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## IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION - 2013

### The Year in Review

Roddy Flynn, Tony Tracy (eds.)

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## Split Screens: The Year in Review 2013

Roddy Flynn & Tony Tracy

In seeking to get a handle on a year in the life of a national audiovisual industry, it seems practical to commence with some basic facts – how many projects were completed, at what cost and in what specific areas (i.e. film, television and animation)? Time was, one could simply flip through the pages of the annual review of screen production in Ireland prepared by the Irish Business and Employer's Confederation (IBEC) and reel off the statistics. However, in a lacuna which finds echoes in other aspects of the industry, the IBEC report has not been published since 2011. A draft 2012 version was prepared but came with the acknowledgement that, despite a nominal obligation to do so, not all projects made with Irish Film Board support or Section 481 certification, had submitted figures while those who had some were either “incomplete or clearly inaccurate”. So, for the past 2-3 years our sense of the industry in quantitative terms has been based on patchy information from a variety of sources apparently using inconsistent methodologies to produce figures describing the sector.

In December 2013, the Irish Film Board produced figures suggesting that €168m was contributed to the Irish economy in 2013 through “employment creation and spend on local goods and services”. Furthermore this was an 18% increase on 2012 and 42% up on 2011. This seems like good news but it's hard to reconcile it with the figures from the last IBEC report, which suggested that €156m was spent in Ireland in 2011. There is also some inconsistency in the Board's own statistics: on October 15 2013 (the day on which an adjustment to Section 481 was announced) the IFB released a press statement stating that screen production in 2012 was valued at €180m in terms of expenditure on local goods and services. If the €168m figure above represents an 18% increase on 2012, then the 2012

figure should have been €142m (rather than their published €168m).

It may well be that IBEC and the Irish Film Board simply adopted different bases for their calculations and that the inconsistency in the Board's own figures is down to semantic distinctions between Irish expenditure and contribution to the Irish economy. Regardless, the elusive nature of these figures not only draws attention to the difficulty of presenting a clear picture of the state of the sector but also suggests that what is happening within it is either not based on sound and coherent policies or that, in an increasingly diversified and splintered marketplace, it has become more difficult to achieve a clear and coherent picture of what's happening.

For now, no one seems to be bothered as long as things are ticking along. And – absence of reliable figure notwithstanding – the general sense is that the screen industries as a whole in Ireland continue to outperform virtually every sector in the rest of the economy in terms of relative growth.

This is not to suggest however that there will be a slew of Irish films coming soon to an Arthouse/Multiplex near you. For what is most notable about Irish audio-visual production in 2013 –the twentieth anniversary of the re-constitution of the Irish Film Board under order from the then new Minister for Culture Michael D Higgins – is that it has diversified into a multi-platform and highly stratified activity of enormous variety. To speak of ‘Irish Film’ is to attempt to corral a range of practices that include webisode internet drama like Dánnan Breathnach's *Cuckoo*,<sup>1</sup> no-budget / low-budget

1. *Cuckoo* is a 28-minute Irish webseries directed by Dánnan Breathnach that recently secured a distribution deal with Channel France 4 and JRS.TV (Just the -/-

experimental and narrative films (see Donal Foreman's essay below), thriving international TV drama and post-production sectors, personally funded documentaries (eg *The Irish Pub*, Dir: Alex Fegan<sup>2</sup>) and an often struggling feature film category with one or two annual breakout hits (eg *The Guard*, *What Richard Did*, *Once* etc.) and a myriad of misses. On several levels we regard 2013 as a tipping point away from the 1993 ambitions to fund a national cinema centred on theatrically released feature film productions that tell 'our stories' to – primarily – ourselves while, noting simultaneously and paradoxically a mushrooming of personal and often highly accomplished moving-image storytelling that finds limited distribution through non-theatrical channels. In this splintering, the Irish audio-visual sector is unexceptional in reflecting the radical technological changes and globalization of 'content' in the digital age. But accompanying these shifts and more fundamentally it also reflects and, in some cases responds to, a dramatically altered understanding of Ireland as an 'imagined community' since 1993. Thus, while the concept of a national cinema as a useful paradigm within which to not only interpret but also fund audiovisual production has gradually eroded in the interim, we see a proliferation of practices that place the local and global in dynamic tension through a variety of creative and economic emphases.

### Small Screen: Big Audiences

Production for small-screen consumption (which means television and animation but increasingly means film too: see below) remains the lynchpin of the sector. In television the large-scale US productions continue to dominate in financial terms: HBO's *Game of Thrones* completed shooting for Season 4 in Northern Ireland in November 2013 at which point activity shifted south of the border where Dublin-based Screen Scene recommenced their post-production role.

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·/- Story) in Los Angeles. The Irish production was originally commissioned as part of RTE's *Storyland* series.

2. <http://irishpubfilm.com>

Simultaneously, The History Channel's ambitious *Vikings* completed its Season 2 shoot at Ballyhenry Studios in Wicklow, while 25 kilometres up the road, the Sam Mendes-produced *Penny Dreadful*, a late-19<sup>th</sup> Century-set fantasy horror made for Showtime occupied back-from-the-brink of extinction Ardmore Studios for five months from October 2013. These, along with the smaller-scale (at least in budgetary terms) UK productions, *Moonfleet* (an Element Pictures co-production for Sky Television), *Undeniable* (an ITV drama shot in Dublin and Wicklow in November 2013) and the second series of the BBC's crime-horror "Ripper Street", provided the backbone of live-action production. As such it would not be unreasonable to characterize the domestic industry as akin to other sectors of the economy – reliant on foreign direct investment. Indeed even the Irish-set material is more often than not co-produced with UK broadcasters. In comedy, Chris O'Dowd's *Moone Boy* commenced shooting on its third series for Sky in July 2013 (and would win an International Emmy for its first series in November) while Brendan O'Carroll's *Mrs Brown's Boys* a BBC/RTE co-production, having won a second Best Comedy award at the UK TV Choice awards in September, officially cemented its status as the most popular television show in the UK and Ireland, topping the ratings in both countries last Christmas. These were joined in Spring 2014 by a new work from Graham Linehan, *The Walshes* another RTE/BBC joint effort billed as an antidote to the comedy phenomenon of "Mrs Brown".

How, if at all, does the export-led nature of such productions impact upon textual concerns? It varies. While the broad humour – and appeal – of "Mrs Brown" requires no particular familiarity with Irish culture, the quirkier *Moone Boy* makes fewer concessions: what, if anything, do audiences make of use of "Tico's Tune" (better known to Irish audiences as the theme to the Gay Byrne Radio Show for 25 years from 1973) to introduce scenes at the protagonist's home? The question of international appeal is more overt in other co-productions: the RTE/BBC decision to support *Quirke*, an adaptation of John Banville's (writing under the pseudonym Benjamin Black) novels about a 1950s Dublin detective, seems

calculated to appeal to the voracious demand for international crime drama (the series has already sold to Germany, Croatia, Denmark, Iceland and Slovenia) whilst offering a (somewhat belated) perspective on the hidden side of institutional Ireland. In the realm of purely domestic productions, *Love/Hate* Series 4 (reviewed elsewhere by Angela Nagle) surpassed the already stellar audiences of the third series with between 20% and 25% of the population watching the concluding episode in December. (*Love/Hate* has also sold well internationally, arriving on UK screens via Channel 5.) The same is true of the Thaddeus O'Sullivan-directed psychological drama *Amber* (reviewed by Denis Murphy) which, having lain in the vaults since 2011 finally received an airing in Spring 2014, doubtless driven by the knowledge that it was about to be broadcast in the slot formerly occupied by DR's *The Killing*.

That consciousness (post-*The Killing*) of the financial significance of international markets (not just as icing on the cake but as core revenues streams) has been reflected in RTE's decision to rebrand its 'Sales' division as RTE Global. In a clear statement of intent, in January 2014 RTE appointed Microsoft Ireland's former Chief Marketing Officer to head up the division with a brief to activate "new revenue streams from RTÉ Television to maximise returns in content particularly in programme sales, merchandising and licensing". It is also a consciousness which TV3 may, perforce, have to adopt. At the launch of the 2013 Autumn schedule, TV3 execs stressed the increasing importance of domestic production ("2,252 hours of new home-grown programming") to the channel. Although TV3 have unquestionably upped local content in recent years with a mix of popular lifestyle and reality-documentary current affairs content, UTV's announcement in summer 2013 that it intended to launch a competing commercial channel dedicated to the southern Irish market from January 2015 must have raised concerns for TV3. In particular, UTV's acquisition from ITV Studios of the exclusive right to broadcast in the Republic of Ireland the shows which currently constitute TV3's largest audience (namely *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*) must have

raised concern for TV3. In September 2013, TV3 invited proposals for a new Irish soap opera (broadcast twice per week) prompting questions about how such a series might be funded given the limited scale of the Irish market. Even if soap is relatively cost efficient (by drama standards), it's questionable as to whether such an undertaking could be contemplated without reliable international programme sales. On the other hand it may be that TV3 are hoping that the recommendations of a major review of RTE's funding by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland published in Autumn 2013 will increase TV3's share of the Irish broadcast advertising market. The BAI suggested that RTE would require public funding in the coming half decade but, mindful of the need to ensure RTE primarily pursue a public service remit, the review suggested that any increase in public funding occur in parallel with a decline in RTE reliance on commercial revenue. The precise details of such a shift remain to be worked through, however.

### **Big Screen: Small Cinema?**

If international productions and co-productions dominate current production practices in Irish television, ironically – given that the opposite was true several years ago – indigenous content in film production is once again the predominant practice. Even if, almost by definition, IFB-back projects require co-production partners (most commonly from Europe), the spacio-temporal settings of such films remain for the most part recognizably Irish. Conforming to the traditional mid-range budgets are films such as Ken Loach's current film (in post-production) *Jimmy's Hall* (which centres around the narrative of Irish socialist Jimmy Gralton) and literary adaptations of John Banville's *The Sea* (2013) and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (to be directed by John Crowley in 2014 starring Saoirse Ronan). Lenny Abrahamson's eccentric new project *Frank* which stars Michael Fassbender as a pathologically anti-populist musician was shot in Ireland and US and looks certain to bring the director of *Garage* to a wider audience and attention. Thus it is an unusual but canny agreement when Element Pictures (who previously

produced *Garage* and *What Richard Did*) signed him to a ‘first-look’ deal. Unprecedented in an Irish producer context – to our knowledge – such deals see the production company cover the overhead costs of artists in return for first-right-of-refusal on forthcoming projects. But it is a measure of the scale that the diversified and ambitious Element Pictures now operate on (in film and television production, film distribution, the online VOD [Video on Demand] service [volta.ie](http://volta.ie) and exhibition through their ownership of the Lighthouse cinema in Dublin), that they can cash flow such an agreement. Indeed, Element arguably represent the most evolved legacy of the IFB (co-director Ed Guiney produced his first film, *Ailsa* in 1994); their astute balancing of commercial and cultural agendas within the Irish film/TV sector and their relationship with Abrahamson represents an ever more integrated structure stretching from talent to distribution.

While the IFB- notwithstanding the savage cut in its production budget to €7.5m (down from a total budget €20m in 2008) continued to support low-to-medium budget dramas in 2012-2013 like *Love Eternal* (Dir: Brendan Muldowney, reviewed below), *Mister John* (Dir: Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy), *Jump* (Dir: Kieron J. Walsh), *Run and Jump* (Dir: Steph Green) and the comedies *The Hardy Bucks Movie* (Dir: Mike Cockayne), *The Stag* (Dir: John Butler) and the as yet unreleased *Calvary* (Dir: John Michael McDonagh), the most startling shift in recent years has been in the explosion of no/low-budget and frequently genre-focused productions. Individuals like Colin Downey and Ivan Kavanagh have ploughed this particular furrow for some time and both have completed features – *The Looking Glass* and *The Canal* respectively – in the past twelve months. Kavanagh’s as yet unreleased film (his fifth feature following the festival favourites *The Fading Light* and *Our Wonderful Home*) suggests a step-up in budget and its acceptance into the Tribeca film festival and his next announced project – a western starring the ubiquitous *Domhnall* Gleeson – intimate a film-maker who will soon move in from the margins. Additionally, Kavanagh’s back catalogue of largely personally funded projects – including the mostly unseen *Tin Can Man* – have

been bought by various US VOD distributors in a signal not only of the voracious appetite of new platforms but their future role in ensuring the development and even survival of an Irish film production sector (albeit for the small screen). Indeed, in this regard it is interesting to note that the IFB funded male comedy *The Stag* – a domestically successful Irish comedy with a cast that includes Andrew Scott, Amy Huberman and Hugh O’Connor will be distributed in the US exclusively on VOD under the more generic title of *Bachelor Party*. Donal Foreman’s atmospheric *Out of Here* is also illustrative of changes at the level of funding having deliberately eschewed IFB development finance in favour of a crowd sourcing model where it achieved its full production budget.<sup>3</sup> Another significant figure in these developments is Gerard Barrett, director of the evocative rural drama *Pilgrim Hill* (reviewed elsewhere). Reportedly made for €4,500 and shot over 11 days, the resulting film was released to acclaim, toured international festivals and secured the writer/director international agency representation. As a consequence, still aged only 26, he is currently shooting *Glassland*, a Dublin-set thriller with Jack Reynor (of *What Richard Did* and subsequently *Transformers IV*)<sup>4</sup> and the international star Toni Collette.

In what appears to be a paradigm shift in production practices 2013 and early 2014 saw the release and/or filming of around a dozen low/no budget productions with no involvement whatsoever from the IFB. Some of these relied on

3. See TT interview with Donal Foreman in *Film Ireland*

<http://filmireland.net/2014/02/17/interview-donal-foreman-writer-and-director-of-out-of-here/>

4. There can be few better illustrations of the increasingly porous relationship between Irish and global cinema than how Jack Reynor was cast in *Transformers*. In January 2012 Michael Bay – the high king of Hollywood spectacle – wrote on his website, “I just hired a great new actor for *Transformers 4* to star against Mark Wahlberg. Jack Reynor, he is an Irish kid that came to America with 30 bucks in his pocket. Pretty ballsy. Seriously who does that? Anyway I spotted him in a great little Irish movie *What Richard Did*. This kid is the real deal.

almost implausibly low budgets: *Trampoline* a drama set and shot in Nenagh by 26 yr old writer/director Tom Ryan was apparently shot for just €1,000.<sup>5</sup> Films such as *Song for Amy* (Dir: Konrad Begg) or the London set *The Callback Queen* (Dir: Graham Cantwell) cost more but most still make the €350,000 offered under the Film Board's low-budget Catalyst Scheme look positively profligate.

While a number of lo/no budget films that have the art-house aspirations of *Pilgrim Hill* or the still unreleased *Out of Here* the ambition for many of these genre-based films is clearly different with a eye on emerging distribution platforms whether as horror films (*Beau Diable* (Dir: Conor Slattery), *Revenant* (Dir: Sean Smith), *Somebody's There* (Stephen Patrick Kenny) and *Night People* (Dir: Gerard Lough, in production) or crime thrillers *Jack and Ralph Plan a Murder* (Dir: Jeff Doyle), *Black Ice* (Dir. Johnny Gogan) and *The Nixer* (Dir. Fiona Graham). *The Nixer*<sup>6</sup> – from 2010 for instance secured a multiplicity of US VOD services in October 2013 and Emu Productions secured a dual DVD-VOD deal for Colin Downey's *The Looking Glass* for North America. Similarly the *The O'Briens* – “a romantic comedy with an Irish twist”<sup>7</sup> (Dir: Richard Waters) was released exclusively through Hulu, Distriby and tugg – a trio of film distribution/promotion platforms largely unknown to the general public.

By way of conclusion we should like to quickly allude to two of this year's most interesting films, which illuminate both in terms of their production and themes the tendentious character of an 'Irish' cinema. London based filmmakers Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy's *Mister John* (their follow up to *Helen*) yields Aiden Gillen's most satisfying performance to date as a London-based Irishman Gerry who goes to Singapore in order to bury his recently deceased brother. We learn little about the character except that he has recently left his wife because of her infidelities. This slow moving and

atmospheric film is structured by a narrative mystery in which its central male protagonist gradually subsumes his identity to that of a dead man, where personal history and even the borders of life itself become uncertain and fluid. While this *noir*-like narrative has markers of national identity, Gerry is a twenty-first century everyman played, with no more acknowledgement than his accent, by an Irish actor. Yet this small detail creates a powerful resonance for an Irish audience deeply familiar (again) with emigration and the complex sense of home that such an experience engenders.

Donal Foreman's low budget debut *Out of Here* moves the action in the opposite direction in its focus on Ciaran (Fionn Walton); a young backpacker who returns to Dublin from travels in south-east Asia. Foregoing the genre underpinning of *Mister John* it nonetheless rhymes in interesting ways with that film in its foregrounding of a young Irish male who is uncertain of his bearings. While the film clearly draws on elements of American 'mumblecore' cinema (Foreman lives in Brooklyn where he edited the film, though he has been developing it for several years), it is its reworking of Joycean flânerie that is most compelling for an Irish viewer. The loose-limed and seemingly improvised narrative follows Ciaran as he returns to his family home then around the city, catching up with old friends, meeting some new ones, and occupies a liminal space of non-belonging. The juxtaposition between the film's firm sense of setting and more intangible sense of plot and character produces an at times weightless narrative that seems entirely appropriate to the social and economic tectonics of recent years. Like *Mister John*, *Out of Here* can be read as a reflection of Irish identity unsure of its parameters or integrity.

In a seminal article written in the aftermath of the Oscar success of *My Left Foot* in 1990,<sup>8</sup> Kevin Rockett argued that, notwithstanding that film's representation of a 'authentic' Irish story, told with and Irish cast and crew, the periphery must be suspicious of embracing the validation of

5. <http://trampolinemovie.com>

6. <http://www.thenixermovie.com>

7. <http://theobriensmovie.com>

8. Kevin Rockett, "Aspects of the Los Angelesation of Ireland", *Irish Communications Review*, 1, 1991: 18 – 23.

the 'centre', especially where, 'Hollywood is re-energized from the periphery where the production of very particular types of universal narratives are used to reconfirm the dominance of the centre.' As the range of productions of the past year and beyond demonstrates, Ireland now produces film practices that are artistically and commercially diverse within and beyond our borders. And while the centre-periphery dynamic has only hardened in terms of the range of films playing in Irish cineplexes, technology and two decades of training and education has resulted in more Irish producers producing more moving images than at any time in our short history. Nevertheless, the 'Irishness' of such productions seems likely to continue to diminish as a point of critical/ commercial reference in a globalized and

post-national context of instant downloads and personalized preferences. It is, as we can see, no longer really possible to speak of an Irish cinema, so much as moving images which are Irish-themed or set to various degrees.

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### The Concrete Manifestations of Emotional Eternity in Brendan Muldowney's *Love Eternal* (2013)

Barry Monahan

T. S. Eliot considered *Hamlet* “an artistic failure”, but he was clear in emphasising that it was Shakespeare’s play, and not his protagonist, that was the “primary problem” (Eliot 1945: 98). He located his aesthetic dissatisfaction in the fact that the play alluded to much more emotional content than it was capable of rendering formally. He noted in his chapter “Hamlet and his Problems” from *The Sacred Wood* (first published in 1920) that “*Hamlet* ... is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art” (Eliot 1945: 100). The outward manifestation of the eponymous character’s interior reflection and sentiments, best achieved by the concrete “objective correlative”, simply cannot occur because they envelope and exceed the possibility of any stylistic rendering. Hamlet’s existential crisis and the character’s immobilising procrastination in what Sartre would later call “bad faith” (Sartre 1996: 47-50), are ultimately embedded in the question over his suicide. Indeed, his inability to act is doubly manifest in not only his musings on not being, but also in his failure to carry out the suicidal act. The questions of nothingness, becoming nothing, and the afterlife, are equally concerns of the protagonist of Brendan Muldowney’s second feature length film *Love Eternal*, but here there is no problem with objective correlation, as the *mise-en-scène* and musical score (by Dutch composer Bart Westerkamp) become rich externalisations of that character’s emotional and intellectual states.

The film is an adaptation of the Japanese novel *In Love With The Dead*, by the acclaimed author Kei Oishi. It tells the story of Ian (Robert de Hoog), a young man who having had a number of encounters with death – firstly that of his father when he was a boy, then the discovery of the body of a girl who has hanged herself in the woods,

and then the passing of his mother – begins to ask himself fundamental questions about his existence and the spirit world. Concluding on his feelings of social detachment and ostracisation, that he is an unusual being and not really human, he considers and attempts his own suicide in an isolated wooded area. Fatefully, he is interrupted by the arrival of a van load of people who have entered into their own suicide pact. His morbid fascination is deepened when, having watched them pipe carbon monoxide into the vehicle, he takes the corpse of one of the victims back to his home, where he interacts with it as if still alive. Although he ultimately enters the young girl’s body, his enthrallment at the ubiquitous nature of death drives him to seek out others who are hoping to end their lives. His final emancipation from the allure of bereavement is manifest when he digs up two bodies that he has buried in his garden, and “liberates” them by leading the police to them so that they can undergo proper autopsy and burial. We are left with a sense of his liberation from the same earlier obsession and the existential crisis suffered by Shakespeare’s protagonist.

Although the film is concerned with the juxtaposition of the natural world and the supernatural/spiritual realm, and Muldowney makes it clear that the requirement to choose one over the other is a central concern for Ian as he reflects upon the sublime beauty of one and the terror of the other, this is not belaboured. Nonetheless, the splendour of nature is omniscient, persistent and central to the aesthetic of the film with gentle connections between the two realms. The opening and credit sequences establish this as they invite us to reflect upon their visual abstractions and the implication that not all of what human existence comprises can be concretely manifest or comprehended. In one flash-

back, Ian imagines that the hanged girl whom he has found is talking to him about the beauty of the things in nature. This idea is literalised when a light snowfall follows the suicide of the group in the van, and later in a slow tracking shot that brings into the frame a mound of blossoming flowers as Ian attempts his second suicide. These juxtapositions serve as perfect ‘objective correlatives’ for both his choice between, and understanding of, the world he inhabits and the non-physical one for which he holds such affection. At the heart of the film then is a tortured ontological question that places humanity on the fine line between meaning and beauty. The design of the film – both visually and acoustically – is richly informed by the tentative nature of this critical question.

Ian’s struggle to grasp a meaning of existence or non-existence is also manifest in the frequent imbrication of moments of random absurdity with symmetrical rationality. The interiors inhabited by the characters are clinically regular and aesthetically balanced and framed, while the natural settings are randomly patterned and irregularly configured (even when visually split in two linearly by roads or the pier boardwalk). Following his contemplation of the cosmos, Ian struggles to make sense of its incoherence by drawing an impressionistic map of it on his bedroom wall over several days, and after he bathes his second stolen corpse a subtle tracking shot picks up a small metallic pendulum in the shape of a section of the solar system, perfectly rocking to its own regular rhythm. This linking of the haphazard and the symmetrical is echoed in the film’s soundtrack throughout, but it is most evident in one particular sequence in which he brings Tina’s body back to his house. A frenetic asynchronous and atonal section of the score accompanies his confused actions as he moves the corpse around, but as his movements settle to a more calm stability so too does the music become more coherently rhythmic, dramatically settling into an exaggerated clockwork beat – one actually designed to sound like a ticking clock – before it fades into complete silence. In this sequence, the extent to which Ian’s presented pathology can be calmed by his proximity to death is formally rendered in the composition of

the score, as it moves from crazed atonality to a solid rhythmic stability. In a similar but reversed way, the music has already been used to lure us into the mental state of the protagonist from the earlier moments of Ian’s introduction: notwithstanding a comfortable visual stillness, the soundtrack offers a more disturbing undertone and darker edge to his mindset. What is interesting about Westerlaken’s score in this regard is that it communicates the complexities of Ian’s existential outlook with a refined subtlety: nothing like the extreme and demented saxophone interludes used to express the protagonists’ sociopathologies in the 1997 films *The Butcher Boy* by Neil Jordan or David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (scored by Elliot Goldenthal and Angelo Badalamenti respectively).

While Hamlet is an active protagonist, his procrastination and indecision serve to introduce inactivity so that they impede the forward development of the plot of the drama. In Muldowney’s film, Ian’s inaction – or, rather his desire to contemplate the relationship between realms of active being and inactive non-being – is of thematic concern. It is the actions of others – not his own procrastination – that see him twice abandon his plans to kill himself. This sense of his dramatic immobility is underlined for us by a constant alignment with his point of view, and a recurring framing of his looking at and observing others (often, but not uniquely, through his telescope). In one scene, as he sits with Naomi watching passers-by, they narrate stories to each other of the unknown individuals’ lives that they imagine could exist: in failing to grasp his own narrative position in the universe, the best Ian can do is to invent narratives for others.

The ultimate, and perhaps most effective, objective correlative in the film is his walkie-talkie. It represents Ian’s fascination with the afterlife and forms a connection between his current life and the spirit world. It appears at three significance moments. We see it for the first time in the opening sequence when, as a young boy, Ian runs through what seems to be a family orchard, talking with his “papa” who is sitting in a deck chair elsewhere in the garden. Only moments into this “hide-and-peek” game, with Ian

still calling to his father through the device, the old man passes away, and the film establishes the connection between the world of the living and the dead via the two-way radio. Later, an older Ian tells of how he buried one of the handsets in the coffin with his father and spent nights under his bed sheets with the receiver, hoping to hear sounds from the otherworld. The final appearance of the walkie-talkie occurs at a moment when we are led to believe that Ian has had a personal epiphany: not so much in discovery of some supernatural secret or enigma that has obsessed him from the age of six, but because – through his association with the female characters who

have come into, and then left, his life – he has become better-able to leave his obsession behind and free the corpses for proper interment. In a quiet and gently-paced scene, one night he visits the cemetery and the grave where his parents are buried, and pushes the remaining walkie-talkie into the soil. His achievement is peace with the notion established at the beginning of the film when his desire to connect with the voices of the otherworld is stated for us despite the reality that, within the logic of the film's world, we can never ultimately find that place: "Somewhere, there are no human sounds to be heard."

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**Barry Monahan** lectures in the history and aesthetics of Irish and other national cinemas, and film theory, at University College Cork. His recent monograph *Ireland's Theatre on Film: style, stories and the national stage on screen*, published by Irish Academic Press in 2009, considers the relationship between the Abbey Theatre and cinema from the beginning of the sound period until the 1960s.

***Pilgrim Hill* (Gerard Barrett 2012)**

Laura Canning

Gerard Barrett's low-key *Pilgrim Hill* was a somewhat unexpected hit during 2013, the Brown Bag Films writer's debut feature not only receiving its international premiere at the Telluride Film Festival, but earning him its Great Expectation award. Add that to the Bingham Ray award at the Galway Film Fleadh and places at the London BFI Film Festival and Busan International Film Festival, as well as an IFTA Rising Star award, and the film's success appears wildly disproportionate to its ultra-low-budget origins. Costing a meagre €4,500 and filmed in just seven days in Barrett's native Kerry, part of the film's subtle appeal lies in its resolutely downbeat approach to its material.

Joe Mullins (*Killinascully*) stars as Jimmy Walshe, a middle-aged, under-educated farmer eking out a living on a small farm on the eponymous Hill, where the natural sounds and measured seasonal rhythms of rural life dominate, and emotional connection remains elusive. Jimmy clears the rushes from his boggy land, cleans and maintains his pebble-dashed bungalow and outbuildings, feeds and milks his small herd of cattle, with the same deliberate care with which he tends to his bedridden father. This is no Rousseau-inspired bucolic idyll, nor does it call to the romantic representations of rural Ireland of *The Quiet Man*. Jimmy's silence speaks of regret and loneliness, the demands of his solitary life eased only by the occasional match or funeral, his closest companions the cows to whom he deals out unsentimental, companionable pats.

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10. The film also received a distribution support award totalling €25,000 from the Irish Film Board in 2013.

A painstaking measuring-out of time dominates, Barrett's – often silent – focus primarily on the accumulation of moments, the minutiae of Jimmy's daily life. The leisurely pace resolutely refuses to fetishise the Irish countryside or the unfolding of 'natural' time, placing its passage of time not as 'serene', so much as 'anaesthetic', and solidifying gradually into a picture of rural Ireland in crisis. In one sense, this is a deeply personal catastrophe of identity. Jimmy, the product of an unhappy "arranged marriage", his mother's early suicide, and his father's resulting bitterness, admits that he "kinda feel[s] trapped sometimes with it all". The practical obligations of farming and the familial obligations which concern him are not presented as 'timeless' inevitabilities, but are contrasted with Jimmy's more contemporary awareness that other options could once, perhaps, have been available to him. In this sense, Jimmy occupies a hinterland between modern and (implied as more restrictive, and emotionally brutalising) traditional visions of Irish masculinity. Although he frames this generational transition in explicitly personal terms, speaking of his regret at not standing up to his father and talking of his wasted longing for a family of his own – specifically a daughter, which would mark a kind of symbolic end to the patriarchal dominance of the countryside – the generational issues invoked here are not Jimmy's alone.

Barrett's Kerry is almost exclusively occupied by men, and old men at that; bidding on calves at the mart, in the pub casually conversing about the weather. Jimmy's shyness isolates him from them too, but the cumulative impression is one of rural Ireland embedded in a kind of transitional limbo, one which seems as defined in masculine terms as

much as in socioeconomic ones. This is seen clearly in two elements. The first is the pointed distinction made between Jimmy and the brash Tommy, who is “ridin’ the dole train” for want of better options. While emigration to Canada or Dubai is his only real future, Tommy’s youthful naivety – suggesting that the barely literate Jimmy should abandon the farm to go to college – signals a clear rejection of traditional rural norms. So too does his description of Jimmy’s turf-cutting as “caveman stuff”, and his misguided attempt to engage Jimmy in a more contemporary social milieu, all conversation lost amid the banging techno and bikini-clad podium dancers of the local nightclub.

Alcohol here occupies a privileged and yet problematic place, as seen in the emphasis given to Jimmy’s anxious encounter with the Garda who breathalyses him on his journey home. While the Garda – presented, significantly, as new to the area, in contrast to the deeply-embedded Jimmy – notes gently that “if you only had the one you’ve nothing to worry about”, the process is framed both as an invasion of Jimmy’s privacy as an individual, and as an intervention into the ‘traditional’ practices of rural Irish men, whose social lives have, it is implied, historically been dominated by pub culture. Here the film edges towards didacticism, in that drink-driving limits have become a notable contemporary battleground for the politics of rural Irish culture. However, Barrett turns away from explicit position-taking on the matter, preferring instead to focus on a more general concern with the impact of bureaucracy and technology on rural Ireland.

The very technology that allows Jimmy to eke out a living on “thirty acres on the side of a hill out in the back end of nowhere” – his milking machine, his tractor – also guarantees his increasingly painful solitude. The rhythmic cadence of the milking machine may still, as he casually strokes his animals, call to older patterns of life, but a more telling shot is that of Jimmy and another man at the petrol pump, each silently filling a car, never communicating, intent on the screens. This focus on presenting modern Irish life as both emotionally distancing and structurally bureaucratized is reinforced when a

Department of Agriculture official arrives to inform Jimmy that a tuberculosis reactor has been found in his herd, and he must hand over his cattle’s papers and dispose of each day’s milk. Here, while there is no direct criticism of the work done, the emphasis is on illustrating the intimacy of bureaucratic controls, the intensity of the watchful Departmental eye contrasted with Jimmy’s day-to-day loneliness.

*Pilgrim Hill* is anchored by Joe Mullins’ thoughtful performance as a man who visibly dwindles before us as his options shrink. The film’s visual style demands a particular kind of realist performance, as Jimmy’s hesitant monologues are framed as responses directly to camera: there is no sign here of the interrogator, but the implied-interview style, and the emphasis on – often appealingly overlapped – diegetic sound, create the sense of the film as a ‘documentary’. In that context, Mullins’ occasionally halting facial gestures and tentative speech give the deliberate, greatly affecting, sense of a man who has been so seldom emotionally engaged with, that his capacity to express, or even identify, his own feelings has begun to ossify. The restricted budget, with interior shots often greatly limited in their scope, such as those in which Jimmy is framed from the corridor, talking to his forever unseen and unheard father in the bedroom beyond, also works to emphasise the constraints and limitations of Jimmy’s life and opportunities. As the film comes to a conclusion, however, the framing shifts to a more self-consciously ‘cinematic’ style (albeit a rather distanced one) with lush music overlaying the climactic stand-off between Jimmy and those allied forces of bureaucratic Ireland, the Garda and the Department of Agriculture. Such a climax could have been discordant, or indeed overly sentimental, but Barrett manages to avoid this by briefly silencing dialogue in favour of music, then returning the film swiftly to its previous spare, analytical style.

Jimmy’s conclusion is as unsentimental and spare as his affection for the cattle which have been taken from him: “My future is thirty acres on the side of hill out in the back end of nowhere, with no prospects. Maybe a life in the pub. And

grow old, like so many people I've seen, with nobody. So many people who've given up. And just exist." The film's final shots of the empty farm, sound tracked simply by the wind, are

left to point towards an implied future of loneliness and despair, a rural Ireland which speaks only of lost youth and wasted opportunity.

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### ***The Last Days on Mars* (Ruari Robinson 2013)**

Roddy Flynn

Ruari Robinson's personal website doesn't appear to have been updated since 2011, doubtless because he was so busy working on *The Last Days on Mars*. But, burrow deep into it and you'll find a group shot of the Academy Award nominees for 2001. And there, embedded in the Hollywood firmament, alongside luminaries such as Russell Crowe, Nicole Kidman, and Ron Howard, stands a bespectacled, vaguely Harry Potter-ish 23 year-old Robinson, present by dint of his nomination for his animated short *Fifty Per Cent Grey*.

To his left stands Ridley Scott, nominated as best director for *Black Hawk Down*. There's a kind of synchronicity to this because Scott's sci-fi work – specifically *Alien* – clearly constitutes an antecedent to TLDOM, narratively and, to an extent, visually. Six Anglo-North American astronauts/scientists lead by Commander Dalby (Elias Koteas) have spent six months on a mission to find life on Mars – without success. However, within sight of departure, they encounter a Martian bacteria which “infects” them, transforming them (inevitably, it seems these days) into Zombie-like indestructible monsters. The dwindling survivors, lead by Liev Schreiber and Romola Garai, struggle to escape the Mars base and return to the spaceship that will bring them home.

And that's really about it. There are overt visual quotes from other films – a descent into a pit from *Alien*, a nod to the spinning space station in “2001: A Space Odyssey”, the jump ship from *Aliens* etc. There is a pretty impressive cast (filled out by Olivia Williams in Ripley-mode) who turn in downbeat but effective (and occasionally affecting) performances. But beyond that?

When watching TLDOM at the Dublin Film Festival in February this year, there was a temptation – particularly as the film was being

watched with this journal in mind – to try and identify clues pointing to Robinson's national identity, little hints evident only to an eye steeped in Irish visual culture for decades. Frankly, however, this is a waste of time: those clues are simply not present. But, this in itself offers a means of thinking about Irish cinema's place in the international audiovisual markets and culture.

Robinson didn't win the Oscar in 2001. In the event, he lost out to Pixar's *For the Birds* (though he also faced competition from another nominated Irish company, Brown Bag Films, with *Give Up Yer Aul Sins*). Nonetheless stardom beckoned – he was attached to the live action version of *Akira* in the last ‘noughties’ (and apparently spent two years in Los Angeles development hell). In the meantime he maintained his day job, as a VFX-savvy, multi-award award-winning commercials director. (If you've watched Irish television, you'll have seen his work. The Carlsberg “Dream Apartment” ad where a potential tenant is shown around a deceptively spacious terraced house culminating in a balcony view over Croke Park? That's him.) And when, stardom took longer to arrive than perhaps anticipated, he went out, convinced Cillian Murphy and Don Wycherly to appear in his shot, VFX-heavy calling card short *Silent City* and promptly secured an agent.

And it was through his agent that Robinson became involved in a project which was already at second draft script stage. Qwerty Films (founded by Michael Kuhn who led Polygram Filmed Entertainment during its *Four Weddings and A Funeral* heyday) had previously optioned Sidney J. Bounds 1970s sci-fi short story *The Animators* on a basis of a recommendation from screenwriter Clive Dawson. Thus although Robinson was “heavily involved with the whole development phase” and was able to bring Robbie Ryan (with whom he'd worked on *Silent*

*City*) on board as DOP, he was in effect a director for hire. (In fairness, convincing the producers to take on Ryan can hardly have been difficult, especially given that he has become Andrea Arnold's DOP on choice.)

In interview producer Andrea Cornwell stressed that Robinson's appeal lay in his capacity to lend the film "a unique and personal voice rooted in character" describing his short *BlinkyTM* as "very emotional". This may be true and *BlinkyTM* is more about the human characters than it's titular android but Qwerty were clearly also interested in Robinson's effects work: "Ruairi comes from a VFX background so we knew that that was a world he was very familiar with". The film was reportedly made for £UK7m, a limited budget at the best of time, and truly miniscule by sci-fi standards. Robinson had only eight weeks to shoot, two on location (Jordan doubling for Mars) and the rest at Shepperton Studios in London so much of the film was created in post-production. And this is where Robinson has proved himself in the past – even the visually impressive *Silent City* was largely self-funded. The small budget for TLDOM meant he had to take on 60 VFX shots himself.

And that is perhaps the most interesting thing about the film: the – to this writer's mind – flawless visual effects shots which are peppered throughout the 95-minute running time are entirely Irish in origin. Indeed the Irish Film Board's contribution to the original core funding for the film (the rest came from the British Film Institute and presales to Universal Picture and Focus) was predicated not so much on Robinson's involvement (though it was probably vital) but on the decision to use Dublin post-production company, Screen Scene.

As Andrea Cornwell noted: "We are doing most of our post production in Dublin at Screen Scene VFX. That brought on national tax credits and investment from the BFI Film Fund and Irish Film Board" (Cooper 2012).

There is a certain irony here: in recent years Screen Scene's effects show reel has been populated by examples of how they can "deterritorialise" pro-filmic

content, transforming Northern Ireland locations into the wintry kingdoms of Westeros for *Game of Thrones* and contemporary Dublin into 1890s Whitechapel for *Ripper Street*. In addition to conjuring up TLDOM spacecraft and Martian rovers, Screen Scene have worked to deterritorialise the film's locations. As Robinson put it: "Jordan is Mars with shrubbery, so we will need to do a lot of digital shrubbery removal!" (Cooper 2012)

That the Irish Film Board's involvement is conditional on the involvement of a company which (and more power to them) often works to disguise the specific national setting for audiovisual works demonstrates the distance the Board has come from its original, narrower conception of its cultural mission. The Board has long justified support for material with non-Irish settings on the grounds that it gave opportunities for Irish talent to work in a wider set of production contexts, giving them access to experience which they can apply to subsequent Irish projects. (Indeed, the Board has had to offer such legitimation to win European Commission approval for such state aid to industry, something the latter generally takes a dim view of.) Whether the decision to support TLDOM will redound to the benefit of indigenous culture remains to be seen. If *Silent City* was a calling card to suggest Robinson can make features, TLDOM feels like a calling card demonstrating a capacity to make even bigger films. In interviews to promote the film Robinson has consistently stressed the difficulty of making the film under the prevailing budgetary conditions. Having completed this assignment, however, he has clearly signalled that his immediate future lies on the other side of the Atlantic. Asked by Screen International about the lure of Hollywood, his response was unambiguous: "I'm a sci fi guy, that means scale. So yes, hopefully! (Cooper 2012) The tantalizing question which remains is what the application of his unquestionable visual talent at scale on an Irish canvas might produce.

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## **Amber, Screenworks and the production of culture.**

Denis Murphy

Rather than adopting the standard textual analysis approach, this contribution to this year's Film and Television review of *Amber* – a four-part psychological thriller made for and recently screened on RTE television – adopts a production of culture perspective, viewing the series as conditioned by a number of interlinked features of the Irish television production environment. These include factors contributing to the development of Screenworks, the company that created, developed and produced the series.

On a narrative level, *Amber* tells the story of a Dublin teenager's mysterious disappearance, and her family's subsequent attempts to find her. It stars newcomer Lauryn Canny as the missing girl, while Eva Birthistle and David Murray play her parents. In each of the four episodes, the story is approached from a different character's point of view, and we witness the pressures that come to bear on Amber's family as the search continues. Created by Rob Cawley and Paul Duane of Screenworks, the series was written by Garry Duggan (*Fair City*) and directed by veteran filmmaker Thaddeus O'Sullivan (*Stella Days*, *Ordinary Decent Criminal*, *December Bride*).

The production of culture perspective is interested in how cultural products are "shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught and preserved" (Peterson and Anand 2004: 311). The perspective rejects simplistic "reflection" theories in which an underlying social-economic power structure can be somehow "read off" cultural products. Instead, it favours a more multiectional view in which culture and social structure are seen as "elements in an ever-changing patchwork", while cultural artefacts are "shaped in the mundane process of their production (ibid: 312). In their review of the field, Peterson and Anand theorised a model of production comprising six "facets": technology, law/regulation, industry structure,

organisational structure, occupational career and the market (ibid: 313-8). I shall consider some of these facets in an attempt to better understand *Amber's* emergence from the nexus of legal, financial and cultural institutions in which Irish screen products are enmeshed.

### **Technology**

Film and television production has always been technology-intensive. Moreover, technological change brings with it new opportunities for cultural production. For example, the relatively recent renaissance of "quality" television drama is often attributed to the decision by the US cable network HBO to diversify into original programming, a strategic choice rooted in the emergence of TV's digital "third era" of technological development (Edgerton and Jones 2008). HBO's success in producing innovative, differentiated productions like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Game of Thrones* has undoubtedly influenced the creative policy of rivals throughout the international television industry, influencing decisions on permissible levels of violence, strong language and sexual content (ibid.). Arguably, RTÉ's *Love/Hate* exhibits some of these new sensibilities, which may partly explain its relative success in achieving international distribution, with sales to at least nine countries to date (Butler 2013). If *Love/Hate's* international success has had any bearing on RTÉ's subsequent drama development decisions, its backing of *Amber* has undoubtedly been prescient: to date, the new series has been sold to at least a dozen international territories (Slattery 2014).

Technological change in production technology has also contributed in a different way to the rise of *Amber's* production company, Screenworks. The availability of low-cost digital production and post-production equipment lowers barriers to entry for industry entrants by reducing

production costs, especially if combined with free or nearly free labour. One such production initiative, RTÉ's low-budget Storyland initiative, was formative for Screenworks, which produced two series – *Jenny Was a Friend of Mine* (2009) and *Happyslapper* (2009) under the scheme.

### **Law, Regulation and Industry Structure**

There is little doubt that small production companies such as Screenworks, like many other actors in the independent production sector, owe their existence to Ireland's ratification of EU law requiring broadcasters to outsource a percentage of programme production. This, however, is only half the story. In Ireland, as in many other countries, levels of both indigenous and incoming international television production are heavily influenced by State-sponsored financial incentives that underpin production. It is typical for native dramatic television productions like *Amber* to seek funding through two schemes made possible by broadcasting and tax legislation. The first of these is Sound and Vision, a funding initiative administered by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) that distributes part of the television license fee among broadcasters and independent producers, to fund projects meeting certain stated cultural objectives. The second is the Section 481 tax initiative, through which producers raise money from investors, whose ostensible risk is offset through tax relief. The majority of *Amber's* budget was duly raised through these two sources, the remainder contributed by RTÉ (Screenworks 2014).

One of the peculiarities of *Amber's* journey from script to screen, however, is the length of time it took to officially arrive on Irish screens, despite being financed totally through these native sources. Completed in 2012, the series was acquired for international distribution by Content Television, who secured a number of high-profile sales to terrestrial, satellite and VOD broadcasters around the world. Thus by the time *Amber* finally aired on RTÉ in early 2014, it had already been seen in Denmark, Sweden, Israel, Latin America, Brazil, Canada, Australia and the USA (Rosser 2012; Content 2012).

A further regulatory regime has been blamed for this delay: an idiosyncratic international accounting rule requiring programme production costs to be booked during the period of broadcast, rather than the period of production. This narrative, emanating from RTÉ itself, suggests that *Amber's* delayed broadcast was ultimately a consequence of political pressure on the station to break even (Slattery 2013).

### **Organisational structure**

Prior to the opening up of television production via EU-mandated outsourcing of programme making, broadcast production in Ireland was mostly centralised in the monolithic, bureaucratic organisational structure of RTÉ. The advent of an independent production culture enabled the creation of many small, entrepreneurial firms like Screenworks – boutique production companies with a small number of producer and administrator employees, drawing on a pool of flexible freelance labour during production periods. While the number of production companies has undoubtedly proliferated, television drama production, with its relatively high budgets, has tended to be dominated by a few larger companies such as Octagon (*Love/Hate*, *Raw*) Element (*Pure Mule*, *Prosperity*), and Parallel (*The Clinic*), all of whom are also active in film production. *Amber*, it could be argued, marks Screenworks arrival into this elite field. Since producing the series, the company has made two feature documentaries financed by the Irish Film Board, *Barbaric Genius* (2011) and *Very Extremely Dangerous* (2012). It has made a further documentary, *Natan* (2013) through the Arts Council's Reel Art scheme, and is reportedly developing a number of further drama and feature projects with RTÉ and the Film Board (Slattery 2013, Screenworks 2014).

### **The Market**

If the television drama "market" results from producer attempts to satisfy changing consumer tastes (Peterson and Anand 2004: 317), *Amber* might be read as an attempt to capture the market by infusing a generic missing person mystery with

elements of narrative innovation. *Amber* employs a narrative structure based on multiple POV replay narration, a relatively innovative storytelling style also utilised in the Netflix-produced revival of US cult comedy *Arrested Development* (Murray 2013). In a further departure from the norm, RTÉ scheduled the series in “strip” format, airing the episodes over four consecutive nights, the first time it has ever treated a domestic drama series in this way (Slattery 2014). Despite these innovations, and *Amber*’s high audience figures, a lack of narrative resolution appears to have alienated some viewers, judging from online viewer discussion (e.g. Boards 2014). On the other hand, if the audience is only alienated in the final scenes, the drama has arguably succeeded in its market intentions.

### Conclusions

The production of culture approach has been criticised for, among other things, a lack of interest in the supposedly unique nature of cultural products; a disregard for textual analysis and meaning; and a neglect of questions of power and exploitation (Peterson and Anand 2004: 326-7). While I acknowledge these shortcomings of the account presented here, its purpose is to illuminate questions rarely asked by proponents

of text- or audience-centred approaches: What is the *context* of production? How do production companies emerge and develop? Is market support for indigenous drama justified? Can Irish drama compete in an energised international market for “quality” drama? In such a project, questions about the “meaning” of *Amber*, and its success or otherwise as television drama, are largely irrelevant.

RTÉ’s curious treatment of a flagship drama project is nevertheless interesting. Regardless of international accounting rules or supposed political pressure to break even, the bookkeeping narrative contains an obvious flaw. If the BAI’s €550,000 represents, as is typical, 85 percent or so of production costs, and Screenworks also accessed Section 481 funding, which would typically contribute a further 20 percent or so of the budget, it is highly likely that RTÉ made only a token financial contribution to *Amber*. The real reason for the drama’s long-delayed Irish premiere remains unstated.

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***I wanna destroy the passer by: Nihilism, Narcissism and Authority in Love/Hate Series Four***

Angela Nagle

The opening scene depicts a teenage boy, who will spend most of the series trying to kill gang leader, Nidge, showing his friends his gun. He points the gun at another boy and orders his friend to film it on his phone. Instead of shooting the boy, he guns down a passing cat. The scene then cuts to Nidge, who we have watched throughout the arc of the previous three series develop from a sycophantic, ambitious underling to a cold-hearted amoral gang leader, now watching porn in the dark, in which a woman is submissive and her mouth is gagged.

Clearly, the tone of the show is darker than ever. The most likable and moral character in the show, Darren, has been killed as revenge for a killing he carried out to save Nidge. In the first episode of this series, Nidge drives to a graveyard and stands over Darren's grave. His emotions are opaque: although it is not clear if he feels remorse or sadness, he is clearly haunted by Darren's death. The only remaining character with any moral standing (although clearly this is a relative concept in this world) is Tommy but he has been beaten so brutally by Nidge in the last series that he suffered brain damage. Told by Nidge that a group of Nigerian immigrants are responsible for the attack, the confused and damaged Tommy continues to work for Nidge. But Tommy has also been left distant and passive and when we first see him, his wife is watching over him as he sleeps and she wipes some blood from his ear.

Tommy's wife Siobhan seems to have intuited what really happened to Tommy. She is repeatedly shown deep in thought suggesting that she is contemplating how to protect Tommy or perhaps even avenge Nidge's attack on him. The boy who we see in the first scene, already a cold-hearted killer, has joined forces with Lizzie, the dissident Republican gunwoman who killed Darren, and their sole mission is now to kill Nidge.

Despite these threats Nidge emerges unscathed at the end of the last episode. Just at the point when the police are about to catch the whole gang bringing in illegal material, having surveilled them over the course of the series, Tommy passes out, with blood quickly dripping from his ears and mouth. The head of the investigation faces a choice: wait just a few more minutes until the incriminating shipping container comes in and run the risk of Tommy dying, or ruin years of investigative work by calling an ambulance and thus alerting the whole gang to their presence. He chooses the latter, having built up sympathy for Tommy and his wife. This tough moral decision leads to Nidge and his entire gang getting off after arrest without charges. At the end of a series in which it seemed every force in the show was conspiring against Nidge, he emerges triumphant and suffers no punishment for his many crimes. Walking away together, free men despite all the murders and extreme forms of violence they have committed, Nidge says to Fran 'If I hadn't used Tommy I'd be inside now'. Nodding back ironically to the theme suggested by 'Turn, Turn, Turn' at the beginning of the series, Fran says "The universe, Nidgey, the universe."

Over the course of the fourth series, distance emerges between Nidge and Trish, his wife. She spends her days blowing his ill-gotten gains on clothes and pampering and she indulges him despite his bad behaviour. This forgiving and submissive approach only seems to make him more distant. At the same time he is getting closer to Janet, the brothel keeper he works with. Nidge's amorality is exposed to Janet when two of the women working in the brothel die from a heroin overdose: he insists they leave the bodies to rot in an apartment rather than alert anyone and risk police attention. After Nidge reveals his moral character, Janet's warmth towards him

disappears. In a final moment of intimacy Janet reveals that her sister died when they were teenagers. The deaths of the girls has brought back these painful memories for her but has disturbingly not effected Nidge at all. The next time we see her she appears cheery but emotionally removed, using the same tone of thinly veiled contempt she uses with the male customers. She gives Nidge a 'present' of a session with an Eastern European prostitute who has started working in the brothel. Nidge doesn't seem entirely comfortable with the present but Janet insists. Her parting words are to instruct the woman that 'he likes to kiss'. Nidge goes back to his wife that night and starts having rough and violent sex with her, waking her up. It is brief and when it is over, she simply turns over passively and goes back to sleep.

In the final scenes, a triumphant and free Nidge returns to the police station and urinates on their door while smiling and laughing at the security camera. Because he has now committed a crime, however minor, having just got out without a sentence for everything else, they have to take him in and arrest him. He walks down the corridor to the cell with a demonic smile on his face as the nihilistic anthem 'Anarchy in the UK' plays: 'I am an Antichrist/I am an anarchist/Don't know what I want but I know how to get it/I wanna destroy the passer by.' In his cell, he beats his chest and screams, as if possessed, summoning and daring some force in the world, some power or authority greater than his own, to challenge him. And yet, there is something self-loathing in the triumphant scene, as he tears at his chest. Unpunished for his cruelty and transgression, the audience is left wondering in this final scene, what does Nidge want?

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1991) argued that deep social and cultural changes were taking place in Western society that expressed an individualistic and atomised economic order and that this change could be understood in terms of a reported rise in narcissistic personality types and disorders. Lasch saw the culture of narcissism as the realisation of the Marquis de Sade's vision of a nihilistic pleasure-centred individualistic society, which he viewed as the moral order most conducive to an increasingly cruel economic order.

Lasch describes the id-centred therapeutic sensibility of our age as one in which 'sublimations strike the therapeutic sensibility as intolerably oppressive, offensive to the common sense and injurious to personal health and well being. To liberate humanity from such ideas of love and duty has become the mission of the post-Freudian therapies and particularly of their converts and popularisers, for whom mental health means the overthrow of inhibitions and the immediate gratification of every impulse (13). "The Manson murders", wrote Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, 'were the logical culmination of throwing off the shackles of conscience and consciousness, the grim flowering of the id's voodoo energies' (1996: 145).

The utter contempt that the characters have for humanity and recalls how narcissistic personalities, according to Kernberg 'are afraid of not belonging to the company of the great, rich and powerful and of belonging instead to the mediocre, by which they mean worthless and despicable rather than 'average' in the ordinary sense of the term' (1975: 234).

Lasch wrote about the collapse of parental authority and the shift from a society of the Protestant work ethic in which the superego values of self-restraint were ascendant, to one in which more and more recognition was being given to the values of the id, the values of self-indulgence. In *Love/Hate* the parent characters are typically given little respect and often appear as passive, helpless to influence the lives their children have chosen. In series four, Nidge's mother from whom he seems estranged, has a stroke. Despite his wife's pleading he won't go in to the hospital to visit her. In an attempt to exact revenge on another character, an increasingly unhinged Fran digs up the corpse of an enemy's dead mother. Toward the end of the task Fran decides instead to urinate on the corpse and put the earth back down on top of her, not because he is plagued by guilt and disgust at what he has done, but simply because he has become bored by the task.

The two urination gestures of the series, Fran's and later Nidge's, can be read as a symbolic acting out of the triumph over this absent authority. Nidge's urination is an absurd joke at the expense of the weak authority of the justice

system that fails to restrain him. Many critics reviewing the series regarded the final scene as a senseless act without a motivation. Perhaps it is the transcendent purity of motiveless destruction celebrated by Raoul Vaneigem and the Situationists or Baudelaire's oasis of horror in a desert of boredom. Or perhaps the authority being summoned and cursed in the final scene is the maternal. This series brings together the death of Nidge's mother, the destruction of his marriage and his rejection by a lover. The way in which Janet rejects him is significant: rather than delivering the scolding he may have needed or wanted, she invites him to indulge his id even further. His increasingly passive wife does the same. Lasch argued that the flight from feeling and the loathing of the castrating mother were

part of the same social condition. In an era characterised by weak parental authority, in which the id is encouraged to be free and unrestrained, the desire to be restrained and to be punished becomes unspeakable. Nidge is unable to achieve intimacy with these women and unable to satisfy his desire for his seemingly unstoppable id to be restrained. He constantly evades punishment and avoids authority regardless of how extreme his acts of violence and transgression become, no matter how he may invite this authority and punishment. In the end he must force the police to arrest him – a small gesture toward an unspeakable desire to be restrained from the unchallenged fulfilling of desire.

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## New Voices in Irish Experimental Cinema:

Rouzbeh Rashidi, Maximilian Le Cain, Dean Kavanagh and Michael Higgins

Donal Foreman

Irish cinema has never been renowned for harbouring a vibrant underground or experimental film scene. There have been significant exceptions (most importantly, aspects of the Irish “First Wave” of the 1970s), but it’s only in recent years that a body of films has emerged that offer a powerful rebuttal to that perception. While to announce a fully-fledged “movement” would be premature, it is safe to say that the work of Rouzbeh Rashidi, Maximilian Le Cain, Dean Kavanagh and Michael Higgins represent an important new direction in Irish cinema. Working without scripts and shooting primarily on video, with minimal and usually non-existent budgets, zero crew and casts typically drawn from friends and family, all four filmmakers have been developing at a prolific rate over the past few years. Between them, they have produced an astonishing 32 features and countless shorts since 2008 – though it should be noted that Rashidi, who in 2012 alone directed 9 features and 76 short films, has been the most incredibly fertile contributor. All the filmmakers are members of the Experimental Film Society, an international organization founded by Rashidi in 2000 in his birthplace, Iran, and aiming “to produce and promote films by its members” who are “distinguished by an uncompromising, no-budget devotion to personal, experimental cinema.”<sup>1</sup>

For the most part, the films operate in an uncanny space between experimental and narrative film. On the one hand, they generally eschew plot and any conventional notion of “eventfulness” in favour of the immediate sensuousness of images and sounds and their juxtaposition – on the other hand, performers, locations, lighting and sound design are used to evoke affects and atmospheres more readily associated with genre cinema especially the

horror film. Le Cain, also an accomplished critic, once wrote about David Lynch that he “frees the paranoia of noir from the straightjacket of narrative ... [drowning] the plot in a great tidal wave of emotion”, and one can identify a similar impulse at work here. Le Cain adds that “the most unsettling aspect of [Lynch’s work] is that the fear seems to come from a source that is deeper than the plot indicates.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s this deeper level that these filmmakers mostly concern themselves with. As the title of Rashidi’s recent, Arts Council-funded feature, *HSP: There is No Escape from the Terrors of the Mind* (2013), makes explicit, the unease evoked is existential rather than circumstantial: it’s much more about the nature of perception, memory and consciousness than anything that can be resolved, or even expressed, through action or dialogue. Usually forsaking plot entirely to tackle these depths head-on, the films mostly seem to reside in a strange, subterranean world free of the typical “narrative” trappings of our daily life. Jobs, money, the State, even social interaction, are rarely visible. Instead, there are bodies and there are spaces, there are sensations and there are memories, and there is the coming-into-being and intermingling of each of these through processes of perception (and cinema).

When language is foregrounded in these worlds – for example, in Higgins’ *Birds on a Wire* (2011) or Rashidi’s *Bipedality* (2010) – it is usually fragile and woefully insufficient, more resonant as another environmental sound than a medium of communication. Le Cain has described *Bipedality*, one of Rashidi’s last films to feature extensive dialogues, as a study of “how inadequate language

1. <http://www.experimentalfilmsociety.com/p/about.html>

2. Le Cain, Maximilian. 2002. “In Dreams: A Review of *Mulholland Drive*” in *Senses of Cinema* #19: [http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/19/mulholland\\_dreams/](http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/19/mulholland_dreams/)

is to communicate feeling, or to grapple with the mysteries of existing in any given moment in relation to another person or simply to the world that surrounds one,” a world that is, in contrast, “almost overwhelmingly vivid and sensuous.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s our primal and problematic relationship to the world in this sense that each of these filmmakers focus on in different ways: not the world before the Word (in the sense of Stan Brakhage’s “untutored eye”) so much as a world beneath the Word, a subterranean field of sensations that is always available to us but which we can rarely share or articulate in social or verbal terms.

Trying to express this cinematically pushes each filmmaker to experiment with different ways of refreshing and estranging our perceptions. Although each has worked with HD video, they have all in different ways rejected the fetishisation of resolution and clarity that is *de rigueur* in discourse around new film technology – whether through the use of hand-made lens filters (Rashidi), obsolete formats such as VHS or Pixelvision (Higgins) or the projection and re-filming of imagery (Kavanagh and Le Cain). It’s a principle of distortion that foregrounds the unreliable, hallucinatory nature of perception and memory, as well as reflecting on the nature of cinema itself.

It’s important to note here that the group’s cinephilia also sets them apart from most Irish filmmakers. One need only look at the dedications that appear at the beginning of most of Rashidi’s films – among them Jean-Pierre Melville, Jean-Claude Rousseau, Maya Deren, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Theodoros Angelopoulos and Alain Resnais. But rather than resulting in a Tarantino-like referentiality, this voracious appetite for and knowledge of film history seems to have instilled a commitment to a personal, image-centred cinema

3. Le Cain. 2010. “Rouzbeh Rashidi’s *Bipedality*” in *Experimental Conversations* #6: <http://www.experimentalconversations.com/articles/532/rouzbeh-rashidis-bipedality/>

in which, to quote Raul Ruiz, “it is the type of image produced that determines the narrative, not the reverse.”<sup>4</sup>

As Rashidi put it in an interview:

*These films are about images and the progression of images. When there's sound or music, they're about the interaction of sound and image. Cinema itself is always the subject, experimenting with its forms. Not necessarily pushing its limits, because I believe the limits of cinema have already been reached by Structuralist filmmakers like Sharits, or by Garrel's early films, for instance. You can't go beyond that. But if a filmmaker's experiments are true to his or her perception and personality, the medium's possibilities are constantly renewed.*<sup>5</sup>

Beyond these common strategies, there is much that is idiosyncratic to each filmmaker’s “perceptions and personalities,” and we can begin to consider that, only a little facetiously, by assigning each his own broad caricature: the Exile, the Solipsist, the Hermit and the Vagabond.

### The Exile

Rashidi’s prolific filmography can be separated into three key strands:

- Minimal narratives in which there are at least the bare-bones continuity of character and place: introverted and alienated characters, nearly always silent, in spaces infused with unease and mystery.
- More self-reflexive and amorphous “image-scapes” drawing on a seemingly vast archive of personal imagery in a way that foregrounds the haunting, memorialising capacities of moving images.
- Short films which have generally served as the “breeding ground” for Rashidi’s experimentations: a series of 40 preceding his feature film work from 2000 to 2010, and, since beginning

4. Ruiz, Raul. 1995. *Poetics of Cinema* (Dis Voir, 6)

5. Le Cain. 2011. “Rouzbeh Rashidi in Conversation” in *Experimental Conversations* #8: <http://www.experimentalconversations.com/articles/969/experimental-film-society-rouzbeh-rashidi-in-conv/>

to use DSLR technology in 2011, the *Homo Sapiens Project* series, of which there are a jaw-dropping 180 editions to date.

Rashidi's position as an immigrant and exile from Iran is a decisive undercurrent in his work, most recognizably in earlier films such as *Reminiscences of Yearning* (2011), consisting of old footage shot with friends in Iran (and dedicated not to a beloved auteur but "to all the friends and our memory between 1998 – 2004") and *Only Human* (2009), which weaves together the alienated lives of an ensemble of immigrants in Dublin, and still stands as one of the few cinematic explorations of immigrant experience in Ireland. *Hades on Limbo* (2011) serves as a unique take on this disconnect: filmed in Iran by friends, it was in fact directed by Rashidi in Ireland *over Skype* – a first in film history perhaps? Although, of course, there are always sources "deeper than the plot indicates," these notions of estrangement from one's own territory, an emotional experience of exile or even banishment, seem like particularly fitting metaphors for the kind of existential disquiet Rashidi is drawn to.

Rashidi's knack for coaxing subtle but intense performances out of non-actors, as well as an apparently innate eye for finding otherworldly compositions in the Irish landscape, seemed like it could have set him on track to be Ireland's very first bonafide "high art" auteur, in the mould of Russia's Alexander Sokurov or Thailand's Apichatpong Weerathesakul. However, a combination of Ireland's inhospitable funding structures and Rashidi's own inclinations seem to have kept him burrowing away in a more underground, no-to-micro-budget environment. Le Cain may have been a crucial influence in this respect, both because of his polyvalent cinephilic tastes and more unambiguous rejection of narrative arthouse forms in his own practice. Their collaboration and friendship, beginning in 2011, seems to have pushed Rashidi, on the one hand, past the Bressonian austerity of his first features (usually shot in black and white in realist contexts, with a strict absence of music and camera movement)

towards a more lurid and phantasmagoric visual sensibility that draws liberally from the atmospheres of horror and "B" cinema – and, on the other hand, towards a more intimate engagement with the tropes and practices of experimental cinema (flicker effects, found footage, abstraction). This shift in aesthetic orientation can be summed up by Rashidi's statement after a screening in 2013 that "it has become clear that we want to make films like Jean Rollin and Jess Franco, not like Tarkovsky or Bresson."<sup>6</sup>

It reaches its strongest expression in *There is No Escape...*, a film explicitly dedicated to Jean Rollin and containing excerpts of several of the French cult director's musical scores.

Rashidi's embrace of the DSLR camera – which began with his first Arts Council funded work, *He* (2012) – is obviously an instrumental factor in this progression. Although he was already beginning to experiment with it in his previous work, the move to DSLR enabled a more extensive exploration of vintage and hand-altered lenses and filtration, with a particular view towards selectively softening and distorting areas of the frame. The DSLR's capacities for image manipulation have allowed him to essentially grade his images in-camera before he shoots, committing to increasingly bold visual choices from the outset and doing little or no work on the image in post production. Rashidi's prodigious output, unparalleled in Irish cinema, naturally invites skepticism about what quality or consistency could really be maintained at such a pace. His technical mastery is one strong point in defense of this output, since it's clearly the "practice" facilitated by his allegedly daily filmmaking practice which has allowed him to develop such a personalized and sophisticated technical approach.

### The Solipsist

A key to appreciating Maximilian Le Cain's work – which spans from highly fragmented and rhythmic "cut-up" films to pieces of pure abstraction

6. Quoted by Le Cain on his "Close Watch" blog: [http://lecain.blogspot.com/2013\\_04\\_01\\_archive.html](http://lecain.blogspot.com/2013_04_01_archive.html)

and digital noise, and occasionally crosses over into gallery-based installation and performance

– is his adolescent aspirations to be the Irish Tarkovsky. Growing up on Cork’s Beara peninsula, Le Cain made films throughout his teens inspired by the lofty pronouncements of the Russian master, among others. His first unsuccessful attempt at a feature narrative would eventually be adapted into the short, *Kingdom of Shadows* (2004), juxtaposing the re-filmed VHS images (removed from their original narrative and aural context) against a Maxim Gorky text on the Lumière brothers’ first screening in Paris. *Kingdom* itself was then abandoned and the footage was recomposed again as part of *Now Then* (1997-2008), a distillation of much of Le Cain’s film work since ’97.

Le Cain repeated this process of reinterpreting “failed” narrative projects twice more: on the Rohmer-inspired feature, *One Long Breath* (2005), and the RTÉ/Cork Film Centre-funded short, *Point of Departure* (2008). In each case, what began as a scripted narrative, a “movie” in the everyday sense, became a distorted and scrambled labyrinth of sound and imagery, as if someone was haunted by a movie but couldn’t quite remember the details or how exactly it unfolded, or perhaps was in the process of forgetting it as the film progressed. Patterns of decay and disintegration predominate, and in Le Cain’s own words, he thinks of himself as “making films that are tearing themselves apart as they’re coming together. I don’t try to make complete fully finished projects. I see them as ruins.”<sup>7</sup>

In the cases of *One Long Breath* and *Point of Departure*, it could be seen as a formal expression of what the films were conceptually concerned with to begin with: respectively, a premature sense of ageing and loss amongst a group of urban twenty somethings, and the subjective experience of an institutionalised woman with Alzheimer

7. In conversation with the author.

(played by the late stage actress Anna Manahan).

They are the last of Le Cain projects that were not consciously made with a ruinous end in mind: later works such as *Private Report* (2009) employ actors, dialogue, and genre elements in a fractured collage that was never intended to be anything but. The results can sometimes feel impenetrable, an impression not always helped by Le Cain’s persona: when curator Sarah Iremonger teased that one of his pieces was “the most solipsistic, depressing, navel-gazing piece of work I’ve seen in my entire life”, Le Cain reportedly took it as a compliment.<sup>8</sup> But the key, insofar as there is one, is probably not to think of “penetrating” the works at all, but rather exploring their surfaces. Le Cain has expressed a concern with “limits, failures and overwhelming sensations,”<sup>9</sup> and the Spanish artist Esperanza Collado described his work as “an aesthetics of interruption” in which spaces “stutter”<sup>10</sup> – in other words, works that are about the breakdown or impossibility of communication rather than being communicative failures in themselves. If all of the EFS filmmakers problematise the social and the perceptual, Le Cain takes this the furthest, to the point that there is rarely a sense of the world beyond the internal and subjective, beyond the oneiric and haunting visions, memories and hallucinations of the mind.

While this applies to most of Le Cain’s filmography, it’s harder to summarize the various stylistic modes it takes across his ninety or so films of various length to date. Though often meticulously composed, Le Cain lacks Rashidi’s technical virtuosity, often favouring flat, restrained and low-contrast imagery. It’s in the editing room that he has been the most innovative, exploring myriad forms of superimposition, crosscutting and, most characteristically, complex flicker effects involving

8. Quoted by Tina Darb O’Sullivan, “A Philosophy of Art Inspired by an Oyster” in the *Irish Examiner*, July 18, 2013:

<http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsfilmtv/news/a-philosophy-of-art-inspired-by-an-oyster-237163.html>

9. Le Cain, artist’s statement: <http://maximilianle Cain.com/>

10. Esperanza Collado, “Maximilian Le Cain: Beyond the Cretinous World of Images,” program notes for *Available Light* exhibition at Basement Project Space, Cork, 2010: <http://esperanzacollado.org/R.htm>

patterns of images each only a few frames in length. The flicker (something Rashidi has since borrowed in his own work) has a long history in experimental cinema, though much more so in film-based work than in video. In the context of Le Cain and Rashidi, it seems to be an invocation of or tribute to celluloid's essential qualities, not without a tinge of melancholy. This could also be said for his use of found footage, another recurring device. In two of his strongest pieces, *The Mongolian Barbecue* (2009) and *Areas of Sympathy* (2013), images from B horror titles, *Black Magic Rites* (1973, Renato Poiselli) and *The Invisible Ray* (1936, Lambert Hillyer) respectively, are used as part of oppressive atmospheres that the films' bodies seem helplessly caught up in.

If the works themselves have a generally solipsistic slant, it's important to note that there's nothing self-obsessed or anti-social about Le Cain's actual practice as a filmmaker, which has been marked by an expanding array of intense collaborations: with Rashidi on a series of feature diptyches (*Persistencies of Sadness & Still Days* [2012] and *Weird Weird Movie Kids Do Not Watch the Movie* [2013]); with Esperanza Collado on the art/film project *Operation Rewrite*; with the Cork performance and sound artist Vicky Langan (they have produced a series of nine shorts together as well as several live events); and an Arts Council-funded expanded cinema event, *Gorging Limpet*, with the sound artist Karen Power. This is on top of the multiple personalities already collaborating inside Le Cain himself: inspired by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, he has been making films under at least two other pseudonyms, Soltan Karl and Humphrey Esterhaze, since 2010. And we haven't even mentioned the filmmaker's already impressive history as a critic (for various magazines including *Senses of Cinema*, and as editor of and contributor to the Cork Film Centre's online film journal *Experimental Conversations*) and programmer (for the Black Sun music/film series with Langan and, more recently, the Triskel Art Centre's quarterly film series *Phantoscope*)...

### The Hermit

Dean Kavanagh, the youngest of the group, gave powerful performances in several of Rashidi's

shorts and features before developing his own filmmaking practice. His early shorts seem to struggle to define themselves beyond the palpable influence of Rashidi's already developed style – but Kavanagh has begun to come into his own with his first two features, the no-budget *History of Water* (2012) and crowd funded *A Harbour Town* (2013), and his five-part online series, *Late Hours of the Night* (2013-2014). Still living with family in his hometown of Greystones, Co. Wicklow, the 24 year old is the only of the four for whom notions of rootedness and domesticity are pivotal, with a particular affinity for the atmospheric movements of the Irish landscape and climate. Kavanagh invests his rural, seaside locales with a sense of teeming, brooding energy that contrasts with the still and stagnant gestures of his actors (a cast comprised of family members and close friends). In some ways the most traditional of the four (relatively!), Kavanagh's work is more linear and more conventionally slick and "cinematic" in its treatment, shooting with prime lenses on DSLR cameras and sticking to a generally consistent continuity of character and place. Although generally free of dialogue and dramatic interaction, his performers' everyday actions and stares are imbued with all kinds of intense foreboding, and the synopses the director has penned for his work suggest a narrative mind at work, however oblique. His logline for *A History of Water* prepares us for the tale of "a young man [who] films his family to better understand them" and "as a result ... becomes destroyed by them."<sup>11</sup>

Kavanagh is also the EFS member most redolent of the Irish First Wave cinema, especially landmark films such as *Pigs* (1984, Cathal Black) and *Traveller* (1981, Joe Comerford), which share his penchant for densely sensuous, oppressive and distinctly Irish environments, whether urban or rural. Le Cain's comment that even Kavanagh's urban images are "steeped in rural gloom" could apply as well to Black and Comerford.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Synopsis provided by the filmmaker.

These are spaces that always seem to feel heavier than the characters inhabiting them; if Rashidi (and even more so Le Cain) can't escape the terrors of the mind, it's the terrors of space and time that seem to be most unnerving to Kavanagh, and instrumental in pushing his characters towards retreat and isolation. Part of this heaviness seems to be a sense of the memory and history permeating spaces, another point of affinity with Black and Comerford, where that weight takes on a more explicitly socio-political character. For Kavanagh, it's more mythic and more mysterious: the weight of ghosts, old photos, film history... Might this have something to do with all four filmmaker's passion for European horror cinema, in which a sense of the haunting weight of history is so central?

### The Vagabond

Michael Higgins is the odd man out: probably the most autonomous of the four filmmakers, restlessly eclectic in his choice of subject and with an outward looking sensibility that seems strikingly free of the kind of existential angst cultivated by his colleagues. He's also the only one who has not directly collaborated with, or played an on-screen role for, the other filmmakers. His work is divided between two main strands: minimalist feature-length videos and celluloid-based experiments of various lengths. The features (most notably his "road movie" trilogy: *Roadside Picnic* [2010], *You Have Been Killed* [2011] and *Birds on a Wire* [2011]) tend to consist of long static master shots – think early Jim Jarmusch with a less overt sense of humour or hipster cool – while the film-based work is in a much more materialist vein, foregrounding the texture and fragility of the medium itself (scratches, decomposition, etc).

In both cases, a sense of nomadism and the use of (seemingly) found material is central. The "road movie" films each follow a different duo of characters on foreign travels – two Irish friends in Iceland (one played by Higgins), two filmmakers in Poland, and in the stand-out conclusion to the trilogy, two Polish women on a tourist route through the west of Ireland. The latter takes austere observations of what Higgins describes as "the forgotten moments of the everyday

that underpin touristic adventure"<sup>13</sup> and assembles them into a surprisingly rich and evocative whole: *Birds on a Wire* taps so acutely into the damp grey grimness of a rain-swept west coast holiday that you can almost feel the wet on your skin. Whereas the "Road Movie" trilogy feels "found" in the sense of assembling seemingly documentary moments from real journeys, Higgins' celluloid-based feature *The Poorhouse Revisited* (2011) is so in a more literal sense, recomposing discarded, rotting 16mm rushes from Frank Stapleton's 1996 Famine-themed short, *The Poorhouse*, which Higgins discovered on a derelict site on Dublin's Ringsend peninsula (itself the setting for another of Higgins' video features, *Concrete Walls* [2011]).

Higgins' latest and most accomplished video, *Smolt* (2013) is his first to find a medium-specific materiality equivalent to his work with celluloid – shot on a range of formats including the Red camera and mobile phones, the film was then transferred to VHS, projected and re-filmed – as well as being an intriguingly fictionalized expansion of his fascination with the ready-made. Originally produced as an RTÉ/Filmbase-funded short film with a script about two working-class boys in Dublin's inner city, Higgins (echoing Le Cain's ruinous process) expanded the project into a feature-length collage, combining master-shot scenes from the short alongside pre-production and research material including footage shot on phones by the young actors, audio interviews, excerpts from letters, and Youtube videos. Combined with the degraded VHS aesthetic, the result gives the impression of a strange bootleg tape of artefacts from another time and place. The film's wordiness sets it apart from most EFS work – the thick Dublin accents of the film's three child stars narrate and banter throughout – but the idiosyncrasy and, to non-Irish ears, incomprehensibility of much of their speech makes it function on a musical level as much as a textual one and serves to signify a world that is as insular and "subterranean" as those of Rashidi, Le Cain or Kavanagh – and even more defiantly so. Though the film is reminiscent of Harmony Korine's *Gummo*

12. Le Cain. 2012. "Dean Kavanagh: The Memory of Water" in *Experimental Conversations* #9: <http://www.experimentalconversations.com/articles/1039/dean-kavanagh-the-memory-of-water>

13. Filmmaker's synopsis: <http://aroadmovietrilogy.wordpress.com/2011/10/24/hello-world/#more->

(1997) almost to the point of homage, Higgins lacks Korine's fetish for the grotesque and kitschy and exhibits a more even-keeled respect for his subjects. In the Irish context, it's a refreshingly personal and unpatronising take on a milieu that has, post-Dardenne brothers, become grist to a festival mill idolising handheld, aestheticised grit.

### Conclusion

The films of the Experimental Film Society's four Irish and Irish-based members have screened regularly in gallery and micro-cinema spaces around Ireland over the past few years. In 2013, they were also showcased in the inaugural IndieCork festival and as part of IFI International and Experimental Film Club's recently launched touring program on the history of Irish experimental film, *Absences and (Im)Possibilities*. This small-scale but consistent pattern of exhibitions, coupled with growing support from the Arts Council (Rashidi and Le Cain have both received awards several times now), suggests that the group is beginning to carve out a respectable niche for themselves. However, this support has largely come from Ireland's visual arts scene. Within Irish film culture, they remain largely unknown, even if their focus on feature length projects implies that the cinema rather than the gallery would be the natural home for much of their output. They have also received little critical attention, online or in print, from either camp.

The filmmakers' own networks of support and partnership seem to be inexhaustible, however. Rashidi, Le Cain and Kavanagh have just completed a collaborative "science fiction" feature, *Forbidden Symmetries* (2014), as well as recently, under the moniker Cinema Cyanide, branching out into music: they have released four experimental albums online in the past year.

A collective statement by the trio on the relationship between the two mediums can serve as an apt summary of their shared aesthetic points of departure:

*People's expectations of what music can be are far more advanced than what they are prepared to accept from moving image works. Music is allowed to function through an abstract emotional progression, using the power of elements such as mood and rhythm, approaching themes in a lyrical way, treating narrative obliquely or allusively,*

*often very personally. Of course, this isn't always the case, but it is accepted that music can do this. With cinema, on the other hand, people expect hard narrative fact, the rules are far more literal: somehow audiences approach the moving image with a literalness that is very primitive compared to the way music is enjoyed. So we determined early on to make films and videos with the sort of creative prerogatives that musicians can take for granted.*<sup>14</sup>

Of course, with the possible exception of purely abstract experimental work, film is inextricably involved in representation in a way that music is not, and it's worth considering whether this aesthetic direction is ultimately limited by its rejection of social or political contingencies and a distrust of verbal expression. Indeed, though the filmmakers seem to aspire to an asocial universality or singularity, it should be noted that they often explore a kind of isolated, alienated subjectivity that is distinctly male in its brooding, voyeuristic tenor.

Still, the films do represent perspectives and experiences that are rarely given space in our culture: what Le Cain has called "intensely private experiences of perception that perhaps cinema alone has the tools to communicate adequately".<sup>15</sup>

On that point, we could borrow a metaphor from filmmakers Graeme Thomson and Silvia Maglioni and their recent film, *In Search of Uiq* (2013): "In our universe, we are tuned to the frequency that corresponds to the reality of capitalism ... An infinite number of parallel realities coexist with us in the same room, although we cannot tune into them." At their best, Rashidi, Le Cain, Kavanagh and Higgins have found ways to tune into some of those other frequencies, and invited us to join them.

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14. Gianluco Pulsoni, "Cinema Cyanide – an Experimental Sound Project from Ireland" in *Celluloid Beatz*: <http://www.celluloidbeatz.com/interviews/cinema-cyanide/>

15. Le Cain. 2010. "Rouzbeh Rashidi's Bipedality" in *Experimental Conversations* #6: <http://www.experimentalconversations.com/articles/532/rouzbeh-rashidis-bipedality/>

*This essay is an expansion of programme notes written for the New Irish Underground Film retrospective, which took place at Spectacle Theater in Brooklyn in November, 2013: [www.spectacletheater.com/new-irish-underground-film/](http://www.spectacletheater.com/new-irish-underground-film/)*

*For more information on the filmmakers please visit:*

[www.experimentalfilmsociety.com](http://www.experimentalfilmsociety.com)

[www.rouzbehrashidi.com](http://www.rouzbehrashidi.com)

[www.maximilianlecairn.com](http://www.maximilianlecairn.com)

[www.deankavanagh.com](http://www.deankavanagh.com)

[www.mgmh.me](http://www.mgmh.me)

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