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## IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION - 2007

### The Year in Review

Tony Tracy (ed.)

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### Introduction

Tony Tracy, February 2008

2007 will be viewed by future historians as the year the 'Celtic Tiger' finally outstayed its

welcome as a credible description of the Irish economy or mindset. As we make our way into

the palpably bleaker landscape of 2008, the past year will be recalled as another milestone in the redefinition of our cultural identity. Northern Ireland was once again central to this interrogation, though in surprising ways. The restoration of the Northern Assembly was a turning point for Nationalist–Unionist relations and many were bemused by the warm relations between the DUP’s First Minister Ian Paisley and Sinn Féin’s Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness (a softening of relations that may have contributed to Paisley’s resignation). It will be some time before there is as dramatic and emotional an expression of Ireland’s renegotiation of its nationalist project as the sight of the Irish rugby team comprehensively defeating England at the highly symbolic Croke Park ground (24 February 2007, IRELAND 43 ENGLAND 13). For many, the resonance of this event was greatly augmented by their ‘experience’ of Bloody Sunday (1920) in Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins*; itself a powerful argument for the importance of a national cinema as an historical tool. While the dignified reception of ‘God Save the Queen’ signalled a kind of ‘late-nationalist’ maturity in our relations with Britain that many felt proud of, the decision by the former state airline Aer Lingus to abandon its Shannon-Heathrow route in favour of Belfast-Heathrow tested geographical conceptions of the nation and provoked a vociferous response revolving around the meanings and obligations of the ‘national carrier’, and in particular the state’s responsibility to the west of Ireland (a long-time locus of imaginative investment in Irish identity) in an era of ‘Open Skies’. With the revelation that staff on these Belfast-London flights will not use (for the first time in Aer Lingus’ history) the symbolic *cúpla focal* (‘a few words’ in Irish – usually on landing and take off), the cultural ambitions of Irishness became further diluted from the ambitions of earlier governments in more conservative times. If the symbolism seems overstretched consider that Aer Lingus was the last and first point of contact with the homeland for many thousands of emigrants who left Ireland in the 1980s and then returned in unprecedented numbers in 1990s to become the bedrock of the ‘Tiger economy’. Those *cúpla focal* were often the last and first words of their mother tongue heard as they left

and returned. Ironically, just as these linguistic ties began to loosen, the European Parliament declared Irish an official language in January 2007 meaning that Ireland’s MEPs could address the parliament *as Gaeilge* for the first time; though to date there has been very little use made of this long sought-for recognition.

These events formed part of the backdrop for this year’s film and television. The status of the Irish language within the audiovisual sector displayed equally mixed, and perhaps surprising fortunes. In last year’s edition we noted that Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board (IFB) had just undergone a corporate re-branding exercise and that the Irish title has been demoted in its logo (although it retains its premier status in print), with no trace of anything vaguely Celtic or ‘traditional’ in its public image. This semiotic shift gained cultural traction in 2007 with the decision – criticised in this issue by Gearóid Denvir – by the board not to offer funding to Robert Quinn’s Irish language feature *Cré na Cille*. That decision notwithstanding, Sean Crosson’s overview of developments in Irish language broadcasting contends that there has never been a better year for the language in film and television, albeit in a still limited and piecemeal manner. Elsewhere in our special section on Irish language productions Eithne O’Connell derides the tokenistic and faintly preposterous melange of Irish dialects spoken in *Kings*, but acknowledges that there is some kind of renaissance – or more properly awakening – in this long under-performing sector. In our interview with the Film Board Chief Executive Simon Perry, he speaks of a desire to explicitly encourage and support the work of TG4 and put an end to ‘ghettoising’ Irish language production.

After an extended period of lack-lustre performance, it has been a good year for the IFB overall. A special on Irish film production in trade publication *Variety* in early 2007 signalled a strong sense of a new beginning for the indigenous industry. ‘Simon Perry has brought a fresh attitude to the job’, it reported, quoting Perry, “One thing I set out to do was to revive a feeling of confidence among filmmakers here,” a theme he follows up in greater detail in our interview with a discussion of the challenges facing the Irish audiovisual sector and his vision of how its future might be best approached in the

current conditions.

Key to Perry's revised structures of engagement is a shift of emphasis away from the rather hierarchical and distrustful emphasis on filmmakers raising finance first in the marketplace before receiving public money. Instead, Perry seems to be offering a vote of confidence in Irish film producers, most evident in his long-term funding for 10 indigenous production companies; an unprecedented action.

Such confidence finds – admittedly limited – justification in the talent and indeed general variety and quality of output the Irish industry exhibited over the past year. *Once* – favourably reviewed in these pages last year in advance of its Sundance award and 'breakout' success in the United States (after a pretty poor box-office performance in Ireland), represented the feature film highpoint of the year; which was brought to a 'Hollywood ending' with an Oscar win for Best Song. But there were other reasons to be cheerful. *The Tudors* – Showtime's 10 hr Television drama series on the life of Henry VIII starring Jonathon Rhys Meyers, finished shooting its second series and seems likely to return for a third. The success of the series may seem tangential to an Irish film industry but it has kept significant numbers of Irish crew at work for an extended period ensuring that some of the most talented actors and craft personnel maintain and develop their expertise at the highest international level. Particularly notable is the work of set designer Tom Conroy and costume designer Joan Bergin who was rewarded by her peers with an Emmy Award for Best Costume Design in 2007. Also notable was the continued critical success of the Mark O'Halloran/Lenny Abrahamson partnership which produced the feature film *Garage* (reviewed below by Barry Monahan) and the 4-part TV series *Prosperity* (reviewed by Dìog O'Connell). In Saoirse Ronan – Oscar nominated for her performance in *Atonement* – Ireland has a striking new acting talent. And although not covered in these pages, there is considerable activity and success in the animation sector as well as emerging talent coming through in short film production.

Despite these successes however, there is a strong sense of an industry really struggling to

build and maintain momentum. In this year's review Simon Perry admits as much in his discussion of the 'Catalyst' funding scheme while Roddy Flynn explores *Shrooms* as a watershed instance of where Irish cinema might be heading. Other reviews reveal similar structuring concerns: films which seem to stand on the threshold of the national and international, or more accurately Irish and American, albeit in different ways. Ruth Barton examines the country and western backdrop of *Small Engine Repair*, Debbie Ging examines the gender demarcations of two recent Irish 'chick-flicks' and Maria Pramaggiore explores Neil Jordan's New York-set revenge thriller *The Brave One* as an auteur work terminally compromised by the bureaucracy of Hollywood filmmaking practices. Where such films fit in the seemingly endless debate about definitions of an 'Irish Cinema' has yet to be worked out but this review offers an early opportunity for some interesting thumbnail theories. Martin McLoone's recently published collection of essays are prefaced by an acknowledgement of the centrality of change in contemporary Irish life and a sense of loss. "At a time of change something is lost as well as gained so that changing times are full of excitement and tinged with regret – and so is this book"<sup>1</sup>. As one of the key contributors to discussions of Irish Cinema, McLoone's book – and the films it looks back on – feels like the end of an era. The 1990s seem a long time ago both in the amount of films made and the kind of themes they engaged with. What is perplexing for the commentator on Irish film is that the decade gone felt like the beginning of a national cinema, the emergence of talents, themes and the inevitable – if often clichéd – working out of decades of unprocessed history and stories. Flynn's point, and one which comes up in my interview with Simon Perry, is that the first 10 years of the second film board were something of a golden age: In today's changed economic and media structures, national cinema, like a national airline, is no longer the protected, inward-looking entity it once was.

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1. Martin McLoone, *Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland* (Irish Academic Press, 2008)

At time of going to press, ‘Dustin the Turkey’ was voted (by the Irish public) winner of Eurosong 2008 having beaten five more traditional singers (i.e. flesh, bone, voice) for the honour to represent Ireland at this year’s Eurovision Song Contest in Serbia.<sup>2</sup> This seems both a baffling and entirely apt result. The Eurovision is a key site of emergence for the ‘Celtic Tiger’, when we mesmerised the world, and ourselves, with the interval performance of Riverdance in 1994. The event was held in Dublin and we wanted to show our fellow Europeans that we were a people who could simultaneously inhabit tradition and modernity; shattering their stereotypes even as we reinforced them.

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2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/24/ireland.television?gusrc=rss&feed=worldnews>

In those few exhilarating minutes Irish dancing and Ireland seemed born anew, high-kicking and speed-stepping cultural nationalism into the modern age, invigorating our emerging confidence and, in the pairing of Irish-Americans Jean Butler and Michael Flatley, symbolically closing the circle on the millions of emigrant passages from our shores. This latest ‘song’ for Europe suggests that either Ireland has lost its long inward-looking fascination with its identity and moved to a position of post-modern irony on the international stage, or we’ve lost all sense of self-respect. Either way, the Tiger is now a Turkey.

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### From *Kings* to *Cáca Mílis*: Irish film and television as *Gaeilge* in 2007

Seán Crosson

Without films in Irish all the work done for the language in the schools, on the radio and by voluntary organizations is doomed to ultimate failure no matter how effectively it is done.<sup>1</sup>

When this statement was made in 1950 in a booklet entitled *Films in Irish* published by Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge (The National Conference for the Irish Language), few could have foreseen the developments subsequently in Irish-language filmmaking. While it would not be until the end of the decade that the first feature length film in Irish was made – the Gael Linn produced documentary *Mise Éire* (1959) (and almost twenty years further for the first feature length fiction film in Irish – Bob Quinn’s *Poitín* (1978)) – the past 11 years have seen an impressive increase in the output of Irish language television and filmmaking.

That progress notwithstanding, Irish language film and television has, to say the least, had an uneven and indeed precarious existence for much of the twentieth century. In many ways one can view the different contexts within which the Irish language has been used in various media – from radio though film and television – as reflecting wider policies regarding the use of Irish in Ireland in any given period, policies that met with limited success, evident in the lack of Irish spoken among the majority of Irish people today. Since independence, it has been the state that has been the primary financier of filmmaking in Irish either directly through its use in such government information films as *Gnó Gach Éinne* (*Everybody’s Business*, 1951) or *Na*

*Fiacla Sin Agat* (*Keep Your Teeth*, 1951), or indirectly through the state supports given to Gael Linn, a crucial organisation in promoting the use of Irish in film throughout the 1950s and 1960s, most famously in its feature length documentary *Mise Éire*.

As Jerry White has noted, Irish language films for much of the twentieth century were primarily in the Griersonian documentary mode “a socially orientated, non-commercial model for film, a model that was closely linked to strong government and national unity”.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, it was the filmmaker with arguably the greatest influence on Grierson, Robert Flaherty, who directed the first sound film in Irish. The Irish government, through the Department of Education, sanctioned £200 to make the film *Oíche Sheanchais* (*Night Of Storytelling*, 1935), directed by Flaherty in London while in post-production on *Man of Aran* (1934). It is ironic that it is Flaherty we have to thank for directing this film, as *Man of Aran*, one of the first Irish set films to achieve international fame, is notable for the absence of the Irish language despite the fact that its cast is made up of largely non-English speaking Aran islanders. But such have been the paradoxes that have surrounded the promotion and use of Irish in Ireland over the past century.

2007 has been a year of considerable achievement for film and television in the Irish language, reflected in the recent announcement of the nominations for the Irish Film and Television Awards (IFTAs), with Irish language productions receiving over thirty nominations, including 14 alone for Tom Collins’ *Kings*.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Films in Irish*, anonymous booklet published in 1950 by the Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge quoted in Jerry White, “Translating Ireland back into Éire: Gael Linn and filmmaking in Irish”, *Éire-Ireland*, 38.1/2, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FKX/is\\_1-2\\_38/ai\\_105439608/pg\\_1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FKX/is_1-2_38/ai_105439608/pg_1) (accessed January 10, 2008)

2. Jerry White, “Translating Ireland back into Éire: Gael Linn and filmmaking in Irish”, *Éire-Ireland*, 38.1/2, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FKX/is\\_1-2\\_38/ai\\_105439608/pg\\_1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FKX/is_1-2_38/ai_105439608/pg_1) (accessed January 10, 2008)

While both Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board (IFB) and TG4 continued to support provocative short work and drama, through the Oscailt and Lasair schemes, the release of two critically acclaimed Irish language films – the second being Robert Quinn’s *Cré na Cille* – marks a highpoint of production. A significant development is the level of interest been shown in Irish medium work by the general public, notwithstanding the modest performance of *Kings* at the Irish box office.

Robert Quinn’s adaptation of Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* (*Graveyard Clay*) has proved to be an audience favourite at festivals from Galway to Shanghai. [Reviewed by Gearóid Denvir elsewhere in this edition. Ed]. Set in a graveyard in Connamara, the narrative is structured around often quite confrontational and deprecating dialogues between corpses about the world, relations and neighbours overhead. Quinn is fortunate to have some of the finest Irish language speakers and actors at his disposal including the superb Bríd Ní Neachtain in the lead role of Caitríona Phaidín, ably supported by the entire cast. Yet credit is due to Quinn for the overall convincing manner in which he addresses the central conceit – that is that most of the film’s characters are already dead and speaking from beneath a graveyard in Connamara. Furthermore, there are great comedic moments included from the world above that are well realised. While one Irish language commentator has criticised some of the omissions from the original text,<sup>4</sup> inevitably an adaptation of a work of over 360 pages<sup>5</sup> requires considerable truncation for less than 2 hours of film.

3. Michael Dwyer, “Irish emigrant film receives 14 Ifta nominations”, *Irish Times*, Thursday, January 10, 2008, [http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/ireland/2008/0110/1199313758872\\_pf.html](http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/ireland/2008/0110/1199313758872_pf.html) (accessed January 10, 2008)

4. Éilis Ní Anluain, “Díomá faoi chré mhearai Quinn”, *Irish Times*, Wednesday, Mar 14, 2007, [http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/anteangabheo/2007/0314/1173443115066\\_pf.html](http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/anteangabheo/2007/0314/1173443115066_pf.html) (accessed June 7, 2008).

Yet Ó Cadhain’s works arguably lend themselves more easily than others might to dramatisation, drawing as they do frequently on Irish traditional oral forms like *agallamh beirte* and *lúibíní*. His writing has been adapted successfully previously as stage plays, including Macdara Ó Fátharta’s (who co-wrote with Quinn this year’s cinematic adaptation) stage adaptation of *Cré na Cille*, in which many of the actors in Quinn’s film performed.<sup>6</sup> There is a competitive element to the encounters between characters in Quinn’s adaptation reminiscent of the traditional *lúibíní*, a form of Gaelic song where “two or more performers are set against each other or collaborate together in a bout of semi-spontaneous composition”.<sup>7</sup> The richness of the language comes through in these clashes where one tries to outdo the other in insults – and the viewer is left in no doubt by the end of the richness and variety of insults and coarse words in Irish! Indeed, Quinn’s work is one of the most memorable released in 2007, not least because of the viscerality and richness of the language found in Ó Cadhain’s original and its superb realization by the actors in this production.

While few would have suspected that the much maligned Blasket Island’s writer Peig Sayers would provide material for contemporary drama, Daniel O’Hara has added to his previous successes (including the multi-award winning Irish-language shorts *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* (2003) and *Fluent Dysphasia* (2004)) with the TV comedy mini-series *Paddywhackery* (TG4). The story concerns Paddy Woods, played by Paddy C. Courtney (who co-wrote the series with O’Hara) who on losing his job with Maxicorp, is inspired by the appearance of the ghost of Peig Sayers (Fionnula O’Flanagan) to turn to the Irish language to get the required grants to start his

5. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1949).

6. RTÉ also adapted Ó Cadhain’s short story “An Taoille Tuile” as a TV play in the 1970s.

7. Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha, Stream of Tongues* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002), p. 188.

own business. Aided by Siobhán (Siobhán O’Kelly) – a native speaker from Connamara - he sets out to learn Irish and attempts several projects – including a race night, driving lessons and speed dating *as Gaeilge*, before settling on the translation and production of major musicals in Irish. While the narrative as a whole is somewhat stretched and uneven over the six episodes, there remain moments of real humour and not a little insight into the use of Irish in Ireland today, particularly its dependence on government subsidies. Along the way, O’Hara restores to Peig some of the personality she was renowned for as an extraordinary traditional storyteller rather than the depressing narrator of the eponymous book that became the bane of many a Leaving Certificate Irish student.

While *Paddywhackery* revealed the continuing development of Daniel O’Hara as a writer and director, Declan Recks, award-winning director of *Pure Mule* (2005) [see review in *Estudios Irlandeses*, Issue 2. Ed], was responsible this year for directing one of the finest drama series in any language on Irish television. *The Running Mate* (TG4), co-written by Marcus Fleming, Nicky Murphy and Mark Canton, was one of the most pointed critiques of the Irish political system and the considerable corruption that has damaged public confidence in recent years. It is significant that RTÉ rejected playwright Connor McPherson’s initial idea for the series some years ago, which at that time was to be set in Dublin and produced in English. TG4 has shown since its foundation that it is possible to tackle issues in Irish that other broadcasters have feared to engage with, including featuring the first gay kiss on Irish television, in *Rós na Rún*, TG4’s flagship drama serial, over ten years ago. Ruth Lysaght’s list of subject matter covered in episodes of this serial indicate the willingness of the station to engage with topics mainstream broadcasters have been hesitant to explore: “Exploding petrol pumps, rape, skullduggery, abortion, rural renewal, cot death, drink driving, planning corruption”<sup>8</sup>.

Set in the Kerry Gaeltacht, *The Running Mate* features local politician, Vincent Flynn (Dennis Conway), who has given his political life as a foot-soldier for Fianna Fáil mopping up votes as the running mate for the local corrupt TD, Paudie

Counihan (Eamonn Hunt). Unable to take Counihan’s hypocrisy and condescension any longer, Flynn decides to run as an independent candidate when the government falls, assisted by his campaign manager, the alcoholic ex-schoolteacher, Willie Costello (Don Wycherley). Family crises ensue, including an unwanted pregnancy and rumours of an affair, but through it all *The Running Mate* makes for gripping drama, despite a somewhat predictable and saccharine final episode. The fact that this is a bilingual programme (or “Breac Scannáin” as Fidelma Farley has described much Irish language drama in recent years),<sup>9</sup> that engages in a pointed manner with issues pertinent to contemporary Ireland as a whole, and not just to the Gaeltacht, represents a considerable maturing in Irish-language drama not apparent in earlier periods.

In a seminar at the Huston School of Film in 2005, director Paul Mercier suggested that in the current climate there are primarily three areas in which filmmaking in the Irish language can be made with integrity. These were films set in the past, films set in the future or films that engaged with the challenges of the Irish speaker in Ireland today. Tom Collins’ *Kings*, moves outside such choices to explore another relevant area for engagement – the experience of the Irish speaker abroad. A poignant and at times deeply moving account of a reunion of a group of Connamara natives now living in London, *Kings* effectively utilizes the Irish language to accentuate the marginalized positions of the characters depicted, all of whom left Ireland in the 1970s with high hopes of success in London [see Eithne O’Connell’s review of *Kings* in this issue. Ed].

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8. Ruth Lysaght, “Ar Oscailt-New Openings. Short Films in the Irish Language Since the Advent of TG4”, *The Representation of Ireland/S: Images from Outside and from Within*, ed. by Rosa González (Barcelona: PPU, 2003), p. 147.

9. Fidelma Farley, “Breac Scannáin/Speckled Films: Genre and Irish-language Filmmaking”, *Genre And Cinema: Ireland And Transnationalism*, Brian McIlroy (ed.) (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2007), pp. 163-176.

As was the case for many emigrants, few of these hopes were realised and while Joe Mullan (Colm Meaney) has managed to find some success with his own construction industry, Jap (Donal O’Kelly) and Git (Brendan Conroy) have been less fortunate. Unemployed, poor and living in dreadful conditions, they try to come to terms with their past and present while unsure, as in the case of their friend Jackie (Seán Ó Tarpaigh) who took his life, that there can be a future. One might ask what the purpose of Irish could be here, particularly when Jimmy Murphy’s play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2001) on which the film is based was produced entirely in English. Yet the use of the Irish language is not merely for colour or exoticism – it is a further level and element in the drama that depicts the struggles of each character, whether successful or not, to come to terms with their own existence, often on the margins of a foreign society.

*Kings* was the first primarily Irish-language drama to get a general release at the Irish box office in Ireland and also the first to be entered by the Irish Film and Television Academy in the ‘Best Foreign Language Film’ category for the Oscars. Though it failed to receive a nomination, nonetheless it has attained a North American theatrical deal with BFS Entertainment where its moving narrative, strong performances and the growing interest in the Irish language among the Irish-American community may help it find a significant audience.

It would be wrong, despite the considerable achievements this year, to ignore the formidable challenges that still exist. It was remarked to me by one of those involved in the production of *Cré na Cille*, for example, that if it had not been made this year, it would have been increasingly difficult for the work ever to have been successfully adapted as fluent speakers of the richly textured and complex Irish found in Ó Cadhain’s masterpiece become more difficult to find. Despite the success of Irish medium education (or Gaelscoileanna) in recent years, and the growing numbers of Irish people who claim to be able to speak the language,<sup>10</sup> one of the ironies of the developments in Irish language film and television is that it is happening at a

time when the language itself continues to decline in the primarily Irish speaking, or Gaeltacht, areas. A detailed report – *Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht (The Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht)* – published in October 2007 suggested that Irish may well fail to exist as a community language within 20 years if the decline in the use of the language, particularly among young people, in Gaeltacht areas is not arrested.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the future of funding for Irish language productions is far from clear. In October 2007, Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board announced the discontinuation of the Oscailt scheme (responsible for funding almost thirty shorts in Irish since its inception in 1998) ostensibly because of concerns over the “ghettoisation” of Irish language shorts.<sup>12</sup> While the Board also indicated that all five shorts schemes – Frameworks, Virtual Cinema, Reality Bites, Short Shorts and Signatures – will now be open to Irish language submissions, the failure of the Board to fund *Cré na Cille* does not inspire confidence in its commitment to productions in Irish. It is also unclear whether the *Ciste Craoltóireachta Gaeilge* (Irish Language Broadcast Fund) in Northern Ireland will continue beyond 2009 as the current DUP

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10. According to the most recent census figures there are more Irish speakers in Ireland today – 1, 656, 790 – than at any time since independence. However, it should be noted that these figures do not equate with fluency in the language, and are more representative of knowledge, or at least a sense of good-will towards it.

[See <http://beyond2020.cso.ie/Census/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=10380> for more information on Irish speakers today.]

11. Acadamh Na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, Ollscoil Na hÉireann, Gaillimh, *Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht* (2007), 1. 356. Seán Tadhg Ó Gairbhí agus Áine Ní Chiaráin, “Droim láimhe do phríomhmholadh”, *Foinse*, Dé Sathairn, 2 Samhain, 2007, 1. 1.

12. Niamh Creely, “Schemers”, *Film Ireland*, 119 (November/December 2007): 16.

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Edwin Poots, has yet to announce any further funding and there are strong indications that no such funding may be forthcoming.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless there are hopeful signs, including the doubling of the funding (to €20,000) available under the Filmbase/TG4 *Lasair* scheme, through which some of the most successful recent work in Irish was produced, including *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom*. In addition, there are indications that Irish is becoming more integrated into the mainstream media. The title of this article derives from one of the most quoted recent advertisements on Irish television. Though primarily in Irish, it wasn't just found on TG4, but rather featured in a popular advertisement for Danish beer, Carlsberg, carried on all Irish mainstream and cable channels, and in Irish cinemas in late 2007.<sup>14</sup>

While a skit on the use of the Irish language by many Irish people, often used more on trips abroad than in Ireland itself, the advertisement reflected the continuing growth in the use of Irish in the mainstream media and in film over the past ten years. While Irish speakers may rightly lament the nonsensical content, with the

words and phrases used more a commentary on the limited knowledge of the language by the speaker than noteworthy in themselves, the fact that Irish was featured at all is significant. As Colm Ó Laoghaire, director of Gael Linn's Amharc Éireann series, remarked in 1957 '[the newsreel's] primary purpose is to encourage the public to accept Irish in the cinema as something normal and everyday (no more: not even to teach a few words)'.<sup>15</sup>

The use of Irish in this commercial, as well as other recent advertisements for Tayto crisps and Chef sauce, and the growth of the Irish language film and television sector, may just help contribute to its normalization in everyday life.

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13. Conubhar Ó Liatháin, "Post na náire faoi Chiste" *Lá Nua*, Dé Céadaoin, 23 Eanáir, 2008, l. 1.

14. The commercial is available to view on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTNBmFveq2U>

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15. Quoted in Harvey O'Brien, *The Real Ireland : the evolution of Ireland in documentary film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 335.

*Cré na Cille* (2007)

Reviewed by Gearóid Denvir

Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1906-1970), the Irish language writer from the Connemara Gaeltacht, was one of the dominant literary and intellectual personalities of his time in Ireland. Had he written in English, or had he translated his work, he would certainly be spoken of today in the same terms as Yeats, Joyce, Synge, Friel, Heaney and other canonical Irish writers in English. As is obvious from all his published work, both creative and discursive, Ó Cadhain's Gaeltacht origins deeply influenced his philosophy of life and worldview. His Connemara was no land of fairytale and legend, no Tír na nÓg, no place where comely maidens and sturdy youths dance at the crossroads. His novel *Cré na Cille*, published in 1949, is significantly more modernist in tone and outlook than his earlier traditionalist work. Situated in his own 'local organic community' it announced the arrival of Ó Cadhain as a major writer whose work would be read and discussed as long as literature in Irish continues to exist.

The narrative of *Cré na Cille* is shaped by an audaciously original conceit; a series of monologues, dialogues and conversations amongst the underground 'un-dead' of a Connemara graveyard including the newly-buried Caitríona Pháidín. As various new corpses arrive, the story unfolds of Caitríona's lifelong hatred of, and bitter conflict with her sister Neil, and of her unending, and ultimately futile, battle to outdo her.

The book is an acerbic, satiric and darkly comic depiction of some of the rather less pleasant side of human nature told with earthy, Rabelaisian humour. Ó Cadhain's portrayal of Caitríona Pháidín runs contrary to the idealised construct of Irish womanhood common to his time and his vision of society is greatly removed from the image of rural Ireland that emerges from the work of most of the traditionalist Irish-language writers of his time. It has more in common with the work of writers like John B. Keane (notably in *The Field*) and Patrick Kavanagh (whose *Tarry*

*Flynn Ó Cadhain* reviewed favourably in 1949, the same year *Cré na Cille* was published).

Since its publication, *Cré na Cille* has succeeded in crossing the borders of literary and artistic *genre* and its popularity has not been confined to the written word. The spoken medium was most apposite, especially in the light of the novel's roots in the oral tradition. As with the manuscript tradition in earlier times in Ireland, the book was read aloud in many houses in the Connemara and Aran Gaeltacht after its publication in 1949 and Raidió na Gaeltachta broadcast it as a very successful serial drama in 1973 (recently re-issued in CD form by Cló Iar-Chonnachta). A stage version was produced in 2002 and 2006 by Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, both of which sold out—an unusual occurrence for an Irish language play. The Kerry artist Pádraig Ó Mathúna has also painted a series of haunting pictures which recreate vividly the atmosphere of the graveyard and depict eerily its ghostlike inhabitants and which can be viewed in Áras na Gaeilge at NUI, Galway. And now, finally, Robert Quinn has brought this most verbal of works to the screen.

Ó Cadhain's greatest success in the novel is perhaps the richness and scope of the language of the book which, while based on what he calls the 'earthy, racy, polished' speech of his own dialect, is far removed from what earlier writers called the 'speech of the people' in a literary context. All that the inhabitants of the graveyard have at their disposal is their speech; the power of the spoken word as a means of both self-revelation and self-protection. Moreover, much of what they have to say is but talk for talk's sake, as if they are constructing a wall of words around themselves as a form of protection against loneliness and aloneness. All the characters return to the same issues and statements again and again throughout the novel: Caitríona talks constantly of Neil and of her own desire for a cross of island greenstone to mark her grave; An Máistir Mór, the local school-

master, talks of nothing else but his young widow's betrayal of him when she married the local postman, Bileacha an Phosta; Nóra Sheáinín, the uneducated mother of the wife of Caitríona's son, babbles continually about matters of culture and literature.

This use of language is a fundamental part of the comic and satiric import of the novel (successfully transported to the film, as we shall see) and is grounded firmly in the Irish comic tradition from earlier texts such as *Fled Bricreann*, *Aisling Meic Conglinne*, *Parlaimint Clainne Tomáis*, down as far as *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, the comic Rabelaisian court poem by Brian Merriman in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and on into Ó Cadhain's inherited oral tradition in the Connemara Gaeltacht.

The musicality of the language, the accumulated power of the words themselves, and the bombastic, argumentative style of the novel (again successfully recreated in the film) carry the narrative forward as if in a headlong rush. There is no need to understand every word in the strictly semantic sense as the language also functions at what might be called the level of sound symbolism. *Cré na Cille* does not seek to convince the reader/listener/viewer on an intellectual or conceptual level. Its import is on an emotional, primordial, mantraic, almost sublingual level, as with music, for example, or incantation. The power of language and argument overcomes any reasoned or reasonable approach in an almost ceremonial manner, particularly when the likes of Caitríona or An Máistir Mór let loose with a vituperative tirade of personalized abuse.

The film adaptation of *Cré na Cille* was produced by ROSG, a Connemara based production company, and directed by Robert Quinn, son of filmmaker Bob Quinn. The film was shot in 2006 as one of a series of events to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ó Cadhain's birth. In early 2007 it made the final 16 (from among hundreds of entries) at the Shanghai International Festival and was shortlisted for the Best Feature Award at the Magners Irish Film Festival in Boston. It was broadcast nationally on TG4 on St. Stephen's Day 2007 and is scheduled to be screened at festivals in Montreal and Tokyo in 2008.

The film version of *Cré na Cille* is far removed from the inane, homogenised mid-Atlantic idiom of much of latter-day Irish cinema and even further from the quasi-Syngian view of rural Ireland with its folksy, stage-Irish kitchen drama. Given its subject matter, the film could easily have descended into some unreconstructed Kiltartan, a read on the world at a considerable remove from the worldview of Ó Cadhain's original novel and most of his other works. Despite the fact that the opening wake scene, with its merry fiddlers and *de rigueur* rendition of the classic 'Amhrán Mhuínse' flies somewhat close to that particular wind (in a manner redolent of scenes from the film version of *The Field*), Robert Quinn's sure-handed direction ensures that *Cré na Cille* does not meet Kiltartan.

The script, by Mac Dara Ó Fatharta (who also adapted the novel for the stage) and Quinn, was developed in a manner faithful to the aims and scope of the original novel and reworked successfully to enable the transfer from the written/oral to the visual/oral. The film has, of necessity, lost some fundamental elements of the original: the mysterious god-like voice of Stoc na Cille does not feature; the background choir of voices is not heard commenting on the affairs of the graveyard; and the versified parts of the original are not included. However, the film remains true in the main to the original storyline and overall message of the novel, while at the same time successfully making the *genre* leap from page to screen to produce what is undoubtedly one of the best – perhaps even **the** best – film ever made in the Irish language.

This was no easy cinematic challenge - to translate what is essentially a drama for voice into a visual medium. The well-known writer and critic, Alan Titley, stated in jest in 1981 that it would take a very creative Swedish director to produce a film of *Cré na Cille*. Lo and behold, we now have a full-length 94 minute feature film based on the novel – and not a Swedish director in sight! Much of the credit for the significant artistic success of the film must go to Robert Quinn – indeed, it would be difficult to imagine another Irish director who could bring to the project the same cinematic creativity and intuitive understanding of the work of Máirtín Ó Cadhain and the world from which it grew. The

principle difference between the novel and the film is the introduction of scenes from the real world above ground. In the novel these incidents are recounted by characters during monologues or conversations with other corpses in the graveyard. The film visually reconstructs and re-imagines these scenes while at the same time retaining the actual speech of the characters verbatim from the novel, thus retaining the linguistic authenticity of the original. The opening scene, the death and wake of Caitríona Pháidín, is one such re-imagined episode and sets the tone and parameters for the remainder of the ‘life’ – as opposed to ‘death’ – scenes.

This re-imagining of these scenes above ground leads directly to one of the most striking creative achievements of the film which is the wonderful contrast of light between the lively, light filled, colour scenes of authentic Connemara life of the 1920s and 1930s, as against the dark, stark, black and white world of the subterranean graveyard. This contrast is further accentuated through the many wide-lens action shots above ground which are constantly juxtaposed with the close-up, almost portrait-like shots with constrained movement in most of the underground scenes.

Language both as a medium of communication (or lack thereof at times) and of public self-declamation is a fundamental part of the novel *Cré na Cille*. Therefore, it was of the utmost importance that the cast of the film be totally comfortable **with** and **in** the language of the script. Unfortunately, one of the main criticisms of many stage and film productions in Irish over the years has been the lack of a comfortable command of the language among many actors which leads quite often to almost unintelligible utterances on stage and screen, and often to the utter embarrassment and confusion of audiences if not of the actors themselves. The film version, however, remains true to the linguistic creativity and richness (some would even say difficulty) of the original novel and bravely does not attempt to make compromises towards language learners or second-language Irish speakers with a non-native language competence. This is no mere tokenistic exercise. It is worth noting, in this context, that the English subtitles are sufficient unto their task without descending into Hiberno-

English. The present reviewer, and I am sure many others among us whose language of first choice is Irish, would hope that a version with optional subtitles might become available when the film is released on DVD.

Robert Quinn and producer Ciarán Ó Cofaigh consciously and successfully avoided this fundamental linguistic pitfall and succeeded in casting the best acting talent available. Without any shadow of a doubt, not to have done so would have scuttled the integrity of the entire project from the outset. Most of the cast of *Cré na Cille* have served long and fruitful apprenticeships both on stage and, in latter years, in the Irish language TV and film sector which has blossomed since the establishment of TG4 (originally TnaG) in 1996. They are all, without a single exception, completely at ease in their acting and linguistic ability to deliver their roles successfully to the highest of standards. Most of the main actors also played in the above-mentioned productions by Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, from which the original concept for the present film version of the novel emerged in the Ó Cadhain commemorative year.

Brid Ní Neachtain is frighteningly unforgettable in the main role of Caitríona Pháidín, as she was in the original stage version. Her darkly comic, cantankerous presence, and in particular her piercing eyes, dominate the film just as Caitríona Pháidín dominated all those around her in her life above ground and in the graveyard. Peadar Lamb as An Máistir Mór also delivers a virtuoso performance — his ritualistic, incantatory declamation against his wife when he discovers that she has married Bileachaí an Phosta (Seán Ó Coisdealbha) is a particular *tour de force* similar to a poetic malediction from older times, just as Ó Cadhain himself intended. Mac Dara Ó Fatharta (Beairtle Chois Dubh), Joe Steve Ó Neachtain (Tom Rua) and Diarmuid Mac an Adhastair (Tomás Taobh Istigh) also deliver strong, convincing performances, particularly in bringing the comic element in the film to the fore. Moreover, all of the “minor” or walk-on characters (such as the un-named gravedigger and the keen-woman, Bid Shorcha) are perceptively cast and provide the small, authentic, background detail which underpins and validates the entire film.

*Cré na Cille* was delivered on an incredibly low budget of €1.1 million. The project was co-funded by TG4 and the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland with support from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Shamefully, Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board refused to support the project at any stage despite its obvious artistic and cultural significance and the track record of its participants — an indictment, perhaps, of the Anglo-centric or mid-Atlantic philosophy that drives that same august body! Ó Cadhain's novel grew out of an inherited, communal, oral tradition allied to his own firm grounding in and understanding of modern literature and thought. With the demise of reading, or what might be termed the death of the book in a digital society, in particular in the case of lesser-used or minority languages such as Irish, *Cré na Cille* has now been in a sense returned to its roots, albeit through the convoluted post-modern process of re-mediation through the medium of film. If Ó Cadhain is not being read, he shall at least be heard and seen! He himself would, I believe, be content, as would the ethereal Stoc na Cille who proclaimed constantly throughout the novel, 'Éistear le mo ghlór! Caithfear éisteacht!', 'Listen to my voice! You must listen!'

***Cré na Cille*** (Irl, 2007)

Director/Stiúrthóir: Robert Quinn

Producer/Léiritheoir: Ciarán Ó Cofaigh

Writers/Scribhneoirí: Macdara Ó Fatharta, Robert Quinn

Cast/Cliar: Bríd Ní Neachtain, Peadar Lamb, Macdara Ó Fatharta, Máire Ní Mháille, Joe Steve Ó Neachtain, Diarmuid Mac an Adhastair, Máire Uí Dhroighneáin, Tom Sailí Ó Flaithearta, Peadar Ó Treasaigh, Máirín Uí Neachtain, Darach Ó Dubháin, Seán Ó Coisdealbha.

Director of Photography/Stiúrthóir Grianghrafadóireachta: Tim Fleming

Designer/Dearthóir: Dara McGee

Music Composer and Arranger/Ceol cumtha agus cóirithe ag: Jim Lockhart

**Gearóid Denvir** is a Professor of Modern Irish at Scoil na Gaeilge, NUI Galway, where he is head of school. He has published many articles and books on various aspects of Irish literature and culture. His books include *Aistí Phódraic Uí Chonaire* (1978), *Cadhan Aonair: Saothar Liteartha Mháirtín Uí Chadhain* (1987), *Amhráin Choilm de Bhailís* (1996), *Litríocht agus Pobal* (1997) and *Rogha an Chéid* (2000).

**The Kings' Irish: Dialogue, Dialect and Subtitles in *Kings* (2007)**

Eithne O'Connell

*Kings*, the Newgrange Picture/Greenpark Films co-production adapted from Jimmy Murphy's play, *The Kings of the Kilburn Highroad* (2000), scripted and directed by Tom Collins enjoyed many nominations, international showings and awards in the months following its release in September 2007.<sup>1</sup> Based closely on Jimmy Murphy's acclaimed play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2000), the film is a searingly realistic portrayal of a boozy reunion of five Connemara men in Kilburn, London for the funeral of their friend, who has been killed on the tracks of the London Underground. The six of them had left Ireland together in the 1970s to work 'on the buildings' in London, but over the course of the subsequent thirty years they went their separate ways. The tragic end met by Jackie (Seán Ó Tárpaigh), brings them together again at his wake and forces them to face their respective demons, however briefly and inconclusively.

Joe Mullan (Colm Meaney), the most successful of them, has done well for himself and is now running his own building company. But he has a cocaine problem and a certain sense of having let Jackie down at a critically important time. Git O'Donnell (Brendan Conroy) and Jap Kavanagh (Donal O'Kelly) are more or less hopeless, unemployed alcoholics, who would be failures if they were to return home and are

almost destitute in London. Máirtín Rodgers (Barry Barnes) has a wife and home but will have used up his last chance to save his marriage if he hits the bottle one more time with his mates. The only one in a stable enough position to actually organise the funeral and take care of Jackie's father when he comes over from Ireland to bring the coffin home, is Shay Ó Meallaigh (Donncha Crowley), a married man with family and a successful London greengrocery business. Decent and steady through he is, he also knows that his decision years ago to fire Jackie may have set his once-time friend on his ultimately fatal downward spiral. All the issues raised and hinted at are played out, one way or another, during the wake which is held in the snug of the pub they used to frequent together as young lads, recently arrived from Ireland, with all their lives ahead of them.

*Kings* is the story of a closely knit bunch of Irish emigrants, people who grew up together and are possibly all even from the same parish, if not townland or village. They know each other and each other's seed, breed and generation intimately. Before they set out on their great adventure to England, they knew exactly who they were: local lads and sporting heroes. Now in England, the early identity they shaped for themselves in Ireland means little or nothing. They are marked out in London by their minority status: unskilled immigrants – Paddies – and Irish-speaking Paddies, at that. The story of dashed hopes and human failure which the film tells, rings true and is deeply, depressingly, moving. It is a story Ireland has been in no great hurry to tell. Like all good art, the film is both local and universal in its appeal and succeeds in conveying many of the challenges central to the experience of migrants the world over. For this reason, although it is ostensibly a film about Ireland's past, *Kings* is also very much a film about our present and our future.

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*Kings* premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh July 13th 2007 before going on to screen at Copenhagen Film Festival, Toronto Film Festival and Taormina Film Festival in Sicily. It won Best Cinematography - Hamptons Film Festival 2007 and 2007 Directors Guild of America/ Directors Guild of Ireland New Finders Award. In 2008 it was selected as Ireland's Official Entry for the Oscars in the category of Best Foreign Film. It also received 14 IFTA nominations for 2008.

It is in this context that the decision to film mainly in Irish, and to use the issue of language as a particular marker of identity, a marker of both inclusion and exclusion, needs to be examined. Clearly, since the film was funded by Northern Ireland Screen, Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board, the Broadcast Commission of Ireland and TG4, there was some linguistic novelty value in using Irish rather than English for the main dialogue. And having the main players speak Irish, a minority language even in its own country, was a useful way to emphasise the marginalised status of the characters in the great metropolis of London.

The main characters are all presented as having come to England from south Connemara. This is never stated explicitly by anyone but rather is signalled visually by means of grainy flashbacks featuring Galway Hooker races along the western seaboard, and aurally by means of the crowds cheering the boatmen along in distinctive Connemara Irish. Given this cultural background, the premise that this bunch of lads would use Irish amongst themselves and when attending a wake for one of their own in London is entirely credible and in no way contrived. Thus there is nothing gimmicky about the decision to tell this story through Irish and this move towards linguistic authenticity in Irish cinema is novel and refreshing. The linguistic enactment of this decision, however, is more problematic.

Of course, the fact that this story is told in the first instance through Irish will to an extent be lost on huge sections of its potential audience. The majority of people who will see this film, whether in Ireland or abroad, and whether they know no Irish or very little, will probably only register the Irish language used in most of the dialogue as a kind of background linguistic wallpaper. For many of them, Irish will be experienced in much the same way as the original language of a French, German or Spanish film. Such viewers will rely heavily on the English subtitles provided and the film will more or less become either a 'foreign' subtitled film or an English-language film for them. Cinema goers with school Irish will probably be pleasantly surprised to note that they actually

recognise and can understand the odd phrase here and there but are also likely, like those with no Irish, to lean heavily on the prop provided by the English subtitles.

It is interesting to note that even officially, there seems to be a little confusion as to the linguistic character of the film. It has been described in many reviews as an Irish-language film and occasionally, and more accurately as bilingual. But it is listed on the UCI website as English-language and in the accompanying IFCO Consumer Advice the use of Irish is not even mentioned although punters are alerted to 'strong language and infrequent moderate/mild sexual references'.

Irish in *Kings*, where it functions as 'foreign language' wallpaper for those audiences who do not understand it, is a bit like the Bengali in Mira Nair's film *The Namesake*, i.e. less a mode of communication and more a linguistic marker of difference/otherness. This marker works well for its Anglophone audiences who do not know their (eastern Indian) Bengali from their (western Indian) Gujarati or Punjabi. However, for those who can tell the difference, it has been quite unsettling to have to listen to Indian actors with poor Bengali trying to pass themselves off as native speakers from Calcutta when their intonation and delivery show that they are clearly from a different part of the subcontinent. It also sends the clear message that the film was not made with them in mind.

Similarly, in *Kings*, while the premise that these characters really are Irish speakers from Connemara is important to their identity and marginalisation, it is hard for any Irish speaker to suspend disbelief on the basis of language. It seems as if the filmmakers wanted to make the film in Irish but did not pay much attention to what sort of Irish was used and did not attach much importance to linguistic authenticity and regional variations. The varieties of the language as spoken today by native speakers are identified as broadly belonging to either the Ulster, Connacht or Munster dialects. Each dialect has certain distinctive features and there are various further regional variations within each of the main dialects. The only credible Irish for the lads in the film to speak are versions of Connacht

Irish broadly covered by the term Connemara Irish (Gaeilge Chonamara). This is the dialect most commonly heard on TG4 and is the anchor dialect on that station's leading soap opera *Ros na Rún*. But some of the supposed Gaeilge Chonamara spoken in *Kings* is a travesty of that dialect and its lack of authenticity is disconcerting for an (admittedly small) section of the potential audience that knows Irish well and is going to the cinema to see a film which tells a story convincingly through that medium.

Three of the actors Crowley, Ó Tarpaigh and Ó Treasaigh, who play Shay, Jackie and Jackie's elderly father respectively, are fluent, convincing exponents of Connemara Irish. They are 'the real McCoy', and Diarmuid de Faoite, who plays the Scottish (English-speaking) on-site foreman would also have been well able to deliver the linguistic goods, had he been called upon. It seems strange not to draw on an actor of his calibre, experience and linguistic competence in a film where the linguistic medium is part of the message- at least for a small but important section of the potential audience. O'Kelly tries in a patchy, though informed way to reproduce Gaeilge Chonamara, but it sounds more like mimicry than imitation. Perhaps he tries too hard but, to be fair, he really tries. Meaney's Irish in no way hints convincingly at Connemara origins but Meaney is a star of the screen in real life and therefore indispensable to the filmmakers and could plausibly be cast as a 'blow-in' to Connemara for the purposes of the film. Barnes speaks clear, fairly neutral school Irish and Conroy offers 'whatever you're having yourself', i.e. mainly the Irish of a Dub – 'Gaeilge Bhaile Átha Cliath', with some specific Connemara and Munster features thrown in to confuse the issue. The result is that those characters destroy any illusion that they are really part of a gang from Connemara every time they open their mouths. Lest this criticism be read as some ungenerous gripe from a disgruntled Gaelgeoir, readers should try to imagine watching a version of *The Snapper* set in Dublin but starring the likes of Sean Connery, Michael Caine and Billy Connolly – speaking their own distinctive idiolects, with their heavy regional influences – alongside two real Dubliners like Colm Meaney

and Brush Shields. Would it be reasonable to expect the audience (or that section of the audience that knows what Dublin English actually sounds like) to believe for a moment that all the characters are really equally true blue Northside Dubs?

Those who know little or no Irish may deem this criticism unimportant just as most audiences viewing *The Passion of Christ* care little about the variety and standard of the Aramaic spoken by the actors in that film. They place their trust in the standard and quality of the subtitles provided, which is fair and reasonable. But having decided to translate the script of *Kings* into Irish and shoot the film in Irish, it would have been nice to address the problem of authenticity by trying to serve all potential audiences, both major and minor, with equal professionalism. By all means, go ahead and provide English subtitles for the majority audience who need them to translate the dialogue. But let that dialogue on which the subtitles are based be what it purports to be, namely a convincing rendition of Connemara Irish delivered by actors fluent in that dialect. After all, there's no shortage of good, proven actors with Connemara Irish after 10 years of TG4.

#### ***Kings* (2007)**

Directed by Tom Collins

Written by Tom Collins (screenplay) Jimmy Murphy (play)

Principal Cast: Colm Meaney, Donal O'Kelly, Donncha Crowley, Brendan Conroy, Barry Barnes, Seán Ó Tarpaigh, Peadar O'Treasaigh

Produced by Tom Collins, Jackie Larkin

**Dr Eithne O'Connell** teaches at the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University. She is author of many articles on teaching the Irish languages and Translation Studies and the monograph *Minority Language Dubbing for Children*, (Peter Lang, 2003).

### Altered Images: *Shrooms* (2007) and Irish Cinema

Roddy Flynn

From a textual perspective *Shrooms* offers limited possibilities for analysis. It is a genre film, and a banal one at that even if efficiently constructed. It follows a more or less entirely American cast oversexed youths (an anonymous crew of graduates from US television drama that – piquantly – features John Huston’s grandson Jack) who travel (“trip”) to a forest park somewhere in Southern Ireland to take magic mushrooms. They are chaperoned by slumming gentry: Jake (Huston) who primes them for consuming the fungi with stories of a now-derelict industrial school and the psychotic cleric who used to run it. Under the influence of the ‘shrooms’ and increasingly unable to distinguish reality from imagination, the ‘trippers’ become convinced that they are being watched by the deranged spirit of the cleric and – as the genre demands - meet their grisly ends one by one.

If pressed, one could possibly construct a hypothesis on the manner in which the script mobilizes the spectre of industrial schools – now universally understood (in Ireland, at any rate) – as sites of irredeemable evil for thousands of young men and women. To do so however would not merely credit the script with depths that are entirely absent but would crucially miss the point that *Shrooms* seems expressly designed to evade any local references that might confuse overseas audiences.

Thus, *Shrooms* is interesting for what it suggests about the current direction of Irish cinema. For all the critical success of *Once* and *Garage*, 2007 was not a good year for the indigenous industry. This was most overtly signaled by the February 2008 Irish Film and Television Awards which included *Becoming Jane*, in the nominations for Best Irish Film. This despite the fact that *Becoming Jane* is a film about Jane Austen, is set in England, features leading cast members exclusively drawn from

the UK and US cast, an English writer and director and was largely crewed by UK Heads of Departments.<sup>1</sup> The sole basis for that film’s inclusion amongst the nominees was that it was shot here and was part-funded by the Irish Film Board (although the bulk of the money came from the BBC and UK Film Council so even finance wasn’t a clincher). The fact that *Shrooms* itself was nominated in the same category gives one some sense of how little there has been to enthuse about.

But *Shrooms* (along with *Becoming Jane*) is indicative of an increasingly pragmatic/cynical/desperate (delete as you consider applicable) outlook not just on the part of Irish filmmakers but also on the part of those institutions which support audiovisual production on the island of Ireland. Both the Irish Film Board and the Northern Ireland Film Commission put funding into the Treasure Films production along with private finance from Nordisk and Ingenious Media.

Irish filmmakers are by no means alone in embracing this orientation: after four decades of work at the heart of the German film industry, 2007 saw Werner Herzog make his first Hollywood-financed film albeit the Christian Bale-starring *Rescue Dawn* was a fictionalized version of his earlier German documentary *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. Similarly by the time you read this Michael Haneke – whose career to date has seemed like a lengthy critique of mainstream (i.e. Hollywood) cinema – will see his shot-by-shot US remake of his 1997 film *Funny Games* arrive at your local multiplex courtesy of Warner Brothers. Since the 1920s Hollywood has deliberately hoovered up talent from other national film industries in a bid to add a touch of

1. In fairness Eimear Ni Mhaoldomhnaigh did look after the costumes but Consolata Boyle’s work on *The Queen* didn’t make that film Irish.

the exotic to the marketing of output. And, to draw an analogy from physics, Hollywood remains a cinematic singularity today: light striking celluloid cannot escape its pull.

Indeed, one doesn't need to be directly employed by a Hollywood major to see this influence at work. When Jim Sheridan accounts for the success of *My Left Foot* in terms of its being a universal story, one can't help suspecting that he was really describing it as a story that – happily for Sheridan's subsequent career – could “play” in front of US audiences. This has been the holy grail for Irish filmmakers since: finding the universal story that is at once local (i.e. culturally specific) yet which can appeal to international (for which read “American”) audiences.

The other option is to make a film which is only incidentally local but which is primarily directed to overseas markets: *The Nephew*, *The Matchmaker* and *The Closer You Get* spring to mind. However, these were basically US projects to begin with. But *Shrooms* marks the most comprehensive eschewing of all cultural specificity yet seen in a domestically originated project.

This is evident in the fact that it is impossible to discuss *Shrooms* without referring to “genre”. Nods to other examples are pretty much overtly acknowledged: intertextual references to *Blair Witch* and *Deliverance* come thick and fast. Of course genre is usually considered a nasty word in any discussion of national cinema (as if national cinemas didn't of themselves constitute genres). And certainly, much of the negative response from Irish critics was predicated on the assumption that genre was something that Irish filmmakers shouldn't get involved with. Nonetheless there is clear evidence that *Shrooms* is but the latest in the emerging sub-genre that is Irish horror. Some examples of these have been given a decidedly local inflection: the hurley-wielding zombie killers of *Dead Meat* for example. Others less so: *Boy Eats Girl* clearly targeted (but largely missed) the international market whilst the five leads in last year's *Isolation* came from four different countries. The predilection for such films seems to reflect a

sense amongst that subset of Irish filmmakers who I suspect self-identify as “pragmatic” that, given the budget levels available to small European film industries, survival in the international cinema market may require them to work within the confines of genre.

Such thinking is certainly supported by the *Shrooms*' relatively wide local release: 37 screens in the Republic of Ireland and a further 199 in the UK, taking nearly \$2 million (US) across the two territories in the first three weeks of its release, a performance comparable with the likes of Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* and Sarah Gavron's adaptation of *Brick Lane*. Admittedly it has been less successful in the US where, at time of writing, it has been on release for two weeks, on a mere 4 screens. Based on the disappointing returns from even those few screens it reached, it seems unlikely that US theatrical rights holder Magnolia Films will seek to broaden the release.

Nonetheless the commercial wisdom of such filmmaking remains undeniable. Sales agent Capitol Films picked up worldwide distribution rights for *Shrooms* in February 2006, a month before shooting began – indicative of its genre appeal. The film has also travelled in a way few Irish films have (at least without MEDIA/Eurimage assistance). Even aside from the fact that the film received any kind of US release (a dispiritingly rare event for the vast majority of Irish films), Capitol almost immediately sold all Spanish rights to Spanish producer-distributor DePlanta in 2006 and in Feb 2007, Swiss distributor Ascot Elite picked up rights for all German Territories. Indeed the real market for genre work like *Shrooms* is less likely to be the cinema and more that identified in European and Irish audiovisual policy documents as a basis for developing local film industries since the early 1990s: the burgeoning cable and satellite television markets which voraciously consume low-cost content. In a manner similar to other Irish genre pieces like thriller *Dead Bodies*, *Shrooms* is custom-built for the kind of sci-fi/fantasy/horror channels long characteristic of the US cable market and now increasingly prevalent on this side of the Atlantic.

As such, *Shrooms* prompts a consideration of what a putative indigenous cinema hoped for in the early 1990s - before the Irish Film Board was re-established and Section 481 was altered to allow more investors to avail of it. If one cuts through the verbiage that characterized the *Coopers and Lybrand Report* and indeed the *Film-Makers Ireland* report of 1992, a curious kind of doublethink emerges. That Ireland should become an active producer of 'local' stories rather than a passive consumer of those made overseas was "important". But the nature of that importance was left rather vague, so obvious perhaps that didn't require elaboration. Nonetheless there was clearly an echo of the kind of thinking that informed cultural nationalism in the 1890s. Though separated by their emphasis on Irish and English respectively, Douglas Hyde and W.B. Yeats agreed that if independence was to mean anything more than switching from one administrative structure to another it would require the development of independent modes of thought informed by the creation/rediscovery of a national culture. In the 1990s there was a sense that the headlong rush to embrace economic globalization *should* be counterbalanced by some assertion of cultural specificity. "Should" was not enough, however: the clinching arguments of the Coopers and Lybrand and the FMI reports were the assertions that the liberalization of European broadcasting would create hitherto undreamt of opportunities for content producers and that Ireland needed to 'gear-up' to fulfill the demand. It was the promise of new markets that ultimately underwrote the decision to re-establish the Film Board and adjust Section 481.

In the event those new markets largely failed to materialize: although new cable and satellite channels mushroomed across Europe, for the most part they have relied on cheap content imported from the US, a strategy exemplified locally by TV3 and Channel 6. However, until 2003 this didn't matter. The seemingly endless influx of large-scale international productions indirectly subsidized the production of smaller-scale indigenous films such that it appeared that the audiovisual sector as a whole in Ireland was self-sustaining. Since 2003, however, as

exchange-rate fluctuations saw the incentive for US production companies to shoot in Ireland dwindle to nothing, the indigenous market has been left increasingly exposed to the exigencies of the market. This is at once reflected in a decline in average budgets for indigenous productions (as exemplified by micro-budget output like *Once* and the Film Board's "Catalyst" scheme) but also in the more commercial orientation informing a project like *Shrooms*.

This orientation may be pragmatic (it may in fact be the only way for the industry to survive) but it raises questions about the kind of career paths left open to Irish directors. That the director of *Shrooms* is Paddy Breathnach makes the point in a particularly acute manner. His 1997 collaboration with Conor McPherson on *I Went Down* (which itself followed the warm critical success of *Ailsa* in 1994) was regarded as proof that it was possible to contemplate a career making Irish films. Breathnach was poised for great things: there was talk of first-look deals with Hollywood and Breathnach's follow-up *Blow Dry* featured then A-Listers Josh Hartnett and Rachel Leigh Griffiths. A decade on from *I Went Down* though, Breathnach is back making what, to all intents and purposes, feels like a calling card movie. The Pearse Elliott script is clearly (and cleverly) designed to afford the director/cinematographer/editor triumvirate of Breathnach/Nanu Segal/Dermot Diskin plenty of scope to show off their respective skills without getting bogged down in cumbersome plot exposition. Although this is not a film that could ever conjure the kind of persisting existential dread associated with the most successful horror films, Breathnach *et al* demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the visual aspect of the genre. The inevitably small budget is occasionally reflected in slightly dodgy special effects shots and though the film may lack any popcorn-flying, leap-six-feet-in-the-air-in-a-sitting-position showstoppers, the minor climaxes, coming as they do every 3-4 minutes, are quite sufficient to slake the thirst of all but the most jaded horror aficionados.

Nonetheless the question remains – what is a director of the caliber and experience of Paddy Breathnach doing making a film like this?

Perhaps more pertinently, how will the decision of the Irish Film Board to fund such activity be read by those who have in the past queried the need for such an institution? The Board's response will be that it is unfair to judge it solely on the basis of a single film: and they would be right. However, the Board's own future is not now and has never been secure: it's not so long since a Department of Finance committee seriously recommended simply shutting it down entirely. And funding films which are indistinguishable from teen horror flicks like *Jeepers Creepers* or *Cabin Fever* (i.e. so generic as to be almost entirely devoid of local cultural markers) is grist to the mill of the kind of individuals who question why the Irish state is involved in supporting film production at all.

***Shrooms*** (2007)

Directed by Paddy Breathnach

Written by Pearse Elliott

Principal Cast: Lindsay Haun, Jack Huston, Max Kasch, Maya Hazen, Alice Greczyn

Produced by Robert Walpole, Paddy McDonald  
*et al*

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***Small Engine Repair* (2007)**

Reviewed by Ruth Barton

In the rush to embrace what seems to be a new flowering of Irish art cinema, the film that has proved most resistant to categorisation is debut-feature director, Niall Heery's, 2007 release, *Small Engine Repair*.

With its quirky title and themes of alienation and displacement, *Small Engine Repair* most recalls American 'indie' filmmaking, to which it makes a number of overt references. The narrative concerns a group of men who live in an unidentified Irish locale where the chief economic activity is logging. One of the group, Burley (Stuart Graham), is released from gaol where he did time for a hit-and-run accident that resulted in the death of another of their friends' children. Burley returns to avenge himself on the anonymous tip-off that landed him in gaol and is convinced that it came from within his circle. Doug (Iain Glen) dreams of becoming a Country singer though he is filled with self-doubt and the expectation of failure. Driving a pick-up with the bumper sticker reading HONK IF YOU'RE LONELY! (itself the title of a country song), he seeks less to transcend his situation as to share his experience with other lost souls. Conversations between the men return over and over again to the question of whether they should leave, with the film strongly suggesting that they stay because they are afraid of going.

One of the most disorienting features of *Small Engine Repair* is its lack of any specific indicators as to setting. In fact, Heery filmed in Northern Ireland, as much to take advantage of tax breaks as for narrative considerations and in interview (*Film Ireland*, July/August, 2007, pp. 16-18) the director has said that he intended the setting to be somewhere in the Irish midlands.

Clues to location that might otherwise be gleaned from accent are frustrated by Iain Glen's obtrusive English speech patterns while rising

star, Laurence Kinlan, who plays the mildly rebellious youngster, Tony, delivers his lines as if his character were from Dublin. More than this, the film appropriates much of the iconography of the American mid-West. The men wear lumberjack shirts, drive beat-up cars, live in trailers and meet for social exchanges in a saloon-style bar. Visual references to John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) and Cimino's *The Deerhunter* (1978) further suggest that the film takes place in some psychological in-between space, its boundaries dictated by the men's imagination.

What most interests me about the film is its appropriation of American country (and Western) culture and, specifically, American country music, as a medium for exploring issues of masculine alienation and transgression. In utilising this device, *Small Engine Repair* aligns itself with a number of films that speak similarly of male anomie. I would further like to suggest that the appropriation of this form of American culture is connected to Ireland's own emigration culture and that it comes to substitute for the journey that these male characters will not physically take. While much critical writing has focused on narratives of exodus and arrival, less attention has been paid to those characters who, for one reason or another, failed to emigrate. In film, this condition has often been expressed visually and spatially as much as through straightforward narrative devices. Emigration is the unspoken of these narratives, its existence seeping through in their soundtracks and lurking behind the recurrent iconography of saloon type pubs bearing names such as The Frontier and The Hideout.

The other factor that we need to remember in any discussion of American country music is that its own roots are partially to be found in Irish

music that travelled with the earlier emigrants, so that there is sense of cultural connectedness between the two musical forms that reflects on the cultural connectedness between the two countries.

Think back to that often-overlooked early excursion into indigenous Irish filmmaking, Peter Ormrod's *Eat the Peach* (1986). In an establishing sequence, its two central characters, Vinnie (Stephen Brennan) and Arthur (Eamon Morrissey) head for the pub with their friend, Bunzo (Takashi Kawahara) on hearing that, due to a global economic downturn, their employer, a Japanese industrial plant, is closing down. As they sit in silence nursing their pints, we hear the sounds of Country music on the soundtrack; this is soon revealed to come from the television screen where a group is performing. An edit takes us into the room next door where local performers are playing. Little else needs to be put into words, with the music filling in for the unsaid. If country music offers itself as a vehicle for emotions that are otherwise unspeakable, the same could be very well be said about the articulation of male sentiment in Irish society and it is no coincidence that this scene ends with a fight, the alternative outlet for emotional expression.

The Frontier Bar that provides the setting for much of the film's action is a tribute to rural Ireland's love affair with Country music, with its décor and iconography insisting that this is a little bit of America in the Irish midlands. This substitution of Americana for Irishness further suggests a lack within the home culture, one that can be filled by the more desirable other.

This setting is repeated throughout these narratives. The midlands are the least represented space of the Irish landscape, offering neither the romantic vistas of the West, the degraded colonialism or Celtic Tiger chic of Dublin. They are a liminal space whose in-betweenness reflects the characters' own psychological liminality – being neither here nor there. The film makes much of the emptiness of the boglands, a landscape that equally connotes ancientness and preservation, a layering of history lying beneath the transient everyday.

Soon after the sequence just described, Vinnie

returns to The Frontier where he demands to see his favourite video, *Roustabout* (John Rich 1964), a film that is so familiar to the habitués that Arthur can parrot the dialogue and mimic the actions as they are played out. In this, Elvis Presley plays a stunt rider on a Wall of Death whose main carnival attraction is of course his singing – the accompanying soundtrack album contains 11 Elvis hits. Inspired by the film, Vinnie determines to set up his own Wall of Death in the midlands and it is this that takes up the main action of the film. Of the other ancillary characters, the most important is 'Boots' (Niall Tobin) (so called after his cowboy footwear) who speaks with an American-inflected accent and whose reputation is based on his time in Nashville and his ear for a good country song, attributes that he employs to chat up the bar tender with the promise that he is sure he can get her a recording break. In another plot strand, the local politician, the corrupt Boss Murtagh (Joe Lynch) lives in the epitome of borrowed American popular culture, the once ubiquitous Dynasty-style ranch.

If American country music and the kind of American popular culture represented by Presley movies opens up a promise of escape for the film's central characters, ultimately, Americana will let them down. Boss Murtagh's smuggling venture does not yield the financial promise waved under the noses of the film's gullible protagonists and the Wall of Death is so unstable that the crowd who has assembled on its ramparts rushes to the safety of the ground when Vinnie starts riding his bike around its interior.

At the end of the film, too, Boots confesses he is a fraud, and that he has in fact never been to America. If it is signalled to us that this kind of appropriation is a synthetic replacement for an unidentified and somewhat nebulous Irish authenticity, the film's attitude to the other cultural borrowings is less clearly articulated. Boots' deceit, his lie that he has been to America is widely understood by the community to be just that – a lie and only he attaches any importance to it. That he dreams American dreams is both his saving and his downfall, both panacea and substitute for engaging with 'real life'. Vinnie actively destroys his dream, by setting the Wall

of Death alight. Yet, a final scene reveals the men clustered Vinnie's newest scheme, the design and construction of a home-made helicopter.

There is a sense throughout *Eat the Peach* that the emotional consolations offered by ersatz American culture, false as they are, are not counterpointed by a 'real' Ireland. In *Small Engine Repair*, the same absences structure the film's aesthetic and narrative. For its maker, it is as if Celtic Tiger Ireland had never existed. With the exception of one scene where the main characters drive into the local town, the action is divided between the pub, The Hideout, and Bill's (Steven Mackintosh), the owner of the 'Small Engine Repair' works, home in the woods. Doug is betrayed by his wife early in the film's narrative and moves in with Bill and his son Tony (Kinlan). Just as the lyrics of Country music so often articulate the conventions of the male melodrama, so the film resonates with these tensions, specifically after Burley identifies Doug as the snitch.

Forming a band entitled 'Doug T and the Lonely Boys', Doug finds the medium to express his hurt at his wife's infidelity, composing and performing a song that he plays to resounding applause at The Hideout. So successful is he that he makes it onto the local radio show where he is interviewed as the up and coming name in Country music. Asked why he has chosen this type of music, Doug tells the interviewer, 'it lets you say things that are hard to say'.

By voiding his film of all the conventional indices of Irishness, Heery is able to focus on his exploration of masculinity. What is interesting is that here the music is an enabling device in so far as Doug overcomes his fear of failure and is seen at the film's ending to move, if tentatively, towards a greater sense of purpose. This does not mean, however, rejecting Americana but embracing it.

To conclude, the adoption of American country music and the visual iconography of the American West seem to me to allow for an exploration of male emotions that is otherwise increasingly difficult within postmodern cinema and its attendant ironies. *Small Engine Repair* is not so much a pastiche (of American indie cinema), as a self-conscious borrowing of its iconography that has the further effect of referencing that culture of emigration that for so long underpinned rural Irish life. In this way, Heery's film reconnects with older Irish narratives, allowing for a suggestion that the Celtic Tiger is not the only story in town.

***Small Engine Repair* (2007)**

Directed and Written by Niall Heery

Principal Cast: Iain Glen, Steven Mackintosh and Laurence Kinlan.

Produced by Tristan Orphen-Lynch, Dominic Wright (Subotica Films)

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## Lenny Abrahamson's *Garage*: A Drama of Cinematic Silence

Barry Monahan

It would be empirically impossible to prove the assertion that Irish cinema has traditionally been firmly grounded in the spoken word. In very general terms, the number of literary adaptations, and the background of two of Ireland's most successful directors – Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan – in the novel and theatre respectively are notable, and the loquaciousness of the Irish stage and film character has been a recurring defining trait. Also significant are the adaptations for screen at key moments in the history of Irish cinema of what Colbert Kearney has called “the three most famous laments in Irish literature”.<sup>1</sup> Juno Boyle's renowned supplication in the O'Casey play and Maurya's lament in Synge's *Riders to the Sea* both appeared in the early years of sound cinema, and *Caoinéadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, directed by Bob Quinn in 1975, became an important Irish feature film in its challenging earlier American and English depictions of the country. Against the background of previous Irish films that may be considered verbally intricate or profuse, Lenny Abrahamson's second feature *Garage* offers a gentle silence, a measured rhythm and a hollowed dramatic space.

If the film moguls in the mid-1920s were in any way justified in their expression of doom and fear of the demise of purer cinematic expression with the imminent arrival of sound, many subsequent literary adaptations and occasional examples of verbally cumbersome cinema might have retrospectively confirmed some of their fears.<sup>2</sup> In parallel with this type of

post-talkie cinema there has existed a perennially recurring history of films that facilitate a harmonious visual marriage of cinematic space and the silent cinematic protagonist: each mutually born from, and encapsulated by, the other. *Garage* is a perfect example of this lyrical, visual harmony. We discover its protagonist, Josie, comfortably situated in its landscapes as he is “intended” into the natural setting, like a moment of phenomenological consciousness. Wide shots of open countryside are established before he enters the frame, and often shots linger as he turns to walk away from the camera. His relationship with nature is further marked by association with water, the beats given each time that he looks over the bridge where the bag of puppies has been thrown, and in his connection to the horse. Significantly, all of these moments are associated with his awkward dealing with, or alienation from, society. His ease in the natural context draws attention to his discomfort in the social one, and this is characterised by his clumsy use of language and awkward turn of phrase.

The proliferation of meaningless interjections and the repetition of words and phrases draw attention to, rather than fill, uncomfortable silences. What happens in the relationship between action, landscape and frame is echoed in Mark O'Halloran's script, through the excessive and textured (and ultimately futile) attempts by characters to communicate. This texture is immediately evident in Josie's repetition of the word “now”, each time given a different inflection that invites audiences' engagement with the character without leading them, or using a short-hand stereotyping by the describing minute details of his thoughts and feelings. Other

1. Colbert Kearney, *The Glamour of Grammar: Orality and Politics and the Emergence of Sean O'Casey* (London, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000) p. 90.

2. Scott Eyman *The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the talkie revolution, 1926 – 1930* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997)

repeated utterances serve the same tonal effect: Josie's decision to move "the oils", his reference to the lustful activities of truckers "in the cab", as well as his story of "the eels" which is used awkwardly to avoid the issue of the emotional suffering of Mr. Skerrit (played by Tom Hickey). In a similar way, many of Josie's actions are exaggerated for tonal effect but not practical purpose. Time given to gathering beer cans meticulously only to have them carelessly tossed into the ditch, to carefully winding flex around hand and elbow to have it thrown on the ground in a slapdash manner, and to other minor actions like making tea, arranging biscuits on a plate and going through daily routines, all intensifies the cinematic drama by exaggerating the emptiness and inviting instantaneous spectator engagement with, and consideration of, the character.

The revelation of Josie's solitude and the way in which he is socially ostracised, is handled by a fluctuation of the spectator's perspective and sympathy, in much the same way it was accomplished in Abrahamson's *Adam and Paul* (2004). The suggested social alienation of the heroin addicts in that film is one in which the audience is gently implicated as our attention and empathy oscillates from our perception of Adam and Paul as victims, to one where they are perpetrators of illegal acts or inhumane actions. The regulation of the emotional audience/protagonist connection occurs differently in the case of Josie. In *Garage*, we are positioned sometimes watching in disgust or embarrassment as other characters humiliate or mock him sarcastically, while at other times we are involved in laughing at his simple-mindedness, turn of phrase or uncomfortable demeanour. These shifting perspectives create the sense for the onlooker of a fragmented community of individuals who at times approach certain personal and emotional interaction without ever making the ultimate connection. A series of tangential and unresolved narrative threads provides a diegetic setting for the main plot. Among the most prominent are the suggestion of Breffni and Carmel's fraught relationship and separation, the allusion to Pauline's divorce, and Mr. Skerrit's bereavement. The inference for the future is equally problematic, and while the teenagers seem to represent a socially cohesive

group, gathering for alcohol parties and pairing off romantically, David's position with respect to the gang is hesitantly and awkwardly poised as just as liable to fall on the wrong side of the social set. In an ironic marking of the villagers' failure to function as a healthy community, Josie tells David: "The town looks out for its own, David" and the teenager responds with due doubt "It does, I'd say."

In a recurring blocking and compositional motif the character/audience connection is given prominence over the equivalent character/character relationships. Frequently, conversations are filmed with those in dialogue sitting or standing facing the camera and not each other. In the rare event when characters face each other during exchanges, standard shot/reverse shot is often withheld. Profile compositions are established with strong backlighting that creates a dramatic tension equivalent to moments of awkward or failed communication between characters facing the camera. Notable scenes include the discussions that take place at the pub table, in the evening scenes at the bar, or between Josie and David behind the garage. However, the conversation already mentioned between Josie and Mr. Skerrit on the bench by the lake is one to which Lenny Abrahamson has pointed as pivotal to the thematic and character concerns of the film.<sup>3</sup> As it formally echoes the bench sequence where Adam and Paul encounter the Bulgarian, it reproduces the dramatic tone of a similar climactic moment between Gar Public and S.B. O'Donnell in Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*<sup>4</sup>; a scene intensified by the tragic failure of communication. Inviting the audience to empathise with his characters, and emphasise the disjunction in their relationships, the film's director of photography Peter Robinson shoots these scenes front-on and respecting the temporal and spatial integrity of the moment.

3. Personal interview with the author, 8<sup>th</sup> November, 2007.

4. Brian Friel *Selected Plays of Brian Friel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984) *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* EPISODE THREE, PART II, pp. 94 – 5.

***Garage*** (2007)

Directed by Lenny Abrahamson

Written by Mark O'Halloran

Principal Cast: Pat Shortt, Anne-Marie Duff,  
Conor Ryan

Produced by Element Pictures: Ed Guiney,  
Andrew Lowe

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**Prosperity: Social Realism in the New Millennium**

Reviewed by D og O'Connell

One of the more exploratory and reflective pieces of television drama in recent years was produced and screened in 2007, a four part series entitled *Prosperity*, written by Mark O'Halloran and directed by Lenny Abrahamson who had also collaborated on *Adam & Paul* (2004); *Garage* (2007). What makes this drama particularly interesting is its links back to a tradition of radical drama from the 1960s and 1970s known as Social Realism, evolving in Britain and appropriated by some Irish writers and directors in the nascent days of Irish television. Yet, far from being anachronistic, this turn to this tradition acquires a distinctly contemporary feel in the creator's treatment of narrative and aesthetic.

Social Realism evolved from realism, a term with multiple definitions, but most associated in television drama with 'kitchen sink' drama, soap opera etc. Realism is often inextricably linked with verisimilitude, differing to naturalism by drawing attention to 'truth'. As a concept, realism has a powerful philosophical thrust, relying on an ideological commitment to an objective, external reality – whether of timeless universal abstract notions like 'human nature', or of historical but objective facts like class struggle (Cook, 1990). The status of external reality is privileged over its representation, i.e. we look through the representation for a 'truth' beyond, or else some kind of cultural resonance, significance or explanation. Realism can be then understood as an aesthetic construct dependent upon a set of artistic conventions and forms.

Social Realism developed in British cinema first, and like other political movements in the field of cinema (French New Wave, Italian Neo-realism for example) emerged as a result of critical writings in film journals. Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz argued in the seminal film publication *Sight & Sound* for a new type of

film 'which would discard out-moded artifice in favour of the simplicity and freshness of personal observation of every day reality' (Ibid: 147).

As socialists, these critics/writers pitted themselves against the artificiality of Hollywood and requested a personal poetic observation of reality, giving rise to the documentary forerunner of British Social Realism known as Free Cinema. Like all movements it lasted just as long as it was commercially viable and its formation policy remained in tact – in this case its adherence to realism. The films directed by Lindsey Anderson (*If*, 1968), Tony Richardson (*A Taste of Honey*, 1961) and Karel Reisz (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1960) were generally centred on themes that embodied issues of class, sex and youth, exploring what became known as the social problem film, demonstrating a committed left wing view of British films and an interest in artistic form. This aesthetic and narrative form was appropriated into television drama in the 1960s, notably in such ground-breaking productions as Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and Tony Garnett's *Kes* (1969), continuing the tradition of observational style, long takes and improvisation. These productions brought a political edge to the realism approach, by combining the specific subject matter with a distinctive aesthetic approach.

As has been noted elsewhere (Sheehan, 1988) Ireland's output of television drama in the 1960s and 1970s was remarkable for a country of its size and the newness of its broadcasting service. While the 1960s was characterized by a predominance of Abbey Theatre stage play adaptations, the 1970s was the most innovative decade for the eclectic range of dramatic productions. Ireland's close proximity to Britain and its nearest competitor, the BBC, meant the standards of production were set very high. This challenge, which the new station RTE rose to,

particularly in the field of drama in the early days, meant that the strong tradition of social realism drama filtered through, emerging in such notable productions as *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton* (Brian MacLochlainn, 1971). Telling the story of a male youth just released from a reform school in the West of Ireland and how he tries to re-integrate into society in the absence of any state support or efforts at rehabilitation, this drama can be seen as a political drama in a similar vein to *Cathy Come Home*. MacLochlainn mixes documentary style approaches such as the voice over and direct address to the camera with fictional drama, portraying urban Dublin through an aesthetic of social realism. While not having the same political impact as *Cathy Come Home*, *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton* is an important historical document in revealing the close relations between British traditions and the nascent television station in Ireland of the 1970s. The fact that Irish writers, producers and directors were exposed to weekly BBC television drama meant that this era was both innovative and experimental. However, Ireland's economic downturn in the 1980s meant that the level of output of drama plummeted and although recent years has seen a growth and diversity in the range of Irish television drama, the levels of 1970s production have not been recaptured despite Ireland's economic growth and boom in the 1990s.

It is notable therefore that one of the more innovative and critically acclaimed dramas of recent years, while distinctly modern in many production approaches, is reminiscent of these historical movements and as Fintan O'Toole (2007) has noted, nods back in the direction of dramas such as *Cathy Come Home* and *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton*. *Prosperity* follows the lives of four people on one day, living on the fringes of Celtic Tiger Ireland, each episode devoted to one character, with their lives overlapping tenuously. Characterised by a low-key approach to narrative development, little in the way of plot points and dramatic moments are knitted into these stories. These dramatic scenarios unfold as observationally constructed with the significance of their stories not being

realised until the closing sequence and on reflection when the subtleties of approach have sunk in.

Episode One, for example, focuses on Stacey, a 17-year-old single mother who whiles away her time on the streets of Dublin with her small baby, hanging out in the new Mecca of Ireland, the shopping centre, looking for appropriate places to feed and change her baby, while waiting to return to her welfare Bed and Breakfast accommodation each evening where she is prohibited to spend her days. The other three episodes follow the stories of Gavin, a 14 year old boy with a stammer who is both a bully and is being bullied; Georgie, who is struggling with a drink problem, and Pala, an African living in Dublin who finds herself increasingly isolated. Each episode is tenuously linked visually, rather than narratively yet all can be understood as stand-alone dramas; akin to the approach of Kieslowski's *Three Colours Trilogy*. The modern urban yet alienating environment of Dublin city is evoked in a style reminiscent of Abrahamson's earlier feature film, *Adam & Paul*.

While not self-consciously demonstrating that the Celtic Tiger has an under-belly, this series reveals another side to Ireland's recent growing prosperity, that there are many marginalized people living on the fringes of society, yet they are still very much part of the complex Irish society that has developed over the past fifteen years. It is not that these stories are untold, that these sections of society are invisible or absent from the mass media or that mainstream Ireland is oblivious to this parallel way of life. If anything, this marginalized sector of Irish society is, ironically, very much visually to the fore by occupying and inhabiting public spaces in Ireland. Their existence can't be unknown.

What is unique and innovative about this series therefore, is its approach to the art form rather than its polemical objective. This series develops out of the shadow of radical, ideologically-driven social realism drama yet has a distinctive 21<sup>st</sup> century feel to it. Neither polemical nor didactic in tone, it allows the narrative advance through the development of its characters. While British television drama of the 1960s and 1970s had a function as a consciousness-raising vehicle, *Prosperity* resonates more in the vein of Ken

Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998) rather than *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994), and consequently is all the more effective for it. By focusing on the story this drama series reveals complex yet subtle characters rather than plots that simply act as a vehicle to convey snippets of time and space.

Stacy's character in Episode 1 resonates at a deeper level through her absence of verbal expression. Failed somewhere along the way, by her family, her education, her society – we can only surmise – she has been rendered inarticulate about her own situation. This is not to say she doesn't experience or feel emotionally, she just can't find the means to express it. This inability, or disability, is brought into sharp relief through her relationship with her baby's father and other people around her. The absence of control over her own life is in stark contrast to the perceived nature of modern Ireland, evoking a bygone era whereby she moves through her days, ghost-like.

Reminiscent of Kirsten Sheridan's *Disco Pigs* (1999) and Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam and Paul*, Gavin in Episode 2 reflects that urban male youth that has become a familiar anti-hero of recent Irish cinema. However, in Abrahamson's construction, pity and fear is simultaneously evoked. Gavin is vulnerable but in the absence of any protection for his vulnerability he turns his emotions inside out to become a bully, wayward, anti-social, a hard-chaw, rounding on the one companion he has. Thus his fragility wins out to tragic effect. Rather than casting the Celtic Tiger as the *bête noir* of contemporary Irish society, this drama reveals the complexity of a modern, neo-liberal capitalist society, giving voice not so much to the hidden aspects but allowing the shadows come to the fore.

Where this drama deviates from traditional social realism drama is in its subtle approach to its core meaning, developed and articulated through its characters, who are not simply ciphers for a polemical position but rather reveal through nuanced subtlety how some sections of Irish society have been left behind or outside, and thus excluded from the 'great move forward'. Similarly to the early pieces, Episodes 3 & 4 tell the story of one character on this particular day and follow their narrative as they grapple with alcoholism and social exclusion respectively. It is not an angry piece, but rather an observation of those on the margins, yet people inhabiting very public physical spaces, who are encountered by mainstream society but are rarely heard or invited to speak.

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### *Prosperity* (2007)

4x1hr (TV); First screened Sept 3<sup>rd</sup>  
 Directed by Lenny Abrahamson  
 Written by Mark O'Halloran  
 Produced by Element Films: Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe / RTE

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### The Celtic 'Chick-flick': *How About You* (2007) and *PS I Love You I* (2007)

Reviewed by Debbie Ging

2007 saw the emergence of the (quasi-) indigenous 'chick-flick' in Ireland, a genre whose literary equivalent, the 'chick-lit' novel, is a firmly established and hugely successful corner of the Irish publishing world. Stalwarts of the form such as Maeve Binchy, Deirdre Purcell, Cathy Kelly, Marian Keyes and Patricia Scanlan have long been penning stories about modern Irish women; from feisty brunettes constrained by rural tradition and authority to the urban-based escapades of the 'singleton' or 'desperate housewife'. It is not surprising, therefore, that the two biggest 'Irish chick-flicks' of 2007 - *How About You* and *PS I Love You* - were both adaptations from 'chick-lit' novels by Irish writers.

It is important to point out from the outset that *PS I Love You* is a US production filmed by an American director (Richard La Gravenese, a highly successful Hollywood screen writer of romance - *The Bridges of Madison County* and *The Horse Whisperer*, among others) and featuring an almost exclusively American cast. Its status as an 'Irish film' relates of course to the fact that the eponymous novel from which it was adapted was written by Celia Ahern, daughter of Ireland's Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. The film adaptation is, to a large extent, textbook chick-flick material, yet with some interesting variations. Its protagonist is the thoroughly modern yet reassuringly traditional all-American Holly (Hilary Swank), who finds herself unable to let go of her Irish husband Gerry (Gerard Butler) after his unexpected death. In death as in life, Gerry continues to act as Holly's sage counsellor, anticipating her emotional needs before she herself is aware of them and ultimately leading her to a new love interest in Ireland, a man called Billy (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) who, it transpires, was an old friend of Gerry's.

Like the genre classic *Bridget Jones Diary*, *PS I Love You* espouses all the core values of post-feminism. Women are unfulfilled unless in a stable relationship with a man. Women have different emotional hardwiring than men - who don't understand them - yet paradoxically they also need men to psychoanalyse them and keep them on track in life. Careers are quirky distractions which allow our protagonists to indulge their creative sides until Mr Right comes along. Narrative closure is generally achieved when it is decided which of two potential Mr Rights has won the heroine's affections. And finally, consumerism is equated with liberation - a woman can't have enough shoes and it is imperative that none of them are comfortable.

Exactly how these infantilised shoe-fetishists became icons of the new feminism is beyond the scope of this article but suffice to say that the 'chick-flick' has played an important role. Perhaps, in any case, *PS I Love You* is a more interesting film when viewed in terms of its construction of Irish-American identity. Diane Negra (2006) has argued that since 9/11, Irishness has become a highly desirable and idealised ethnicity in the United States by virtue of its unusual status as both Other and white, and therefore unthreatening. Certainly, the attraction of the novel *PS I Love You* to American filmmakers seems to have been influenced by this current marketability of Irish ethnicity as hip and modern on the one hand and, on the other, as "a moral antidote to contemporary ills ranging from globalization to postmodern alienation, from crises over the meaning and practice of family values to environmental destruction" (Negra, 2006: 3).

Gerry's Irishness fits perfectly with this sort of idealized ethnic identity, both proud of its traditions and yet unequivocally confident in its sense of belonging to the dominant culture. This

is played out through Gerry and Holly's stormy relationship (a nod to *The Quiet Man*'s Sean Thornton and Mary Kate Danaher; 'harmless' domestic violence and all), Gerry's musical talent, the dark humour at his wake (which like Gerry's favourite song *Fairytale of New York*, starts out seriously but turns into something more playful and ironic) and most of all in the characters' ability to have fun in a way that is presumably being deliberately coded as real and earthy. Scenes of 'realistic karaoke' (à la *Lost in Translation*) and heaving bars full of sweaty people dancing construct Irishness as hip and self-aware, yet endearingly untainted by the falseness and vacuousness of postmodern American life.

Most importantly, the link to Ireland allows for a nostalgic closure in the form of a return to the pre-modern and to the maternal, a trope which pervades Irish films from *The Quiet Man* to *Into the West*. By travelling to rural Ireland at the film's end, Holly re-establishes links with family and tradition and re-bonds with her own mother. The quirky plot device of having the heroine open ten letters, each of which brings her to new levels of coping and self-discovery, is more than just a narrative strategy: it is also a ten-step psychological guide to dealing with loss. Gerry and Holly may not be traditional Irish Catholics but their story is a spiritual one. It is shot through not only with the sense of moral centeredness offered by Irish ethnicity but also with the logic of self-help therapy. This is clearly a winning combination at a time when, according to *New York Times* journalist Thomas L. Friedman, "People all over the United States are looking to Ireland for its reservoir of spirituality, hoping to siphon off what they can to feed their souls, which have become hungry for something other than consumerism and computers" (Friedman, 2001, cited in Negra, 2006: 9).

Irish director Anthony Byrne's second feature film *How about You* (after the quirky *Short Order*, 2005) is not a conventional 'chick-flick' in contemporary manifestations of the genre in that it does not revolve around the romantic escapades of ditzy singletons or bereaved or otherwise desperate (house)wives. Based on a Maeve Binchy short story, it owes more to the

'first-wave' of Irish 'chick-lit', which tended to focus on stories of personal self development not always achieved through romantic love. Indeed, why the film should be considered 'chick lit' at all raises an important question about the gendering of films which feature female protagonists or deal with women's concerns as 'female-interest', while those which feature male protagonists or deal with men's concerns are labelled 'general-interest'. In a media culture which is becoming increasingly gender-segregated, and set against the wider backdrop of 'Men-are-from-Mars-Women-are-from-Venus' discourses, it is harder and harder to make this very obvious lack of equivalence visible.

*How about You* tells the story of Ellie (Hayley Atwell), another hot-headed heroine, when she is left to run the residential home normally managed by her sister over the Christmas holidays. Unable to cope with the residents' impossible demands, Ellie becomes involved in a succession of intergenerational conflicts, which are the source of the film's comedy. Representations of older people are rare in mainstream cinema and this is therefore an interesting theme in a culture obsessed with youth and staying young. The film is notable too for the quality of performers cast in these roles - Vanessa Redgrave, Joss Ackland, Brenda Fricker and Imelda Staunton. Needless to say, the film evades any reference to the realities of the recent Leas Cross scandal, nor does it enter the complex moral terrain of being unable to care for elderly parents, so deftly handled by *The Savages* (2008). However, it is an engaging film in its confrontation of prejudices associated with ageing, although it does not completely avoid the pitfalls of stereotyping, however benevolent this may be.

Ultimately however, *How about You* is yet another manual on emotional intelligence. Indeed, beneath the apparent superficiality of many mainstream films marketed at female audiences lie potentially complex meditations – however constrained these may be by conservative ideological forces - on life, death and relationships and their psychological impact and significance. Herein lies the problem that has dogged most women's genres, from the

melodrama to soap opera. While critics have tended to regard them as debased cultural forms which espouse bourgeois, heteronormative and gender-stereotypical worldviews, male audiences would appear to dismiss them for another reason: because they are perceived as being ‘for women’.

That universal topics such as romantic love, grieving and relationships are regarded as the sole domain of women is perhaps one of the central tragedies of contemporary gender relations. Of course this is a highly lucrative ‘tragedy’, for as long as men and women believe they cannot communicate without expert advice, the self-help industry is in big business. Lars von Trier (*Dancer in the Dark*) and Todd Haynes (*Far from Heaven*) have demonstrated that women-centred musicals and melodramas can be complex, ideologically elastic and appeal to both male and female audiences. However, the ‘chick-flick’ as we know it shows few signs of fostering such self-referentiality or complexity because ultimately, it is a sub-genre based first and foremost on marketing and demographic profiling rather than on a coherent set of internal codes or conventions. As long as ‘chick flicks’ perpetuate myths about women being better carers and communicators as well as obsessive consumers and domestic control freaks, they continue to reinforce men and women’s alienation from one another, both as film characters and as film viewers.

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#### ***PS I Love You* (2007)**

Directed by Richard La Gravenese

Written by Richard La Gravenese (screenplay) and Steven Rogers (screenplay), Cecilia Ahern (novel)

Principal Cast: Hilary Swank, Gerard Butler, Lisa Kudrow, Harry Connick Jr., Gina Gershon, Kathy Bates.

Production Companies: Alcon Entertainment, Grosvenor Park Productions, Wendy Finerman Productions; distributed by Warner Bros.

#### ***How About You* (2007)**

Directed by Anthony Byrne.

Principal Cast: Vanessa Redgrave, Joss Ackland, Brenda Fricker, Hayley Atwell, Imelda Staunton and Orla Brady.

Written by Jean Pasley (screenplay), Maeve Binchy (short story).

Producer: Noel Pearson (Ferndale Films)

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***The Brave One* (2007)**

Reviewed by Maria Pramaggiore

Comparisons between *The Brave One* (2007), Neil Jordan's latest film, and *Taxi Driver* (1976), Martin Scorsese's seminal work of existential Americana, were as inevitable as they were slightly off the mark. Understandably, critics were drawn to the obvious similarities between the films: both are set in the disorienting underworld of New York at night and they feature Jodie Foster as a stalwart victim on whose behalf a spate of vigilante murders unfolds. Both directors embrace the challenge of humanizing characters who are in the process of becoming something less than human.

In Jordan's film, Foster's initially stable character becomes an unhinged avenger, taking matters into her own hands after a personal experience with random violence. This scenario contrasts sharply with that of Scorsese's Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), whose backstory includes a stint in Viet Nam that only partially explains his confused political philosophizing and his increasingly delusional understanding of himself as a champion of the oppressed. The degree to which these characters are differently marked by tragedy – one the innocent victim of a senseless crime and the other a tainted product of a sick culture – offers an important clue to the disparities in the underlying visions of American culture that the two films purvey.

In fact, the differences between the films are more profound than their similarities and they reveal the disparate concerns of these two directors, with Jordan focusing on the psychological dynamics of fragile individuals who come face to face with inner demons after their identities are shattered beyond repair. This theme pervades nearly every one of his films. By contrast, Scorsese seems more interested in illuminating the social texture and group dynamics within communities of men whose

grandiose dreams of acquiring power and status outstrip their intellectual capacity and thus their ability to maintain dominance. (*Taxi Driver* is a slight aberration in Scorsese's oeuvre because Paul Schrader's screenplay focuses so narrowly on the alienated individual). Jordan's and Scorsese's films also speak volumes about the changing image of New York as the quintessential American city.

At its most basic, *The Brave One* is a tale of individual transformation wrought from a monstrous violation. Foster's Erica Bain, a National Public Radio personality who comments on the changing character of the city through its soundscape (she interviews people and also records ambient noise), is brutally attacked in Central Park with her fiancée, who is killed. After the incident, fearful of public spaces and aware that the perpetrators might never be apprehended, Erica takes to wandering the city at night, carrying an illegal 9 mm handgun and looking for evildoers. Although her first kill in a convenience store is a direct quote from *Taxi Driver*, the narrative trajectory more closely resembles that of Jordan's first feature film, *Angel* (1981), in which an apolitical jazz musician named Danny (played by Jordan alter ego Stephen Rea) becomes caught up in the Troubles in Northern Ireland after witnessing the murders of his band's manager and a young woman by paramilitaries. In an evocative metaphor that Jordan uses in both films, characters literally replace instruments of creation with instruments of destruction: Danny carries his Armalite in his saxophone case and Erica totes her weapon around in the bag that contains her microphone and tape recorder.

The fact that the young woman whose death is avenged in *Angel* is mute (and possibly deaf) underscores another important resonance between these two Jordan films, namely, the

critical role of sound. When pressed by her boss to do a television show, Erica protests, “I’m not a face; I’m just a voice,” foreshadowing the paradoxical identity she will eventually assume as a famous, yet anonymous, killer. In the film’s opening moments, Erica dangles a microphone to record the sounds of a city that, she regrets, is changing before her very eyes and ears, becoming something other than itself in the wake of 9-11. Her voice-over narration initially is motivated by her research for her radio broadcasts, but eventually her philosophical musings about the internal changes she is experiencing become detached from her on-air persona. Jordan almost always uses familiar songs as a prominent stylistic element, and this film is no exception: the popular standard “You don’t know me” underscores the romantic tension that builds between Erica and Mercer (Terrence Howard) the sympathetic, insomniac detective who is working on her case.

Yet the emphasis is placed squarely on sound itself rather than music, which enhances Jordan’s depiction of New York after the attack on Erica (and, implicitly, after 9-11) as a dangerous space haunted by the ghosts of innocent victims. Sounds not only signal danger – in the distorting echo that dominates the scene of violence at the Stranger’s Gate that changes Erica’s life irrevocably – but they also revive the past as painful present tense. When Erica returns home, she hears her dead lover’s voice on her telephone answering machine, demonstrating Jordan’s interest in rendering the soul-destroying effects of losing a loved one to violent death (following the tradition established by Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*). In another scene, Erica telephones Mercer before committing a pre-meditated murder and the pitch of an elevator bell betrays her location (a homage to another dark 70s film, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*).

Jordan captures the surreal character of traumatic memories through recorded sound as well. One of Erica’s attackers happens to have recorded the incident on his mobile phone (a galling act that helps Erica to track him down), and the digital file is played near the film’s conclusion. Because the images on the small phone screen are of such poor quality, the sound of the menacing thugs triggers the viewer’s

memory of the event.

In addition to developing this sound motif, Jordan uses visual devices such as flashbacks and parallel editing to drive home the film’s gothic insistence that the past never releases its hold on the present. In a tightly edited sequence, Erica perceives the doctors who minister to her injured body in the hospital as her dead lover caressing her. Frequent tilts signal Erica’s disorientation, and reflective surfaces such as mirrors – a common Jordan element – bring into sharp relief the concept at the center of the film: the dreadful emergence of the gothic double, the mysterious stranger that resides within all of us. Several scenes are reminiscent of Jordan’s own taxi driver film, *Mona Lisa*, the most obvious being a sequence where Erica saves a young black woman who has been drugged by a man and held captive inside his automobile.

The increasingly claustrophobic and abstract mise-en-scène suggests a parallel between Erica’s process of emptying herself and the shifting urban landscape she moves within. Through Jordan’s tight framing, frequent close ups, and shallow focus, New York loses its specificity and its personality, shedding its tinge of American exceptionalism along the way. This almost generic sense of New York as more of a vacuum than a cultural mecca offers a direct contrast to Scorsese’s film, which portrays the city as a living, diverse, if problematic space of confrontation and creativity. Scorsese creates a space for irony, which Jordan’s film lacks: viewers remain aware of the absurdity and menace of Travis’s plight, see beyond his misguided racism and sexism, and also recognize his utter Americanness. As Erica’s world become more insular in Jordan’s film, all others come to embody a threat that neither viewers nor Erica can escape. New York becomes everywhere and nowhere at the same time; in other words, it represents the global city. The point that globalization levels differences in the most damaging of ways is reinforced by an underdeveloped subplot involving Erica’s neighbor Josai (Ene Oloja), a woman who has fled a country torn by civil war and child soldiers, only to encounter another newly initiated killer in Erica.

The film has been criticized for its impossibly romantic ending, which recalls the sacrifice made at the conclusion of *The Crying Game*. It's fair to say that this is not the first time Jordan has stumbled while concluding a film whose plot was constructed by another writer (*In Dreams* comes to mind). This point, along with problems of consistency that plague the film's narrative, lead one to a familiar lament about contemporary studio films. Poor writing seems to be the most salient manifestation of the hegemony of American industrial film culture: the now-familiar whiff of the entertainment corporation's risk averse committee process plays out in the development process. My point is not to shed tears over the loss of the (now-idealized) Hollywood studio system or to curse the co-optation of independent filmmaking by conglomerates. But there is certainly something amiss in the charmed inner circle of corporate filmmaking when accomplished writers like Jordan are repeatedly underemployed on projects such as this one, where the screenplay was penned by three television writers. There are several reasons why the Writer's Guild recently went on strike: for me, the most important issue is that the corporate behemoths repeatedly fail to

recognize the importance of aesthetic integrity at the level of screenwriting. Until they do, we will continue to see some of our most gifted directors and actors (Foster garnered a Golden Globe for her performance in this film) in work that cannot do justice to their talents.

***The Brave One* (2007)**

Directed by Neil Jordan

Written by Roderick Taylor, Bruce A. Taylor and Cynthia Mort

Principal Cast: Jodie Foster, Terrence Howard, Nicky Katt Mary Steenburgen

Produced by Susan Downey, Joel Silver, Jody Foster (Executive Producer), Silver Pictures/Warner Bros

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***Experimental Conversations: Ourselves Connected?***

Donal Foreman

Halfway through *Experimental Conversations*, a quote appears on screen which boldly situates Fergus Daly's film in opposition to almost all other documentary explorations of Irish cinema. The quote, from Irish filmmaker and critic Maximilian le Cain, declares: "Since there is no worthwhile commercial cinema in Ireland, all great Irish films come from experimental cinema."

From its outset, Daly's film seems to implicitly endorse this position – but rather than using it as the basis for a reductive partition of Irish cinema, this narrowing of focus is taken as an opportunity to open up the discussion in other ways, as Daly suggests links, parallels and exchanges between Irish experimental cinema and its international counterparts, particularly in France. Divided into broad thematic chapters, the film uses interviews with an array of Irish and French filmmakers and critics to explore various aspects of experimental film practice. French critic Nicole Brenez sets the tone with a working definition of experimental cinema: while "the so-called standard cinema standardises emotions, sensation, perception and belief," experimental cinema "re-opens the entire field of experience". It's the "exploration of all possible conceptions, which don't pre-exist the exploration itself."

"All possible conceptions" may sound like pretty expansive subject matter for a two-hour documentary, but *Experimental Conversations* strikes an engaging balance between narrative cohesion and discursive looseness. Not forcing his featured filmmakers too tightly into generic categories, Daly at the same time allows their thoughts and experiences to parallel and intermingle under shared headings, and, by focusing on the specificities of their own

work, prevents the discussion from becoming too unwieldy to manage. The selection of artists covers a broad (if mostly French) spectrum, ranging from cult arthouse directors Philippe Grandrieux and FJ Ossang through established avant-garde figures like Malcolm le Grice to lesser known independent figures such as Augustin Gimel. The Irish contingent encompass a somewhat narrower range, with most (such as Gerard Byrne, Clare Langan, Grace Weir) working on film within a fine art context. Interestingly, the least recognisable of the Irish filmmakers featured, Vivienne Dick and Maximilian le Cain, are the only ones who began working independently, outside of the fine art world.

The dialectic between the singularity of each artist and their commonalities emerges as one of the film's main thematic concerns. Daly has described "the ethics of the experimental filmmaker" as entailing a simultaneous commitment to working in relation to a tradition of experimental practice, while at the same time constantly seeking out new and unexplored formal possibilities.<sup>1</sup> The film exhibits that same double commitment. So, while ample time is taken to discuss, for example, the unique qualities of Grandrieux's cinematography or Langan's technique of hand painting lens filters, there is a repeated movement between this kind of specificity and a contextualisation of their work in relation to other artists and cultural milieus. Vivienne Dick and Jackie Raynal are dealt with in terms of their interactions with the New York art scene of the late '70s; Ossang discusses the impact of futurism and rock 'n' roll on his work; Byrne talks about his engagement with the detritus of

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1. Daly, Director's Notes, <http://www.corkfilmfest.org/2006/exp-con.html>

US pop culture. The particular exchanges between French and Irish culture are highlighted by French critic Raymond Bellour's lecture on James Coleman, an Irish artist whose work straddles the border between cinema and photography, and a defining influence on some of the younger Irish artists, despite having a much stronger reputation in France than Ireland.

Although its basic building blocks – film clips and talking heads – are ubiquitous within TV and documentary, there are no real reference points for a film like *Experimental Conversations* within Irish cinema. There has been a surge in arts documentaries in recent years, but almost all have been single-artist studies, and to my knowledge no-one has ever attempted the kind of cross-cultural reflection Daly does here. One can see some precedence, however, in Daly's previous documentary, *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living* (co-directed by Pat Collins, 2003), which, while fitting the single-artist mode, had an unusually strong focus on critical and conceptual analyses and structured itself around such discussions. Daly's work as a film critic obviously feeds into this; he has written for *Film West*, *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Senses of Cinema*, co-authored a book on Leos Carax, and has often focused on formal and philosophical parallels between films across an international spectrum (the influence of Gilles Deleuze on his work in this respect is worth noting).

But in a broader Irish context, Daly's film is perhaps most usefully seen in contrast to *Irish Cinema: Ourselves Alone?* (1996). Directed by Donald Taylor Black and written by Kevin Rockett, now two presiding figures in Irish academia as heads of the National Film School and Trinity Film Department respectively, *Ourselves Alone?* is probably the defining documentary account of Irish cinema. Taking a broad and linear historical view, the film charts the development of indigenous filmmaking in Ireland since the early 20th century. The development is framed mainly in terms of the many false starts of indigenous industry, hampered by unsympathetic government policy, with the success and recognition of

'90s Irish cinema positioned as a final flowering of a long-stunted aspiration. Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan, as the figureheads of this culmination, are the star interview subjects, with First Wave filmmakers such as Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford and Pat Murphy given supporting roles as the pioneers who laid the foundations for the '90s filmmaking boom. There is, however, little focus on questions of style and no mention of experimental cinema or non-industrial forms of filmmaking.

Daly's approach is implicitly oppositional to Black's in many respects. First of all, apart from a passing reference to Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Daly deals with '70s Ireland solely through the lens of Vivienne Dick, the only First Wave filmmaker completely ignored by Black. As Maeve Connolly, one of the few Irish scholars specialising in experimental cinema (and the only one to feature in *Experimental Conversations*), has written, "Within Irish cinema studies, the period from the late 1970s to the early 1980s has been historicised in terms of the emergence of an indigenous industry."<sup>2</sup> Daly's focus on Dick rejects this historicisation, as unlike her Irish contemporaries, Dick's work (mostly shot on Super 8) has never so much as flirted with industrial production. It also indicates that Daly is as uninterested in national identity as he is in national industry, as Dick is significantly the Irish filmmaker most formed by and engaged with international currents, having begun working in the New York "No Wave" scene and later working with the London Filmmakers Co-Op.

Implied in these contrasts is the most pivotal difference between the two films. Black builds a picture of a body of work called Irish Cinema – not homogenous or static, but still identifiably corporeal. Although the Le Cain quote mentioned at the beginning may suggest a desire to build an alternative body – that of Irish Experimental

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2. Maeve Connolly, "Sighting an Irish Avant-Garde in the Intersection of Local and International Film Cultures" in *boundary* 2 31.1 (2004), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/boundary/v031/31.1connolly.html>

Cinema – Daly undermines such an image from clearly emerging. Concerning itself much more with the creation of links than boundaries (Daly’s narrative doesn’t even limit itself to cinema; theatre, photography, fine art and science all emerge as interconnected disciplines at various points), *Experimental Conversations* is in many ways an experimental work in itself, and the conversations of its title – conversations between different cultures, arts, generations – are central. As Daly puts it, “This ability to experiment in a conversational situation is analogous to what experimental film and video artists do in their daily practice: to push forward without pre-conceived idea or prepared answers.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than offering an alternative history of Irish cinema, *Experimental Conversations* in fact offers an alternative discourse; a different way of thinking about cinema in which Irish Experimental Cinema isn’t something one can formulate in isolation.

There are weaknesses to this approach. As in the Kiarostami documentary, Daly is much more interested in a non-linear tracing of influences and concepts than with material facts. As a result, cinema is almost never discussed by the interviewees in terms of their personal background or social or economic situation, for example. Arguably such avoidance reinforces the misconception Connolly criticises, “that avant-garde practice constitutes a transient process of ‘experimentation’ rather than a critique of the industrial apparatus and the institutions and structures of production and reception.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Connolly, “Sighting an Irish Avant-Garde in the Intersection of Local and International Film Cultures” in *boundary* 2 31.1 (2004), [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/boundary/v031/31.1\\_connolly.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/boundary/v031/31.1_connolly.html). Daly’s approach also leaves out questions of arts policy and its importance as a means to support, or marginalise, experimental cinema—as well as what we might learn from France on the matter.

4. Daly, Director’s Notes, <http://www.corkfilmfest.org/2006/exp-con.html>

Stimulating as Daly’s focus on conceptual and formal thinking may be, the issue arises of how useful it is in terms of addressing or assisting experimental cinema’s current situation in Ireland.

Before answering, it’s worth briefly outlining that situation. After many years of invisibility, experimental cinema is enjoying an increasingly stable and supported position as a discipline within fine art practice in Ireland. In galleries and graduate shows, film, mainly in the form of video installations, is becoming ubiquitous. This seems natural, given that the fine art world, in contrast to the relatively confined parameters of the film industry, provides an attractively open, multi-disciplinary, and international base in which to work (the international question emerges in *Ourselves Alone?* only in the pragmatic guise of how to negotiate Hollywood’s global hegemony). The place of experimental cinema within film culture, however, is increasingly negligible. Despite the First Wave’s mix of industry and experimentation, all its members have either effectively “dropped out” (Dick, Comerford) or gone the industry route (O’Sullivan, Cathal Black) – and there is now little interaction between the world of “film film” and “fine art film”; their audiences, for example, tend to rarely overlap. It doesn’t seem insignificant that Dick and Le Cain have recently moved towards the gallery,<sup>5</sup> but it’s also worth noting the stifling effect this separation can have on fine art filmmakers, leaving them without a foothold in the international avant-garde film scene that operates outside of fine art. Daly seems aware of this situation when, opening his film at a bookshop event in Paris which brought together “not only filmmakers and critics, but also composers, photographers, painters, actors...” , he states that “such a gathering confirms my belief that Paris is the only place in which to ask ‘What’s at stake in the new wave of Irish artists? What’s the international context for their sounds and images?’”

5. Dick’s last film, *Excluded by the Nature of Things* (2003), was her first gallery installation, and Le Cain exhibited (...from a dying hotel), a site-specific installation, last year.

Daly argues that “for Irish artists thinking more conceptually has meant thinking more globally”<sup>6</sup> and this film is the beginning of a discourse in those global terms. His emphatic forging of links with France (where film and fine art seem quite healthily entwined), seems to imply that such a discourse is currently lacking in Ireland, but the very making of the film suggests a desire to initiate it. It also explains the film’s more tenuous associations; for example, the argument that French playwright Antonin Artaud’s 1937 trip to Ireland “tied us irrevocably to the French avant-garde” seems more like wishful thinking than historical reality – but it does tell us something about the way Daly’s film works. The relevant question seems to be not “did Artaud really influence Irish culture?” but rather “what can be gained for Irish culture now by imagining that influence and contemplating its implications?”

This is what problematises *Experimental Conversations* as a documentary and what makes it all the more significant as a cultural provocation; on the one hand its refusal to acknowledge that which it does not believe in (commercial cinema, for example, or the economic context of experimental cinema) and on the other hand its supposition of links in a way that encourages a re-imagining and re-contextualisation of Irish experimental cinema. As a work in itself, *Conversations* is clearly less interested in being a record of connections than an active means of forging them; by placing Irish artists and critics within an international context, Daly is encouraging an exchange and expansion of Irish cinema rather than a definition of it. Whether there is an audience willing to follow Daly’s lead isn’t clear yet (the film has only been screened once in Ireland),<sup>7</sup> but there have been a spate of

recent cultural events which seem to be advocating a likeminded international and cross-medium expansion of how we view experimental cinema: for example, the Darklight Symposium, the Dublin Electronic Arts Festival and Esperanza Collado’s film screenings at Thisisnotashop gallery, as well as visual arts events such as Tulca in Galway and Mamuska in Limerick. (8)

Perhaps Paris will not be the only place to ask these questions for long.

### ***Experimental Conversations (2006)***

Written and directed by Fergus Daly.

Featuring Nicole Brenez, Philippe Grandrieux, Maeve Connolly, Gerard Byrne, Malcolm le Grice, Vivienne Dick, Vincent Deville, Jackie Raynal, Raymond Bellour, Olwen Fouéré, FJ Ossang, Augustin Gimel and Maximilian le Cain.

Funded by the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board.

**Donal Foreman** is a writer and independent filmmaker: [www.donalforeman.com](http://www.donalforeman.com)

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6. Fergus Daly, Film Synopsis (emailed by author)

7. The film premiered at the Cork Film Festival and has since been screened only one other time, at the Alternative Film/Video Festival in Serbia. Two clips from the film can be viewed on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itmZstYeudo>

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8. For more information on these events, check out <http://www.deafireland.com>; <http://darklight.ie/pages/talks.htm>; <http://tulca.ie> and <http://thisisnotashop.wordpress.com/2007/11/09/esperanza-collado-zero-degree-the-new-image-of-thought>.

**Ghosts of Empire: Mitchell and Kenyon in Ireland and Saoirse? on DVD**

Reviewed by Harvey O'Brien

Two DVD releases of 2007 brought a gust of cold wind from Ireland's Imperial past: *Mitchell and Kenyon in Ireland* (BFI, 2007) and *Saoirse?* (Gael Linn, 2007). Though George Morrison's much-vaunted but commercially unsuccessful *Saoirse?* actually hailed from 1961, it is composed of archive material filmed between 1919 and 1921, the last days of the British Empire in Ireland. The Mitchell and Kenyon footage is earlier, filmed between 1901 and 1906, comfortable in its Edwardian exoticism, boasting unassuming gazes from the faces of British subjects attending events including the Cork Exhibition of 1902 and the startling sight of a Union Jack fluttering languidly in the breeze on Patrick Street.

The Mitchell and Kenyon story is almost too good to be true. It is one of those wonderful fairy-tales from film history like the rediscovery of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* or the casting of *Casablanca*: the kind of thing cinephiles tell their children – or other cinephiles – to inspire awe. It begins (possibly in sepia, with scratches) with young Peter Worden solemnly observing severe, waxed pencil-tipped mustachioed photographer Sagar Mitchell behind the counter of his photographic parlour in 40 Northgate, Blackburn in the late 1940s. Worden knew that Mr Mitchell had been a filmmaker at one point, though he and his son had by now confined themselves to stills alone.

After Mitchell's death in 1952, Worden vaguely wondered what treasures might lurk in the recesses of the property but it was not until (dissolve to colour) demolition work on the premises in 1994 led to the discovery of sealed, milk-churn-type barrels, containing rolls and rolls of mainly well-preserved nitrate film. You couldn't write the script better: burly non-sense Blackburn construction workers asking

someone nearby if this lot might be worth anything; the elderly Worden receiving a phone call to ask him his opinion; 'Spielberg shot' of the widening eyes of the child within the man as he gazes upon the contents of the barrels: the lost films of Mitchell and Kenyon, a film production company active both in fiction and non-fiction throughout the early years of the twentieth century until 1913 or so, calmly and diligently documenting local events for local people, and, as evinced by the Irish films, taking on 'overseas' commissions as well. In the summer of 1994 this cinematic bounty hovered between two destinies – as trash in a skip, or as the centrepiece of a film restoration project that would have a long and wide reach.

Peter Worden donated the collection to the BFI in 2000. The films began to see daylight a few years later first in theatrical exhibition at the BFI, then as a television series (and subsequent DVD) *Electric Edwardians: The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*. It was a piece of saturation bombing for BFI publishing, who not only launched the programme, the TV show and the DVD, but brought out a volume of essays edited by Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple and Patrick Russell (BFI, 2004), then followed up with further DVDs including *Edwardian Sports* (2007) and our immediate concern *Mitchell and Kenyon in Ireland*.

The contents of the Irish collection are duly and ably catalogued and reviewed by Irish film historian and filmmaker Robert Monks in Toulmin et al. (2004: 93-102), and those who care to view the DVD will also have access to a detailed historical commentary written by Toulmin and read by Fiona Shaw. In summary, the films are fairly typical early film actualities: short subjects featuring workers leaving factories, trains arriving at stations (I kid you not), phantom rides, sporting events, firemen at work, and other miscellaneous cityscapes and views.

As with any film production company active during this period, including the Lumières, Mitchell and Kenyon were out to capture as many familiar scenes and as many human faces as they could manage so that the films could be screened in the same locality shortly afterward to an audience keen to see themselves and their home on the big screen. The films in this collection were shot in Belfast, Derry, Dublin, Wexford, and Cork, primarily the latter, and mostly in 1902, marking the successful Cork Exhibition: a fairly typical Edwardian celebration of progress and majesty in the mould of the Victorian Great Exhibition.

It is as continuity with the practice of Empire that these films are at their most fascinating. The aforementioned image of the Union Jack flying over the streets of Cork is merely the most explicit statement of the prevailing sense of an Ireland that is neither rural nor colloquial, but merely another happy, urbanised corner of the British Empire. As I wrote in my 2004 book *The Real Ireland*, Mitchell and Kenyon were, no more than Alexandre Promio in 1897, not seeking out an identifiably “Irish” Ireland, but rather seeking out local, mainly urban, audience by filming what that audience wanted to see. The films were not ‘owned’ by Mitchell and Kenyon, nor all shot by the men themselves. They were commissions by a variety of companies, including Edison, and used several camera operators, including Irish pioneer Louis de Clerq. Though the Mitchell and Kenyon logo was ‘local films for local people’ (a phrase with a whole new set of associations thanks to *The League of Gentlemen*), what they were at their heart were commercial products, documentary-like advertisements for lifestyle and locality under the umbrella of Edwardian capitalism. Toulmin’s commentary makes the interesting observation that when the Belfast films were screened, the admission price was equivalent to more than a weeks’ industrial wages at the time, meaning that, as she observes, the films were intended for a primarily middle class audience. She also notes how several of the films presented challenges to the filmmaker in the form of elaborate headgear worn by the well-to-do ladies attending the events they’re trying to shoot. The Mitchell and Kenyon films’ view of Ireland’s classes and

castes in no way reflect or, more properly, foreshadow, the political turbulence of the years to come, although an Irish-language banner is seen at one public parade.

Toulmin’s script is literate and informed, and does not shy away from analysing and contextualising at least some of the films being shown. Primarily though, the DVD is presented as an historical object, a trip into a distant past of faces and places duly and properly labeled and presented as incidental actualities. Robert Monks’ essay in the Toulmin et al. volume is similarly diligent and scholarly, which is why I have opted to editorialise a bit more freely here. In reviewing the DVD and putting it in the context of 2007, it is hard not to ask the difficult question of what function the release can serve. For the general viewer, these are exotic short subjects, presented with the usual tinkly piano and fiddle score evoking distance and nostalgia. And yet, in themselves, the films are not especially interesting as short subjects, at least no more or less so than any of their ilk. There is almost a giggle in viewing the one and only extant Irish ‘factory gate’ film *Lee Boot Factory – Dwyer & Co. Ltd* (1902) and the similarly reminiscent ‘train arriving at the station’ *Wexford Railway Station* (1902) and comparing them with Lumiere, but for those unfamiliar with the latter, of what value are the former?

Historians would be more interested, especially those with a keen interest in the period or the geographical area, and I think it is here that the DVD is actually most likely to be at home. However, the commentary, as noted, does play into the prejudice that films are somehow the raw evidentiary data of things that were, and that the presentation of this data must subscribe to a fairly limited level of contextualisation in order to serve a ‘historical’ project. To be fair to the BFI and the scholars who have worked on it, this DVD release is merely one small segment of an overall film-historical project that is much more ambitious and valuable. But from the point of view of a punter hiring the DVD, one might ask why they would bother. The last category of viewer would be the film historian, and here, again, we have the wonder of the Mitchell and Kenyon story itself. The Irish collection does not change our concept of cinema, but does have the

novelty of running the gamut of early film genres in an Irish setting, and it does provide a valuable link in the film-historical chain between Lumière and *Irish Events*.

*Irish Events* was, of course, the newsreel from which the bulk of the footage came for George Morrison's *Saoirse?* Long a cinematic *bete noir* in Irish film history, Morrison's film was the disastrous sequel to *Mise Eire* (Morrison, 1959), released to such aplomb in 1959 that it became the official history of the Irish state for more than a generation afterward. Where *Mise Eire* had charted the history of Ireland from the Celts through to 1919, presenting a crowd-pleasing portrait of centuries of struggle against English occupation, *Saoirse?* moved into more problematic (and then more recent) territory. Beginning where *Mise Eire* left off with Sinn Fein's victory in the 1919 General Election, *Saoirse?* proceeded through the War of Independence and the Treaty Debates, closing with the outbreak of the Civil War and the clouds of smoke above Dublin as Free State troops fought their former IRA colleagues. Whereas *Mise Eire* had been celebrated in 1959, *Saoirse?* was rather more coolly received. Perhaps the events it charted were still too contentious in 1961, perhaps audiences were now bored with nationalism in the light of Whitaker and Lemass' reversal of economic protectionism. Morrison himself has always claimed that the reason the film was not popular was that it did not concede to romantic nationalism, that the film was a self-conscious counterpoint to *Mise Eire*'s triumphalism. Whether this view is sustainable or not may remain as much a matter of faith as interpretation, as, viewing *Saoirse?* again on DVD, it is still hard to escape the fact that it is formally, stylistically, and emotionally much the same film as its predecessor: only the history is different.

There is arguably a fascinating irony in the fact that the 'problematic' history here comes in viewing the end of the Empire. It is in finding its own feet as a burgeoning democracy that Free State Ireland comes up against its own dark id: the history of violent struggle so lionised in *Mise Eire* and in popular nationalist history in general. The ghosts of the Empire are passive martyrs, the

ghosts of the Civil War are nobody's fault but our own. Oh, we can talk about postcolonialism and the legacy of the British Empire throughout the world and the pattern of independence-civil war that still echoes across the world, but on viewing the historical project of *Saoirse?* alongside Mitchell and Kenyon, we must inevitably question the nature and role of the cinema as an agent of history.

Now that *Saoirse?* has passed its sell-by date in controversy, what are we left with? It is an extremely well made, beautifully scored compilation film that, in spite of any problems one might have with its interpretation, at least has the benefit of having one. Where *Mitchell and Kenyon in Ireland* can sit, as a DVD, in an uncomfortably neutral ground of passive recorder, *Saoirse?*, by dint of content alone (and the all-important question mark in the title), invites deeper reading. Morrison's assembly of historical footage was, in itself, an act of historical argument, but *Mitchell and Kenyon in Ireland* retains the troubling veneer of 'mere' history.

[Ed. Note: *Saoirse?* on DVD is made available for the first time with English subtitles; a facility denied earlier viewers of the film.]

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*At Home with the Cleary's*<sup>1</sup> (2007)

Reviewed by Pat Brereton

Until the 1980s, representations of the Catholic priest in Irish film were generally benevolent. The priest is, of course the mediator between God and the individual, but in traditional genre cinema he is also 'a social mediator, a figure of authority who will ensure that the physical and ebullient Irish can be regulated and brought under some kind of social control'. (McLoone 2000: 49) One of the best – and most ironic – instances of such a mediating figure occurs in John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952) where the film's narrator Father Peter Lonergan introduces himself, 'here comes myself – that's me, the tall, saintly looking man.' Meeting the returned emigrant Sean Thornton (John Wayne) for the first time, the priest perfectly traces his ancestry, a preoccupation of many in rural Ireland, which in turn confirms the historical lineage of a closely-knit community.

A notable exception to the general historical portrayal of a benevolent clergy in Irish cinema is seen in the acerbic and ground-breaking documentary *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968), when the director Peter Lennon contends in a provocative voice-over that Ireland remained locked into a backward, church controlled state, which did not follow through on the heroic struggle of the revolutionary's vision from the past. To underpin his thesis Lennon interviews one well-known 'singing (or swinging) Priest,' Father Michael Cleary. Unknown to Lennon at the time, Cleary would later cause posthumous scandal through the revelation that he had fathered a child. Cleary's banter and insights in 'Rocky Road' assume a hypocritical taint in

hindsight, especially when he extols the virtues of celibacy and how the church was 'not against sex', *per se*, but wanted it 'celebrated in an appropriate way', rather than being 'abused' outside of the sacrament of marriage.

In spite of a slow burning anti-Catholic sentiment, precipitated by the numerous church scandals of the 1990s, it still took a long time for representations of extreme institutional violence by the clergy and Religious orders to be documented. This is effectively exemplified in *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *Song for a Raggy Boy* (2003). While at another level, the cult television classic *Father Ted* has helped to comically puncture the aloof and revered authority of the Irish priest. Graham Linehan, one of the creators of this series, comments on the DVD voice-over that Bishop Leonard 'Len' Brennan (Jim Norton), whose character had a mistress and son living in California, certainly anticipates the (in)famous real life stories of Bishop Casey and Fr. Cleary. He further notes that Phyllis Hamilton's biography 'Secret Love: My life with Father Michael Cleary' was published in 1995, the same year that the *Father Ted* series started. This mixture of generic approach chimes with developments in trauma theory which suggests that comic as well as more traumatic representational exposition of the abuse of power is necessary for the therapeutic process of healing and memorializing to begin.

Lennon's celebrated documentary and his ironic evocation of Cleary is counterpointed by the contemporary exposé of this most enigmatic of post Vatican II Irish Catholic figures; *At Home With the Clearys*. The original documentary footage was shot by a film student, who somewhat surprisingly was afforded full access to Cleary's house, where she captured reality-television type footage of his 'family arrangement'. In an interview for RTE

1. BBC NI website announced Dec 2007, "Clearys will go out on BBC Four and BBC Northern Ireland in the New Year under the title *The Real Father Ted*".

([www.rte.ie/TV/clearys/background.html](http://www.rte.ie/TV/clearys/background.html)), Alison Millar tells how she first met Cleary at an Irish cabaret show in Kilburn, London in 1991 when she was 21 and a student at the National Film and Television school on the look out for a subject. 'He's Ireland's Pope' one woman screamed from the audience and she knew then she had a fitting subject for her documentary. At no time she claims did it occur to her that Phyllis Hamilton, his housekeeper, or that Ross her son, were actually related to Cleary.

An earlier documentary, *In the Name of the Father*, directed by Kevin Byrne ([www.rte.ie/TV/Scannal](http://www.rte.ie/TV/Scannal)) in 2005, revealed that Cleary had fathered another child with Phyllis in their 26 years together, who was given up for adoption. Furthermore, it was well documented that when Phyllis died in 2001, the house where the family lived was sold by the church with a small reimbursement made to Ross, who had some health difficulties consequently.

Much of the archive footage of Ross with his father appears pedestrian, even mundane, yet at the same time somewhat prurient from this distance in time. Such scruples notwithstanding, it is strange to witness Cleary on his very successful radio chat show dispensing moral and sexual guidance to the nation with his young son in tow. Now many years later, having apparently never revealed the original footage when the scandal broke, the director wanted to come back to 'fill in the clues of the real Fr. Cleary', who had fathered a son and yet never publically acknowledged him. Like many documentary formats she attempts to discover the true story by juxtaposing the original archive footage viewed side by side with contemporary footage. Ross on re-viewing the old footage apparently did not find his relationship with his family that strange, I suppose since that was all he knew. Nonetheless the audience is encouraged to feel sympathy for his strange upbringing.

The documentary also includes interviews with Father Brian D'Arcy, a good friend, but who was upset that Cleary never confided in him. Likewise Cleary, we are reliably informed was annoyed when the equally famous Bishop Casey was outed for having fathered a child in 1992. Apparently, Cleary had confided in him

regarding his predicament, but this openness was not reciprocated. Within Ireland it cannot be underestimated that these celebrity priests were the darlings of the media and how both served as 'warm-up' to the Pope's visit to Galway in 1979, as seen again in archive footage. Gerry McCarthy best describes this performance-fixated cleric with his 'jaw jutting at a rakish angle, cigarette in hand, Cleary is the voice of modern Irish Catholicism' and continues how he 'sings and dances the boogie woogie' and acts like 'being one of the lads'. (*Sunday Times* May 14 2006)

Signalling the major transformation in attitudes towards religion, *At Home with the Clearys* did not cause as much of a media ripple as it might once have, probably aided by the fact that this has become such a well known and even old story by now. Nonetheless, the headline review from the *Irish Examiner* of 6<sup>th</sup> September 2007 screamed out; 'Fr Cleary, the obnoxious hypocrite wasn't half the man his son is' ([www.archives.tcm.ie/](http://www.archives.tcm.ie/) Irish Examiner). The review continues that the film 'challenges the universal rules of one of the biggest belief systems in the world by examining the damage Father Michael Cleary left behind when he chose to take his secrets to the grave', having died of throat cancer in 1993. Hillary Fannin of the *Irish Times* from 8<sup>th</sup> September, emphasizes how his son was 'hidden in plain sight'.

The narrative trajectory of the documentary centres on the familiar pattern of the filmmakers search for the lost child/man and explores how he has coped with his 'secret history'. Nonetheless, I feel the viewer remains somewhat detached from easy identification with the main protagonists. One of the most surprising incidents involves speaking with Cleary's niece, Edel Sweeney who spoke of how her family treated him as a priest from an early age. She was very engaging and appeared visibly shocked even at this distance with such revelations. But she appeared also to have no difficulty relating that the immediate family had nothing to do with his 'wife' and most particularly her son, after Cleary died. Apparently the inferred reason was because they had caused such grief and deception within the greater family.

In hindsight and reminiscent of the well worn trope of *Citizen Kane* (1941) attempting to explain the rise and fall of a great man, many commentators in the documentary suggested that the lanky, chain smoking Cleary was simply overly preoccupied with his public reputation and fame. This was inferred as one of the major reasons why he did not 'come out in the end' in spite of this being, according to his son and presumably a majority of the viewers, 'the right thing to do'. Trying to appreciate the enigma of this father-son relationship remains the backbone of the documentary and was played for all its dramatic effect. As the film concludes we see footage of Ross walking down a beach, while the audience is treated to a romantic pop song on the sound track. The conflicted legacy of Father Cleary lives on and this timely documentary marks another chapter in the reappraising of such an iconic figure within contemporary representations of Catholicism in Ireland.

### Work Cited

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### *At Home with the Clearys*

Broadcast: RTÉ One, Monday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007.

Produced by Tern TV

Directed by Alison Millar.

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**Interview with Simon Perry**

Tony Tracy

Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board (IFB) is Ireland's national film agency. Reconstituted by Minister Michael D Higgins in 1992, the day to day operations of the IFB are directed and managed by the Chief Executive who reports to the board. This position was held by Rod Stoneman from 1992-2002 and Mark Woods 2003-2005. Simon Perry became the third CEO of the Film Board upon his widely welcomed appointment in November 2005.

Tony Tracy met him in his Galway office in February, 2008.

TT: Since you are not likely to be well known to the majority of readers of *Estudios Irlandeses*, let's start by hearing a bit about you; where you came from, and the expertise you've accumulated – and how that's relevant to your current job.

SP: Fundamentally I'm a producer and in the 1970s I started being an independent filmmaker / would-be producer. I did a bit of film journalism for *Variety*, which is where I learnt how the business works. But I always really wanted to produce. I did try directing but I didn't enjoy it. At the start of the 1980s I set up my own film company and through the 1980s I made a number of independent British films mainly, but also a number of French films. I worked with Michael Radcliff; we made three films together – *Another Time Another Place*, 1984 and *White Mischief*. The films were getting bigger as we went along.

I also made a couple of films in France as I wanted to understand more about the rest of Europe and in particular the French way of making films. That started a whole conviction in me that for the future of independent cinema in Britain, and I now believe it to be true of Ireland

as well; that if we want to make the films we want to make, we need very good allies in the rest of Europe, we need to be part of that network for financing films. This came out of a context of growing up in Britain where cinema was for many decades dependent on Hollywood. I fundamentally thought that that was unhealthy.

In the 1990s, I ran an organisation called British Screen for 10 years which was the national film fund for new British feature films. During my 10 years we made more than 140 films possible, including *The Crying Game* as well as films by Mike Leigh and Ken Loach. Those particular films would not have been possible without funding from the rest of Europe. The British filmmakers who I think are the most interesting have always have had a large audience in the rest of the world. I feel in those 10 years we dragged Britain into Europe and showed them the possibilities of co-production. We also were co-producers of other films that came from the rest of Europe. It was an interesting strategy and it was very different for Britain to be involved in films in that way and not simply a small player in English language cinema which was what it had always been condemned to be.

British Screen was then taken over by the Film Council which was a new institution set up by the New Labour. I didn't really agree with that because I didn't think that was what Britain needed, I still don't, so I took it as an opportunity to teach and to consult for film festivals and to do other things until this job came up here.

TT: What's the attraction of a job like this?

SP: I find it very interesting to use public money to try to make a difference to the way the capitalist market wants to make things happen. You need public money to nudge the boat in different directions. That's what I'm trying to

do here. I still believe in the benefits of European partners. There is a long dependence of Irish Cinema on the British which needs to be broken – we need to get over the post-colonial relationship. I believe that Irish filmmakers will be better equipped to make their films if they have partners elsewhere in Europe as well in the UK and the US of course.

TT: I have to smile when I hear the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Chief Executive of the Irish Film Board saying that we have to get over our post-colonial relationship with Britain!

SP: [laughs] Well, what I mean is in relation to distribution particularly; the fact that Ireland is locked-in with the UK as a single territory is really destructive; it's just kept the distribution potential here in Ireland so small and so strangled.

The normal pattern is this – if you've an Irish film and you want a strong distributor as opposed to one of the local small ones, you really have to go to London and talk to Pathé, Momentum, Optimum or one of those. If it's an Irish film, they will only take the UK rights if they get Ireland as well. The power is in London for Irish film.

TT: I want to go back and ask you about this idea of becoming more closely involved with European co-production. Does that have an impact on the kind of stories that would get made, the kind of stories that would be advanced for funding to co-production partners?

SP: Well certainly you pick the co-production partners where you think the film will be of interest. But that doesn't mean to say that you tailor the film to suit that particular market. I think it's very liberating to have the opportunity to approach several different countries as film partners, maybe even several partners on the same film. I saw British filmmakers for years endlessly trying to study what would work in America and try to come up with good ideas and cast people that would give them that American deal. I think that's fatal. I believe that Ireland can be successful if we do what European cinema

does best which is quality auteur work. I think the most exciting work in world cinema comes from directors with very strong signatures, something to say and a powerful way of saying it. That's not to say that I totally subscribe to the idea that the director is the author of the film, films are made by a variety of collaborations, but what we see at the moment is that the films which can compete in the world are those which have something strong to say.

TT: Is that what the IFB is trying to promote? I was looking at your most recent trailer on 'You Tube' and wondering what it said about Irish cinema. It seems very 'tourist-driven' and mainstream – all U2, helicopter shots and landscapes.

SP: Well, that's a trailer aimed at attracting productions to this country. It's explicitly saying 'You can make big features in this country'. We have two sides to our work here. We are looking to support new voices in Irish cinema – Irish ideas and Irish films. And also, for economic reasons, we're looking to sell Ireland as a location. That's why we have the tax break [481].

TT: I can see where difficulties may arise there – balancing an *Irish* film industry with a film industry in *Ireland*. Can we talk a little bit about the benefits a vibrant international industry brings?

SP: The benefits are in the skills and the infrastructure. The UK is quite a good example of that. It has very highly skilled visual effects companies as well as the studios (Shepperton and Pinewood) and a good resource of very skilled technicians from this combination of quite a vibrant indigenous industry and big international productions.

In Ireland it's started to happen too, but there's room for tremendous development here – especially in the digital age – for a visual effects industry.

TT: And then the tricky thing is that it could swamp your local industry.

SP: Yes, the danger is that if that becomes the default position in the industry, then the indigenous industry becomes very quickly forgotten in the minds of those who give money like the politicians. And it can become a distraction for those who want to get involved in making films – away from local stories and into an ‘international style’.

TT: As a former producer and film journalist, how do you account for the success of *Once*? Do you think the Sundance audience award was the tipping point for its success?

SP: Oh yes, absolutely. I remember seeing it at the Galway Film Fleadh in 2006 and thinking that there’s something very credible happening between these people; it is a very accomplished work on the part of the director to achieve that. It was shown to various festival organisers in Europe to very little response before the Sundance win. The Americans just seemed to understand the film emotionally and they have the ability to make or break something. What was written about this film in the *LA Times* was just wonderful; you could never buy that publicity.

TT: You’ve raised a curious paradox – if you look at *In America*, *The Crying Game*, *My Left Foot* – all films that triumphed in America, and then the Europeans either followed, or as in the case of Jim Sheridan’s films in UK, showed no interest at all. The argument for European co-funding you made earlier is interesting, but it’s also interesting that the biggest Irish hit of recent years was turned down by European festivals who don’t get it, and yet the ‘big bad cultural enemy’ said ‘yes, we love it’!

The other aspect of *Once* which strikes me as interesting is this issue of an auteur cinema and budget. John Carney’s a good instance of someone who previously made a film – *On the Edge* – with studio funding (and the backing of Hell’s Kitchen) and it didn’t go anywhere and yet with the limitations of budget he’s created something truly personal and original ...or is that fanciful?

SP: Yes, there’s something in that. I agree

with you, although the directors never will! I don’t believe that money is liberating in film-making. I don’t believe the quality of the ideas necessarily gets better the more money is being spent. At the same time I don’t want to be heard to say that artists should be starving in garrets – I don’t believe that. So it’s a tricky one and very interesting that you raise it.

TT: Let’s talk about how the IFB funds Irish film. Maybe you’d outline to me the general way in which you go about your business and your funding structures.

SP: What I particularly wanted to do when I came here was to change the attitude that the Film Board had towards the industry and the attitude the industry had towards the Film Board – which on both sides had suffered a considerable erosion of trust. I think the Film Board had somehow manoeuvred itself into a position of remoteness that was in danger of making it unpopular but also unable to do the job of inspiring confidence which is what I think we should be doing, as well as giving money. Being rigorous in your selection is part of setting standards of what filmmakers should aspire to. They may not agree with you all the time but if you’re prepared to defend your decisions face to face rather than through some official letter then a different relationship starts to develop.

There is a very vibrant and creative animation sector in this country so we’ve now put funding structures in place and are strongly looking after them. Rod Stoneman had previously decided that the Film Board would be involved with documentaries, which was also something new to me. We have now begun to focus on bigger and more international documentaries, with more theatrical potential. We now turn down a lot of smaller subjects that are 52 minute RTE docs, because we believe that RTE should do this stuff themselves.

I also wanted to encourage the production of more Irish feature films. In terms of a strategy to get them made, we’re connecting to the European funding partners as well as other co-production partners like Australia and Canada, and

communicating at every opportunity that we're co-producers of films on a reciprocating basis. This type of strategy is the bedrock of what I'm about.

TT: So the idea of a self-financing, self-subsidising national film industry is not really viable in this era?

SP: Well, it's not even really viable in a market like France which has a vibrant industry and local audience; they are out looking for co-production partners now for the first time ever. I don't believe it would ever be viable in a small country such as Ireland.

TT: Talk to me about the new low-budget initiative, "Catalyst". What was the thinking behind that?

SP: Well it was born out of necessity. I've mentioned that it is harder to get feature films made and one of the results of that is that the budgets are coming tumbling down, not just here, but also in the UK. In the 1990s the average budget for a British film was £2m, now it's less than £1.5m. Most of the films made in Ireland last year cost less than €1.6m. "Catalyst" is a response to the great difficulties in raising money in the market, the need to understand what it takes to make a film on a very small budget, what it means to conceive it and write it for a particular budget.

With all these factors in mind, we conceived "Catalyst" as a training and production initiative. There were 2 weekend workshops and in order to apply for funding you had to have attended all 6 days of the workshop. We got a huge volume of applications – 47 fully fledged written films – we chose 3 and they are in production now. They were budgeted at €250,000 per film.

TT: That's the production budget. What about the cost of Prints and Advertising (P&A)? Is that an additional cost for the film's producers?

SP: Yes, there's no cost of distribution in there and it can vary quite a bit. In the case of *Once*, Samson Films got the film finished for €170,000 in time to show it at Sundance. But then it was a big success, was picked up by Summit – a huge sales agent – and the territories started selling and selling, so another €80,000 was needed to make the film 'deliverable', so that's why it cost €250,000.

TT: So in the "Catalyst" films do you get involved with that at all or are they on their own?

SP: No, the rule is that the producers have got to be able to show in their budgets that they can arrive at a point that the film is basically deliverable. If one of the films was to become a massive success, more money would be needed for distribution.

TT: I notice all the funding you offer is described as a 'loan'. What does that mean?

SP: Well, it's always viewed as an investment. Normally there are several investors, and then when the money starts to come back in it's divided up as it's earned.

TT: What has the ratio of loan to return been like?

SP: Oh, it's very low. At British Screen we achieved a very high rate. We got back half of what we put out, but that takes an incredible amount of effort and good luck to get back half!

In Ireland, it's much much lower. Last year for example nearly €2m came back in earnings from films we back, but the lion's share of the money we spend comes from the government every year.

TT: Can you offer a broad outline of your annual budget and spend?

SP: We're up to annual funding of about €20m at this stage. We've two budgets – capital and distribution. From the capital budget – in very broad terms – you could say approx €15m is allocated to production and €3m to development,

(i.e. screenplays). We have deals now with 10 production companies on a ‘multiple development scheme’ which we brought in last year. Of the (approx) €15m we spend on new film production each year, €7m goes to feature films, €1m to documentaries, €1m to animation, €1m to short films and the “Catalyst” project last year cost just under €500,000. The other €2m along with any money recouped goes into training as we give a substantial grant to Screen Training Ireland and all the other things we do in the industry – the Film Festival workshops and so on.

We also have a small fund (just under €1m) to spend on new distribution initiatives. We are going to intervene somehow in the digitisation of cinemas, but we’re not entirely sure in what way just yet. Ireland badly needs more cinemas to show world cinema. Even big (‘Arthouse’) hits this year like *Garage*, *La Vie en Rose*, *The Lives of Others* all did poorly enough in Box Office terms here, and it’s mainly because there are not enough places to show this type of cinema.

TT: Let’s come to the question of funding for productions in the Irish Language. I know that ‘Oscailt’ [short films in Irish language scheme] has recently been abolished and *Cré na Cille* [discussed elsewhere in this issue] received no funding at all from the board. There seems to be a perception that there isn’t a distinctive – or even a directed – Irish language policy.

SP: Well, I wouldn’t accept that. The volume of work in the Irish language since I’ve been here is quite impressive, mostly but not exclusively for TV. We did the first series of *Aifric* (TG4) which was very nice, we did the series of *The Running Mate* (TG 4) and we’ve just started a series called *Féidh* (TG 4). And we continue to be much more open to Irish than to English language TV applications. In fact we don’t really want to do any more English language TV work because we believe that the TV companies should be able to do that. The Irish language projects still need our help, and we have a very special relationship with TG4. And on the film side, we’ve just produced *Kings* which is Ireland’s first submission to the foreign

language category of the Oscars. We *are* stopping the ‘Oscailt’ strand of funding, yes, but also we’re stopping ‘Short Cuts.’ That’s because I don’t think Irish language filmmaking is benefiting from being ghettoised. The quality of submissions to ‘Oscailt’ had been falling for several years and the great majority of ‘Oscailt’ submissions were rejected submissions from ‘Short Cuts’ translated into Irish. What is the point of that!?

*Cré na Cille* was very specific and that was about whether we believed the film had theatrical potential and we didn’t. We felt they had the money to make it for TV and that they should make it for that medium.

TT: What’s your take on the skills of the Irish film industry at this point in time?

SP: The most important thing for me is that there are exciting signs of new talent. But as everywhere they’re sporadic and they’re not that many, but I certainly live in hope. There’s the example of Lenny Abrahamson and John Carney. I could tell you about filmmakers who are coming through Short films, and “Catalyst” and are developing to make their first feature film – there are some exciting people emerging. Talent is the bedrock of any industry and it’s our job to nurture and encourage that.

For more information on the board’s activities and filmography to date visit:  
<http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/>

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