
IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION - 2006

The Year in Review

Tony Tracy (ed.)

Introduction	251
Industrial In/Action: The Irish Audiovisual Sector in 2006 Roddy Flynn.....	255
<i>TG 4: Ten Years On</i> Eithne O'Connell	258
<i>The Wind that Shakes the Barley</i> Ruth Barton	262
Attack of the Killer Cows! Reading Genre and Context in <i>Isolation</i> Barry Monahan	264
<i>Capital Letters</i> Debbie Ging	267
<i>Once</i> Tony Tracy	269
Misery, Missed Opportunities and <i>Middletown</i> Jane Ruffino	272
<i>Six Shooter</i> Sean Crosson	274
All the World's a Stage: Brendan Gleeson Harvey O'Brien	277
<i>The Clinic</i> Diog O Connell	280
Busting the Boom: <i>The Tiger's Tail</i> and <i>The Pope's Children</i> Pat Brereton	283

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Introduction

Tony Tracy, February 2007

This year's review of the year in Irish film and television is slender by comparison to 2005, reflecting a dearth of new productions, ongoing difficulties in distribution and the still unpre-

table nature of the sector despite more than a decade of sustained infrastructural support.

Six Irish films received a domestic release during the year: *The Wind that Shakes the*

Barley, Middletown, The Tiger's Tail, Isolation, the hardly released *Short Order* and the widely released but hardly seen *The Front Line*. *Breakfast on Pluto* was also a release in 2006 but we reviewed it in these pages last year, while *Small Engine Repair* and *Once* (which recently won the Audience Award for World Cinema at the Sundance Film Festival) both received festival screenings in 2006 but have not, as yet, found theatrical releases.

Under the stewardship of its new CEO, Simon Perry, the Irish Film Board (IFB) is again showing signs of life after a period of stagnation and rumours of dissatisfaction from within the organisation and the film industry. By year's end the IFB had shiny new offices –still in Galway– a new logo and 'brand identity'. Gone is the green Celtic 'swirl' in place of a vaguely abstract graphic which might belong to any organisation involved with moving-image production. A PR campaign to coincide with the re-branding papered over the recent slim output with a colourful annual review –which dwelt heavily on upcoming productions– and the distribution of Vol 3 of the popular DVD compilation of IFB funded short films.

The semiotics of the logo is an interesting indicator of where we stand with regards to ideas about a national film culture. Writing recently in *The Irish Times* under a column entitled 'Culture Shock', Fintan O'Toole initiated a backlash against Ireland's Celtic heritage. "The secret of Celtic Ireland is that it is all bogus [. . .] The survival, and indeed thriving, of bogus Celticism owes something to the relative timidity of the archaeological establishment and a lot more to the sheer utility of the term. Baggy, mystical, touched with the glamour of oppression, a useful way of alluding to white ethnicity without sounding overtly racist, it sprinkles a dust of profundity on much that is mediocre and meaningless"¹. The old IFB logo was introduced at a time when Ireland was in the early flush of the Celtic Tiger era which –as O'Toole suggests–

¹ Fintan O' Toole. 2007. "Our ancestors weren't Celts, they were copycats", *The Irish Times*, February 3.

drew upon a rag-bag of the mythic and the modern in reconciling Ireland's 'deep past' and high-velocity present; the most intoxicating articulation of this newly configured 'imagined community' being *Riverdance*. And yet the 'bagginess' of the ideas were useful to a culture attempting to move into a global marketplace while internally moving away from the confining limitations of nationalism in the years leading up of the 'Good Friday Agreement'. In re-establishing the IFB (and TG4) the then Minister for Culture Michael D Higgins held such a tension in balance in a frequently iterated commitment to the local, and a state sponsored repudiation of 'cultural colonisation'. "The right to communicate has a community component – the right of the community to hear its own story, to serve minorities and more importantly to recover a myriad of stories and imagine a whole series of things." But Higgins' ambitions for the second film board and the oft repeated sentiments of its first Chief Executive Rod Stoneman –who called for a 'radical pluralism' of Irish audiovisual content– increasingly seem as distant and ambitious as the words of Yeats and Lady Gregory in the heyday of the Celtic Twilight. While there appeared in those first ten years of the film board a wide variety of aesthetic styles, ambitions and indeed competencies, there nonetheless emerged a strong sense of a national cinema in the making. This has been on the wane in more recent years. Take, for instance, what the film board is funding this year (2007): *Becoming Jane* ('Inspired by the true events of the little known romance of the young Jane Austen when she falls in love with the attractive young Irishman Tom Lefroy'); *Dot.Com* (what appears to be a Portuguese comedy); *Foxes* ('Alzbeta, a young Slovakian girl, arrives in Ireland to make a new life. She is envious of her older sister who is happily settled in Ireland with a nice house and partner'); *Shrooms* ('A group of American teens go to rural Ireland in search of notoriously potent magic mushrooms'), *Puffball* ('Powerful forces are unleashed when a young architect becomes pregnant after moving to an isolated and mysterious valley to build a house and neighbouring farmers move against the unborn child'); *True North* ('In order to save the trawler

of which he is first mate, Sean reluctantly decides to smuggle Chinese immigrants into Scotland for extra money').² All of these productions are essentially foreign with Irish co-producers, featuring largely foreign casts. To be sure there are also a small number of what might be called 'indigenous' productions, like Anthony Byrne's *How About You* (which features a largely British cast in a kind of generic Home Counties setting) and *Kings* (the most promising of the lot dealing with a group of middle-aged male Irish emigrants in London) but we can detect here a recognisable shift away from developing local stories towards hosting international co-productions and international audiences – in the case of Paddy Breathnach's *Shrooms*, a film aimed squarely at an American youth audience.

Andrew Higson and others have recently begun to question the very parameters of what constitutes a national cinema. "When describing a national cinema there is a tendency to focus only on those films that narrate the nation as just this finite, limited space inhabited by a tightly coherent and unified community, closed off from other identities beside national identity"³. Higson writes from the multi-cultural context of Britain in the aftermath of Empire but his objections to the famous Benedict Anderson formulation of 'an imagined community' have repercussions for Irish cinema. To be sure, a priority for the IFB must be to bring back the film industry from its recent state of crisis and consolidate the efforts and advances of the past decade and a half, but there is also a growing sense that the Irish cinematic imagination is unsure of where to look for inspiration and engagement; witness the recent spate of low-budget horror films. (Though Barry Monahan finds room for a contextual reading of this most sealed of genres below in his reading of *Isolation*) Perhaps this is because Ireland is less sure of being a 'tightly

² Information and descriptions taken from Irish Film Board website.

³ Andrew Higson, 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema' in Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (eds) *Cinema and Nation*, London: Routledge (2000)

coherent and unified community' than at any time since its independence. Indeed it is remarkable that the most successful – commercially and critically – Irish film of the past year, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (discussed in this issue by Ruth Barton) was written, produced and directed by non-Irish personnel. Over the past decade a traumatic breach in the national imagination has opened up. How else can we understand the daily, numbing stories of random violence – shootings, suicides, car crashes, street fights, robberies, stabbings, and sexual assaults – except as the collapse of solidarity central to the national project? Along with the destruction of any correlation between value and worth in many people's minds (largely down to the property market) has come a similar cutting of the cord between individual action and larger social consequence. There are vast sections of Irish society cut adrift from their moorings of identity, reduced to the status of consumers – rather than citizens – in a culture presided over by an ideology no more sophisticated than an 'open economy' at all costs. Is this sense of alienation the 'deep structure' beneath a slate of films which include elements of Irishness only so as to fulfil international co-production requirements? Where are the stories that address who we are as a community today? In an early phase of the nation state French philosopher Ernest Renan was able to declare, "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle". A principle comprised of two elements: "One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form"⁴. But what if the 'value of the heritage' is no longer present in 'an undivided form'. Whence then for a national cinema?

In this year's review we have a number of reviews which attempt to come to terms with both sides of this discussion – the 'spiritual' and

⁴ Ernest Renan. 1996. 'What is a Nation' [Lecture at Sorbonne, 11 March 1882] in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (ed) *Becoming National: A Reader*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 41-55.

the industrial— and despite the paucity of output we find subject for discussion.

Pat Brereton reviews two attempts to explore contemporary Ireland —John Boorman’s *The Tiger’s Tail* and the documentary series *The Pope’s Children*— and finds both wanting. Roddy Flynn’s essay undertakes an illuminating analysis of the roller-coaster fortunes of the Irish audio-visual industry and offers an insight into the vagaries of a creative business so sensitive to national and international pressures which have little if anything to do with the young and not-so young writers, directors, actors, technicians and indeed policy-makers hoping to shape a film culture. As well as a number of individual film reviews —including one of Ireland’s Oscar-winning short film entry *Six Shooter*— and the TV series, *The Clinic*, this edition contains an overview of the Irish language channel TG4 after 10 years on air, and an appreciation of Ireland’s most employed character actor Brendan Gleeson. Our review of John Carney’s modest, low budget ‘musical’ *Once*, suggests one way out of the impasse discussed above. Tender and engaging,

this unusually framed tale of unfulfilled attraction between a young Irishman and a Czech girl manages to be both topical and timeless. Debbie Ging finds a similarly topical, if far less romantic, tale of immigrant women in Ireland in *Capital Letters*⁵.

As 2007 begins, the New Year augurs better for the film and television industry than 2006 with the number of productions in both sectors significantly increased. There is a sense of optimism returning among those who work in the industry. How such an increase in production will contribute to debates on a national cinema remains to be seen.

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⁵ *Capital Letters* was made in 2004, but had a very limited release.

Industrial In/Action: The Irish Audiovisual Sector in 2006

Roddy Flynn

It has been another up and down year for the Irish audiovisual sector. In December 2006, the publication of the IBE Confederation Annual Review of the sector confirmed what was obvious to anyone working in the industry: film production activity has declined significantly since 2003. The total value of audiovisual output had fallen from €320.1m in that year to €169.9m in 2004 and €152.4m in 2005.

The collapse in expenditure on feature film production is particularly significant dropping from €244.3m in 2003 to just €33.5m in 2005. The collapse is almost entirely due to the disappearance of international production in Ireland: although low-budget indigenous production has continued more or less apace, non-Irish expenditure on features fell from €91.1m in 2003 to €14.2 in 2005, with a concomitant knock-on effect on the levels of Section 481 funding (availability of which is closely tied to international activity here). This has had a very real impact: 2004 saw employment dip below 1,000 fulltime job equivalents for the first time in a decade, in an industry which in 1999 had been identified by the Film Industry Strategic Review Group as having the potential to quadruple in size by 2010.

When the Irish state introduced a number of measures designed to kick-start the audiovisual production sector in the early 1990s, it was generally assumed that the a commercial basis for the industry would be based on producing content for newly liberalised broadcasting markets in Europe. Senior figures in the Irish film industry frequently asserted that the future of the industry lay with Irish film-makers:

Whether it's Mel Gibson or Tom Cruise or whoever, they may never be back to the country. That's no disrespect to those individuals, but the nature of the business is that they may not have a project that lends itself to Ireland again, or not for a long time. Whereas, if you develop indigenous film makers, they will make films

here this year and hopefully next year, and the year after.¹

(Kevin Moriarty, Chief Executive of Ardmore Studios in 1993).

In practice, however, the main focus of audiovisual policy has not been on new markets but on winning contracts to 'service' (i.e. shoot) international productions developed overseas. The collapse in such activity has demonstrated both the extent to which the Irish film industry has come to constitute an element of the new international division of cultural labour and its vulnerability within that division. In the first volume of his Information Age Trilogy, *The Network Society*, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells argues for the emergence since the late 1970s of a new 'informational' economy:

It is informational because the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in this economy...depend on their capacity to generate, process and apply efficiently knowledge based in information. It is global because the core activities of production, consumption and circulation...are organised on a global scale, either directly or through a network of linkages between economic agents².

Film production can perhaps be considered doubly 'informationalised'. At one level its basic output is constituted by information. However, the project-based nature of production facilitates constant monitoring of the opportunities for reducing costs or accessing 'soft' finances across the globe by Hollywood production companies. In the 1990s the Irish film industry reaped the benefits of these cost pressures. Ireland offered Hollywood real cost-savings not just through the

¹ Luke Clancy. 1994. "Tax breaks encourage renaissance in the Irish film making industry" *Irish Times*, May 28.

² Manuel Castells. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 66.

availability of Section 481 finance but also less visible subsidies such as cheap access to the defence forces and national monuments. However, reliance on exogenous production left the Irish film industry vulnerable to shifts in international terms of trade beyond the control of the Irish state. The role played by an internationally resurgent Euro in this regard has already been discussed elsewhere by this author³. However other factors have also been significant. When the Irish government signed up to the European Convention on Co-Production in April 2000, the fact that both of the main UK film tax incentives –Section 42 and Section 48– were available to co-productions with relatively low levels of UK spend allowed producers to structure projects which simultaneously availed of tax incentives in the UK and Ireland. This was a “key factor in attracting major Hollywood films to Ireland”⁴.

However, in early 2004, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown announced that both Section 42 and Section 48 would be replaced by a new structure. Since Spring 2006 projects availing of British tax incentives must spend at least 25% of their budget within the UK. Furthermore British cast and crew working in Ireland no longer count towards British spend as had previously been the case. This has greatly reduced the incentive for productions on the scale of *Reign of Fire* and *Tristan and Isolde* (both of which shot in Ireland in 2003) to shoot outside the UK. The Irish state has conceded its relative impotence in the face of such exogenous pressures. In July 2004, John O’Donoghue admitted that:

There is very little one can do about exchange rates and the value of the euro against the US dollar. I have no control over the fluctuations on the money markets...we can only control those things which are under our remit and maintain the highest standards in those areas in which we have power⁵.

That the outlook for the Irish audiovisual sector as a whole is not even worse is largely due to a perhaps unexpected expansion in production for television. Having long come in for criticism from the

³ See Roddy Flynn. 2006. “Irish Film 2005: An Industry in Crisis?” *Estudios Irlandeses*, Issue 1, pp. 158-162. <http://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/Issue1/FilmReviews.pdf>

⁴ James Flynn as Chair of AV Federation Film Financing Committee in IBEC’s Film and Television Production in Ireland Review 2005 – p. 6

independent production sector for failing to commission, RTE has, over the past five years hugely increased the resources devoted to doing just that. In part this was forced upon the station by the introduction of mandated minimums for independent commissions by the Broadcasting (Amendment) Act of 1993 which also led to the establishment of the Independent Production Unit within RTE. However, whilst the station was initially slow to embrace the concept of external commissions, in recent years expenditure on independent commissions has leapt from €51m (in 2004) to €70m in 2006, far in excess of RTE’s mandated minimum spend (€9.4m in 2006).

This impact of this has been felt across programme genres but is perhaps most obvious in the field of drama. From a low point in the mid-90s where RTE Drama was essentially limited to a single soap opera, there is now a constant flow of new broadcast fiction. As this article goes to press, soap stalwart *Fair City*, is flanked in the schedules by *Trouble in Paradise*, *Dan and Becks* and *Rough Diamond*. Two other high production value series –*The Clinic* and *Showbands*– have also become established elements of the Autumn schedule.

These shows have made a significant financial contribution to the audiovisual sector. Perhaps more importantly from a cultural perspective, they are routinely engaging with audience numbers that many Irish feature films could only dream of. A single episode of *Trouble in Paradise* going out at 21.25 on a Monday night garners upwards of 250,000 viewers⁶. Compare this with the frankly disappointing theatrical releases of indigenous films like *Short Order*, *Isolation*, *The Front Line*, *Middletown*, and *A Tiger’s Tail* in 2006. Furthermore a further phalanx of Irish films made in 2005 and 2006 have yet to receive any theatrical release at all: whither *Johnny Was*, *48 Angels*, *Pride and Joy* and *Speed Dating*?

⁵ Marie O’Halloran “Major film studios ‘shun’ Ireland” IT, IT, July 2 2004, p. 6.

Despite this, Irish audiovisual policy continues to concentrate its efforts on winning back overseas projects, fine-tuning what incentives remain within its gift with varying degrees of success. In December 2003 Minister for Finance, Charlie McCreevy increased the ceiling on monies which could be raised via the Section 481 tax break to €15m. When this failed to have the desired effect, 2006 saw further changes allowing producers to avail of 80% of production costs via Section 481 up to a maximum of €35million. There has also been a new emphasis on the Irish Film Board's promotion of Ireland as a location for Hollywood productions: in October 2006, the Board appointed Jonathan Loughran to run the board's first US office (the Irish Film Commission US). Thus far, however, these moves have not succeeded in wooing any new large-scale international feature film productions.

One initiative –also Film Board-related– has been more successful. In 2005 and 2006, Minister John O'Donoghue secured for the Board an additional €1.5m and €2.3m, to fund a new category of international production loans 'targeted at high-quality international production that can demonstrate a strong connection to Ireland.'⁷ Those connections have nothing to do with content: projects thus far availing of the scheme include *The Tudors* (a Showtime (US) production about the British royal family in the 16th century), *Northanger Abbey* (a Granada television adaptation of Jane Austen's novel) and *Kitchen* (which is set in a Glasgow restaurant and produced for the UK's Channel 5). Instead announcements of Film Board involvement in these projects heavily stress the involvement of senior Irish crew and their economic impact.

There's nothing technically untoward about this re-orientation of the Board's spending. The 1980 legislation establishing the Film Board gave it carte blanche to do anything it saw fit in the interests of creating a film industry in Ireland. Actual practice throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, assumed the Board would concentrate on indigenous material. Thus when he referred to the need for the Board to "balance its support for incoming productions with

its role in promoting the indigenous Irish film sector"⁸ in a May 2006 speech John O'Donoghue was announcing a de facto shift in practice.

There is no question but that the Film Board's international loans have succeeded in bringing in new activity. Provisional estimates for audiovisual spending in 2006 suggest that total overall output will rise to €238m, a 50% increase on 2005's figures. Nearly two-thirds of this (€155m) has been spent on independent television production. Section 481 has also been an element in the fact that the majority of overseas projects attracted to Ireland since 2004 have been television projects: the new tax incentives introduced in the UK in 2004 are not currently accessible for television production. Thus Ireland has, unwittingly, gained first mover advantage in that particular and currently lucrative niche market.

However, the television example again highlights the precarious nature of the current structure of the Irish audiovisual sector. Although in December 2006, the Film Board announced that new series of *Murphy's Law* and *The Tudors* would shoot in Ireland in 2007, the presence of such productions is reliant on Ireland's constant vigilance in the face of competing incentives elsewhere. In January 2007, an entirely new set of tax incentives came into effect in the UK and the government there was under pressure to further extend even those breaks for use with television production. The question ultimately posed then is that of how far future Irish governments will be prepared to go to compete in what has become an international incentives race.

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⁶ Source: AGB Nielsen Media Research (2007) Top

⁷ See <http://www.filmboard.ie/guidelines.php?type=g&id=14>. Accessed 12/9/2006

⁸ Speech by John O'Donoghue T.D. Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism Cannes Film Festival On Sunday 21st May 2006 at 6.30pm.

TG4: 10 Years On

Eithne O'Connell

Birth of a Station

On 31 October 2006, TG4, the Irish-language television channel, which had started life as *Teilifís na Gaeilge (TnaG)*, celebrated 10 years on the air. For many years prior to its foundation in 1996, various groups associated with Irish-language issues had lobbied hard for their own station, while other enthusiasts claimed that increased provision of Irish-language programmes within RTÉ's mainstream scheduling would be more appropriate. At that time, there was considerable debate as to the primary audience that a separate, dedicated station might endeavour to serve. This debate was reflected in the two names initially proposed for the channel: *Teilifís na Gaeilge* or *Teilifís na Gaeltachta*, i.e. *Irish-language Television* or *Gaeltacht Television*. Supporters of the general concept identified the need for some such service as urgent in the extreme in order to counteract the overwhelming and devastating effect of English-language broadcasting on the Irish-language competence of children, in particular, whether in the Gaeltacht, or being reared through Irish outside the Gaeltacht.

Although the idea of an Irish language station had been something of a political 'hot potato' through the 1980s and early 1990s, it eventually received all-party support in 1992 and in 1993, the then Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Labour T.D, Michael D. Higgins of the Fianna Fáil/ Labour Coalition decided to push ahead with the idea. £4.5 million, derived from a 'cap' on RTÉ's advertising, was set aside in the 1993 budget to cover the start-up costs for TnaG. The total cost in establishing the transmission and links networks and the construction of the station's headquarters in the Connemara Gaeltacht was £16.1 million. Annual running costs increased from £10.2 million in 1996 to £16 million in 2001 and Euro 30 million in 2006. These costs are met by the Exchequer, with some additional income arising from advertising revenue (much of it rather

inappropriately in English), sponsorship and increasingly, programmes sales. Very significant assistance in non-monetary terms comes from RTÉ which is annually required to provide over 360 hours of programming at no cost to TG4.

Programming and Penetration

In addition to the average of five hours of Irish-language material broadcast daily in the early years, the channel also carried other public service programming such as Question Time from Dáil Éireann and the European Broadcasting Union's EuroNews, steadily increasing audience share by acquiring exclusive rights for a number of top sports fixtures and by re-broadcasting highly popular GAA footage from the sports archives. Within less than six months of the launch of *Teilifís na Gaeilge*, almost 65% of the Republic's television sets were able to receive the channel and the nightly audience reach had risen to 250,000 viewers. Three months later, in May 1997, independent research revealed that the station was able to attract audiences of 500,000, i.e. 68% of sets in the Republic, for at least one hour's viewing per week. By May 2001, 730,000 viewers were tuning in each day to TG4 and in 2007, the figure is 800,000. That represents a share of 3.5% of the national television market. Of course, not all of these viewers necessarily tune in specifically to watch Irish-language material. The real breakthrough came for the television station after it was re-branded as TG4 in 1999. The change in name and the restructuring of the schedule was part of a plan to establish it in Ireland alongside mainstream niche broadcasters BBC2 and Channel 4¹. The precise choice of name incorporating the number 4 also helped to make the channel more prominent in television programme listings, where it started to appear in fourth position after RTE 1, Network/RTE2 and TV3.

¹ See Ó Dubhghaill (2005)

‘Súil Eile’

The original stated aim of TG4, to provide the Irish people with a worthwhile alternative to what was already available in their multi-channel environment, was captured very well from the beginning in the station’s clever slogan *Súil eile*, which means literally *another eye or perspective*, i.e. another way of looking or seeing. Its very limited budget, especially in the early years, has placed obvious restrictions on the extent to which TG4 has been able to live up to its own vision. Nevertheless, it has from the outset offered quite an imaginative programming mix, which includes drama, music, sport, travel, soaps in Irish (and *Gàidhlig* or Scots Gaelic in the initial period) as well as films in other European languages, documentaries and current affairs. Perhaps most significantly, it has consistently identified children as a priority and has offered a wide range of programmes for this audience: dramas, quiz and game shows as well as some animation. In the early years much of this was bought in from other European countries and dubbed into Irish. Later the material to be dubbed became more mainstream, e.g. *Sponge Bob Square Pants*, *The Muppets* and even *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

Subtitling

While one might expect the station’s primary audience to be native speakers of Irish and others fluent in the language, the station’s approach has been much more inclusive than that from the outset. TnaG/TG4’s early policy of providing English-language Teletext subtitles on all pre-recorded material was evidence of the station’s wish to reach out to as wide an audience as possible. The initial use of Teletext technology meant that viewers who needed subtitles could select them as an option. This strategy won praise from many sectors, including the deaf community, and has certainly been a smart move from a commercial perspective, increasing audience reach significantly. Later, the subtitling policy became more heavy-handed, resulting in open English subtitles, i.e. ones which cannot be turned off, being provided on most pre-recorded programmes. There is considerable justification for criticism of English subtitles on Irish-

language programmes as research has shown that it is impossible to ignore subtitles whether or not they are needed². Irish speakers end up involuntarily reading English text while ostensibly watching/listening to Irish-language programmes. Moreover, it has been shown that the written word, i.e. a subtitle, requires considerably more cognitive processing and therefore has a much greater impact than the aural word. The result is that almost surreptitiously, supposedly Irish-language broadcasting provision has become largely bilingual.

Back in 1996, it was also the station’s long-term policy to provide subtitles in Irish on all pre-recorded programmes where financially possible. Such an approach would be of great assistance to native speakers of Irish, who may not be familiar with a particular dialect or some specialised or new terminology. It would also be of assistance to non-native speakers, adult learners, schoolchildren and those with impaired hearing. In the first year, Irish subtitles were provided for a bilingual Irish/*Gàidhlig* documentary series and for the *Gàidhlig* soap opera *Machair*. But at present very few programmes have Irish subtitles although the flagship soap opera, *Ros na Rún*, has had them for several years.

Staffing and Structure

The station operates as a publisher/broadcaster with a small core staff who work in areas involving programme-commissioning, acquisition functions, technical and presentation skills and administration. Most of the programmes broadcast are produced by the private sector and by RTÉ although the station has its own dedicated news service *Aonad Nuachta Theilifís na Gaeilge*, which operates from a state-of-the-art newsroom and studio at TG4’s headquarters in Connemara, with the assistance of a Dublin office and a number of regional correspondents.

As constituted from 1996 to the present, TG4 is administered by RTÉ but operates fairly autonomously thanks to the establishment of two bodies to oversee its development: *Comhairle Theilifís na Gaeilge* and *Seirbhís Theilifís na*

² See O’Connell (2000)

Gaeilge Teo. In April 2007, after many delays and much debate, TG4 is at last due to become independent. Ironically, the first head of TnaG/TG4, Cathal Goan, who is now Director General at RTÉ, is opposed to the move, saying it was not in the best interest of either TG4 or RTÉ. He and other more independent commentators have raised a number of controversial questions about such matters as future funding arrangements and the use of the RTÉ archive but although TG4 has consistently argued for independence, they have not succeeded in making a strong case publicly for the advantages it might bring.

Impact

It is still rather early to attempt to evaluate the significance of TG4 after just a decade during which it has been underfunded and 'in limbo' in relation to independence from RTÉ. However, reviews in the Irish and English language media on the occasion of its 10th anniversary indicate that the general public and even its main critics back in 1996 feel the station has made a good start and has carved a name for itself with some innovative broadcasting. Nonetheless, there has been genuine concern and well-founded criticism from the very beginning relating to the station's poor funding and its consequent inability to offer a) full, continuous daily schedule through Irish and b) the same working conditions and remuneration to its employees as enjoyed by colleagues in RTÉ. Indeed, in November 2006, there was a threat of strike action³ on pay and conditions by employees. There has also been criticism of the fact that the station does not appear to have a clear language policy and there is criticism of the standard of Irish spoken, not only by guests and interviewees, but also by some of the core or anchor personnel and actors in some broadcasts. TG4 has responded that the varieties of Irish to be heard on the station accurately reflect the realities of current Irish language usage, warts and all, rather than some linguistic utopia. The actual and potential impact of TG4 on the Irish language in its first ten years

³ Reported in FOINSE 25 November 2006

was one focus of a recent conference organised in November 2006 by DCU and NUIG. It is hoped that the proceedings⁴, which are to be published in 2007, will act as a base line for further research in this area.

TG4 has certainly had a positive impact on employment numbers in the audiovisual sector. It now spends more than Euro 20 million per annum on independent Irish productions, supporting approximately new 350 jobs in small, private sector companies throughout Ireland. Moreover, as a result of the availability and use of the latest technology, many employment opportunities created directly or indirectly by TG4 have benefited those in 'remoter' parts of the country, particularly the Gaeltacht areas, though Connemara seems to have fared better than the Kerry or Donegal Gaeltacht areas. There are several factors involved in the current prominent position of Connemara in the audiovisual sector. One is surely the fact that during the 1980s, *Údarás na Gaeltachta* identified the strategic development of the audiovisual industry⁵ in the area as a goal. Another is the fact that Connemara is the Gaeltacht with the largest critical mass of speakers. Its leading position is unlikely to be challenged in the foreseeable future, not least because both the largest Irish-language post-production company, Telegael, as well as the head quarters of TG4 are located there. What the future implications of this will be for the relative prestige and usage of the Ulster, Munster and Connacht dialects, remains to be seen.

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⁴ O'Connell, E., Walsh, J. and Denvir, G. (eds) (forthcoming) *TG4@10- Proceedings of the 'Súil siar, súil ar aghaidh' seminar*.

⁵ See Walsh (2006)

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The Wind that Shakes the Barley (2006)

Reviewer: Ruth Barton

The top grossing Irish film in the 2006 box office was also its most controversial. Ken Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* won the 'Palme d'Or' at Cannes in May '06, was released in Ireland in June '06 and had become the highest grossing domestically produced film ever by August '06.¹ Set during the War of Independence and the Civil War, the film starred Cillian Murphy alongside a mix of professional and non-professional actors, and followed the fates of two Cork-born brothers who, in the best tradition of the Civil War narrative, ultimately ended up on opposing political sides of the conflict.

What I would like to explore here is not so much the content of the film, which is very much in the mould of Loach's oeuvre, but the responses to it from a variety of interest groups who made the most of the media's fallow summer period to express their disparate and often conflicting opinions on a film that was widely perceived as a 'corrective' to Neil Jordan's earlier *Michael Collins* (1996). Here was the Fianna Fáil film that would set the record straight on Jordan's romanticisation of the Civil War hero whose short life and political career promised a future that was rudely usurped by de Valera and the party he led into, and maintained in, power.

As didactic as one expects Loach's work to be, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* did not invite debate as a consequence of its own narrative construction but because of its provocative position-taking. Unsurprisingly, the first shots fired in the ideological battleground were by those who had not seen the film. Simon Heffer, biographer of Enoch Powell, shared his feelings with his *Daily Telegraph* (June 3) readers thus:

Talking of hypocrisy, has there been any more nauseating lately than that of the bigoted Marxist film director Ken Loach on winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes? ... He hates this country, yet leeches off it, using public funds to make his repulsive films. And no, I haven't seen it, any more than I need to read *Mein Kampf* to know what a louse Hitler was.

Whatever about his sentiments, Heffer's labelling of Loach's film as British is contentious; for Irish critics, politicians and the Irish Film Board this was indisputably an Irish film. Financing, in fact, had come from an amalgam of sources; officially the film was an Irish/UK/Spanish/Italian/German co-production and various accounts produce different budgetary figures. It seems that, of a budget of €6.4m, €3.6m was raised under Section 481; the balance came from the Irish Film Board, the UK Film Council's New Cinema fund and Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, with smaller contributions from the other partners. The film was shot in Ireland and post-produced in Britain, probably for the last time after British chancellor, Gordon Brown's, announcement that from now on tax relief would only be applicable to those films produced in Britain.

Financing is, obviously, only one measure of a film's identity; and we could argue that its nationality, if it must have one, could equally be decided by creative intent. What's interesting here is that both the principal territories with an investment in claiming the film read it as a reflection on their own particular political and historical concerns. For Loach, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* was an anti-imperialist film that covertly critiqued British involvement in Iraq, not the first instance of a British artist using the Irish situation to make a statement about their own country's military/political campaigns, nor indeed the first time that Loach himself had done this, an earlier example being his *Troubles* film

¹ The film was also winner of 2006 Best Irish Film at the Irish Film and Television Academy (IFTA) awards in February 2007.

Hidden Agenda (1990). On the Irish side, the film was appropriated by both Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin as vindication of their own origins.

The latter even went as far as producing a fund-raising T-shirt (available on-line and in the Party shop) with the title, 'The Wind that Shook the Barley', emblazoned over an uncredited photo of an IRA flying column. True to their dual financial imperative, the two British tabloids with editions in Britain and Ireland, the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, offered hyperbolic readings of the film that were as 'pro' in one territory as they were 'anti' in the other. Thus, both their Irish editions lauded the film's success in Cannes, while their British editions savaged Loach in language similar to that employed by the *Telegraph*. "Cillian's men give Brits a tanning in Cannes" read the headline in the Irish version of the *Sun*, while its UK big brother shrieked that, "Top Cannes film is most pro-IRA ever".

At home, the letters' pages reflected the divided opinions expressed in the media over Loach's depiction of Irish history. The highest profile engagement between two political and (nominally) artistic perspectives came from Kevin Myers, now a columnist for the *Irish Independent* after a long career with the *Irish Times*, and Professor Luke Gibbons writing in Myers' old paper. In an essay on *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, printed in the June 17 edition of the *Irish Times*, Gibbons discussed the film's commitment to highlighting the social and historical divisions of the Civil War, praising Loach for de-romanticising Republican history. He also took issue with the current idea that the murder of landowners in Co. Cork was an early example of 'ethnic cleansing', praising the film for its depiction of its representative

Protestant as an informer. It was this point in particular that drew the ire of Myers: "there we have it," he wrote in his column of June 28 in the *Irish Independent*, "in a single poisonous paragraph; all the exonerative filth, all the moral caveats, all the easy generalisations, all the special sectarian pleasing, all the moral separatism, by which the Irish republican agenda proceeds." Happy to state that he had not seen Loach's film, Myers concluded by pouring scorn over the notion that Gibbons could be 'Keough Family Professor of Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame', an appointment that in Myers' opinion, was as ludicrous as the spelling of the family name. Awarded a right-to-reply, Gibbons wrote a detailed response (July 1), in the *Irish Independent* refuting Myers' political and personal jibes.

Those who remember the many column inches devoted to Jordan's *Michael Collins*, will conclude that little has changed in the ten years that bridge the release of both films. This too was marked by the exchange of political analysis and personal abuse, again often articulated by historians and columnists who took some pride in asserting that they had not seen the film. Both films were enormously successful in Ireland and less so elsewhere, reminding us, if nothing else, that history in Ireland is still a vibrant, contentious and popular topic.

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Attack of the Killer Cows! Reading Genre and Context in *Isolation* (2005)

Reviewer: Barry Monahan

In his 1993 essay “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity”, Jim Collins sets out to map certain tendencies that he identifies in contemporary mainstream cinema. Collins draws on four generic groups previously classified by John Cawelti in a 1978 article and reduces them to two categories. He separates films into those that work through a parodic intertextual referencing of genre (what he calls “Eclectic Irony”), and those that treat genre convention seriously (designated as “New Sincerity”)¹. Although he does not make direct reference to the horror genre, it is one that developed a clear line of parodic self-referentiality throughout the decade in ways that would make it easily placed within the first set. Nor is this tendency –inherently related to tonal affects that the horror and comedy share– simply isolated within American mainstream practice, and many examples of the horror comedy or the horror effected comically have emerged over the last fifteen years from minor national cinemas: recently, among them, *Cabin Fever* (Eli Roth, US Independent, 2002), *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, Britain, 2004) and *Boy Eats Girl* (Stephen Bradley, Ireland, 2005)².

Irish productions since 1990 have frequently displayed the same formal and stylistic tendency to address generic conventions through parody or self-referential mockery that creates its comedy by juxtaposing the local recognisable with universal genre structures. The comedy works because in different ways the local semantics fail to sit comfortable with the generic syntax. In fact, as burgeoning national cinemas emerge into mainstream circuits of production and

distribution, for reasons of economy, technology or aesthetic exploration, it is common to see degrees of address to established genres. There is also evidence of tendencies during different phases of a national cinema of placing national characteristics against the mainstream tropes, semantics or coding of established genres, and while it is not always necessarily done for comic effect (Godard’s *A bout de souffle* from 1959 is one prominent example), more often than not, such genre blending is designed to work comically³. These are films that work through, and expect the audience to enjoy, a dialogue with genre conventions. They acknowledge implicitly a level of spectator sophistication and the ability to recognise the genre play and the referencing of mainstream generic language.

However, another identifiable phase of development of a minor cinema (one not necessarily chronologically separate from moments of parodic genre play), occurs when a genre is treated seriously. Such films no longer talk through the generic language from outside genre performance, rather they perform the genre sincerely, with a level of sophistication that displays both a respect for the confined regulation that informs genre production and consumption, and also marks the extent to which genre limitations may, in fact, be creatively liberating. Here, I would like to propose that Billy O’Brien’s 2006 feature *Isolation* displays consistent creativity in its application, evocation and arrangement of the language of the horror genre. This is marked, above all, by a credibility –as narrative and character verisimilitude– that is perfectly managed without allowing (as is

¹ Collins, Jim “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic irony and the New Sincerity” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* Collins, Jim et al. (eds). 1993. New York: Routledge, pp. 242-263.

² For a review of this film, see Ruth Barton contribution to Issue I of this Journal, March 2006, pp. 162-163.

³ For a more in-depth discussion on this aspect of genre in Irish cinema, see Monahan, Barry “Playing Cops and Robbers: Recent Irish cinema and genre performance” in *Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism* McIlroy, Brian (ed). 2007. New York: Routledge, pp. 45-57.

eminently possible in the genre) the ridiculousness of the incredible to become deliberate comedic generic failure, eclectic irony, or genre parody.

Three interconnected aspects of the horror film –categorised here under the general headings aesthetics, theme and narration– are drawn together with both textual and textural respect for the horror genre’s precedents, but also with the appropriate dramatic self-reflexive generic intertextuality by which all genres work. The tone is established with formal fragmentation of image and text during the credit sequence, and Adrian Johnston’s soundtrack –as is typically the case with Romero, Carpenter and Argento– intensifies the mood disproportionately in relation to the images. In this way, the soundtrack assists the suggestion of the presence of an extra-diegetic being; a force with supernatural power entirely beyond the control of the diegetic characters and the narrator. Throughout the film, unmotivated point-of-view shots reaffirm this presence with Robbie Ryan’s continually budging hand-held camera whose perspective is usually restricted or masked by walls, doors, peep-holes, and other shadows. Typically, this manner of blocking the view, and thereby hindering knowledge, is a particularly effective objective correlative for the uneven epistemological provision that is critical for the horror genre, one that I will deal with below. Even the closing scene, which reveals ultrasound scan of the womb of the pregnant ‘final girl’ in the maternity hospital, embodies literally as it dramatises the possibility for what is most threatening about the horror film: the fact that the terror is ultimately beyond narrative control and arrangement. The story does not achieve a typical point of closure, rather it suggests a lack-of-finality and the ever-possible return of the monster in a sequel.

As order, and a basic faith in epistemological regulation and empirical expertise, is converted into disorder, the narrative struggle for the characters is always one of seeking to impose control over that which has become overwhelming. As the deformed embryos of the cow on which the German biologist has been experimenting

begin to grow at an unprecedented rate, the incredibility of the situation is managed by conventions that facilitate the genre’s alternating rapid disempowering and empowering of characters and spectators that adds to the horror’s emotional affect. This inevitably leads to some of the more problematic lines in such films, as the description on what has taken place ‘scientifically’, necessarily directed at other innocent characters, is effectively designed to inform us. Both John, the ambitious and corrupt German biologist, and Orla his assistant will inform us of the severity of the potential national threat, but as this information is passed we can be certain that, true to the genre, we will be aware of their demise before they are. An example of such transferral of information occurs in one sequence, shortly after an impromptu autopsy on the calf’s womb, which begins with Dan and Orla staring at unrecognisable embryonic growths. We wait in suspense until Orla enlightens us as to what exactly is lying on the table. A shift occurs on a shock effect beat when, immediately after she has said, “They could never have lived”, one of the embryos twitches, levelling our respective ‘knowledge positions’. Our position is brought to one of knowledge superiority in the following scene when we return to the operating table, to find one of the creatures crawling off the table top, in the absence the other characters.

This shifting of knowledge perspectives also introduces another key aspect of the regulation of epistemological orders that is objectively dramatised in the horror: the transgression of borders by the association of space with knowledge. This spatial delineation is dramatised both in terms of biology, as the parasite invades human inner-space, geography and architecture as signs are posted warning “Keep Out”, and “No Entry” and informed characters frequently warn others to “Stay away!”, “Keep back!” or “Don't go in there!”. This tonal aspect of the genre largely motivated Barbara Creed's application of Julia Kristeva's notion of the ‘Abject’ to the horror. All of the distinguishing attributes of the abject appear in O'Brien's film, although the parasitic nature of the monsters inverts its operation by insisting a reintroduction of the abject, back to the farm, into the body and, ultimately, into society.

While genetic mutation renders concretely and metaphorically the fundamental instability of narrative, character and spectator relations in the genre, it is the inability fully to reject, avoid, dispel and discard the monster that provides much of the horror in *Isolation*. Socially, however, those forced outside the boundaries –the travellers– may be read as one aspect of the film's abject as their caravan is frequently framed in front of the 'No Entry' sign and because much of the dialogue about, or directed at, them supports their social alienation. At one moment, in an interesting revision of the common horror utterance "I'll be right back!", they are warned: "Be outta here by tomorrow!"

Ultimately, however, as the title points simultaneously to the idea of quarantine and remote geographical separation – both usefully applicable in the operations of the genre, the film can be contextualised against very real contemporary fears about the possibility of a pandemic proliferating from farm lands. With the threats to humans from 'Mad Cow' disease, the devastating effect of 'Foot and Mouth' disease, and the more recent scare surrounding Avian Flu, rural iconography has never been more easily de-romanticised as holocaust-like images of major culling were framed against the countryside landscape. Billy O'Brien's film applies generic formula with a precision, authenticity and 'New Sincerity' that readily assists a horrific fictionalisation of images so recently produced.

Dr. Barry Monahan has lectured in Irish, European and early-American cinema at Trinity College, Dublin and at University College Dublin. He has published articles on Irish film history and contemporary Irish cinema, and is currently researching work by Abbey Theatre players and repertoire writers on screen.

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Isolation (2005)

Directed by Billy O'Brien

Written by Billy O'Brien

Principle Cast: Essie Davis, Sean Harris, Marcel Iures, Crispin Lett, John Lynch, Ruth Negga, Stanley Townsend.

Original Music by Adrian Johnston

Cinematography by Robbie Ryan

Produced by Bertrand Faivre, Ed Guiney, Ruth Kenley-Letts

Capital Letters (2004)

Reviewer: Debbie Ging

Given the paucity of Irish films that deal with immigration or other aspects of minority-ethnic experience or identity, it is perhaps unsurprising that the few productions which have ventured into this territory have borne an impossibly heavy 'burden of representation'. They tend to run the risk of being criticised either for presenting an unrealistically upbeat vision of multicultural Ireland or for portraying immigrants as victims and thus peddling negative stereotypes. Short films such as *Buskers* (2000) and *Yo Ming is Ainn Dom* (2003) seem to get it right by refusing to ignore that immigration has the potential to produce conflict, yet at the same time demonstrating that both majority and minority cultures are positively transformed by adopting an intercultural approach to multi-ethnicity. Of *The Nephew* (1998), on the other hand, Harvey O'Brien has commented that the racial angle, while having the potential to give the film some edge, is "peculiarly muted and confined to one or two punchlines and an embarrassingly bad scene where farm-hand Phelim Drew sings a rap version of 'Whisky in the Jar'. It seems that Ireland is not quite ready to face up to its racial demons yet, though I suppose it is notable that a black character features so prominently in an Irish film at all."¹

It would appear that Irish filmmakers are reluctant to tackle politically sensitive issues of which they have little or no direct experience, while the lack of minority-ethnic professionals working in the industry means that 'authentic' or non-western perspectives on events are few and far between. However, even when minority-ethnic writers, producers and directors do gain a foothold in a particular country's film or television industry, the pressure to speak on behalf of an entire community –bound together in terms of cultural or national origin but heterogeneous in other ways– may well conflict with their own artistic and political goals.

¹ Harvey's Movie Reviews,
<http://homepage.eircom.net/~obrienh/neph.htm>

What pleases critics, academics, policy-makers and audiences may differ considerably, and opinions on what is acceptable, desirable or authentic will always be contentious. In this respect, Ciaran O'Connor's *Capital Letters* (2004) is an encouraging example of how a powerful message can be delivered about racism and globalisation within a film that is not explicitly about ethnicity or questions of intercultural conflict or coexistence. O'Connor recognises the limits of how this story can be told and wisely confines his social critique to the misogynist and racist power structures within the Irish criminal underworld which allow human trafficking and prostitution to thrive rather than attempting to (over)interpret his protagonist's culture or experiences.

Capital Letters opens with a young black woman Taiwo (Ruth Negga) being delivered to a Dublin backstreet in the back of a transit van. Unaware of the fact that she has been 'imported' by ruthless brothel owner and gangster McManus, she is nonetheless suspicious and fearful, and succeeds in escaping, only to be spotted and picked up by Keeley (Karl Shiels), a small-time criminal in the trafficking business. Keeley decides to keep Taiwo for his own financial gain, and offers her a bed, food and the prospect of a job in exchange for a percentage of her earnings. A tender if somewhat ambiguous relationship develops between the two and Keeley finds her a job serving drinks in a lap-dancing club. Before long, however, the owner forces her to dance for his clients and thus begins the silent and painful disintegration of Taiwo's innocence and her descent into a life of degradation and drug use. By getting to know Taiwo through her monosyllabic exchanges with Keeley and the other characters she confronts, the audience gets a genuine sense of how ignorant this alien world is about her culture and how little it matters anymore who she is or where she has come from. The film's failure to disclose

her national identity is neither a cop-out nor an attempt to portray a generic or universal experience of immigration but rather a device that highlights the trauma and helplessness experienced by a thinking, feeling human being who is suddenly perceived purely as a commodity. As a counterpoint to this world in which she is powerless and voiceless, Taiwo's inner monologue gives the viewer privileged access to her thoughts and fears, her compassionate personality and her intense relationship with and love for her sister, who is also trying to get to Ireland.

When McManus discovers that Keeley has taken Taiwo, he sends brothel manager Leslie (Jasmine Russell) to take her back and she is forced to start working as a fully-fledged prostitute. When Keeley finds out, he tries to buy Taiwo back by borrowing 25,000 Euros from the lap-dancing club owner and, even though McManus agrees to the deal, he beats and brutally rapes her to punish Keeley for taking what wasn't his in the first place. Keeley then kills MacManus but is subsequently killed himself by Leslie's henchmen. Betrayed by Keeley and now owned by Leslie, Taiwo must resign herself to a life of sexual exploitation with only the arrival of her sister to look forward to, which we are told at the end of the film is being organised by Leslie the following day. *Capital Letters*, therefore, is as much about the abuse of women in the sex industry as it is about racism. Although it demonstrates how powerful men exploit and oppress less powerful men, and how solidarity among women is severely compromised within the political economy of a male-owned global sex trade, it pulls no punches in its ultimate message that women and, in particular, women of colour are always bottom of the heap.

Shot mostly indoors with a dark, grainy feel and an edgy soundtrack, *Capital Letters* presents an image of Dublin's seedy underworld that is refreshingly at odds with Lad Culture's glib, blokeish celebration of gangsters, lap-dancing and the criminal underworld, which has become a cliché of so many contemporary British films

as well as a raft of recent Irish films (*I Went Down*, *The General*, *Headrush*, *Last Days in Dublin*, *Flick*, *Man About Dog*, *Intermission*). Sexual violence, misogyny and racism, stripped of rapid editing, witty, ironic dialogue and a thumping soundtrack, are exposed for what they are. The camera's gaze focuses not on the female lap dancers' bodies but is turned back on the voyeur to reveal the dark, vacant and desperate expressions of Taiwo's male clients. It is in fact a film much closer in tone to Stephen Frears' *Dirty, Pretty Things* (2002) than to anything that has come out of Ireland, and compels those who regard this country's newfound accession to the playground of the global sex industry as liberating or progressive to take a long, hard look at what is happening behind the scenes. Avoiding sentimentality right up to the end, there is little comfort in the film's closure, as Taiwo, in voiceover, composes a letter to her mother. Her voice is lonely and detached yet not entirely devoid of hope as herself and her sister face into a precarious future. The feeling of uncertainty and discomfort with which we are left is fitting, given that the real story of trafficking women from other countries for use in the Irish sex industry is probably only just beginning.

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***Capital Letters* (2004)**

Directed and Script by Ciarán O'Connor

Principle Cast: Ruth Negga; Neilí Conroy;

Martin Dunne; Niall O'Brien; Jasmine Russell; Karl Sheils

Cinematography by Ruairi O'Brien

Original Music by Niall O'Sullivan

Produced by Linda Cardiff, Nuala Cunningham

Once (2006)

Reviewer: Tony Tracy

It is now eleven years since John Carney came to the attention of Irish cinema audiences with his fresh and fiercely independent debut, *November Afternoon* (1995). It was the early years of the re-established Irish Film Board (1993); but the video stock, cast and crew cost virtually nothing with the Film Board providing financed for post-production and prints. Written and directed in collaboration with Tom Hall, the duo followed this atmospheric and uncomfortable tale of incest in the city with *Just in Time*; a similarly unvarnished exploration of sexuality in modern Ireland. It is fair to attribute to these films the overused appellation of 'groundbreaking' both in their stylistic immediacy and thematic daring.

A search for John Carney on Google will produce more hits relating to American independent maverick John Cassavetes, thanks to the prolificacy of his Boswell, Ray Carney. The accident is a happy one since it is hard to find precedents for John Carney's ambition in Irish cinema or literature. His sources of inspiration include the Cassavetes school of character-driven, low-budget, intense and complex narratives of often superficially conventional characters with swirling depths of desperate longing and confused identities. He is, above all, a resolutely modern film-maker; his stories concerned with private emotions rather than public morals. He is also utterly urban in focus and disposition and more particularly, takes inspiration from his native Dublin. His films and television work – notably *Bachelors Walk*¹ – glide through a city of familiar pubs, streets and settings, often eschewing the shine and surface of 'new' Dublin, in favour of locations related to

¹ He co-wrote and directed the successful RTE drama/comedy series *Bachelor's Walk* (2001, 2002, 2006) once again with Tom Hall and his brother Kieran Carney

the 1980s declaring a sensibility at once contemporary and out-of-place.

After the critical success of his first co-written and co-directed features, Carney went solo in 2001, directing *On the Edge*, produced by Jim Sheridan's Hell's Kitchen in association with Universal Pictures. This represented a substantial step forward in terms of profile and budget and his cast of teenage oddballs included Cillian Murphy and the American actress Tricia Vessa. Clearly aimed at the American 'indie' market's taste for good-looking misfits and loners –who may or may not be mentally unstable– the film disappointed both critically and commercially. Though it featured his characteristic preoccupation with the difficulty of emotional contact, *On the Edge* –in ironic defiance of its title– seemed less convincing than the earlier, more immediate and less polished films.

More than one critic has noticed Carney's debt to Eric Rohmer and the French *nouvelle vague* – it's a comparison difficult to avoid in his choice of black and white photography and the jazz soundtrack in *November Afternoon*. It's an influence felt once again in Carney's fourth and most recent feature, *Once* (2006), which sees him once again employing the mobile 'flaneur' camera of the early work, in a delicate story of heterosexual yearning. The film is structured as a series of songs strung across a fine thread of frustrated attraction. It is quite unlike anything seen in Irish cinema before; yet its themes, use of location, technique and use of music make it unmistakably 'Carneyesque'.

Once details the unfolding relationship between a busker (Glen Hansard) and an eastern European immigrant (Czech musician, Marketa Irglova) over a couple of weeks in and around Dublin city centre. Hansard will be familiar to audiences as 'Outspan' from *The Commitments* – the first, hugely successful, adaptation of a Roddy Doyle novel. He is better known these days as the charismatic front-man of Dublin band

The Frames –of which Carney was originally a member– and as a highly respected musician. He has written music for an earlier Carney project and suggested Irglova as ideal for the role of the girl in the film, following a recent musical collaboration². Hansard's character –referred to in the credits simply as 'the guy', is in the wake of a break-up with his girlfriend who has moved to London. Irglova's 'the girl' is one of Ireland's new immigrants and lives alongside similar 'new Irish', sharing a flat with her mother and young daughter Ivana in a run-down part of the inner city. She encounters Hansard singing on Grafton Street one evening as she is selling the homeless magazine 'Big Issue', and they develop a relationship based around songs which at first gives voice to his heartbreak and bitterness, giving way to his attraction to her and her gentle but stoical rejection of his advances.

There is something wilfully anachronistic about the way Carney uses Dublin; a curious mixture of topicality inflected with a very particular affection for a city now experienced rarely, if at all. Walking down Grafton Street recently I saw an eastern European man playing energetic Abba on an accordion as he danced and sang in an incredibly powerful, heavily accented, voice . . . 'Oh Chiquita, you and I know, that the heart aches come and they go . . .' *Once* has Hansard –at one time a Grafton Street regular– meet the feisty and forward foreign girl and bring her back to his Da's small vacuum cleaner repair-shop before inviting her up to his bedroom to listen to cassette tapes of his music. Cassette tapes! What kind of musicians would even know where to find a tape-recorder today; never mind the Jimi Hendrix poster which line the walls of this 30 something singer-songwriter. His Da – wonderfully played by Bill Hodnett is but one of a gallery of small parts in the film played by 'real ould Dubs' in public places; in a music shop, on the bus, selling second-hand suits. And though Carney does nothing to hide or obscure the recent building bonanza around the capital

² In 2006 Hansard and Irglova worked together on a CD entitled 'The Swell Season.' Information and excerpts from this very beautiful collection – which includes music from the film *Once* – can be found here: <http://www.myspace.com/theswellseason>

we find ourselves in locations well-known to the denizens of an older Dublin; Simon's Place café, Grogan's Pub, the George's Street Arcade, McCullough Piggot's. Not a mobile phone, iPod or panini in sight. There's even a late night dinner party which turns into a music session straight out of *Dead as Doornails* – Anthony Cronin's account of 1950's literary Dublin. Among the performers, Dubliners of a certain vintage will recognise Pete Short, the long-time seller of *In Dublin* magazine outside Bewley's of Grafton Street. And though Sean O'Casey's Mountjoy Square tenements are now inhabited by immigrants like 'the girl'; they are presented as the contemporary equivalent of O'Casey's decent, working class characters. This is brought home in one amusing scene where three foreign lads from next door walk into 'the girl's' flat unannounced, to watch the soap-opera 'Fair City'. 'Fair City is brilliant,' they say . . . 'we learn English from Fair City'. The girls are still pretty, even if they're from the Czech Republic.

Once is effortlessly charming and affective. This is down to the charisma and depth of Hansard's generous and open performance, the easy chemistry between him and Irglova, the melancholic appeal of the music and a script and direction which displays a lightness of touch that comes with confidence of vision. That vision, as we've suggested, is naturalistic without being realist. The central romance is credible because of 'the guy's' vulnerability and attraction and 'the girls' inability to respond because of her circumstances. The prospect of romantic love offers the opportunity for self-reinvention as musical expression; singing away the pain of the past and sharing harmonies of the heart. Melodrama in its purest form. There are few more engaging stories than frustrated romance between good people. But Carney's romance extends beyond emotions to include a vision of modern Ireland inspired by a rose-tinted view of the past. Dublin is a place where no one has much money but everyone gets by and shares what they have. The 'locals' and the immigrants are basically the same, living classless, communal lives with open doors and shared resources. It's not quite *Amelie* –there is no element of pastiche or nostalgia– but neither is it Ken Loach. In its primacy of matters of the heart

as the grounding narrative, this is Irish cinema with a French accent, a republic of emotions. But this foregrounding of people over place does not ultimately endure. The couple's crossing of cultural boundaries –a refreshing representation which has not been sufficiently explored in contemporary Irish cinema– is ultimately a digression rather than a re-orientation as they return to the claims of their cultures' pasts and emotional pairings which reinforce rather than breakdown the divide between the Ireland of 20 years ago and today's multicultural city-dwellers. Working in an entirely different cinematic idiom of the celebrated duo of Irish-International cinema –Jordan and Sheridan– John Carney is building an idiosyncratic and resolutely personal body of work that offers

confidence and inspiration to aspiring Irish cineastes; an impression reinforced by the recent success of *Once* at the Sundance Film Festival.

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Once (2006)

Directed by John Carney

Written by John Carney

Principle Cast: Glenn Hansard, Markéta Irglová

Music by Glenn Hansard, Markéta Irglová

Cinematography by Tim Fleming

Produced by Martina Niland

Misery, Missed Opportunities and *Middletown* (2006)

Reviewer: Jane Ruffino

Ireland produces so few feature films that when the rare opportunity comes to say something over the course of two hours, directors and writers frequently try to say too much and end up showing the same repressed Ireland; conveying an overarching sense of isolation and entrapment that is old news to most viewers. Despite the presence of a talented cast, *Middletown* is no exception. Rather than being the barbed comment on fundamentalism set in a blackly comic landscape he seems to have intended, director Brian Kirk's attempt to satirise the bleakness of 1960s Ireland is just yet another foggy, formless Irish film. Kirk places his story in a hyperbolic state of relentless misery, a small town that could be anyplace, anytime, and while it would be wrong to suggest that the grimness was gratuitous, that the payoff – if there was to be one – is not apparent makes it difficult to wonder why anyone should bother watching it.

The story opens with 'good son', Gabriel Hunter being told by his father (Gerald McSorley) that he has been chosen to inherit the role of church minister, while 'not-so-good son' Jim waits outside the church, getting into fights. Fast forward to adulthood, and Jim (Daniel Mays) is married to the only woman of seemingly marriageable age in the town (by far his luckiest break), Caroline (Eva Birthistle – who won an IFTA for her performance). They live in a caravan beside their half-built bungalow on the outskirts of the town, while Jim works for his father in the local garage, and Caroline tends bar in her family's pub.

The Reverend Gabriel Hunter returns from his seminary training, and his time working in the missions, to take over the parish church from Reverend Cray (Mick Lally), as was determined in his childhood. From the moment he is installed in the pulpit, the downward spiral begins, and none are safe from his bombardment of moral proclamations, his fire-and-brimstone war on immorality.

The Reverend sweeps into the town with the vehemence of a maverick Texas sheriff, hell-bent on fire-and-brimstone justice, cinematic homage, perhaps, to Johnny Cash, whom Kirk cites as an influence. The problem is that, rather than a man who comes undone in the presence of stubborn immorality, McFadyen's character appears almost to arrive with the intent, not to reform the locals, but to lose his head entirely.

In the dank back room of the town's only pub (and even this lacks verisimilitude – what Irish town has just the one pub?) the residents find solace in their weekly cockfights. Solace, indeed, but not pleasure, nor mirth, nor glee, nor the constant barrage of cheap puns and innuendoes one would expect to surround a cockfight in any Irish town. In fact, the inhabitants of *Middletown* almost entirely fail to respond to their surroundings in any believable way. Rather than use a contemporary lens to satirise an Ireland of the recent past, *Middletown* profiles the sort of Irish misery that might be easily packaged and sold to an audience too cool for Frank McCourt, looking for an *Angela's Ashes* with a bit of edgy sophistication, something for the Tribeca Film Festival set (where Kirk's feature was first screened).

The only female characters, apart from Caroline, move in creepy unison around church and town. It may not be far-fetched to wonder if this purposely recalls another small-town Irish priest, Father Dougal McGuire, the well-beloved simpleton from Channel 4's *Father Ted*, who once described a similar Cerberus-like she-beast of Craggy Island as being 'like jam – jam made out of old women'. *Middletown* strives to move away from the *Father Ted* brand of parody and into a subtler form of satire, but it moves to a point so distant that it alienates the wit that could have made this more engaging and more entertaining while losing none of its weight. It is a challenge indeed to construct an atmosphere of joylessness without rendering the experience

itself unpleasant, and this satirical statement about singleminded zealotry comes across, not as a Gothic satire, but as a one-dimensional dirge of misery. So grim, in fact, that the ‘cock’ reference, the use of the so-twee-it’s-sinister Ulster-American Folk Park as a backdrop, the ooze made out of tut-tutting women – it is difficult to know if these were meant to amuse. But a touch of humour, an acknowledgement that in miserable situations, it is part of Irish life North and South, to laugh, to ‘take the mickey’, to make light of even that which is the most grave, would have thrown the bleakness and the hopelessness into the high relief it deserves.

Kirk deliberately omitted references to the denomination of the Reverend Hunter which, rather than creating a universal fundamentalism on which to comment, confused some international audiences. His vaguely flippant response to the comments of one critic, who wrongly assumed Middletown’s religion to be Catholic, reveals another difficulty between Irish directors and international audiences, and that is that rather than tell people something they may not already know about Ireland, they are blamed for not knowing the ins and outs of mid-20th-century Northern Ireland already.

The ‘Middle’ in Middletown was perhaps an attempt to blur distinctions between north and south, old and modern, satire and reality, ‘good’ and ‘evil’, salvation from drink and the damnation from sin, and earthly hell and heavenly paradise, but instead of creating a liminal space in which to explore the nexus

between misery and mirth, or between steadfast commitment and terrifying fundamentalism, it instead just sits on the fence and tells the same old tale of woe.

Middletown could have been so much, and yet it was a missed opportunity to share an insight about Ireland or about fundamentalism, or at least to spin a good yarn. Brian Kirk, who also directed the first episode of Showtime television’s hugely successful Irish-American gangster series *Brotherhood*, is a talented director who summoned a highly talented and established cast of actors for this barn-raising of a feature, but saddled them with an leaden script, while subjecting its audience to a tragicomic experience of an unintended sort.

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Middletown (2006)

Directed by Brian Kirk.

Script by Daragh Carville.

Principle Cast: Matthew Macfadyen; Daniel Mays; Eva Birthistle; Gerard McSorley; Mick Lally; David Wilmot; Sorcha Cusack; Bronagh Gallagher.

Music by Debbie Wiseman.

Cinematography by Adam Suschitzky

Produced by Michael Casey, Martha O’Neill (executive), Mark Thomas (associate).

Six Shooter (Martin McDonagh, 2006)

Reviewer: Sean Crosson

Since the emergence of a critically engaged indigenous cinema in the mid-1970s, short films have played an important role in Irish film culture. Not only did they offer Irish filmmakers such as Joe Comerford, Bob Quinn and Cathal Black an opportunity to learn their trade and establish their credentials, often the films themselves made original and provocative contributions to contemporary debates while providing an important local response to the sometimes questionable portrayals of Ireland often found in international productions. Furthermore, Irish short films –in contrast to most feature-length productions– have proven remarkably successful at international festivals’ award ceremonies.. Few may recall the Oscar nomination for Hilton Edwards’ *Return To Glenascaul* (1951) starring Orson Welles, but among the major award winners in the last twenty years have been John Lawlor’s *Sunday* (1987), John Moore’s *He Shoots, He Scores* (1995), Damien O’Donnell’s, *Thirty five Aside* (1995) and Daniel O’Hara’s *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* (2004). As recently as 2005, Ken Wardrup’s *Undressing My Mother* (2004), won the European Film Academy Short Film Award, while Tim Loane (*Dance Lexie Dance* (1996), Cathal Gaffney (*Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (2002)) and Ruairi Robinson (*Fifty Percent Grey* (2002)) have all received Oscar nominations for their work in the past ten years.

Such success notwithstanding , there was considerable surprise when Martin McDonagh won the best Oscar award in March 2006 for his debut short, *Six Shooter*. For any Irish film to win an Oscar is no small matter in a country not renowned for its filmmaking culture. For it to be the directorial debut of a young Anglo-Irish filmmaker (London-born of Irish parentage) seems almost impertinent. But if McDonagh’s filmmaking credentials are slim, he already has an esteemed reputation on both sides of the Atlantic as the author of seven plays and

recipient of numerous awards, including two Laurence Olivier Awards for *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2003) and *The Pillowman* (2004). He has also been nominated twice for Broadway’s Tony Award as author of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1998) and *The Lonesome West* (1999). However, while he is best known for his work in theatre, and often compared to JM Synge with whom he shares an interest in the west of Ireland, it is from the cinema that McDonagh takes much of his inspiration, citing Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, and Quentin Tarantino as major influences.¹ (Garrett 2006)

Combining the darker themes and extreme violence of Scorsese and Tarantino with the surrealism of Lynch, *Six Shooter* is one of the most provocative Irish shorts for some time. Over its 27 minutes the film manages not just to reference McDonagh’s major influences but also provides a commentary on representations of Ireland in cinema, often characterised by “rural backwardness or a marked proclivity for violence”.² (Rockett et alia 1988: xii) However, in line with McDonagh’s irreverent approach to Irish theatre, it is a provocative portrayal that may appear at first to perpetuate as much as critique previous questionable representations.

McDonagh’s choice of a train journey is particularly inspired. It not only propels the narrative along but allows for an encounter with the modern (on the train) and the traditional (out the window). Furthermore, while the character of ‘Kid’ (Rúaidhrí Conroy) may have resonances with Synge’s Christy Mahon, in cinematic terms, McDonagh takes the conventional representation of the violently insane Irish character (apparent in films such as *Patriot Games* (Phillip Noyce,

¹ Garrett R. Leonard, “Everyman captures McDonagh’s wit”, *The John Hopkin’s News-letter*, February 10, 2006. <<http://www.jhunewsletter.com/>>

² Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill (eds.), *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. xii.

1992) and *Blown Away* (Stephen Hopkins, 1994)) and brings it to its absurd extreme, creating in the process a character, dressed in (what else?) a bright green shirt, that owes more to a British and Irish-American imaginary (and cinema) than to the realities of Irish culture. But there is a further presence here epitomised in the gunfight sequence at the film's climax, and that is the American west, a recurrent feature throughout McDonagh's work, where the west of Ireland seems occasionally indistinguishable from the Wild West. In this respect, in terms of McDonagh's theatrical work, *Six-Shooter* seems closest to *The Leutinant of Inishmore*. However, whereas it is the death of a much beloved pet cat that bookends the narrative in the play, in *Six Shooter* it is the death of a rabbit that provides the film's blackly humorous dénouement.

Six-Shooter's narrative begins with a doctor's revelation to Mr. Donnelly (Brendan Gleeson) that his wife has just passed away. While he sits by his wife's hospital bed, we are presented with the familiar figure of the inarticulate Irish male – reminiscent of Bunny Kelly in *I Went Down* (Paddy Breathnach, 1997) – repeating the words 'I don't know what to say'. The doctor can provide little support, forced to leave to attend to two cot deaths and the body of a headless woman, killed by her son. From the beginning McDonagh is referencing Irish theatre, except here it is not a father who dies at the hands of his son *à la* *The Playboy of the Western World*, but a mother.

We now move to the terrain where most of the action of the film takes place – on a train. Once the train has left the station it travels through the countryside and coastal regions of Wicklow and Waterford where the film was shot. While Donnelly sits opposite a verbose and eccentric young man, known only as 'Kid' in the film, they are joined in the next seat by a clearly upset couple who become the subject of repeated verbal comments by Kid. We discover later that they have lost a son to a cot death, a matter which provides further amusement for Kid who suggests that they may have 'banged it on something'.

From the beginning of this train's journey one is reminded of an iconic moment in Irish cinema. The first shots of the train's arrival, while

Donnelly waits to board, are reminiscent of the opening scene of that most quintessential and influential of 'Irish' films, *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952), the film that more than any other served to establish in the world's imagination the image of Ireland as a green pastoral idyll populated by a friendly, loquacious though seemingly unintelligible people, with a noticeable weakness for alcohol and conversation – not entirely dissimilar to characters portrayed in McDonagh's film. However, in *Six Shooter* the director seems intent on literally exploding and shattering myths that John Ford's 1952 film helped to promulgate.

The Quiet Man is a film in which the rural idyll of Ireland provides relief from the modernity of the city for the film's protagonist, the returning Irish emigrant Seán Thornton (John Wayne), a former prize fighter attempting to come to terms with his accidental killing of a friend in the boxing ring. The Pittsburg he left behind is described by Thornton as 'hell' and contrasted to the 'heaven' he imagines Innisfree to be. Similarly in *Six Shooter*, for the characters on the train, all of whom are attempting to come to terms with their own suffering, the repeated shots of the Irish countryside they see through the train's windows appear to offer some brief relief from their own internal traumas. Again and again we see the train's passengers stare out into the countryside, particularly at tense points in the narrative – following a failed attempt by the man (David Wilmot) to comfort his distraught wife (Aisling O'Sullivan), the mother of the cot death victim; after the attempted physical attack by Wilmot's character on Kid for repeated use of bad language; and after Kid reveals he would kill his own child if he had one. In this final instance, it is Kid himself who draws our attention to the outside world, remarking unexpectedly while discussing Rod Steiger's late parenthood: "Ah Sheep". We are then presented with familiar shots of sheep in an Irish field framed, almost postcard like, in the train's window. It seems that all the time while we watch, the passengers are watching their own film, a film that unfolds through the window allowing them to temporarily escape their present worries.

But it is all an illusion, and McDonagh suggests as much by the very framing of the

pastoral images. Furthermore, the windows themselves are broken dramatically as the train comes to a final halt and a gun fight ensues between Kid and the armed Gardaí outside, shattering not just the windows, but the very illusion that outside there might be some relief from the traumas of those taking the train.

As if to emphasize the shattering of pastoral myths, McDonagh includes within the narrative Kid's story of a cow suffering from trapped wind. In a surreal sequence brightly lit by cinematographer Baz Irvine to amplify its images and suggest an exaggerated fiction from Kid's past, we witness Kid as a child been brought to a cattle fair by his father. Everything about this scene suggests an imagined and heavily constructed event, whether in terms of the number of people present, the events that follow or the location, including the ubiquitous ruins (seemingly an ever-present in Irish-themed films) in the background. On the soundtrack, Kid describes the expanding cow's stomach and the unorthodox solution provided by a 'short tiny fella', reminiscent of the conventional image of a leprechaun. However, the apparent 'solution' leads to the exploding of the cow, an event that is as effective and memorable in exploding myths as the detonation of an atomic bomb in the centre of a scenic Irish lake in Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997).

As with McDonagh's theatrical work, *Six Shooter* will no doubt offend and irk as many as it will impress. For viewers, it is hard to find an assured position in relation to a film which repeatedly undermines one's expectations with

regard to both character and narrative. Yet in all of this *Six Shooter* provides an intriguing, if ironic, commentary on representations of Ireland in cinema and indicates the important role short film continues to play in Irish film today.

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Six Shooter (2006)

Writer/Director: Martin McDonagh

Cast: Brendan Gleeson, Rúaídhri Conroy, David Wilmot, Aisling O'Sullivan, and Domhnall Gleeson.

Cinematography: Baz Irvine.

Produced by Kenton Allen, Mia Bays, Mary McCarthy & John McDonnell.

All the World's a Stage: Brendan Gleeson

Reviewer: Harvey O'Brien

In November 2006 Brendan Gleeson became the fourth recipient of the Magner's Irish Film Festival Boston Excellence Award, honoring his contribution to Irish film and film culture. For an actor only sixteen years in the profession, he has had a remarkable career. In 2006, his profile was higher than ever, following his appearance as 'Mad Eye' Moody in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Mike Newell, 2005) and the short *Six Shooter* (Martin McDonagh, 2005), which won an Oscar in March.

In 2006, Brendan Gleeson's film work included three features: Paul Mercier's adaptation of his own play, *Studs* (Paul Mercier, 2006), the low budget Irish-American drama *Black Irish* (Brad Gann, 2006), and the actor's fourth collaboration with John Boorman (following *The General* (1998), *The Tailor of Panama* (2001), and *In My Country* (2004)), *The Tiger's Tail* (Boorman, 2006). In documentary, Gleeson contributed a voice over to *Flann O'Brien: The Lives of Brian* (Maurice Sweeney, 2006), and announced his plans to develop an adaptation of O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The actor also appeared on the Irish television talk show *The Late Late Show* where his impassioned assault on the Government's handling of Public Health (having been through the crumbling system with his own parents) brought huge public response, and later directly inspired the emergency room sequence in *The Tiger's Tail*.

Writing in *Cineaste* in 2006, Patrick McGilligan quoted Lee Strasberg on the qualities of 'great' acting saying "The things that fed the great actors of the past as human beings were of such strength and sensitivity that when these things were added to conscious effort, they unconsciously and subconsciously led to the results in all great acting." This observation seems particularly apropos for Brendan Gleeson, who, has that unique ability as an actor to appear both wholly and completely in character and yet remain identifiably himself. This is not to say

that watching Brendan Gleeson on screen is the same as knowing Brendan Gleeson the person, but that his ability to bring elements of his personality and his experience to bear on his characterisations through his skills as an actor makes him a powerful anchor of authenticity in any film.

His early experiences as an actor were on the student stage at UCD. It was here he began his association with Paul Mercier, who speaks of Brendan's "tremendous leap of faith" in participating in Mercier's early work, including Rock Musicals in the Irish language. When Mercier moved up to the professional stage with the Passion Machine productions of the 1980s, Gleeson largely devoted his professional life to teaching at Bellcamp College in Dublin.

Perhaps his years as a teacher had the kind of impact on his later acting of which Strasberg spoke. Certainly his capacity for observation, seen in the precision he brings to deportment, movement, and vocal and gestural interpretation; his attentiveness to other actors, seen both in the flowing naturalism of his interaction with others on screen and attested to by those who have worked with him in terms of the generosity he shows in rehearsal and with advice for younger performers; and of course his ability to shift from fearsome to friendly in exploring multi-faceted characters; all indicate a depth of human experience drawn from the personality of a teacher.

Gleeson first came to notice for his portrayal of Michael Collins in the television drama *The Treaty* (Jonathan Lewis, 1991) where his uncanny physical resemblance to the real-life Collins belies the subtlety of his performance. His Collins is an intelligent, determined man very much aware of the political issues at stake in the Treaty negotiations, a section of Irish history omitted entirely from Neil Jordan's later film of Collins' life (in which Gleeson also played a small role). Gleeson went on to play a number of supporting roles in Irish films

including *Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992) and *The Snapper* (Stephen Frears, 1993), where he succeeded in bringing a quality of authenticity to roles that otherwise might easily have descended into cliché.

His international breakthrough came in 1995 with Mel Gibson's multimillion dollar epic *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), filmed in Ireland. Gleeson's broad but earthy performance as Hamish, the huge highland warrior who initially combats, then befriends William Wallace, not only introduced Gleeson to a larger audience, but gave the film one of its most quoted lines as Hamish, made up and armed for a fatal battle the Highlanders know they cannot win says "Well, we didn't get dressed up for nothin'"

Braveheart gave Gleeson an opportunity to explore 'larger than life' type of roles, bringing again a discernible quality of authentic humanity to potentially shallow strong-jawed characters. This is something he did again in *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) and *Kingdom of Heaven* (Ridley Scott, 2005), producing very different characterisations by emphasising different core emotions in the bearded and barrel-chested warriors he played in all three cases. The loyal companionability of Hamish evaporates in the lusty envy seen in Menelaus, and this in turn is replaced by a sinister righteousness in his Christian Crusader Reynald.

Gleeson's most well known roles in Irish cinema came also through genre performances, but in films which self-consciously re-interpreted the conventions of those genres. In 1997 Gleeson won strong notices as the secondary lead in the gangster comedy *I Went Down* (Paddy Breathnach), a slightly dim but streetwise hit man called Bunny Kelly. Gleeson observed of the character that he was "a chaotic steamroller of a man, a big Dublin lullagh with an exaggerated sense of his own importance – the sort of mad gobshite who could never even arrive in a Tarantino movie." This role was followed by his most acclaimed performance, as real-life gangster Martin Cahill in *The General*. This performance earned him several international awards and notices, though not without controversy. Cahill's role in comparatively recent Irish history left many left

victims of his brutality deeply uncomfortable with his on-screen representation. Cahill was, in reality, famous for shielding his face from the public, and his personality and identity were only to be gleaned from supposition or unreliable testimony. Gleeson's performance explored the layers of masks worn by the man, moving past and through the 'fun loving criminal' side of his antics and revealing both Cahill's humanity and monstrosity. Said Gleeson: "Maybe I got it completely wrong, but I tackled it with integrity. There's nothing more I can do if somebody's going to take umbrage at it."

Gleeson has continued to work steadily and impressively in a wide variety of international projects, with directors as diverse as Steven Spielberg (*A.I. Artificial Intelligence*), Martin Scorsese (*Gangs of New York*), Danny Boyle (*28 days later...*), John Woo (*Mission: Impossible II*), Anthony Minghella (*Cold Mountain*; where his actual skills as a musician were demonstrated as he played fiddle in a poignant scene as a doomed musician), and M. Night Shyamalan (*The Village*). However, he has also continued to work with Irish filmmakers, including giving a small but beautifully judged performance as a Christian Brother in *The Butcher Boy* (Neil Jordan, 1997), a brave rendering of a simple-minded circus performer in *Sweetie Barrett* (Stephen Bradley, 1998), and a funny turn as a TV chef who loses his memory and believes himself a teenager in *Wild About Harry* (Declan Lowney, 2000). He has also worked on smaller scale projects with directors including Conor McPherson (*Saltwater*), Gilles MacKinnon (*Trojan Eddie*), and Stephen Rea (*A Further Gesture*), showing his willingness to invest himself in riskier films if he believes in the role.

Gleeson's work of 2006 gave him an opportunity to re-unite with two of his most important collaborators - Paul Mercier and John Boorman. Though neither *Studs* nor *The Tiger's Tail* elicited strong box office or critical support in Ireland, both films again showed Gleeson's strength and diversity. In *Studs* he employed his ability to shift registers in exploring the mind games played by a football manager. *The Tiger's Tail* offered him the always desirable thespian opportunity to play two characters in the one film: one a successful Irish businessman, the

other his dark doppelganger, the latter played with a kind of black comic relish that was entirely suited to the film. *Black Irish* saw him tackle the role of an Irish-American patriarch, the grumpy and emotionally unavailable father of a boy who longs to be a baseball star. This low budget indie film opened the Magner's Irish Film Festival in Boston and saw director Brad Gann and producer Todd Harris speak after the screening of Gleeson's tremendous generosity and support for the film.

It is clear that Gleeson's is a talent of particular note and importance in the contemporary Irish cinema. His ability to perform both in the lead and in support, to play in drama, comedy, epic, and intimate films seems to come from a tireless work ethic that somehow never lends itself to introversion or

self-importance. On 11 November 2006, Gleeson modestly accepted his Excellence Award following a retrospective overview of his career to date and video testimonials from Boorman, Jordan, Mercier, and Jim Sheridan, with the gentle remark "Well, that was embarrassing," then spoke with the packed audience at the Harvard Film Archive in a characteristically amicable and honest Q & A

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The Clinic (RTE)

Reviewer: Díóg O'Connell

With recent successes in Irish television drama, including *The Clinic* (which completed its fourth series in 2006), *Bachelors Walk* (2001), *Pure Mule* (2004) and the long running urban soap opera *Fair City* (1989-to date), it's safe to suggest that television drama in Ireland is in renaissance. An ensemble medical drama serial, based on an original idea by Orla Bleahon Melvin of Irish-based production company Parallel Films, *The Clinic* links with the international explosion of medical drama, particularly since the 1990s, on our television screens. This Irish medical drama was developed independently in collaboration with Ireland's national public service broadcaster, RTE. Given the history of television drama in Ireland, that journeyed from high activity in the 1960s and 1970s to almost extinction by the 1980s with a trickle of renewal in the 1990s, it is significant that RTE has invested and committed, on a long term basis, to this production.

Parallel Films, the independent production company that produces *The Clinic*, is a high profile and successful Irish television and film production company, set up originally in 1993 by Alan Moloney to concentrate on feature films and television dramas. Its credits include cinema releases *Last of the High Kings* (David Keating 1996), *A Love Divided* (Syd Macartney 1999) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (Neil Jordan 2005) and the highly acclaimed television dramas *Amongst Women* (1997), *Falling for a Dancer* (1998), *Showbands* (2005/06) and *The Clinic*. Reflecting changes in the production environment in America whereby many talented writers and directors are more focussed on becoming involved in television drama than feature films due to the changing face of film production in an era of globalisation, Parallel Productions has carved out a niche for itself within the Irish production environment by producing four critically and popularly acclaimed series of *The Clinic*. While film production tends to be the

focus of analysis for many issues around identity within Irish Studies discourse, due to its critical mass this series raises key questions about identity within contemporary Irish society and reflects many of the conflicting allegiances between "Boston and Berlin" that frame our economic, cultural and ideological sensibilities in the twenty-first century. Scrutinising this drama within its generic boundaries reveals many narrative tensions reflective of a society in flux.

The medical drama is one of the most enduring, flexible yet self-contained genres within the television schedule. Since the evolution of television, each decade has produced memorable medical dramas in Britain and America. One of the nascent examples, *Dr. Kildare* existing first in book, radio and film form, was then transformed into the highly successful television series from the 1960s, featuring young, eager intern Dr. Kildare (Richard Chamberlain) and his more senior mentor and superior Dr. Gillespie (Raymond Massey). From the outset the US medical drama was a locus for human emotional stories explored through the intertwining narratives between on-screen characters. In the 1950s and 1960s these dramas centred on narratives that endorsed and reassured the audience of the medical profession and hospital system in a paternalistic way, principally through the lead doctor who was often portrayed as infallible and god-like. As it evolved and changed over time, medical drama challenged this portrayal, reflecting the change in mood in 1970s America in particular, where the growing counter cultural section of society was questioning and challenging the status quo. This manifested itself in a shift from the emphasis on one or two doctors to an ensemble of medics working in a team. *M*A*S*H* (1973-1982), one of the most successful television shows of all time, is the genesis of much of the medical drama on our television screens today. Doctors working in a

“war zone”, not in control of their environment, susceptible to many outside forces and where medicine is a game of roulette, is a scenario not all too unfamiliar in contemporary medical drama. *The Clinic*, like most aspects of Irish popular culture, has not been immune to outside influences and thus reflects the changes in US medical drama whereby the doctor has transformed from the competent and compassionate Dr. Kildare to the abrasive Dr. House and sometimes morally-challenged, or merely human, ER medics. To what extent *The Clinic* appropriates from the US model whereby the focus is on character interpersonal relations alongside popularising and normalising complex medical practice, or the British trend of narrative tensions hinging between the ‘system’ which militates against the doctor and the provision of best practice, is key to exploring the Janus-face of modern Ireland.

The Clinic structures its storylines and character exploration around the milieu of a private medical clinic whereby the doctors are not pillars of society to be trusted at all costs inspired by a vocation for pastoral care but are ambitious and driven to build a successful business and enjoy the fruits of wealthy Celtic Tiger Ireland. In this way it presents a contemporary Irish spin on the medical drama, ensuring its local ratings, by appropriating conventional characterisation and plot approaches familiar to American productions. However, where it deviates most from its US counterparts, connecting more to British drama, is in its total absence of irony and its traditional and conservative visual style. It could be argued that Michael Crichton’s *ER* changed medical drama forever by introducing multiple storylines, realistic medical jargon and moving cameras. By situating the series in a public hospital, the range and diversity of human experience could now be explored at the level of culture and ethnicity, moving away from broad universal themes. *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Scrubs* have taken the genre in a new aesthetic direction with the emphasis on irony and fun.

The doctors in *The Clinic* represent a combination of forces driving modern Ireland and its current preoccupations: the drive for

success and accumulation of wealth, Cathy Costelloe main shareholder and director of *The Clinic*; a growing emphasis on ‘the body’, Dan Woodhouse, plastic surgeon; an obsession with ‘alternative lifestyles’, Jack Lavery, life coach and Clodagh Delaney, doctor and acupuncturist; the dominance of sport within the public sphere, Keelin Geraghty, physiotherapist. This combination of characters, situated within the milieu of a private clinic alongside the iconography of Celtic Tiger Ireland attempts also to be a vehicle for exploring ‘issues’. While this approach worked well in the morally regressive 1970s and 1980s, whereby *The Riordans* (1965-1979), Ireland’s rural soap opera, facilitated the discussion of such taboo subjects as contraception and marriage-breakdown through *risqué* storylines played out by well-liked characters, *The Clinic*’s attempts to do the same fall short in the absence of a careful balance between serious drama, likeable characters and entertainment. *The Clinic*’s storylines over the four series included alcoholism, depression, brain injury, post-natal depression, malpractice, falsifying qualifications, still-birth, infidelity, sexual harassment and bullying, to name but a few. All worthy issues, current and pertinent to modern-day Ireland, but delivered in the absence of a well-crafted balance of humour and entertainment, sets this series aside from its US counterparts.

Nevertheless, *The Clinic* has garnered a critical and popular following, polling well in the television reviews and achieving high audience ratings (almost 40% of the audience share according to RTE’s own figures), despite the proliferation of alternatives and choice. In the absence of any narrative or aesthetic irony, the real paradox is that *The Clinic* is not only popular but has developed a cult following, albeit on a small scale, among thirty-something Ireland, whereby it is discussed and analysed in the pub, at the dinner party and in the workplace. The point that serious weighty drama is the commercial and critical success of television drama output in the new Ireland despite all outside trends moving in a hipper, slicker direction, suggests that Ireland’s schizophrenic identity and tug between the Boston / Berlin

allegiance is as confused as ever, manifesting itself as a crisis of narrative strategy in contemporary Irish popular culture.

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Busting the Boom: *The Tiger's Tail* (2006) *The Pope's Children*¹

Reviewer: Pat Brereton

Both of these texts attempt to examine the current economic and social landscape of Ireland and present a range of constructed characters to dramatise how the country has been radically transformed from being fixated with the past and memories of poverty and emigration. By foregrounding the newfound wealth and opulence of the capital, both seek to uncover what drives the so-called 'Celtic Tiger', while incorporating various fault-lines, such as the prospect of a property crash or a personal crisis which is initiated by the past coming back to haunt a successful property developer. But while David McWilliams' TV study celebrates the new brashness within the culture, John Boorman's film remains more sombre and pessimistic from the outset.

McWilliams' effectively captures the conspicuous consumption of a new middle class. This newly found self-confidence is encapsulated by the wild generalisations cited at the start of his best selling book:

Ireland has arrived. We are richer than any of us imagined possible ten years ago. No Irish person has to emigrate, none of us need pay for education and even our universities are free. Unemployment is the lowest in our history. We have more choice than ever, the place is more tolerant and no one can be legally discriminated against. We have more cash in our back pockets than almost anyone in Europe. We are better off than 99% of humanity. We are top of foreigners' lists as places to live. Unlike many of our rich neighbours, in survey after survey we claim to be very happy.²

At the same time, while evoking much irony and sarcasm, the well-known Irish economist also captures this new cosmopolitan middle class on television. We meet 'DIY

Declan', 'Low GI Jane', 'Breakfast Roll Man', 'Yummy Mummy' and the 'HiCo's' – the latter being the elite city dwellers far removed from the inhabitants of the growing suburbs, which is characterised by the 'Decklanders'. Mapping the capital's radically changing landscape from the air, McWilliams underscores his thesis with headline grabbing copy, such as 'Irish families are getting smaller but our kitchens are getting bigger', coupled with an assertion that we are witnessing 'the greatest makeover Ireland has ever seen'³. Such tabloid copy is brash and bold echoing the success of TV production companies like Tyrone Productions, who made this series and were harbingers of a Celtic Tiger confidence, having most famously created the Riverdance phenomenon that travelled the world. Surprisingly the big screen has been slower in capturing the excesses of this 'new Ireland' for comic or more serious dramatic effect.

The English director John Boorman, a long-time resident of Co Wicklow, has been a key figure in the Irish film industry, shooting and/or editing many of his films here, including *Deliverance* (1972), *Emerald Forest* (1985) and *Excalibur* (1981) among others.

² David McWilliams. 2006. *The Pope's Children: Ireland's New Elite*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, p. 3.

³ On McWilliams' own website he explains how 'we have been pushed together and lifted up in a sort of Wonderbra economics effect, which has allowed us to display our rather impressive material cleavage'. To patronisingly extend this tabloid analogy and help to make the economic point more explicit, the TV adaptation materialises a blonde model posing in said bra. Within a new 'Lad-culture' environment, it appears that such naked revelations can be positively construed as ironic and therefore inoffensive, which is a long way from the more normative representations of females being manipulated by a predatory and puritanical patriarchal system, or is it? Nonetheless the somewhat radical message of this popular series is that lending institutions have served to artificially inflate the economy by making loans cheap and easily available.

¹ *The Pope's Children*, David McWilliam's best selling book, which gets its title from his classification of a new generation who were born following the Pope's visit to Ireland. The book was translated into a three-part RTE series broadcast on consecutive weeks from November 6th 2006.

Lead actor Brendan Gleeson also starred in the title role of Boorman's successful true-life gangster story centred on notorious Dublin gangster Martin Cahill, *The General* back in 1998. Unfortunately, this latest study of contemporary Irish culture and social politics falls flat by comparison with the director's earlier more accomplished portrait of the underbelly of Ireland.

Primarily, I would suggest, on account of a poorly developed script, which remains a recurring weakness within much Irish cinema. Furthermore, the sometimes preacherly tone of Boorman's social-realist tale does not sit well with the contrasting hyper-realism of the Bacchanalian excesses of Dublin's 'Left Bank' area.

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Liam, played with confident aplomb by Gleeson, is awarded the accolade of 'Developer of the Year' – belying the fact that real-life developers have received a very bad press over the last number of years with corruption charges brought by various public tribunals. He spies his double, (a trope much beloved in cinema history) having first seen him through his car window in a traffic jam, the ubiquitous paradox of Ireland's economic success. To explain this apparition, he has to make a journey of self-knowledge back to his old, pre-Celtic Tiger world, in the Irish countryside. Surprisingly, we see very little of his long suffering wife, played by Kim Cattrall, of *Sex and the City* fame. Her intertextual persona is probably meant to evoke a form of hyper consumerism and predatory sexuality, contrasted with his aged Irish mother who remains more touching and authentic. Asked if he was adopted, his erstwhile mother tells him the truth about how he was reared as her own, after her then 15-year-old daughter secretly gave birth to him in England.

The secret of the other twin requires further investigation from his newly re-discovered mother. Having been first introduced as his sister, Oona (Sinead Cusack) finally admits that Liam has a twin, given up for adoption at birth and hidden from the rest of the family. Even more fantastical, Liam's real life father is revealed to have been the local parish priest. Surprisingly, this revelation gives them both a good laugh, a somewhat strange response by all accounts.

Clerical abuse and the perennial Irish

problem of suicide are juxtaposed through yet another cinematic representation of an Irish priest, played by Ciarán Hinds who also doubles as a social worker and intones how young men taking their own lives has become an epidemic: 'they are our suicide bombers' he explains, in language reminiscent of McWilliams' colourful tabloid rhetoric, but which is more misdirected and offensive. 'They hate this new world we have given them, and this is their only way of fighting back'⁶.

Later Liam's apparent strength of character is fully tested when his own son ends up in the shelter where the priest works, as a suicide victim himself. Played by Gleeson's own real-life son, Brian frequently quotes from Marx about how capitalism has caused so many problems in society. 'Your success Dad means someone else has to suffer'. This is crudely yet dramatically illustrated when Brian ends up on a gurney in an anonymous hospital corridor. The scene dramatically echoes the constant media exposure of this national scandal with such overcrowding testing the patience and endurance of an overworked hospital staff. In a further twist to this blurring of private and public discourse, Brendan Gleeson received praise and admiration following his comments on the appalling treatment his own mother received in the health service, while appearing on the *Late Late Show* to promote the film.

Such pessimism is ostensibly relived by the 'feel good' happy-ending of the film, when Liam brings his son onto his boat to instigate an escape from reality, recalling his own dream as a child. Having seen the light with the help of his twin he simply leaves his wife and his wealthy life-style. Are we supposed to

⁶ A more considered response, yet one which seems to echo Boorman's thesis also is fleshed out by Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling in their essay 'The Happiest Country in the World?' which notes a survey placing Ireland at the top of the 'happy stakes', but goes on to conclude that 'the melancholy spirit of the Celtic Tiger is a consequence of Ireland's collision culture: an experience of accelerated modernisation and the persistence of older social forms, while higher values and metaphysical ideals are destabilised and uncertain ...' [See *Uncertain Ireland: A Sociological Chronicle 2003-4*, ed. Mary Corcoran and Michael Peillon. Dublin: IPA 2006: 40.]

celebrate the possibility of the one-time ruthless capitalist transforming into a benevolent fun-loving socialist? Of course not; like the comic caricatures of McWilliams' economic miracle parable, these are both illustrative examples of a contemporary Irish fable.

Both of these productions reflect a current preoccupation with understanding the Celtic Tiger phenomenon and display an attempt to appreciate the present in light of the past with varying success. The current fixation with consumer wealth, as in Boorman's allegorical tale, masks a form of amnesia towards the traumas and truths of the past. Only by appreciating and understanding the implications and meanings of this – as Gleeson discovers his family – can psychological harmony be achieved. But while *The Tiger's Tale* is overly laboured and unconvincing, *The Pope's Children* is much more effective in capturing the imagination of Irish audiences reflecting the everyday experience of a new generation, using a televisual format which prefers style to substance. McWilliams also exposes topical social issues including obesity and drug abuse and presents the warning signs

of recession, but his narrative is much less concerned with the past and more preoccupied with visualising the cultural reality of the present as it is sustained by economic success. This makes effective television, while Boorman's low production values belie a severely flawed cinematic tale.

Dr Pat Brereton teaches in the School of Communications, Dublin City University.

The Tiger's Tail (2006)

Directed by John Boorman

Script by John Boorman

Principle Cast: Brendan Gleeson, Kim Catrell,
Ciaran Hinds, Sinead Cusack, Sean McGinley

Cinematography by Seamus Deasy

Original Music by: Stephen McKeon

Produced by John Boorman, John Buchanan,
Kieran Corrigan

In Search of The Pope's Children (2006)

(3 eps; screened RTE 1, Oct 25th, Nov. 13th, Nov
20th 2006)

RTE / Tyrone Productions

Written and presented by David McWilliams