of investigation, literary profiles were popular as ever, with *John McGahern: A Private World* picking up plaudits for best English-language documentary at the Irish Film and Television Awards and *Patrick Kavanagh: No Man's Fool* earning a similar nod at the Boston Irish Film Festival.

The most interesting new non-fictions came from young filmmaker Ken Wardop, whose sensitive and moving short film *Undressing My Mother* was selected for a Critic's Week screening at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival and continued to pick up awards in Japan and the USA throughout the year.

Seen along with his marvellous *Useless Dog*, which also received international attention at the Oberhausen Film Festival in 2005, Wardop's work looks like the beginnings of a serious film-making career that we can only hope will continue to include documentaries.

**Dr Harvey O'Brien** is the author of *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester, 2004) and co-editor of *Keeping it Real: Irish Film and Television* (Wallflower, 2004) and the journal *Film and Film Culture*. He is head of Film Studies at UCD Dublin.

## *Pavee Lackeen*

Seán Crosson

It has become almost a truism among Irish film-makers and scholars that foreign film-makers have been responsible for some of the more questionable representations of Ireland, creating, according to the authors of the seminal study on Irish cinema, *Cinema and Ireland* (1989), “a set of cinematic representations which have tended to sustain a sense of cultural inferiority.” However, what is less remarked upon is the significant work made by filmmakers coming from outside Ireland that has tackled controversial issues which have rarely engaged indigenous directors. In recent years examples include Peter Mullen’s *The Magdalene Sisters* and Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday* but one of the best Irish films of 2005, *Pavee Lackeen* (The Traveller Girl), was also made by a British director. Originally from Shropshire, Perry Ogden grew up in London and made his name as a photographer with some of the leading international fashion magazines including *Vogue* and *Elle*. After moving to Ireland in the mid-1980s, Ogden became interested in the stories behind the Nike-clad children he witnessed riding horses around Dublin’s housing estates. It led to the publication of his book *Pony Kids* in 1999 which featured photographs of these kids at the Smithfield horse fair. He found, through photographing and interviewing these children, that many came from Traveller families and told similar stories of marginalisation and discrimination.

Inspired by his experiences with the Traveller children, Ogden chose as the subject of his debut film, *Pavee Lackeen*, the experiences of a Traveller family on the outskirts of Dublin. The film was featured at the 2005 Galway Film Fleadh, where it won the award for best first feature, and Ogden remarked on his innovative approach (at least in the context of Irish cinema) to the project. While Travellers have featured in the work of Joe Comerford (*Traveller*, 1981) and most recently Kevin Liddy (*Country*, 2000), Ogden took the courageous decision to use an actual Traveller family for his film, which is made up almost entirely of a non-professional cast. Furthermore, while he initially drafted a script concerning a homeless boy, it soon became

secondary to the stories he found from an extended period spent in the juvenile court and among the travelling community. The subsequent narrative emerged largely from the lives of the Travellers themselves in his attempt to produce an authentic document of their lives.

Shot hand-held over 10 months on mini-DV in a pseudo documentary style, sometimes called *video-verité*, whenever Ogden had time (and more particularly money), *Pavee Lakeen* is the story of Winnie Maughan, a ten year old girl who shares a dilapidated caravan with her mother and ten brothers and sisters on the outskirts of Dublin. While following Winnie’s day to day life, the film details the Maughan family’s struggles with poverty, neglect, the imprisonment of family members, alcoholism and a state bureaucracy that will do little to assist, sometimes even manipulating the family in order to avoid their responsibilities. The family are being pressurised to move by the local council from the side of the busy road their caravan occupies. However, when they do so (under threat of court action), promises of improved conditions, including running water and sanitation, are never fulfilled. Indeed, their moving is revealed to be a ploy by the council to move them to non-council land where they are no longer the council’s responsibility. Meanwhile, Winnie’s hopes of finding a place in a school for settled children is similarly frustrated as schools resist the admission of Traveller children.

In all of this the film eschews a conventional narrative, comprising instead simple narrative threads that reveal the considerable challenges the family members face. Ogden’s decision to build these stories, over an extended period, around an actual Traveller girl and her family creates a sense of people living their own lives, rather than performing to a camera, particularly through Winnie Maughan, who is an extraordinary presence throughout revealing the genuine innocence and intense curiosity of a ten year old.

In *Pavee Lakeen*, Ogden also draws clear, but significant, parallels between the Traveller and immigrant communities in Dublin. As Winnie makes her way through the streets of Dublin to fill her time after being suspended from school for fighting, all of those she meets represent some of the major immigrant groups in Ireland. She enters a video store where only

Russian titles are available, information she is given by the Russian woman who works there; she browses in a hairdressers which is staffed entirely by African women; the only people we see in the arcade where she goes to dance are of Asian origin, including the girl who changes the coins Winnie has salvaged from a fountain. Even the petrol station, where she goes with her sister Rosie to buy petrol for their mobile home's generator, is attended by what appears to be a Chinese man. While the almost total non-appearance of any other Irish people (apart from council officials and social workers) in the film appears sometimes overly contrived, the message is clear: if Irish society cannot treat her own indigenous minorities with respect how can it hope to embrace the diverse immigrant groups that increasingly make up the country.

The significance of this parallel was underscored in the 2004 Irish Government funded 'Know Racism' campaign, which found that Travellers and asylum-seekers were the minorities viewed most negatively by the majority population in Ireland. According to the report, 54 per cent of people believed most asylum-seekers were bogus, while a fifth said Travellers should not have the same rights as the settled community. The theme of intolerance was a recurring concern of Irish film from the late 1990s whether based on sexual orientation (Johnny Gogan's *The Last Bus Home* (1997)), religious belief (Syd McCartney's *A Love Divided*, 1999 and Seán Walsh's *Bloom*, 2004) or directed towards members of the travelling community (Kevin Liddy's *Country*). The advent of mini-DV has facilitated the production in recent years of still more challenging and uncompromising explorations of this intolerance in contemporary Ireland. Ciaran O'Connor's *Capital Letters* (2005), was a dark, and sometimes brutal, portrayal of the exploitation and abuse of illegal immigrants in contemporary Ireland. *Pavee Lackeen*, equally, is not just compelling and sometimes innovative filmmaking, it is also an important and necessary work which raises important questions for Irish society to consider at a time of great change.

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***Pavee Lackeen*** (Irl, 2005)

Director: Perry Ogden

Screenplay: Perry Ogden and Mark Venner

Cast: Winnie Maughan, Paddy Maughan, Rose Maughan, Rosie Maughan

Cinematography: Perry Ogden

Producers: Perry Ogden, Martina Niland, John Rocha

## **Adaptations: *Tara Road* and *Breakfast on Pluto***

Tony Tracy

...and God help you if you use voice-over in your work, my friends. God help you. That's flaccid, sloppy writing. Any idiot can write a voice-over narration to explain the thoughts of a character. (Robert McKee character in *Adaptation*, 2002)

It would be surprising indeed if literary adaptations were absent from a review of Irish film in 2005 given the ongoing centrality of books – literary and popular – in the cultural life of the nation. John Banville's Booker Prize and Cecelia Ahern's film deals<sup>1</sup> notwithstanding, there was a surprising paucity of material adapted from page to screen in the last year with the majority of young film-makers favouring original screenplays. This predilection for originality is impressive among a young industry but raises interesting questions about a storytelling heritage.<sup>2</sup> Are film-makers now not interested in adapting from previously published materials? Is film development being led by writer/directors rather than creative producers? Is adaptation seen as a soft option, less cinematic and less 'entrepreneurial' than the long and hazardous process of script development? Or, more mundanely, is this hiatus more a blip than a tendency?

Two high profile and quite different film adaptations were completed in 2005, encompassing both the literary and popular poles of the Irish publishing world. And tellingly, in a year of limited production, both

<sup>1</sup> John Banville won the prestigious 2005 Man Booker Prize for fiction with his novel 'The Sea'. On October 10<sup>th</sup> 2005, industry website IFTN (Irish Film and Television Network) announced that Cecelia Ahern had sold 'the movie rights to her novel 'If You Could See Me Now' to Walt Disney Pictures, who plan to adapt the book into a musical vehicle for Tony Award winner and 'X-Men' star Hugh Jackman'. Elsewhere it noted that in 2004 'Ahern sold the movie rights for her novel 'P.S. I Love You' to Warner Bros with Richard LaGravenese directing'. <http://www.iftn.ie/news/index3.htm?area=Finance&fuseaction=section> (November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> Might this tendency also be linked with the failure to attract distribution 'pre-sales' as outlined in Roddy Flynn's article in this issue?

were produced by experienced figures in Irish cinema.

Producer Noel Pearson, (*My Left Foot*, *The Field*, *Gold in the Streets*) brought together a large cast of well known actors headed by Andie McDowell under the direction of Gillies McKinnon for an adaptation of Maeve Binchy's bestseller, *Tara Road*. The presence of Ms Binchy's name above the title and Ms McDowell's below squarely placed the film in the marketing tradition of 'international national cinema' as practiced by Working Title and other British production companies over the past decade. A headline US actor, a 'brand-name' author's best-seller – already well known and established in the United States<sup>3</sup> – and an experienced cast and crew working quickly and efficiently is a particularly conceived kind of cultural product with the producer as cultural alchemist turning the local into global gold. The central plot of the film, a house exchange between the USA and Ireland would seem an almost improbably calculated conceit for such a project (two women struggling to overcome different kinds of trauma – the death of a child and the end of a marriage), allowing for not one but two audiences to find markers of identification and engagement. Who hasn't, after all, wondered what it would be like to live another life for a while and tinker with the possibility of romance with charming strangers? Maeve Binchy knows her audience, and more importantly from a producer's point of view, her audience know her.

*Tara Road* proved to be an attractive proposition to a considerable Irish cinema audience and gave a welcome fillip to a generally lack-luster year at the domestic box-office, where it took an unexceptional but not embarrassing €500,000. The film was unusual in the prominence it gave two female leads (Andie McDowell and Olivia Williams), relegating male characters to the fringes – with the exception of the 'almost' affairs. It was

3. *Tara Road* is Binchy's highest selling novel in the US, largely as a result of its selection, and Binchy's subsequent guest appearance, on the Oprah (Winfrey) Book Club in 1999. Oprah's enthusiasm for the book's self-empowered women was echoed by Mrs Barbara Bush, who described the book as her favourite. Thus the film has substantial advance endorsement and marketing to draw on in the North American marketplace.

appealing to an audience over the now seemingly inviolable threshold of 34. But though the talented actors of *Tara Road* do a worthy job, the overall feel of the film is of a TV movie. Grief and its transition to recovery are difficult to show convincingly and cinematic style must go some way in evoking the poetic sense of loss that words might achieve on paper. To try to capture this process and all its attendant detail over 90 mins using generally banal and functional methods is difficult, to say the least. The screenwriter, Shane Connaughton (*My Left Foot*) does a satisfactory job in condensing the very verbal Binchy source down from its door-stopper dimensions, but there are simply too many incidents and characters to allow us to be moved, though it would be churlish to deny that we become involved. Although *Tara Road* is no cinematic milestone (it might have been more interestingly reworked as a TV series), and it fails to match the artistic (and so far, commercial) success of Binchy's earlier *Circle of Friends*, it is nonetheless a welcome addition to the range of films that make up a diverse and vibrant national cinema.

*Breakfast on Pluto* is an altogether more daring and inspiring reworking of a literary source. Neil Jordan follows his successful return to prose fiction (the acclaimed novel *Shade*, 2004) with a return to the prose of Pat McCabe with whom he memorably collaborated on *The Butcher Boy* (the subject of a new monograph by Colin McCabe in the *Ireland Into Film* series). *Breakfast on Pluto*, shows similarities to the earlier book/film in tone, themes and feeling but is nonetheless an utterly original work, certainly the most exuberant and inventive Irish film made this year, and possibly any year. Proving the lie to McKee's dictate on voice-over as 'flaccid' the story tells the sad tale of Patrick 'Kitten' Murphy (in a captivating – and Golden Globe nominated performance – by Cillian Murphy), a boy conceived during a tryst between the local Parish Priest (Liam Neeson putting an ironic twist on his long list of recent father-figure roles) and his house-keeper (Eva Birthistle). Kitten is adopted after his mother abandons him – it's the late 1950s and illegitimate children would be automatically taken from their mothers – and brought up in a traditional household, which his colourful personality – and cross dressing – soon outgrows. Kitten has no time for 'serious,

serious, serious' and leaves in search of glamour and romance. His subsequent travels include spells as a Pocahontas inspired singer in Billy Rock's showband (Gavin Friday – to whom McCabe dedicated the original novel) until he is chased out of Ireland by the IRA, followed by spells as a 'Womble', a Magician's assistant, a peep-show entertainer, a late and poignant reconciliation with his father, and finally a happy return to London as a surrogate mother. It is a vertiginous and episodic tale; high-camp picaresque set against a backdrop of rising IRA violence, sexual revolution and social change spanning the 1960s and early 1970s.

This is a collaboration of the highest order; a playful and inspiring meeting of imaginations. Pat McCabe's fecund and wildly eccentric source material is bent to thematic concerns recognisable from elsewhere in Jordan's work – emotional vulnerability and the sleazy sex-for-sale demimonde of *Mona Lisa*, the sexual and political border-crossings, as well as the political backdrop of the Northern Irish conflict found in *The Crying Game*, and familiar issues of faith, guilt, transformation and the mutability of the subject, among others. Indeed, it is difficult to see where one author leaves off and the other begins – though there are identifiable changes from the novel and the visualisation of character and settings are all Jordan's own. Thus we see the director's common fascination with the glitter world of bars and clubs and the bracing air of the seaside. There is no other director who has shown such a sustained interest in placing Irish characters in England – particularly London and Brighton. The night and day worlds of nightclub acts and out of season holiday resorts frequently lend Jordan's films a sad and sometimes tawdry air, but such tendencies are avoided here by the contrapuntal pace of the story, the rich cast of supporting actors, Cillian Murphy's defiantly ironic, jaunty and credible performance and an extensive soundtrack of period pop which all combine to deflect from the undeniably serious themes of the story to reach an emotionally uplifting conclusion. While *Breakfast on Pluto* confirms rather than develops themes and interests present in earlier Jordan films it does so with élan, daring and great film-making fluency, and confirms his status as the most gifted and original Irish film-maker at work today.

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***Tara Road*** (Irl, 2005)

Director: Gillies MacKinnon  
 Writer: Maeve Binchy (novel), Cynthia Cidre, Shane Connaughton  
 Cast (Principal): Andie MacDowell, Olivia Williams, Stephen Rea, Brenda Fricker, Srah Bolger, Iain Glen, Jean-Marc Barr.  
 Cinematographer: John de Borman  
 Producer: Noel Pearson, Sarah Radclyff

***Breakfast on Pluto*** (Irl, 2005)

Director: Neil Jordan  
 Writer: Pat McCabe (novel), Neil Jordan  
 Cast (Principal): Cillian Murphy, Liam Neeson, Brendan Gleeson, Laurence Kinlan, Ruth Negga, Brendan Gleeson, Stephen Rea, Gavin Friday, Ian Hart, Eva Birthistle  
 Cinematographer: Declan Quinn.  
 Music: Various  
 Producer: Neil Jordan, Alan Moloney, Stephen Woolley.