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# The Irish Phone Home: Reflections of Ireland in Jim Sheridan's *In America*

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**Abstract.** This article analyses Jim Sheridan's film *In America* (2002), arguing that the American location reflects back imaginary images of Ireland to its Irish audience, in a manner similar to the mechanism described in Lacan's discussion of his experiment of the inverted bouquet, which he uses to illustrate the three registers of the human psyche. It explores imaginary, symbolic and real dimensions of identity as they are articulated in the film, showing that, as in Lacan's experiment, the symbolic dimension, which equates with the position of the human subject as social being, is the most powerful structuring force. In Sheridan's film, this dimension is embodied in Steven Spielberg's film *ET*, a fictional narrative that allows Johnny, the father of the family, to articulate his grief and begin a new life. Further, Sheridan's film suggests that America is the imaginary locus of contemporary Irish identity, and that it can be understood as analogous to the spherical mirror of Lacan's experiment.

**Keywords.** Jacques Lacan, Jim Sheridan, imaginary, symbolic, real, American west, Irish west.

**Resumen.** Este artículo analiza la película de Jim Sheridan *In America* (2002), argumentando que la ubicación de América refleja imágenes imaginarias de Irlanda a su público irlandés, de manera similar al mecanismo descrito en la discusión que Lacan hace de su experimento con el ramo invertida, que utiliza para ilustrar los tres registros de la psique humana. Se exploran dimensiones imaginarias, simbólicas y reales de la identidad tal como se articulan en la película, demostrando que, como en el experimento de Lacan, la dimensión simbólica, que equivale a la posición del sujeto humano como ser social, es la fuerza estructurante más poderosa. En la película de Sheridan, esta dimensión se encarna en la película de Steven Spielberg *ET*, una narrativa de ficción que permite a Johnny, el padre de familia, articular su dolor y empezar una nueva vida. Además, la película de Sheridan sugiere que América es el lugar imaginario de la identidad irlandesa contemporánea, y que puede ser entendido como análogo al espejo esférico del experimento lacaniano.

**Palabras clave.** Jacques Lacan, Jim Sheridan, imaginario, simbólico, real, oeste americano, oeste de Irlanda.

So complex, so tangled as if we have to wait  
on some riff of imagination to refract detail,  
some fiction to shape elusive meaning of fact  
(O'Siadhail 2002: 14)

Jim Sheridan is one of the most important and prolific filmmakers in Ireland today, and has worked in some of the most successful films in the Irish canon, including *My Left Foot* (Sheridan 1989), *The Field* (Sheridan 1990), *In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan 1993), *The Boxer* (Sheridan 1997) and *Into the West* (Newell 1992). The popularity of these films has ensured their influence on how contemporary Irish subjectivity is perceived in the Western world, and perhaps more importantly, how Irish people perceive themselves. Yet it is precisely this popularity that has caused critics to question Sheridan's value as an auteur. As Ruth Barton states, "[i]t is perhaps their very profitability that has rendered Sheridan's films suspect, even slightly tainted, in the eyes of the academic establishment" (2002: 4). It is true that many of Sheridan's films operate in a formulaic manner. They are frequently stories of triumph in the face of adversity and focus on a small number of characters in order to avoid obfuscating the central messages of the film. However, this should not necessarily hinder a rigorous theoretical reading of them. Mainstream Hollywood narratives for example, frequently prove fruitful for film theorists because of their universality and not in spite of it.

Sheridan's career in film has been plagued by controversy, particularly because of his advocacy of republicanism and the anti-British sentiment evident in films like *In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan 1993) and *Some Mother's Son* (George 1996). But his thematic interests have not been confined to political matters: he also addresses issues like disability in the context of an Irish family in *My Left Foot* (Sheridan 1989), and his adaptation of *The Field* (Sheridan 1990) is an almost archetypal representation of the dynamics of the small Irish community and the traditional emotional attachment to land. Sheridan is aware of his participation in the creation of identities and the power of his chosen medium. "In the sense of how people live" he states, "they live through television now; that's their ethics and morals, not the Pope" (in Barton 2002: 148). In Ireland, religion has to some extent been replaced by the media, which acts as moral guide in a new, more secular nation, possibly because some of the most significant moral issues in the last decade have been *about* abuse of power by the Catholic Church and have

been critiqued largely through cinema and television. These issues have been brought to public attention in films like *The Magdalene Sisters* (Mullan, 2002), concerning the incarceration of women in the Magdalen laundries, and *Song for a Raggy Boy* (Walsh 2003), which deals with paedophilia in an industrial school. Considering the particular power of the media in modern Ireland, Sheridan's contribution cannot be underestimated. He works within established formulas and rarely tries to subvert them, but, as a filmmaker who is conscious of his responsibility and who is unquestionably influential, his films are an ideal vehicle through which to explore the dynamics of identity in contemporary Ireland. This article discusses this aspect of his film *In America* (Sheridan 2002).

Irish film in the last decade has been marked by an interest in the Irish diaspora, a fact that is borne out by the spate of recent films which deal with the experience of Irish immigrants in the United States, and particularly in New York. These include Paul Quinn's *This is My Father* (1998), about a second-generation Irish-American, and Eugene Brady's *The Nephew* (1998), which analyses the effect of a returning Irish-American who is also African-American. Martin McLoone lists Elizabeth Gill's *Gold in the Streets* (1997), Johnny Smallhorne's *2 by 4* (1998), George Bazala's *Beyond the Pale* (1999) and Bill Muir's *Exiled* (1999) as examples of films which explore Irish immigrants in New York. To this catalogue must be added Martin Scorsese's blockbuster *Gangs of New York* (2002), which explores the role of Irish immigrants in the gang wars that occurred around the area of the five points in mid-nineteenth century New York City. McLoone regards this new-found interest in Irish-America ironic at a time when economically and politically Ireland is closer to Europe (2000: 198). In many ways, this echoes the statement made by the Irish Tánaiste Mary Harney in 2000: "[a]s Irish people our relationships with the United States and the European Union are complex. Geographically we are closer to Berlin than Boston. Spiritually we are probably a lot closer to Boston than Berlin" (2000: etext).

In the light of how Irish identity has changed in the last two decades – joining the EU, beginning the peace process in Northern Ireland, becoming the host nation for large

numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers, and going through an economic boom – it is no surprise that the subject of the Irish diaspora in America is a major theme in Irish film, because it is a synecdoche of how, in general, Ireland has opened itself up in a more radical way than ever before to the influence of Europe and the United States. Illustrating this sea change, Eugene O'Brien compares a scene from *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999) with a similar scene from the “Nausicaa” chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1993: 350). In the former, Lester Burnham masturbates at the sight of the cheerleader Angela revealing the underwear beneath her skirt. In the latter, Leopold Bloom masturbates on the beach at the sight of Gertie McDowell, who also displays her underwear for a male gaze. As O'Brien observes,

[t]his scene in *Ulysses*, first serialized in *The Little Review*, was deemed to transgress good moral taste, and lead to confiscation, book burning, legal prosecution for obscenity, and banning in 1921. The scene from the film, translated into a number of awards including a Golden Globe and an Academy Award for the screenplay (2006: 59).

O'Brien's comment highlights the liberalisation of sexuality and morals by juxtaposing an early twentieth century Irish novel with a contemporary American film. This thought process suggests that, imaginatively at least, America is a filter through which the hold of nationalistic conservatism can be loosened. The filmic exploration of the position of Ireland between Europe and America is a product of the cultural re-imagining of Irish identity within global contexts and a way of expressing a form of nationality that is centrifugal rather than centripetal, as has previously been the case. It may also be a way of claiming ownership of American popular culture, which has a significant influence on Ireland, by re-articulating the role of the Irish in the creation and development of that culture. From this perspective, J.J. Lee's claim that Harney's comment marked “a revolution in the Irish self-image, or at least some Irish self-images” (2003: 31) seems to be validated. *In America*, with its merging of American popular culture with signifiers of a particularly Irish identity, realizes this re-imagining of Irishness in an American context.

In theoretical terms, Irish identity as articulated in Sheridan's film, and also in the other films dealing with Irish emigrants mentioned above, is conjured through the medium of America, in a manner similar to the mechanism described in Lacan's discussion of his experiment of the inverted bouquet. Lacan borrows this experiment from the discipline of optics to illustrate symbolically the relationship between the three registers of experience that constitute the basis of his philosophy: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. In the experiment, a vase of flowers is placed on top of a box. The open side of the box is pointing directly at a concave cauldron which serves as a spherical mirror. If the onlooker is in the correct position, he or she will not see the real vase of flowers, but an image of the vase of flowers appearing at another point, from the ray reflected off the spherical mirror. The experiment constitutes an optical illusion that proves very useful to Lacan. The actual vase of flowers represents the real; the illusory image that emerges when the rays of light are reflected off the mirror represents the imaginary; and the eye of the individual, the location of which is crucial to the success of the experiment, represents the position of the subject in the symbolic order. For Lacan, the imaginary is vital for the individual's perception of his or her own identity. The first time a person understands how he or she appears from the outside (or to put it in psychoanalytic/linguistic terminology, understands himself or herself as a subject of the enounced) is during the mirror stage in childhood. As Lacan states, “[t]his is the original adventure through which man, for the first time, has the experience of seeing himself, or reflecting on himself and conceiving of himself as other than he is – an essential dimension of the human, which entirely structures his fantasy life” (1987: 79). It is thus the imaginary, as it is constituted in the symbolic, which enables an understanding of the real, although the imaginary dimension is always, inevitably, distorted. In this article, I will argue that America is the metaphorical spherical mirror through which the real of Irish identity is alluded to, and that the symbolic dimension in which this approach to the real takes place is that of American popular culture, as portrayed in the music and filmic references in Sheridan's *In America*. The real is the realm that is debarred from symbolic experience, but

nevertheless, it can be glimpsed from the symbolic domain. Lacan confirms this when he states, “I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth because there’s no way, to say it all. Saying the whole truth is materially impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real” (1990: 3). Although words fail, they carry with them traces of the real, and it is these traces; these clues, that can be seen in Sheridan’s film.

The film is a semi-autobiographical account of Sheridan as a young man in New York, where he lived with his family for eight years. In fact, the script was written in collaboration with his two daughters, Kirsten and Naomi, who shared the experience with him (Murray 2005: etext). From the beginning of *In America*, it is clear that Sheridan wishes to destabilize the prevailing narrative of the Irish in America in terms of the American dream. The film revolves around an Irish family called the Sullivans and the first scene shows them in a car crossing the border between Canada and the United States. The family consists of two young parents, Johnny and Sarah, and their two children. The youngest, Aerial, is around six or seven and her sister Christy is ten. Parents and siblings are still reeling from the tragic death of their son and brother, Frankie, who died in Ireland as a result of a freak accident when he fell down the stairs of their home. The film is narrated through the voice-over of the oldest daughter, Christy.

As they queue up to be inspected by the American police at the border-crossing, Christy reveals in her voiceover that Frankie has given her three wishes. Her tone suggests pessimism when she states, “[t]here’s some things you should wish for and some you shouldn’t”. Her childlike belief in the magical properties of the wishes she has been given, made clear later in the film, is undermined by this opening statement, which pre-supposes that the fulfilment of desire may not live up to expectations. The family enters America as illegal immigrants, telling the policemen that they are on holiday. The sense of wonder and the potential for transformation associated with the American dream is captured evocatively when the Sullivans drive through the busy streets of New York for the first time. The camera pans over the tall buildings and multi-coloured lights of the city; advertising billboards loom over the streets connoting the

consumerism and wealth of this society; people of diverse ethnic origins talk animatedly on the sidewalks and over the scene plays the song “Do You Believe in Magic”, suggesting the mystical quality of New York city, as seen through the eyes of this young Irish family, and embodied in the character of Christy, who literally does.

The initial joy of the city is soon replaced by the harsh reality of life in New York for a family with scant financial resources. They find a place to live in a block of apartments in Hell’s Kitchen. On their way to view what is to become their new home, a man loitering outside asks them nervously if they are the police, because of the camcorder that Christy is holding. When Johnny reassures him that they are not the police – they are Irish, as if the two were mutually exclusive, the man replies, “but all Irish are police”. Johnny’s first conversation with an American, aside from the border police, immediately evinces the gap between the perception of Irish-Americans in Ireland and in the USA. They are not, as Johnny thinks, renowned most for their friendly, magnanimous nature, but for their participation in the American police force. The contribution of Irish immigrants to both the police force and the fire department in New York has been well-documented, but the paradox between this official role as law-enforcers and the characterisation of the Irish in America as socially irresponsible and irreverent has not. The scene initiates the de-idealisation of both American and Irish identity that the film will effect<sup>1</sup> by showing that stereotypes are ridden with contradictions in both cases.

This is not the only contradiction that the Sullivans must accept in their experience of

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Gerardine Meaney has explored this contradiction in relation to two recent action movies: *The Devil’s Own* (Pakula, 1997) and *Patriot Games* (Noyce, 1992). Meaney suggests that these films map the relationship between self and other in the American culture of the 90s. The Irish terrorist confronted in both is threatening because of his physical similarity to his enemies: “white, hard to distinguish, related” (2004: 90). Ironically, the Irish are feared precisely because of the characteristics that made them desirable members of American society; their adaptability and their willingness to fit in.

America. They find a place to rent in a dark, dingy apartment block, which the locals refer to as “the junkie building”. Climbing the stairs to their apartment, they encounter a couple peering out of a door haphazardly pulling their clothes back on, and are greeted by the disturbing screaming of a painter who lives below them. They are forced to sell their car to pay for the apartment, and because Sarah is unable to obtain a job in her profession as a teacher, she is forced to take employment in an ice-cream parlour ironically called “Heaven”. The harsh pink neon lights of the sign underscore the artificiality of the signifier while also suggesting that the transcendence and fulfilment that religion may offer have been displaced by consumerism; a consumerism that is now as much a part of Irish culture as American culture.

Although this film is set in America, it talks back to contemporary Ireland in many ways, and, while watching the fate of these Irish emigrants on screen, the spectator may see the analogy with the many immigrants and asylum seekers living in Ireland today. This demographic shift in population of the country constitutes one of the biggest social changes that Ireland has undergone in the last fifteen years. In the recent past, there has been an upsurge in literary as well as filmic explorations of the Irish Diaspora. Some examples include Dermot Bolger’s *A Second Life* (1994), Roddy Doyle’s *Oh Play that Thing!* (2005), Frank McCourt’s *Tis* (1999) and *Teacher Man* (2005) and Sebastian Barry’s *White Woman Street* (1992). It is probably no coincidence that these narratives have emerged at a time when Ireland is adjusting to being the host country for immigrants rather than a country that sends emigrants away. This parallel between Irish emigrants of the past and immigrants to Ireland of the present perhaps encourages sympathy with immigrants, migrants workers and asylum seekers in Ireland, serving as a reminder of the Irish historical tradition of being in the position of foreigners on foreign shores.

The disparity between experiential and imaginary reality, in relation to the American dream, is concretized even further by the family’s first experience of a New York summer. The humidity becomes so intense that the girls must sit under the cold shower just to cool down. Sarah’s breathing difficulties make the heat almost intolerable for

her, so Johnny steals an air conditioner, a huge, heavy machine the size of a small fridge. Since they have no car, and because the air conditioner would cause too much of an obstruction on the busy sidewalks, Johnny pulls it home with a rope through the New York traffic and it takes all his strength to carry it up the many flights of stairs to their apartment. When he finally reaches his destination and his wife and daughters are gathered around in excited anticipation of a cool breeze, he realises that the plug is incompatible with the socket. At the end of his tether, Johnny attempts to purchase a two dollar plug in a nearby store, only to discover that he is 20 cents short. The sales assistant refuses to allow him to pay back the difference at a later date because he recognises Johnny as a resident of the junkies’ building. He returns to the apartment yet again in a state of dejection, when Sarah suggests that he return four glass bottles to make up the balance. As he gives the money for the plug to the sales assistant, he says in a tone laced with irony, “two dollars, Mr. American Dream”.

In this film, the idyll of the American dream is constantly negated by the reality of experience. As is well known, this concept, which has permeated American film and literature for the last two centuries, emerged as a result of the American frontier. In the early 1800s, before the trans-continental railway made travel across America easy and relatively safe, the west in general, and the Californian gold rush in particular, promised to fulfil aspirations of wealth for those who were brave enough to take the physical and economic risks involved. It is this that fundamentally informs the idea of American democracy, which promises equal opportunities for all. In Sheridan’s film, the American dream is revealed as an illusion. There is nothing particularly novel about this, but what is interesting is the way in which the American west parallels the west of Ireland.

The two locations share three important characteristics. The west of Ireland has had an important role in the filmic creation of Ireland in films as far back as *Man of Aran* (Flaherty 1934), and as recently as *The Field* and *Into the West*, the latter written by Sheridan. Equally, since the advent of the Western, the American west has stood for many of the qualities that supposedly epitomize America, such as equality, democracy, and the opportunity for

wealth. From an imaginative, ideological point of view, both offer possibilities for self-transformation. In America, this was epitomized in the gold-rush; in Ireland, the magical association probably derives from the special place given the west in late nineteenth-century cultural nationalism and in the Irish Literary Revival. Edward Hirsch argues that “in this period the Irish peasant was fundamentally ‘created’ and characterized for posterity” by writers like W.B. Yeats, John Synge, Lady Augusta Gregory and Douglas Hyde, in a manner far removed from actual rural life (1991: 1116). Both have been depicted in literature and film as rugged, wild, unchartered territories; liminal spaces between urban-centred law and the lawless wilderness. One need only think of Yeats’ plea to “Come away O human child! to the waters and the wild” (2000, 23) for verification of this mythology of wildness. In his comparison of the two locations, Luke Gibbons notes the “striking resemblance” in their “hostility to law and order, and the forces of centralisation” (1996: 24). Finally, both places are portrayed as a site of authentic national identity: Gaelic and native-American. This representation can probably be accounted for by the fact that the Irish language, culture and traditions were gradually pushed further west as a result of the colonial policy of plantations and the spread of the English language, culture and industrialization from the East, with a few notable exceptions such as the Waterford gaeltacht. Similarly, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, native American-Indians were forced west by the encroaching frontier, as Europeans steadily built their way across the continent. As Gibbons states, “both concern themselves centrally with sites of cultural survival, the sole remaining enclaves of traditional values in a world corrupted by progress and industrialisation” (1996: 23). The correspondence between America and Ireland in the context of the idealised west of both countries is consolidated later in the film during the school show, in which Christy sings a solo song, “Desperado” by The Eagles, dressed up in a cowboy hat. The fact that this film is set on the east coast matters little in relation to the imagery that is used; that of the American dream. While she sings, Johnny films her through the camcorder that Christy has been using to record fragments of their new American life. Throughout *In America*,

particular events are filmed from the point of view of Christy’s handheld camera, which is differentiated from the invisible camera of the film itself by the grainy quality and shaky movement of the images. While Christy sings “Desperado” on stage, the film crosscuts to other scenes similarly shot with the camcorder: a home movie of the Sullivans in their garden in Ireland and Johnny driving a taxi in New York. The sequence is a visual realisation of idealised versions of both Ireland and America. The video footage of the Sullivans in Ireland depicts a happy, loving family, but the image is contradicted by the audience’s knowledge that one member of that family, Frankie, died soon after. Similarly, the familial occasion of the school play with his daughter’s solo performance is, from an imagistic point of view, a source of pride for Johnny, but again, the power of the image is undercut by the spectator’s knowledge of the rift between Christy and her father, caused by his inability to articulate grief or love. In this case, what poses as an authentic depiction of reality from the camcorder, in contrast to the main camera of the film, is revealed by Sheridan to be ultimately false. The images seen from the supposedly objective, “realistic” point of view of the camcorder (as opposed to the camera of the main film which invisibly mediates the narration) are misleading if deprived of the language and context that inform them.

The imaginary versions of both the American west and the west of Ireland must also be contextualised within the symbolic structures that create and disseminate them, in the same way as Christy’s camcorder must be contextualised within the film. Christy links the two countries in her song performatively: through her national identity (an Irish girl), her outfit (a cowboy dress) and the lyrics of “Desperado”, which tell the story of a disillusioned cowboy and resonate with the idealistic American dream that the Irish family hope to attain. The song is obviously meant for her father, for whom the narrative of Desperado’s unhappiness is highly appropriate. The lyrics that Christy sings, “now it seems to me some fine things/ have been laid upon your table/ but you only want the ones that you can’t get” refer most obviously to Johnny’s neglect of his daughters in favour of the dead Frankie, but on another level, they also echo the idealised locations of the American west and the west of Ireland, which function as the loci

of desire, a desire that is doomed to fall short of its *objet a*. The *objet a*, sometimes referred to as the *objet petit a*, is Lacan's term for the object of desire sought in the other. This desire will never be satisfied, because desire is instituted on entering the symbolic order, the world of words. The idealisation of the locations above is an example of how, as humans, we attach desire to external objects rather than accepting the lack that is within each individual.

In Lacanian terms, the insatiability of desire is a direct result of symbolic structuration, and the reason why neither the handheld camcorder nor the subject can speak from a position outside of their structures in an "authentic" manner. The images seen through the camcorder are structured by their position within the metanarrative of the film itself, just as the subject is structured by his/her position within language. According to Lacan, the advent of language locks the real, the only realm without lack, into the inarticulable unconscious, and means that for all subjects, as Christy sings in "Desperado", their "prison is walking through this world all alone". However, to retreat completely and not even attempt to navigate this enforced isolation leads only to more unhappiness, both for the subject and those around him, as Christy poignantly tells her father in the last line of the song when he is looking at a close-up of her face in the small screen of the camcorder: "you better let somebody love you before its too late".

Despite the tensions arising from Frankie's death, the family becomes accustomed to life in New York, and by the fall of that same year, the two girls have been enrolled at the local Catholic school. In a sequence of shots depicting Aerial and Christy in their uniforms playing in the local park, Aerial mimics the statue of liberty holding up a styrofoam cup on a stick. Over the sequence, the American national anthem "The Star Spangled Banner" plays, ending with the evocative line, "the land of the free and the home of the brave", articulating the ideal society of the American dream. Aerial's imitation of the statue of liberty shows how she has internalized the ideology of her new home, but her makeshift branch and plastic cup also indicate how far removed she and her family are from the benefits that the American dream promises. As with the neon sign that hangs over the ice-

cream parlour where Sarah works, the words, in this case those of the national anthem, are undercut by the image which accompanies them, rendering in a visual manner the gap between ideal and actual, or in Lacanian terms, imaginary and symbolic. Just as the real becomes swallowed by the symbolic dimension, ultimately so too, does the imaginary – the third element in Lacan's triad and the domain of fantasy and images. The imaginary – represented by the neon sign and by the national anthem, is superseded by the real when the audience are made aware of the conditions of this family's existence in New York; aware of the extent to which idealised fantasy is contradicted by reality.

Sheridan takes advantage of the incongruity of Aerial's statue of liberty, juxtaposed with the words of the national anthem, to express the hope and aspirations of the family, which are at odds with their actual experience, thus defeating the myth of the American dream. Sheridan states that, the "story exists on two levels. It exists on the level of realistic scenes and then there's another kind of thing that's running parallel with it which is mythological" (in McCurrie 2004: etext). By alluding to the mythological within the realistic, as he does with Aerial's statue of liberty and Christy's song, Sheridan reveals the gap between them.

The statue of liberty scene also illustrates the divide between first and second generation immigrants in the comparison between Aerial's easy adaptation to her new environment and her parents' more cautious, doubtful response to their new surroundings. This is enacted by Aerial and Christy in an argument that erupts over a Halloween party being held at their school. They are the only two girls in school whose costumes have not been purchased or rented, and although they receive a prize for the best home-made costume, both are aware that it has been given out of pity. When their parents tell them that it is good to be different, Aerial replies, "[w]e don't want to be different: we want to be the same as everybody else". The girls embrace the American festivity of Halloween with enthusiasm, and ask to be allowed to go trick-or-treating like their schoolmates. For Christy, the tradition is not just a custom, but an ideology and an attitude that she aspires to, which, from her point of view, her parents do not have. "You don't ask for help in America", Christy tells them, "you demand it. Trick or treat – you threaten".

It is a third party, Mateo, who acts as conduit between the girls and their parents, and who allows Johnny and Sarah to overcome their guilt about Frankie's death. Mateo is an African painter who lives in the same building as the Sullivans. He is given a wide berth by the other residents because of the regular screaming and shouting that come from his apartment and because of his unfriendly temperament. When Christy and Aerial go from door to door trick-or-treating, Mateo is the only one who answers, rather irately. But on seeing the two girls in their costumes, a more gentle and playful demeanour comes to the fore. When they describe Mateo's apartment to their mother and tell her that there was nothing in his fridge except medicine bottles, Sarah decides to invite him for dinner. Johnny is initially threatened by the arrival of this strange man into his home, and even more annoyed that he appears to be so popular with both his daughters and his wife. In the scenes that follow, Mateo is introduced to a variety of Irish traditions and customs. He finds the ring in the barn-brack and the coin in the colcannon, and when Johnny glances into the girls' bedroom later on, Mateo is sitting on the top bunk with Aerial and Christy, teaching them how to paint a mural of an angel on the wall. Johnny is irrationally angry that his position as father is being usurped by this stranger, who relates to his children with an ease that he himself seems unable to achieve in the aftermath of his son's death. The positive attributes of Mateo's ethnic identity are symbolically brought to light through the medium of the Irish language. Looking at a photo of Mateo with his family in Africa, Sarah gleans that they were once quite wealthy and tells him that in Irish, black man is translated as "fear gorm", which literally means blue man, or a man of blue or royal blood. The direct translation of black man into Irish, Sarah tells him, would be "fear dubh", which denotes the Devil. Sarah's comments illustrate the power of words as symbolic containers into which identities are poured. The Sullivans also find it difficult to escape the potency of the signifier – in their case, the signifier "Irish" and the positive and negative associations that it entails – just as Mateo is unable to escape the construction of his identity through his black skin in an American context. The foreign language of Irish allows him to reconstruct his identity outside of an

African or American context. As Bruce Fink states, "each language has its own symptomatology" (2004: 52).

Lacan summarises the structuring power of language by stating that the experiences of any community take place within a discourse, the structures of which "reveal an ordering of possible exchanges which, even if unconscious, is inconceivable outside the permutations authorized by a language" (Lacan 1989: 164). But since, as Fink notes, each language divides up the world differently, it is the Irish language and not the English one that allows Mateo to identify himself within a different discursive context and free himself from the restrictions of American-English. Later in the film, the roles are reversed when Mateo asks Johnny, "[w]hat was Frankie like?" As Johnny speaks about Frankie, Mateo utters a phrase in an African language, which means, he informs Johnny, "a warrior who is not afraid to go to the other side". Mateo's re-imagining of himself through Irish, and the articulation of Frankie's death through Mateo's native language, is also a synecdoche of the recent exploration of Irish identity in film through the Irish diaspora, where identity is redefined in exogenous social spheres, and is another instance of how Irish identity is refracted in this film through an American context.

The impossibility of articulating the unconscious real within the structure of language is also explored in relation to the conflict between fictional and symbolic discourses through the medium of drama and acting. While in America, Sarah becomes unexpectedly pregnant again. Due to her ill health, the doctors tell her that it is likely that she will have to choose between the baby's life and her own in the final stages of pregnancy. Johnny becomes enraged that she is willing to risk her life in what he considers a reckless manner, which results in an argument that reactivates his unexpressed grief over the death of their son, Frankie. Johnny has never shed a tear since their son died and Sarah pleads with him to express his grief, saying that it is vital to deal with Frankie's death for the sake of their other children. Johnny responds by arguing that putting her life at risk for the sake of this new baby contradicts her defence of the children's interests over their own, something that will be impossible if the birth of the baby results in her own death.

Sarah posits an analogy between Johnny's

inability to express grief or emotion of any sort and his failure to get an acting job in New York. She has had to take a low-paid job in order to facilitate her husband's auditions, in the hope of fulfilling his ambition to be an actor. At the height of the argument, she asserts that the reason he cannot get an acting job is that he refuses to allow himself to feel anything. Johnny retorts by shouting, "[t]his is real! It's not a fucking play!" The real of death makes the imaginary of drama seem a ridiculously inadequate attempt to express the pain of experience. Johnny's differentiation between real life and acting is questioned by Aerial later in the film. Upset when she wakes up during the night and remembers that her mother is in hospital, she begins to cry hysterically. Johnny is unable to comfort her, and she shouts at him, "I want my real Da!" The comparison that Johnny made is revealed to be inaccurate: for his daughter, the dividing line between fictional and actual does not lie between acting and real life, but between Johnny's personality before and after Frankie's death.

It takes a heated conversation with Mateo to make Johnny begin to realize that art of all kinds is a way of metonymically gaining access to this real, however limited that access may be. Fresh from the argument with his wife, Johnny passes Mateo standing at the door of his apartment, and accuses him of encouraging his wife in her irrational decision to go ahead with the pregnancy by telling her that the baby will bring its own luck:

Mateo: You don't believe.  
 Johnny: In wha'? God? You know I asked him a favour; I asked him to take me instead of him and he took the both of us. And look what he put in my place. I'm a fucking ghost. I can't think. I can't laugh. I can't cry. I can't fucking feel!

Misinterpreting the relationship between Mateo and his wife, he asks him if he is in love with her. However, Mateo is not drawn to Sarah because of sexual attraction, but because she symbolizes the culmination of his desire for a wife, home and family, something that will inevitably be denied to him because he suffers from AIDS. He tells Johnny, "I'm in love with *you*. And I'm in love with your beautiful woman. And I'm in love with your

kids. And I'm even in love with your unborn child. I'm in love with anything that lives". Mateo makes Johnny realise that he has been languishing in his own grief to the extent that he has alienated himself from any potential happiness that his family might bring him. Once again, self-realisation about events that happened in Ireland occurs through a process of refraction in America.

It is Sarah who articulates the crux of the issue and shows that there is not a division between acting and real life or fiction and fact in the way that Johnny imagines. On the contrary, as Lacan maintains, lived experience is by definition equally if not more constructed than discourses which are consciously created. Near the end of Sarah's pregnancy, the baby stops moving and Johnny tells her "[i]t's gone. We can't make believe anymore". Sarah responds by saying, "[s]ometimes I think our entire lives are make believe. This is make believe". Each individual is constructed by the symbolic order, which cuts them off from the real, and effectively means that the real is inaccessible except in a metonymic fashion. An instinctive knowledge of this may be why Sarah describes her life as make believe. We constantly narrate our own histories in an effort to re-articulate or make sense of, the void that is our unconscious. Symbolic structuration of this sort is what Althusser refers to as interpellation through ISAs.<sup>2</sup> Where Lacan deviates from Althusser is in his assertion that human subjects are to a certain extent creators of the structure and not just its passive supports, which he illustrates by numerous examples, from the retrospective acquisition of meaning at the level of a sentence in the graph of desire, to the symbolic creation of personal and even national histories. In opposition to this, Althusser argues for structural causality, where the structure is the cause that affects the subject and not vice versa. This distinction between the two theorists becomes important later in the film.

Johnny provides an example of participation in symbolic creation, at the level of the

<sup>2</sup> Althusser's ideas on this subject are developed in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp.127-186.

individual subject, towards the end of the film. Sarah has survived the pregnancy and brings the new baby home for its first night with the family. The hospital bills, which amount to over 30,000 dollars, have been paid by Mateo, who bequeaths the money to them on his death. In her analysis of *In America*, Barton states that symbolically, Mateo “must die to ‘save’ them” (2004: 90). At this point in the film however, no one has been saved. Sarah and the baby have survived the birth, but the issue which drives the narrative, Johnny’s struggle with his grief, has not been resolved. What saves Johnny particularly, and the family in general, is not money, but words, or more precisely, words from a screenplay. Earlier in the film, after the air-conditioner incident, the family goes to see Steven Spielberg’s *ET*, a film released in 1982, the same year in which the events in *In America* are temporally set. Spielberg’s fiction becomes a motif in Sheridan’s film, although *In America* as a whole is not, as Barton suggests, “thematically...held together through its referencing of *ET*” (2004: 89).

At a funfair that they attend after the movies, Johnny spends every cent the family owns gambling to win an ET doll for Ariel, worth 30 dollars, perhaps in an effort to make up materially for what he is unable to give emotionally. Later, when Ariel becomes upset about the sores on Mateo’s face, Mateo comforts her by saying, “I’m an alien like ET, from a different planet: my skin is too sensitive for the sun”. The occasion of the baby’s homecoming is somewhat dampened by Ariel’s visit to Mateo’s now empty apartment and she tells Christy sadly, “[h]e never said goodbye”. On the balcony outside their apartment that evening, Johnny asks Christy to look up at the sky, where she will see Mateo riding past the moon on his bicycle to say goodbye to Ariel, in an imitation of the iconic scene from *ET*. All three wave goodbye to him and ask him to look after Frankie. At this point, Christy uses the third wish that Frankie has given her to ask her father to say goodbye to Frankie.

Reluctantly, quietly at first, but on Christy’s encouragement, eventually shouting loudly, he says goodbye to Frankie and begins to cry for the first time since his death in a cathartic release enabled by the imaginary conjuring of a

scene from *ET* and the vocalization that allows him to articulate to some degree the repressed real of his son’s death. The importance of America for the Irish family, and specifically this American film, is an accurate reflection of the influence of American society and culture, as disseminated through television, film and the internet, in creating part of the symbolic order that structures the symbolic of Irish society in the era of global telecommunications in which we live.

Moreover, the scene elucidates the fact that redemption is not to be found in the mythological imaginary of national or American identity; nor in the loved other (Sarah); the ethnic other (Mateo) or the God with whom Johnny made a pact. It is to be found in the awareness of the importance of the symbolic in permitting entry, however restricted, to the unconscious real. In this case, the symbolic comes in the form of an American film, which allows Johnny to “phone home” both to his unconscious trauma, and to his earlier life in Ireland, providing another refraction of Irish identity that bounces off an American mirror. In this way, Johnny’s disdain of the fictionalized reality of acting is ultimately seen to be unjustified. The psychical reality of each individual subject is constructed through a combination of imaginary identification, which is replicated in the experience of reading a novel or watching a play or film; symbolic structuration from the Other, which results in the censorship of the real, and the personal construction of individual history, which replicates the function of the symbolic order in the individual. As Lacan states, “how could a psychoanalyst of today not realise that *speech is the key to that truth*, when his whole experience must find in speech alone its instrument, its context, its material, and even the background noise of its uncertainties” (1989: 163). Belief then, at the end of this film, is not located in imaginary identifications with a national Ideal or an idealised other, but in the healing power of words themselves, specifically the words of a fictional film, which create and mould reality. Through this American film, the Sullivans find that the imaginary and symbolic show the way to the real, as they do in Lacan’s experiment.

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